

## Vietnamese EFL Students' Critical Thinking In An English Literature Course

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**Abstract:** While critical thinking is one of the ultimate requirements for students and is integrated into assessment practices in higher education, there has not been a definitive view of what it means and how it can be achieved. This limitation challenges students when they neither recognize the need to demonstrate critical thinking nor successfully perform it. To reconceptualize critical thinking in higher education, this study emphasizes how critical thinking is defined, performed, and evaluated in an English Literature course in Vietnamese higher education. Following the analyses of the course documents, the students' writing with the lecturer's comments, and the interview with the lecturer, the study revealed the distinctive view of critical thinking in relation to the characteristics of the writing genre and the Literature discipline. For critical thinking being discipline-oriented and genre-based, successfully performing critical thinking was also found challenging to the students given their limited understanding of the lecturer's conceptualization of critical thinking in this particular course. This study therefore suggests pedagogical implications to support the explication of this concept to students to improve their academic performances.

**Keywords:** critical thinking, discipline, English Literature, genre.

Critical thinking is one of the most debated topics in higher education (Mirador, 2018). The debates are attributed to an indefinite conceptualization of critical thinking due to different views of what critical thinking means. In general, Bruce (2014) refers critical thinking to the ability to make evaluative judgments which are assimilated with evaluating qualities of subjects or works done by oneself or others (Tai et al., 2018). Critical thinking is also approached from cultural lenses when researchers discuss how people from different cultures perform critical thinking and if there are (mis)alignments in understanding critical thinking in different cultural contexts (Atkinson, 1997; Kubota, 1997; Phan, 2011; Tran, 2011). Furthermore, critical thinking is also explored in educational settings where different academic courses are seen as different discourse communities (Hackney & Newman, 2013). In these communities, gatekeepers such as instructors establish dominant conventions or norms such as what to write and how to write in a text (Hyland, 2004, 2005). However, these conventions may not be familiar and recognizable to students who are less experienced members in these communities. Thus, students need to find ways to understand and align themselves with these conventions to become recognized in their discourse communities. Relating this point of discourse communities to the concept of critical thinking, it can be understood that what critical thinking means and how students are expected to demonstrate their critical thinking largely depend on the requirements established by instructors in their courses. These instructors with authority tend to define critical thinking, impose this concept on the students, and

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evaluate the students' performances (Hackney & Newman, 2013). Hence, critical thinking needs to be examined in a particular discourse community. Following previous research on critical thinking, it can be concluded that a shared view on this concept has not been achieved, given the different standpoints that researchers take to define critical thinking. Therefore, critical thinking remains confusing although it is a crucial element that students, particularly at higher education level, need to achieve (Mirador, 2018). Consequently, due to the lack of a shared view on what critical thinking means, teaching students how to be critical in their academic performances is challenging.

Following the call to further explore critical thinking in education, this study is undertaken in Vietnamese higher educational context to examine how Vietnamese students perform critical thinking in their writing. Specifically, this study investigates how critical thinking is defined, performed, and evaluated in a Vietnamese higher education context to contribute new insights into the concept of critical thinking. This qualitative case study focuses on an English Literature course and particularly the final written assignment in which the students have to select a story and report their analysis of the stories for assessment. An English Literature course is the focus of the study as it obtains some distinctive features such as more freedom in writing styles and in demonstrating writers' perspectives in writing (Ahmad, 2021a, 2021b; Mahmood et al., 2021). These features are relatively different from the common view of academic writing which is predominantly evidence-based (Wingate, 2012). Within the limited scope of this paper, I selected representative assignments of High-Achieving and Low-Achieving groups to reveal students' variations in demonstrating their abilities of critical thinking. As critical thinking needs to be examined in a particular course and a writing context, I took into consideration the requirements of critical thinking based on the assignment guidelines and marking criteria through which this concept is distributed to the students. I also examined the students' performances of critical thinking in their written assignments and how the lecturer evaluated such performances. The purpose of context-based examination of critical thinking is to identify how contextual elements such as writing task demands, Literature-disciplinary characteristics, students' perspectives, and instructor's assessment practices appeared to influence the students' performances of critical thinking in writing.

## **Literature Review on Critical Thinking**

This section reviews existing literature on critical thinking as the central concept in the study. Following diverse perspectives and ongoing discussion on this topic, I start with the shared view on the significance of critical thinking at higher education level. This is followed by a review of how critical thinking has been defined in order to establish a framework that guides the later analysis of critical thinking in an English Literature course in the study.

## **The Cruciality of Critical Thinking in Academic Writing**

The long-lasting conversations on critical thinking in higher education are evidence of the considerable attention given to this concept. According to Mirador (2018), critical thinking is particularly important in higher education as a must-have element. This cruciality of critical thinking in higher education is attributed to its indication of learners' substantial knowledge and problem-solving ability which are desired learning outcomes at higher education level (Dao & Hockey, 2021). Therefore, critical thinking is necessarily included in the marking criteria to assess students' academic achievements (Mirador, 2018). In addition, increasing concern about critical

thinking in higher education stems from the perspective of students being unaware of this concept. Observing students transitioning from high school to college level in the UK, Wingate (2012) realizes that these students are not familiar with proposing a convincing argument as the core component in their writing, which is foregrounded by their critical thinking ability. To explain, what Wingate (2012) considers as the causes of failure in making an effective argument is the students' inability to demonstrate their opinions with supporting evidence from the literature. This form of argument is assimilated with voice, and Groom (2000) and Wingate (2012) disregard solipsistic voice as merely writers' personal views, unaverred voice as the summary of what other researchers have mentioned, and unattributed voice as taking the voice of others into the possession of writers without proper acknowledgments of the sources. Wingate (2012) reminds the need to be critical in proposing an argument that can demonstrate writers' voice which is literature-informed. To do so, students need to obtain substantial knowledge of the field as the foundational stage before moving forward to evaluating the acquired knowledge and subsequently presenting their critical evaluation in texts in an academic and acceptable way. Therefore, critical thinking indicates students' substantial content knowledge of writing topics and ability to demonstrate their stances in the form of a convincing argument in their writing. These are features that construct writers' academic identity and qualities of academic writing in higher education. Given that writing is a widely utilized form of assessment in higher education (Paltridge, 2004), producing successful writing is a deciding factor of students' eligibility to pass their current courses and move to a higher level. Critical thinking is embedded and considered one of the core components of successful academic writing (Mirador, 2018); thus, it unquestionably influences students' academic achievements.

### **The Various Definitions of Critical Thinking**

Bruce (2014) points to critical thinking as “an evaluative judgment made within any field of human activity about some aspect, object or behavior of that field” (p. 85). Further to this, Tai et al. (2018) define such judgments as evaluations of the quality of works produced by oneself or others. Following these views, critical thinking in academic writing, which is usually evidence-based, refers to evaluating the quality of existing knowledge presented in previous research. In other words, writers need to synthesize and analyze the information presented in previous research and establish their stances towards the presented knowledge. According to Wingate (2012), the purpose of demonstrating critical thinking is to establish an argument in academic writing which is an indispensable component in higher education writing. However, writing is not monolithic and indeed contextually-dependent, which means in different contexts there are different requirements of what to write and how to write (Hackney & Newman, 2013; Hyland, 2004). This view on contextualized writing further proposes that critical thinking is possibly contextually governed. For example, Brumfit et al. (2005) define critical thinking as

*the motivation to persuade, engage and act on the world and self through the operation of the mindful, analytical, evaluative, interpretive, reflective understanding of a body of relevant knowledge mediated by assimilated experience of how the social and physical environment is structured combined with a willingness and capacity to question and problematize shared perceptions of relevance and experience (p. 149).*

Following this definition, critical thinking undergoes a complex process of engaging, analyzing, evaluating, and reflecting knowledge in a *context*. This view of constructing and presenting critical thinking in an acceptable form extends the discussion on critical thinking as being socioculturally constructed. When discussing critical thinking in relation to context, there exist debates on how different cultural contexts impose the need to perform critical thinking on the members. Notably in such a discussion, Atkinson (1997) claims that critical thinking is associated with the cultural values and influences that encourage or constrain an individual to perform critical thinking. This conclusion to some extent is supported, but not entirely agreed with by other researchers. Some researchers have found similar findings when students from one culture are placed in another culture and struggle with the requirements of practicing critical thinking in their written assignments (Phan, 2011; Phan & Li, 2014; Tran, 2011). Their studies emphasize how students from collectivist backgrounds share their difficulties and discomforts when performing critical thinking which is defined as the ability to evaluate the existing knowledge that other researchers have previously found.

However, the relation between cultural values and critical thinking has been argued in that such cultural generalizations have neglected the individual differences and the socio-historical backgrounds that are immensely influential on the understanding and performance of critical thinking (Kubota, 1997; Phan, 2011; Stapleton, 2001, 2002; Tran, 2011; Wang, 2011). In these studies, while some students' reports on their uncertainty of what critical thinking means, other students are still able to propose their definitions of critical thinking. These students have experienced critical thinking in their previous educational programs and the discourses they have been exposed to such as instructions and materials that guide them on how to perform critical thinking in writing. Nevertheless, when practicing this act in their writing, some students may feel reluctant due to their cultural perceptions of harmony and politeness and their self-positioning as inferior to evaluate research of leading figures in their disciplines. However, Phan (2011) and Tran (2011) still recognised the willingness to perform evaluative judgements by Vietnamese and Chinese students in their writing although these students are commonly categorised to advocate harmony and politeness, hence avoiding making these judgements in their works. This performance was said to be developed from the students' encounters with critical thinking in their previous training programs. Therefore, the discussion about critical thinking shifts from cultural to pedagogical dimensions.

To continue the argument placed on critical thinking as culturally governed, researchers have found out the influences of the task demands on student writers' critical thinking. Stapleton (2001) examines Japanese students' critical thinking in their essays as responses to two topics. He found that topic familiarity strongly influences their critical thinking in terms of demonstrating and evidencing their views towards the topic. For the 'gun control' topic, Stapleton (2001) sees this as being unfamiliar to the Japanese students and limiting their discussions on this topic. Meanwhile, 'rice import' is more familiar with and compatible with the students' background knowledge for extensive discussion on the topic. Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi (2015) also find EFL students in Oman developed their critical thinking in their written assignments with pedagogical supports such as interactions with peers, reflection and revision on earlier writing drafts, reading for content knowledge, and familiarity with writing topics. Zhang and Zhan (2020) investigate Chinese students' writing and point out students' arguments in writing. This finding not only proposes a challenge to the existing literature about students of collectivism being reluctant in critical thinking, but it also suggests the need to consider the discourses that the students are exposed to that form their understanding of critical thinking. For example, undergraduate students are comfortable in showing their personal opinions in writing while evidence-based writing is found in postgraduate

students. This variation in showing writers' views is influenced by how they are taught to present their views in writing (Zhang & Zhan, 2020) by their instructors coupling with the materials provided to them such as exemplars (Carless & Chan, 2017; Hackney & Newman, 2013; Stapleton, 2002). These research studies conceptualize critical thinking as being teachable given that appropriate pedagogical approaches are provided to students.

### **Research on Critical Thinking in Vietnamese Students and Vietnamese Context**

In Vietnamese context, research on critical thinking has been done to unpack what it means and how it could be performed and assessed, which would result in pedagogical implications. Dao and Hockey (2021) claim the teachability of critical thinking in Vietnamese classrooms with an acknowledgement of the importance of disciplinary knowledge in order for students "to analyse, synthesise, and evaluate information" (p. 2). In addition, it has been found that cultural influences are considerable determinants of the implementation of critical thinking in Vietnamese classrooms. Furthermore, the values of harmony and hierarchical order are strongly emphasized by Vietnamese students, making them hesitant to do such critical thinking in terms of evaluating the information provided to them by other superior agents (Ngo, 2019; Tran, 2011). The students are reluctant to question and challenge the reasoning offered by teachers and textbooks written by high-standing scholars. They further claim that the lack of exposure to critical thinking in academic writing hinders their understanding and performance of this concept. Therefore, Vietnamese students' enactment of critical thinking is still restricted. Nonetheless, it seems irrelevant to categorize Vietnamese students as unable to perform critical thinking. Vietnamese students are able to recognize the need to be critical in terms of questioning what has been claimed and providing rationality to their own claims. The students' understanding and performance of critical thinking is declared to be an outcome of their being taught about this concept and how to practice it in writing (Phan, 2011; Tran, 2011). Therefore, in addition to the long-lasting view on cultural influences on critical thinking, it is necessary to further investigate the pedagogical practices to teach Vietnamese students the necessity of critical thinking and how it could be performed (Dao & Hockey, 2021; Ho et al., 2018; Ngo, 2019; Phan, 2011; Tran, 2011).

### **My Position Towards Critical Thinking in This Study**

The review of previous research on critical thinking has revealed several issues, which constitute my understanding and stance towards critical thinking and how this concept could be explored in this study. Critical thinking has been discussed as the evaluative judgments that one makes in relevance to the contextual conditions that govern how critical thinking is understood and expected to perform. In academic writing, critical thinking needs to be examined in relation to how students are instructed to understand and perform this concept. Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi (2015) place an argument on previous studies on critical thinking as being valorized in 'Western' culture and problematic for those from other cultures. Instead of claiming the absence of critical thinking of non-Western individuals, what is more relevant is to understand how critical thinking is defined in different cultures. Given that one is strongly influenced by their socio-historical backgrounds, it is reasonable to conclude that how they understand and perform critical thinking is largely driven by how it has been conceptualized in their experience. This experience also includes educational experience in which the lecturers' instructional practices create the writing norms in their courses for the students to follow, thus imposing how critical thinking needs to be presented in academic texts. Previous literature has assimilated a course with a discourse community in which the lecturer

plays the gatekeeping role in disseminating the community's values and norms and assessing how students as new members are able to adhere to these norms to become qualified (Hackney & Newman, 2013). In other words, what the students write in a course needs to reflect and respond to the expectations that the community members impose on them. Only being able to satisfy such expectations, their writing is considered accepted and their credibility is recognized. Hence, in this study, the investigation into students' critical thinking will consider the context and the discourses that the students are exposed to in order to unpack how the concept of critical thinking has been foregrounded to the students. In other words, I will take into consideration the lecturer's expectations of critical thinking in a course indicated through the course discourses. Understanding how critical thinking is expected will foreground my further investigation into students' understanding and performance of critical thinking in texts and how that critical thinking (mis)aligns with the lecturer's expectation.

## **The Study**

This research is a case study that explores the concept of critical thinking in-depth from multiple sources (Yin, 2014). As previously mentioned, students' understanding and performance of critical thinking is governed by the contexts such as the courses where they are instructed and required to perform critical thinking. Therefore, conducting a case study with a small number of participants and considering the contexts will allow an in-depth investigation into critical thinking. My aim is to explore the students' performances of critical thinking in their written assignments and the responses from the lecturer. I selected an English Literature course as the focus in this study and sought answers to the following questions:

1. How is critical thinking defined by the lecturer in the English Literature course?
2. How is students' critical thinking performed and evaluated in the English Literature course?

In this study, I examined a cohort of 32 English-major students at a university in Vietnam. The students were in their last year at college in which English Literature was a required course. I selected this cohort following the convenience sampling technique for some reasons (Robinson, 2014). Firstly, the lecturer in this course was known to me through my work experience with him. I also had a chance to visit his class and discuss with the students about my research project and invited their participation. The students were willing to permit me to use their assignments for this research. Secondly, as critical thinking has been conceptualized as the students' making evaluative judgments, I found this English Literature course relevant as the students were required to submit a report in which they had to demonstrate these evaluations in their writing. Thirdly, as seniors, they were highly proficient in English, which was a supportive factor in presenting their critical thinking in texts (Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015) and might have experienced critical thinking in their previous courses. Fourthly, the examined assignments were take-home and evidence-based, which aligns with Wingate's (2012) proposal of effective argumentation as critical thinking is evidence-based in academic writing. Finally, writing in Literature courses has been claimed to hold features that are different from other scientific and academic forms of writing (Ahmad, 2021a, 2021b; Mahmood et al., 2021). Therefore, it was my intention to explore if the distinctive features in writing in this course would impact the conceptualization of critical thinking.

To comprehensively understand critical thinking, the data were collected from different sources to ensure the credibility of this qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Firstly, the assignment guidelines introduced the task to the students including the

structure, requirements for each section, word limit, and the marking criteria sheet. The assignment guidelines and marking criteria sheet were used to identify how the students were instructed and required to demonstrate their critical thinking. Secondly, the students' graded assignments revealed their critical thinking and the lecturer's comments on the performance. The assignment was a 1000-word report on the students' selected stories from either the coursebook or other sources. The prescribed coursebook was Pearson English Readers Level 5 - British and American Short Stories. This assignment was due in the final week of the course and had to be sent as an attachment to the lecturer's email. In this 15-week course, the students were instructed to analyze stories and report the analysis at the beginning of the course. I selected two assignments that were classified as High-achieving (HA) and Low-achieving (LA). This classification was attributed to the students' grades awarded by the lecturer. The HA paper was graded the highest, and LA was the lowest in the class. I selected these assignments to represent different levels of the students' critical thinking in academic writing in the course. Thirdly, the interview with the lecturer was helpful to point out the perspectives of what critical thinking was and how it should be presented in the assignments. These were text-based interviews in which I drew on the segments in the texts (assignment guidelines, marking criteria, and students' written assignments) and elicited the lecturer's perspectives of those segments (Lillis, 2008; Polio & Friedman, 2017).

Thematic analysis was applied to textual and interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Firstly, I analyzed the assignment guidelines to identify how critical thinking was defined and instructed to the students by the lecturer. Secondly, I analyzed the students' assignments following the themes of critical thinking generated from the guidelines. The lecturer's comments on those critical thinking segments in the students' assignments were also noted. Thirdly, these segments were brought into text-based discussion with the lecturer to further understand this concept. The interview was transcribed and translated into English, and the script was read through several times to identify segments that were related to critical thinking. In doing so, I paid attention to perspectives that aligned and misaligned with previous literature and the assignment guidelines provided by the participants. Codes were generated from these segments and grouped into themes. The themes were checked to ensure that they correctly reflected the codes. The segments reported in the study were cross-checked with the lecturer participant to confirm the appropriateness of my translation and interpretation of the data, which ensured the confirmability of this qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

## **Findings**

In this section, I present how critical thinking is expected by the lecturer in the course and the students' performances of critical thinking as perceived by the lecturer. From my analysis of course materials and interview with the lecturer, critical thinking was defined to encompass students' personal views towards the stories being reported and the inclusion of story details with explanations as evidence for such views. Taking this definition of critical thinking into students' writing, I then categorized the students' performances as high-achieving and low-achieving levels in accordance with the lecturer's satisfaction with the students' performances through the scores and the feedback.

## Critical Thinking as Expected in the Course – Personal Views and Story-Based Evidence

In the assignment guidelines and marking criteria, there were instructions on what the students needed to include in their writing. In addition to introducing the authors of the stories and performing the academic writing conventions (grammatical and lexical accuracy), I particularly paid attention to two sections retrieved from the assignment guidelines and marking criteria that demonstrated what the students needed to perform regarding their selection of notable features in the stories and their opinions towards those features.

**Table 1**

*Extracts from the assignment guidelines and marking criteria on critical thinking*

Extract from the assignment guidelines	Extract from the marking criteria
The reports should have three parts similar to the group presentations. Please note reports are not mere summaries; you are advised to critically analyze and express your opinions on the readings. You are strongly encouraged to use references with appropriate citations.	Summarize the story Analyze the story based on the plot, setting, point of view, imagery (if any), symbolism (if any), tone, irony (if any) and the theme. Demonstrate understanding and express opinions about the story

From the above extracts, the students were required to present their points of view towards the writing topics. The students firstly summarised the stories, but this was not central in the assignment. As reported by the lecturer in the interview, this summary was to “introduce what the story is about for those who did not know”. The lecturer highlighted the inclusion of the students’ understanding and opinions towards the stories. In addition, supporting evidence by referencing previous research could strengthen the students’ claims. However, in the assignment guidelines, such evidence was “strongly encouraged”, which did not seem to demonstrate an obligation to have such references in the work. In the interview, the lecturer explained that

*Of course, they need to have critical thinking in this assignment. But this is a Literature course; the students may only present their personal feelings; it is not a research report so it is not a must to have references. I think they can at least show me their views, like they like it or not and why. But of course, they were encouraged to have references. I thought that they had learned how to use citations before in their Research Methodology course. But again, it is not a must here, just show me their views can be enough.*

Following the interview, it could be understood that the lecturer allowed the students to personalize their claims in the reports without supporting evidence from the existing literature. Therefore, in this assignment, a solipsistic argument could be accepted; however, unaverred and unattributed arguments were not allowed as they indicated neither the writers’ views nor the sources used to foreground those views. In order to form such a view, the students needed to understand the stories, interpret their meanings, events, and point out the notable points that they were interested in in the stories. The lecturer scaffolded the students’ acquisition of the meaning of the stories and recognition of the interesting details by suggesting the key features that the students had to include in their reports. These features were the core elements when analyzing literary works that had been instructed at the beginning of the course to the students and reminded in the



assignment guidelines. As the lecturer noted, while referencing previous studies was not mandated, the elements were required

*What they need to have are the elements that I mention in the guidelines such as tone, irony, symbolism, and other points besides their views. When reporting these points, they need to provide evidence from the stories. It is not difficult; they can pick a detail in the story and explain why that detail is interesting to them.*

Further to the inclusion of the mandated features for a literary report, the students were required to attach evidence to justify their claims. As previously reported by the lecturer about referencing to previous research, the evidence was not necessarily from external sources but could be simply retrieved from the stories that were being analyzed and reported. Therefore, the students' critical thinking in the assignments in this course referred to the demonstration of their views towards the stories. From the two interview extracts with the lecturer, critical thinking included personal views with an inclusion of evidence from the stories to justify such views. Therefore, critical thinking in this assignment was foregrounded by the students' understanding of the stories and recognized through how they selected details in the stories and elaborated these details following the regulated features to establish their views. This view of critical thinking would be taken into further analysis of the students' writing in order to reveal the extent to which the students were able to satisfy the lecturer's expectations of critical thinking in this course.

### **The Performance and Evaluation of Critical Thinking**

In this section, I present the findings from the students' assignments. I report the segments that the lecturer admitted as critical thinking and non-critical thinking in the writing of high and low levels of achievement and the reasons for such identification.

#### ***High-Achieving (HA) Writing – Personal Views with Elaborations***

The HA writing was about the story taking place at a barbershop. The barber's uncle had been in such a miserable life. This uncle had risked his life to make ends meet when working in a circus. The uncle placed his head into a tiger's mouth to please the audience. The tiger suddenly closed its jaws, tragically ending the uncle's life. The uncle had been informed of the risk and the accident that had happened to the previous actor. However, he was not hesitant to accept the work. Not only because of the money, but the acceptance of the risk was also attributed to his desperation and misery.

When reporting this story, the student firstly introduced the author, summarised the story, and followed the assignment guidelines to unpack several features of the story. Following her performance, the lecturer noted some interesting personal views. To illustrate, when highlighting the detail about customers always being offered free coffee at the barbershop, the student expressed her opinions as the image of "addiction and unkindness".

**Table 2***The student's writing and lecturer's comment*

The student's writing extract	The lecturer's comment
I always think about the addiction and unkindness of the barber when he mentions coffee all the time when first seeing the narrator. And at the time I read about the tiger, I imagine it will hurt the uncle because tigers are regarded to be very fierce. And my guess is right!	I think you should explain why you have this feeling.

The lecturer highlighted this section for further attention, which I decided to bring into the interview. Reportedly, as a reader, he was unable to recognize how that impression was formed. He advised that there had to be some explanations that led to such a feeling.

*What I like in this sentence is that the student could pay attention to the details in the story. I also like how she was able to show her thinking and feeling. It is what I see as her critical thinking. However, I wonder what made her feel like that. She should have included some details in the story and explained why those details caused the feeling. I mean every student will have their views of the story, so I want to know why she had this particular feeling.*

In this instance, the student's performance of critical thinking was not completely satisfactory to the lecturer. Although there was an alignment between the student's performance of critical thinking in demonstrating her views towards the story or its details, the student needed to include some evidence.

However, in another case, the student was positively evaluated. This positivity was seen in the lecturer's comment on the student's elaboration of the symbolism and ironies of the story. In this part, the student not only included the details of these features but also presented her concluding remarks on how these features seemed to her.

**Table 3***The student's writing and lecturer's comment*

The student's writing extract	The lecturer's comment
The first symbolism is the thought and opinions of the whole world about the big-haired boy expressed in the saying of Miss Gamma, the mother and brother Krikor. They represent the right thing to do in the world. The Barber Uncle Misak is the symbol of human loneliness. The tiger stands for the nature. Last but not least, the Barber signifies the kindness and love sharing for others. In my own perspectives, there are full of meaning symbolisms in the story. However, they happen in three big ironies. The first easy-to-see-irony is that the Aram shop has no customers and just few people come by chance even though he appears to be kind, experienced and wise. The second big irony is that they boy has such bad haircut in the shop that everyone laughs at him, but he looks forward to the next coming back time. The last irony is that Uncle Misak and the tiger are good friends but it ends his life by biting him off unexpectedly.	Interesting views of the story

When being questioned about such a comment on this part, the lecturer explained that he found the ideas interesting as the student was able to express her impression of the story. This could be evident in his comment on the students’ demonstration of the symbolism and ironies in the story. These features had been demonstrated in the assignment guidelines that the students needed to focus on in their reports. While presenting the symbolism and ironies in the story, the student embedded her personal views of the notable details of the story. These views were grappled with the use of first-person pronoun and its possessive form also helped affirm the authorship of the student towards these views. The lecturer noted that

*I think this is what I expect to see. The student showed her views such as three big ironies and meaningful symbolism and she was able to explain what they were or why. This is what I have mentioned earlier. The students do not need to include references from other sources, but they need to give me some examples or details in the stories that give them the views or feelings.*

Furthermore, the lecturer highlighted another example of the student’s critical thinking in terms of providing evaluative judgments on the values of the story. This instance occurred in the concluding paragraph of the writing, so it could be seen as the student’s final message.

**Table 4**

*The student’s writing and lecturer’s comment*

The student’s writing extract	The lecturer’s comment
From the story, there are a few themes I think I would make them into my valuable life lessons. First and foremost, everyone can change themselves to be better. The boy with no cares about the others’ sayings finally decides to have a haircut. Secondly, even in the worst circumstances, people can still keep their good merits. Even though the uncle nearly dies of hunger, he does not steal anything. Thirdly, if people know and try to live for their youth, they can definitely avoid loneliness and poverty. Last but not least, nature and human are not consistent. We do not know how the nature is going to treat the human though we treat them like people. Thanks to the story, I start to take up a passion on reading literature and story since this is the source I learn valuable lessons.	I guess these are the most important parts when analyzing the story. Therefore, it is better if each of these themes is written in more detail with some evidence from the story. Themes are very important in analyzing stories, so you should have more details for them.

Again, the student was able to evaluate the values of the story and conclude these values as messages that she would take as lessons to her life. The lecturer highly appreciated this act of making evaluative judgments and conclusions as “the most important part”. However, similar to the previous instance, there was a lack of evidence and details for these critical points.

*Just like what happens in the previous section, I like her messages. I could see that she understood the story, interpreted its meaning, and presented her personal views. As this is the conclusion in her writing, I really like how she pointed out what she liked most in the story. That is what I want to see in this assignment because I have mentioned to the students that they*

*need to show their views. But again, she did not write enough for this part. It is interesting and valuable, so it should have been written more, not just a paragraph.*

It should be noted that before reaching this conclusion, the student had presented several features in the story that she was interested in. For example, she presented the symbolism (Table 3) about “kindness and love sharing”, which then resulted in the theme of “good merits” or the relation between “tiger” as a symbol of nature and the theme of nature-human inconsistency. Being able to identify those features, the student foregrounded her understanding of the story and concluded the key themes that she was keen on reporting in the assignment. However, the detriment to the values of her performance of critical thinking was the lack of explanations. Therefore, evaluative judgments were included but needed to be accompanied by story-based evidence. When being asked about the high score for this paper, the lecturer noted

*I think this is a good paper. I can see her personal views and the features of the story as I expect. But I hope she can have more explanations for her views. This is a very good paper but it would have been even better if the explanations had been included.*

From the three instances that the lecturer highlighted in this HA writing (Tables 2, 3, and 4), effective critical thinking in reporting literary work needed to have the writer’s view and the evidence or details that elaborate and support the views. As previously mentioned, the lecturer did not mandate the use of references to support the students’ opinions. However, making use of the details within the story being reported was necessary to explain how the student’s views had been formed. Indeed, this would lead to a more convincing argument in the student’s writing.

***Low-Achieving (LA) Writing – A Predominant Summary***

This LA writing was selected as it was graded the lowest in the pool of assignments. What I realized for this low appreciation was the lack of personal views and evidence. While the report was around 910 words, the students spent about 800 words to summarise the story. There was only one instance that the student expressed her view towards the story.

**Table 5**  
*The student’s writing and lecturer’s comment*

The students’ writing extract	The lecturer’s comment
<p>For me, there’s some really fine writing in those opening paragraphs in this story. The ending is interesting in that Brisbane and the Captain decide on a policy of repression: they decide to avoid the issue and hope it won't bother them. They refuse to correlate the contents of their minds. This seems to be a closed-ended encounter with otherness. The story works for me because Brisbane is so unimaginative and that makes him seem credible. I was also amused to see that old bit of folklore about certain foods inducing nightmares and ghostly visions.</p>	<p>This is too much of retelling the story. You need to spend more space for the analysis including the interesting points of the story and your opinions. What about imagery, symbolism, irony, climax...?</p>

Unlike the HA paper, in this LA report, only in the final paragraph did the student present her views of the story (Table 5). For the lecturer, this was very ineffective when other features were missing. For example, the student was expected to point out the symbolism such as a specific detail and its implied meaning or the climax as the notably impressive event of the story. Being able to show these constituted the student's views and evaluation as the student would demonstrate what was interesting, memorable, valuable, or frustrating to her in the story. However, these points were not presented and replaced by a lengthy summary.

*I gave this paper the lowest because I could not clearly see her views or any of the features that I would like to see in a report. You can see in the guidelines that I have shown them several features that they should have in the story. But I cannot see them here. I can't even understand how she could make this conclusion as there was very limited explanation. She was summarising actually. So, I was not sure if she really understood and had a thought about this story. There's no critical thinking here to me.*

Similar to the HA paper, this LA paper lacked the elaboration of the writer's views. The absence of critical thinking as limited demonstration and elaboration of the writer's view lowered the quality of this paper. Therefore, the lecturer was doubtful about the student's understanding of the story and the assignment. From the lecturer's comment and interview responses, it can be understood that the starting point of critical thinking was the understanding of the topic (e.g. the story being reported). Such an understanding could be seen in the students' analyses of the stories based on the features that the students had been instructed in the assignment guidelines. When understanding the story, the students would be able to point out what they found interesting, valuable, or irrelevant in the story. It was also certain that evidence should be provided to justify their views.

## **Discussion**

In this section, I discuss how critical thinking is defined in the course by the lecturer and how the students demonstrate critical thinking in their writing. It has been found that critical thinking is disciplinary-oriented and genre-based. Therefore, the view of critical thinking needs to be placed in a particular context. Specifically, in the Literature course, critical thinking is defined as the students' opinions towards the stories with an inclusion of evidence from the stories to clarify their opinions. In the study, both students attempt to indicate critical thinking in their writing but with different levels of quality as perceived by the lecturer. Thus, the common claim of critical thinking being culturally-determined (Atkinson, 1997) needs to be re-considered because educational contexts including instructional and assessment practices also impact students' performances of critical thinking in writing. As a result, proper pedagogical implications are essential to teach this concept to the students.

The findings of the study have presented what critical thinking means and how it can be demonstrated and evaluated in an English Literature course. In this study, critical thinking is defined by the lecturer as the students' points of view towards the stories that they report. This presentation of critical thinking seems to resonate with the writers' ideational expressions of their beliefs, interests, and views towards the writing subjects (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). Furthermore, this view of critical thinking is relevant to the characteristics of Literature reports in which students are expected to be either or both descriptive and interpretive. These two expectations respectively

refer to students' explanation of the texts and the details in non-judgemental and judgemental ways (Mahmood et al., 2021). In this study, both descriptive and interpretive views were found in the students' writing, and the lecturer highlighted the demands for extensively interpretative work as personal views towards the literary texts as their evaluative judgments of the values of the stories (Bruce, 2014; Tai et al., 2018).

In an English Literature course, such personal views play a dominant role in demonstrating the writers' critical thinking and constitute the quality of the reports. In addition to presenting critical thinking as personal views of the values and devalues of the stories, evidence needs to be presented to support these views. However, it seemed that having supporting evidence was not well-recognized by the students in the course, which was detrimental to their performances. To illustrate, the lecturer challenged and rejected the LA student's mere inclusion of writers' personal views without supporting evidence, also known as solipsistic voice (Wingate, 2012). The primary source of the evidence that the students were recommended was the details of the stories that foregrounded their personal views while referencing previous research or other sources was optional. This view of critical thinking in the course contributes to the complexity of the meaning of critical thinking and does not align with what has been previously claimed about having literature-informed judgments in writing in higher education settings (Wingate, 2012) as intertextuality (Mahmood et al., 2021). However, it needs to be acknowledged that the logic and reasoning used in Literature area are different from their counterparts in scientific and other forms of academic writing (Mahmood et al., 2021). That is, the students in this Literature course are allowed more freedom in their language use and importantly in expressing their perspectives towards the literary texts (Ahmad, 2021a) with evidence from these texts. This characteristic of critical thinking in Literature course might not align other forms of academic writing with using evidence from previous research to support writers' claims (Wingate, 2012). Nevertheless, this misalignment is not an argument to previous claims on critical thinking in academic writing but preferably a different understanding of what critical thinking is perceived in a particular context of an English Literature course. In other words, the lecturer associated Literature reports with personal feelings in the interview, which indicates how critical thinking is expected for this particular form of writing. Therefore, critical thinking is highly contextually conditioned in that different forms of writing and different courses impose different views of critical thinking that writers need to align with (Hyland, 2004, 2005; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015; Zhang & Zhan, 2020). However, the students may not be well aware of the expectation of critical thinking, leading to different levels of performance of critical thinking in their writing.

From these findings, critical thinking is concluded to be dependent on the conditions in a writing context such as genres and disciplines, and understanding what critical thinking means is crucial for successful writing. The lecturer has emphasized the lack of the required features in the LA writing; meanwhile, such features are reported in the HA paper. In this course as a discourse community, the lecturer proposed the requirements of critical thinking and explicated how the students were expected to demonstrate critical thinking in their writing. This finding resonates with previous research on the authority of readers as gatekeepers in a discourse community who impose the writing norms on emerging members (Hackney & Newman, 2013; Hyland, 2004). Hyland (2004) states that "the ways that writers present themselves, negotiate an argument, and engage with their readers is closely linked to the norms and expectations of particular cultural and professional communities" (p.148). Therefore, novice writers as emerging members need to acquire such conventions in their respective communities. These conventions can be recognized through the discourses provided by the gatekeepers such as the assignment guidelines and marking criteria that help disseminate these norms of critical thinking in the course (Hackney & Newman,

2013). The essence of constructing students' understanding and performance of critical thinking in their respective discourse community is affirmed through how the two papers were assessed following their alignments with the lecturer's expectations. Although resistance to the conventional discourse can demonstrate the writers' power and identity (Almenia & Alharb, 2020), this resistance may be detrimental to academic performances. This detriment is evident in the LA paper which did not conform with the expectations of critical thinking proposed by the lecturer in this course. Therefore, it is crucial to provide students with access to different instructional forms to scaffold their understanding of critical thinking to produce successful writing in a course (Dao & Hockey, 2021; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015; Ngo, 2019; Zhang & Zhan, 2020). Hence, pedagogical implications are important to clarify critical thinking to students to support their understanding and performance of critical thinking in writing.

## Conclusion

This study has contributed a definition of critical thinking that is relevant to an English Literature course at the higher education level. Specifically, while critical thinking is essential for academic writing in higher education, there has not been a definitive conceptualization of critical thinking. This study has provided that critical thinking in a Literature course primarily refers to writers' personal views of the values and meaning of the stories, which tends to misalign with common views of critical thinking as evaluative judgments that need supporting evidence from previous research. Therefore, it is helpful for both educators and students to understand that critical thinking should be defined and examined in relation to the context of writing such as the disciplines and the writing genres.

For critical thinking to be unstably defined, pedagogical implications are suggested. It is firstly recommended explicating what critical thinking is and how it is evaluated to the students so that they can align their performance of critical thinking with the lecturers' expectations. Such explication can be achieved by providing students with instructional materials that explain what critical thinking means and how students can demonstrate critical thinking in texts. While instructional materials in this course include assignment guidelines and the marking criteria, additional materials such as writing exemplars can be of high value. Indeed, exemplars are works produced by previous students, which can be of high and low qualities (Carless & Chan, 2017; To & Carless, 2016). In this study, two assignments of different qualities were used to identify critical thinking in Literature reports. These assignments can become valuable exemplars or samples to illustrate different levels of critical thinking in an English Literature course for future students. Critical thinking seems to be an abstract notion; thus, there need to be specific examples of what critical thinking means and how it can be expressed in writing. Lecturers can make use of these exemplars to introduce successful and unsuccessful critical thinking in writing to scaffold students' understanding of this notion. In addition, feedback is also found important to explain abstract knowledge such as critical thinking to students (Carless & Boud, 2018; Hyland, 2019). Therefore, providing feedback to students on how to present critical thinking in writing and organizing meetings with students as teacher-student conferences to discuss the feedback would be tremendously helpful to clarify feedback on unsatisfactory features in the students' performance and construct their understanding of what is expected in the regard of critical thinking for better performances.

This study involved a small sample and focused on only one course. Further research is recommended with a larger group of participants across disciplines, writing genres, and a

comparison between lecturers' and students' perspectives of critical thinking to obtain a more comprehensive view of critical thinking.

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