

Assessing Critical Thinking in English Language Teaching: A Document Analysis of Student Book Reviews

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Abstract

Fostering critical thinking is prudent for English Language Teaching (ELT); however, assessing it within a classroom context remains difficult. Discussion about assessment tools for critical thinking and its use to reveal students' critical thinking within classroom are still infrequent. Therefore, this study investigates critical thinking in ELT and analyzes students' book review writing through the lenses of the OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric. The rubric provides criteria for evaluation of reasoning, argumentation, and analysis within the context of evidence for the classroom. The findings show that 17.6% of students displayed Outstanding critical thinking skills, 29.4% were categorized as Flourishing, 35.3% as Emergent, and 17.6% as Dormant. The results indicate that there is a basic demonstration of students' critical thinking ability, but the depth of evaluative reasoning remains low. The study underscores the OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric's effectiveness in pinpointing many areas needing attention and improvement, while also suggesting that the adoption of various structured assessment devices may sharpen the focus of didactic instruction on critical thinking. This resulted in contributions to ELT by highlighting the importance of integrating critical thinking instruction and assessment with learning outcomes for students, and therefore enhancement of students' academic writing skills is achieved.

Keywords: Critical Thinking; English Language Teaching; OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric.

Critical thinking is one of the key competencies of tertiary education, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT), in which students need to analyze, evaluate, and construct arguments based on several texts. Critical thinking is important for academic success, career progression, and decision-making in a complex and rapidly changing world. However, despite its recognized importance, critical thinking skills development and evaluation remain problematic in many teaching contexts

(Ennis, 2018; Lai, 2017).

Critical thinking is an essential component of language learning as it enables learners to read intensively, question assumptions, and offer well-supported arguments (Ennis, 2018; Facione, 2020). Students with improved academic writing skills and increased confidence in expressing their views, as seen in research, exhibit critical thinking skills (Fung et al., 2016). Furthermore, Halpern (2019) explains that critical thinking

fosters autonomous practice, which allows students to become improved problem solvers outside and inside the classroom. Marin & Halpern (2011) research highlights conscious critical thinking instruction as critical in enhancing students' reasoning skills.

The competence of being critical is needed especially for students in university level. The end goal of critical thinking and reasoning is transformation, that is, moving from one level of wellbeing to a higher level of wellbeing (Rivas, Saiz, & Ossa; 2022). Align with such goal, students of ELT within higher education context are expected to be a better state of wellbeing as English teacher or educator. Moreover, the foreign language they have to learn, the pedagogical competence they need to have, and the adaptability towards dynamic curriculum address the need of having good critical thinking.

However, despite such benefits and needs, the integration of critical thinking in ELT courses remains uneven, primarily due to the fact that educators are not adequately trained and do not possess the right assessment tools (Kuswandaru & Prasetya, 2024). Common critical thinking assessment tests are not classroom friendly where they are administered out of the classroom context.

Evaluating a student's critical thinking skills is painstakingly complex due to the nature of evaluation. While essays and armchair deliberations are useful, they in themselves do not encapsulate the true facets of a student's mind as a teacher has to rely on general grading systems which are centered on content knowledge and not the rubric's mentioned cognition. Hence, evaluating the students' analytic and evaluative skills becomes a Herculean task. This differentiation shows the necessity for more sophisticated methods of testing that try to capture students' ability to construct and defend their arguments with the relevant evidence (OECD, 2019; Dhari & Maisarah, 2025).

For critical thinking assessment in ELT, document analysis stands out as one of

the most hopeful strategies (Bintang, 2024). A teacher's assessment of students' written work for reading comprehension is termed document analysis. Document analysis serves to provide a window into the organizational structures students use to synthesize, interpret, and respond to reading passages. Through students' book reviews, teachers can observe how learners are able to reason, support their arguments, and articulate differing viewpoints. (Bintang, 2024).

The OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric offers a systematic approach to evaluating written work from students, and it analyzes the critical thinking processes of taking and defending relevant positions, constructing arguments along with counterarguments, backing claims with appropriate evidence, and recognizing assumptions and limitations (OECD, 2019). This guide gives educators a dependable method of assessing critical thinking capabilities using book review assignments. It can also be administered within classroom context.

Book reviews are valuable tools for enhancing and evaluating critical thinking skills in English language teaching (ELT). When learners are assigned to write a book review as part of academic writing, they are engaged in high order skills – comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Summarizing the book, weighing the arguments critically, comparing differing viewpoints, and outlining supported opinions are all tasks that students must perform. As Fung, To and Rim (2016) note, students shift from being passive consumers of academic content to proactive producers of academic text.

Like every other student of English writing, English department requires their students to engage in writing book reviews as part of coursework. Writing book reviews sharpens critical reading, analysis, and academic writing skills. Writing book reviews requires that students employ higher-order thinking skills, such as synthesizing information, evaluating evidence, and

providing reasoned critique (Hyland, 2019). Studies show that book reviews promote critical analysis of texts, argument development, and writing proficiency (Kamimura, 2020). Unlike essays, book reviews incorporate objective analysis and subjective interpretation. This is particularly useful in enhancing one's analytical skills (Rose, 2021).

Research also shows that writing book reviews can facilitate metacognitive awareness in writing. Students who engage in writing book reviews, Cheng (2018) contends, are more conscious of their evaluation and analysis processes, leading to greater self-regulation in writing tasks. Nesi & Gardner (2018) additionally found that book reviews help students practice synthesizing outside sources so that they become more competent at synthesizing information and constructing logical arguments. Despite these advantages, students are challenged with effectively structuring their reviews and providing constructive criticisms beyond summary (Kuswandar & Prasetya, 2024). This means that there is a need for direct instruction and systematic assessment tools that can help students learn to write book reviews.

However, despite the benefits of book reviews as a means of promoting critical thinking, there remain difficulties in their implementation. Some students struggle to put forward well-structured arguments, use relevant evidence to support claims, and address counterarguments. These difficulties underscore the importance of direct instruction and scaffolded practice in critical thinking, along with the use of clear and explicit assessment criteria to promote student learning (Ilyas, 2016 ; Marin & Halpern, 2011). The OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric provides a scoring framework for evaluating students on how well they (1) Develop a personal stance to a clearly articulated problem, (2) Link their stance to other possible theories or stances, (3) Use evidence to defend their stance, and (4) Identify the limitations and assumptions of

their argument (OECD, 2019). This rubric will be utilized to assess the written work of students based on the final product and not classroom discussions or the learning process (Deardorff, 2021). Studies have confirmed that rubrics enhance grading reliability and provide quality feedback to students (Sadler, 2018; Kuswandar & Prasetya, 2024). The rubric classifies students' critical thinking skills into four levels: Outstanding, Flourishing, Emergent, and Dormant.

Outstanding category is achieved when students, seen through their written products, are able to claim a problem with a clearly articulated, personally held position, connect it to intradisciplinary and/or extra disciplinary alternative stances, offers strong evidence, and critically reflect on the claim's assumptions or limitations.

Meanwhile, Flourishing category comes when students are able to claim a problem with a personally held position which is clearly defined, connect it to at least one alternative theory or perspective, provide some evidence at least acknowledging strong assumptions, and acknowledges.

An emergent category is revealed when students claim a problem in imprecise terms which is at best vaguely defined personally held position, connect it to one alternative stance within the discipline, offer very limited evidence to support it, and recognize a few assumptions or limitations, but very nominally. The last level, Dormant, comes when students claim supportable by solid evidence without critically examining their assumptions or alternative viewpoints.

There have been some research on the place of critical thinking in writing instruction. Hardianti et al (2023) investigated critical thinking skill in students' writing analytical exposition text and showed that students experienced difficulty in arranging arguments. The study identified the lack of clear teaching and assessment guidelines, which leads to inconsistency in the degree to which students can develop reasoned arguments. Similarly,

Hastiari (2020) assessed the critical thinking of students in essay writing and concluded that although students could generate ideas, they were not capable of developing well-supported arguments. These findings indicate that students may touch on critical thinking superficially but are not able to develop coherent, evidence-based arguments.

Moreover, Destri (2019) discovered in his research that students exhibited average critical thinking skills in writing analytical exposition texts but struggled with assessment and justification components. The study attributed the challenges to a lack of emphasis in the curriculum on higher-order thinking skills. While these studies provide some insight into students' critical thinking development, they are focused primarily on argumentative writing and lack a standardized assessment approach.

Despite growing literature on critical thinking in ELT, studies on the application of standardized rubrics like the OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric in book review writing assessment have been limited. The majority of studies focus on instruction methods and not systematic assessment instruments, and therefore it is difficult to measure objectively students' progress (Kemendikbud, 2020). Moreover, the assessment guideline used by those previous studies in investigating students' critical thinking, such as Facione (1990) used in Hastiari (2020), are not updated and less friendly for classroom context. Lastly, mostly examine argumentative essays rather than book reviews that require different analysis skills.

With regard to the gap, this study aims at examining students' critical thinking reflected through the book reviews as their written products, using OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric. In that way, this research aspires to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of guided assessment frameworks in enhancing critical thinking skills in ELT classrooms. By focusing on the written work of students, this research will

determine if the students construct solid arguments, provide evidence to support claims, and tackle counterarguments in their review.

Method

This study uses a qualitative research design with a document analysis approach to examine students' critical thinking skills which are reflected through their book reviews as their written products. Document analysis, a qualitative research method, allows investigators to examine textual nuances systematically and is particularly valuable in education for evaluating students' writing, such as book reports and essays, by assessing argument construction and evidence use, with prior research highlighting its effectiveness in measuring students' ability to develop arguments and challenge claims with counterevidence or reasoning (Bowen, 2009); Bintang, 2024; Brown & Race, 2020; Li, 2016). It is claimed to be efficient by earlier studies regarding the scope of students' engagement with different perspectives (Dhari & Maisarah, 2025).

This study analyzes students' critical thinking skills by examining the written output of their book reviews. The reviews of the books completed by the students in the fourth semester of the English Language Education Program at a University in Surabaya constitute the primary data of the study, which enables thorough evaluation of their reasoning, argumentation, and evidence use in academic writing.

The book reviews are used as an object of study because they need students to use and apply critical thinking processes such as comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Unlike traditional essays, a book review requires both an objective analysis of the content and a subjective interpretation that results in a more holistic measurement of the student's ability to formulate an argument, evaluate the evidence, and even challenge the argument presented. In light of the problems of measuring critical thinking in

ELT, the research employs the OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric, which assesses reasoning as well as the use of evidence and counterarguments. It is a standardized tool used for the assessment of students' reasoning, evidentiary support, and consideration of opposing views (Ilyas, 2016).

The primary data of this study consists of 34 documents of book reviews written in English by 4th semester students of English Education Study Program in a Public University in Indonesia. The writings are the students' first draft after they receive conceptual knowledge and examples of book review. The objects were selected based on criteria including the book reviews served as a weekly assessment in the Written English course, they were written in English, and the reviews were complete with a title, an argument, and a conclusion. These limitations were made to maintain the uniformity of the assessment of students' critical thinking skills when performing similar writing tasks.

The OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric was used to systematically evaluate students' written work based on defined criteria. These rubric measures four aspects including analytical depth, integration of supporting material, analysis of opposing views, and the formulation of the argument. It offers objective criteria for evaluating students' critical thinking skills by assigning them four predefined categories: Outstanding, Flourishing, Emergent, and Dormant. Unlike more traditional grades which are highly subjective, this type of grading ensures that students do more than simply display basic cognitive comprehension and language skills.

The meticulous choice of selected book reviews as a critical thinking assessment tool, alongside previously conducted research, justifies the study's validity as review analyses measure self-argument construction and defense capabilities. The study is further validated because there is implementation of a known structure with established standardized evaluation criteria, which increases the

reliability of the study by minimizing the subjectivity of the assessment due to the OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric. The data was cross-checked to guarantee code fidelity, and any differences discovered were resolved through meticulous cross-checking of the data.

The first set of data was composed of students' first drafts of book reviews done after receiving some form of conceptual instruction and exemplification. These documents were meticulously stored and anonymized in a way that ensured the identity of students was protected. The purposive sampling technique guarantees that only complete book reviews that adhered to the predetermined structures were selected, thus excluding any drafts with informal submissions. This method kept the integrative evaluation of critical thinking skills in the written work of all students' uniforms.

The book reviews were analyzed through a qualitative coding procedure following the OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric. Each review was analyzed in three phases. In the first phase, students' reasoning and argumentation processes were analyzed to discern recurring patterns. In the second phase, the reviews were coded qualitatively for depth analysis, quality and relevance of evidence, alternative perspectives that were considered, and argument construction. In the final phase, students' critical thinking capability was assessed and placed into one of four classifications: Outstanding, Flourishing, Emergent, and Dormant, corresponding to the level of sophistication of the students' reasoning and evaluative capabilities.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to students of one university, so the findings cannot be generalized to a wider context. Second, the document analysis did not include interviews or observations of the writing process, which might have provided additional insights into students' barriers. Third, the use of the OECD rubric-although it has been adapted-potentially ignores local cultural aspects in assessing critical thinking.

Result

This study assessed the critical thinking skills of English Education students by analyzing 34 book reviews using the OECD assessment rubric. The students' abilities were divided into four categories: Outstanding (17.6% or 6 students), Flourishing (29.4% or 10 students), Emergent (35.3% or 12 students), and Dormant (17.6% or 6 students). While the Outstanding category was distinguished by sophistication from in-depth analysis and consideration of other perspectives to justification, the Dormant category was merely descriptive and lacked critical analysis.

Table 1. Critical Thinking Levels of Students Across Levels

Critical Thinking Level	Number of Students (n = 34)	%	Characteristics
Outstanding	6	17.6%	Strong critical engagement, multiple perspectives, clear justification with evidence.
Flourishing	10	29.4%	Well-structured argumentation with some justification but limited alternative perspectives.
Emergent	12	35.3%	Basic understanding, weak justification, minimal critical engagement.
Dormant	6	17.6%	Primarily descriptive, lacks critical analysis or justification.

Table 1 shows a substantial portion of students, 64.7%, were in the Flourishing and Emergent categories. Students in the Flourishing category were capable of constructing structured arguments with adequate justification but failed to consider alternative perspectives. In contrast, the Emergent category demonstrates a basic understanding of the book's content, but the arguments provided are too shallow, lacking

evidence and depth of analysis.

The Dormant category (17.6%) exposed students' inclination for paraphrasing the contents of the book without exercising any form of critique. Writing in this category did not include attempts to analyze the book's strengths or weaknesses, relate the themes to the wider world, or challenge the author's viewpoints.

The researcher further scrutinized the flourishing category (29.4% of the total), we observed that students' claims were well reasoned and internally consistent, but there was a notable absence of external support (e.g., theories, research) to substantiate their arguments. Most justifications simply quoted portions of the book without employing other relevant evidence which could deepen and enrich their account and perspective.

Within Emergent category (35.3%), students most frequently mentioned focusing on summarizing specific chapters or sections of the book. Students in this group also failed to evaluate the author's reasoning and the asserted claims' weight. Students in this group also seem to bypass the more fundamental questions, like whether the author's concepts are coherently developed in the book or how the book engages with contemporary issues and debates.

The most significant finding in this comprehensive analysis is the dominance of critical thinking skills at the intermediate level (i. e., Flourishing and Emergent) – but it's also worth noting that only 17.6% of students scored at the Outstanding level. These findings indicate that most students need more practice in integrating alternative perspectives, supporting arguments with external evidence, and developing in-depth evaluative analysis.

Discussions

The results that Flourishing and Emergent categories are dominant are consistent with Hardianti et al. 's (2023) study that found that students struggled with constructing structured arguments. Although

the tools of assessment used are different, they lead to similar indications. However, the book reviews as the objects reveals more and deeper points of critical thinking that connects to use of class-friendly rubric (OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric). Moreover, this study provides integrated level of critical thinking which are categorized into four levels instead of separated elements with assessment range from Poor to Excellent.

This study extends those findings to show that the problem is greater than structure alone, including integrating alternative perspectives and external evidence. This is consistent with Paul & Elder (2006) claim that critical thinking requires applying intellectual standards like depth and relevance, which are weak in students' writing. The results of the Outstanding category (17.6%) contradict the OECD report (2019) which states that 25% of students in OECD countries are capable of high-level critical thinking. This difference may be due to methodology: OECD used problem-solving tasks, while this study focused on text analysis. This finding suggests that critical thinking skills are contextual and depend on the type of task given.

This study contradicts Davies & Barnett (2015) assumption that writing tasks in higher education have been designed to trigger higher-order thinking. In fact, without explicit instruction, students tend to regard book reviews as descriptive tasks. This corroborates Ennis' (2018) criticism that ambiguous instructions can hinder the application of critical thinking.

The dominance of the Emergent and Dormant categories reflects the influence of Indonesia's educational culture, which is still oriented towards memorization and reproduction of knowledge, as criticized by (Lun et al., 2010). In contrast to the findings of Rahman et al (2020) in Malaysia, where 40% of students are capable of critical analysis, this study reveals a gap that may be triggered by differences in curriculum emphasis on analytical skills.

This trend is further supported by the historical use of rote memorization in Indonesia, where students are learned and tested on their memories instead of their comprehension. Such classroom activities revolve around the teacher's lecture, which does not allow students to express their opinions, engage in debates, or think critically (Suryadi, 2019). Consequently, students find it challenging to actively interrogate a text, integrate different opinions, or construct logical and factually sound arguments, all of which are essential to critical thinking. In addition, the focus on achieving high scores in standardized tests creates a mindset which favors answers instead of analyses and critiques. Such form of education is different from those education systems that include critical thinking and problem solving, like in Malaysia, and other countries with better developed analytical frameworks (Rahman et al., 2020). In the absence of training on how to evaluate and formulate arguments, it is difficult for Indonesian students to shift from narrative to more complex forms of analysis required in book reviews. To overcome such fundamental problems, a different approach to teaching is required that includes more debates, thinking, and interdisciplinary learning to promote greater engagement with concepts and texts.

Although the OECD rubric was used, only 17.6% of students achieved the high category. This contrasts with the success of Abrami et al (2015) in Canada who reported a 30% increase in critical skills after the use of a similar rubric. This finding suggests that rubrics do not have maximum impact without lecturer assistance and internalization of critical thinking criteria in the learning process.

The results of this study support Facione (1990) theory that critical thinking is a competency that can be developed, but also confirm that conventional training (such as academic writing courses) is not enough. An infusion approach is needed Halpern (2014) that integrates critical exercises into

specific tasks, such as comparing perspectives or evaluating evidence.

Destri's (2019) research on Indonesian Literature students found a similar pattern: weak justification in analytical writing. However, this study added that foreign language education students, who were expected to be exposed to critical literature, also experienced similar difficulties. This indicates that the problem of critical thinking is cross-disciplinary and not tied to linguistic competence.

The Dormant category (17.6%) is at odds with the finding in Hastiari (2019), that university students perform very well in the idea generation. This may be explained by the type of task: book reviews require evaluation analysis, but general essays are more open-ended. This observation shows that task design matters for critical thinking. Hastiari's (2019) object of study are argumentative essays while this study evaluates book review. This is in line with (Rose, 2021) that, unlike essays, book reviews incorporate objective analysis and subjective interpretation. This is particularly useful in enhancing one's analytical skills

The Flourishing category (29.4% of the total) shows the OECD rubric to have a particular weakness in capturing aspects such as originality of ideas or creativity. The rubric may be very strong at measuring structure and justification, but may not be sensitive to local cultural contexts, as Lun et al. (2010) pointed out in their detailed examination of Asian education.

These findings are pertinent to the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia which emphasizes 21st century skills. The high level of intermediate categories such as Flourishing and Emergent indicate that critical thinking is not yet embedded in learning. The curriculum needs to be reoriented so that students are not only memorizing but also analyzing using multidisciplinary approaches. The integration of 4C (Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, and Creativity) is suggested to have potential to help students develop their soft skills in classroom context. In their research, Lestari

& Hindun (2023) noted that incorporating 4C skills into Merdeka Curriculum at the senior high school level is a remarkable development that has valuable impacts. This curriculum goes beyond comprehending academic subjects and includes learning based on skills which equip learners to tackle real-world problems.

The undeveloped justification capabilities in the Emergent group could reflect a deficiency in teaching critical analysis, because lecturers rarely demonstrate how to critically interact with the texts, especially in the first drafts of the reviews written for book critiques. This is consistent with Gelder (2005), who claims that scaffolding through stepwise teaching increases the students' evaluative justification skills; nevertheless, in Indonesia, intensive teaching loads frequently constrict the students' mentoring time. Imaniar et al. (2018) also emphasize that while there are attempts to integrate an explicit focus on critical thinking within the academic writing paradigm by university teachers, the methods used—mainly providing consultation and feedback—might not be sufficient to foster strong analytical capabilities in the absence of proper demonstration and intensive practice.

The results of this study align with Freire's (2020) notion of critical pedagogy, particularly with regard to the importance of dialogue and reflexivity in developing critical citizenship. Students across different educational sectors in Indonesia are conditioned to accept knowledge as unquestionable, which is why they do not have the confidence to critique texts or challenge dominant views within the stringent classroom culture (Lun et al., 2010). This explains why learners who fall within the Emergent category struggle to engage in critical analysis of book reviews. It is possible that these learners do not possess the needed confidence to evaluate the arguments put forward by the author, consider other possible viewpoints, or even express their own views. It is therefore important to implement more dialogic teaching techniques like peer discussions, guided debates, and Socratic

questioning in ELT classes so that learners can be motivated to critique and engage with the texts (Brookfield, 2012).

The results demand the development of teaching materials that do not only focus on grammar or text structure but also provide concrete examples of critical analysis. For example, modules could include examples of book reviews that compare feminist, marxist, or postcolonial perspectives on the same book. A following up action is very needed towards the students' first draft by having reflection or consultation session. Experimental studies are needed in the future to test the effectiveness of interventions such as peer-review based on OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubrics or the integration of multimodal analysis (e.g. combining text, video, and data) in writing tasks. In addition, comparative research across ASEAN countries could reveal the influence of national education systems on the development of critical thinking.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the critical thinking skills of English Language Education students at one University in Surabaya, as reflected in book review writing, are still dominated by the intermediate level (Flourishing and Emergent). A total of 64.7% of students were able to construct structured arguments but were limited in multidimensional analysis, use of external evidence, and consideration of alternative perspectives. Only 17.6% reached the Outstanding category, while the other 17.6% were in the Dormant category with descriptive writing without critical analysis. These findings indicate that most students need more practice in integrating alternative perspectives, supporting arguments with external evidence, and developing in-depth evaluative analysis.

The study underscores the OECD Critical Thinking Assessment Rubric's effectiveness in pinpointing many areas needing attention and improvement, while also suggesting that the adoption of various

structured assessment devices may sharpen the focus of didactic instruction on critical thinking. This resulted in contributions to ELT by highlighting the importance of integrating critical thinking instruction and assessment with learning outcomes for students, and therefore enhancement of students' academic writing skills is achieved.

Based on the findings, the main recommendations include explicit integration of critical thinking frameworks (such as the OECD assessment rubric) into the curriculum of academic writing courses, accompanied by concrete examples of multidisciplinary analysis, training lecturers in designing assignments that force students out of the descriptive zone, for example by adding specific instructions, Providing feedback, consultation and reflection as a following up action of every academic writing done by students. In addition, collaborative efforts between educational institutions and policy makers are needed to reduce the administrative burden of lecturers, so that they can focus on intensive assistance in developing students' critical thinking.

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