Academic English

Section 12: Writing a critical review

Kallia Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts
School of Sciences and Engineering
REVIEW OF AN ARTICLE
SUMMARY AND CRITICAL
E V A L U A T I O N
Read critically
KEEP UP TO DATE
ADJUST TO CHANGE
Steps in summarizing

Quick overview - read all sections
Read without taking notes
Read again and highlight important ideas

- main aim
- opposing views
- methodological approach
- textual analysis
- main findings/conclusions

Use your notes ONLY
Paraphrase
Steps in evaluating

STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

SPECIFIC CRITERIA

Understand not just content

UNDERSTAND TEXT’S PURPOSE

INTENDED AUDIENCE

MAIN COMPONENTS

INTERRELATION
AUTHOR’S AIM
ACHIEVED - TO WHAT EXTENT ADDS TO THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE
RELATIONSHIP IT BEARS TO OTHER WORKS IN THE FIELD
WHAT IS MISSING?
IS THIS A PROBLEM?
Specific Criteria (2)

Research Approach
Objective or Biased
Valid Reliable Results
Analytical Framework
Clear Hypothesis
Argument Consistent
Valid Reliable and Effective
Evidence
Conclusions Justified
Textual Imitations
Ballard and Clanchy therefore suggest that students intending to study in English-speaking countries need to do more than develop their English language competence. They also need to adapt their study behaviour and in particular to develop a more analytical and critical approach to learning (p. 17).

How convincing though, is this idea that Asian students think in a fundamentally different way? First of all we need to consider the evidence Ballard and Clanchy draw on to support this view. The case studies presented seem persuasive, but it must be remembered that these are only small in number and we do not know how typical they are. The case of the Japanese student for example, may be quite unusual. In my view, more systematic and comprehensive research of this issue is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn. It would be interesting for example to try the essay topic on a large group of students and find out how they would respond to it. The authors of the chapter can therefore be criticized here for a lack of evidence to support this view.

Another questionable aspect of this article is its implied cultural bias. Although the authors do not state that the methods of Australian education are superior, this is what is implied from their model of learning styles. Whereas it is suggested that Australian students progress from a “reproductive” approach to an “analytical” approach, the authors seem to think that Asian education does not move beyond this “reproductive” stage. Are Asian tertiary students then to consider themselves only as the equals of Australian secondary students? By implication, Asian education is seen as an undeveloped form.

The same cultural bias can also be found in the Kaplan material. His characterisation of the English pattern as “linear” in contrast to the “circularity” of the Asian pattern implies that he finds the former more logical. Scholars from Asian countries, which have their own rich traditions of learning, may regard this view, however, as offensive. Kaplan may also be accused of serious over-simplification when he speaks of a single Oriental style of thinking. Asia consists of many cultures and languages which cannot be reduced into one uniform pattern. By contrast he proposes that there are three distinct European patterns - English, Russian and Romance.

A final shortcoming in the article is the authors’ portrayal of how students are able to adjust their approaches to learning. If we accept the view that patterns of thinking are conditioned by language and education from an early age, then it is fair to assume that the process of adjustment to a new pattern would take a good deal of time and effort. However in the case of the Japanese student, the authors suggest that he only needed to recognise that he was approaching essay tasks in the wrong way and “then he was able to make the necessary shifts without any great difficulty” (p. 11). This does not sound very plausible.

Despite these criticisms, Ballard and Clanchy’s article still has some value and we need to judge it in terms of the authors’ purpose in writing it. It is not intended to be a rigorous piece of academic work, but is intended mainly to assist students in preparing for overseas study. We can therefore understand why the authors choose to be positive about Asian students’ capacity for adjustment, and why most cases are presented ultimately as success stories. The issue of how cultural differences affect academic performance, nonetheless, remains a complex one, and further research is no doubt required before we can gain a full understanding of it.

References

1. Introduction

Begin with full bibliographical information of the text reviewed

Introduce the broad issue

2. Summary

Introduce text authors and their main argument

Focus on the most important points

Summarize the supporting evidence

Round off the key points and State the implications

3. Evaluation/Critique

Signal the shift to evaluation

Negative comments:
Limited evidence (small sample)
Cultural bias
Oversimplification

Positive comments:
Balance your commentary

4. Conclusion
References

End of Section
Financing

• The present educational material has been developed as part of the educational work of the instructor.

• The project “Open Academic Courses of the University of Crete” has only financed the reform of the educational material.

• The project is implemented under the operational program “Education and Lifelong Learning” and funded by the European Union (European Social Fund) and National Resources.
Licensing Note

• The current material is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0[1] International license or later International Edition. The individual works of third parties are excluded, e.g. photographs, diagrams etc. They are contained therein and covered under their conditions of use in the section «Use of Third Parties Work Note».

[1] http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

• As Non-Commercial is defined the use that:
  ▪ Does not involve direct or indirect financial benefits from the use of the work for the distributor of the work and the license holder
  ▪ Does not include financial transaction as a condition for the use or access to the work
  ▪ Does not confer to the distributor and license holder of the work indirect financial benefit (e.g. advertisements) from the viewing of the work on website

• The copyright holder may give to the license holder a separate license to use the work for commercial use, if requested.
Reference Note

Preservation Notices

Any reproduction or adaptation of the material should include:

- the Reference Note
- the Licensing Note
- the declaration of Notices Preservation
- the Use of Third Parties Work Note (if is available) together with the accompanied URLs.