

ENGLISH EDUCATION MASTER STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract

One of the essential factors strongly supported university EFL learners' academic writing skills development is critical thinking. With the supports of critical thinking skills, university EFL learners will be capable of synthesizing, analyze, and evaluate their ideas to be written effectively in their academic writing products. This present small-scale qualitative study was conducted with the support of qualitative content analysis to obtain clearer data based on the specific phenomenon told by the research participants. 10 items of the Likert-scale questionnaire as well as 5 open-ended written narrative inquiry questions were administered to 16 English Education Master Students batch 2019. Based on the obtained research results, the utilization of critical thinking skills progressively enabled graduate university EFL learners to be more strategic, analytical, and proficient academic writers. In addition, the participants also acknowledged that critical thinking skills should be practiced intensively in a long-lengthy process to foster their academic writing skills as well. It is expectantly hoped that these obtained results will shed more enlightenment on the further utilization of critical thinking skills for the betterment of academic writing learning activities in the future.

Keywords: Critical Thinking Skills, Academic Writing, English Education Master Students

INTRODUCTION

In this globe, university EFL learners are strongly encouraged to fully master critical thinking and academic writing skills to transfigure them into more influential future academicians. Shaila and Trudell (2010) state that a higher level of critical thinking skills enable university EFL learners to be more competent academicians capable of imparting positive changes in their future working places. Another essential reason why university EFL learners are required to possess robust critical thinking and academic writing skills is the future working worlds will

commission them to be more autonomous knowledge seekers, judicious decision-makers, and effective problem-solvers. This perspective is in line with the contention proposed by Al-Dumairi and Al-Jabari (2015) arguing that advanced critical thinking, as well as academic writing skills, will direct EFL learners to be more proficient and selective academicians while encountering various obstacles in their working sites.

The nature of academic writing learning enterprises is not easy at all, even for graduate university EFL learners. In academic writing, learners are not merely required to continuously maximize their critical thinking skills but also critically select a wide array of literature resources correspondingly matched with their writing topics. Irvin (2010) propounds that in the light of academic writing learning dynamics, university EFL learners are highly demanded to self-select some particular writing resources compatible with the present writing contexts to produce high-quality writing products. In this case, critical thinking skills also play such a crucial role for university EFL learners' academic writing learning processes since they ought to delineate all the presented ideas accordingly in such an understandable written communication. Paul and Elder (2014) believe that the further activation of critical thinking skills can allow university EFL learners to be more analytical, critical, and wise enough in explaining all of the intended ideas for worldwide readers. Another essential step university EFL learners should cope with after mastering all those aforementioned matters is they are recommended to instill more advanced practices of academic writing conventions, skills, and language features unless their writing products will be meaningless. Coffin and Donohue (2012) state that the mutual combination of academic writing and critical thinking skills can potentially transform university EFL learners into more proficient academic writers.

In Indonesian EFL academic writing contexts, the common issues hampering our learners from developing their critical thinking and academic writing skills are their lack of ideas, vocabulary, and academic writing conventions knowledge. These general hurdles are closely associated with the findings discovered by Rahmatunisa (2014) finding out that the majority of Indonesian university EFL learners are not strongly motivated to write academically due to their word amounts, academic writing skills, and ideas drawbacks. These above-mentioned issues seem to be more challenging when we notice that academic writing enterprises also demand university EFL learners to produce more precise, clearer, and meaningful academic writing products for globalized readers. Kornhaber et al. (2016) mentioned that the major purpose of academic writing competencies that should be infused by university EFL learners is to generate more interactive as well as inspiring writing products for all readers since good academic writing results can stimulate readers' thinking to critically inquire all the proposed ideas.

Hence, to promote a higher degree of academic writing skills, university EFL learners should be prompted to question, analyze, and evaluate all the written ideas critically before going deeper in their academic writing learning activities. These arguments are inextricably associated with the theory of critical thinking skills proposed by Abbasi and Izadpanah (2018) believing that the strength of establishment of critical thinking skills will better ease university EFL learners to yield more qualified academic writing products. By infusing a higher level of critical thinking skills, university EFL learners can also have wider opportunities to foster their academic writing skills more significantly. When their academic writing skills have been more advanced, the more satisfying academic writing achievements will also wait for them. Wang and Seepho (2016) discovered that most Chinese university EFL learners having been equipped with robust

critical thinking skills are far better at improving their academic writing skills compared to other learning members who merely rely on the lower-level of cognitive skills. In another study, Golpour (2014) also revealed that the majority of university EFL learners having been exposed to critical thinking skills practices are more capable of achieving more fruitful academic writing learning outcomes.

In addition, discussing the basic conceptions of critical thinking skills is a never-ending process since there is no exact single fixed definition of this term. However, the researcher may rely on one of the reliable critical thinking skills interpretation declared by Shirkhani and Fahim (2011) stating that critical thinking skills are a higher level of cognitive skills in which learners are required to determine their further learning actions by carefully reflecting on their thoughts. In another definition, Ennis (2013) also argues that critical thinking skills refer to learners' capabilities to not merely embody certain appropriate actions but also confidently tackle many kinds of learning hindrances based on their in-depth reflections. Despite those distinctive theoretical frameworks, there are 6 indispensable critical thinking values that university EFL learners need to ingrain when engaging in academic writing learning enterprises. All these 6 notions were originated from Facione (2015). The first value refers to interpretation. In this first cycle, learners are required to be more analytical while selecting the rich information forming in their writing resources to better delineate their upcoming ideas. Second, learners are also demanded to have good analytical skills by matching their existing knowledge with the information found in their literature. In the inference process, learners ought to create trustworthy conclusions to produce clearer ideas for readers. Afterward, learners need to evaluate all the ideas in their writing products more critically to minimize the major and minor academic writing errors. In the explanation stage, learners are striving to connect all of the presented ideas in harmony with the readers' expectations to reduce the discrepancy between them. The last and most essential step is self-regulation. This last step is crucially important since learners are encouraged to exert more control over their academic writing learning enterprises by repeatedly analyzing, synthesizing, validating, and evaluating the credibility of their writing contents to yield better academic writing results.

When university EFL learners are committed to implementing all those 6 basic principles of critical thinking skills utilization in academic writing learning dynamics, it can be argued here that they will be more competent academic writers capable of arranging all the facts accordingly, constructing the appropriate ideas efficiently, and bridging all the background as well as existing knowledge more meaningfully in the form of written communication. These positive values are closely related to the critical thinking benefits in academic writing theory postulated by Barnawi (2011) arguing that a higher level of critical thinking skills can address university EFL learners with broader opportunities to hone their analytical, innovative, creative, and higher-order thinking skills in an attempt to generate high-quality academic writing results. Wingate (2012) also asserts that the strong construction of critical thinking skills can simultaneously direct university EFL learners to better organize, delineate, and present their academic writing ideas in a better purpose for the targeted readers. To better facilitate a more significant development of Indonesian EFL learners' critical thinking and academic writing skills, it is worth suggesting for EFL teachers to play their new roles as supportive learning facilitators by incorporating more interactive, enjoyable, and meaningful academic writing learning activities where all learners can jointly foster their academic writing along with critical thinking skills progressively. This recommendation is in accord with the notion raised by Shirkhani and Fahim

(2011) arguing that EFL teachers must promote more holistic student-centered learning dynamics in their academic writing classes to increasingly increase their learners' critical thinking and academic writing skills. In another in-depth investigation about the relationship between critical thinking and academic writing skills, Fahim and Eslamdoost (2014) also discovered that most university EFL learners having been introduced to more interactive and engaging academic writing learning activities were better able to yield more qualified writing products and elevate their critical thinking skills simultaneously.

Five prior studies are investigating the significance of critical thinking skills in academic writing learning enterprises. The first study was conducted by Ariyanti (2016). This research found out that Indonesian EFL teachers are prompted to promote more pleasurable academic writing learning activities for university learners to continuously motivate them to practice their academic writing and critical thinking skills. In the second study, Dewi et al., (2019) highly encouraged Indonesian EFL teachers to utilize peer-assessment activities in their academic writing classes to help learners enrich each other's understanding more efficiently regarding academic writing conventions and increasingly improve their critical thinking skills concurrently. Husin and Nurbayani (2017) prompted Indonesian EFL teachers to continually instill more interactive academic writing activities to preserve their volition to rehearse their academic writing skills meaningfully. Wijaya (2021) discovered that the majority of graduate university EFL learners having been well-equipped with self-regulated learning skills were better in coping with all academic writing learning hurdles resulted in more satisfying academic writing achievements. In the last study, Wijaya and Mbato (2020) also advised EFL teachers in this archipelago to constantly establish, maintain, and reinforce learners' self-motivation in academic writing activities to progressively improve their academic writing along with critical thinking skills. Regardless of the aforesaid research results, this present small-scale qualitative study aimed to further investigate English Education Master Students' perceptions on developing critical thinking skills in academic writing activities. The results of this current study will shed more enlightenment for all Indonesian ELT parties concerning the effective utilization of classroom activities, which can sustain the further development of graduate university EFL learners' critical thinking as well as academic writing skills. To fulfill this research objectivity, one specific research problem was formulated in this study namely: (1) what is the significance of critical thinking skills in academic writing activities according to graduate university EFL learners?

METHODS

Research design

This present qualitative study was conducted by using a qualitative content analysis to obtain a clearer picture out of the specific phenomenon experienced by research participants. Mayring (2004) states the main purpose of conducting a qualitative content analysis approach is to attain more obvious portrayals out of the observed phenomenon. To fulfill this objectivity, 10 likert-scale questionnaire concerning the significance of critical thinking skills in academic writing were also designed to fully obtain the specific perceptions hold by English Education Master Students. 5 open-ended written narrative questions were also created to sustain the robustness of findings obtained from the likert-scale questionnaire items. Although the questionnaire sampling method is closely interlinked with the quantitative method, it can also be utilized in a qualitative data gathering processes due to the accurate data in the form of statistics that can be obtained from the research participants. Creswell (2018) argues that the questionnaire can also be harnessed in a qualitative research as long as the precise statistical data represented the targeted research samplings.

Participants

The participants of this study were 16 English Education Master Students batch 2019. The major reason why the researcher chose them to take part in this small-scale qualitative study was they have already experienced quite richer experiences in utilizing critical thinking skills in their academic writing learning processes. For information, these participants have published their scientific writing products in various journal article platforms either Indonesian or overseas countries to be able to graduate from their study program. Meaning to say, their critical thinking skills must have been harnessed to achieve the aforementioned academic writing learning success.

Ethical Considerations

Concerning the 3 interviewees' data, the researcher planned to not write their real names in the data analysis in a later section. However, the researcher would substitute their names by using specific academic calling like student 1, student 2, and student 3 to put a higher degree of respect for them and ensure convenience during the data gathering processes in online interview sessions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section attempted to delineate 2 major themes inferred from 16 English Education Master Students batch 2019 regarding the significance of critical thinking skills in academic writing learning enterprises. Those 2 themes are (1) Mastering academic writing skills is a long-lengthy process and (2) Critical thinking enabled EFL learners to be more proficient academic writers. More complete explanations can be seen in the following lines.

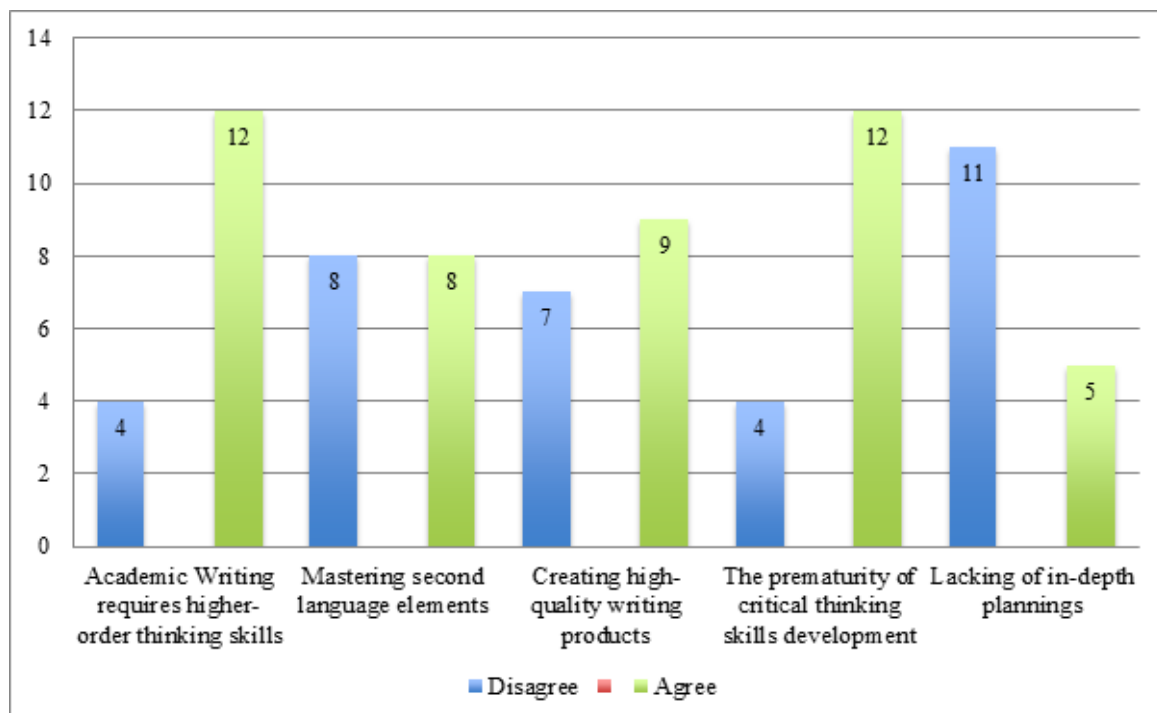


Figure 1.1: Mastering Academic Writing Skills is a Long-Lengthy Process (58% Participants Agreed)

Theme 1: Mastering Academic Writing Skills is a Long-Lengthy Process

Based on theme 1, most of the participants agreed that mastering academic writing skills is a long-lengthy process. There are several internal and external factors heavily affecting this success. One of the important factors is the full mastery of higher-order thinking skills. 12 out of 16 participants concurred that the activation of higher-order thinking skills could enable them to be more competent academic writers capable of organizing all the ideas systematically. This matter occurred since higher-order thinking skills allowed the participants to interpret, analyze, and explain all their ideas clearly for the readers. Preiss et al. (2013) argued that to be more qualified academic writers; EFL learners should be well-trained in interpretation, analytical, and explanation skills. The next indispensable element determining university EFL learners' academic writing success is through the full acquisition of second language elements. 8 participants agreed with this second finding. It is worth highlighting here that second language elements comprising of grammar, vocabulary, and dictions can greatly impact the learners' academic writing final products since they can share their intended thoughts more purposefully for the targeted readers. This is in line with the previous academic writing finding of Wingate (2012) suggesting EFL learners becoming well-organized in compiling their ideas, language structure, and cohesion through academic writing products to produce clearer information for worldwide readers. All these delineations fitted with the three interviewees' excerpts as follows.

[Interviewee 1: *Sometimes, the unique ideas are already in our mind but we are difficult to pour them out in the written form. Therefore, we understand how to deal with writing organization, creativity, and quality.*]

[Interviewee 2: *If a writer has better critical thinking skills, their academic writing will be easier to read, and the content of their writing will be clearer and of higher quality.*]

[Interviewee 3: *When a writer can organize their thoughts and ideas in a good way, their academic writing outcomes will be more impactful for readers.*]

When graduate university EFL learners have progressively fostered their critical thinking and academic writing skills, it is well-said here that they will be strongly encouraged to write more during their academic life. 9 out of 16 participants are in agreement with this third finding. This positive academic writing behavior takes place since they can establish a solid connection between their background and existing knowledge of the topics they are going to write. Simply stating, their academic writing learning motivation can be gradually diminished when they are failed in utilizing their background knowledge to be connected with their specific topics. This argumentation is closely related with the finding discovered by Maguire et al. (2020) showing that most of university EFL learners were lacked background and existing knowledge concerning the ideas they are going to delineate in their academic writing resulted in demotivated writing learning behavior. However, the prematurity of critical thinking skills can also be one of the serious hindrances for university EFL teachers aiming to elevate their learners' academic writing skills into the utmost levels since 12 out of 16 participants openly confessed that they have just been well-trained in activating their critical thinking skills in their universities. This matter indicates that the majority of them do not possess a good shape of critical thinking skills before entering the university. For this reason, it is of critical importance for Indonesian EFL educators to instill more intensive critical thinking skills training at the beginning of academic writing classes to fully breed more proficient academic writers possessing robust academic writing skills development. This perspective is in accord with

the theory of critical thinking significance in academic writing proposed by Gillett (2017) asserting that to produce more high-quality and acceptable academic writing products, university EFL learners' critical thinking skills need to be fostered at the beginning of academic writing learning activities to continuously help them to be more proficient academic writers capable of intertwining all the ideas as one unity in their writing. All these values are mutually associated with these three interviewees' excerpts.

[Interviewee 1: *Yes, I believe that critical thinking skills enable me to be more competent, strategic, innovative, and life-long academicians. I believe that critical thinking skills are essential for students to assist them in accomplishing task independently and with others by implementing problem-solving solution.*]

[Interviewee 2: *Many lecturers encouraged me to hone my critical thinking skills to better approach any subject, including academic writing.*]

[Interviewee 3: *Almost all my lecturers helped me to improve my critical thinking and academic writing skills. I feel really grateful for that supports.*]

To a lesser extent, it is also surprising to discern that 11 out of 16 participants did not agree that they are not careful planners designing well-organized academic writing objectives. It can also be asserted that most of the participants have transformed into more judicious decision-makers, effective problem-solvers, and careful analytical thinkers. As a result, the participants have become more resilient as well as resourceful academic writers since they can discover their solutions, strategies, and approaches best suited academic writing learning enterprises. These thoughts are closely connected with the finding of Al-Dumairi and Al-Jabari (2015) revealing that a great number of university EFL learners possessed lower development of critical thinking skills were not capable of generating more qualified academic writing products and efficiently delineating their thoughts since they could not maximize all the ideas resided in their mind.

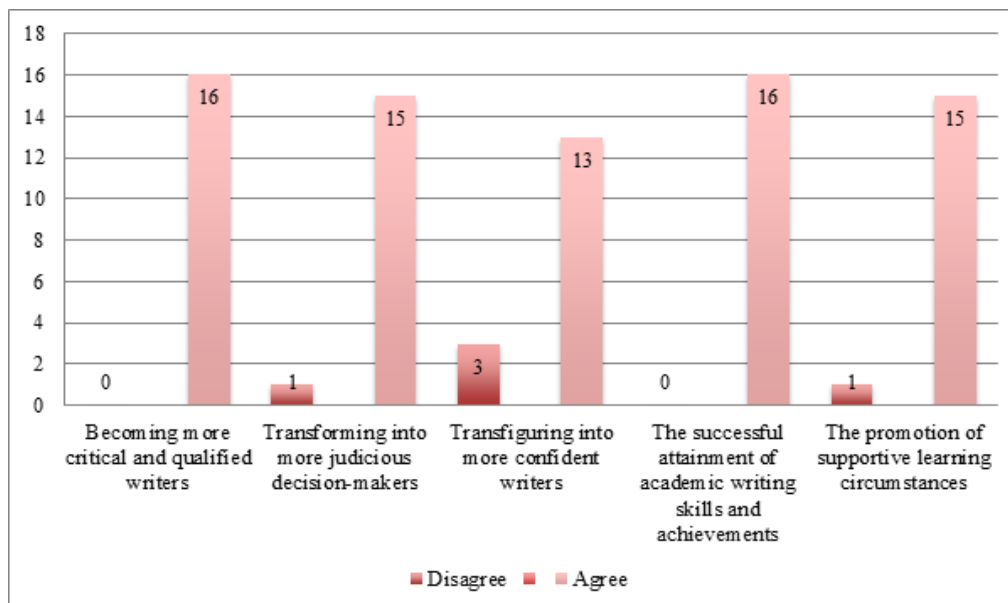


Figure 1.2: Critical Thinking Enabled EFL Learners to be More Proficient Academic Writers (94% Participants Agreed)

Concerning the second theme, the majority of participants agreed that the utilization of critical thinking skills transformed them into more competent academic writers. This rewarding academic writing learning outcome can be fully obtained since most of the participants are strongly willing to be more life-long academic writers not merely to achieve satisfying scores but also constantly improve their academic writing qualities. More specifically, all participants have progressively maintained the significant improvement of their critical thinking as well as L2 writing skills in the light of academic writing learning activities. One influential factor making this matter happen is all 16 participants feel motivated to engage in academic writing activities; even they have graduated from their graduate program. All these conceptions are closely associated with the significance of academic writing activities theory offered by Liu and Stapleton (2018) arguing that the integration of academic writing activities enabled university EFL learners to be more highly motivated and desirous in fostering their academic writing as well as critical thinking skills concurrently. It is also worth emphasizing that the activation of critical thinking skills also allowed graduate university EFL learners to be more judicious decision-makers. 15 out of 16 participants consented with this statement. In this case, becoming wiser decision-makers refers to learners' awareness of selecting the most appropriate resources appropriately match with their academic writing contexts. Since mastering academic writing skills does not only talk about formal writing conventions, language elements, language structure, and writing quality, it is of great importance as well to train learners' analytical thinking while self-selecting their academic writing resources to continually assist them to produce better quality of writing products. Indah and Kusuma (2016) strongly motivated Indonesian university EFL teachers to address more insistent critical thinking supports that can heighten their learners' academic writing as well as higher-order thinking skills to continually assist them to select various academic writing resources appropriately suited them. These following 3 interviewees' excerpts also resonated well with those above-mentioned conceptions.

[Interviewee 1: *We are encouraged to reflect on our strategies, strengths, and weaknesses in academic writing. Also, there are several activities, in the pre, while, and post-writing activities such as setting goals, formatting, understanding grammar rules, and applying ideas effectively are the piece of writing requires critical thinking.*]

[Interviewee 2: *I was able to hone my critical thinking skills since I read all the sources myself and wrote it down in my own words.*]

[Interviewee 3: *I always pick up my academic writing resources carefully because I believe it will affect my writing qualities in the end of academic writing sessions. I do this to make my writing become more reliable and beneficial for everyone.*]

The more critical the writers, the more confident they are. This principle was emanated from the third finding in which 13 out of 16 participants strongly agreed that the stronger establishment of critical thinking skills could direct them to explain all their ideas more confidently for the readers. Critical academic writers do not feel doubtful with their writing skills since they are consistently motivated to maintain their writing efforts into the utmost levels, challenged to overcome any kinds of hardships in their academic writing journeys, and integrate all the ideas coherently to yield more qualified academic writing products. These positive values are in agreement with the finding of Golpour (2014) finding out university EFL learners possessing more robust establishment of critical thinking skills were far better in tackling the academic writing obstacles, organizing all the ideas, and

maintaining their writing endeavor constantly to yield more high-quality academic writing products. Moving forward to the further finding, all participants fully concurred that the stronger inculcation of critical thinking had progressively enabled them to foster their academic writing skills and attain more fruitful academic writing learning achievements at the same time. This positive learning outcome took place since the participants had already known the right paths of analyzing, synthesizing, summarizing, and making use of all the ideas forming in a vast range of literature to be accurately poured in their academic writing products. It can also be asserted that graduate university EFL learners participating in this study had consistently fostered their critical thinking skills continuously resulted in a higher level of academic writing motivation. A higher degree of academic writing volition also successfully helps learners to improve their academic writing skills resulted in the successful attainment of academic writing achievements as well. Villavicencio (2011) found out that the majority of university EFL learners having been well-equipped with a higher level of critical thinking skills were have a wider chance to foster their academic writing skills and achievements due to the increasing enhancement of their academic writing learning motivation. Eventually, it is also worth reminding for all Indonesian EFL teachers to sustainably play their new roles as supportive learning facilitators in their academic writing enterprises. This role can be well-nurtured when teachers are willing to promote more supportive, engaging, and pleasurable academic writing learning circumstances for all learners. When all learners' academic writing learning desire had been elevated, it can be guaranteed that they will be more persistent academic writers continuously striving to reach their goals since they have ingrained more positive perceptions toward the academic writing learning dynamics. Thus it is crucially essential for every language teacher to bring about more interactive student-centered academic writing activities where all learners can enrich each other's understanding and mutually provide a continual support for other learning members' academic writing learning processes. By carrying out this suggestive learning activity, it can be ensured that educational institutions have fully breed proficient academic writers capable of establishing more solid networking with others. These conceptions are closely interlinked with the major finding revealed by Aunurrahman et al., (2017) highly prompting university EFL teachers to induce more supportive, enjoyable, and engaging academic writing learning atmosphere for learners to improve their interest in academic writing learning venture. The following 3 interviewees' excerpts are also in line with these above-mentioned conceptions.

[Interviewee 1: *Yes, the lecturers always support us to develop critical thinking skills by providing many interesting activities that promote us to think critically. In every meeting, we are given several articles in relation to the materials and we have to analyses, synthesize, and evaluate those based on the instruction.*]

[Interviewee 2: *It will, because the more I am able to understand the subject I am writing for, the better I will be able to write them down. It is because of the help of my lecturers, they always create fun student-centered activities in which I can share and learn from each other.*]

[Interviewee 3: *Because the lecturers supported me to do my best in my academic writing processes, I always feel motivated to look for many resources, learn from other friends, and share my knowledge to other classmates. It is very important for the lecturers to do this kind of thing because they have higher knowledge and experiences which will be useful for developing our critical thinking and academic writing skills.*]

CONCLUSION

All in all, the obtained results highly suggested Indonesian EFL teachers to train their university EFL learners' critical thinking skills at the beginning of academic writing learning enterprises. The significance of critical thinking skills cultivation fully affecting the whole learners' academic and future lives since they will be more resilient, optimistic, strategic, and competent academicians who are not merely capable of generating their ideas purposefully but also becoming more adaptable writers in overcoming various difficult situations hampering their ongoing academic writing learning processes. For the advancement of the upcoming studies, it will be beneficial for future researchers to utilize more variegated research instruments such as classroom observation, likert-scale questionnaire for university EFL teachers, and students' journaling to generate more robust research results. Further, future researchers are also strongly encouraged to involve a great number of graduate university EFL learners enrolling in different universities to produce more generalizable research results beneficial for all ELT parties in this nation. Despite the above-mentioned suggestions, the obtained results taken from this small-scale qualitative study lent a further support for the academic writing learning processes advancement conducted in higher educational institutions since the similar model based on the invited participants can be replicated and modified in other universities to produce similar or even better results concerning critical thinking and academic writing skills progress experienced by graduate university EFL learners.

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