Practicing critical thinking through extensive reading activities

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ABSTRACT: To become creative, people must evolve critical thinking skills. The skills in Critical Thinking (CT) are not developed unplanned. Those skills can be taught and practiced as part of an Extensive Reading (ER) program. The present study was to find out whether the activities in ER influence L2 learners’ CT skills as well as their other language skills. The program was implemented at the English Education Department, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teachers Training, UIN Jakarta. The results show that the majority (more than 60%) of the students stated that not only were their language skills improved, but their CT was also developed. They also said that this program not only helped them in doing other subjects, but also influenced their way of thinking or seeing things.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since information and innovation are the key factors in the global world, intensive knowledge is highly needed (Carnoy, 2005). Therefore, ways of transforming the knowledge will play a crucial role in adjusting to new technology. Higher education is one factor which undergoes and experiences pressures with those changes.

It has been common knowledge that education is one of the main factors which determines the development of a country. Education plays a vital role in preparing the human resources (Carnoy, 2005). Moreover, it can also characterize a nation and a civilization.

Like other countries, Indonesia has been very concerned in preparing its human resources to be able to compete with those from other countries. One of the first steps to create high quality human resources is to improve the quality of education.

In the report from the Ministry of National Education (Kurniawan, 2003), Indonesia in terms of the quality of education, is in twelfth place in Asia after Vietnam. It is still debatable whether the low quality of human resources is related to the quality of education given at the higher education level or to the whole system of education. The fact remains that many of Indonesia’s future employees lack creativity, and as a result, fail to get the job opportunities.

To become creative, people must evolve Critical Thinking (CT) skills. In a sense, CT is a way in which people put all efforts into thinking deeply and quietly in an even-handed way before they make up their minds (Ennis, 2001). To educate the students to become critical thinkers is very crucial, both for themselves and the continuity of the society (Facione, 1990).

To bring up the students to become critical thinkers means helping them change into people with natural curiosity who are knowledgeable, trustful, open- and fair-minded, adaptable, honest, careful, and sensible in making decisions (Facione, 1990). They also have good organization in complex matters, are diligent in searching for related information and persistent in trying to find out the legitimate solutions. However, although it is definitely not easy to reach those ideals of critical thinkers in a very limited time and condition, it does not mean it is totally impossible. Those characteristics mostly require cognitive work. In fact, the specialists portray certain cognitive skills as fundamental or the essence of CT skills (Facione, 1990).

The skills in CT are not developed unplanned. They need practice and experience. Those skills can be taught and practiced from the very beginning level of study and in various subjects. Some simple and practical reading activities in encouraging the skills in CT can be applied in Indonesian higher education classrooms.

Some core skills of CT like interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation, can be conducted in simplicity (Facione, 2007) in Reading subjects. Of the various subjects that are taught in Indonesian formal education, reading is the crucial one, because, based on the 2004 Curriculum, skills in reading are to be emphasized.

Critical reading practices will be one of the ways that can be used by Indonesia with its limited influence to empower students’ CT ability. Through both intensive and extensive practice of reading critically, they will learn how to stimulate their thoughts to see various aspects of the discourse.
Critical reading is assumed to be one of the effective ways to improve students’ CT ability in this study.

Based on the need to improve students’ CT skills through critical reading while the time is very limited, Extensive Reading (ER) (as one of the Reading subjects in the English Education Department (EED) in the Faculty of Educational Sciences, UIN Jakarta) was chosen as the shelter subject to practice it.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to find out whether the implementation of ER activities can improve students’ CT skills. Students’ opinions about ER and CT, both before and after the class, will be part of the data to support the findings.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 General conception of CT

The teacher should drive the learners to have a higher order of thinking by creating their classroom to become a place for the thinker community (Davidson & Dunham, 1996).

The skills in CT are merely just an outcome. CT skills should also be observed during the process (Garrison et al., 2001). The judging will come from an individual perspective, where the teacher’s responsibility is to see that the students acquire a deep and meaningful understanding as well as content-specific critical inquiry abilities, skills, and dispositions. Even though the CT skills as a product are difficult to assess, because as a cognitive process CT is very complex and can only be accessed indirectly, the skills still can be acknowledged through individual assessments.

To be recognized as a person who possesses CT ability does not mean that the individual must be skillful in every aspect of CT (Facione, 1990). Even though it is ambiguous to assess, still, five upper-levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy (that is, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, comprehension, and application) were offered as guidelines in CT practices (Ennis, 1993). Ennis (1993) also stated that experts still try to get the best way to analyze the assignment with CT elements. Elaboration is suggested as a way to assess CT existing in students’ assessment, to see the comprehensiveness of the CT assignment. According to Ennis (1993), the failure in assessing CT is usually because the assessor or teacher is less open-minded and fails to judge the credibility of the sources used in the assignment.

One of the very first definitions about CT is what was called Reflective Thinking (RT) by Dewey (1933) who stated that RT is 'Active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends' (as cited in Rodgers, 2002). However, both CT and RT have their own focuses. CT is a kind of thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal-directed. Meanwhile RT is referring specifically to the processes of analyzing and making judgments about what has happened.

It can be concluded that CT involves a wide range of thinking skills leading towards interesting products while RT focuses more on the process of making and analyzing judgments about what has happened.

Borrowing ideas from Dewey, another definition on CT was given by Glaser (1941) as cited in (Fisher, 2011):

- an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one’s experience;
- knowledge of the methods of logical enquiry and reasoning;
- some skill in applying those methods. CT calls for a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends.

It is clearly seen that Glaser’s (1941) definition on CT was much influenced by RT from Rodgers (2002). The effort to scrutinize the topic before delivering the opinion was emphasized as part of CT skills.

The CT skills that will be emphasized in this present study are analyzing, inferring, elaborating, and reasoning. All those skills should be recognized within their assignments, including when asking questions during the presentations.

2.2 Understanding extensive reading

The initial characteristic of ER is, as the name implies, the large amount of reading compared with the amount that readers would read in different types of reading programs. However, ER is not just a matter of submerging students in a bath of print (Bamford & Day, 1998): it takes superior materials, clever teachers who love to read themselves, time, and effort to develop the reading habit (Harris & Sipay, 1990).

ER is an approach to the teaching and learning of second-language reading in which learners read large quantities of books and other materials that are well within their linguistic competence (Bamford & Day, 1998). This program will help L2 learners to acquire their L2 language because they try to understand the material they read. This was in line with what has been stated by Krashen (1982) about comprehensible input. While learning to understand the text, the program of ER is expected to help the L2 learners develop good
reading habits while building up their knowledge of vocabulary and structure (Richards & Schmidt, 2013).

With the various practices of ER, this program has developed several approaches in its implementation. This decreases the use of silent reading class as an additional assignment. However, Bamford and Day have provided ten guidelines to put ER into practice:

- The reading material is easy.
- A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
- Learners choose what they want to read.
- Learners read as much as possible.
- The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
- Reading is its own reward.
- Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
- Reading is individual and silent.
- Teachers orient and guide their students.
- The teacher is a role model of a reader.

In addition, Richard (1998) presents the objectives of giving ER to L2 learners:

- to improve positive attitude towards the language being learned;
- to enhance confidence in reading;
- to build high motivation in reading;
- to develop the ability to avoid looking up the dictionary too many times;
- to develop word recognition ability;
- to build the ability to read based on need and purpose.

This study will apply what is known as Integrated ER, where other skills such as the four language skills and CT are embedded in the program. The study that ER can be integrated with other programs has been widely researched, such as with writing (Stevens et al., 1987), reading (Sheu, 2004), with software implementation such as the Moodle course management system (Robb & Kano, 2013), and language skills (Lituanas et al., 1999). Many also used ER to improve the English or literacy programs (Macalister, 2008; Judge, 2011; Yu, 1993; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007).

3 RESEARCH METHODS

This study was a qualitative research. Most data was taken based on observation and written interview. The observation was started for 120 students from the 2007 academic year who were in the 5th semester in 2009 and finished in 2014 or for students from the 2012 academic year. The first data collected was the reading speed of each student, which was taken three times in each semester. The need to get a particular speed was to ensure they would not meet too many difficulties in doing the ER subject next semester.

ER is the last part of the Reading course in EED's curriculum. It is given to the 5th semester students who have passed their Reading 4. The ER subject was started in 2009 with two credits, or a 100-minute session each week for each class. It was started with the obligation to read eight novels and seven textbooks. In 2014, the number of the materials increased. The students had to read ten English novels which consisted of a minimum of 300 pages, ten articles in English from journals, proceedings or anthology, and eight English text books in the form of references, instruction, workbook, and biography.

The ER subject in EED is an Integrated ER, where other skills are embedded to get the maximum benefit of ER. All language skills are used as part of ER activities, and within those skills CT plays an important part as the acknowledgement of their ER projects.

In this subject, the students chose any type or genre from the listed novels in the EED Reading Corner library. One title of the novels could be read by a maximum of two students, who had to be from different classes. After reading, they were given a test as shown in Figure 1.

To get the maximum points, they had to be able to explore their answer by giving evidence, analyzing the story, and correlating it with their own thought or opinion. Meanwhile, for textbooks reading, the requirement was in different projects of summary based on book types. They were required to write bibliography for each article.

To support their speaking and listening skills, two of the materials were presented in front of the
classroom, where the audience were obliged to ask critical questions, for which they received a score. Additionally, the participants were also given questionnaires. The questions were given before and after (in the last meeting) the program started and only given to students from the 2011 and 2012 academic years. This means, they had their ER subject in the 2013 and 2014 academic years. In those academic years, there were three classes each year, consisting of 40 students. The questions were given to 20 students from each class, totaling 60 students, for each academic year, and 120 for two academic years.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Time is needed to see whether ER has benefited students' CT skills within 2–5 years. The length of time needed in conducting this research was due to the necessities of understanding the effects of the whole program (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). The first data was the students' reading speed that was recorded since they were in the 1st semester. In each semester their reading speed was tested using a speed-reading test formula three times, except in the 5th semester when they were tested once only at the end of the semester. The results are shown in Table 1.

From the Table it can be seen that all students' reading speed improved in their 12th rapid-reading test in semester and kept improving in their 5th semester. Of course, reading cannot take the ultimate honor as the one that influences that improvement. Bias can happen since the students also received skills input from other subjects.

Meanwhile, the responses from 120 students of the open-ended question on CR and ER are as follows:

Before the class

Question 1. What do you know about ER class?
(The answers have been grouped based on the similarity.)

- Terrifying class (38)
- Time consuming (29)
- Strict rules (17)
- Afraid (10)
- Difficult process (10)
- Curious (8)
- High pressure (8)

Question 2. You have heard about CT briefly, do you think you have those skills in CT?

- Yes (24)
- No (57)
- Not sure (16)
- Do not know at all (23)

After the class

Question 1. What do you know about ER class?
(The answers have been grouped based on the similarity.)

- Good effect on language skills and components (63)
- Challenging (24)
- Time management (14)
- Time consuming (12)
- High pressure (7)

Question 2. You have practiced CT skills in ER, what do you learn?

- Thinking management (35)
- Think before act or say (33)
- Improve curiosity (19)
- Learn to be objective (14)
- Learn to elaborate (11)
- Being sensitive (8)

The comparison of the responses between before and after classes has shown that the students had mixed feelings, considered being negative about ER before the class, then changed by the end of the semester. The reason for their negative thoughts on ER was because they were informed by their seniors about ER and it seems that the seniors' explanation frightened them.

Before the class started, CT skills were explained, embedded in the explanation of the requirements. Many of them did not think that they had CT skills ability; in fact, most of them did not know about CT skills. From the observation, many of them looked worried when it was explained that the CT skills were to become part of the assessment in their ER assignment. The questions about how to do those skills emerged. Many of them worried that inability to perform CT skills well would affect their grades.

However, by the end of the semester, their answers had changed. The majority believed that ER had improved their language skills as well as
their language components’ mastery. All activities in ER had forced them to use all those skills consecutively. They felt more confident to read in English and they said that they had no problem in reading journal articles which all this time had become a burden for them in their study.

The activities in ER had also forced them to be more creative, including in managing time, due to the workload while their time is limited and they still need to do other assignments from other subjects. 20% of the participants said that they were challenged by the reading and workload in ER in a positive way. They felt very motivated and were urged to conquer those challenging tasks.

However, 15.8% of the participants still felt under pressure with ER activities. They admitted that they had difficulties in managing the time. It was difficult for them to fulfill the requirement in the assignment. The workload, limited time, and limited materials, made them feel so pressured with ER.

Nevertheless, with regard to CT skills, no negative effects had been detected from their answers. 29% of participants said that they got used to managing the way they thought after ER class. They knew which one need to think deeper and which one that they can think later. They also said that they learned to be more careful in giving their opinions. Their curiosity also improved because they always had to give logical reasons for their opinions.

5 CONCLUSIONS

From the findings, it can be said that ER has improved students’ language skills (slightly more than 50%), making them be challenged by the assignments as well as getting them used to managing their time to meet the demands of the study. Moreover, they were satisfied with their new understanding about their ability in CT. They also mentioned what kind of CT ability they thought they are able to perform.

Even though some negative feedbacks still persist, it can still be said that the program was successful in developing students’ ability in CT and therefore, to achieve better understanding on whether the findings can be applied in a general sense, the continuation of the program is strongly suggested.

However, this study still needs other studies to support the findings. For further research, the possibility to use an English standardized test such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) will empower the findings of language skills improvement. Questionnaires and other types of assessments with specific rubrics can also be used to measure the improvement of the students’ CT skills.

REFERENCES


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