

## **Reflexive Account of an Indonesian International Student's Challenges and Opportunities in a U.K. University's Doctoral Education Program**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study is an autoethnography focused on providing an in-depth understanding of my personal experiences as an international doctoral student from Indonesia in a university in the United Kingdom. In this article, I share and discuss some challenging situations during my doctoral study particularly in writing a 5,000-word-essay for nine modules, which required me to explicitly perform critical thinking in my writing. I found that expressing my critical voice in writing was not easy, especially at the outset of my doctoral study period. I believe my previous education experiences neglected critical thinking pedagogy in the classroom, which is one of the most important factors causing this kind of difficulty of demonstrating critical thinking especially in writing.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, critical thinking, international students

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Born and raised in a small town in Indonesia, I never thought that I could get an opportunity to pursue my doctoral degree in a British university; yet in September 2016, I got the chance to start my doctoral study in the United Kingdom after winning a scholarship from the Indonesian government through the Directory General of Higher Education. Many international students coming from different countries and sociocultural environments often find it difficult when entering a new system of education, such as British universities that emphasize self-directed and critical thinking learning traditions (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008; Richmond, 2007; Yeoh & Terry,

2013). International students, particularly from Asian countries, such as myself from Indonesia, often find it difficult to adapt to these expectations, especially in the beginning of study (Ai, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). At the outset of my study period, I found I had to adjust from a model of learning that emphasized memorization to one that focused on critical thinking.

Today, critical thinking has been one of the main agenda items for education in Indonesia (Indah, 2017). However, during my schooling period in Indonesia from primary to university level, I experienced a pedagogical system that was still based more on a teacher-centered, textbook-focused approach (Gu & Maley, 2008). According to this pedagogical system, explanation is a dominant instructional practice with an emphasis on rote learning to be reproduced in examinations (Kameo, 2007). As a student, I was expected to be a passive recipient by simply listening to my teachers' explanations and a reproducer of knowledge in which critical thinking was rarely practiced. I grew up in this educational culture and learning atmosphere that emphasized utmost respect for teachers. This background shaped me to be someone who is always reluctant to express contradictory ideas, especially ideas opposed with those of my teachers. At that time, I was afraid that critiquing them would be considered rude and impolite. A similar situation has been well described by Wu (2002) who critically highlighted the difference in approach between East Asian and Western pedagogy as that of "filling the pot or lighting the fire" (p. 7).

In this article, I intend to provide insight and guidance from the experiences of an international doctoral student in the United Kingdom. In addition, my experiences may provide educational services and relevant government agencies a greater understanding on how to support international doctoral students more effectively in the future.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Educational System in Indonesia**

In order to fulfill the demand of globalization, the Indonesian government, as manifested in the 2003 National Education System Act of Indonesia, focused on critical thinking as an important issue in national education at both school and university levels (Indah, 2017). Despite the Indonesian government's placement of critical thinking as a main agenda item, implementation is difficult due to teachers' lack of understanding of critical thinking and their reluctance to apply these concepts and skills in their classroom (Emilia, 2010; Indah, 2017). This hesitancy might be because critical thinking is still considered as a Western approach of learning that places more concern on individuals than groups (Novera, 2004; Shaheen, 2012).

Kameo (2007) wrote that no matter how good critical thinking sounds in theory, it cannot be automatically transplanted into a culture that holds different values. Kameo (2007) further argued that critical thinking cannot be easily transplanted to the educational culture in Indonesia. This statement is supported by current findings of critical thinking-related studies conducted by other

Indonesian scholars such as Gustine (2014) and Indah (2017). Gustine (2014) reported that Indonesian students' critical thinking, especially in the context of writing, lags behind their counterparts from Western countries due to the previous "spoon-feeding" model of teaching and learning.

This educational background influenced me when entering a British university for my doctoral study. Dealing with critical thinking, especially in academic writing, is challenging not only because of my low understanding of the critical thinking concept but also because of my lack of proficiency in English in general and academic English in particular. This has been the hardest part I have experienced as a doctoral student, particularly at the outset of my study abroad.

### **Education in the United Kingdom**

Higher education in the United Kingdom has attracted many international students. The United Kingdom has been reported the second most popular destination for international students to continue their studies, following the United States (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). For example, in 2019, the total number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges was 1, 095, 299 (IIE, 2019) followed by U.K. universities with 485, 645 international students (HESA, 2019). The motivation to study in British universities for international students is not only to gain a degree, but also to improve their maturity as a person, to improve their English proficiency, to build an international network, and to enhance their cultural understanding (Huang & Turner, 2018; Yamazaki, 2005). Studying abroad also helps international students enhance their job options and uplifts their social recognition in their own community (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In other words, studying in U.K. universities opens opportunities for international students to grow personally, academically, and professionally (Furnham, 2004).

Critical thinking forms the heart and soul of every subject in the higher education system in the United Kingdom (Fell & Lukianova, 2015; Vyncke, 2012). It is an important component of students' learning assessments (Swatridge, 2014). This commitment is evidenced, for example, in the National Committee of Inquiry in the UK Higher Education, which clearly indicates that international students studying in the British universities are encouraged to be self-directed learners, who possess both disciplined thinking and high curiosity (Shaheen, 2012).

### **Studies Concerning International Doctoral Students**

Many studies have focused on international doctoral students' experiences in British universities (e.g., Brown & Holloway, 2008; Cadman, 2000; Evan, 2007; Shaheen, 2012). Some of these studies have reported that international doctoral students in the United Kingdom suffer from some disadvantages. Robinson (2008) found that international students in the United Kingdom struggled with feeling lost and anxious on their arrival. Ingleton and Cadman (2002) found that instead of feeling successful, newly arrived international doctoral students felt isolated and uncertain. Studies have contended that a lack of familiarity with the language

and the target culture often leads to international students' confusion, misunderstandings, anxiety, and stress (Gu & Maley, 2008; Karuppan & Barari, 2011). Proficiency in English, especially academic English, is significantly related to academic and psychological success in the program (Poyrazili & Grahame, 2007).

Other researchers have focused their studies on critical thinking issues among international students from Asian countries in the United Kingdom (e.g., Shaheen, 2012). Shaheen (2012) noted that most Asian students found it hard to make a comparison, evaluation, argumentation, and presentation of ideas in their writing. Shaheen (2012) wrote that the inability of most Asian students to express their critical thinking in their writing is due to differences of culture and low abilities in English. Bruce and Brameld (1999) further mentioned that the low ability of most Asian students to express their critical thinking in writing is due to their previous educational cultures that are more didactic, structured, and hierarchical than the Western education cultures. Forming a new learning strategy is not easy for most international students (Wierstra et al., 2003). Finally, in terms of English, Lea and Street (1998) emphasized that doctoral students might think clearly in their home language, but find it difficult to express their thoughts in English easily and find it hard to understand lessons during lectures and group discussions.

However, international students have still expressed their happiness with their study in the United Kingdom given they have more opportunities to meet with other international students (Brown & Holloway, 2008). These opportunities make it possible for them to build a professional network in the future (Cadman, 2000) and to increase their self-confidence levels and maximize their learning (Wong & Warring, 2010). Gu and Male (2008) reported that the educational environment in U.K. universities support international students in the exploration of their personal interests in learning independently (Gu & Maley, 2008). Thus, research of international students in the United Kingdom has identified common issues but also shared success, which my experiences attest to, as well.

## **METHOD**

### **Autoethnography**

This study is an autoethnography, which is interpretive in nature (Butz & Besio, 2009). It is a formal, structured approach to the study of the self (Austin & Hickey 2007). An autoethnography is often used in research and writing that seeks to understand cultural experience through a systematic narration, evocative thick descriptions, and analysis of personal experiences (Ai, 2015c; Sparkes, 2000). In Pelias' words, autoethnography is a study that "lets you use yourself to get to culture" (Pelias, 2003, p. 372). In other words, an autoethnography is a study that shows a link between a person with his/her culture (Wall, 2006). In this autoethnography I show the connection between my previous educational culture, which is teacher- and textbook-focused (Gu & Maley, 2008, p. 230) in Indonesia, and my experience in my first year as a doctoral student in a U.K. university, which puts emphasis on creativity and independent learning (Vyncke, 2012). I

concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research that is grounded from my personal experience.

As a qualitative method, autoethnography is “both process and product” (Hughes & Pennington, 2016). In this study, I use personal narration as a method to explore my experiences as a doctoral student in a British university, examining opportunities this doctoral program offers and challenges I have encountered. By using an autoethnography, this research bears the signature and voice of my own personal interpretation of my experiences (Schon, 1987); therefore, subjectivity, emotionality, and my influence as the researcher on the study is inextricable (Ellis et al., 2011). As both researcher and subject of this study, I have the opportunity to speak as a participant in the research. Integrating my voice, thoughts, and reflections into the text made the study more than “a mere summary and interpretation of the works of others, with nothing new added” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 3).

### **Rationale and Justification**

To follow Ai (2016), in this research I only focus on myself as the participant and use my experiences as a doctoral student in a university in the United Kingdom. I examine my own experiences because I want to provide an in-depth understanding of my personal experiences as an international doctoral student coming from a different tradition of learning in Indonesia. This self-study illuminates the educational “cultural experience” (Wall, 2006, p. 146) of my doctoral experiences to make this research more purposeful and powerful. Believing that “writing is a way of knowing, a method of inquiry” (Richardson, 2000, p. 13), in this autoethnography study, I did a free writing activity and jotted down all my experiences related to opportunities I gained from my doctoral program and challenges I encountered as suggested by Farrell et al. (2017). I relate events and actions to one another and “explore the cultural theme at play in the context of working in a setting with educational structures that differed vastly from those experienced by the author as a learner” (Farrell et al., 2017, p. 979).

Finally, to enhance the trustworthiness of my research, I used two validation strategies including detailed descriptions of my data and triangulation of my primary data with another source through returning to the literature in my discussion as another way to add rigor to the study (Wall, 2006).

## **FINDINGS**

### **Challenges**

One of the hardest challenges for me as an international doctoral student in a U.K. university has been learning critical thinking, especially in the context of writing for both module assignments and my dissertation. Expression of critical thinking is in conjunction with an individualist Western pedagogical tradition. My doctoral program demands the development of high levels of intellectual skills in which existing knowledge is mastered, synthesized, evaluated, critiqued, and

communicated, and an original contribution to new knowledge is made (Chalungsoth & Schneller, 2011). The emphasis on critical thinking in my doctoral program is in line with what is expected of a doctoral degree—the highest level of academic award that demands every doctoral candidate is able “to conceptualize, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and understanding” (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2001, p. 2).

As an international student, however, I come from a pedagogical system that expected me to be a passive recipient and reproducer of knowledge. This system of education did not allow for practice of critical thinking, as assignments given emphasized rote learning. I also grew up in a culture in which teachers and intellectuals should be highly respected. Critiquing them is considered rude and impolite. These cultural expectations strongly affected me when entering a doctoral program at a U.K. university, where I am encouraged to be an independent learner and thinker. For some time, I was not able to adjust to the practice of critical thinking, especially in the context of writing at the beginning of my study period. I was confused when every module tutor said that my essay writing should be presented critically. I was nervous at that time that this inability to write critically would stop my journey in this doctoral program and I would return back home with no doctoral certificate in hand. It was such a terrible moment! I was so fearful every time the results of every module assessment were issued.

What I felt is similar to what was reported by Evans and Stevenson (2010), who cited a Chinese student participating in their study saying, “At home they want to know what you know from a text, not so much from your own critical thinking – here they encourage critical thinking which is very hard for me” (p. 9). My teachers in Indonesia wanted me to show my understanding of what I read through repeating phrases I gained from the textbooks.

As writing critically is not easy for me, often tutors commented on the clarity of ideas in my essay assignments. This occurred due to my English barriers and lack of understanding and skills in terms of academic writing in English. This situation coincides with the views of Facione (1990), who emphasized that clarifying meanings, purposes, ideas, and information is the most difficult part in writing an essay. This has also been a main problem many international students from Asian countries encounter (Campbell, 2008). Another main problem in dealing with writing is performing a critical analysis of the existing theories. Facione (1990) stated that in order to analyze critically, students will need to be able to organize ideas in their writing in a systematic and logical way.

In addition to demonstrating critical thinking, I also found expressing my thoughts in English during lecturing sessions challenging because of my lack of confidence in my English language skills. For example, it was not easy for me to understand or to explain a certain concept during a class session because I lacked familiarity with certain terms in English. This has led to confusion, misunderstandings, anxiety, and stress. I felt insecure as it took longer for me to be more proficient in academic English in order to fully participate in my module meeting sessions. The difficulty was doubled because a strong local accent (Irish)

of several tutors was not easy to understand. Almost two decades ago, Takahashi (1989) reported a study concerned international students in universities in the United States. He wrote that acquiring academic English may take a longer time for international students due to its complexity and strong linguistic abilities the students must have. This finding is still relevant to the situation that I experienced during my first year of doctoral study.

A similar thing occurred during interactions with my local friends. Their strong local accent was a barrier to fully grasp what they said and meant during conversations with them both in and outside the classroom. For me, an interaction with my local colleagues was actually an opportunity to better understand local culture and values. However, it was very difficult to mingle with them due to my lack of familiarity with their English and accent. This situation was so irritating to me at that time and was a daunting barrier in my adjustment process in the early stage of my study. I am aware that this lack of English proficiency happened due to my lack of exposure with English in my previous education and my environment in general in Indonesia. When I was at primary and secondary school levels, for example, my teacher of English, spoke in Bahasa Indonesia more than English. A similar situation occurred even when I was studying at the English education department for both my bachelor and master's degrees; only a few of my professors applied an English-only policy in the classroom. The rest of them explained mostly in Bahasa Indonesia during lessons in the classrooms.

All in all, my experiences coincide with findings of studies focused on international students' experiences of study. For example, Mahmud et al. (2010) said that language is one of the basic aspects for adjustment process for international students. According to their study, students' poor English proficiency and understanding local dialect may hinder their adjustment process, especially in the early stage of their study abroad. Other researchers have found that instead of feeling successful, many international doctoral students start their study feeling isolated and uncertain due to their low proficiency in English (Ingleton & Cadman, 2002), which is significantly relating with their academic and psychological success in the program (Poyrazili & Grahame, 2007).

## **Opportunities**

Apart from those challenges above, as an international student studying in one of the outstanding universities in the United Kingdom, today I realize that those challenges were a part of my journey as a doctoral student. I have realized that this university and the doctoral program have provided me opportunities to grow personally and professionally. For example, studying at the professional doctoral program in this university has allowed me to engage in interprofessional communities of learning and practice through module class sessions, which has shaped my new self-identity as someone who is more confident with his current knowledge and experience as an academician in my home country in general and as a doctoral student in particular. The discourse of professional doctorates which emphasises the connection between theory and practice (Neumann, 2005) has also provided me with a new perspective of the

importance of linking what I learn in my doctoral program with my professional context in Indonesia.

The process of learning in my doctoral program, which emphasizes critical thinking, has provided me with more opportunities for my personal and academic development, especially in the context of critical writing abilities and skills. Tutor feedback has helped me to learn about critical thinking in the context of writing. In addition, essay writing itself has been a real exercise to improve my critical thinking because through writing essays, I have learned directly how to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate theories. In addition, I have also learned to provide arguments that are supported by evidence to make them persuasive and convincing. All these are essential aspects of critical thinking, which I must show in any piece of writing (Chaffee, 2014). By having a better idea of critical thinking, as well as knowing how to apply this concept in my daily life as a student and as an academician in my home country, I hope I can be an independent thinker and an agent of change in the future.

Moreover, I also find myself at the moment, through this doctoral program, feeling more confident with my own learning and my way of expressing my ideas to others especially through writing. This is evidenced by, for example, my new role as an article writer for a local newspaper in my home country that I do regularly. This doctoral program has also transformed my ideas and mindset in relation to engagement with the world (Intolubbe-Chmil et al., 2012) and to intercultural learning and competence (Ippolito, 2007). I have also learned to challenge my sense of self, as well as improve my language skills, especially in academic English, which is useful in the completion of both writing and oral presentation assignments.

Finally, I also feel that my sense of independence in learning is stronger than before. I am aware that here, in this university, I am given freedom as a doctoral student to decide my way of learning. I have a lot of space to develop myself as a doctoral student, as well as an academician. Now, I can write research proposals, which allow me to learn a lot about a research topic of my interest. My potential supervisor encourages me to be more independent and choose any topic that fits in my interest. She gives me more and more freedom with my research. This surely challenges my creativity and my critical thinking. All these experiences as an international doctoral student, I am sure, will be enormously beneficial for me in the future and will also “shape my new outlook for the rest of my lives” (Furnham, 2004, p. 23).

## **CONCLUSION**

In this autoethnography study, I have shared and discussed my personal experiences as a doctoral student in a university in the United Kingdom. For example, I shared some challenging situations during the first year of my study, particularly in writing a 5,000-word-essay for seven modules in which critical thinking should clearly be performed. I found that expressing my critical voice in writing was not easy, especially at the outset of my doctoral study period. I have emphasized in this study that my previous education experiences provided no

emphasis in giving personal opinion in writing assignments, which was one of the most important factors that caused my failure in expressing critical thinking in writing. Apart from those challenges, in this writing I have also explained that today I feel more confident with my own learning and with my way of expressing ideas to others especially through writing as realized, for example, in my new role as an article writer for a local newspaper in my home country. What I learned most from my experience is the fact that this doctoral journey has helped me transform my ideas and mindset in relation to engagement with the world. I hope that this story of my first-year doctoral journey provides insights especially, on the importance of a clear guidance in terms of the expected standards for critical thinking in my doctoral program and in other contexts in which similar situations may be found.

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