

## INVESTIGATING EFL LEARNERS' INQUIRY PROCESS IN ACADEMIC READING

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**Abstract:** For a higher-order comprehension, academic reading class at *IAIN Syekh Nurjati Cirebon* is designed to develop the EFL learners' critical reading, and to draw their awareness to the relationship between reading and writing. The study was intended to find out how the students are engaged critically to respond to academic texts, and express an informed opinion on issues addressed in a written form. The idea of reading response is influenced by the work of Rosenblatt. For her, reading transaction is an active event. Although this theory was widely applied in literature major, but the writer sees such a valuable thing to bring this theory into academic reading setting. Qualitative data are presented, which demonstrate how critically minded these learners are when engaging with texts. The author gathered data for this analysis by conducting observation, interview and document analysis of learners' written work. This article concludes with suggestions for how teachers can develop their own critical literacy approach to texts and units. The research concludes that the EFL learners presented in this study established a careful selection of texts, activation of their background knowledge, questions to the author's ideas, intertextuality for answering the questions, and reflection in finishing their product.

**Keywords:** Critical reading; reader-response; academic text

### BACKGROUND

Reading, in learning foreign languages, is a topic that is not used up for discussion. As one of the main language skills, reading greatly contributes to the intellectual development of an individual. This is based on the fact that perception, meaning construction, information acquisition, and reuse of information that has been obtained in the communicative process in written communication is very dependent on reading activities. Therefore, it is not excessive if reading is considered an activity that requires many supporting elements to produce powerful reading skills.

Unfortunately, reading kadung is considered only an activity to find information that is asked in the test questions. Students place reading activities not as an effort to seek, understand, and then interact with the discourse being presented. Reading, finally, only becomes a very pragmatic language skill. This kind of reading activity certainly cannot create students who have critical reading skills.

Reading learning as mentioned above should not only be used as the only type of reading activity in the classroom. Reading activities only form students becoming passive readers who are only able to find information in the text (Davies, 1995). Furthermore, Tomitch (2000) argues that such traditional reading activities do not allow students to read more in-depth information related to the discourse being discussed. The two arguments are very reasonable because the reading process is only directed at the text part, not the whole text. Finally, reading activity is not considered as something interesting and fun.

In fact, in the current era, reading is even considered an activity carried out by people with high intellectual qualifications (Bahadir, 2012, p. 2). Many researchers have emphasized that reading is the main way to obtain information and is also considered as a pre-requisite for achieving success in every step of life. In addition, using a similar approach, reading is defined as an act of adding meaning, forming life, and providing a different perspective.

Reading activity begins with letters and written signs. Discussions about reading activities also cannot rule out contributions from psychological issues. In reading, cognitive processes also become an important aspect (Celik, 2006). Although questions about the effectiveness of physical components and cognitive processes in reading activities have been answered through various forms of research, an understanding of the process of reading is an issue that is still considered complex (Ozdemir, 2007, p. 29).

Existing complexity also shows the complexity of the relationship between the writer and the reader. Many researchers have agreed that there is a very close relationship between the writer and the reader during the reading process (Ozdemir, 2007, Kuscü, 2010, p. 68). Relying on this, reading can be perceived as a complex action when the process of meaning and understanding involves physical, cognitive, individual, and social aspects; the relationship between the writer and the reader is formed from certain codes and symbols in a process; reading is considered a very important activity for humans.

In the world of education, reading is not seen merely as a simple process. Therefore, the concept of critical reading appears as a model approach related to business for 'rereading' which requires many influential concepts, either directly or indirectly, through a broader perspective. This concept refers to variations in concepts that emphasize ideal reading and reading something behind the text. Arici (2012, p. 46) defines critical reading as 'reading ideal'. Critical reading occurs in communicative interactions with texts and is related to the ability to comment on and evaluate texts.

A person's ability to remember what has been read for a long time can only be had when critical reading is done. Ozdemir (2007, p. 18) even emphasizes that critical reading can only be done by an 'intellectual', besides that, critical reading can also result in intellectual enlightenment and an increase in the limits of personal competence. Asihoglu (2008, p. 7) states that a reader who is not critical cannot increase the level of his perception in critical reading, as a critical reader can gain competence up to the level of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In conclusion, critical reading indicates the issues behind the text and readings that involve intact understanding (Comber, 2001).

Critical reading requires an active communication process and involves comments and evaluations of the text being read. In critical reading, the text being read is the basis of the process of reading other texts, while readings from various texts form the basis of reading the text being carried out. That is, even though the process of reading has ended, the transmission of the meaning of a text continues.

At this point, critical reading does not place text as a provider of facts. Text needs to be treated as a medium that describes a topic. Therefore, a critical reader not only understands what is said by the text, but how the text describes a topic. That is, each text is a unique creation of each author.

Rosenblatt (1978), through reader response, has a considerable influence on the reconstruction of the concept of reading. Through this concept, reading becomes an interactive activity because actually the writer and the reader make transactions on the understanding that each of them has (Lynn, 2008).

Critical reading does not stop at understanding what is conveyed by the text. In critical reading, the way the text displays or describes a topic is the estuary of reading activity. Therefore, Kurland (2000) demonstrates the existence of three stages of analysis in critical reading, namely what a text says (restatement), what a text does (description), and what a text means (interpretation).

Restatement is related to the re-submission of topics presented in the text. This skill is a basic skill that should be possessed when the reading process has finished. This activity is only in the form of information repetition, without any discussion process and further interpretation of the topic presented. The next step is description. This stage is more complex because it requires discussion of things that are indeed being discussed and presented by the text. The discussion process in question is considering various information presented in the text. That is, the reader needs to consider the suitability of the topic with the pattern of descriptions performed by the author.

The final stage of critical reading is interpretation. This stage is done through analysis and deepening of the entire text. Interpretation is strongly influenced by the context of each individual. Therefore, this process requires the breadth and flexibility of the reader to be able to make a comprehensive interpretation of all available information.

The three stages of critical reading are directed to fulfill certain goals. Conceptually, critical reading is needed to understand the author's goals, understand persuasive elements in the text, and realize the existence of paradigm bias (Kurland, 2000). From the concept it can be seen that the three objectives do not refer to information explicitly written in the text. All of them require inference from various textual evidences seen. To understand the purpose, a reader needs to identify various patterns of topic selection and language structure. To understand persuasive elements, a reader must classify the selection of persuasive language elements. To realize the paradigm bias, a reader must classify the basic pattern of content selection and the consistency of the language structure used.

The concept of critical reading needs to be integrated in real terms in the learning process in the classroom. In improving critical reading skills, Huckin (2007) has reminded that instructors or instructors need to consider the age and interest of students so that learning feels more relevant to their experience. Huckin (2007) also emphasizes that bringing a discourse that is in accordance with the experience of students in the text being read is mandatory.

In reading learners, Brown (1994) states that there are three phases in reading learning, pre-reading discussions, while reading tasks, and post-reading exercises. In the pre-reading discussion phase, students are introduced to topics and texts that discuss the topic. Discussions can lead to basic elements that can be explicitly seen in the text. Meanwhile-reading tasks refer to providing instructions to students as directions regarding what they need to do when reading. The final stage, in the form of post-reading exercise, is to give certain questions about students' understanding of the information

presented by the text, aspects of vocabulary usage, discussion of the topic and the way the writer presents the topic, and draw conclusions from reading results.

In addition, Swales and Feak (2012) state that to be able to read critically, one must (1) be able to distinguish facts and opinions, (2) consider the author's background, assumptions, and objectives, (3) know the bias of individual understanding, (4) identify evidence and conclusions, (5) consider variations in perspectives and interpretations, and (6) identify various implied and explicit information. These six things become aspects that need to be considered by the teacher. Teaching critical reading involves many aspects, so various things need to be considered so that critical reading is completely different from merely information seeking activities.

In practice, critical reading will give students plenty of room for independent learning. This gives the author the assumption that students will carry out several stages of investigation since the investigation allows them to make decisions about their learning and are responsible for it (SAD Report, 2011). For example, questions require more than just answering questions or getting the right answers. It supports investigation, exploration, search, research, pursuit and study. This is enhanced by involvement with the community of students, each learning from other social interactions.

As educators, we are required by challenges and big responsibilities to involve students in learning so that they develop the skills and knowledge they need to function in today's world. Questions and concerns abound. How do we instill the skills and values needed to experience success in the present and in the future? How can we give students the opportunity to move beyond the recipient of passive knowledge to become a knowledge builder, able to create creative and innovative solutions to a problem? How can we play a role in human progress by equipping our students with the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to solve the fearsome problems of our time? Therefore, this study aims to explore the learning process of students in the practice of literacy or critical reading which includes what and how to engage their critical mindset in reading academic texts.

## **METHOD**

The researcher spent about 4 weeks with 4 classes in the third semester in the Reading for Academic Purposes course for observing and writing field notes related to student learning in the classroom; by recording what students are doing before, during and after the process of responding to academic texts. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 informants. The criteria for informants were chosen based on their work during the process of responding to academic texts. Interviews and analysis of documents aim to find out how each phase is carried out, as well as to determine the extent to which involvement of critical patterns of students in responding to academic texts.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The researchers encode data from observations and field notes based on the response process (before, during, and after responding to the text process). During the review of the encoded theme, the author makes a note of his thoughts related to the activities the participants took to the text. The following are procedures performed by students in the process of responding / responding to academic texts.

Observation Focus	Coded Activity (Phases)
<b>Before Responding Process</b>	Selecting the text
	Summarizing the text
<b>During Responding Process</b>	Responding to author's ideas
	Supporting the responses with evidences
<b>After Responding Process</b>	Combining the summary with the responses in a coherent thought

Table 1. Procedure Applied by the EFL Learners in Responding the Text

The table above shows the procedures applied by Tadris English students in response to the text. First, they are instructed to choose the text to be responded to. They are only given a number of criteria about articles by lecturers such as: articles must be based on research and published in a clear journal identity. Second, they are instructed to summarize the text (article). This phase is intended to examine their understanding. In addition, a summary will be included in their final product. Third, they were instructed to respond to the writer's ideas. Fourth, they are instructed to support their responses with evidence / references. The basic idea is that they must link the text being read to several other sources to support their response. Finally, they are instructed to combine summaries with responses in coherent thinking. This phase is the task of writing where they have to complete their final product (response essay).

#### 1. Selecting the Texts

In this phase, students are involved to choose texts that must be responded independently. The study also revealed that prior knowledge (background knowledge) of participants did not influence their choices directly (because they need to discuss topics in groups), but prior knowledge influenced their perceptions of their topics, whether difficult or easy. This finding confirms that students' initial knowledge can influence their question-based learning (Beach, 2014).

The reading comprehension section is considered to be able to foster critical thinking skills from students of English. There are several techniques and strategies proposed in applying the reading comprehension section in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. In particular, in producing academic writings such as essays are critical responses. There are several strategies that are instructed based on three phases. In the planning phase, such as considering choosing texts, taking main points, and making summaries. Here is choosing text, where EFL participants must be careful in choosing the text they want to respond to. In choosing what needs to be read by the writer and the reader is an important part of the task writing process (Crème Phillis and Lea Mary, 2003: 43).

Based on respondents' statements in in-depth interviews, they informed about the criteria for academic texts that must be chosen to respond to and the text areas chosen by their own groups. First, they are instructed in the process of selecting text, but they can also choose the text area freely. In general, the criteria are the same,

academic texts cannot be more than 2013 published, texts must be from journals that have a clear identity, and better if the text includes international journals.

Furthermore, researchers want to know about the reasons for EFL participants in choosing articles to be responded to. Where, this phase provides students with an understanding of the text, their inquiry process in this phase aims to be the opening phase of the investigation because they need to activate or build their background knowledge before they develop their own questions on the ideas presented (Moreillon, 2014).

Based on the respondents' statements in the interview, most of the reasons for English students in choosing text are based on the level of language difficulties in the text, the choice of language of the author, and they think that the articles chosen by them are in accordance with their competencies and interests. This is in accordance with Crème Phillis and Lea Mary (2003: 43) which emphasize that what you need to do is to consider carefully what you will need to complete a particular part of the work and then choose your appropriate material.

Furthermore, after selecting the text, students must take important points before making a summary. One of the successful writing techniques in the academic environment is to be able to integrate the important points of what has been read into the writer's own writing (Crème Phillis and Lea Mary, 2003: 52).

Based on the results of the interviews, the students were actually instructed by their lecturers in the writing process. The next strategy used by students is to take the main points from the articles chosen by them, to help them make summaries. Because, summarizing information is considered to help solidify it for use in their own papers, summaries help them understand the main ideas and content in articles, parts of a book, or a group of paragraphs (Anson, 2003).

## 2. Summarizing the Texts

In this phase, students are involved to summarize the text. The typical action taken by participants in this phase based on interviews is reading text, identifying vocabulary, and taking the main points of the text. Because this phase provides students with an understanding of the text, their inquiry process in this phase aims to be the opening phase of the investigation because they need to activate or build their background knowledge before they develop their own questions on the ideas presented (Moreillon, 2014).

After highlighting the main points in the article, EFL participants were instructed in the writing process to understand the text. Because students cannot understand text without integrating important points. One successful writing technique in the academic environment is to be able to integrate the important points of what they have read into their own writing (Phillis Crème and Lea Mary, 2003: 52). They are instructed to use certain strategies. Like Maimon et. al (2009) says that summaries help us understand the main ideas and content in articles, parts of a book, or a group of paragraphs.

As a result of interviews with respondents, respondents were generally fostered in understanding articles by summarizing. In line with Maimon et. al (2009) which states that considering using an article summary or study summary to help the author to organize and summarize the source. Summarizing each source is to determine

important and relevant information from each source, such as findings, methodologies, theories, etc. Based on answers from respondents, that the benefits of summarizing strategies are easier to understand, because the language used by their own words.

### 3. Responding to author's ideas

In this phase, students are involved in responding to the writer's ideas. This phase can be considered as the main phase involving their critical involvement and investigation process. It connects students with what they already know and motivates them to bring their own questions to the writer's ideas. A good question should be an invitation to know to learn more about something that was asked. The more open and provocative, the better the question for investigation. However, the findings indicate that students often ask wrong or inadequate questions, because their relevant knowledge is incomplete. This finding also shows that participants use different approaches to generate important questions and sub-questions.

The students respond to the text on several criteria, namely the use of the author's language, author's ideas, and the structure of the article. But, in this phase more emphasis on the writer's ideas to be developed and discussed. In responding to ideas, they use the reader response theory. So, using efferent reading can help develop ideas from the author. Ideas in reading efferent dominant, children must learn to focus on extracting the public meaning of the text. Attention must be given especially to the top-of-the-inner-iceberg "tokens", to regulate abstract concepts as indicated by verbal symbols. This can produce information, clues, logical conclusions that will be the remainder of Rosenblatt's reading action (1987, p. 271).

Based on interviews, some respondents generally have the same clarification that they only respond to articles about author's ideas. As confirmation of the first respondent that when he asked his instructor to respond to the structure of the grammar of the author, the instructor suggested not responding to this beforehand, just considering and emphasizing the writer's ideas to be developed and responded to. In the process of rereading this, the reader reconstructs the structure and meaning of the ideas expressed by others. They need to do careful, active, reflective and analytical reading. "Developing strong interpretations requires awareness of all processes and changes in reading, understanding individual responses better by comparing them with others, and thus looking at some interpretative possibilities" (Woodlief & Cornis-Pope, nd) quoted in (Eliana & Harold , 2015). Then, the second and third respondents added that synthesizing and reading well to respond to the article was a way that could help develop the author's ideas.

### 4. Supporting the responses with evidences

In this phase, students are involved to correlate the text being read to several other texts to support the answers to what they are asking in the previous phase. Answers to urgent questions need to be built. Students build responses based on various resources and reflect in creative ways that produce original products.

The qualitative analysis of this study shows that some participants cannot consciously refer to their questions when they are looking for relevant information. Therefore, as Tallman and Joyce (2006) suggest, instructors need to guide students to

relate their information to their questions to make their searches more focused and meaningful, rather than gathering interesting information.

In their duties, students must prove their arguments or responses or statements with some evidence to strengthen their responses in their essays. Usually, accurate sources to support the author's responses come from leading journals. Based on interviews with respondents, they stated that they used strategies in recording sources to support their responses in the essay writing response process. At the top of the chart is space to record the source, and along the side of the chart are spaces to record the main points of the argument about the topic being discussed. The strategy is a synthesis matrix. This can encourage students to collect and compare sources for evidence. Synthesis matrix is a chart that allows researchers to sort and categorize various arguments presented on a problem (Hussey, 2006). All respondents stated that at least need 2 sources in the same topic and the same area to support writing ideas. Using various information sources allows us to find answers to questions, compare points of view, and get a better understanding than just using one text (Blachowicz & Ogle: 2001).

Based on interviews with lecturers, he said that using matrix synthesis can help students to distinguish and compare between two or more sources in the same topic. Furthermore, this can improve student competence in synthesizing sources and understanding the main points of the source. Hussey (2006) has adapted that the Synthesis Matrix helps writers record the main points of each source and document how the sources relate to each other. After summarizing and evaluating the source, arrange in a matrix to help the author see how they relate to each other, and apply to each of their themes or variables. By arranging resources in the matrix based on themes or variables, the writer can see how their sources relate to each other, and can start thinking about how they intertwine them together to create narratives.

5. Combining the summary with the responses in a coherent thought

This phase is a product of another phase. This is a component of making meaning in which data is considered as evidence that supports, denies or adds to the text being responded to. They must combine their summaries and responses. In constructing their responses, they need to be connected from one data (answer from question) to another in coherent thinking. This phase can be a reflection of them to re-examine connections from one idea to another. They can even make corrections to the questions they make.

Students are nurtured by strategies in completing their final response process. Where, students combine their work processes from summarizing, and synthesizing related source topics, then responding to related article topics. Activities to choose and try to regulate based on the habits, assumptions, and expectations of the readers that have been obtained become the environment that is also responded to (Rosenblatt, 1978: 17) quoted (Eliana & Harold, 2015).

Based on interviews with lecturers, he stated that their final assignment process was instructed and systematic. The strategy in this step involves summarizing and responding. First, students must find out the contents of the article, the findings in the



experiment, and the methods used, therefore, they must understand the selected article, and that should be included in the summary. By summarizing each source is to determine important and relevant information from each source with related topics, such as findings, methodologies, theories, etc. Because considering the use of article summaries or summary studies can help the author to organize and summarize the sources with related topics (Hussey, 2006). Then, after summarizing, students must respond to the writers' ideas. Responses are very important in helping students move through the stages of the writing process and various ways of providing feedback used, including teacher-student conferences, friend responses, recorded feedback, and reformulation (Hyland, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

The portraits presented in this study offer a window for students where critical literacy and inquiry learning work together. This study reveals that promoting critical literacy in classroom based inquiry is an active process that requires careful planning and continuous reflection. Students in this study carry out careful selection of texts, activation of their background knowledge, questions for author's ideas, intertextuality to answer questions, and reflection in completing their products. This teaching practice is the basis for the development of critical thinking. and awareness and taking place within the framework of investigations where misconceptions, questions, and ideas help guide the learning process, providing many opportunities to explore the text being read.

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