

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the general issues related to the present study. These include the background of the study, research questions, purpose of the study, significance of the study, scope and organization of the thesis.

1.1. Background of the Study

In this rapidly changing information age, the proliferation of accessible data has created a vital requirement for individuals to think critically. In response to this, Chaffee (2000, p. 5) believes that the ability to think critically and to reason well has been considered an important and necessary outcome of education in order to function effectively in this globalized world. In his further notes, Chaffee said that it is vital to try to determine the accuracy of information and evaluate the credibility of the people providing the information.

In the context of education, Paul (1995) said “critical thinking is an essential foundation for adaptation to the everyday personal, social and professional demands of the 21st century and thereafter” (p.7). This suggests that, like what Chafee believes above, the distinguishing characteristics of those who will not only survive but also “thrive” in the future will be abilities and traits, both intellectual and emotional that entail excellence in evaluating and responding to the conditions of change.

With regard to the English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia, critical thinking has been a challenging issue. Indonesian EFL teachers are given responsibility to assist their students to acquire critical thinking skills while learning English (Alwasilah, 2001). This is done to give them adequate practice in critical thinking so that they can actively participate in the international community particularly in the global workplace.

Research on critical thinking has been a subject of concern of many educators from both second and foreign language education like Reed, (1998); Stapleton, (2001); Emilia (2005); Flores, (2006) and Alagozlu, (2007), among others. Conducted in one university in Japan, Stapleton (2001), for example, assessed critical thinking elements and voice in the writing class to find out whether Japanese students display elements of critical thinking and individualized identity. In his study, he found that those students possessed a firm grasp of elements of critical thinking which is indicated by their ability to put essential elements of critical thinking in their writing such as argument, reason, evidence, refutation and conclusion. In addition, Flores (2006) conducted a study regarding thinking skills as reflected in the argumentative essays of freshmen college students in Manila. This study revealed that almost 25% of students involved found writing an argumentative essay difficult. Those students, according to him, seem to be less critical due to the fact that most of them are poor in responding to opposing views in their writings.

Another study on critical thinking was conducted by Emilia (2005) in an English department of one state university in West Java, Indonesia. She focused her concerns on designing activities aimed to improve students' argumentative writing skill and critical capacities. Her finding showed that the students gained some development in both writing skills and critical capacities as reflected in their essays. This development, as she reported, is the implication of the critical thinking development program conducted in the writing class she taught. Other finding related to critical thinking investigation is also reported by Alagozlu (2007). Focusing on students' argumentation essays in one university in Turkey, she found that most of the students were poor in demonstrating their critical thinking in terms of writing like arguments, evidence, refutation, etc. In this case, the students failed to give reasonable reasons and evidence as parts of critical thinking indicator in their writing.

Although many previous studies as mentioned above have investigated the students' critical thinking, only a handful studies have explored the students' critical thinking in writing in Indonesia (see Emilia, 2005; Chandra, 2007 and Kameo, 2007). In the research site, there has not been any research investigated students' critical thinking. In response to this, research on critical thinking is urgent to be conducted in the site as the first step in creating a program in which critical thinking is incorporated in the teaching of writing in the future. Therefore, there is a need to investigate students' initial critical thinking in the context of writing since it is found that many students

find it difficult to demonstrate critical thinking elements such as arguments, reasons, and evidence in their essays (see also Moore and Parker, 1995; Stapleton, 2001; Reichenbach, 2001, among others) which directly show their ability to create a good and thoughtful argumentative writing (Chaffee, 2000).

Departing from the facts described above, this present study aims to investigate students' critical thinking as demonstrated in their argumentative essays. As has been proven by Reichenbach, (2001); Flores, (2006) and Alagozlu (2007) through their studies, argumentative writing is an effective means to portray students' critical thinking. According to them, the argumentative writing assists students in making ideas of their own, clarifying opinions or beliefs and sorting out the evidence which are part of critical thinking realization. In addition, this study also aims to find out the students' consciousness on their own critical thinking. In this sense, information regarding their awareness as to whether they show critical thinking and individual voice has been the object to investigate through out the study.

1.2. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What elements of critical thinking are demonstrated in students' argumentative essays?
2. To what extent are the students aware of the critical thinking skills they have?

1.3. Purposes of the Study

As mentioned in the background above, this study aims:

1. to investigate elements of critical thinking as demonstrated in students' argumentative essays.
2. to find out the students' consciousness of their own critical thinking skills.

1.4. Significance of the Study

With regard to the significance of the study, this research has the potential to the theory, educational and professional practices.

Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the literature on critical thinking in the context of academic writing which is still likely received a little attention in Indonesian EFL context.

Practically, this study provides information related to students' critical thinking in order to seek remedies to integrate critical thinking into the classroom and the curricula especially in the English education department of the university.

Professionally, informed by the results of this study, it is hoped that EFL writing teachers could develop materials and teaching strategies which incorporate critical thinking in order to support students' success, especially, in writing academic essays.

1.5. Scope of the Study

This study is a case study of undergraduate English Study Program students in one state university in Banten province, Indonesia. This study uses text analyses and in-depth interviews to investigate the elements of critical thinking (CT) as displayed in argumentative essays written by the third semester students in the English education department of the university. Nine argumentative essays from nine English students were analyzed in terms of elements of critical thinking which includes arguments, reasons, facts, opinion and conclusion (Paul, 1991; Moore and Parker, 1995; Chafee, 2000; Reichenbach, 2001; Stapleton, 2001). Besides those elements of critical thinking, the other aspects of critical thinking investigated in this study are critical thinking standards and critical thinking dispositions, among others, as suggested by Reichenbach (2001). The first includes clarity in arguments, relevance of data and evidence, depth, breadth and sufficiency in the arguments and specific in giving details in writing (Chaffee et al, 2002 and Lipman, 2003, among others). The second includes a) using credible sources and mention or refer to them, b) taking a position or a stance, c) differentiating facts and opinion (Reichenbach, 2001; Hyland, 1999; Paul, 1991). Moreover, the interview analysis also attempts to find the students' consciousness on their own critical thinking as to whether they show critical thinking and individual voice in their essays.

1.6. Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into five chapters.

Chapter One gives a general description of the introduction to the topic of the research. This introduces the research questions and considers the significance of this particular research. Chapter Two discusses the literatures used in the study. This covers two broad theories relevant to the purpose of the study which are Critical Thinking (*e.g. definitions, aspects, dispositions and assessment of critical thinking*) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) especially about aspects related to argumentative writing. Chapter Three elaborates the methodology of the study that includes research questions, research design, research setting and participants, data collection and data analysis. A sample of data analysis will also be presented in this chapter. Chapter Four shows data presentation and discussion from the text analysis and interview. Chapter Five provides the conclusion and recommendation derived from the study.