
DEVELOPING STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING IN ESSAY WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is the ability to think critically, clearly, and logically in order to gather, interpret, and evaluate information. One of the types of essays to develop students' critical thinking is comparison and contrast essay. In comparison and contrast essay, students have to figure out what criteria they want to focus on in comparing (similarities) and contrasting (differences) of two things or items. By promoting students' critical thinking in comparison and contrast essay, it can be assumed that students can strengthen their memories, develop higher-order thinking skills, increase their comprehension, and enhance their writing in the content areas. Therefore, this present paper aims at providing theoretical views on the issues of critical thinking in writing class as well as offering lecturer's creative and innovative ways in lecturing comparison and contrast essay. The participants of this research were from one class consisting of 25 college students at Indraprasta PGRI University, semester VI, academic year 2015/2016. The methodology was a descriptive qualitative. The research findings showed that students were good at organization (introduction, body, and conclusion), content (logical development of ideas), and vocabulary (style and quality of expression); however, they were still poor at punctuation, spelling, mechanics and grammar.

Keywords: *Students' Critical Thinking, Writing, Comparison and Contrast Essay*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is an inseparable skill in learning a language after listening, speaking, and reading. It is about discovering and expressing ideas or information from a writer to a reader. Writing has been a very hard and challenging task because it is a process which a writer has to create, plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish it as a product. To get a good product of writing, a learner as a writer has to develop his or her critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking is the ability to think critically, clearly, and logically in order to gather, interpret, and evaluate information. It means making reasoned judgments that are logical and well thought out. Critical thinking in addition includes the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. As a result, someone with critical thinking skills is able to understand the logical connections between ideas, identify, construct, and evaluate arguments, detect inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning, solve problems systematically, identify the relevance and importance of ideas, and reflect on the justification of one's belief and values.

One of the types of essays to develop students' critical thinking is comparison and contrast essay. In comparison and contrast essay, students have to figure out what criteria they want to focus on in comparing (similarities) and contrasting (differences) of two things or items. The goals of a comparison and contrast essay are varied. Some comparison and contrast essays are designed to foster critical thinking skills for the students. By promoting students' critical thinking in comparison and contrast essay, it can be assumed that students can strengthen their memories, develop higher-order thinking skills, increase their comprehension, and enhance their writing in the content areas.

On the basis of the background, this present paper aims at providing theoretical views on the issues of critical thinking in writing class as well as offering lecturer's creative and innovative ways in lecturing comparison and contrast essay. Therefore, we would like to find out the research findings of developing students' critical thinking in comparison and contrast essay at Indraprasta PGRI University, semester VI, academic year 2015/2016.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally, understanding the logical connection between ideas. According to Ennis (1985: 45), critical thinking is reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do. Critical thinkers raise vital questions and problems, formulate them clearly, gather and assess relevant information, use abstract ideas, think open-mindedly, and communicate effectively with others. Moreover, Maiorana (1992) noted that the purpose of critical thinking is to use questioning techniques to achieve understanding, evaluate view-points, and solve problems. In essence, critical thinking requires students to use his or her ability to reason. It is about being an active learner rather than a passive recipient of information.

Critical thinking is considered to be central to higher levels of education or a fundamental goal of learning (Kuhn, 1999; Keeley and Shemberg, 1995). Critical thinking includes the component skills of analyzing arguments, making inferences using inductive or deductive reasoning, judging or evaluating, and making decisions or solving problems. Background knowledge is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for enabling critical thought within a given subject.

Critical thinking is a physical act by verbalizing or a thought process which is showcased through writing by displaying the ability to think through problem. When it comes to university contexts, critical thinking is defined in terms of abilities or skills such as selection, evaluation, analysis, reflection, questioning, inference and judgment (Tapper, 2004). Despite the many diverging views on the nature of critical thinking, there is consensus in the literature that critical thinking is exhibited through the students' abilities to "identify issues and assumptions, recognize important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence or authority, and deduce conclusions" (Tsui, 2002: 743). When critical thinking is applied to writing, the above abilities are expressed through the process of making academic writing.

It can be concluded that critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally about what to do or what to believe. It includes the ability to engage in reflective and independent

thinking. It is also a process that challenges an individual to use reflective, reasonable, rational thinking, to gather, interpret, and evaluate information in order to derive a judgment. Critical thinking can be applied in a variety of learning platforms such as reading, written work and discussions; therefore, critical thinking can help students acquire knowledge, improve the theories, and strengthen their arguments.

Writing

A successful and effective communication can be achieved through the use of correct and appropriate language that fits to situation, and a good command of vocabulary and grammar are essential. The mastery of these language components is partly supported through learning the four basic English skills, and one of very important basic skill of learning English is writing. Harmer (1998: 79) pointed out that writing as a very important language skill, “writing as a skill: by far the most important reason for teaching writing, of course, is that is a basic language skill, just as important speaking, listening and reading. Students need to know how to write letters, how to put written reports together, how to reply to advertisements – and increasingly.” From the statement above, it can be assumed that writing has a main role in developing skill. It presents how the brain works by using the students’ mind to think by delivering information such as ideas, opinion and spread their creativity. It also leads them to be more competitive when they want to have a good position for job.

Writing is the integrating part in learning process, because writing is one of the language skills that have to be mastered by the students as a medium of intellectual communication. So it has very important role for writing ability determines the students’ achievement in learning process. Furthermore, Macdonald, Andrew & Gina (1996) defined writing as the main part of education, “writing is a vital part of education, because writing is basic of thinking and education is all about thinking. Writing forces to think, explore ideas, find out an argument, evaluate product.” From the statement above, it can be assumed that writing has a main role in education. It presents how the brain works by using the students’ mind to think. Education needs thought to deliver information such as ideas, opinion and spread their creativity. Both of the functions are able to be evaluated by writing a letter, essay, poem as the product. It redirects to get the process of teaching, training, and learning.

It can be concluded that writing is a vital skill in basic knowledge development. It presents how the brain works by using the students’ mind to think by delivering information such as ideas, opinion and spread their creativity. It is one of productive skills in which students are able to produce written form to communicate with others.

Comparison and Contrast Essay

Comparison and contrast is a method of showing similarities and dissimilarities between subjects. Comparison is concerned with organizing and developing points of similarity; contrast has the same function for dissimilarity. As Caplan (1984: 55) pointed out that exposure to expository writing beyond the “explaining” paper is essential: “The comparison essay is one of the most important writing lessons that students can master.” Sometimes a writing assignment

may require that student cover only similarities or only dissimilarities. Occasionally, an instructor may ask the students to separate one from the other. Usually, students will combine them within the larger design of his or her paragraph or essay. For convenience, the term comparison is sometimes applied to both comparison and contrast because both use the same techniques and are usually combined into one operation.

Organization of Comparison and Contrast Essay

The first key to writing a successful comparison/contrast essay is to organize it carefully. One way to organize a comparison/contrast essay is to use point-by-point organization, which is each point of comparison becomes the topic of a paragraph. The other way to organize a comparison/contrast essay is to arrange all the similarities together in a block and all the differences together in a block or vice versa. The following table is the model of point-by-point and block organization (Savage & Mayer, 2005: 113-115).

Table 1
Model of Point-by-point Organization and Block Organization

Point-by-point Organization	Block Organization
I. Introduction Thesis Statement	I. Introduction Thesis Statement
II. Body Paragraph 1 1. Topic Sentence- Aspect 1 Topic 1- Aspect 1 Topic 2- Aspect 1 Transition Sentence Body Paragraph 2 2. Topic Sentence- Aspect 2 Topic 1- Aspect 2 Topic 2- Aspect 2 Transition Sentence Body Paragraph 3 3. Topic Sentence- Aspect 3 Topic 1- Aspect 3 Topic 2- Aspect 3 Transition Sentence	II. Body Paragraph 1 (Similarities or Differences) 1. Topic Sentence- Topic 1 Aspect 1 Aspect 2 Aspect 3 Transition Sentence Body Paragraph 2 (Differences or Similarities) 2. Topic Sentence- Topic 2 Aspect 1 Aspect 2 Aspect 3 Transition Sentence
III. Conclusion	III. Conclusion

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method that will be used in this research will be descriptive and analytical method. Descriptive research is the type of research that takes into account the need for accurate information about an issue at hand. In other words, this type of research is used to describe an

already existing phenomenon whether in an organization or in academics. “Descriptive research mainly deals with the “description of the state of affairs as it is at present” (Kumar, 2008: 6). In other words, descriptive research attempt to describe explain and interpret conditions of the present. This research aims at providing theoretical views on the issues of critical thinking in writing class.

In analytical research, the researcher has to use facts or information already available, and analyze these to make a critical evaluation of the material. It involves the identification and interpretation of data already existing in documents. “The researcher has to use facts or information already available and analyze these in order to make a critical evaluation of the material” (Kumar, 2008: 9). This research analyses students’ critical thinking in comparison and contrast essay. The participants of this research were from one class consisting of 25 college students at Indraprasta PGRI University, semester VI, academic year 2015/2016.

The steps of lecturing comparison and contrast essay to develop students’ critical thinking as follows:

1. Lecturer delivered comparison and contrast essay material by lecturing method.
2. Students shared ideas and discussed it in pairs.
3. Students searched more detail material on internet and discussed it in groups.
4. In the next meeting, each student finally chose one of two topics then wrote a comparison and contrast essay in the classroom supported by PPT slides.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Students’ result of writing comparison and contrast essay is based on writing assessment indicators from Brown (2004: 244-245) with range score 1 to 5. Detail assessment is depicted as follows:

Table 2

Writing Assessment Indicators						
Students	Organization	Content	Grammar	Punctuation/ Mechanics/ Spelling	Vocabulary	Score
1	4/5	4/5	4/4	5/4	4/4	84/88
2	4/4	4/4	3/2	3/3	3/3	68/64
3	4/4	4/4	3/3	3/3	4/4	72/72
4	5/5	4/5	4/5	5/4	4/5	88/96
5	4/5	4/4	4/4	3/3	4/5	76/84
6	4/5	4/5	3/2	3/3	3/3	68/72
7	5/5	4/4	3/3	3/3	4/4	76/76
8	5/5	4/4	3/3	4/3	3/4	76/76
9	5/5	4/4	4/3	4/4	4/4	84/80
10	5/5	4/4	3/3	3/3	3/3	76/76
11	5/5	5/4	3/3	3/3	3/3	76/72
12	5/5	5/5	4/4	4/3	4/4	88/84

13	4/4	4/4	3/3	4/4	4/4	76/76
14	5/5	4/4	3/2	3/3	4/4	76/72
15	3/3	3/3	4/4	4/4	4/4	72/72
16	3/4	3/3	4/4	4/4	4/3	72/72
17	4/5	4/5	3/2	3/3	4/4	72/76
18	3/4	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/4	60/68
19	5/5	5/4	3/3	4/3	4/4	84/76
20	4/5	4/4	2/2	3/3	3/3	64/68
21	5/4	4/4	2/2	4/3	3/4	72/68
22	5/5	5/5	3/3	4/3	4/4	84/80
23	4/4	4/4	2/2	3/4	3/4	64/72
24	5/5	5/5	4/4	5/5	5/5	96/96
25	5/5	4/4	3/3	3/3	4/4	76/76
Total	110/116	102/104	80/76	90/96	89/98	1,900/ 1,912
	4.40/4.64	4.08/4.16	3.20/3.04	3.60/3.84	3.56/3.92	76.00/ 76.48
Average	4.52	4.12	3.12	3.72	3.74	76.24

To get reliable results; therefore, the two researchers assessed students' writing of comparison and contrast essay. The red font color was the assessment from the first researcher, whereas the black font color was the assessment from the second researcher.

DISCUSSION

On the basis of the students' results of writing comparison and contrast essay, it showed that the average score of students' writing of comparison and contrast essay was 76.24. Dealing with writing assessment indicators, the first highest score went to organization (introduction, body, and conclusion) with the average score was 4.52. Then the second highest score went to content (logical development of ideas) with the average score was 4.12. The third was vocabulary with the average score was 3.74; the fourth is punctuation, spelling, and mechanics with the average score is not different from the third that was 3.72. Finally, the lowest score dealt with grammar was 3.12.

Students were excellent at organization because title was appropriate. Topic was stated. Unity and coherence of introduction, body, and conclusion was acceptable. Transitional expressions were used properly; however, few ideas were not fully developed perfectly by some evidence.

Students were very good at developing their logic of ideas (content). The ideas were concrete. Essay addressed the assigned topic and the issue but missed a few points. Some extraneous material was still present; somehow, the essay reflected thought.

Students were good at vocabulary. They attempted variety vocabulary; however, the use of vocabulary was inappropriate. For example, "We can *make* a status." The expression of ideas was mediocre. The essay had lack of awareness of register; it might be too wordy.

Dealing with punctuation, spelling, and mechanics, students' writing was adequate. They made more erroneous punctuation marks than spelling and mechanics. One of the examples

was they got wrong when they inserted semicolon and comma for connector (conjunction or conjunctive adverb) in a compound sentence. There were some occasional spelling errors such as simple (simple), actrees (actresses), multi-talent (multitalented), feminime (feminine), merried (married), etc. Even though they used handwriting, they wrote neatly; the paper was also neat and legible.

Students were poor at grammar. Some students made errors mostly in grammar such as subject-verb agreement (She has three childrens.) linking verb (She looks attractively.), prepositions (...in Facebook and Twitter), articles (She is a best singer.), verb forms (They can success.), comparative degree (Twitter has more simple features than Facebook.), singular and plural noun (Agnez Mo is one of the most famous singer in Indonesia.). Besides, there were some fragments (They alike but different.) and run-on sentences (Picture without creating album photos.).

CONCLUSION

On the basis of result and discussion, the result findings showed that students were good at organization (introduction, body, and conclusion), content (logical development of ideas), and vocabulary (style and quality of expression); however, they were still poor at punctuation, spelling, mechanics and grammar. It could be concluded that developing students' critical thinking while teaching comparison and contrast essay was successful.

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