TESOL in Context
Journal of ACTA
Australian Council of TESOL Associations
ISSN 2209-0916

The critical challenge for ELT in Indonesia: Overcoming barriers in fostering critical thinking in testing-oriented countries

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Abstract

In recent years, the Indonesian government has put greater emphasis on promoting critical thinking in the education system, including the notion of critical thinking in national examinations, curriculum, and graduate outcomes for school education. Nevertheless, as in many testing-oriented countries, fostering critical thinking in the Indonesian context can be challenging, as the long-standing culture of testing, in which every answer is either correct or not, contradicts the concept of critical thinking. This paper focuses on identifying challenges in promoting critical thinking in English Language Teaching, especially in testing-oriented countries. The paper argues that critical thinking can be effectively fostered in students if teachers have a profound understanding of the notion. Demonstrating how critical thinking can be incorporated into teachers' daily pedagogical activities and encouraging teachers to conduct collaborative action research about the teaching of critical thinking are suggested as two productive ways to boost teachers' understanding of the notion of critical thinking.

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Publication
Received: 08 July 2024
Revision: 02 December 2024
Accepted: 08 December 2024
Published: 11 December 2024

Keywords: *Critical thinking; challenges; collaborative action research; high-stakes testing*; *testing-culture.*

Introduction

Recently, fostering critical thinking has become one of the primary concerns of education policies in many countries. The central role of critical thinking in the labour market, globalisation, the information revolution, modernity, and in technology and connectivity (Defianty & Wilson, 2019; Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019) has led several countries to reform their education policies. Furthermore, in the English Language Teaching (ELT) landscape in particular, a recent meta-analysis study conducted by Taherkhani and Gholizadeh (2023) revealed that critical thinking can potentially enhance students' competence in all four macro language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Indonesia is among those countries which have reformed their education system, including ELT, by aligning their policies with the notion of critical thinking. For example, the current curriculum, Kurikulum Merdeka, explicitly states that critical thinking is one of the compulsory elements of school graduate profiles. Another major reform has been introduced by changing the national standardised testing system from "high-stakes" to "low-stakes" testing. It was expected that these policy changes would encourage teachers to move away from the traditional emphasis on teaching-to-the-test and allow for greater emphasis on critical thinking. However, research shows that teachers in Indonesia still cling to their former testing regimes and that ELT teachers still have a limited understanding of critical thinking and how to teach it (Defianty & Wilson, 2022; Ilyas, 2018; Puspitasari & Pelawi, 2023). Unfortunately, as Li (2023) pointed out, it appears that policy reform may not automatically change teachers' teaching practice.

In this paper, we argue that a country that has a long history of national high-stakes testing, such as Indonesia, may find fostering critical thinking a challenge, even though the official policy has moved on, as teachers are still strongly influenced by the culture of testing in which they have been immersed since childhood. We first explain the context of ELT in Indonesia and the recent changes in the national testing system; then, we discuss the notion of critical thinking, particularly as it relates to ELT. Next, we explain high-stakes, standardised testing, and its effects on teaching and learning, arguing that it is inimical to the teaching of critical thinking. We then introduce the notion of a "testing culture". Finally, we explore how critical thinking in ELT can be effectively fostered in countries with such a culture.

A glimpse of the assessment system in Indonesia

All schools in Indonesia are required to implement the national curriculum and to administer the national examination. This examination is a "standardised" test, meaning that the same questions and the same method of grading are applied across the entire country to ensure that the test is "fair" and reliable (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2021). National standardised testing has been implemented for decades with various labels.

The current standardised test, entitled AKM, is considered to be a significant reform for the assessment system in Indonesia for the following reasons. First, AKM is the first national standardised test that is "low-stakes" in that, unlike the previous long-standing Ujian Nasional (national examination), the score has no bearing on individual students' eligibility to graduate and to continue towards further learning. Like the NAPLAN test in Australia (ACARA, 2017), the aim of the test is to provide information about whole school performance that can be used to improve learning outcomes. In contrast to the previous testing regime, the current test is administered to students at year five, eight, and eleven, and the results do not hinder students from progressing to the next grade. Only a representative sample of a school population—30 students for elementary level and 45 for lower and higher secondary levels, randomly selected by the school—are required to take the test. Secondly, in contrast to the previous standardised testing, the AKM emphasises students' critical thinking (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020), whereas previously, the national standardised testing focused on cognitive skills and knowledge at surface level.

Nevertheless, it has been argued that the reform has only been applied at the policy level (Defianty, 2021; Ernawati et al., 2023); in practice, teachers continue to treat AKM like the previous national examination. Thus, schools purposely prepare students for the test despite the fact that the government has explicitly stated that the results of AKM have no consequences for the schools or the students who take the test (Ernawati et al., 2022, 2023). In addition, several studies also show that teachers are not able to construct AKM-like tests with a focus on critical thinking and that many believe that AKM is similar to the previous standardised test, the Ujian Nasional, in that teachers can train their students to answer the test questions and thus get a high score. In other words, they still treat the test as if it were a knowledge and skills-based test with only one possible correct answer for each question (Ernawati et al., 2022; Murni et al., 2022; Nurjati et al., 2022). In the following paragraphs, we will explain why this approach to testing is inimical to the teaching of critical thinking.

The paradox of critical thinking and standardised high-stakes testing

Critical thinking and its application in ELT

To understand the challenges of implementing critical thinking in Indonesia's ELT context, it is important to first clarify what we mean by critical thinking. Critical thinking is now universally recognised as an essential skill or attribute for participation in modern life, enabling citizens to assess situations, evaluate information, make rational decisions, and solve complex problems (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019). Nevertheless, defining critical thinking has often been challenging as scholars have not yet formulated any consensus of what critical thinking is and what constitutes its practice.

In the field of education, theories of critical thinking can be attributed to Ennis (1991) who defined critical thinking as "… reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what

to believe and do" (p. 6). Another widely accepted definition of critical thinking is from Elder and Paul (2010); they define critical thinking as "…the process of analyzing and assessing thinking with a view to improving it. Critical thinking presupposes knowledge of the most basic structures in thinking (the elements of thought) and the most basic intellectual standards for thinking (universal intellectual standards)" (p. 38).

From numerous theories of critical thinking, Davies and Barnett (2015) distilled three key areas: thinking skills, criticality, and critical pedagogy. On one level, critical thinking involves thinking skills such as analysing, comparing, reasoning, evaluating, and decision-making. However, being equipped with skills is not sufficient, as students also need "criticality"; that is, they need to develop a disposition for thinking critically, to recognise and value critical thinking, and develop habits of thinking critically in their work, everyday lives, and in society. Further, proponents of critical pedagogy urge students to examine pressing social issues and to acquire and practice ethical values such as inclusivity, environmental responsibility, and open-mindedness.

In relation to pedagogy, studies agree that critical thinking can be taught, including in the Indonesian ELT context. Several studies have shown that critical thinking can be embedded in various teaching activities. For example, a meta-analysis including 341 effect sizes from quasi and true-experimental studies revealed that learning activities such as argument mapping, problem-based learning, and cooperative learning, significantly improve students' critical thinking skills (Abrami et al., 2015). Other studies demonstrate how Indonesian students can be taught to develop 'criticality'. For example, Defianty and Wilson (2023) describe how an ELT teacher in Kalimantan introduced her year 12 students to critical thinking. This teacher had her students discuss how the UN's Millenium Goals related to their hometown and what they personally could do to help achieve these goals. In terms of critical pedagogy, Mambu (2010) explains how he engaged students in an ELT class in a rural high school in East Java, albeit with minimal English skills, in critical reflection on issues currently affecting their own school and community. Mambu encouraged students to voice their opinions, by overlooking grammar errors, lending support with vocabulary, and allowing them to code-switch between English and Indonesian where necessary.

While there are examples in the literature of ELT teachers in Indonesia applying critical thinking pedagogies, it may not be clear to many teachers how critical thinking relates to ELT. Studies show that ELT teachers are not confident in explaining critical thinking (Defianty & Wilson, 2022). In the ELT classroom, teachers have long focused on teaching vocabulary and grammar rules: content which has proved to be easily testable in multiple choice formats in standardised tests. This is the content which underpins teachers' traditional confidence in their role as imparters of knowledge. Mambu (2010) suggests that the content of ELT needs to focus instead on problematic themes such as "fast food" or "environmental pollution" supported by visual stimuli to prompt students to participate dialogically in English classes. This approach resonates with Defianty and Wilson (2020) who suggest that critical thinking in ELT entails both thinking analytically *about* the language (e.g., "What is the difference in meaning and usage between the past simple and the present perfect tense?") and thinking *through* the

language; that is, using English to engage in reflection and discussion about problematic topics of contemporary interest. While thinking *about* the language particularly entails thinking skills, such as analysing, comparing, and evaluating, thinking *through* the language affords opportunities for criticality and critical pedagogy.

However, it is a huge challenge for ELT teachers, who are used to teaching language as 'grammar + vocabulary', predominantly through grammar and translation exercises with multiple choice answers, to shift towards teaching students to think critically. If they are to shift towards a focus on critical reflection on challenging issues, as Mambu (2010) proposes, both substantial teacher agency and new skills are required. Rather than controlling their classes by working through the textbook exercises, teachers need to be able to engage students in classroom activities that stimulate critical thinking and encourage students to think, and use English, independently.

Standardised high-stakes testing

Thinking independently was definitely not encouraged in the era of standardised high-stakes testing. Popham (1999) defined standardised tests as "any examination that is administered and scored in a predetermined, standard manner" (p. 8): all candidates answer the same questions, and there is only one acceptable answer. Standardised testing has long been the norm both for national and international "high-stakes" exams where, for example, students are competing for access to limited places in higher education or for entry to elite professions. Although there are many other instruments that can be used to assess students, such as portfolios, self-assessment, peer assessment, and journals, standardised testing has dominated high-stakes assessment for many years, as it is a practical way to attain immediate and comparable information. A uniform test can be administered quickly and efficiently to vast numbers of students, especially where multiple choice formats are applied, in order to obtain reliable results (Hughes, 2013). These results are deemed to be fair (despite the confounding factors that may disrupt this) and cannot easily be challenged by disaffected test-takers. Marking is cheap, rapid, and objective. Thus, from an administrative perspective, as Brown and Abeywickrama (2021) point out, high-stakes, standardised testing has much to recommend it. Standardised, high-stakes testing was well understood by teachers as the form and style of the test generally remained constant from year to year, so question types and content became well known. This made it easy to predict probable test questions and expected answers, so teachers could prepare their students with targeted test-taking skills and knowledge. Teachers' skills in preparing students for high-stakes standardised testing were highly appreciated by school principals, students, and parents, and there was enormous pressure on teachers to "teach-to-the-test", as failure in such high-stakes tests could mean disgrace for the student's family.

Nevertheless, standardised high-stakes tests, such as the long-standing national examination (Ujian Nasional) in Indonesia, have been widely criticised for their negative impacts, including the stress and anxiety they cause for both students and teachers, detracting from the quality of students' learning experience (Furaidah et al., 2015; Romios et al., 2020; Saukah & Chayono,

2015; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011). A major drawback from high-stakes testing is the teaching-to-the-test model of learning. Koretz (2017) argued that high-stakes testing shifts teachers' attention towards test preparation and away from more fundamental learning objectives; he pointed out that "high-stakes testing creates strong incentives to focus on the tested sample rather than the domain it is intended to represent" (p. 18). In the same vein, Au (2007) argued that "[high-stakes standardised testing] contradicts curriculum and instruction aligned with professional standards …" (p. 14). Several previous studies have indeed found the negative impact of high-stakes testing. For example, a survey involving 117 teachers in upper elementary schools in California revealed that high-stakes tests negatively affect instructional study and planning. Specifically, teachers purposively spend their allotted teaching time on preparing students for the test (Herman & Golan, 1993). In Indonesia, a recent study which also focused on the impact of the high-stakes standardised testing revealed that teachers still believe the test had negatively affected their teaching roles and instruction (Puspitasari & Pelawi, 2023).

Standardised high-stakes testing leads to a "testing culture"

According to Birenbaum (2016), high-stakes testing, usually involving standardised tests, fosters a "testing culture", characterised by a clear distinction between instruction and assessment, a passive role for students in the assessment, and decontextualised and discrete tests in a multiple-choice format. In contrast, in an "assessment culture", students play an active role; there are multiple forms of assessment; and students' achievement is defined in a profile instead of a single score. In a testing culture, "classroom assessment is seen as simply preparation for an externally set and assessed exam", while in an assessment culture, classroom assessment is guided by "considerations of learning and teaching" (Hamp-Lyons, 2007, p. 488). The features of testing and assessment cultures are identified in Table 1.

Table 1. Testing culture versus assessment culture (adapted from Birenbaum, 2016, pp. 277–286)

Category	**Testing culture**	**Assessment culture**
Mindset		
The purpose of assessment	Making grades for reports	Aiming for learning
The function of assessment	Accountability	Direction for further learning
The methods of assessment	Prefers standardised tests	Focuses on establishing dialogue (interaction) with learners
Power relations in assessment	Controlled by assessor	Shared assessment power
Attitudes towards diversity	One instrument will suit all students	Acknowledges students' diversity
Expectations about learning	Teachers believe that students' capacities are fixed	Teachers believe that students have distinct capacities which can be used to move learning forward
The fidelity of assessment	Tests can measure students' ability accurately	Tests may not depict students' overall ability
Classroom assessment		

Formal assessment	Assessment for learning is interpreted as frequent testing, and formative assessment strategies are applied superficially	Emphasises and applies formative assessment
Classroom culture	Competitive and score-oriented	Applies the notions of constructivist learning theory such as collaborative learning, higher-order thinking, student agency
Teacher professional learning	Carried out by external providers which may not be in line with teachers' needs	Focused on developing self-regulated learning
Leadership	Teachers have passive role in making decisions	Emphasis on capacity building, and being pedagogical leaders
The impact of external accountability tests	Applies 'teaching-to-the-test' model	Instruction is not affected by standardised tests

Several features of the testing culture such as rote memorisation and teach-to-the-test teaching tend to hinder students' critical thinking skills from developing (Jiang, 2013). Critical thinking emphasises deep and active learning, reasoning, and tolerance of ambiguity; in contrast, high-stakes testing encourages memorisation, repeating the expected correct answer, and ventriloquising prepared reasons. Thus, negative backwash from high-stakes testing counteracts critical thinking pedagogy.

Moreover, the negative impact of the testing culture and high-stakes testing lingers even when the test is no longer administered. For example, a longitudinal study in Taiwan involving 46,361 students showed that reform in the examination system has not changed the cram schooling culture (Chao et al., 2024). In other words, changes in examination policies may not automatically change the long-standing testing mind-set (Chao et al., 2024). This Taiwanese study corroborated Li's (2016, 2023) argument that reform of the assessment system will not automatically change teachers' practice.

The contrast between "testing culture" and "assessment culture", which reaches into every dimension of teaching-learning, helps to explain why it is that ELT teachers in Indonesia may find it so challenging to respond to the policy change towards low-stakes testing and teaching for critical thinking, which entails a new mindset and major cultural change.

Barriers to fostering critical thinking in ELT within a testing culture

The testing culture that lingers in Indonesia, despite the policy changes which have been introduced, thus presents a number of barriers to the teaching of critical thinking. Most importantly, as the legacy of a lifetime of high-stakes testing, teachers still believe that test preparation is a staple of classroom practice, and they lack knowledge of how to introduce

critical thinking into their assessment practices (Ernawati et al., 2022; Murni et al., 2022; Nurjati et al., 2022).

A further barrier is that teachers in Indonesia still lack understanding of critical thinking and how to teach it. Unfortunately, research shows that teachers in Indonesia, as in some other testing-oriented cultures, still have limited understanding of critical thinking and how to teach it. For example, based on 59 questionnaires answered by teachers from three different regions in Indonesia, Ilyas (2018) concluded that teachers' conceptions of critical thinking are disparate, though one key element shared among the participants is analysis. A similar finding was also shown in a study involving 271 ELT teachers, which revealed that teachers have limited understanding of critical thinking (Defianty & Wilson, 2022). Even when teachers understand the concept of critical thinking, they need to have the willingness—and confidence—to shift their long-held attitudes to teaching associated with the testing culture. Moreover, they themselves need to develop a greater capacity to think critically.

In particular, moving towards a pedagogy for critical thinking necessitates a shift towards more active engagement of students in classroom interaction and a less teacher-dominated classroom culture. This shift requires more agency on the part of both teachers and students and less reliance on a set textbook to control the pace and content of their classes (Fadilah & Mufidah, 2021; van den Ham & Heinze, 2018). This can be threatening for teachers who are steeped in a testing culture of education which depends, in ELT, on students acquiring a set repertoire of grammar and vocabulary, rather than learning how to communicate ideas in English and to think critically about these ideas. Thus, teachers' lack of experience and skills in actively engaging students in participation in the classroom is a further barrier to overcome.

Another barrier is that teachers who are accustomed to a testing culture may not be equipped for a move towards forms of assessment appropriate for an "assessment culture", such as portfolios, creative artefacts, presentations, and journals. Teachers need new understandings and strategies for conceptualising assessment as an integral part of moving learning forward, in other words implementing assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning (Arrafii & Sumarni, 2018; Widiastuti & Saukah, 2017).

Lastly, studies show that teachers tend to believe that their students' limited English prevents them from participating in critical thinking in the ELT classroom (Defianty & Wilson, 2022; Velayati et al., 2019). This belief is another barrier to overcome while introducing critical thinking into ELT in testing-oriented cultures.

Overcoming the barriers: Possible solutions

Vincent-Lancrin et al. (2019) maintain that fostering critical thinking requires a strategic and on-going plan, particularly in terms of teacher development, as teachers' beliefs and understandings are crucial in bringing critical thinking into the classroom (Li, 2016, 2023).

Several professional development strategies, such as workshops or seminars, have been established in Indonesia to improve teachers' understanding of critical thinking, and the government has published guidelines on how to implement critical thinking for teachers in Indonesia (Ariyana et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these professional development programs and publications have not yet yielded a promising result. Clearly, a sustained approach to professional development is needed in order to enhance teachers' understanding of critical thinking and how to teach it.

One approach to improving the teaching of critical thinking is collaborative action research, which can be defined as a collaborative partnership between teachers and researchers or mentors to identify and resolve problems in teaching–learning (Yuan & Burns, 2017). Collaborative action research involves a cycle of identifying the problem, planning, implementing, evaluating, and redesigning innovations in teaching. It has two major advantages: first, it creates a sense of ownership, as teachers are directly engaged in designing and conducting the research in order to answer their own dilemmas and challenges, but with support and guidance from mentors/ researchers; second, it helps teachers align theory and practice in a meaningful way for their own needs and situation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). An advantage of collaborative action research is that it can be deeply rooted in teachers' daily teaching practice, as the research emerges from teachers themselves in collaboration with researchers. Gandana et al. (2021) showed that top-down introduction of a completely new approach to instruction can be counterproductive. The study involved fifteen ELT teachers in Indonesia. Participants were introduced to how to teach critical thinking through literature by adopting a critical thinking model from Bobkina and Stefanova (2016). Drawing on data from teachers' subsequent instructional activities, the researchers concluded that teachers were still having difficulties in implementing critical thinking in their own classroom context. Gandana et al.'s (2021) study confirmed previous research showing that teachers can be resistant to change, as they need to both learn and unlearn their practice at the same time (see Kennedy et al., 2008). Rather than change being imposed on teachers by external actors, collaborative action research allows teachers themselves to be in control of the innovation with support and mentoring from the researchers.

A second aspect of professional development for critical thinking pedagogy in testing-oriented cultures is that teachers need to see actual examples of how the pedagogy can be applied successfully in their own contexts. Such examples can help to build an awareness and confidence in new teaching practices for critical thinking. A number of studies describing strategies for critical thinking pedagogy have emerged in Indonesia in recent years, such as: extensive reading programs (Husna, 2019); Mobile Assisted Language Learning entitled 'English with Noni' (Agustina et al., 2022); listening journals (Purnamaningwulan, 2022); and Socratic questioning (Lintangsari et al., 2022). These studies and publications offer strategies and inspiration for ELT teachers who are attempting to incorporate critical thinking into their teaching. For example, "English with Noni" (Agustina et al., 2022) encourages students to develop their own clearly reasoned arguments in response to a written text. Similarly, Purnamaningwulan (2022) asked students to understand, analyse, and reflect on audio texts and then to relate them to their own lives, thus involving students in all three dimensions of

critical thinking defined by Davies and Barnett (2015): thinking skills, criticality, and critical pedagogy. Similarly, the examples provided by Mambu (2010) show how students can be involved in critical thinking despite their low English ability. There is an urgent need for more research of this kind as well as wider dissemination of success stories in critical thinking pedagogy.

In addition, more research is needed to show how formative assessment, assessment *for* learning, can be used in the teaching of critical thinking in Indonesia. Such research is essential in supporting the move towards an assessment culture, particularly in underpinning professional development initiatives.

Conclusion: Teachers need more support to overcome the long-standing "testing culture"

This paper has argued that the long-embedded culture of high-stakes standardised testing remains a barrier to introducing critical thinking pedagogy in countries like Indonesia; and that ELT teachers who have been nurtured in a testing culture and have worked and studied within this culture for years may find it very difficult to change their teaching practice, despite the emphasis on critical thinking in the revised curriculum. Brought up themselves in a testing culture, it is hard for teachers to develop a new repertoire of strategies which encourage students to participate more actively and more critically in English language classes.

As we have argued, many ELT teachers are still uncertain how critical thinking applies in their classrooms, particularly when students' language ability is very low. For years, teachers have been used to teaching test-taking skills based on grammar rules and discrete vocabulary. A move towards critical thinking requires them to focus more on students participating actively in using English to make meaning, rather than simply rote-learning given content. This also means moving away from a focus on the 'correct' answer and allowing students to experiment with using English to talk about issues which are important to them, as suggested by Mambu (2010). Importantly, a move to critical thinking pedagogy also entails thinking about assessment as a way to move student learning forward rather than as a tool for reporting, as described in Birenbaum's (2016) view of an "assessment culture". For all of these reasons, moving away from a testing-culture calls upon teachers to make profound changes in the way they conceptualise English language learning and their role and goals as English language teachers, and so teachers need considerable support in re-thinking their approach to ELT.

We have argued, with Vincent-Lancrin et al. (2019), that well-planned teacher development programs are necessary to help teachers develop understanding of critical thinking and how it applies in English language classes. On one hand, teachers need to learn strategies and techniques for developing and assessing critical thinking in teaching English, and professional development workshops can help to disseminate these strategies. However, teacher professional development alone may not overcome teachers' reticence and build their

confidence in a new paradigm of learning. We have suggested that one way to help break through teachers' resistance to change may be to use collaborative action research, in which teachers and mentors together tackle the challenges which teachers face in their own classrooms. Cultural change—changing from a fundamentally testing-oriented culture towards embedding critical thinking in ELT—will not happen quickly. But with more opportunities for teacher development, and for collaborative action research, in particular, a gradual shift towards more critical thinking in ELT can be achieved.

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