



**ISSN-P 2339-2576**  
**ISSN-E 2527-6484**

**Vol.10 No 2 (2023)**

**Englisia**  
**Journal of Language**  
**Education and Humanities**

# Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities

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## Table of Contents

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### Article

<a href="#">The impacts of school on English learners' motivation in Indonesian Islamic schools</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.14656 Achmad Farid, Reza Anggriyashati Adara, Salim Ashar	<a href="#">PDF</a> 1-19
<a href="#">EFL students' language attitudes toward virtual learning environment: A technology acceptance model</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.15178 Avita Elok Faiqoh, Ashadi Ashadi	<a href="#">PDF</a> 20-36
<a href="#">Students' perception of social presence in the online EFL speaking class</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.15018 Brigita Woro Diyatni Kusumaningtyas, Thomas Wahyu Prabowo Mukti	<a href="#">PDF</a> 37-55
<a href="#">Understanding identity construction of an in-service pre-k teacher using discursive psychology</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.13998 Faishal Zakaria	<a href="#">PDF</a> 56-70
<a href="#">Professional development of Indonesian in-service EFL teachers: Perceived impacts and challenges</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.15589 Fidelis Elleny Averina, Paulus Kuswandono	<a href="#">PDF</a> 71-91
<a href="#">Elements of critical reading in EFL teachers' instructions</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.17142 Hamzah Puadi Ilyas	<a href="#">PDF</a> 92-104
<a href="#">The semiotic and modern hermeneutic review of the online Covid-19 public service advertisement texts</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.15005 I Gede Astawa, I Bagus Gde Upadana, A.A. Sagung Ayu Srikandi Putri	<a href="#">PDF</a> 105-118
<a href="#">The relationship between sociocultural adaptation and L2 pragmatic development during online study abroad</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.15374 Ismail Tahir, Aryati Hamzah	<a href="#">PDF</a> 119-136
<a href="#">When English language matters: Internationalizing PhD research by Indonesian political scientists</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.17607 Jürgen Rüländ	<a href="#">PDF</a> 137-147
<a href="#">Measuring EFL students' self-efficacy levels in online learning</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.14773 Maman Asrobi, Siti Maysuroh, Zukhruf Farizi	<a href="#">PDF</a> 148-163
<a href="#">English learning motivation and pragmatic competence: Correlational study of non-English major postgraduate students in java</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.15130 Muhammad Syahied Hidayatullah, Nur Hidayanto	<a href="#">PDF</a> 164-178
<a href="#">"Publish or no degree": Cultivating a scholarly writing Group for Indonesian Master's students of English education</a> 10.22373/ej.v10i2.16725	<a href="#">PDF</a> 179-193

<p><b>Politeness strategies used by Papuan students in virtual communication practices at university</b>  <b>10.22373/ej.v10i2.15289</b></p>	<p><b>PDF</b>  194-216</p>
<p>Rahmawansyah Sahib, Zulihi Zulihi, Abdi Maloga, Zulfadli Zulfadli, Lalu Nasrulloh, Junaidin Junaidin</p>	
<p><b>Understanding the implementation of an at-home language test: A case of an online version of TOEFL-PBT</b>  <b>10.22373/ej.v10i2.15899</b></p>	<p><b>PDF</b>  217-230</p>
<p>Refanja Rahmatillah, Rizki Fajrita, Endah Anisa Rahma</p>	
<p><b>The analysis of the use of satire in the daily show with Trevor Noah</b>  <b>10.22373/ej.v10i2.16611</b></p>	<p><b>PDF</b>  231-242</p>
<p>Sitti Rahma, Syahron Lubis, Alemina Perangin-angin</p>	
<p><b>Online English speaking instruction in junior high schools: Readiness and obstacles</b>  <b>10.22373/ej.v10i2.15043</b></p>	<p><b>PDF</b>  243-254</p>
<p>Syafryadin Syafryadin, Santiana Santiana</p>	
<p><b>Weighing research competencies of department of English language education graduates at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh</b>  <b>10.22373/ej.v10i2.17226</b></p>	<p><b>PDF</b>  255-275</p>
<p>Syarifah Dahliana, Saiful Akmal, Rizka Malda Phonna</p>	
<p><b>Exploring Al-Ghazali's concept of education: A study of speech acts through English language lens</b>  <b>10.22373/ej.v10i2.17515</b></p>	<p><b>PDF</b>  276-291</p>
<p>Zurriyati Zurriyati, Alemina Br, Perangin-angin, Fadhlur Rahman</p>	

## **Elements of critical reading in EFL teachers' instructions**

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Manuscript received February 7, 2023, revised April 4, 2023, accepted April 15, 2023, and published online May 7, 2023.

### **Recommended APA Citation**

Ilyas, H. P. (2023). Elements of critical reading in EFL teachers' instructions . *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 10(2), 92-104. <https://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v10i2.17142>

### **ABSTRACT**

Reading instructions should go a bit beyond 'explicit question' to facilitate students' critical thinking. What it means by 'explicit question' is question whose answer can be found in the text explicitly. This research, therefore, aimed to investigate EFL teachers' reading instructions to find out to what extent the instructions contained the elements of critical reading. Twenty-seven EFL teachers participated by listing all the activities they had given to students throughout their teaching career. All the activities were collected, and similar activities were combined. There were a total of ninety-nine instructions. The activities were then compared to critical reading framework to find out which elements they belonged to. Findings showed that teachers' reading instructions only belonged to such categories as identifying, analyzing, summarizing, and guessing. Aside from that, the instructions for the four categories were the same. It appeared that EFL teachers lacked creativity and innovative ideas. There were still elements or categories of critical reading that had not yet been utilized or explored. These findings prompted the inclusion of critical reading instruction design skills in teacher education. After all, critical thinking has long been emphasized in national education as a means of developing responsible citizens and avoiding becoming a victim of false information.

**Keywords:** *Critical reading; EFL teachers; Reading instructions; Elements of critical reading*

### **1. Introduction**

Reading activities cannot be separated from human lives. For students, reading is an integral part of educational journey to grab knowledge. Therefore, reading skills, apart from study skills, should be taught to them. This should include reading in a foreign language. There are various reading approaches/techniques/strategies in the EFL

contexts. The famous ones, which have recently been presented and investigated by EFL practitioners with aiming to varied research objectives, belong to bottom-up and top-down models (e.g. Kakvand, Aliasin, & Mohammadi, 2022; Soomro, Khan, & Younus, 2019; Suraprajit, 2019; Yang, Tsai, & Hikaru, 2019), extensive reading (e.g. Park, 2015; Suk, 2016; Wanzek, et al.; 2013; Yamashita, 2013), a concept referred to as pleasure reading (e.g. Ovilia & Asfina, 2022; Ross, 2021; Sullivan & Brown, 2015), cognitive and metacognitive (e.g. Dabarera, Renandya, & Zhang, 2014; Kendeou, Van Den Broek, Helder, & Karlsson, 2014; Linderholm, Virtue, Tzeng, & Van den Broek, 2018; Zhussupova & Kazbekova, 2016), and technology-based reading strategies (e.g. Al-Kalefawi & Al-Amrani, 2021; Hassan Taj, Ali, Sipra, & Ahmad, 2017; Kim, 2020; Mohammadian, Saed, & Shahi, 2018).

The abovementioned studies have surely shed a light on teaching reading with the main purposes of encouraging reading comprehension. However, reading activities are not merely understanding the content of the reading texts. There should be efforts to find out things beyond the texts such as their agenda and propaganda, as expressed in critical reading (Carrillo, 2019; Masoud & Mostafa, 2020; Wexler, Swanson, Kurz, Shelton, & Vaughn, 2020). This is because misinformation, whether done on purpose or not, has always been bombarding human life that can lead to fatal consequences: human can be the victim of false information. Therefore, critical reading, which is an integral part of critical thinking, needs to be taught to students, be it primary or secondary level. Over the past decade, studies have shown that critical thinking can be taught to school kids (e.g. Florea & Hurjui, 2015; Marie-France & Mathieu, 2012; Nilson, Fetherston, McMurray, Fetherston, 2013; Qizi & Qizi, 2021) and even pre-school children (Karadağ, Demirtaş, & Yıldız, 2017).

To date, several studies on critical reading in educational, including in the EFL, contexts, having been conducted in Indonesia (e.g. Arifin, 2020; Kusumaningputri, 2019; Utami, Amalia, Prayitno, & Ain, 2020; Widowati & Kurniasih, 2018) and outside Indonesia (e.g. Ahmad, 2019; Akın, Koray, & Tavukçu, 2015; Albeckay, 2014; Fatemeh, Mahmoud, & Roman, 2020) have shown promising effects with regard to reading critically: there is possibility for students to develop their criticality. Of course, teachers cannot expect students to be critical automatically after having critical reading instructions; however, such instructions need to be infused in reading activities in the classroom with the hope that students will be accustomed to questioning everything coming to their life.

Encouraging students' critical reading skills, especially in primary and secondary level of education, cannot be separated from the role of teachers. This is because students cannot be suddenly critical if they are not taught how to be so. Unfortunately, few studies have investigated how teachers give instruction in reading classroom. There should be studies investigating teachers' reading instructions which promote critical reading, leading to students' ability to think critically. Therefore, this research attempts to find out to what extent reading instructions given by EFL teachers promote students' criticality.

This research analyze the instructions, which are then connected, compared, and contrasted to the critical reading framework to find the elements or categories of critical thinking.

## **2. Literature review**

This research, as mentioned, explored EFL teachers' reading instructions to primarily find out the elements of critical reading, which eventually promoted critical thinking. To do so, firstly, the literature informing EFL teachers' strategies was critically reviewed; the result was the list elaborating teaching strategies which could promote criticality. Secondly, findings from previous studies and existing critical reading framework were combined to create a new framework of critical reading used in this research.

### *2.1. EFL teachers' critical reading strategies*

There have been some studies, in the past decade, investigating strategies in teaching critical reading in the EFL context in Indonesia and outside Indonesia (Albeckay, 2014; Fadhillah, 2017; Khabiri & Pakzad, 2012; Rajabi & Tabatabaee, 2015). The studies showed that teaching critical reading strategies in EFL had some other benefits, apart from encouraging students' criticality.

Khabiri and Pakzad (2012), for example, showed that teaching critical reading strategies could improve EFL students' vocabulary retention. This was proven by the mean score of the experimental group which was higher than control group only receiving common comprehension-based approach, not critical reading strategies. Even though this research didn't specifically focus on improving students' critical reading, it showed another positive effect of teaching critical reading strategies infused in EFL. The critical reading strategies which were used by Khabiri and Pakzad (2012) adopted Sousa's framework in 2004, and the strategies were "previewing, contextualizing, questioning, reflecting, outlining and summarizing, evaluating an argument, and comparing and contrasting" (p. 79).

Different from Khabiri and Pakzad (2012) who proved critical reading strategies' contribution to vocabulary retention, Albeckay (2014) showed critical reading could also promote reading comprehension. In doing the research, he designed critical reading program and showed that "the majority of the participants improved their scores in the reading sub-skills" (p. 180). Unfortunately, Albeckay's designed critical reading program used in his study was not thoroughly elaborated; however, it consisted of the following elements: identifying facts and opinions, identifying author purpose, making inferences, making evaluation, and analyzing the text. Another study was conducted by Rajabi and Tabatabaee (2015). They carried out an experimental study to investigate the development of EFL students' critical reading using critical reading strategies. While the control group was taught comprehension-based approach, the experimental group was taught such strategies to promote criticality as previewing, annotating, questioning,

outlining, summarizing, inferencing, analyzing, and responding. Rajabi and Tabatabaee (2015) informed that students in the group receiving critical reading strategies could develop their critical reading ability.

In Indonesia, studies investigating critical reading strategies specifically in the EFL context in the past decade were very few. One of them was conducted by Fadhillah (2017) who showed positive effects of infusing critical reading in EFL. Even though the study did not attempt to especially increase EFL students' critical reading, the teaching of critical reading strategies could increase EFL students' level of critical thinking. The critical reading strategies implemented in the study took the following points: previewing, outlining and summarizing, questioning, reflecting, and evaluating.

A study almost similar to the current research was conducted by Sunggingwati and Nguyen (2013). They investigated questioning practice by secondary teachers in Kalimantan with the underlying belief that questions given by teachers potentially encouraged students' criticality; however, the study did not specifically investigate to what extent the teachers' questions contain critical reading. The study also examined the questions provided in the teaching materials (textbooks) to find out whether the questions facilitate higher order thinking. Unfortunately, there was no clear information with regard to the textbooks, whether they were official English textbooks from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology or commercial textbooks for complementary materials published by private publishers. Through interview, observation, and textbook examination, the authors found that the questions from textbooks and teachers posed mainly low-level questions, apart from teachers' dependence on questions from the textbook. This motivated further research to explore EFL teachers' questions in different parts of Indonesia connected to critical reading and to investigate wider scope of textbooks used by secondary school students in Indonesia.

## *2.2. Critical reading framework*

The abovementioned research revealed critical reading strategies conducted by teachers. The strategies were then connected to critical reading framework the literature offered. The teachers' strategies and the existing frameworks were examined, compared, synthesized, and combined to find out the elements of critical reading in order to create a new framework used in this research.

Considering some critical reading frameworks in the literature, this research limited to the publication over the last decade and found two frameworks (DiYanni, 2017; Marschall & Davis, 2012). DiYanni (2017) proposed a critical reading framework consisting of five stages: making observations, establishing connections, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and considering values, and guessing. While observation could make students have ability to judge, DiYanni (2017) argues that students could make "connections among the details" (p. 9) to prepare them to infer before finally drawing a conclusion.



Marschall and Davis (2012), on the other hand, proposed what they called as a “critical reading technique” (p. 67). The technique consisted of several strategies implemented in reading stages: pre-reading, experiential reading, post-reading. The strategies were activating, connecting, envisioning (pre-reading), questioning, visualizing, inferring, extending (experiential reading), summarizing and synthesizing, and developing (post-reading).

Examining the combination of strategies and frameworks, the researcher found several common elements of critical reading. The most recognized element was *previewing* (Fadhillah, 2017; Khabiri & Pakzad, 2012; Rajabi & Tabatabaee, 2015), followed by *questioning*, *evaluating*, and *summarizing*, which are also shared by most authors. With regard to *summarizing*, almost all authors joined it up with *outlining*. That was why in this research *outlining & summarizing* was considered as one critical reading element. Other elements shared in common were *reflecting*, *concluding*, and *analyzing*. The next element was *inferring*, which was shared by four authors (Albeckay, 2014; DiYanni, 2017; Marschall & Davis, 2012; Rajabi & Tabatabaee, 2015).

Apart from the elements shared in common, there were also elements not shared which potentially encouraged critical reading. The first element was *comparing & contrasting* by Khabiri and Pakzad (2012). Khabiri and Pakzad (2012) proposed *identifying facts & opinions* and *identifying author purpose*. Principally, both activities have the same purpose, namely *identifying*, so it was used to cover all things related to identifying activities. Final element was *responding* by Rajabi and Tabatabaee (2015). All the elements of critical reading which were the result of synthesizing strategies and framework can be found in the table below.

**Table 1**

Framework of critical reading.

No	Elements
1	Previewing: describing things before officially discussed
2	Questioning: asking questions about everything
3	Evaluating: calculating the importance and quality of things
4	Outlining and summarizing: drawing the main shape and main idea
5	Reflecting: thinking carefully about possibilities
6	Concluding: making conclusion after careful thought
7	Analyzing: studying carefully about things
8	Inferring: making an opinion based on information
9	Comparing and contrasting: examining differences and similarities
10	Identifying: finding and describing things
11	Responding: commenting on things
12	Guessing: thinking on things with intelligent judgement

### 3. Method

This research adopted qualitative research, with the content analysis partly being employed. Content analysis required analytic category, and the category used was the framework of critical reading above, which was the result of synthesizing critical reading framework and teachers' critical reading strategies. As mentioned, the aim of this research was to find out the element of critical reading in teachers' reading instructions. Therefore, analytic categories were used as a guide to find out teacher's reading instruction whether their instruction contained the elements of critical reading, and if they did, what kind of critical reading was dominant and what kind the least used.

Twenty-seven English teachers participated in this research, with their age ranging from 27 to 49 years old. They came from Jakarta and Bogor, Bekasi, Depok, and Banten province such as Tangerang, Tangerang Selatan, Cilegon, and Serang. They were randomly selected to participate in the study. As long as they were active teachers and were willing to participate, they were eligible for the study. This was because study were interested in EFL teachers' reading instructions only, without considering gender, teaching experience, educational background, and place of work. Their teaching experience was from three years to more than ten years, with ten males and seventeen females.

The participants were given questionnaire and asked to list all activities or instructions they had given to students in reading lesson, starting from the first time they became the teacher until now. The problem was sometimes they did not remember the reading instructions given to the students and were not sure whether an activity belonged to reading. To solve this problem, they were asked to write down all activities they had taught during teaching reading skill, including follow-up activities.

After the data were obtained, they were all read thoroughly and compared each other. The purpose was to find similarly connected instructions which were then considered as the same instruction. As a result, the researcher got a list containing all teachers' instructions. The list of instructions was connected, compared, contrasted, and evaluated based on the analytic categories above (Table 1). The result of this study was the information about categories of critical reading from teachers' reading instructions. Thus, the study answered to what extent EFL teacher's reading instruction could facilitate students' criticality in reading.

### 4. Findings and discussion

The study found there were 99 activities written by English teachers. There were some 60 instructions that could potentially be able to promote critical reading. 39 activities did not potentially promote critical reading such as "students are asked to read aloud the texts," "students asked to pronounce the words aloud," and "asking students to read biography books based on their own choice." These activities did not seem to be able to promote students' critical reading; however, these activities could be used as a bridge to the next activities that promote critical reading.

With regard to the critical thinking instructions, there were activities which were different in wording but actually they had the same message. For example, one participant wrote “asking students to underline the difficult word and then guess the meaning of the words,” while another participant mentioned “asking students to write the meaning of words by guessing them.” This could be considered one type. After the careful reading and consideration, the study grouped the reading instructions by English teachers which belonged to critical reading into a list as follows:

**Table 2**

Teachers' reading instructions.

No	Instructions
1	Analyzing language features of texts
2	Analyzing structure of texts
3	Answering questions provided by texts
4	Doing free reading
5	Doing question and answer based on texts
6	Finding implied meaning of texts
7	Finding meaning of difficult words
8	Guessing meaning from context
9	Guessing title of texts
10	Identifying fact and opinion of texts
11	Identifying figurative language used in texts
12	Identifying function of texts
13	Identifying key words of text
14	Identifying tenses in texts
15	Identifying topic of texts
16	Identifying types of texts (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, or exposition)
17	Making a dialog based on texts
18	Performing drama based on texts
19	Reading aloud for pronunciation
20	Retelling texts
21	Summarizing texts

The table showed the most dominant element of critical reading was *identifying*. As mentioned, identification belonged the element of critical reading (Khabiri & Pakzad, 2012). From the table, the teachers' reading instructions related to “identifying” were six elements: identifying fact and opinion of texts, identifying figurative language used in texts, identifying function of texts, identifying key words of text, identifying tenses in texts, topic of texts, and identifying types of texts (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, or exposition).

Even though “identifying” was categorized as critical reading activities, we had to see the characteristic of the activity; there was the degree of difficulty. For example, “identifying tenses in text” could be activities that least promoted critical reading, because it was easy to do and did not use critical reading skill, except done by very basic level of students. If it was done by intermediate level of students, it would be done with ease. However, it was considered critical activities, if it asked finding a very complex tenses because students needed to use their knowledge and to think. Texts used in reading materials for senior high school students, let alone junior high school students, did not contain very complex tenses.

The activities that promoted critical reading under category of “identifying” could be “identifying fact and opinions,” “identifying figurative language used in the texts,” and “identifying topic of texts.” In “identifying fact and opinion” for example, students had to understand which one belonged to opinions of the author and which one supported the opinion. It needed a thinking process which was indeed more difficult if the text was long and complicated. “Identifying topic of text” could be the perfect example of critical reading. Such an activity required students to firstly read the whole text, then understand the text, and finally determine what the topic was. There were some thinking stages students had to do, and this was a good example for critical reading.

From the list of teachers’ reading instructions above, there were such instructions as “finding implied meaning of texts” and “finding meaning of difficult words.” These activities were similar to *identifying*. We could say, for example, “identifying implied meaning of texts,” which actually asked students to look for the implied meaning of text. Therefore, the researcher didn’t create new element of critical reading.

The next element of critical reading was *analyzing*. Two activities found in teachers’ reading instructions were “analyzing language features of texts,” and “analyzing structure of texts.” Unfortunately, teachers did not explore this category more deeply; therefore, they seemed to lack creativity. In fact, there were a lot of things they could develop from this category. For example, teachers could ask students to analyze the characters of the story, analyze the relationship among the characters, and analyze text propaganda. As a result, the text could be more explorable, and students’ critical reading could be optimized.

Another element of critical reading found in the EFL teachers’ instructions was *guessing*. The examples of this elements were “guessing meaning from context” and “guessing title of text.” The former asked students to read the context and understand it before finally guessing the word, while the latter students had to read the whole passage, try to understand it, and make a logical guess about the title of the text. In both processes there was a thinking process that students had to undergo. Sometimes the process was difficult, depending on the text. So, it was not wrong if guessing was categorized as one of critical reading elements.

The elements of *guessing* actually could be more varied, so EFL teachers should have not only restricted to guessing title and meaning only. Teachers could ask students

to guess the missing vocabularies, for example. This could enable students to read and think about the context. In so doing, they could guess the suitable words to fill the blanks. Another example was teachers could ask students to guess the continuation of the story if the text was about fiction. This could also promote students' creative thinking, apart from their criticality.

The list of teachers' reading instruction mentioned "summarizing the texts." *Summarizing* was one of critical reading elements which was included by some authors (Fadhillah, 2017; Khabiri & Pakzad, 2012; Marschall and Davis, 2012; Rajabi & Tabatabaee, 2015). There was a thinking process when students made summary. In summarizing, students had to read the whole passage, to find the gist of it, and to rewrite in different wording. Every stage was not easy for students to do, and every stage involved a thinking activity. So, *summarizing* could be used by EFL teachers to practice their students' critical reading.

The elements of critical reading that could be found in EFL reading instructions were *identifying*, *analyzing*, *guessing*, and *summarizing*. EFL teachers had to be more creative in developing reading instructions to facilitate students' development of critical thinking. Other reading instructions found from the list did not encourage criticality, for example, "doing free reading," "performing drama based on texts," "reading aloud for pronunciation," and "reading aloud for pronunciation." It didn't mean the activities useless and unimportant. Still, it was good to do for other purposes, for example, practicing pronunciation. Those activities could be given as pre-reading activities and post-reading activities, or the activities could be used as a bridge to more critical activities. It was impossible to suddenly start reading activities with critical reading questions. There had to something like "warming-up" activities, starting from easy activities.

There were still other elements of critical reading that were not yet explored by EFL teachers. The study did not find such elements as *questioning*, *evaluating*, *reflecting*, *concluding*, *comparing and contrasting*, and *responding*. *Questioning*, for example, was good to practice students' criticality. Teachers could ask students to question the purpose of writer's writing the text or the message behind the text. This could raise the awareness of text propaganda and of political text. While in *evaluating* teachers could ask students to evaluate writer' argument whether it was strong or weak, in *responding* teachers could ask students to respond to the text whether they believed or not, or whether the text was convincing or not. Of course, this could be done in higher level of students; however, this could be done using easy texts in lower level of students to promote their critical reading since early age.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that EFL teachers' reading instructions contained few elements of critical reading. There were only four elements (identifying, analyzing, guessing, summarizing) given to students with limited variety of activities.

There were still eight categories (previewing, questioning, evaluating, reflecting, concluding, inferring, comparing and contrasting, responding) which were not yet explored by EFL teachers. There could be two factors causing this. Firstly, this could be due to a lack of creativity or teachers' ignorance about critical reading. They needed to be made aware of the importance of critical reading to promote students' critical thinking. So, students were expected to be more responsible citizen in the future and could not be a victim of propaganda in the middle of fast flow of information. Secondly, teachers were still confused how to create activities which promoted critical reading. To solve this problem, there should have been training in this regard. Teachers had to be equipped with necessary knowledge and tools to teach critical reading. Finally, this research was not comprehensive, only researching 27 EFL teachers from several areas. Further research needed to cover wider areas, and even it could cover teachers teaching different school subjects.

### Acknowledgement

The writer thanks *Lemlitbang Uhamka* for funding this research.

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