



## EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL WRITING SKILLS AMONG EFL SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Asri Fatiha Sari<sup>1</sup>, Yuliati<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Negeri Semarang

E-mail: [afatiha2411@students.unnes.ac.id](mailto:afatiha2411@students.unnes.ac.id)<sup>1</sup>, [yuliati@mail.unnes.ac.id](mailto:yuliati@mail.unnes.ac.id)<sup>2</sup>

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Corresponding Author:

Asri Fatiha Sari

Email Corresponding :

[afatiha2411@students.unnes](mailto:afatiha2411@students.unnes).

### ABSTRACT

EFL learners at the senior high school level continue to face significant challenges in producing critical writing, as this skill requires the simultaneous integration of linguistic proficiency and higher-order critical thinking, often demanding substantial time and cognitive effort. Drawing on theoretical perspectives of critical writing and critical thinking in EFL contexts, this study aimed to identify and examine the challenges encountered by twelfth-grade EFL students when composing argumentative texts. Using a qualitative case study design, the research involved ten twelfth-grade students and collected data through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and supporting instructional materials, including textbooks. The data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns across sources. The findings revealed four major categories of challenges: linguistic (grammatical and lexical limitations), cognitive (difficulties in developing coherent and logical arguments), affective (low confidence and fear of making errors), and socio-cultural (reluctance to engage in confrontational discourse). In line with previous studies, these results indicate that difficulties in critical writing extend beyond technical language issues and are shaped by psychological and cultural factors. The study concludes that effective instruction in critical writing at the senior high school level requires an integrated pedagogical approach that addresses linguistic accuracy, critical thinking development, and the creation of supportive classroom environments.

**Keywords:** *Critical Writing; EFL Students; High School Students; Argumentative Writing*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely recognised as one of the most demanding skills for EFL learners to master (Flores-Ferres et al., 2020; Waruwu, 2022; MD et al., 2020), as it requires the orchestration of complex cognitive and linguistic processes. At an advanced level, writing involves higher-order thinking skills such as analysing information, organising ideas, evaluating arguments, and reflecting critically, alongside linguistic competence in grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics (Al-Shanqeeti, 2020; Atasoy, 2021; Ozfidan et al., 2024). These cognitive operations are closely intertwined with the development of critical thinking, which plays a pivotal role in enabling learners to construct meaningful, coherent, and well-reasoned written texts. Consequently,

writing is not merely a linguistic activity but an intellectual endeavour that entails argument development, idea evaluation, and sensitivity to audience perspective (Riwayatningsih et al., 2025; Aljuaid, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). In this regard, critical thinking constitutes a core foundation for the development of critical writing ability among EFL learners (Irwanto, 2023; Listyani, 2019; Nejmaoui, 2019).

Learners who actively engage in critical thinking are better equipped to evaluate information, formulate logical arguments, and articulate opinions supported by evidence and reasoning. At the secondary school level, effective writing is therefore expected to reflect not only grammatical accuracy and coherence but also the presence of critical

**Vol 9, No 1 (2026): ESTEEM**

engagement with ideas. However, research suggests that the implementation of critical thinking in classrooms is strongly influenced by teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and institutional support. Dali Youcef (2023) reported that although Algerian university lecturers demonstrated strong critical thinking capacity, limited institutional frameworks constrained its classroom implementation, resulting in an emphasis on content transmission. Similarly, Yasir and Alnoori (2020) found that teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking abilities significantly shaped instructional practices in Iraqi higher education. These findings underscore that the cultivation of critical thinking in writing is not solely dependent on learners' individual abilities but is also shaped by pedagogical practices and classroom environments that either facilitate or inhibit higher-order thinking.

The development of critical writing further requires sustained engagement across multiple stages of the writing process, each of which demands distinct cognitive and evaluative operations. The writing process typically consists of at least five stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Flower & Hayes, 2019; Tarchi et al., 2023; Oktaviani & Chan, 2023). During the prewriting stage, writers select topics, generate ideas, conduct preliminary research, and organise outlines activities that primarily involve critical thinking skills such as observation, conceptual connection, evaluation of information relevance, and initial decision-making. Drafting prioritises idea development over technical accuracy, allowing writers to focus on meaning construction. Subsequent stages require increasingly refined critical judgment, particularly during revision, where writers reassess the clarity, coherence, and strength of their arguments. Editing and proofreading then address linguistic accuracy and textual quality, which are essential for minimising structural and mechanical errors and ensuring communicative effectiveness (Arisah et al., 2024; Thi & Que, 2025; Loewen et al., 2020). Although demanding, this recursive process positions writing as a powerful medium for both academic achievement and language development.

Despite its importance, many EFL high school students continue to experience

significant difficulties in producing critically informed writing. Classroom observations and preliminary findings indicate that students frequently produce superficial responses or rely heavily on copying content from online sources without meaningful evaluation or synthesis (Fattah et al., 2023; Nasution et al., 2024; Almusharraf, 2021). When tasked with writing argumentative essays on contemporary issues such as electronic money, students often present general opinions without supporting evidence, logical reasoning, or concrete examples. This pattern suggests underdeveloped critical thinking skills in applied writing contexts, a challenge similarly documented in studies on EFL argumentative writing (Ilyas & Arifin, 2025; Jaya et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2023). Numerous studies have consistently reported that EFL learners struggle with constructing arguments, employing logical reasoning, and integrating evidence effectively in argumentative texts (Xu & Xu, 2025; Lo et al., 2025; Toba et al., 2019).

Within the Indonesian secondary school context, the national curriculum explicitly emphasises the development of higher-order thinking skills, including critical thinking, particularly through argumentative writing tasks. Nevertheless, there remains a noticeable gap between curricular expectations and students' actual writing performance. Although a growing body of research has examined critical thinking and argumentative writing in EFL settings, studies focusing specifically on how critical thinking is manifested in Indonesian senior high school students' argumentative writing remain limited. In particular, research at the twelfth-grade level that foregrounds the manifestation of critical thinking rather than instructional outcomes or intervention effectiveness has received insufficient scholarly attention.

Addressing this gap, the present study shifts focus from general writing difficulties or instructional evaluation to an in-depth examination of how critical thinking is reflected in twelfth-grade students' argumentative writing within the Indonesian secondary school context. By adopting a level-specific and context-sensitive perspective, this study contributes a nuanced understanding that has been underrepresented in previous research.

**Vol 9, No 1 (2026): ESTEEM**

The primary objective is to explore the ways in which critical thinking is manifested in students' written arguments. It is expected that the findings will illuminate the discrepancy between curricular intentions and classroom realities, while offering pedagogical insights to support the design of writing instruction that balances linguistic development with critical thinking cultivation. Specifically, this study aims to assist teachers in developing writing instruction that foregrounds critical engagement, help students gain awareness of the challenges they encounter in critical writing, and provide researchers with a clearer depiction of how critical thinking is realised in EFL high school students' argumentative texts.

**2. METHODS**

This study explored the difficulties high school EFL students have while writing critically using a qualitative approach and a qualitative case study design. This design was chosen because it enables researchers to present a rich, in-depth, and contextualized depiction of participants' experiences, attitudes, and challenges within their natural educational setting. A qualitative case study allows for a focused examination of a specific group within a particular context, making it appropriate for investigating critical writing challenges among twelfth-grade EFL students (Neuman, 2019; Tisdell et al., 2025; Patton, 2020). Previous qualitative research on this matter has proven that this methodology yields very helpful results concerning critical writing problems experienced by EFL students, especially with regard to critical thinking and language proficiency (Hidayat et al., 2025). Moreover, qualitative research methods help to reveal complex data concerning students' writing problems related to anxiety, idea development, and other critical issues that cannot be covered or revealed with quantitative research methodologies (Clark et al., 2021).

Ten high school students in the twelfth grade constituted the study participants. Purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling where the study participants are selected based on deliberate criteria for the study objectives, was employed in the study. The sampling technique is very useful in searching for people with specific knowledge or skills in a study who can provide the study

with rich qualitative data because of the quality of the data produced. To ensure the data collected aligned with the aim of examining the difficulties the students experienced in the critical writing from the critical perspectives, the sampling in the study was done based on the students' experience in writing the critical essays. Purposive sampling is common in qualitative studies where the study seeks particular insights from selected participants (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2023).

Several instruments were used in order to maintain authenticity and credibility through triangulation. In educational research, the reliability of findings is increased by using a variety of data sources (Noble & Heale, 2019; Carter & Townsend, 2022). In light of this, this study used three main tools: (1) semi-structured interviews to investigate students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges regarding critical writing; (2) classroom observations to record students' engagement, difficulties and interactions during writing activities; and (3) textbook' analysis to comprehend how critical writing and critical thinking are represented in instructional materials.

Each instrument contributed to the research focus in a complementary rather than fixed sequence of data collection. Semi-structured interviews provided an in-depth perspective into the linguistic, cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural challenges that students faced in critical writing. Classroom observation offered contextual evidence as regards how these challenges are manifesting during actual writing activity and classroom interaction. Textbook' analysis helped identify the extent to which instructional materials supported or constrained the development of critical writing skills.

The data were collected in three systematic phases. First, the classroom observation phase was done to note the involvement of students in the writing classes (Van Maanen, 2025). The second phase was the conducting of the semi-structured interviews to understand the students' perspectives regarding critical writing concepts. The third phase was the classroom textbook'

analysis to complement the findings from the observation and the interviews. The method followed in collecting the data complements the concept of triangulation in gathering data in qualitative research to complement the study validity (Malik et al., 2025; Vivek et al., 2023).

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis (TA). TA is one of the most popular methods of data analysis in qualitative inquiry because it facilitates the search, examination, and reporting of patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The inductive approach to thematic analysis was employed in the study because it permits thematic emergence from the data without being guided by previously determined notions from theories. The study's exploratory character in attempting to comprehend students' lived experiences in critical writing also corresponds with the inductive method of thematic analysis. The process of data analysis entailed the stages of familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme identification, theme development, and reporting of the findings, following the thematic analysis framework. As recommended by other methodological research, digital tools were used to facilitate the methodical grouping of topics during the analytic process.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of this study revealed some challenges encountered by twelfth-grade EFL students in the process of critical writing with particular focus on argumentative writing. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and textbook' analysis, these challenges were identified and categorized into four major themes: linguistic challenges, cognitive challenges, affective challenges, and socio-cultural challenges. Furthermore, the analysis indicated a lack of instructional support related to the development of critical writing skills within the instructional material.

#### **1. Linguistic Challenges in Critical Writing**

The results revealed that linguistic challenges constituted a major issue for twelfth-grade EFL students when engaging in critical writing, particularly in argumentative

tasks. Drawing on interview data and classroom observations, students experienced persistent difficulties related to grammar, vocabulary use, and sentence construction during the writing process.

Grammar-related issues were frequently observed in the classroom. Many students were reluctant to write independently and repeatedly asked the teacher about grammatical accuracy, particularly when attempting to formulate their own sentences. This pattern was also reflected in interview responses, in which students expressed uncertainty about producing grammatically correct sentences without external assistance. The students who were using translation aids or AI software seemed much more confident and less doubtful about the grammar questions.

Limited vocabulary was identified as another major linguistic issue. Classroom observations indicated that nearly all students used mobile phones during writing tasks to access translation tools or AI assistance due to insufficient lexical resources. Only a small number of students were able to write independently without using these tools. This finding was supported by the interview data showing that students experienced difficulty selecting appropriate words to convey their ideas.

The difficulty in constructing complex sentences was also evident. During classroom activities, several students took a long time before writing, produced partially written sentences, or sought confirmation from peers or the teacher. The results from the interviews also indicated that it was difficult for students to connect ideas to form a structured sentence. Linguistic constraints made it difficult for them to complete a number of sentences within a short time.

Overall, the results demonstrated that students' ability to write critically in argumentative writing was greatly undermined by grammatical inaccuracies, limited vocabulary, and difficulty constructing complex sentences. These linguistic difficulties not only affected students' language accuracy but also interacted with higher-level cognitive processes required in critical writing.

#### **2. Cognitive Challenges in Critical Writing**

From the results, it was evident that cognitive demands played a significant role in

**Vol 9, No 1 (2026): ESTEEM**

influencing students' capacity to produce critical argumentative writing. Based on interview data and classroom observations, most students experienced difficulties in developing arguments, using supporting evidence, and explaining their reasons coherently.

Difficulty in developing logical arguments was apparent during essay-writing tasks. Classroom observations showed that some of the students were unable to start their essays independently and required prompts from the teacher before their ideas began to emerge. Interview data also indicated that the students relied on the internet or AI tools to generate ideas, suggesting limited ability to organize arguments on their own.

The reliance on general concepts without being able to support them with facts was another issue that was consistently being raised. Classroom observation revealed many students focused only on agreeing and disagreeing with a topic, particularly when they were unfamiliar with the subject. Observation data further revealed that students needed additional time to search for information and collect facts before attempting to support their claim. Interview responses confirmed that students rarely provided concrete examples or factual support unless they were prompted by the teacher.

In addition, the inability to generate and develop reasons was consistently evident. Classroom observations indicated that most students produced short arguments with a maximum of two to three sentences and struggled to expand their ideas further. In addition, students confirmed the findings through the interview process, where most students showed that it is not easy for them to explain or strengthen their arguments without assistance from the teacher or technological tools.

Overall, the results demonstrated that weaknesses in logical reasoning skills, use of evidence, and idea development adversely affected students' critical writing performance. Beyond cognitive demands, students' engagement in critical writing was also shaped by affective conditions experienced during the writing process.

**3. Affective Challenges in Critical Writing**

The results showed that affective factors also played a role in the students' performance

in critical writing. Lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes emerged as factors that frequently influenced students engaging in critical writing, particularly in argumentative tasks.

Classroom observations indicated that some students took a long time before beginning the writing process, while others relied on translation tools or AI applications to avoid making language errors. This behavior reflected students' lack of confidence in their language abilities. Interview data further indicated that students were more concerned with grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use than critically evaluating their ideas.

Fear of making mistakes was also evident in both written and spoken communication. Although students appeared relatively more confident when expressing their ideas in written form, interview findings showed that they became more hesitant when required to explain or defend their views orally in English. Many students were reluctant to speak for fear of producing incorrect language. This pattern indicated that students' willingness to take an active role in their critical writing tasks was constrained by low confidence and fear of errors. In addition to individual emotional factors, broader socio-cultural contexts also influenced how students expressed and developed their arguments.

**4. Socio-Cultural Challenges in Critical Writing**

The results showed that students' involvement in critical writing was affected by socio-cultural factors. Findings from the interviews and classroom observations showed that students were reluctant to express their personal views when these conflicted with the views of their fellow students, especially when dealing with opposing viewpoints.

Classroom observations showed that students tended to use more popular ideas rather than their own during argumentative writing tasks. When students worked individually, this tendency was more evident, with some relying on general ideas obtained from the internet.

Moreover, the results of the interviews showed that students associated disagreement with the possibility of conflict and negative judgment. Therefore, students preferred writing neutral or widely accepted statements rather than developing stronger arguments.

**Vol 9, No 1 (2026): ESTEEM**

This tendency was more visible in oral communication, where some students avoided participating in discussions or debates conducted in English.

In general, the results indicated that fear of disagreement and the desire to maintain harmony influenced how students responded to arguments in written form. These individual and social challenges were further reinforced by the nature of instructional support provided through the textbook used in the classroom.

**5. Instructional Support for Critical Writing in Textbook**

In the textbook' analysis, instructional support for critical writing in the classroom was revealed to be irregular and, in some instances, limited. The textbook emphasized structural aspects of writing, focusing more on vocabulary, grammar, and paragraph formation than on the explicit development of critical thinking skills.

The analysis also revealed that most argumentative writing tasks focused on identifying generic elements such as the thesis statements, arguments, and conclusions, without providing explicit guidance on constructing logical arguments or supporting opinions with evidence. Writing tasks that required evaluating ideas, comparing different perspectives, and justifying arguments were minimal and often implied.

Most writing tasks involved short or general responses to prompts, without clear instructions on how students should develop their ideas, provide evidence, or include examples. As a result, these tasks tended to encourage surface-level engagement rather than deeper critical thinking.

Overall, the textbook supported argumentative writing in terms of structure and language use, however, it provided limited opportunities for students to practice critical reasoning, evidence-based argumentation, and evaluative thinking.

Taken together, the results indicated a complex set of difficulties in students' critical argumentative writing, in which limited instructional scaffolding in the textbook compounded the interaction of linguistic constraints, cognitive difficulties, affective challenges, and socio-cultural tendencies. Linguistic constraints were further intensified by low confidence, fear of making errors, and socio-cultural attitudes that discouraged

disagreement. From a pedagogical perspective, although the textbook emphasized structural and linguistic aspects of writing, it provided limited support for the development of critical reasoning and evaluative skills, leaving these interconnected challenges insufficiently addressed.

**Discussions**

The findings of this study indicate that twelfth-grade EFL students face multiple interrelated challenges in developing critical writing skills, particularly in the production of argumentative texts. These challenges align with prior research emphasizing the combined influence of linguistic, cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural factors on learners' writing performance, especially in contexts where instructional support for critical writing remains limited. Linguistic constraints emerged as a foundational barrier, as students' ability to justify argumentative positions was hindered by limited vocabulary, difficulties in sentence construction, and grammatical inaccuracies. Consistent with earlier studies Toba et al. (2019), these limitations redirected students' cognitive focus toward form rather than content, thereby restricting opportunities for deeper analysis and argument elaboration. This supports the view that a certain level of linguistic competence is a prerequisite for engagement in higher-order critical thinking during writing (Al-Shanqeeti, 2020).

Beyond linguistic challenges, cognitive difficulties were also evident, particularly in students' limited capacity to construct logically coherent arguments supported by relevant evidence. The tendency to rely on generalisations or external sources, including digital platforms and AI tools, suggests insufficient internalisation of argumentative reasoning skills. This finding corroborates previous research indicating that without explicit instruction in logical reasoning and evidence-based argumentation, EFL learners struggle to transform ideas into structured written arguments (Tsao, 2021; Baleghizadeh & Maryam, 2019). Affective factors further constrained students' critical engagement, as low self-confidence and fear of making errors reduced their willingness to express and defend personal viewpoints. Similar patterns have

**Vol 9, No 1 (2026): ESTEEM**

been widely documented in EFL contexts, where anxiety and fear of error inhibit students' participation in higher-order thinking activities (Ilyas & Arifin, 2025), reinforcing the importance of affective readiness in critical writing development.

Socio-cultural influences also shaped students' writing practices. The findings revealed a strong reluctance to articulate opposing or controversial viewpoints, with students often adopting neutral or socially accepted positions to avoid potential conflict. This tendency reflects broader cultural norms prioritising harmony and non-confrontation, as reported in previous studies within Asian and Indonesian EFL contexts (Toba et al., 2019). Such norms may restrict opportunities for practising argumentation, which inherently requires the evaluation of multiple perspectives and the defence of individual positions. Additionally, analysis of instructional materials indicated that textbooks largely emphasised structural and linguistic aspects of writing, offering limited guidance on critical thinking, evidence evaluation, or argument construction. This imbalance, consistent with earlier findings, may contribute to superficial writing practices and students' reliance on external resources when engaging in critical writing tasks (Mohammed, 2020; Yang et al., 2025).

Taken together, these findings support theoretical frameworks that position critical thinking as an integral component of language proficiency shaped by contextual and instructional factors. Pedagogically, the results suggest that EFL writing instruction at the senior high school level should extend beyond grammatical accuracy and text organisation to explicitly incorporate activities that foster critical reasoning, argument development, and evaluative thinking. Teachers are encouraged to employ varied instructional strategies and media that scaffold argumentative skills while cultivating a supportive classroom climate that reduces students' fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, instructional materials should be designed to include tasks that promote critical evaluation and exposure to diverse perspectives. Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a single secondary school, a small participant sample, and a single grade level, which may restrict the

generalisability of the findings. Future research should therefore involve more diverse educational settings, larger samples, and multiple grade levels to provide a more comprehensive understanding of EFL students' critical writing development across contexts.

**4. CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that twelfth-grade EFL students encounter multifaceted challenges in developing critical writing skills in argumentative texts, arising from the interplay of linguistic, cognitive, affective, and socio-cultural factors. Linguistic limitations constrain students' ability to articulate ideas precisely, while cognitive difficulties hinder the construction of logical, evidence-based arguments, indicating that problems in critical writing extend beyond technical language issues to higher-order thinking processes. These challenges are further compounded by affective factors such as low confidence and fear of making errors, as well as socio-cultural tendencies to avoid disagreement and prioritise harmony, which collectively restrict students' engagement in critical argumentation. In addition, insufficient instructional support from textbooks characterised by an emphasis on structural form rather than critical reasoning and evidence use limits opportunities for students to develop independent arguments, often leading them to rely on external aids. Taken together, these findings highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to EFL writing instruction that integrates linguistic accuracy, critical thinking development, affective support, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Pedagogically, teachers and curriculum developers are encouraged to design learning activities and materials that explicitly foster logical reasoning, evaluative thinking, and argument construction in a supportive classroom environment. Future research should extend this investigation across diverse school contexts, larger participant groups, and multiple grade levels to further examine how instructional practices and curricular support influence the development of critical writing skills in EFL settings.

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**Vol 9, No 1 (2026): ESTEEM**

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**Vol 9, No 1 (2026): ESTEEM**

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