



Reading Between the Lines: Narrative Accounts of How English Literature Students Construct Meaning, Navigate Misconceptions, and Make Sense of Facts and Opinions in Scientific Texts

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ABSTRACT

Background: The ability to distinguish between fact and opinion is a critical component of academic literacy and scientific reasoning, particularly in the digital age where students encounter complex information flows. However, misconceptions and reliance on intuition are common among higher education students, undermining critical evaluation of scientific claims.

Purpose: This study aims to analyze the abilities of English Literature students at Halu Oleo University in classifying facts and opinions, and to identify factors influencing this process.

Method: A mixed-methods design was employed, involving a questionnaire completed by 82 students and an argumentative analysis of their written responses based on Toulmin's model. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were thematically coded to assess claim construction, warrant application, use of evidence, and consideration of rebuttals.

Results: The results of the study show that students tend to rely on intuition, everyday empirical experience, and common sense. sense compared to critical evaluation based on scientific evidence in determining facts and opinions. Furthermore, students' abilities in constructing claims, providing warrants, using scientific evidence, and considering rebuttals are still relatively low. This study also found that low levels of critical digital literacy affect students' ability to verify information and recognize digital information bias.

Conclusion: These findings highlight the urgent need to strengthen epistemological literacy, argumentative skills, and digital critical literacy in academic curricula to improve students' scientific reasoning and information evaluation capabilities.

KEYWORDS

Critical Literacy, Digital Literacy, Epistemology, Toulmin's Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Reading proficiency constitutes a core competency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, particularly at the higher education level (Chan dkk., 2025). Critical reading extends beyond comprehension of explicit information, encompassing interpretation, evaluation, and analysis of textual content (Jackson & Atari, 2025).



It requires students to identify argumentation structures, connect ideas, evaluate evidence, and exercise reflective reasoning (C.-C. Chang & Kuo, 2024). For English Literature students, who frequently engage with English language scientific texts, critical reading is essential to navigate complex information flows, prevent misconceptions, and support academic success.

Despite growing attention to critical reading, many EFL students struggle with fact-opinion discrimination (Y. K. Chang dkk., 2024). Prior studies indicate persistent misconceptions, where statements aligning with common beliefs are incorrectly treated as factual without evaluating supporting evidence. Moreover, students exhibit limited ability to construct arguments integrating claims, warrants, and evidence, reflecting underdeveloped critical reasoning. Low digital literacy further exacerbates susceptibility to misinformation and biased interpretations in online academic contexts.

In critical reading, the ability to distinguish between fact and opinion is a key indicator of a reader's comprehension of a text (Moore, 2024). Facts refer to empirically verifiable information, while opinions are subjective views influenced by particular interpretations, beliefs, or perspectives. In practice, scientific texts often present more than just facts but also contain the author's interpretations and arguments, presented persuasively (Paricos dkk., 2024). This requires readers to be able to identify the boundaries between objective and subjective statements to avoid logical fallacies. This ability is crucial because academic texts are essentially constructed through argumentation, which aims to influence the reader's thinking by using interconnected claims, reasons, and evidence.

According to (Sayehvand dkk., 2025) the core of a scientific argument lies in claims supported by logical reasons and evidence, so readers must be able to evaluate the validity of the relationship between these three elements. Thus, the ability to distinguish between fact and opinion is an important part of developing academic literacy and strengthening students' critical thinking skills (Yıldız dkk., 2025). However, various previous studies show that many students still experience difficulty distinguishing between fact and opinion when reading scientific texts. Some students tend to consider a statement as fact simply because it sounds logical, is widely believed, or is presented convincingly (Hossain, 2026). This error indicates a misconception regarding the concept of objectivity and validity of scientific information. Students often understand facts only as something that is generally accepted, without considering aspects of empirical evidence and academic verification (Zolfaghari dkk., 2025). As a result, subjective opinions are often treated as absolute facts. This phenomenon is also evident in the results of the researcher's initial observations of students in the English Literature Study Program at Halu University (R'boul & Yazidi, 2026). Oleo found that most students still make mistakes in identifying factual statements and opinions in scientific texts.

This phenomenon indicates that critical reading instruction has not fully developed students' conceptual understanding of the difference between fact and opinion (Tewari dkk., 2024). If this condition persists, students will struggle to evaluate academic information objectively and potentially produce biased reasoning in their academic process. In fact, much research has been conducted on critical reading, particularly regarding reading strategies, text comprehension, and inference skills (Pietschnig & Schermer, 2026). However, most previous studies have focused on reading comprehension outcomes without specifically examining the ability to distinguish between fact and opinion as part of the critical thinking process (Wolff dkk., 2025). Furthermore, studies that highlight student misconceptions related to the concepts of fact and opinion in scientific texts are still relatively limited, especially in the context of EFL students in Indonesia. Yet, conceptual

misconceptions are a crucial factor that can influence the quality of students' understanding and evaluation of academic information (Malik dkk., 2026). For example, findings indicate that students tend to accept claims that align with empirical experience and common beliefs as fact without evaluating the validity of the evidence or the structure of the argument. Furthermore, students' ability to connect claims, warrants, and evidence is still relatively low, resulting in underdeveloped critical thinking processes (Zhu dkk., 2026). These findings suggest that students' understanding of facts remains intuitive and simplistically positivistic. However, this research focuses more on critical reading skills and has not yet fully examined the epistemological dimensions of students' classification of facts and opinions through Toulmin's argumentation theory approach and its integration with critical digital literacy.

Furthermore, findings (Chong & Cheng, 2025) indicate that low digital literacy and critical thinking skills make students vulnerable to misinformation, digital information bias, and the acceptance of popular claims without verification of scientific evidence (Zhuang dkk., 2023). Furthermore, students are more likely to believe viral information that aligns with their initial beliefs than information that requires critical evaluation based on trusted academic sources. Likewise, students' ability to source information is also affected. evaluation, recognizing digital information manipulation, and considering scientific rebuttals are still relatively low (Garcia-Varela dkk., 2025). These findings confirm that the development of digital media influences students' epistemological construction of the concept of scientific truth. However, these studies have focused more on aspects of digital literacy and misinformation without specifically linking them to the ability to classify facts and opinions in academic scientific texts (Frieson dkk., 2023). Therefore, this study fills this gap by integrating epistemological analysis, Toulmin's argumentation theory, and critical digital literacy in the context of academic learning in the UK.

Therefore, based on these problems, this study aims to describe the abilities of students of the English Literature Study Program at Halu University. One in distinguishing facts and opinions in scientific texts (Shields & Narayanan, 2026). In addition, this study also aims to identify the forms of misconceptions experienced by students in understanding the concepts of facts, opinions, objectivity, and the validity of scientific statements (Sambath & Kosalram, 2025). This study is also expected to provide an empirical overview of the challenges of learning critical reading in the EFL context and become a basis for developing more effective and contextual academic reading learning strategies (Czech dkk., 2023). Meanwhile, the novelty of this study lies in the focus of its analysis which not only measures the level of students' critical reading abilities but also explores the forms of conceptual misconceptions that influence the process of identifying facts and opinions in scientific texts (DeJoseph dkk., 2024). This study offers a deeper perspective on the epistemological dimensions of critical reading, particularly regarding how students understand objectivity and scientific truth (Ervits, 2025). Therefore, this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of critical reading studies in the EFL context as well as practical contributions to strengthening academic literacy learning and students' critical thinking skills in higher education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate English Literature students' ability to distinguish facts from opinions in scientific texts (Gao, 2023). A descriptive-quantitative component measures students' classification accuracy, while a qualitative component explores the reasoning behind their responses using Toulmin's argumentation theory.

The population consisted of 387 students enrolled in the Reading course at the English Literature Study Program, Halu University. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring inclusion of students actively attending the course and representing diverse academic performance levels. The sample size and sampling procedure were determined to achieve sufficient representation for both quantitative analysis and qualitative exploration.

The research instrument comprised a test of 30 philosophical and scientific statements, where students categorized each as a fact or an opinion and provided supporting reasons. Instrument validity and reliability were established through expert review and a pilot study. Validity was confirmed with corrected item-total correlations above 0.30, and reliability was verified using Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.82 for each construct, ensuring consistency of measurement.

Data collection procedures included preparation of the test, distribution to students, collection of responses, and systematic observation of answer patterns. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions) and inferential statistics to identify performance trends. Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically according to Toulmin's argumentation framework (Tsao, 2025). Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was achieved through triangulation, allowing qualitative insights to explain patterns observed in quantitative results, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of students' critical reading and epistemological reasoning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Classification of Facts and Opinions

The research findings show that the classification of facts and opinions carried out by English Literature students at Halu University Oleo is still dominated by common- based epistemological perceptions everyday sense and experience. Based on the questionnaire results, the majority of respondents categorized statements considered logical, objective, and familiar as facts, even though philosophically and scientifically these statements are still debatable. This finding also shows that students tend to understand facts as absolute truths that are fixed and universal. In this research analysis, which uses Toulmin's argumentation theory, it was found that students used intuition-based warrants more often than verifiable scientific evidence. This pattern indicates students' low epistemological awareness of the tentative nature of modern science. Therefore, the results of this study confirm that the process of classifying facts and opinions is not only influenced by linguistic abilities but also by the students' scientific thinking paradigms. This finding aligns with the theory of the nature of reading, particularly evaluative or critical comprehension, which requires readers to assess the quality of information, identify the accuracy of data, and distinguish between fact and opinion. This ability, according to (Faherty dkk., 2024), is an indicator of critical reading skills that involve in-depth analysis of text content.

This research (Botes, 2026_) that students generally still experience misconceptions. epistemological aspects in understanding the truth status of a scientific claim. The research results found that respondents tend to accept information that aligns with personal experience and social authority as fact without critically evaluating the validity of the evidence. This finding is in line with the research results (Webb & Lee, 2025) that low argumentative literacy makes it difficult for students to distinguish between facts, interpretations, and opinions in academic texts. The research findings confirm that students are not accustomed to considering rebuttals or the possibility of scientific rebuttal when evaluating a claim. This condition seems consistent with the results of this study, where the majority of English Literature students at Halu University Oleo considers popular

claims as absolute facts. Therefore, this study strengthens the argument that strengthening critical literacy and literacy Epistemology is an urgent need in academic learning in the digital era.

Factors influencing classification

The research findings indicate that subjective factors have a significant influence on the process of classifying facts and opinions in students (Chen dkk., 2026). Based on the analysis conducted by English Literature students at Halu University, Oleo People tend to determine the status of a statement based on personal experience, philosophical beliefs, cultural background, and individual perceptions of reality. Respondents showed quite a high degree of variation in their answers to several statements related to consciousness, free will, and the nature of reality. This situation suggests that the process of identifying facts is not entirely constructed through objective scientific evaluation but is instead influenced by subjective interpretations formed from social experience and individual knowledge construction. From an epistemological perspective, this finding indicates that English Literature students at Halu University Oleo still positions personal experience as the basis for legitimizing the truth of a claim. As a result, the classification of facts and opinions often fails to consider the validity of the evidence or the potential for scientific rebuttal to a statement.

This research finding is reinforced by (Smare & Elfatihi, 2025) study, which also found that students are often only able to recognize explicit facts but have difficulty detecting implied opinions or contested claims. Similarly, findings (Clark, 2023) that students' assessment of scientific information is heavily influenced by cognitive bias and individual subjective experiences. The study's findings indicate that respondents more readily accept claims that align with their initial beliefs than claims that require critical evaluation based on scientific evidence. This finding is consistent with research (Ozturk dkk., 2025), which found that students tend to consider statements that align with their personal intuitions as facts. This research demonstrates that cultural and social environmental factors shape how students understand the concept of scientific truth. Furthermore, students often connect facts to social values considered common and accepted within their communities. This condition aligns with the results of this study, which demonstrates that the classification of facts and opinions is not neutral but is influenced by social construction and students' subjective experiences. Therefore, this study confirms that low literacy epistemology of English Literature students at Halu University Oleo cannot be separated from the influence of subjective factors in the scientific thinking process.

Argumentative Literacy Skills

The research findings show that students' argumentative abilities in classifying facts and opinions are still at a basic level and do not fully reflect critical scientific thinking patterns (Smith, 2026). Based on an analysis using Toulmin's argumentation theory, English Literature students at Halu University Oleo Students are generally able to construct claims or establish a position regarding a statement, but this is not followed by the ability to provide strong warrants based on scientific evidence (Alyokhin, 2026). Most respondents provide intuitive, normative, and everyday-experienced reasons when explaining why a statement is considered a fact or opinion. Furthermore, the use of scientific evidence to support arguments is still very limited. Students tend to rely on general assumptions and personal beliefs rather than empirical data or relevant scientific theories. The findings of this study also indicate that the ability to consider rebuttals or potential scientific objections is still low (Ma dkk., 2023). The majority of respondents view facts as absolute truths, making them less accustomed to evaluating the possibility of alternative perspectives on a claim.

This condition shows that the argumentative literacy of English Literature students at Halu University Oleo has not developed optimally in the context of reading scientific texts. These findings reinforce the views of (Tyrrell, 2026) and (Alatawi & Good, 2025) that evaluative understanding is a complex level of understanding and requires explicit and structured teaching. Therefore, the results of this study show that most of the English Literature students at Halu University Oleo was able to convey claims, but failed to systematically establish logical connections between data, reasons, and conclusions. This finding aligns with research findings (Nasseh dkk., 2026) that showed a weak use of warrants and scientific evidence in student responses. Furthermore, the low ability to consider rebuttals leads students to tend to accept popular claims as facts without critical evaluation. These findings suggest that students rely more on intuition and subjective experience than on scientific verification when assessing the validity of information. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that English Literature students at Halu University Oleo They are not yet accustomed to viewing scientific knowledge as tentative and open to criticism. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of strengthening argumentative literacy and critical thinking skills in academic learning in higher education.

The analysis of student responses using Toulmin's Argumentation Theory revealed that out of 50 statements evaluated, only 28% of students correctly identified both facts and opinions. Approximately 42% relied primarily on intuitive reasoning, while 30% provided unsupported or normative explanations. For the construction of warrants, 22% of students used scientific evidence, whereas the majority (78%) relied on everyday experience or personal beliefs. Only 15% considered possible rebuttals to claims.

Table 1. Summarizes these findings.

Component	Correct (%)	Intuitive/ Subjective (%)	Scientific Evidence (%)	Consideration of Rebuttals (%)
Fact-Opinion Identification	28	72	-	-
Claim Construction	60	40	-	-
Warrant Application	22	78	22	-
Rebuttal Consideration	15	85	-	55

The data indicate that English Literature students at Halu University Oleo exhibit low levels of argumentative literacy in scientific text analysis. While 60% of students could construct basic claims, the majority failed to apply scientific evidence effectively as warrants, consistent with Toulmin's framework. The limited consideration of rebuttals (15%) shows that students rarely engage in critical evaluation or challenge claims systematically. These results highlight a gap between theoretical understanding of argumentation and practical application, emphasizing the need for pedagogical interventions targeting evidence-based reasoning and critical evaluation in academic reading.

Digital Critical Literacy Skills

The research findings indicate that students' critical digital literacy is still at a suboptimal level, particularly in their ability to verify information and evaluate the validity of digital claims. Based on the analysis, the majority of English Literature students at Halu University Oleo Students tend to accept information that appears popular, logical, and widely believed as fact without verifying its sources or scientific evidence. Students also struggle to recognize bias in digital information, particularly information disseminated through social media and online platforms. This

is evident in respondents' tendency to accept claims that align with personal experiences and common beliefs over claims supported by strong scientific arguments. Furthermore, critical thinking toward popular claims remains relatively low, as students rely more on intuition than on in-depth epistemological evaluation.

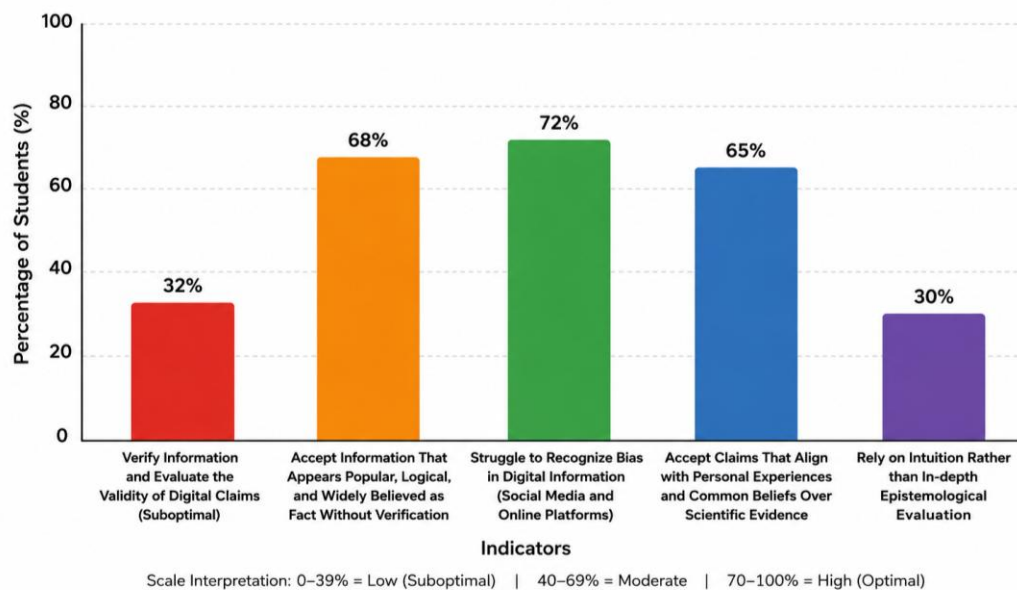


Figure 1. Critical Digital Literacy of English Literature Students at Halu University Oleo

In the context of digital ethics, this study also found that students are not yet fully aware of the importance of moral responsibility in using and disseminating digital information. Therefore, this finding indicates that the digital critical thinking skills of English Literature students at Halu University are still low. Oleo is still influenced by a simple positivist paradigm and a culture of instant information consumption in the digital era. The findings of this study reinforce the view of (Hamidi, 2025) model, which is part of the conceptual framework, where a statement can be categorized as fact if it is supported by verifiable data and is free from significant scientific refutation. In contrast, the majority of statements in this research instrument, such as "What we see is reality" or "Time is constant and flows forward," should be classified as opinions because they are still the subject of debate in the contemporary scientific realm.

This finding is in line with the results of research (Carter dkk., 2024) which shows students' weak ability to evaluate scientific evidence and digital information bias. Furthermore, low levels of critical digital literacy are closely related to students' lack of argumentative skills and ethical reflection in the use of digital media. The findings of this study found that students tend to accept viral claims as social truths without considering the possibility of information manipulation and the algorithmic interests behind their dissemination. These findings are consistent with the results of this study which show that English Literature students at Halu University Oleo They are not yet accustomed to viewing digital information critically and reflectively. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of strengthening critical digital literacy as part of developing students' epistemological and ethical academic abilities in the contemporary information technology era.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that students of the English Literature Study Program at Halu University Oleo demonstrate limited ability to distinguish facts from opinions in scientific texts, relying more on intuition and everyday experience than on scientific evidence. The findings provide theoretical insight into the epistemological and argumentative literacy of EFL students, showing how Toulmin-

based argumentation and critical digital literacy intersect in academic reading. Practically, the results suggest that instructional strategies should focus on strengthening claim evaluation, evidence-based reasoning, recognition of digital information bias, and consideration of rebuttals. Research limitations include the relatively small and localized sample, reliance on self-reported responses, and the focus on a single academic context, which may restrict generalizability. Future studies should explore cultural, cognitive, and digital literacy factors with broader and more diverse populations.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Grammarly to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

Author 5: Supervision; Validation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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