

## Analyzing ELIT200 Critical Reading And Writing Course: How Is Critical Thinking Developed And Applied Through Critical Reading And Writing?

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### Abstract

We believe that our required university course ELIT200 Critical Reading and Writing, which is taught and presented in English – the official language of IUS, helps to develop our students' critical thinking/reading/writing skills which seem to be underdeveloped due to their previous education experiences at the primary and secondary level. This is a freshman course thus the techniques used are supposed to develop their skills and enable them to critically and analytically examine all audio-visual-reading materials that they come across during their university studies. Furthermore, upon completing our university course, they are equipped to write proper argumentative essays as well as engage in academic debates and discussions on current topics most of which are quite controversial (discrimination, the impacts of social media, artificial intelligence, to name a few). The assessment is also organized and planned in a way that it supports and evaluates the improvement of their critical thinking skills (reading assignments, video assignments, writing an argumentative essay, preparing a speech/presentation as well as summative assessment components such as one mid-term exam and one final exam).

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking, Reading, Writing, Controversial Topics, Discussions, Assessment, Analysis

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### Özet

IUS'un resmi dili olan İngilizce'de öğretilen ve sunulan zorunlu üniversite dersimiz ELIT200 Eleştirel Okuma ve Yazma'nın, öğrencilerimizin önceki eğitimleri nedeniyle gelişmemiş gibi görünen eleştirel düşünme/okuma/yazma becerilerini geliştirmeye yardımcı olduğuna inanıyoruz. İlk ve orta düzeyde deneyimler. Bu birinci sınıf bir derstir, bu nedenle kullanılan tekniklerin becerilerini geliştirmesi ve üniversite eğitimleri sırasında karşılaştıkları tüm görsel-işitsel okuma materyallerini eleştirel ve analitik olarak incelemelerini sağlaması beklenir. Ayrıca, üniversite kursumuzu tamamladıktan sonra, çoğu oldukça tartışmalı olan güncel konularda (ayrımçılık, sosyal medyanın etkileri, yapay zeka, birkaç isim) akademik tartışmalara ve tartışmalara katılmanın yanı sıra uygun tartışmacı makaleler yazacak donanıma sahip olurlar. ). Değerlendirme aynı zamanda eleştirel düşünme becerilerinin (okuma ödevleri, video ödevleri, tartışmacı bir makale yazma, bir konuşma/sunum hazırlama) gelişimini destekleyecek ve değerlendirecek şekilde organize edilir ve planlanır. dönem sınavı ve bir final sınavı).

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Eleştirel Düşünme, Okuma, Yazma, Tartışmalı Konular, Tartışmalar, Değerlendirme, Analiz

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching critical thinking skills is of the utmost importance in all cycles of university level education (and even before that). It includes several important factors, such as judging whether a statement follows from the premises; whether something is an assumption; whether an observation statement is reliable; whether a simple generalization is warranted; judging whether a hypothesis is warranted; whether a theory is warranted; whether an argument depends on an ambiguity; whether a statement is over-vague or over-specific; and whether an alleged authority is reliable (Ennis, 1964).

Critical thinking largely relies on the understanding of the connection between language and meaning. The meaning of words can be changed and used connotatively to suit the communicator's needs. Words express the way we think, they are not always clearly defined, and can be misused as such.

(...) Certainly, nothing equals the study of a foreign language for developing the consciousness that language is an important instrument whose use requires discrimination. Language, properly taught, shows that a given word is not always equivalent to a given idea, and that equivalent words in different languages are not true and perfect equivalents. If a student can be made to realize the inadequacy and falsity of a word-for-word translation, he has already come a long way (Kragness, 1945: 522).

Critical thinking skills are most effectively taught through reading and writing activities that are done throughout a given course. As for critical writing, it is "crucial in cultivating critical thinking skills" (Çavdar and Doe, 2012: 299). In the case of traditional writing, certain procedures need to be followed in order for the whole process to be successful, such as proper communication between a student and an instructor in order for the student to understand what they have done correctly or incorrectly in a given assignment. The feedback sessions should be beneficial and effective in providing the student(s) with opportunities to immediately use the knowledge acquired during those sessions, which is not always the case, and can result in a further deterioration in the student's knowledge. (Elbow, 1997; Hodges, 1997; Lunsford, 1997; Sommers, 1982; Underwood and Tregidgo, 2006). As for critical reading, it can be developed through the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA) (Stauffer, 1969, 1980). Haggard (1988) suggests the following steps in the DRTA be taken into consideration when planning and implementing the DRTA method: 1) identifying purposes for reading, 2) adjustment of rate to purposes and material, 3) observing the reading, 4) developing comprehension, and 5) fundamental skill development. Moreover, critical thinking can be taught using literature, where different interpretations and analyses of a literary work can be used to further foster students' critical thinking skills (Commeyras, 1989).

When it comes to eliciting critical thinking skills through asking appropriate questions in class and having an appropriate assessment method (or even methods), we ought to be aware of some very important factors that can impact both of them to a large extent. Firstly, some teachers are not equipped with suitable critical thinking skills in order to be able to teach them to their students both because they are not stimulated to develop their own critical thinking skills during

their education and careers and they do not have enough opportunity to practice the skills that they need to gain in order to teach them. Moreover, materials, especially certain textbooks, that teachers have at their disposal do not require students to do enough critical thinking while working on specific tasks, and teachers need to be instructed how to use textbooks and to find or design some extra materials to develop their students' critical thinking skills in instruction. Another argument is that too much focus is placed on test scores. If there is only one right answer to a question, it is very unlikely that the question fosters critical thinking, bearing in mind the fact that critical thinking is unpredictable per se. This is particularly the case with standardized tests. Lastly, inclusion makes it very difficult for teachers to work on developing their students' critical thinking skills. Due to the overwhelming amount of preparation for their lessons and the work that is needed both in and out of class, teachers give more importance to meeting their learning outcomes rather than fostering their students' critical thinking skills. (Costa, 1986; Savage, 1998)

The aim of this paper is to show to what extent our materials and teaching methodology at ELIT200 Critical Reading and Writing help foster our students' critical thinking skills.

## **2. Materials and Method**

For our observation and research, we have studied and analyzed a Freshmen English course – ELIT200 Critical Reading and Writing. Each segment of the course has been evaluated to determine if students improve their critical thinking skills upon the completion of the course. The material that has been specifically analyzed is the ELIT200 reader with a compilation of audio, visual, reading, and writing materials collected to engage the students in the critical thinking process. After a particular topic in the lecture is taught, there are certain questions in the reader which refer to critical thinking skills and the further discussions that follow only foster those skills. Teaching these skills should not only be utilized in the classroom because they must be used outside as well (Reboy, 1989:411).

The method of our research is qualitative based on class observations and formative assessment. We observed students during our class discussion and have noticed how their arguments and reasoning developed during the 15-week semester. Furthermore, the results of the midterm and final exam have concurred with our findings.

## **3. Results**

The results of our findings reveal that students improve their critical thinking skills after passing the ELIT200 Critical Reading and Writing course. They can utilize those skills in their other courses throughout their academic studies and life. During the semester, the students learn how to critically analyze a text from many sides and determine its fallacies or validity. Having the ability to study and critically analyze a text, article and/or other forms of research is an imperative ability in the daily function of life. This function also serves as a reminder to beware of any falsehoods in an argument or belief.

#### 4. Discussion

The freshmen ELIT200- critical Reading and writing course contains six parts all of which enable students to improve their critical thinking skills. In the first part, students become familiarized with the critical thinking techniques and strategies such as persuasion, dispute, and logical fallacies. The strategies which are taught at the beginning of the course are utilized since for many of the students this is the first time, they encounter critical thinking questions. The next part of the course deals with artificial intelligence. Students read and analyze different texts related to robots and Alan Turing's experiment. Besides the reading materials, students also watch videos related to this topic. After completing the discussion of artificial intelligence, satire is explored. In the section which explores satire, excerpts of *Animal Farm* by George Orwell are scrutinized and the skills of critical thinking are implanted. Satire is furthermore conversed after watching certain satirical shows such as Stephen Colbert. Students are able to view how satire is used in comedy when describing political situations or everyday life occurrences. In the fourth part of the course, social media is analyzed. In the topic of social media, students take a deeper look at the real impact of social media or whether social media creates narcissists. Prior to writing the argumentative essay, the broad topic of discrimination is discussed. Many forms of discrimination are viewed and critically examined, especially gender, racial, religious and social discrimination. Different visual and written material is scrutinized using critical thinking skills. The final part of the course gives the opportunity for the students to use all the skills talked about during the 15-week semester. Students are taught to write an objective argumentative essay where the opposing side needs to be included and then rebutted. In doing so, students prove that they can take an opposing argument into account when providing the reader/listener with their counterargument/rebuttal.

When discussing the overall achievement, out of 43 students, 36 were successful and were able to pass the course, however, seven were not successful. Out of the 36 that passed the course, 19 received at least a B-/C+. It is important to note that these results were taken from our ELIT200 that was conducted in the fall semester of 2019, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and online teaching, so one could imply that these results are quite authentic. There are eight components of the overall score for the course including the midterm and final exam. For the midterm exam, the students were instructed to answer questions related to critical thinking skills and techniques with reference to particular terminology. For the other part of the exam, they needed to critically analyze a text with follow-up questions. As seen in the provided table, most of the students were not successful, and this could be because this was the first time many of them come in contact with critical analysis. This reasoning could also be viewed in the final exam results because overwhelmingly students were successful. For the final exam, the students needed to write an argumentative essay and once again critically read and scrutinize a particular text. With the majority of the students passing the final exam, it only solidifies the fact that with the ELIT200 course, students learned how to critically analyze and utilize their critical thinking skills.

For most of the other six components of this course, the students were successful. For assignments one and two, where the freshmen students needed to read a text and answer questions using critical thinking skills, about half (Assignment 1 – 19; Assignment 2 – 22) were successful in completing the task. These results may be explained because this was the first time

the students encountered critical thinking questions. For the third assignment, the results are slightly better (24) and for this assignment, the students were obliged to watch a video and reply to questions using critical thinking techniques. For the last two assignments, assignments four and five, students write argumentative essays taking into consideration the opposing side as well. Along with their completed essay, the outline of the essay is also marked. In writing an argumentative essay, students need to research a particular topic, present factual arguments and acknowledge the opposing side, which are all elements of critical thinking skills. The students were quite successful in these components because over three-fourths received a passing mark (Assignment 4 – 33 and Assignment 5 – 31). The final component apart from the exams is the video speech they needed to record. In the recorded video, students display their arguments written in an argumentative essay with an immense success rate (37). This shows that their oral argumentation skills improved throughout the course. All the listed course components are used to improve the critical thinking skills of students.

Finally, what is important and needs to be emphasized here is the fact that Assignments 1-3 included the two most prominent types of questions through which the critical thinking skills of our students were especially developed, namely open-ended and multiple-choice questions.

**Table 1.** Representation of Success Rate of an ELIT200 Course in the Fall Semester of 2019-2020

Course Component	Total Number of Students	Successful	Not successful
Midterm Exam	43	17	26
Final Exam	43	33	10
Assignment 1 – Critical Reading	43	19	24
Assignment 2- Critical Reading	43	22	21
Assignment 3 – Video/ Speech Analysis	43	24	19
Assignment 4 – Argumentative Essay Outline	43	33	10
Assignment 5 – Argumentative Essay	43	31	12
Speech/Video (Critically Analyzing Arguments)	43	37	6

## Conclusion(s)

What can be noticed based on our results and discussion sections is that the majority of our students do improve their critical thinking skills by applying different critical reading and writing strategies as well as the theoretical background that they are introduced to and taught in the ELIT200 Critical Reading and Writing course. As it has been acknowledged before, it is not significant only as far as passing or failing the course is concerned, but also due to the fact that critical thinking skills are something without which we cannot hope to have future generations of our countries, continents and world capable of making important decisions and changes in our modern societies that do need to undergo a make-over and where we need to reset certain things and start from the scratch if we want to make our world a better place and leave it for the generations to come.

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