EFL STUDENTS’ LEARNING NEEDS IN CRITICAL WRITING: WHAT DO THE TEACHERS SAY?

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Abstract: Despite the growing attention to EFL students’ development of critical writing, research identifying their learning needs for this language skill remains more paucity of evidence. The present study aims to explore EFL teachers’ perspectives on students’ learning needs of critical writing course in university setting. Drawing on exploratory qualitative research, this study invites eight EFL teachers teaching critical writing course at some universities in Surakarta municipality, Indonesia. The required data are elicited using semi-structured interviews to reach in-depth understanding about the research issue. The findings yield a number of issues conveyed by the EFL teachers related to students’ learning needs of critical writing. First, teaching critical writing plays a crucial role in shaping students’ profile toward the twenty-first century skills. Second, a learning model of critical writing instruction, including the syllabus and plannings, learning technique and media, instructional materials, and assessment model, must be developed. As the pedagogical implication, ELT practitioners and policy makers can use this study’s findings as references in taking policy related to teaching critical writing in university setting.

Keywords: Critical Writing; Need Analysis; EFL Teachers; EFL Students

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INTRODUCTION
The Merdeka curriculum, which emphasizes independent and flexible learning, fosters critical writing by encouraging students to think independently, analyze diverse perspectives, and express their thoughts coherently. This approach aligns with the principles of critical writing, where clear argumentation and critical analysis are essential. As a twenty-first century skill included in Merdeka Curriculum established by the government of Indonesia, critical thinking has gained more attention in the field of education, including English language teaching (ELT). In ELT context, enhancing students’ critical thinking can be through the administration of critical writing course (Hanim et al., 2020; Suteja & Setiawan, 2022). Thus, developing language students’ critical writing abilities especially in university level is a must. Critical writing enhances students' cognitive skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, which are highly valued in both academic and professional settings (Kazemian et al., 2021). For educators, this implies a need for a more holistic approach to teaching, integrating writing tasks that encourage analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Incorporating these elements into the curriculum not
only improves students' writing skills but also prepares them to navigate and contribute to a complex, information-rich world (Ebadi & Rahimi, 2018). Thus, the emphasis on critical writing in EFL education reflects a broader goal of equipping students with essential skills for lifelong learning and global citizenship.

The concept of critical writing is closely linked to the practice of critical thinking, where an argument consists of a series of claims presented as justifications for accepting additional claims and ultimately reaching a conclusion (Lustyantie et al., 2022). According to Abdelrahim (2023), the goal of critical writing is to sway the audience by providing facts and reasons in a manner that convinces them or gains their acceptance. In order to be argumentative, a writer must systematically and logically present the facts, organizing them in a structured and coherent way that leads to a convincing conclusion (Nejmaoui, 2019). It is widely recognized that metacognition plays a role in enhancing one's ability to construct compelling arguments. The structure and content of the reasons that persuade readers to accept the conclusion may vary, but they always include a series of claims presented as justifications to capture the audience's attention (Huang, 2012). Engaging in critical writing plays a crucial role in developing students' metacognitive and critical thinking abilities. According to Nejmaoui (2019), there is a direct correlation between the level of a writer's metacognitive and critical thinking abilities and their proficiency in effectively crafting a critical essay.

As critical writing is growing up as an interesting topic of discussion among ELT practitioners, in the recent years, there has been significant focus on critical thinking within the field of language education. Teaching critical thinking appears to be an ideal approach to promote students' critical skills, as Lee (2018) highlighted that critical writing depends on critical thinking. According to Lin et al. (2018), integrating critical thinking in the teaching of language can enhance meaningful interaction in the target language. Critical writing must be taken into account by EFL teachers, and the profile of skillful critical writers has to be one of the intended learning outcomes of language education at universities (Ataç, 2015). It is due to critical writing can be used as the vehicle for students to express their critical thinking (Huang, 2012). It allows students to use logical and critical analysis, interpretation, inference, induction, deduction, and evaluation in their writing (Abdelrahim, 2023). The integration of critical thinking is essential in creating a critical piece of writing. Unquestionably, as emphasized by Mehta and Al-Mahroqi (2015), the acquisition of critical thinking skill is important for students during their university education and they must be aware of it. This crucial role of critical writing underlies the rationale of this study to examine EFL students' learning needs on this subject.

Recent research on need analysis for critical and academic writing highlights several key insights into the challenges and requirements of teaching these skills in university settings. A systematic literature review by Seufert et al. (2021) identified critical thinking and academic literacy as fundamental competencies that need to be developed for effective academic writing. The review emphasized that students must engage in conceptualization, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information to enhance their academic writing skills. This comprehensive approach underscores the necessity for structured educational models that promote these competencies through targeted writing exercises and reflective practices (Cai, 2017). Additionally, research conducted by Teng and Yue (2023) examined the relationship between metacognitive writing strategies and critical thinking skills. The study found that fostering metacognitive awareness can significantly enhance students' ability to engage in critical writing. By teaching students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their writing processes, educators can help them develop deeper analytical
skills and improve their overall writing proficiency. These findings indicate the importance of incorporating metacognitive training into writing curricula to support the development of critical writing abilities.

However, specific need analysis on critical writing course remains more paucity of evidence. How the syllabus looks like, the instructional materials, learning technique and media, and the assessment model of critical writing course in university setting are still unexplored. Therefore, the present study aims to fill the gap by exploring students’ learning needs of critical writing course as seen from EFL teachers’ perspectives. Conducting research on EFL teachers' perspectives on the learning needs of critical writing is urgently needed due to the pivotal role teachers play in shaping the development of students' writing skills. Teachers' insights are crucial for identifying gaps in current curricula and understanding the specific challenges students face in mastering critical writing. Given the increasing emphasis on critical thinking and analytical skills in both academic and professional settings, it is essential to ensure that teaching methods and materials are effectively aligned with these demands. Moreover, teachers' firsthand experiences can provide valuable feedback on the effectiveness of existing instructional strategies and highlight areas for improvement, ultimately leading to more targeted and impactful educational practices.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

**Research design**
The current study aims to explore EFL teachers’ views and insights on learning needs in critical writing instruction at university level. To reach the objective, exploratory case study research was employed. It allowed the researchers to delve into participants’ thoughts on particular issues and phenomena (Yin, 2015). This research concerned on EFL learning needs in critical writing course, and considered this issue as crucial since critical writing is closely associated to the twenty-first century skill that must be acquired by students (Tight, 2021). In this context, exploratory case study was an appropriate research design to depict EFL teachers’ perspectives on students’ needs in critical writing instruction.

**Setting and Participants**
This study involved eight EFL teachers teaching in English education program at four universities in Surakarta municipality, Central Java province, Indonesia. Involving eight participants in qualitative research using interviews is justified because it allows for in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perspectives, which is essential for rich, detailed data (Yin, 2015). This sample size is manageable, facilitating thorough analysis and meaningful interaction during interviews. Additionally, it provides enough variation to identify common themes while remaining small enough to delve deeply into each participant's unique viewpoint (Tight, 2021). The participants' selection was based on purposive sampling techniques with two primary criteria, i.e. (1) teaching critical writing (or argumentative and academic writing) for university EFL students and (2) having teaching experience in the similar subject for more than three years. All participants are native Indonesian, having master’s (N: 5) and doctor’s (N:3) degrees in English language teaching. Their ages ranged from 32 to 43 years old, and their teaching experiences ranged from 5 to 11 years. The participants informed consent to participate in this study before the data collection, and they were well-notified that their responses were only used for this study.
Instrument and Data Collection
The data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Magaldi and Berler (2020) characterized semi-structured interviews as dialogues wherein the interviewer possesses a guideline in hand but does not adhere strictly to the predetermined set of questions. This way facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the discussed subject matter, as the interviewer could delve into nuanced aspects by posing open-ended follow-up questions based on the informants’ responses (Brown & Danaher, 2019). In this study, the interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online via video conferencing, accommodating participants’ preferences, and took place from April to May 2024. All sessions were conducted in Indonesian, and lasted for about 30 – 35 minutes each. About the interview protocol, the questions focused on several themes, i.e. (1) the importance and aim of critical writing course, (2) how the subject was taught in university, and (3) challenges of the subject administration. To ensure its clarity, the interview protocol underwent validation by two experts in qualitative research methodology in language learning. The first author was responsible to conduct all participant interviews to maintain consistency and minimize bias or deviation in the process.

Data Analysis
This study employed thematic analysis (Lochmiller, 2021) for data analysis. This study followed an iterative methodology, wherein researchers systematically revisited and analyzed the data to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the research subject (Morgan & Nica, 2020). Data analysis commenced with a process of familiarization through examination of interview transcripts. Initial coding was executed based on the predetermined research themes pertaining to teaching critical writing in university setting. Subsequently, codes with similar connotations were grouped into potentially analogous themes and subjected to continuous comparative analysis. Throughout this process, the researchers scrutinized and refined emerging themes based on insights gleaned from the interviews. A cross-case comparison was further undertaken to refine the overarching themes concerning the teaching critical writing. During this phase, the researchers engaged in deliberations to achieve consensus on the final findings and conclusions. This study identified a total of five thematic findings, which are expounded upon in the subsequent section.

FINDINGS
The data analysis in this study resulted in three major themes as the findings, i.e. (1) the importance and objective of critical writing course, (2) the teaching of critical writing, (3) and challenges of critical writing course. The following section is the findings, presented in narratives accompanied by direct quotations of the participants’ responses to support the delineation of the findings. The code P indicates participant with P1 – P8 as the total of 8 participants participating in this study.

The Importance and Aim of Critical Writing Course
Several participants conveyed that one crucial objective of critical writing course for EFL students was to equip students with abilities and skills for critical and reflective thinking and writing as one of competencies for prospective teachers and researchers. P5, who has been teaching this subject for 7 years, for example, said:
“I think this subject [critical writing] is very important for EFL students since it provides experience to write critically with clear and strong arguments. Also, it enhances students’ reflective thinking toward particular issues or phenomena.” (P5, transcript 151)

P1 added that critical writing subject taught in the university could foster students’ critical thinking ability, which enabled them to evaluate and analyze issues and phenomena and provided appropriate responses accordingly. P1 claimed for having successful language learners was not only good at grammatical and interpersonal communication but also excellent in delivering ideas and thoughts through critical writing. Another participant, P8, argued that critical writing is essential for language learners since it is in line with the 21st century skill that must be acquired by students in today’s globalization era.

“Critical writing course helps students to improve their critical thinking skills, so they can perform critical evaluation and analysis toward reading texts and issues in their environments. Also, successful language learners have to master not only grammatical rules of the language and how to use it but also excellent writing ability.” (P1, transcript 008)

“Sure, it [critical writing] is very crucial because it is included in one of the 21st century skills enacted in Merdeka Kurikulum established by the government of Indonesia”. (P8, transcript 311)

Because his research area focuses on students’ academic writing, P1 added that teaching critical writing played important role in developing the pre-service teachers’ abilities to summarize, synthesize, analyze, and evaluate information. It helped them to compose a qualified writing, since as future teachers, their tasks will not only be dealing with teaching but also producing both academic and non-academic writings.

“Critical writing subject plays a crucial role in developing students’ academic writing. So far, I am conducting research on EFL students’ academic writing, and I found that the ability to summarize, analyze and evaluate information from reading passages significantly determines the quality of students’ writings”. (P1, transcript 002)

From the previous excerpts, it can be concluded that critical writing subject in English education program has significant contribution in enhancing students’ language skills and abilities. First, it provides experience to write critically with clear and strong arguments and promotes students’ critical thinking toward particular issues and phenomena. Second, it supports the fulfilment of the 21st century skills as required by Merdeka Curriculum established by the government of Indonesia. Third, it plays a crucial role in developing students’ academic writing which might be key ability to be professional English teachers in the future.

The Teaching of Critical Writing

The current study also recorded how the participants commented on how teaching-learning of critical writing was conducted. In terms of credit hours, all participants conveyed similar issue that critical writing subject were being taught in 2 hours (110 minutes) once a week. P2, for example, said:

“In my department, critical writing subject is taught in 2-credit hours for about 110 minutes once a week. I think it is not sufficient to maximize students’ potentials in writing critically. Therefore, I decided to add structured assignment and independent learning for my students outside the class hours”. (P2, transcript 031)
About the curriculum, in most of universities whose the participants are affiliated, critical writing is not merely becoming an independent subject, but it is integrated or included in other subjects. For instance, in P7’s department, the subject of critical writing is integrated in Argumentative Writing course that is taught in semester 2. Meanwhile, as stated by P6, critical writing is combined with critical reading under the course of Critical Reading and Writing, and taught in semester 4. In addition, P4 mentioned that critical writing is included in the subject of academic writing taught in semester 3 and students must have passed Basic English Writing and Composition Essay Writing subjects given in the previous semesters.

“In my campus, critical writing is integrated in Argumentative Writing course for 2 credit hours in a week. In my opinion, it is ok since argumentative writing is closely related (or even a part of) critical writing.” (P7, transcript 276).

“No, it [critical writing] is not standing alone as an independent subject, rather it is combined with reading in Critical Reading and Writing, since reading and writing is interrelated.” (P6, transcript 261)

“Ohh, in Academic Writing course. One of the sub-topic in academic writing is critical writing. This course (academic writing) is given in semester 3 and students must have passed prerequired courses (Basic English Writing and Composition Essay). (P4, transcript 119)

To sum up, the teaching of critical writing is conducted in 2 credit hours for about 110 minutes once a week. Several participants uttered that this time allocation is not sufficient; that is why they provided additional activities in terms of structured assignments and independent learning outside the class hours. With regards to administration, critical writing is taught as an independent subject or it is integrated/included in other subjects.

Challenges of Critical Writing Course

In administering critical writing course in the university setting, a number of challenges were encountered by the teachers. P1 and P3, for example, pointed out about the absence of syllabus for critical writing course. They conveyed that the instructors still need to create instructional outlines for the course due to the inadequacy of an available syllabus.

“As a skilled-based course that students should master, a comprehensive syllabus for this course [critical writing] must already be in place. However, my department does not provide it, so I create my own”. (P1, transcript 009)

“As the lecturer, I do not find particular syllabus for this course. Therefore, I still need to create instructional outlines and plans for my teaching”. (P3, transcript 089)

A module (instructional materials) plays an important role to enhance the efficiency of the learning activities. With regards to this, several participants expressed their experiences. P5, for example, argued that instructional materials for critical writing course tend to be left to the direction of the teachers. Consequently, there was lack of standardization and the materials varied among different classes, depending on the preferences of the teachers.

“One problem that I concern with is the instructional module. There is no module in my class for this course [critical writing]. As a consequence, there was lack of standardization of materials among different teachers who teach this subject”. (P5, transcript 156).

Moreover, the absence of established learning techniques and media is a distinct issue, especially for teachers tasked with delivering critical writing course. This study discovered
that the teachers often have the liberty to adopt their preferred teaching techniques and media. In other words, the department did not design blueprint of teaching critical writing. As P2 said, she had to design overall learning instrument including the techniques and media.

“In my opinion, one challenge that I face during teaching of critical writing is the absence of learning techniques and media. I design the overall teaching-learning instrument from the lesson planning to the assessment, including media and techniques.” (P2, transcript 043)

Last but not least, inappropriate model of assessment became one of the crucial issues conveyed by the participants. For instance, P7 commented that the assessment overly focused on grammar and language mechanics. In other words, students’ ability of critical writing cannot be effectively measured solely by their proficiency in English language grammar and vocabulary usage.

“About the assessment, I find that the existing test is not fully accommodate students’ ability for critical writing, rather it often focuses on language grammar and vocabulary”. (P7, transcript 280)

In a nutshell, from the participants’ utterances through the interviews, we are well-notified that they encounter several problems during the teaching of critical writing. Some problems appeared are the absence of comprehensive syllabus, lack of instructional module, lack of well-structured learning techniques and media, and inappropriate assessment.

DISCUSSION
This study’s findings suggest that EFL teachers have several concerns related to students’ learning needs of critical writing course in university setting. First, this study yields the teachers’ views on the importance of critical writing for EFL students. It is disclosed that critical thinking belongs to the twenty-first century skills as established in Merdeka Curriculum stated by the government of Indonesia that must be mastered by university students, including those in English department. In line with this, critical writing course provides a venue for EFL students to develop their critical thinking through written expression of ideas and thoughts (Kabri et al., 2024). What make critical writing important for students is this skill enables them to express their thoughts, arguments, and analyses clearly and coherently, which is essential for academic success and effective communication (Shen & Teng, 2024). This study is in line with Teng and Yue (2023) that in the context of English language teaching today, fostering critical writing skills goes beyond grammar and vocabulary; it involves teaching students to evaluate information, construct well-reasoned arguments, and present their ideas logically. This ability is particularly important in an era where information is abundant and often conflicting, requiring learners to discern credible sources and articulate their perspectives thoughtfully (Karaer et al., 2024).

Second, this study also reveals EFL teachers’ experiences on the implementation of critical writing course in their universities. From the findings, we are well-notified that critical writing is mostly taught in 2 credit hours (about 110 minutes) once a week. Issue that may arise is that whether the time allocation is sufficient to develop students’ critical writing ability. Moreover, it is found that in some universities, critical writing is not standing as an independent course, rather it is integrated in or combine with other subjects such as critical reading, academic writing, and argumentative writing. The majority of the participants in this study say the time allocation is not enough; however, research conducted by Rosário et al. (2019) indicates that sustained engagement over the course of a semester, with weekly
sessions ranging from 60 to 90 minutes, is effective for significant improvement in writing quality. Nevertheless, a study conducted by Fouché (2023) emphasizes the importance of reflective and iterative feedback during the writing course, instead of measuring an ideal allocation of time in teaching critical writing. It makes sense since evaluations of academic literacy interventions show that a continuous cycle of reflection and feedback, supported by weekly sessions, significantly improves students’ writing skills (Niloy et al., 2024). In conclusion, the success of teaching critical writing not only lies on the ideal time allocation but also depends on the quality of learning activities in class. Therefore, this study implies that EFL teachers must pay more attention to the learning activities to enhance students’ critical writing skills.

Third, several challenges of teaching critical writing encountered by EFL teachers are also discovered by this study. The absence of comprehensive syllabus, less adequate instructional materials, lack of learning technique and media usage, and inappropriate assessment model are among the challenges. This finding is not surprising, but it is interesting to discuss because these challenges faced by teachers are often related to institutional constraints. A study of Sultana (2019) shows that teachers frequently face institutional constraints, such as limited time and resources, lack of teaching equipment including syllabus, lesson plans, and media which restrict their ability to implement comprehensive learning programs. This includes insufficient professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their own skills in teaching critical writing (Karaer et al., 2024). One significant challenge highlighted by the findings of this study in teaching critical writing is the prevalence of inappropriate assessments that focus predominantly on grammar rather than on students’ ability to construct and analyze arguments. When assessments emphasize grammatical accuracy, they can inadvertently undermine the development of critical thinking skills, which are central to effective writing (Bailey et al., 2015). This narrow focus can lead students to prioritize surface-level corrections over the deeper cognitive processes required for crafting well-reasoned essays (Kazemian et al., 2021). Consequently, students may struggle to develop the analytical and evaluative skills that are essential for critical writing, ultimately limiting their academic growth and engagement with complex texts (Sinaga & Feranie, 2017). For educators, this study points out that assessment practices need to be re-evaluated to ensure they support holistic writing development rather than merely technical proficiency.

To sum up the discussion, the authors would like to say that conducting research on critical writing within the context of the Merdeka curriculum in Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms offers valuable insights into how educational reforms can enhance language proficiency and critical thinking skills. The Merdeka curriculum, which promotes autonomy, flexibility, and student-centered learning, aligns with the principles of critical writing that emphasize independent thought, analytical reasoning, and clear expression. In an EFL setting, where students are already navigating the complexities of a foreign language, integrating critical writing tasks encourages deeper cognitive engagement and a more nuanced understanding of English. This approach not only improves their linguistic abilities but also fosters critical literacy, enabling students to analyze texts, construct coherent arguments, and articulate their viewpoints effectively. Research in this area can reveal how such curriculum changes impact students’ writing skills, their ability to think critically in a second language, and their overall academic performance. It can also provide educators with strategies to effectively implement critical writing exercises within the framework of the Merdeka curriculum, addressing the unique challenges faced by Indonesian EFL learners. Ultimately, this research can contribute to the
development of more effective teaching methodologies that support both language acquisition and critical thinking, aligning with the broader educational goals of the Merdeka curriculum, especially for higher education institutions involved in this study.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the present study focuses on EFL teachers’ perspectives on teaching and learning needs of critical writing course in university setting. Employing an exploratory research design, the findings depict EFL teachers’ views on the importance of critical writing, its teaching and learning process, and challenges occurred during the course implementation. It is revealed that teaching critical writing plays a crucial role in shaping students’ profile toward the twenty-first century skills. Second, a learning model of critical writing instruction, including the syllabus and plannings, learning technique and media, instructional materials, and assessment model, must be developed. This study’s findings contribute to the realm of English language teaching in terms of providing fruitful insights on EFL students’ learning needs of critical writing as seen from EFL teachers’ perspectives. ELT practitioners and policy makers can use the findings as references in taking policy related to teaching critical writing in university setting. Despite from the compelling results, this study only covers participants from four universities in one municipality in Central Java province of Indonesia. Wider project involving a greater number of participants is highly required to generalize the findings of this study.

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