

CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING: AN EXPLORATORY INTERVIEW STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS AND THE EXPERIENCES OF EFL TUTORS AT A HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY

<http://doi.org/10.61425/wplp.2023.18.103.123>

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Abstract: The development of students' critical thinking (CT) skills in English academic writing poses challenges for both educators and students within the realm of English language teaching. In response to these challenges, the present study examines two main research questions related to tutors' perceptions and their experiences in fostering CT skills in English academic writing classes at a Hungarian university. The study employed a qualitative exploratory approach and involved the participation of five EFL tutors. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings indicate that EFL tutors consider CT skills crucial for evaluating sources, analysing academic texts, questioning reliability, and expressing independent opinions. Various strategies are employed to foster CT skills, including sample texts, guided tasks, the process approach to teaching academic writing, technology use, written feedback, self-assessment, peer revision, and the Toulmin model. Challenges faced by EFL tutors include mixed English language proficiency levels of students, students' limited exposure to CT and academic writing, students' attitudes towards CT and academic writing, time constraints, and systemic issues. The study offers EFL tutors' insights and effective strategies for enhancing students' CT skills in English academic writing.

Keywords: critical thinking skills, English academic writing, EFL tutors' perceptions and experiences, Hungarian higher education

1 Introduction

A crucial aspect of successful English academic writing across various disciplines, including arts, humanities, and social sciences, is constructing a coherent argument. To compose effective essays, students must develop their critical thinking (CT) abilities and articulate a well-supported perspective (Lea & Street, 1998). Therefore, CT skills are a prerequisite for academic achievement. Nevertheless, teaching and developing students' CT skills in English academic writing is challenging for educators and students in English language teaching (Borglin, 2012; Davies, 2015). International students often struggle to demonstrate CT skills in academic writing due to factors such as differences in cultural and educational backgrounds, limited proficiency in English, and misconceptions regarding CT skills and pedagogical approaches (Bean, 2011; Dewaelsche, 2015).

Building upon these observations, the proposed study aims to address research gaps in CT in English academic writing, which have been identified through previous literature. Firstly, there is still a challenge in proposing a common definition of CT that is relevant to different fields of study and promoting CT in English academic writing for academics, researchers, teachers, and students in the EFL context (MacPeck, 1981). To address this, the study intends to propose a working definition of CT which is specifically useful in fostering CT in English academic writing.

Secondly, there is a lack of literature investigating EFL tutors' perceptions, strategies, and difficulties in fostering CT in English academic writing in a Hungarian context and undergraduate programs. Hence, the proposed research will contribute to filling this research gap and provide valuable insights into the English language teaching community of the Hungarian and international EFL context.

2 Literature review

2.1 Critical thinking

Over the past few decades, the concept of CT has been the subject of inquiry by cognitive psychologists, philosophers, and behaviorally oriented psychologists. Despite this concerted effort, no single definition of CT can be considered exhaustive or comprehensive (Davies, 2015). Scholars have attempted to define CT from various perspectives, yet each definition remains limited in its scope. Due to its complex nature and multi-faceted components, CT presents a challenge for the development of a comprehensive and practical definition.

To begin, the origin of the term "critical thinking" is rooted in the ancient Greek words *kriticos* and *kriterion*, which roughly translate to discerning judgment and standards, respectively (Paul et al., 1997). This definition aligns with the original appearance of CT, which was based on the Socratic method that emphasised "deep questioning, examining reasoning and assumptions, analysing basic concepts, and tracing out implications" (Paul et al., 1997, p. 8).

Several scholars have attempted to define CT more broadly, with varying degrees of success. Norris & Ennis (1989, p. 3) have defined it as "a reasonable, reflective thinking focused on making decisions about what to believe or do", while Elder & Paul (2010, p. 38) have characterised it as "a process of analysing and assessing thinking to improve it". Several scholars (e.g., Ennis, 1962, 1987; Glaser, 1941; Huitt, 1998; Scriven & Paul, 1987) view CT as a set of intellectual skills, abilities, and dispositions, including the ability to think critically, open-mindedness, research knowledge, logical reasoning, and the rigorous passion for assessment and judgment.

Ennis's definitions (1962, 1987) show the evolving nature of CT. Initially, he viewed it as a skillful assessment of statements. However, he later expanded it to encompass judgement and dispositions. According to his updated definition, critical thinkers not only assess problems but also possess a passionate commitment to rigorous judgement. Consequently, the modified definition emphasises reasonable and reflective thinking for decision-making (Ennis, 1987).

A related definition of CT was presented by Scriven and Paul (1987) at the 8th Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Education Reform. Scriven and Paul (1987), defined CT as a process of gathering or generating information from a person's observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, while Huitt (1998) defined it as a mental activity of evaluating arguments or propositions, making judgments, and taking action.

Paul and Elder (2008) also have views on CT that are similar to those of former scholars, and they claim that CT is not just any type of thinking. It is a distinctive mode of cognitive activity that involves intentionally enhancing the quality of one's thinking processes. This approach can be applied to any subject matter or problem and is adaptable to various contexts. CT requires skillful navigation and manipulation of cognitive processes involved in reasoning, such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and interpretation. It is a complex process that involves applying a range of intellectual standards like “clarity, precision, relevance, logical consistency, and fairness” (Paul & Elder, 2008, p. 12). By using these standards, one can improve the quality of their thinking, leading to better decision-making and problem-solving. This definition highlights the active and intentional nature of CT. It requires a conscious effort to identify assumptions, examine evidence, and consider multiple perspectives on an issue.

In light of these overlapping definitions, CT can be defined as a complex and evolving cognitive process involving rational and reflective thinking, evaluating information and arguments, and applying logical reasoning to make informed decisions and judgments. In the context of the current research project, CT focuses primarily on developing cognitive skills among EFL undergraduate students to enable them to analyse, evaluate, and draw conclusions, as well as identify and assess arguments effectively in English academic writing.

2.2 Critical thinking skills

The definitions of CT offered by different scholars (e.g., Davies, 2015; Ennis, 1962, 1987; Facione, 1990; Glaser, 1941; Huitt, 1998; Scriven & Paul, 1987) show that most experts agree that CT involves certain cognitive skills. However, there are disagreements over which specific skills should be part of a critical thinker's skill set (Geng, 2014). In this section, the cognitive skills that promote the development of CT proposed by Bloom (1956), Facione (1990), and Davies (2015) will be briefly discussed.

Bloom et al. (1956) introduced the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, which categorises learning objectives into six stages: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These stages represent progressively higher levels of skill. The first stage, knowledge, involves acquiring and memorising information. Comprehension occurs when students understand and can explain the material. Application is the ability to use knowledge and understanding to solve problems. In the analysis stage, students break down ideas, recognize relationships, and compare different statements. Synthesis involves gathering and organising information to create a pool of knowledge. Evaluation is the final stage, where students make judgments based on criteria and standards, employing the other five types of thinking. CT encompasses these cognitive skills necessary for analysing, understanding, applying, synthesising, and evaluating information.

Like Bloom's (1956) framework, Facione's (1990) presents a consensus list of CT g skills and sub-skills. The skills include Interpretation, Analysis, Evaluation, Inference, Explanation, and Self-regulation. Each skill is accompanied by specific sub-skills that further define its components. Interpretation involves categorization, decoding significance, and clarifying meaning. The analysis includes examining ideas, identifying arguments, and analysing arguments. The evaluation focuses on assessing claims and arguments. Inference encompasses querying evidence, conjecturing alternatives, and drawing conclusions. Explanation involves stating results, justifying procedures, and presenting arguments. Self-regulation comprises self-examination and self-correction. In short, Facione's (1990) CT skills lists serve as a valuable reference for understanding and developing CT abilities.

Davies (2015) proposed a list of cognitive CT skills. Davies (2015) categorises different levels of thinking skills as follows:

- (i) Lower-level thinking skills: These skills form the foundation of CT. They include interpreting information, identifying assumptions, and asking questions for clarification.
- (ii) Higher-level thinking skills: These skills involve more advanced cognitive processes. They include analysing claims, synthesising claims, and predicting outcomes.
- (iii) Complex thinking skills: This category comprises skills that require deeper analysis and evaluation. It includes evaluating arguments, reasoning verbally, and making inferences.
- (iv) Thinking about thinking: This category focuses on thinking about thinking i.e., reflecting on one's own thinking processes. It includes metacognition and self-regulation.

Similar to Facione's framework, Davies's (2015) CT skills list involves cognitive processes such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation. However, Davies' framework categorises skills into lower-level thinking, higher-level thinking, complex thinking, and thinking about thinking while Facione's framework breaks down these skills into sub-skills, such as categorization, decoding significance, and clarifying meaning. Furthermore, Davies' framework includes a broader range of skills, such as metacognition and self-regulation, which are not mentioned in Facione's framework. This suggests that Davies' framework takes a more holistic approach to CT, recognizing that cognitive skills alone are not sufficient for effective CT.

In conclusion, CT is a crucial cognitive skill set that involves several cognitive processes such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation. Bloom's Taxonomy, Facione's and Davies's frameworks provide valuable insights into understanding and developing CT abilities. While Bloom's framework focuses on categorizing learning objectives into six stages, Facione's framework breaks down CT skills into sub-skills, and Davies's framework categorizes thinking skills into lower-level thinking, higher-level thinking, complex thinking, and thinking about thinking. All these frameworks recognize that cognitive skills alone are not sufficient for effective CT and that self-regulation and metacognition are also essential components of CT.

2.3 English academic writing

Academic writing is a formal style of writing used by scholars to share the knowledge they gained from their research and communicate with other scholars (Hyland, 2000; Kaplan,1966;

Seidlhofer, 2012). Defining a good piece of writing is challenging due to contrastive rhetoric, which refers to the different “preferred patterns of exposition, interaction, and argument across cultures and languages” (Hyland, 2000, p.153). Kaplan (1966) was the first to introduce contrastive rhetoric and identified five different movements of paragraphs in English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance, and Russian. He observed that English paragraphs have a linear thought pattern that represents the Anglo-European cultural pattern. In contrast, Chinese paragraphs, categorised as oriental writing, are indirect and develop through a "turning and turning in a widening gyre" (Kaplan, 1966, p.10). Therefore, it is challenging to determine what makes a piece of academic writing good or poor by looking only at its linguistic features such as sentence structure, grammar, and cohesion.

Nowadays, western Anglo-Saxon countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have established educational practices that are popular in the international education context. Seidlhofer (2012) pointed out that science research papers and academic communication started and are common in English-speaking countries, and English has become "the default language of science" (p. 393). Therefore, the term international has become an implied meaning for Anglo-Saxon norms. Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) support the idea that students must learn the conventions of the English academic language to succeed in their studies. In other words, the more students comply with the conventions and expectations of the target community, the better they perform in academia.

Numerous published studies (e.g., Coffin et al., 2003; Hyland, 1994; Jordan, 1997) have provided explicit instructions regarding Anglo-Saxon academic conventions. Coffin et al. (2003) suggest that excellent academic writing should contain a broad range of vocabulary, increased use of nouns and passive voice, and verbs and phrases that modify claims. They also emphasize that argument is a critical element of academic writing in higher education. Lea and Street (1998) support the view that successful academic writing in all disciplines requires the development of an argument. Therefore, students must develop an argument with a strong stance, voice, and CT. Moreover, Siepmann (2006) observed that Anglo-Saxon academic writing has explicit coherence and a linear structure. The topic sentence controls each paragraph, and hedges are used to soften or strengthen arguments. Finally, it is the writer's responsibility to ensure the clarity and relevance of the text to the readers. By improving their CT skills and following these conventions, students can produce high-quality academic writing in English that meets the expectations of the target community.

2.4 Teaching English academic writing in higher education in Hungary

Some studies related to CT skills and English academic writing in the Hungarian context will be reviewed in this section. The first study by Tankó and Csizér (2018) focused on high-achieving undergraduate students and their written argumentation skills. The researchers emphasised the importance of teachers' explicit instructions in helping students understand academic writing. They recommended familiarising students with various argumentation structures and components.

Godó (2008) conducted a contrastive study comparing Hungarian and North American college students' argumentative writing. The findings revealed cultural differences, with Hungarian students maintaining intellectual traditions and hesitating to evaluate or critique them. American students, on the other hand, showed a preference for evaluating and justifying the works of others. The author suggested that students should adjust their writing practices to align with the conventions of the target community.

Prescott (2018) conducted a qualitative study on the struggles of first-year Hungarian university students adapting to academic writing in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The study identified three phases of enculturation: cultural shock, learning to write about subject content, and building a new identity. Challenging writing tasks were found to be significant in helping students adapt to academic writing conventions, and the support of academic members was emphasised.

The most recent and relevant related research for the proposed study was a research project by Wind (2022) that investigates the L2 writing development of Hungarian undergraduates in Budapest. The study included sixty-three students from Undivided Teaching Training and the English and American Studies (EAS) programs, who composed two essays at the beginning and end of an advanced writing course. Their English language proficiency levels were around CEFR level C1. The data was analysed quantitatively, focusing on the essays' syntactic complexity and fluency indices. The study found that the participants' essays showed improvements in fluency during the advanced writing course. EAS students' essays demonstrated statistically significant increases in fluency, while Undivided Teaching Training students' essays did not show significant improvements in fluency. The researcher explained that the stagnation of syntactic complexity may be due to a limited observation length and high language proficiency.

Overall, the studies reviewed in this section discuss the challenges that Hungarian students face when it comes to academic writing in English. The studies highlight the importance of explicit instruction, practice, and awareness of cultural and sociocultural differences in enhancing CT skills and English academic writing abilities. Further research is needed to develop a comprehensive understanding and effective strategies for fostering CT skills and English academic writing proficiency in the Hungarian context.

2.5 EFL tutors' perceptions on the role of critical thinking skills in English academic writing

Elder and Paul (2010, pp. 38) claimed that “only when instructors understand the foundations of critical thinking can they effectively teach for it”. Therefore, investigating teachers' attitudes toward CT and teaching practice are important issues to address.

In a qualitative study by Martin and Pava (2017), EFL tutors' perceptions of CT were investigated. The study focused on ten EFL tutors at a university in Columbia with teaching experience ranging from 3 to over 10 years. Findings indicated that the tutors associated CT with cognitive skills and believed it to be beneficial in analysing and reflecting on the teaching and learning process. Therefore, the researchers concluded that the participants' understanding of CT is generally related to the CT definition of the Delphi report (Facione, 1990).

Asgharheidari and Tahriri (2015) surveyed EFL teachers' attitudes toward CT instructions. The study included 30 EFL teachers from 12 different institutes in Iran, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 15 years. The research findings revealed that most participants had a clear understanding of CT and held a positive attitude toward it. Similar to the previous study, they advocated for the inclusion of CT in the curriculum and desired additional training.

Ayyash (2022) conducted a recent study that explored EFL teachers' perceptions and understanding of CT skills in EFL classrooms, particularly in writing. The study used a multiple-choice questionnaire administered to 22 EFL teachers at Birzeit University, Palestine. The findings indicated that the teachers recognized the importance of developing CT skills in students and believed it enhances overall language achievement. However, there was some ambiguity and uncertainty among teachers regarding the precise understanding of CT. The researcher suggested providing in-service training for teachers on instructional methods integrating CT in EFL courses and explicit evaluation of CT in the four language skills to improve teachers' competency.

The reviewed studies revealed that EFL teachers generally hold a positive attitude toward CT and advocate for its inclusion in the curriculum. However, they also expressed a need for more training. The present study aims to investigate EFL tutors' perceptions of the role of CT skills in English academic writing aiming to contribute meaningful discussion to previous studies.

2.6 EFL tutors' strategies in teaching critical thinking skills in English academic writing

In the context of effective teaching strategies for CT in English academic writing, several scholars suggest that a process-based approach, subsequent writing, and classroom discussion are useful strategies for developing students' CT skills. Studies by Tsui (2002) and Jee and Aziz (2021) supported the efficacy of the process-based approach in enhancing students' CT skills in argumentative essay writing. The approach involves students generating ideas through various techniques, drafting, revising, receiving formative feedback from teachers, and rewriting their essays. The feedback provided by teachers plays a vital role in helping students improve their writing and produce higher-quality work.

Ayyash (2020) conducted a systematic review on teaching CT skills and found that integrating technology can enhance students' CT abilities. Technology without instruction aids in teaching and learning but doesn't specifically address CT. On the other hand, using technology with direct or indirect instruction, such as computer simulations, online discussions, and web-based inquiry learning, promotes problem-solving, reflection, collaboration, and deeper CT. Furthermore, researchers such as Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Tsui (2002) have recommended that classroom discussions, including dialogues and debates, can enhance students' high-level thinking skills, such as CT and problem-solving, and are more effective than lecturing.

To sum up, teaching CT skills is a complex task and it requires a variety of instructional strategies. Selecting appropriate instructional strategies and approaches can facilitate students' CT development in English academic writing. The present study further explores the instructional

strategies employed by EFL tutors in teaching CT in English academic writing, contributing valuable insights to the existing literature.

2.7 Difficulties EFL tutors encountered in teaching critical thinking skills in English academic writing

According to Kacanoz and Akbas (2017), teaching CT skills in English academic writing classes faces challenges due to an exam-focused education system with multiple-choice questions. This leads to less time dedicated to fostering CT. Time constraints, students' language barriers, limited knowledge, and certain mindsets add to EFL tutors' difficulties.

Shaheen (2016) interviewed 14 university teachers from UK universities to identify international students' challenges with CT in academic writing. The study found difficulties related to unfamiliarity with CT requirements, inadequate explanations, cultural differences, rote learning, and English language proficiency. Recommendations include explicit explanations, language proficiency development, and addressing cultural differences to enhance students' CT skills in academic writing.

Similarly, Hyland (2003) compared Western and Asian education systems. While Western education promotes analysis, evaluation, and independent thinking, Asian education emphasises respect for tradition and memorization. This cultural difference hinders CT in Asian education, causing challenges for students in the international academic community, including difficulties with discourse, exams, assignments, and plagiarism.

In conclusion, teachers need to recognise the factors that hinder the teaching of CT in academic writing so that they can effectively incorporate CT skills in their students' English academic writing. The proposed study also explores the difficulties EFL tutors encounter in their English academic writing classes to help EFL tutors make CT skills more accessible to the students.

2.8 Research questions

Following from the above, the present study aims to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do EFL tutors perceive the role of critical thinking skills in English academic writing?

RQ2: What are EFL tutors' experiences in developing first-year university students' critical thinking skills in English academic writing?

RQ2.1: What are EFL tutors' strategies in fostering first-year university students' critical thinking skills in English academic writing?

RQ2.2: What are the difficulties EFL tutors encounter in fostering first-year university students' critical thinking skills in English academic writing?

3 Research method

To address the research questions mentioned above, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted involving five EFL tutors. Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection instrument, and thematic content analysis was employed as the method of data analysis. By utilising these research methods and exploring the perspectives and experiences of EFL tutors, this study sought to provide valuable insights into the promotion of CT skills in English academic writing classes.

3.1 Participants and Setting

The participants of the semi-structured interview study are five EFL tutors from the English and American Studies Programme at a prestigious university in Hungary. The teachers are native or non-native speakers of English with teaching experience ranging from 2 years to more than 20 years. They teach Academic Skills Course 2, a mandatory course for all first-year students at the university.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the perceptions, challenges, and teaching strategies in developing EFL students' CT skills in English academic writing from the teachers' perspectives. Therefore, the typical sampling strategy is used to access rich and varied information (Dörnyei, 2007), recruiting teachers who teach Academic Skills Course 2, which mainly focuses on CT and English academic writing.

It is a prerequisite to complete Academic Skills Course 1 to join Academic Skills Course 2. Academic Skills Course 1 primarily focuses on teaching paraphrasing, summary writing, and guided summary writing to students. Language skills such as punctuation, cohesion, and paragraph structure might also be taught to help students develop their writing skills. At the end of the Fall semester, students take an academic skills test and write a one-paragraph summary.

Academic Skills Course 2 builds on the skills learned in Academic Skills Course 1 and focuses on teaching students how to synthesise different sources. Students learn how to select appropriate articles for their argumentative essays through library research, and CT is emphasised to help students decide what to include in their writings. Additionally, students learn about the structure of theoretical and empirical research papers, write an annotated bibliography, and give a formal presentation. Overall, the Academic Skills Courses 1 and 2 aim to equip students with the necessary skills to cope with academic work in English.

3.2 Data collection

The semi-structured interview guide has been chosen as the research instrument for the study. Five interviews were conducted with five EFL tutors on their perceptions and experiences in developing first year university students' CT skills in English academic writing. A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) is designed with pre-prepared questions with follow-up questions (probing questions) and some comments to conduct the interviews more effectively

(Raizi, 2016). It is composed of three main parts: the background questions section is followed by questions related to EFL tutors' perceptions on CT and English academic writing, how the EFL tutors teach CT in English academic writing classes, and the difficulties they encounter in English academic writing classes. Before conducting the interviews, self-interview, and self-reflection were conducted, and kept the data as a reflective diary by the researcher (Prescott, 2011). After two pilot interviews, the problematic questions, which needed to be clarified to the interviewees, were revised and refined. It was tested and retested for the other three interviews.

According to the participants' availability, three face-to-face interviews and two online interviews were conducted. Participants were informed that they would be recorded, and they gave their consent to that. The interviews lasted from 30 to 50 minutes. The interview recordings were transcribed using Microsoft Word (Dictation) and Teams transcript.

3.3 Data analysis

The qualitative data collected from the interviews was analysed using thematic content analysis (Dörnyei, 2007). The reason for using thematic content analysis is that it can identify the relationship between the main coding categories (themes) to explain a phenomenon theoretically (Raizi, 2016). According to Dörnyei (2007), thematic content analysis includes four phases: (i) transcribing the data, (ii) coding (initial and second level), (iii) growing ideas, and (iv) interpreting the data and drawing conclusions. The study followed all these phases step by step.

Because of this emerging research design of the study, an inductive data analysis approach is adopted. In an inductive approach, no hypotheses are generated before data collection, and there are no predetermined categories. Instead, important categories emerge from the data itself (Mykut & Morehouse, 1994). The ongoing data analysis helped form the main categories and themes to understand what is happening in EFL academic writing classrooms.

The analysis of the data collected from the interview study involved a comprehensive qualitative approach. The first step in this process was manually coding the collected data. This coding process was thorough, closely examining the transcriptions of five interviews conducted in the study. The recordings were transcribed, and the researcher carefully read the resulting textual data multiple times to identify and extract significant codes. As the researcher examined the transcripts, meaningful patterns and recurring themes emerged.

The specified codes were then systematically organized into a list of the various aspects and elements in the participants' responses. These codes were not isolated entities but were grouped into themes and subthemes. After that, the identified themes were synthesized in alignment with the existing literature review discussion. The analysis was not isolated but connected to the broader body of knowledge in the field.

The themes and subthemes were categorized to extract meaningful insights into the participants' perceptions and experiences related to teaching CT skills in their academic skills classes. Then, the researcher provided a structured and comprehensive response to the research questions, offering a nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives.

4 Results and discussion

In this section, the findings of the research will be reported and discussed according to the main research questions.

4.1 How do EFL tutors perceive the role of critical thinking skills in English academic writing?

At first, the participants were asked to talk about the requirements of Academic Skills Course 2 at university through the question “What are the requirements of the course the students are expected to fulfil?”. For clarity and conciseness, the answers of the participants are being quoted. The responses are presented with the interviewees’ pseudonyms (Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5).

The primary themes that emerged in the first part of the interviews were about the goals and requirements of Academic Skills Course 2 at the university. Academic Skills Course 2 emphasises acquiring specific skills such as integrating information from multiple academic sources, constructing argumentative essays, delivering effective presentations, and evaluating academic references. Successful completion of the course entails fulfilling several requirements, including the submission of assignments, presentation delivery, essay composition, and demonstrating the ability to synthesise information from different sources.

After talking about the requirements of the course, the participants were asked about their perceptions of CT and the role of CT in English academic skills. The common themes across participants’ responses include understanding arguments, recognising and analysing claims, questioning the validity of sources, maintaining an open mind to new perspectives, expressing doubts, and not accepting things at face value. These findings indicate that CT involves skills such as analysing texts, evaluating sources, questioning information, and forming independent opinions. While there are differing opinions on the necessity or role of CT in specific academic courses, it is generally considered essential in ASC2. Teacher 1 believes that first year students are at the beginning stages of their academic journey and, therefore, introducing CT too early may overwhelm and confuse learners. Furthermore, Teacher 4 claims as follows:

“CT is just one of the cornerstones in a lot of things in connection with academic writing. It doesn’t work on its own. It doesn’t work because it takes so much more to be a good academic writer”.

Teacher 4 perceives CT as one of the cornerstones and one of the academic registers, and only CT is not enough to produce academic writing. The idea that CT requires additional skills to become a good academic writer is supported by Ennis's (1987) evolving definition of CT. Ennis includes assessment, judgement, and a passionate commitment to rigorous judgement in his definition, which further supports the perception of CT as a cornerstone in academic writing."

Besides these remarks, all participants regard CT as crucial for addressing previous research, evaluating literature, constructing arguments, and producing high-quality work. It is also

linked to academic reading, synthesising sources, and questioning the relevance and reliability of the information. Scriven and Paul's (1987) definition of CT, which views it as a process of gathering or generating information, and Huitt's (1998) definition, which emphasises evaluating arguments, making judgments, and taking action, align with the perception that CT encompasses skills such as analysing texts, evaluating sources, questioning information, and forming independent opinions. These findings support the notion that CT is indispensable in academic writing for synthesising sources, questioning the relevance and reliability of the information, and expressing doubts.

Therefore, concerning the first research question of the study, “How do EFL tutors perceive the role of CT skills in English academic writing?”, the findings suggest that CT plays a vital role in academic writing, serving as the first step in research and literature review and facilitating the development of clear and well-supported arguments. The definition of CT as “reasonable, reflective thinking focused on making decisions about what to believe or do” by Norris & Ennis (1989) aligns with the perception of CT skills as the first step in research and literature review in academic writing. The emphasis on reflective thinking and decision-making is reflected in the understanding of CT's role in developing clear and well-supported arguments.

Regarding CT skills, the discussion section presents different frameworks proposed by Bloom (1956), Facione (1990), and Davies (2015). The cognitive skills outlined in these frameworks are seen as contributing to the development of CT. The finding that Academic Skills Course 2 emphasises developing students' CT and analytical thinking skills supports the inclusion of these skills in the frameworks.

4.2 What are EFL tutors experiences in developing first year university students' critical thinking skills in English academic writing?

The second set of themes emerged concerning the experiences of EFL tutors in fostering CT skills in their academic writing classes. To this aim, the participants were asked to talk about the teaching strategies they apply and the difficulties they encounter in teaching CT skills to their students in academic writing classes. The data from the participants' responses reveal various teaching strategies EFL tutors employ. All participants use sample texts to illustrate writing principles and guide students through analysing different texts. However, there is a need to ensure that the chosen samples are appropriate, as both good and bad samples can offer valuable insights into academic writing conventions. Teacher 5 shared their experience that:

“What I have found very useful is just bringing them papers, texts from older students that I have found very useful, very good, with very good arguments, and very good language. And also ones where there were lots of problems. So, when we were doing the literature review or kind of an argument essay, then I tried to look at as many examples as possible, and then look at it like sentence by sentence — Do you think this is true? Do you think there is a problem with this? With what? Is it that the research that this person is citing sounds sketchy, sounds weird, or just somehow unbelievable?”

By using guided questions, Teacher 5 encourages their students to be able to analyse and evaluate the sample texts. To introduce the students to useful and reliable sample texts, the teachers provide the Article Bank, which includes approximately thirty sample texts. Students have to choose two articles from the Article Bank and one from outside the bank to use as sources to write argumentative essays.

Besides, the process approach is employed by all participants, which includes finding sources, taking notes, creating an annotated bibliography, formulating thesis statements, and revising drafts. The process approach provides a structured framework for students to navigate the writing process, from source selection to final drafts. It allows for gradual skill development and promotes a sense of progression. Tsui (2002), and Jee and Aziz (2021) support the efficacy of a process-based approach. The findings from these studies align with the discussion section, where all participants in the research employ the process approach. This demonstrates a shared understanding among the EFL tutors and the literature regarding the importance of a process-oriented approach in fostering CT skills.

Apart from sample texts and the process approach, Teacher 3 implemented self-assessment using a 13-point checklist, enabling students to evaluate their own writing and identify areas for improvement. Lex tutor software (Lex tutor, 2018) was also employed to enhance students' academic vocabulary through interactive exercises and feedback. Teacher 3 also utilised the Coh-Metrix tool (McNamara et al., 2014) to improve the cohesion of students' writing by assessing the logical flow and coherence of ideas. Other participants utilise Moodle, YouTube, and other online educational platforms to provide additional materials, supplementary exercises, and assign homework. This connection supports Ayyash's (2020) findings that technology can be a valuable tool in teaching CT skills.

Both Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 emphasised the importance of teaching argumentation and CT in academic writing instruction. They recommended the Toulmin model (Toulmin et al., 1984) as a practical framework for teaching argumentation, and its application in the classroom was emphasised. It involves making a claim and providing supporting evidence to strengthen it. This model emphasises the importance of including relevant data and addressing counterarguments. By considering different perspectives, the Toulmin model promotes well-rounded argumentation.

Participants also mention the importance of student motivation and responsibility in academic writing. They employ various strategies to engage and motivate students, including explaining the usefulness of academic skills courses and CT. Additional strategies include peer revisions, focusing on coherence and cohesion, and providing extra feedback to weak students and feedback on APA formatting to avoid plagiarism.

Therefore, concerning research question 2.1 of the study, "What are EFL tutors' strategies in fostering first year university students' CT skills in English academic writing?", the research findings suggest that EFL tutors use a combination of traditional and technological tools and strategies to teach academic writing and CT. They also focus on guiding students' writing step by step and providing feedback to improve their writing skills.

The last set of interview questions referred to the difficulties EFL tutors encounter in fostering students' CT skills in English academic writing. The common themes across participants' responses include student-related challenges, time-related challenges, and systemic challenges.

One of the significant student-related challenges is the mixed levels of students as pointed out by Teacher 1 and Teacher 4.

“There are a number of students whose knowledge is not good enough. OK, content, knowledge, and usually language knowledge as well. There are other factors as well, like there are students who have worked harder and learned more of the material and some others did not. So you start with a split-level group immediately. And then, I mentioned another problem for you, the language ability level, which ranges from A2 to C2 in the same one first-year group, there will be students from A2 to C2. Can you imagine that?”

According to Teacher 4's remark mentioned above, it is very challenging for teachers to teach students in the same class who have different levels of content knowledge, language knowledge, and effort put into learning the material. Teacher 5 also added that different motivation levels of students (i.e., how actively students get involved in class discussion, whether they do homework or not, how much they have prepared for the class) are also an issue in fostering CT in academic writing classes. Teacher 5 said that:

“The students don't really apply what they have learnt in academic writing courses. So, if I sit down with them for 90 minutes and we write together. When they go home, many of them will not apply the things that we learned, and it's a motivation issue. Only the very best motivated and good students will actually think twice about what they've learnt and how they write.”

Although teachers teach all students in classrooms, the effectiveness of the lessons differs according to the students' motivation. Only motivated students acquire the skills taught in classrooms, while less motivated students may not learn effectively.

Another student-related challenge is students' lack of exposure to CT and academic writing. As students did not get specific training for academic writing and CT skills in their secondary schools, they have limited exposure to CT skills. Teacher 3 said that:

“That's not easy for them to be able to critically evaluate something. And I think it's related to their age to some extent. Or maybe this is the first time when they hear about CT and when they are asked to basically think critically, because I think it's secondary schools where they are not necessarily asked to think critically, so it's not their task.”

Teaching CT in academic writing classes is a double workload for teachers because the students do not know how academic writing works, and they also do not have a lot of experience with CT. These challenges align with the findings from Shaheen's (2016) study, highlighting the importance of addressing language proficiency, cultural differences, and explicit explanations to enhance students' CT skills.

Consequently, the lack of experience with CT skills and academic writing affects students' attitudes towards academic writing. Students are hesitant and lack confidence when it comes to criticising academic sources. Their limited ability to critically analyse academic sources can also pose significant challenges for EFL tutors. Teacher 1 shared their experience, stating that while some students are capable of critiquing academic texts, others are hesitant and lack the confidence to do so. They perceive academic sources as overly complex and professional, feeling too inexperienced to criticise such materials.

Although the participants encountered many challenges in teaching CT skills in academic writing because of students' mixed levels of knowledge, effort, motivation and attitudes towards academic writing, they remarked that students' CT skills and academic writing have developed over time throughout Academic Skills Course 2. Teacher 2 noted that:

“At the beginning, they focus on paraphrasing and trying to summarise well and they don't think about actually having their own opinion about the topic. But then, we talk about formulating research questions and thesis statements. I tell them just a lot that we don't have ready-made answers in academia. Later, they come up with an answer just like somebody else as long as they can convince me.”

Another significant challenge highlighted by all the participants is time-related challenges. Teaching CT skills to first-year students can be challenging due to time constraints, and the long process of writing can make it difficult to give individual feedback and ask students to rewrite. Time constraints can also arise from the loss of time due to administration issues or extracurricular activities. Teacher 4 explained the tight schedule of the course as follows:

“The first week is usually when you get to know one another. Set up the course administration issues, and so on. OK, so the last week usually is like closing the whole thing down. That's also lost, so we are left with 12 weeks in the best case. If there are national holidays and anything else, then you lose classes.”

This finding is supported by the discussion of Kacanoz and Akbas (2017) which highlight the challenges posed by an exam-focused education system that prioritizes multiple-choice questions, leaving less time for the development of CT skills. The tight schedule of the course and potential time losses due to administrative issues or extracurricular activities make it difficult to dedicate sufficient time to fostering CT skills.

Finally, systemic challenges can also pose significant barriers to fostering CT skills in English academic writing classes. Teacher 5 noted that the systemic problem in Hungarian education (e.g., lack of focus on teaching academic writing and reading at the lower and high school levels) can make it difficult for EFL tutors to teach CT skills to first year university students. Teacher 4 pointed out the irrelevance of the course for some students who do not have to write their papers in English and the uncertainty of some students about their academic goals can also pose significant challenges.

Therefore, concerning the research question 2.2 of the study, “What are the difficulties EFL tutors encounter in fostering first year university students' CT skills in English academic writing?”,

the research findings suggest that students' mixed levels of knowledge and motivation, limited exposure to CT, and lack of confidence in critiquing academic sources are major challenges. Time constraints and systemic issues in the education system also contribute to the difficulty. To overcome these challenges, tutors employed strategies such as explaining the importance of academic skills and CT, utilising alternative educational platforms to make up for missed time, and providing additional feedback to weaker students.

5 Conclusion

The research study aimed to investigate the views of EFL tutors regarding the importance of CT skills in academic writing at a Hungarian university. The study also examined the teaching strategies used by EFL tutors to enhance CT skills in academic writing and explored the challenges they faced in their courses and how they dealt with them.

The findings of the study indicated that EFL tutors consider CT skills as crucial in English academic writing. These skills are necessary for evaluating sources, analysing texts in depth, questioning the reliability of sources, and expressing independent opinions. While some participants believed that CT might not be essential at the basic level of academic writing, others argued that it is an integral part, and the absence of CT leads to low-quality research.

The participants reported employing various strategies to foster CT skills in first-year university students' English academic writing. These strategies included guiding through tasks, utilising technology for academic vocabulary and cohesion, offering explicit written feedback, providing sample texts, writing through a process approach, assigning essay assignments, encouraging self-assessment and peer revision, and using the Toulmin model to teach argumentation. The tutors emphasised the significance of critically evaluating literature, encouraging students to keep an open mind, question the validity of sources, and avoid accepting information without scrutiny. The study also identified challenges faced by EFL tutors in developing CT skills in English academic writing. These challenges included mixed levels of students, students' limited exposure to CT and academic writing, students' attitudes towards CT and academic writing, time constraints, and systemic issues.

This study addresses a research gap by examining the development of CT skills in English academic writing among undergraduate students in Hungary. The results offer valuable insights to EFL tutors, enabling them to employ effective strategies for enhancing students' CT abilities in this area. The study also presents a practical definition of CT skills and provides classroom strategies that can benefit English language teaching in Hungary and other regions. Overall, the implications of this study are significant, filling a gap in research and offering practical guidance for educators.

Being small-scale research with limited stakeholder involvement (only including EFL tutors and excluding EFL students and university authorities) could be considered as a limitation of the study. However, this study serves as a starting point for future large-scale research. Subsequent studies can explore whether students with higher CT skills exhibit similar understanding and encounter comparable challenges in academic writing. Moreover,

investigations can be conducted to explore how teachers from different universities and contexts incorporate CT into their writing classes and address the challenges they encounter. Further research is necessary not only to explore effective teaching strategies but also to evaluate their effectiveness and implications in integrating CT into L2 writing classes.

Finally, it is also important to note that AI-powered tools and software have started impacting the development of CT skills in academic writing. For example, AI-powered writing assistants such as Grammarly and ChatGPT can suggest grammar, vocabulary, and structure improvements, which can help students improve their writing skills. However, while AI technology is helpful, human intervention is still necessary to instruct students on evaluating sources and expressing independent opinions critically. Moreover, as AI technology continues to advance, it is expected to play a more significant role in teaching and learning CT skills in academic writing. As a result, teachers must stay up to date with the latest advancements in AI technology and integrate them into their teaching strategies to enhance students' CT abilities. Therefore, further research on integrating AI in teachers' instructions and guiding students to be able to use AI constructively and ethically are also demanding topics in the context of English academic writing.

Proofread for the use of English by: Randy Martin, Jakarta, Indonesia.

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APPENDIX A

The Interview guide

I am [author], a Ph.D. student at the Doctoral School of Linguistics, Eotvos Lorand University. I would like to invite you to participate in an interview to talk about your insights and experience in teaching academic writing in your Academic Skills classes. The interview may last about 30-45 minutes. The participants' names will be anonymised during and after the research, and I will not share the interview data with anyone else. If you decide to take part you will be asked to sign the consent form to say that you agree. You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

Thank you very much for your time and kind cooperation.

Interview questions

Background Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How many years have you taught Academic Skills classes?
3. What are the three most common first languages of your students?

Teachers' understanding of the course & critical thinking

4. What are the requirements of the course the students are expected to fulfill?
5. What does critical thinking mean to you?
[Can you give me some examples?]
6. In your opinion, what is the relationship between critical thinking and academic writing?
7. How important do you think critical thinking is for academic writing?
[Why?]

How the teachers teach the course

8. How do you establish a good rapport with your students?
9. How do you establish a good rapport among your students?
10. What is your approach to teaching critical thinking skills?
[What are your teaching techniques for critical thinking skills in academic writing classes?]
11. Are there any techniques you find to be more effective for developing critical thinking skills?
[Why?]

Critical thinking-related challenges and how the teachers handle them

12. What do you think of your students' level of critical thinking?
13. How do you assess/evaluate your students' critical thinking skills level?
14. What are the challenges you undergo while teaching academic writing skills to your students?
15. Do you think those challenges are related to students' critical thinking skills? Why or why not?

[What are the critical thinking related challenges experienced by your students in their academic writing?

16. How do you handle these challenges?

[How do you help your students to overcome those challenges?]

Further questions

17. What is your first language?

18. What is your highest level of education?

19. What is your PhD/ Master dissertation about?

20. How would you define your research interest?

21. I have no further questions. Do you have anything more you want to bring up or ask about before we finish the interview?

Request for follow-up sections

I expect to conduct only one interview; however, follow-ups may be needed for more clarification. At that time, I will contact you by email to request this.

Thank you very much.