

## Conference Paper

# Critical Thinking among Indonesian Students Studying Public Health in Australia: Autoethnography of Challenges and Strategies to Adapt

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Critical thinking, as the ability to evaluate, has been a constant challenge for many Indonesians pursuing tertiary education in Australian Universities. As an essential component to the students' competency set necessary to accomplish their degree, many Indonesian students struggle to sharpen their critical-thinking skills in appraising essays or discussing questions correctly. The struggle might be due to the difficulty in distinguishing critical thinking from other intellectual skills such as understanding, memorising and applying. This article is a reflective writing that explores the challenges faced and strategies applied by Indonesian public health students during their course to improve their critical-thinking skills. Several factors including the collective style-culture, where the students come from a home-education background, and the absence of relevant practices are responsible for their lack of critical-thinking skills. Strategies applied are frequent discussion with native students which helps in breaking the cross-culture barrier, thus increasing their confidence in critical thinking; extensive academic articles reading to familiarise the critical-thinking style; practicing self-questioning various topics and validity of evidence; and being more open to other perspectives.

**Keywords:** critical thinking, students, public health, autoethnography, reflexivity

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## 1. Introduction

Australia has been one of the favourite destinations for Indonesian scholars to continue their tertiary education. Almost a quarter of all Indonesians who study overseas have chosen Australian universities, this number can reach up to 8,500 students each year [1]. Despite their heterogeneity in cultural backgrounds, many Indonesian students face

similar problems, namely language barriers, and the difference of Indonesian education system compared to Australia. These two challenges amongst the students arguably lead to the lack of critical thinking during the time of study. Indeed, Kartikaningsih [2] stated there is a lack of critical thinking amongst Indonesian students in the argumentative texts of their assignments. The students' limited knowledge and practices of critical thinking skills may be part of the cause [3–5].

Elder defines critical thinking as “self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way” [6]. Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians describes in their curriculum that successful learners are those who are able to think deeply and logically. By studying fundamental subjects, those learners manage to obtain and evaluate evidence to support their argument. Furthermore, successful learners are creative, innovative and resourceful. When facing a problem, they come up with a solution which is based on a wide range of learning areas and disciplines [7]. Critical thinking is highly valued in the curriculum in Australia.

Indonesian students who come to Australia for pursuing a degree need to deal with several challenges, as they need to adjust the way of learning from memorisation to critical thinking [8]. Most Indonesian students found it challenging to practice critical thinking in oral discussions and also writing assignments. They perceive critical thinking as Western way of thinking instead of their mode of thinking [9]. Amongst Indonesian students who studied public health, it is proven that critical thinking skill would help them to achieve intellectual integrity as well as growing empathy, humility and sense of justice in their future career.

Despite the fact that critical thinking would enable students to define, analysing, interpreting, evaluating, and judging a variety of resources, there is a limited amount of research about Indonesian students studying at Australia Universities in relation to their critical thinking particularly in academic writing. This article is a reflective writing of our experiences as international students studying public health in Australia. As researcher-participants, we employed an autoethnographic approach to reflect upon challenges we were facing in critical thinking and how we tried to manage and adapt. Hopefully, this article could be used as a preparation for future Indonesia students for their academic purpose. Moreover, this writing could also help Australian Academicians to get a better understanding of the experiences endured by Indonesian students when trying to adjust to academic work, cultural and social life around them, both as a student and as a human being.

## 2. Material and Method

This qualitative research employed a Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) tool to unpack the narratives on researcher-participants experience during the time of studying public health in Australia [10]. Several studies mention that autoethnographic data is useful to provide rigorous understanding of particular issues and its related socio-cultural experiences [11]. Autoethnography is not merely a personal story telling, as it also involves structured study design as well as the process of systematic data collection and analysis.

As participant-researchers, we have written self-reflective journals concerning any difficulties we had experienced in regard to our course of study, social and cultural life in Australia. We have reflected on positive aspects of Australian academic and social life. Reflecting on our first-hand experiences, we tried to unfold further our strategies when facing challenges during our study. Finally we reflected also upon the strategies we used to adapt with the academic as well as social life in Australia. Two important components of the CEA approach are self-reflection and collaboration [10]. Stories derived from the journals then will be subject to a thematic analysis. Through the analysis process, we collaboratively developed a series of themes about critical thinking amongst Indonesian students studying public health in Australia.

## 3. Results

Two main themes emerged during the analysis when talking about experiences during our Public Health course in Australia, namely academic and personal issues. Under the academic challenges theme, two sub-themes were derived, one is about language barriers, and the other one is the difference in education systems between Indonesia and Australia. The second main theme was when we were trying to balance between study and personal life.

### 3.1. Language barriers

All participant-researchers experienced difficulties expressing ideas in class during discussion. Although we all have learned English language, and also specifically Academic English before our departure to Australia. We still found that it was not an easy task to apply that in classes.

### 3.1.1. Reflective journal

*The most difficult part of my course was getting involved in classroom discussions which were heavily dominated by Australian Students, especially when the discussion topic was about Australia local issues.*

One of us remembered having a very strong urge to get involved in a discussion in classes, but then she felt less confident with language. She was unable to think how to articulate ideas in a way that everyone in the class would understand.

### 3.1.2. Reflective journal

*The discussion in my class was very interesting and I had some first-hand experience in the field on what they were talking about, but I did not know how to tell them my thoughts in academic English language, I was afraid they would not get my points. I kept being silent for the whole semester.*

For this problem, we agreed that having frequent discussions outside the classroom with other Indonesian students was useful to ensure that we grasped the same understandings from classes. These types of discussions were also a good way to practice communication using Academic English style not only in oral discussion, but all participant-researchers had to deal with challenges when working on written assignments.

### 3.1.3. Reflective journal

*When I wrote an essay, my primary problem would be making myself clear in my writing. It's very hard to make my ideas clear and make my tutor easily understand. I think it's only because I lack English academic vocabularies.*

Dealing with this, participant-researchers were trying to broaden their circles of friends. All of us benefited from having native speaker friends who were also students to proofread our writing assignments. It was surely reciprocal, as all of us assisted these native friends by providing inputs on the structures of their assignments.

## 3.2. From Eastern to Western education system

We found that the education system in Australia was different compared to that in Indonesia. These differences advanced the academic challenges we faced. One of the major issues was moving from passive learning experience into questioning ideas.

### 3.2.1. Reflective journal

*I was worried if my statements or questions in class sound stupid. That might be cultural too, as when I was in high school my teachers would not let us to ask too many questions, especially stupid questions. We were expected to just accept the ideas, theories, and formulas.*

### 3.2.2. Reflective journal

*I found it interesting when I learned epidemiology and biostatistic subjects in Australia. Honestly I did the same subjects through my previous public health course in Indonesia, same concepts. I just realised it here that I was just memorising the formulas without understanding them. In Australia, I really needed to push my critical thinking skill, as my lecturers wanted me to apply those formulas in the real world, in everyday public health-related issues.*

For this, participant-researchers pushed their boundaries from passive learners to be more critical thinkers. It took some period of time to gradually move from accepting ideas to question them.

## 3.3. Living beyond classrooms

When it comes to social life, all participant-researchers experienced a similar situation, difficulties in being socially involved in other circles than Indonesian students.

### 3.3.1. Reflective journal

*I really wanted to hang out with local students or English-speaking students from other countries, but most of the time they invited me to have some drink with them at bars or cafes. I don't drink alcohol.*

### 3.3.2. Reflective journal

*When you studied in my University, you would see how students from the same country or at least from similar culture mingle with others from the same country/culture. Take a look at the cafes at Union house during lunch-time, people from Indonesia or mid-east countries would queue and chat in front of a kebab or curry store, students from China would get Chinese food, and English-speaking students usually stood in front of Subway.*

### 3.3.3. Reflective journal

*In my second year, I tried to leave my comfort zone by hanging out with more local students or other students from English speaking countries. I wanted to have different experiences and learn more about their cultures. It has not only increased my communication skills particularly using English language, but also mutually benefited us all when it comes to assignments. They used to proofread my writings, fixing my English grammars and vocabularies, and I helped them by providing inputs on the contents of their assignments. That was one way for me to practice and eventually improved my critical thinking.*

As mentioned at the last reflective journal, we have succeeded to develop friendships with students from different countries, including those from English speaking countries. Broadening our circle of friendships not only helped to improve our critical thinking skills, it was also useful for us to grow by learning and respecting others' values and cultures.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Critical thinking in Indonesian education system

All of us found it difficult to actively engage in tutorials and seminars during our study in Australia. This is especially due to the difference in education systems between Australia and Indonesia. Lack of relevant practices on critical thinking in Indonesian education systems leads to the feeling of less confidence in articulating ideas when we were studying in Australia.

The previous education system we had was more passive learning experiences, inclusive only of reproduction of ideas. We noticed that we were well trained in routine

memorisation of information from textbooks, without questioning or making sense of the ideas. Moving from passive learners into questioning ideas was, in our opinion, the only way to become more critical. We also realised that we had been holding several prejudices from our previous learning, such as believing what is right and wrong. In the field of Public Health, this *black and white* way of thinking would only hold us back, especially from being critical.

In Indonesia, critical thinking has come into attention particularly after the Reform Era in 1998, when Indonesian people demanded more freedom to express themselves as citizens [12]. To support the development after the reformation, our country needs more people who think critically to pour extensive ideas as well as evaluate which one is logically applicable [13]. Hence, developing critical thinking skills has been the primary agenda of Indonesia curriculum [2]. Several research have reported the need to develop Indonesian students' critical thinking since their skills are lagged behind their peers in other South East Asia countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. To encourage critical thinking skills among students we need a more thorough critical approaches in our pedagogy [4].

A critical thinker can express his thought well either in spoken or written form. According to Quitadamo and Kurtz [14], who studied a population of biology students, writing can positively influence their critical thinking performance. While Barry [15] stated that among social science students, the improvement in their writing follows the improvement of expressing their deeper thought.

In the old curriculum, students were expected to listen and to read rather than to speak. The teacher was the main focus of the class. The situation has created passive students. However in the new curriculum where development of critical thinking skills is emerging, the focus has shifted to students' active participation. Nowadays, students are encouraged (and obliged) to present a topic which they have researched previously. The teacher's role is more to a moderator who keeps the presentation in the correct pathway.

## 4.2. English as a second language (ESL) students

We noticed that in the beginning of our study in Australia, we lacked confidence when dealing with participation in classroom discussion. The lack of confidence due to language barrier could be seen as lack of critical thinking skills [16]. We came to the conclusion that English speaking skills that we have learned in preparation class (or in our previous degree) before we attended the course was insufficient.

As a result, local students and International English-speaking students were seen to dominate classrooms. Not only the participant-researchers experienced difficulties of communication, but often the topics of the discussion were unfamiliar.

For this problem, we agreed that having frequent discussions outside the classroom with other Indonesian students was useful to ensure that we grasped the same understandings from classes. The discussions were also useful as a means of practicing our Academic English language. Moreover, we have common strategies to articulate clear voices in our academic writings. Reading a numerous amount of academic journal articles, and discussions using Academic English with classmates contributed significantly in improving our critical thinking skills, particularly in writings.

Indeed, being part of international students studying in English-language country, the primary problem of Indonesia students in Australia is their mastery of English. Rosenthal, Russel, and Thomson [17] conducted research of the well-being of international students in Australia. They found that 24% of international students have difficulties in academic writing, while 22% admit it is hard to speak fluently in English. The lack of English language skills has directly impacted students' performance both in academics and social life [18]. Both research have suggested that language skill is one of the significant factors to affect critical thinking skills among ESL students.

Asian students who are frequently being less active or less expressive during discussion have been seen to lack of critical thinking, particularly when presenting argument and debating are likely applied as Western academic standard of critical thinking set [19]. The language barrier and lack of confidence have hurdled ESL students to express their argument. Critical thinking to understand a topic, to analyse, and to present the statement with logical reasoning demands a certain level of language proficiency. Thus, it is suggested to educators to structure the assessment in a level of language proficiency which is understandable for all students in order to encourage their critical thinking skills.

### 4.3. Cultural adjustment in critical thinking

Indonesian students have a distinctive social culture compared to the culture of their peer local students. Differences in values and social lifestyle hinder the Indonesian students to be more inclusive and being included. To deal with this, all of us had tried to push our boundaries and have more interaction with local students or students from other English-speaking countries.

Being International students means that we needed several adjustments for our new life. Several studies discuss a range of problems for student adjustment, such as language barrier, lack of confidence inside and outside classroom, academic struggling, financial problems, social pressure, culture shock, homesickness, as well as administrative issues [20-23]. All these factors can influence the capability of students to improve their critical thinking skills. According to Barker and colleagues [24] some Asian students find difficulties to engage in tutorials and seminars once they feel they lack language competence, unconfident and are unfamiliar to actively participate in discussion.

The cultural adjustment is also affected by students relationships with others and their perceived values. Wanguri [25] notes that people tend to favour others who share similar characters to them and dislike others who are different. However, adjusting to a new culture by spending most of the time abroad with people from the same country might be less helpful. As a matter of fact, it is common for us to witness Indonesian students spending time only with other Indonesian students during their study times in Australia.

Weaving the stories of cultural differences, we argue that we should look at these circumstances into a broader system. Individuals who want to be involved would find it challenging when the system was less ready for that. In one of the reflexive journals mentioned, a student wanted to *hang out* with students from different countries. However, this person found it challenging as the system where she was in was less supportive. For having a better social inclusion at a University, it is arguably that the University itself should keep encouraging an inclusive environment. Although there were still several challenges at the University we were attending for study, all of us experienced helpful activities at campus that can broaden our circle of friends. These activities included student clubs on arts, sports, and discussions outside lectures with various interesting topics.

## 5. Conclusion

Critical thinking is an important skill to analyse and interpret a matter from several perspectives, thus helping students to obtain and evaluate evidence to support their argument. As a result, students can think logically and come up with a solution weighing wisely based on multiple disciplines. Nevertheless, language barrier and cultural difference can contribute to the lack of critical thinking skills in international students whose English is not their first language. To adapt and improve their skills, students are encouraged to read extensive academic journals to familiarise themselves with critical

thinking style, actively join group discussion and speaking up their arguments, as well as to broaden their friendship with natives and students from other countries. As research on critical thinking amongst Indonesian students studying public health in Australia is limited, this CAE is useful in filling the gap on the knowledge by providing some insight through our experience. However, we should acknowledge that the pool of CAE data in this study was collected only from three participants-researchers. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised for all Indonesian students studying public health in Australia.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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