Critical Thinking in Moroccan University Students’ Writing: The Case of Chouaib Doukkali University

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to assess Moroccan university students’ critical thinking skills through analyzing their argumentative writings. The focus is on their ability to express their opinion and support their arguments with relevant evidence. The objective is to invite writing teachers to reconsider their perception of teaching writing by suggesting some techniques they can use to help their students’ develop critical thinking skills. The choice of this topic is motivated by the fact that anecdotal evidence indicates that students, even at a higher level of language proficiency, are unable to develop a point of view and support their claim. An ex-post facto design was used. Forty opinion essays were written by semester 6 students and analyzed using a revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives. The focus was on the higher order thinking skills, namely analyzing, evaluating and creating. The frequency analysis revealed that the participants exhibited a low level of critical thinking in their writing. They were unable to develop a stand and support it with arguments. The study concludes with a set of pedagogical implications.
Keywords: Critical thinking, writing, opinion, arguments, Bloom’s taxonomy

1. Introduction

Critical thinking “henceforth, CT” and writing are two skills that students need to acquire to succeed in their academic and professional lives. Writing is the most important skill for students to learn, since most of the exams are written. So, if students master this skill, this guarantees, to a large extent, their success in higher education. An awareness of this fact motivated writing teachers and researchers to delineate ways to improve students’ writing abilities, starting from writing as a process to language and the rhetorical pattern of the essay. In this respect, since the purpose of research in writing is to find out the best practices for teaching writing, a new trend emerged, which called for the incorporation of CT into this subject. This was attributed to the fact that a large body of research revealed a strong correlation between CT, which has to do with the writer’s ability to take decisions about how to make one’s writing effective and persuasive, and writing quality. A critical thinker is able to analyze available information, relate it to one’s real life experiences, readings and observations to be able to come up with convincing conclusions. Within this scope, this study concerns itself with CT in writing. The purpose is to assess Chouaib Doukkali university students’ critical thinking skills through analyzing their argumentative writings. The focus is on their ability to express their opinion and support their arguments with relevant evidence. To attain this objective the following research questions and hypothesis are formulated to guide the inquiry process.

Research questions

- To what extent do Moroccan EFL learners use their higher order skills in their argumentative writings?
- To what extent are they able to have a stand and defend it?
- What is the relationship between the learners’ use of higher order thinking skills and the quality of their writing?

The article starts with a brief review of literature with a definition of concepts. A description of the methodology used in the study is provided in the second section. The last two sections are devoted to the
presentation of results and the discussion of the main findings of the study on the basis of previous empirical research done on the topic.

2. Literature Review

Critical thinking and writing are interrelated; one affects the other. Critical thinking affects the quality of writing since it is determined by the efficiency of communication. In other words, critical thinkers should be good writers and speakers in the sense that they can communicate their ideas freely in speech or writing. They are able to organize, explain, analyze and evaluate their thoughts and deliver them effectively. Similarly, writing can be a medium to enhance CT. This section sheds light on the concept of critical thinking. It provides an overview of Bloom’s taxonomy and discusses how the relationship between critical thinking and writing is perceived by many researchers.

2.1 Definition of critical thinking

There is no agreed upon definition of critical thinking. Yet, according to Hughes (2014) all the definitions contribute to the growing picture of what it is. The concept was first introduced by the Greek philosopher Socrates 2500 years ago, who initiated the idea of deep questioning that involves thinking to search for the truth, before deciding to accept or refute an idea. Barnet and Bedau (2016) adopts the same premise and define critical thinking as a “skeptical state of mind” (p. 3). This implies that the critical thinker is an open minded person who is ready to question not only the others’ assumptions and evidence they offer, but also their own assumptions and ideas to draw intelligent conclusions and improve their thinking.

Hughes (2014) defines critical thinking as “finding out whether something is true, partly true or not true at all” (p. 2). Yet, this is not an easy task to do. It requires a set of sub-skills to be able to differentiate a fact from an opinion, since many writers can use language effectively to hide their bias. For Paul and Elder (2014) critical thinking is the ability to have a purpose at hand and question information, conclusions, and points of view in a clear, accurate, precise, and relevant way. Delcee (2018) views critical thinking as the skill of making reasoned logical and well-thought out judgments. Critical thinkers, according to her, adopt an attitude which involves questioning arguments and conclusions. They do not accept information if it is not supported with evidence.
To sum up, critical thinking has to do with the learners’ use of logic, analysis and good judgments when dealing with different situations. Learners are said to have acquired critical thinking skills when they are able to have an attitude towards the various issues they may be exposed to; when they are able to look for, analyze and use evidence to accept or refute propositions and opinions.

2.2 Bloom’s taxonomy

Bloom (1956) developed his taxonomy of educational objectives because a theoretical framework was needed to facilitate communication among college examiners. This framework was expected to help not only with testing but also with curriculum development, since setting educational goals and classifying them were the basis of the teaching learning process. The taxonomy classifies learning objectives or outcomes into levels of complexity in three domains; cognitive (brain development), affective (emotional growth) and psychomotor (manual or physical skills). The focus of this study is on the cognitive domain.

Bloom’s framework organizes cognitive skills into higher order and lower order skills. The lower order skills consist of three categories; knowledge, comprehension and application. Knowledge has to do with remembering information either by recognition or recall. Comprehension means understanding “the literal message contained in a communication” (Bloom, 1956, p. 89), while application includes the use of the knowledge and skills learned in the first stages of knowledge and comprehension in different situations. The higher order skills include three categories as well. The first is analysis, which is a more advanced order of thinking. It refers to the breaking down of “the material into its constituent parts and detection of the relationships of the parts and of the way they are organized” (p. 144). The second is synthesis, which has to do with relating previous experiences to new material to form “a new and more or less well-integrated whole”. In other words, extending learning to new areas (Veilleux, 1999). This category provides learners with opportunities to think creatively. The third category is evaluation. It refers to the students’ ability to make judgments about ideas, methods, solutions…on the basis of some standards or criteria.

The categories above are set on a hierarchical structure, from lower order to higher order, and learners cannot reach the higher order thinking if they do not go through the lower ones. Bloom was able to introduce a
learning ladder that moves from lower levels to higher levels of abstraction (Doughty, 2006). Yet it is regarded as obsolete now since it no longer conforms to a changing reality. The cultural context, the social circumstances and political imperatives in which Bloom introduced his taxonomy have changed. Doughty also criticizes the fact that the taxonomy is still used in many colleges in the USA although it has been revised so many times that the current versions have little to do with the original.

To sum up, Bloom (1956) introduced a taxonomy of teaching and assessment which explained the different cognitive processes; *remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate*, and *create*. Yet, although it contributed a lot to teaching and assessment, the taxonomy was criticized for being static and difficult to apply for the numerous subcategories it included and for the vagueness of many of them. This has led to the emergence of other versions which have tried to organize learning in a clearer way.

### 2.3 Bloom’s taxonomy revised

Bloom’s taxonomy has been revised so many times making many changes in the taxonomy. In 2001, Anderson and Krathwohl with a number cognitive psychologists, curriculum theorists and instructional researchers, and testing and assessment specialists introduced a new version of the taxonomy, which is more dynamic. The most important of all is changing the noun form into the verb form, indicating that thinking is an active process, rather than an outcome (e.g. remembering replaced knowledge). Also, some categories were reclassified, like understanding and creating which replaced comprehension and synthesis.
Table 1: Summary of the new version of Bloom’s taxonomy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lower order</strong></td>
<td><strong>Remembering</strong></td>
<td>This is the ability to recall information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Understanding</strong></td>
<td>This relates to the ability explain how things work processing the text and trying to get meaning out of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Applying</strong></td>
<td>This is the ability to use one’s existing knowledge and apply it in different situations. Doing the text’s comprehension activities may be taken as an example of how students can apply their acquired knowledge to do different activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Higher order</strong></td>
<td><strong>Analyzing</strong></td>
<td>Concerns the ability to analyze the way information is presented, looking for arguments that back up the writer’s opinion (eg. Not accepting the ideas in the text as if they were not arguable). In writing, analyzing concerns organizing the essay in one’s own way with a purpose in mind (Facione, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Evaluating</strong></td>
<td>This is an important, but at the same time the most difficult stage. It has to do with the higher order thinking. Learners at this point should be able to distinguish between facts and opinions on the basis of the evidence they have to find out in the text and to evaluate the validity and relevance of the information. In writing, evaluating has to do with presenting relevant arguments and being able to support them with evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Creating</strong></td>
<td>At this stage, students should be able to use the knowledge they acquired to express their own opinion through writing and speaking and to draw conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Explaining</strong></td>
<td>This relates to one’s ability to provide explanations of events and opinions using logical reasoning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nguyen and Nguyen (2020) explored the Vietnamese EFL university students’ critical thinking ability and its relationship with their argument essay writing, using Bloom’s taxonomy for educational objectives.

2.4 Critical thinking in writing

Writing is a skill that students need to learn for reasons that go beyond its role as a means of assessment of their knowledge or their language efficiency. Writing is a means of learning and thinking. It helps students think clearly, and express themselves with confidence. This suggests that teaching writing means teaching students how to think, and when they are taught to struggle with their writing, they are invited to struggle with thought itself (Bean, 1996). Some researchers think that writing sharpens thought (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1985 as cited in Panitz, 2001). That is
why educators resort to strengthening the writing curriculum to improve students deteriorating thinking skills. Bean (1996) believes that to help students develop their intellectual and cognitive abilities, teachers should provide them with important writing problems and an appropriate environment in which they can use their best writing efforts. Writing in this sense is considered as both a process and a product; a process in which students learn to enhance their cognitive skills, involving critical thinking skills and a final product, which reveals students’ leanings and their ability to communicate them.

2.5 Research on critical thinking in writing

Many researchers investigated the relationship between critical thinking and writing. Some found a significant correlation between the two (Fahim & Mirzaii, 2013; Hashemi, Behrooznia & Mahjoobi, 2014; Nejmaoui, 2018). Fahim and Mirzaii (2013) conducted an experiment to test the effect of the incorporation of dialogic critical thinking into the teaching of argumentative writing to Iranian EFL learners. The research findings revealed that this incorporation proved its effect on enhancing the students’ writing. Hashemi, Behrooznia, and Mahjoobi (2014) investigated the correlation of critical thinking and argumentative writing achievement, using 'Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal’ (2002). The participants were 178 university students from three Iranian universities. The results indicated a positive correlation between critical thinking and argumentative writing. Nejmaoui (2018) looked into the effect of integrating critical thinking in the writing course on Moroccan university students’ use of critical thinking skills in their argumentative essays. She carried out an experimental study on 36 Moroccan EFL learners from the department of English. The findings of her study showed that the experimental group, which was taught writing with critical thinking, outperformed the control group, which received no treatment.

Others believe that there is no significant correlation between CT and writing (Fahim & Hashtroodi, 2012; Pei, Zheng, Zhang, & Liu, 2017). Pei, Zheng, Zhang, and Liu (2017) delineated the Chinese undergraduates’ use of their critical thinking skills in argumentative writing. Three grade level groups of students participated in the study. The results revealed that there was no significant difference among the three groups in terms of their critical thinking performance, which was
low. Fahim and Hashtroodi (2012) conducted an experimental study to explore the effect of the teaching techniques of critical thinking on Iranian university students’ ability to write argumentative essays. The research findings showed that these techniques helped the students to improve their critical thinking skills, yet no significant difference was found between the experimental group and the control group as far as their writing quality is concerned.

Amrous and Nejmaoui (2016) investigated the effect of the academic level on Moroccan university students’ critical thinking skills. They found out that Moroccan university students demonstrated a low level of critical thinking skills even at a higher academic level. The researchers attributed this result to the type of instruction students receive, which focuses mainly on teaching language and transmitting knowledge. The second finding in the study was that Master’s students outperformed semester 6 and semester 4 students with regard to their critical thinking skills. The researchers attributed this to the learning materials and textbooks which are more advanced and complex at higher levels of academic learning. To sum up, in spite of the growing interest in critical thinking in education, research in this area is still lagging behind. More studies are needed to investigate this issue and find out ways to incorporate CT in education.

3. Methodology

The objective of this study is to delineate critical thinking in university students’ writing, the focus is mainly on the four categories of Bloom’s taxonomy; namely explaining, evaluating and creating. This is to identify the extent to which the students are able to express their opinion clearly and use logical arguments to support it, and to explore the relationship between their level of critical thinking skills and the quality of their essays. To this end, an ex-post facto design was used. A brief description of this design is provided in the following sections with an overview of the research instrument and sampling procedure.

3.1 Research design

An ex-post facto design was used in this study to investigate university students’ use of critical thinking skills in their opinion essays. The choice of this design was motivated by the fact that it is an appropriate method
that can help identify the relationship between two already existing variables; critical thinking and writing quality.

3.2 Subjects

The data were collected at the faculty of letters and human sciences in El Jadida. Forty semester 6 students, males and females, participated in the study. They were aged 21-25. They share the same linguistic background. They all speak Moroccan Arabic or Amazigh as their mother tongue (some grew up speaking both as MT); they also studied Standard Arabic and French at primary school (French starts at the 3rd year of the primary school cycle), middle school, and high school, and started studying English in their final year of the middle school.

3.3 Research instruments

Forty opinion essays were written by semester 6 students at Chouaib Doukkali University. The students were allotted fifteen minutes to discuss the topic in groups before writing their essays to control the variable of topic familiarity. The writing process took place in an examination situation. Participants were provided with two topics of general interest to write on. They were given one hour to write their essays to control the variable of time, and they could not consult dictionaries or other reference books.

3.4 Data analysis

The CT skills in the essays were evaluated using Bloom’s taxonomy for educational objectives (Facione’s taxonomy, 2007), with a focus on the higher order thinking skills; namely, explaining, analyzing, evaluating and explaining. Each of these skills was given a grade out of 5 as a way to assess its use in the essays.

The first and second research questions were investigated using descriptive statistics. The purpose was to count the higher order skills detected in the students’ essays. To answer the third research question, multiple regression analysis was used. The choice of this technique was motivated by the fact that it is useful to estimate the relationship between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables. The objective was to understand whether writing quality could be predicted based on the scores of the students ‘critical thinking skills, specifically the higher order skills explaining, analyzing, evaluating and creating.
Writing quality was assessed by two English language teachers and given grades out of twenty for their quality. The teachers were provided with a checklist to help them assess the participants’ writings in a more objective way. They had to assess the essays’ rhetorical organization, ideas, language (vocabulary, grammar and mechanics).

4. Results

The purpose of the current study is to look into Chouaib Doukkali University students’ critical thinking skills through analyzing their argumentative writings. The focus is on their ability to express their opinion and support their arguments with relevant evidence. To this end, the following research questions were formulated.

- To what extent do Moroccan EFL learners use their higher order skills in their argumentative writings?
- To what extent are they able to have a stand and defend it?
- What is the relationship between the learners’ use of higher order thinking skills and the quality of their writing?

Descriptive statistics was used to test the first and second hypothesis. In other words, it was used to investigate the extent to which Moroccan University students use higher order thinking skills, namely evaluating, explaining, creating, and analyzing, in their opinion essays. Since “creating”, as a cognitive skill, has to do with expressing one’s opinion through writing and speaking and to draw conclusions, its frequency in the students’ writing was also assessed by using descriptive statistics.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>4,00</td>
<td>2,30</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explaining</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>4,00</td>
<td>2,01</td>
<td>1,10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>4,00</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>1,35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>4,00</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>1,15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptive statistics showed that the participants got the highest score on evaluating (M=2,30, SD=0,84). This may give the impression that students are able to provide relevant arguments and support them with logical evidence. Yet, by looking at the mean and standard deviation, we can see that the students were unable to reach the average grade, which is 2.50. This implies that semester 6 students are unable to come up with
relevant arguments that are based on evidence and logic, not just impressions.

The second highest score students got on CTS was on explaining (M=2.01, SD=1.10). The mean and standard deviation indicate a low level in the students’ analytical skills. The way information was presented in the essays analyzed showed a lack of organization.

The lowest scores the students got were on creating (M= 0.95, SD= 1.35) and analyzing (M= 0.70, SD= 1.15). This means that the students were unable to develop a point of view and explain it using their logical reasoning.

Table 3: Regression analysis of critical thinking skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>(R^2)</th>
<th>Adjusted R^2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The multiple correlation coefficient (R= .88), which measures the degree of the linear relationship between two variables, shows that there is a strong correlation between the critical thinking skills (Analyzing, Evaluating, Creating, Explaining) and writing quality. The Adjusted R^2 indicates that 75% of the total variability in the learners writing quality is explained by their use of critical thinking skills.

Table 4: Coefficient

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Regression Coeff Beta (β)</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explaining</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The regression coefficient (β) is used to compare the strength of the effect of every independent variable (Analyzing, Evaluating, Creating, and Explaining) on the dependent variable (writing quality). In the table above we can see that the highest correlation coefficient goes back to explaining (β = .48), creating (β = .41) and evaluating (β = .31). This implies that these skills are predictive factors of writing quality with a
significant T-test value (p< .05). Analyzing, on the other hand was found to have no significant correlation with writing quality P> .05.

5. Discussion

The results of the descriptive statistics provide an answer to the first research question whose objective is to investigate the extent to which students’ writings reflect their critical thinking skills. Table 1 indicates that semester 6 university students encounter difficulties when it comes to their ability to have a stand, support it with solid arguments and find a suitable rhetorical pattern to use to organize their ideas and come up with a pertinent analysis of the arguments. These findings are in good agreement with Amrous & Nejmaoui (2016) whose study revealed that undergraduate students’ writings show a low level of critical thinking. The researchers attributed this fact to the type of instruction students receive, which focuses mainly on teaching language and transmitting knowledge. Students find themselves learning some content that they may forget just because they are not given opportunities to apply it.

Concerning the relationship between critical thinking and writing, regression analysis revealed a significant correlation between the critical thinking skills (Analyzing, Evaluating, Creating, and Explaining) and writing quality. These findings are in consonance with many research findings, which showed that there is a relationship between critical thinking skills and writing quality (Fahim & Mirzaii, 2013; Hashemi, Behrooznia & Mahjoobi, 2014; Nejmaoui, 2018).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that university students tend to focus more on the language and form of the essay rather than the content itself. Their objective is to write with accurate language, yet they overlook the communicative function of writing. They write without a purpose in mind, which affects the message of the essay because they write for only one reader, who is the teacher. This also affects their critical thinking in the sense that they are prevented from opportunities to think about different arguments and different ways of analysis that can be addressed to different readers.

Most of the students do not find writing enjoyable. They believe that it is a difficult task that needs a lot of cognitive efforts since they are required to use the knowledge they have acquired to write a good essay. They find themselves resorting to their memory to retrieve all the information about
the topic and think about a suitable way to present it. However, they are unable to relate it to real life situations, their previous experiences or readings and develop a point of view about it, because they were not taught to write about themselves. They were taught to write only about what other people said. This explains the fact that the majority of students are unable to write a thesis and support their claim and unable to explore new ways to use language.

A close look at the students’ introductions reveals that most of them do not include a thesis. This may be explained by the fact that they do not feel confident enough to express their opinion. They think that if they express a point of view that the teacher does not agree with, they may be penalized for their attitude. The writing teacher is often asked the question: what if the examiner did not agree with my opinion? This belief makes them write about other people’s stands and not their own. Also, the interference of their mother tongue’s rhetoric (Moroccan Arabic) is a factor that accounts for the students’ inability to write a thesis. The Arabic rhetoric is characterized by its indirectness. That is, students, when writing in their mother tongue, tend to start by stating their arguments before they reveal their opinion, which sometimes may be just explicit and left to the reader to decipher it from the context.

Students can transfer their critical thinking skills from reading to writing. Critical readers can be transformed into critical writers through transferring their CT skills to the writing task. Critical readers use their higher order thinking skills while reading to form their own conception of the issues discussed in texts. In the reading process they understand the ideas discussed in the text, analyze them to distinguish between fact and opinion and relate them to what they already know about the issue from their previous readings, experiences or some real life situations. Then, they evaluate them before taking the decision whether to accept them or not. This skill in reading can be applied to writing. Critical writers write with a purpose in mind to communicate their messages to reach their target audience.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The goal of education is not to prepare students to take tests and get good grades; it is meant to prepare them for life. Students will face different life situations in which they have to use their critical thinking skills. They will have to analyze situations and evaluate them, solve problems, take
decisions. So, they should be equipped with the necessary tools to perform all the life tasks effectively. For this reason, the writing course should play an important part in helping students think critically, because the students’ ability to write is supposed to indicate one’s potential success in academic and professional domains. So, the importance of this skill does not stem only from its contribution to the students’ development of the literacy skills, but also from their higher order thinking skills’ acquisition.

This suggests a change of attitude to the course objective and the teaching methods. First, teachers should revise their concept of writing and the writing course. Writing should no longer be thought of as a means to merely reinforce language learning or testing the students’ learning. It is a subject that teachers can use to teach more than language, such as the value of having a say on the current issues. Hence, training on Critical thinking skills should be an important component in the writing class, either implicitly or explicitly. The teacher’s role here should change from a traditional teacher to a coach. That is, she should intervene in the process of writing (Griffin, 1983 as cited in Scmidth, 1999).

In the writing process, students are given opportunities to speak out their minds in the brainstorming phase, discuss their arguments and evaluate their peers’ opinions and arguments. They also have space where they can agree and disagree with their peers ‘opinions. They can use a set of cognitive skills like logical reasoning, problem solving and processing, which can help them identify a purpose, produce and shape ideas and refine expression (White, 1995).

To help students improve their critical thinking skills, the writing teacher should recognize the difference between the acquisition of knowledge and the application of knowledge. He/ She can adopt and adapt a set of techniques that can help their students apply the knowledge they have acquired, such as using new language in context and asking students to guess the meaning of new words from context. These are critical thinking activities since they have to do with problem solving.

An effective use of the revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy can help them move from lower order thinking skills to higher order thinking skills. Students should be encouraged to think deeply, ask questions, express their opinion and make connections; connect the topic at hand to their experiences, real life events, or some of their previous readings.
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