

## *EFL Vietnamese Teachers' Perception Toward Critical Thinking in the Classroom*

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### **Abstract**

The 21<sup>st</sup> academic curriculum worldwide has emphasized Critical Thinking as one of the paramount thinking skills. However, the fact that whether EFL teachers- as direct guides in the classroom- have thoroughly grasped the concept, have been exposed to the concept or equipped with adequate methods and approaches to teach critical thinking in daily lessons remains questionable. This paper aims to present the Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of critical thinking and provide an overview of their current practices of critical thinking skills. The paper emphasized the extent of understanding of critical thinking that Vietnamese EFL teachers show in comparison with definitions in the literature, and how they apply what they understand in the EFL classroom. Participants of the study are 5 teachers who have teaching experience of more than 3 years, and the researchers collected data through in-depth interviews. The findings revealed a lack of information and training from the participants as well as some challenges in practicing the skills due to time-constraints or inadequate general knowledge and limited language level of students. This paper gives EFL managers and practitioners' assessment criteria for whether to include or exclude critical thinking in their classes and sheds light on how Vietnamese EFL teachers can structure their lessons to critical thinking in the classroom.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Teacher's Perception, Teachers' Practice Critical Thinking

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## Introduction

Equipping students with critical thinking has been a fundamental goal of higher education in the West since the last decade (Kuhn, 1999; Keeley and Shemberg, 1995). The ability to think critically at the tertiary level according to Moon's (2002) has been a determining quality that educators and professors employ to distinguish those graduating the course and those not. In the 21st century where most repetitive and manual jobs are efficiently done by robots (Kergroach, 2017), critical thinking has found itself more crucial than ever before as a contributor to graduates' competitiveness in the job markets. This has been emphasized by a great number of accredited educational organizations like OCED, stated clearly in PISA, by different authors such as Phillips & Bond (2004); Ten Dam & Volman (2004); Nguyen, Tran, & Hoang (2019) and Vuong (2019). In the second language acquisition field, the inclusion of critical thinking in language lessons has been continuously reported with positive impacts on the acquisition and development of different aspects of language learning such as vocabulary (Boroushaki & Ng, 2016), writing skills (Rafi, 2011), reading and writing (Liaw, 2007), oral communication skills (Kusaka & Robertson, 2006), listening (Mai, 2019), use of multiple strategies to solve the language learning problems (Fahim & Komijani, 2010). Kusaka and Robertson even found that by scaffolding students to self-evaluate and peer-evaluate the learning, teachers could trigger the desire for oral communication among Japanese first-year students who were inhibited in the first place. The significance of critical thinking to higher education in general and English language teaching, in particular, has led to the suggestion of adding the critical thinking element into language lessons for the mutual benefits.

However, the appearance of critical thinking in English as a foreign language classroom in the Vietnamese tertiary context is still with a question. First of all, the national policy seems not to shed focus on this skill. The concept of "critical thinking" according to Trinh's, Nguyen's and Pham's analyses of national educational policy and practice in 2015, 2016 and 2018 was concluded "remaining a new term" and being absent in the official papers in the meantime (Nguyen & Bui, 2016; Nguyen, 2016; Trinh, 2015).

Secondly, the set of compulsory examinations operated in classes, in universities, and even on the national scale has been driving learners towards the non-critical-thinking end. Found by Hsu (2010), examinations despite being unfavored by students on the surface are the pivotal incentives for English learning. This is especially true in the Vietnam context because showing high grades is a way that children show their filial piety towards their parents (Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2016). As a result, students are motivated to learn what is given in the tests. Most universities in Vietnam continue traditional emphases on lexical-grammar and closed-ended questions (Van, 2010) on the ground of its management convenience and debated fairness (Andre & Webster, 2018). Consequently, it is highly out of the question that children show the need for critical thinking development firstly as it leaves zero impact on their final close-ended assessment where learners are asked to pick an answer from a set of lexical-grammar choices instead of exploring, analyzing, or evaluating the subject or making their argument.

Knowing that if students do not show the need for learning or acquiring the skills, hardly can teachers be inspired to include the element in the lesson given the current academic and teaching workload teachers are bearing on the shoulder referred from the study of Nguyen & Tran (2019). The decision that critical thinking will appear in the language classroom highly depends on teachers' awareness of, understanding of, experience with, the expertise of, and hands-on practice with the skills and teaching skills. Although there have been an increasing number of researchers shedding their attention to educators' perspectives towards the fostering of critical thinking skills in foreign language teaching in higher education (Le & Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen, 2016), the contrivance of the panorama over tertiary EFL teachers' viewpoints on practicing the skills in classrooms hitherto is still in its infancy. Consequently, actions for tackling compulsive problems from this site are still being far from being finalized.

### **Research objectives**

Having identified the significance of the EFL class instructors, this study was established to first explore whether Vietnamese tertiary EFL teachers have been in contact with the term "critical thinking" and to conceptualize the notion of critical thinking currently maintained by those educators. Secondly, it is intended to identify if there has been any effort made by the teachers to include critical thinking elements in their daily language lessons and some possible reasons behind their inclusion and exclusion of the skills. Lastly, in the cases of teachers who embed the skills, this research aims to describe exemplary teaching practices used. In general, this paper hopes to present the language teaching administrators, teachers and lecturers in the relevant field with an insight into the EFL instructors' perceptions over the development of critical thinking skills in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL institution so that training support can be given or valuable practical experiences can be withdrawn and learned from.

### **Research questions:**

The study sets out to answer the following three core research questions in a Vietnamese higher education EFL context:

1. How do the teachers define critical thinking in general and in the language teaching domain in specific?
2. What are some reasons for teachers' inclusion or exclusion of critical thinking teaching in the tertiary EFL classroom?
3. How do the teachers teach critical thinking skills in an English lesson?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Definition of critical thinking**

Critical thinking fosters skills especially beneficial for learners to adapt to a new era where AI is going to dominate the job market. Critical thinking allows students to continuously learn and adjust their viewpoints towards the world surrounding them (Sung, 2012). The correlation between language learning and critical thinking has been proved according to Vygotsky (2012) that the process of conveying thoughts via the language tool shapes knowledge or understanding.

There are numerous and different focused definitions of critical thinking throughout the development of society and history. Paul & Binker (1990) mentioned three notions including in critical thinking: the perfections of thought, the elements of thought, and the domains of thought. Barry (1992, p. 6) defined critical thinking as “a process of carefully determining whether to accept, reject, or suspend judgment about what someone says. It is also a process that emphasizes a rational basis for beliefs and provides a set of standards for analyzing, testing, and evaluating them”. In a different paper by Bailin, Case, Coombs, & Daniels (1999), the three general aspects of critical thinking accepted by educators are the extent of mind in which his or her belief, the appropriateness of thinking in terms of adequacy and accuracy, and the matching of thinking and certain basic standards are. These concepts were all related since it mentions the notion of thinking in the mind as the foundation to think critically.

Even though the notion of critical thinking is originally from the Western culture with its founders Socrates and Plato (Thayer-Bacon, 2000), the concept has implicitly been practiced in the Orient context (Dong, 2015; Lam, 2016; Li, 2015). In Vietnam, the concept of critical thinking also has certain adoptions since Vietnamese scholars interchangeably use the two terms “*tư duy phản biện*” and “*tư duy phê phán*” which means to point out the irrelevant sides in one’s thoughts while making the argument to describe critical thinking (Lê, 2011; Luyen, 2005). Later on, to avoid the negative connotation of criticism in these two terms, “*tư duy biện luận*” has been used. The notion of thinking, according to these experts, should reflect as an ultimate process of one’s mind to solve a particular problem, and therefore, should be relevant to logic, reasoning, and a constructive manner (Duong & Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen, 2016).

The researchers chose the concept of critical thinking from the study of Báez(2004). The core theory in his study kept knowledge level in Bloom’s Taxonomy from the book of Krathwohl & Anderson (2001) for its “importance of retaining and retrieving information” (p.49). Knowledge is also the foundation to create the act of thinking before having critical thinking. Critical thinking is the phenomenon of not accepting and receiving any new information simply and immediately. Critical thinking is often expressed through cognitive and intellectual skills such as interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation, evaluation, and self-regulation. Among which, the last notion of self-regulation in this concept is meaningful as it allows learners to develop their autonomy which should be one of the main aims of teaching and learning.

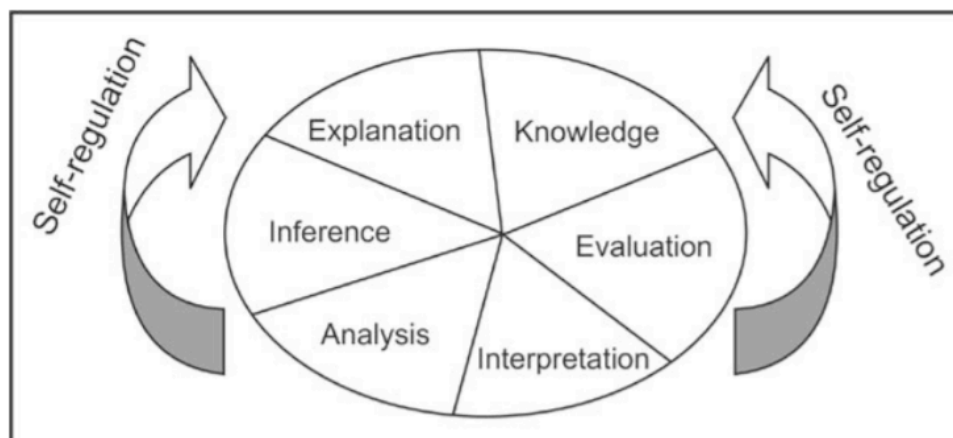


Figure 1. Critical Thinking Skills by Báez (2004)

## **The practice of critical thinking in English Language Teaching (ELT)**

Teachers play a significant role in the development of critical thinking skills in the classroom as they are the ones who explicitly instruct students towards critical thoughts (Thunnithet, 2011), and therefore, their understanding of the concept holds an integral position in the whole process. However, studies have indicated the opposite in reality. Li (2016), who conducted thorough qualitative research and examined the Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs and practice from questionnaires, observations, interviews, reflection videos, proved that 1) There is a vague understanding of the concept by teachers, and 2) teachers, despite having a positive attitude towards critical thinking, had challenges that make it impossible to integrate those skills in English language teaching. A similar result was found in the study of Yuan & Stapleton (2019). This study revealed the lack of training for pre-service teachers and a system or framework to evaluate the improvement in critical thinking skills. The research was conducted in China and its participants were post-graduates with a strong foundation of English linguistics. The study revealed problems in training leading to an insufficient understanding of CT and led to further issues in real-life classroom situations. Furthermore, those pre-teachers who made attempts to deliver critical-based lessons faced constraints from school policy and culture-related issues.

In the context of second language acquisition, obtaining a wide variety of vocabulary range and fluently understanding the reading texts facilitates the higher thinking process (Houghton & Yamada, 2012; Yamada, 2010). Numerous studies conducted in Asia Context to examine the impact of critical thinking in the EFL context and the results indicated positive outcomes of students' learning efficiency for critical thinking lesson-based (Boroushaki & Lee-Luan, 2016; Fahim & Komijani, 2010; Kusaka & Robertson, 2006). Research by Kusaka and Robertson (2006) found that by scaffolding students to think critically under self-evaluation and peer-evaluation, teachers could trigger the desire for oral communication among Japanese first-year students who were inhibited in the first place.

Culture is hereby considered a major factor constraining learners from approaching lesson-based learning and practicing critical thinking. Vietnam is greatly influenced by Confucianism (P. M. Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2012) and along with the existence of grammar-translation teaching methods, students are passive learners (Cao, Hoang, & Ta, 2016). One of the common phenomena that Vietnamese students face is the fear of "losing face". Teachers can easily observe that students do not raise their voice and answer questions either because they lack confidence in their confidence or they are afraid that other people would judge them based on their answer as shown in the study of P. M. Nguyen et al. (2012). Students' readiness, students' level, and their intrinsic motivation are the difficulties in embedding the intervention in teaching critical thinking.

In addition to the critical thinking practice in the language classroom, it is challenging to get students familiarized with the concept of critical thinking while learning language skills. Alnofaie (2013) addressed in his study the fact that language skills are highly emphasized in the curriculum; therefore, the criteria to become a critical being in writing, reading so that they can discuss, negotiate and solve the problems critically

are likely to be neglected. Therefore, he suggested the acts of embedding the learning of thinking critically in the four main skills and sub-skills of a language. Moreover, the researcher recommended building the curriculum for an independent critical thinking course in which students learn the main concept of critical thinking, its nature, and its characteristics so that they can further apply in any other subject.

In general, even though critical thinking has been imposed for a long time in history, its systematic evaluation for teaching-learning has not been explicitly stated in the curriculum, especially in the field of second language acquisition. Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence in practice and training of critical thinking in current tertiary EFL classes leading to confusion in teaching practice. This study investigated critical thinking from the angle of the educators to gain insights into the reality of teaching critical thinking in Vietnam.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper is aimed to study the EFL instructors' perceptions of the concept of critical thinking in terms of their understanding and their teaching practice in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL institution. A case study is employed in this research. According to Gay, Mills, & Airasian (2011, p. 445), this qualitative approach is suitable to study "a particular instance of a phenomenon under investigation to understand a specific problem that occurs in everyday practice". In this study, the participants are the teachers in the university, particularly, the lecturers in the English Faculty of this university. The researchers carefully investigated the literature to find suitable question protocols, then adopted and adapted the questions then collected primary data by individuals interviewed English lecturers to gain insights into the understanding of personal definition and practical teaching cases.

### **The research site**

This study is conducted at a public university in Vietnam. After asking permission to conduct the research from the Dean of the English Faculty and receiving approval, the researchers carried out the study by collecting data from EFL lecturers.

### **Participants**

5 teachers are chosen to conduct this case study research. The teachers who are recruited from the school mostly are experienced teachers holding at least a master degree in TESOL and/ or a relevant field. Teachers are required to obtain at least 2 years of working in the field as well. The researchers approach these teachers via a faculty staff who introduced the researchers to the lecturers.

### **Sample and sampling**

The convenience and purposive samplings are employed in this study because of the previous working experience with the school and the targeted experienced-teachers. The result of this research; therefore, cannot be generalized to the whole population of EFL teachers since according to Gravetter & Forzano (2015), it does not exclude the random elements.

## Research instruments

In this study, the qualitative data is gathered through adapted interview protocols with interview questions. The interview protocols are adopted and adapted from the study of Paul, Elder, & Bartell (1997) The original protocols were made in the Western educational context; therefore, the researchers modified these interview protocols with certain justification from T. T. B. Nguyen (2016) so that they fit with the study's context of Vietnamese English Language Teaching. There are three sub-themes in this research: general information, understanding, practice, and reasons. The first part of the interview aims to collect the demographic information of the participants as the researchers want to find out the educational background of the participants to see whether critical thinking had been included in their learning or training history. The second part is to collect how each participant defines the concepts of critical thinking to compare and contrast with the chosen concept. The third and fourth parts are to emphasize the critical thinking teaching inclusion or exclusion in the teaching and learning process and the reasons behind it. All parts were carefully designed to gain detailed data to be able to answer the research questions. As the original interviewing questions are in English, the researchers decided to translate all of the questions into Vietnamese to avoid miscommunication and make the participants feel comfortable enough to respond to the questions. Before interviewing, the researchers approached two experts: a linguistic expert and a TESOL expert to ensure that the translation has the closest meaning to its origin. The questionnaire was sent to TESOL experts to evaluate its reliability and validity and to some teachers to eliminate any ambiguity question items. A similar procedure was applied with the Vietnamese-English translated version of the transcripts.

## Findings/ Results

### Teachers 'perception of critical thinking.

Upon the request for a definition of critical thinking, there was a high consensus between participants despite being interviewed independently.

Four of the five teachers defined critical thinking as a matter of thoughts whose level is high and stated that the suspension of belief in an incoming piece of information is the manifestation of thinking critically. Particularly, the phrases "*do not immediately believe immediately*", "*do not accept it immediately*", "*do not simply receive and interrogate information.*" appeared with little wording difference between 4 respondents.

Also, three out of five teachers elaborated components of critical thinking identically, including analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing. Among the three, one even provided a comprehensive description as follows,

*"Distinguishing the difference between what we can hear and see only accounts for 30%. The rest of the process should include a description, further analysis, evaluation, synthesis, and faulty logic. As a result, one could find out what tools people are using to try to convince us."*

## Teachers' practice of critical thinking.

**Possibilities of practice and challenges incurred.** Concerning the possibilities of implementing critical thinking in a language session at tertiary education, one teacher contended the impossibility and stated that the predetermined curriculum made it impossible to integrate critical thinking in her language classes.

*"In colleges, I do not teach critical thinking because the program has been fixed and established. 60 hours is not enough to solve problems in that program, not to mention adding other things."*

All other four teachers; however, confirmed the likelihood of embedding critical thinking in their classes but this inclusion is with challenges relating to time, official curriculums, and students' readiness.

The first challenge is in ensuring the simultaneous development of language skills and thinking skills given the great amount of linguistics content to cover per session.

One teacher asserted that as the class is a language class, the development of other thinking skills cannot be the emphasis.

*"It is not the focus of the lesson...It's just a small part so I can't spend too much time."*

Another respondent explained the time-consuming manner of the teaching of linguistics items, which disallowed the catering and nurturing of critical thinking in class.

*"Because there are so many things to be covered in class. (After finishing the language input, and presenting the lesson, then practice that language). Critical thinking should just be considered to teach as a lead-in step. Critical thinking is usually considered as tasks for students to practice themselves (homework)."*

Also, stated by an interviewee that the pressure of ensuring students pass language examinations complicates the inclusion of critical thinking in a language lesson.

*".. it is not simple. as the teaching content in the classroom must be ensured for the exams.. therefore, it depends on the teachers and the levels of the class."*

The second hurdle relates to the official curriculums and syllabus. There reported inadequate attention to critical thinking and a dearth of systematic guidance on how teachers can practice and evaluate the skills from the curriculum designers. In particular, one teacher emphasized that the absence of critical thinking in a course aim,

*"It is not specific, not clear in the syllabus, as well as not included in the subject outline and the curriculum."*



Another pointed out “*an absence of testing/ evaluating system for critical thinking*” in the curriculum.

The third difficulty stems from students’ low level of readiness to learn critical thinking. An interviewee reported that even after being taught critical thinking, “*students show little response to questions, just answer in their way, without any serious thought for that answer, or without any scientific knowledge in it*”. One participant added that some groups “*... are very lazy to think, and wait for the answers from the others instead*” or “*if going online to find ideas, all they do is copying those concepts on the internet...*”

**Some other findings over teachers’ practice of critical thinking in language classrooms.** All four teachers who confirmed their implementation of critical thinking skills considered the scaffolding of the skills as an add-on element, only embedded once the linguistic content in the coursebook is completely covered.

*“In terms of critical thinking, I would only introduce it to the students only after ensuring the linguistic content in the textbook.”, said an interviewed teacher.*

Hence, classes with good students who can grasp the knowledge in the book would see critical thinking elements more frequently.

*“It depends on the level of a different class, to apply the teaching methods for critical thinking. With the class including good students who are able to grasp the knowledge in the book, I will apply that more.”*

Language skills lessons in which the integration of critical thinking is present include writing (2 respondents), reading (2 respondents), speaking (1 respondent) and no participants reported listening.

From the most-mentioned to the least-mentioned, activities that teachers have employed for the enhancement of critical thinking in class are students’ discussion as group work, students’ argument-making, student’s problem explanation, and teachers’ analyzing.

*“I often let students discuss as a group work”*

*“I encourage students that when they have an opinion, they need arguments, justifications for those arguments, to persuade people, to protect their points of view.*

*“I always ask students to explain a problem, whether intuitively or deliberately....”*

## **Discussion**

The findings revealed that in terms of the definition of critical thinking stated in Barry (1992), and Paul & Binker (1990), most teachers conceptualized the characteristic of critical thinking as one dimension right/ wrong dichotomy as the most important aim. Teachers also mentioned that critical thinkers should be able to express personal opinions by synthesizing different perspectives to form a point of view toward issues themselves. However, other domains of critical thinking such as the appropriateness of thinking in terms of adequacy and accuracy, and the matching of thinking and

certain basic standards were neglected. This could be tracked down to the traditional teaching method in Vietnam where knowledge is one-way transmission from teachers to students; therefore, teachers' teaching remains to be the most reliable source. In addition to this, as discussed in Ho, Nguyen, Nguyen, Ngo, & Nguyen (2018), the content-based curriculum with its main aims to deliver factual knowledge barely gives chances for students to develop critical thinking. It is this passive way of learning shown by teachers' mentioning that developing students' self-regulation is almost an impossible task. The respondents highlighted the key points in students' lacking social knowledge leading to struggling in thinking or discussing/ expressing their thoughts to their friends. The teachers acknowledged that students' self-regulating their learning is not common in their class. Reflecting on the definition of critical thinking according to Báez (2004) which acknowledged the importance of self-regulation, this study addressed Vietnamese undergraduate students to recognize the need for this notion.

Most teachers admitted that they lacked professional training in terms of critical thinking knowledge and instructions for critical thinking, which yields to the study of Ho et al. (2018); Li (2016); Yuan & Stapleton (2019). This suggested that nurturing pre-service teachers in a critical thinking environment would be beneficial as it provides a constructive feedback loop for later generations.

Besides, as the teachers were supposed to prioritize language teaching for the sake of testing or examination, they tended not to include CT in the learning practice and considered it as part of the lead-in stage or assigned critical thinking tasks as homework. Group work, peer work activities, and/ or discussion and debates were found as the efficient trigger of critical thinking which was also discussed in the paper of Kusaka & Robertson (2006).

Another interesting insight from the responses of the participants is that most of the teachers mentioned speaking and writing as the two skills that they can apply scaffolding to. Reading skills were considered as the receptive source of information. No feedback regarding listening skills was noted.

Difficulties including students' background knowledge and time constraints are also noted. Teachers observed that students are quite passive in the class and tend to be silent as a response to teachers' questions. Another observation noted was teachers considered that critical thinking is only suitable for students at a high level of English from B1 or above. This result yields with the study of (Ho et al., 2018). Also, some teachers suggested that critical thinking should be taught as an independent subject with a specific syllabus rather than being scaffolding or including in teaching 4 skills of English skills.

## **Conclusion**

With the current content-based curriculum and a gradual shift of policymakers to foster critical thinking, there is a huge gap to make teaching critical thinking become a reality. On a small scale, the traditional learning notions which mostly rely on textbooks could regularly be encouraged to change by a variety of reference sources to approach the phenomenon from numerous perspectives. In Vietnam, the potential

for radical change is enormous by applying technologies with Internet access. It is necessary to equip students with knowledge of the Internet to encourage their autonomy and find reliable sources to enrich their social knowledge-creating a thorough foundation to think and develop critical thinking.

In addition, providing a critical thinking environment for pre-service teachers is necessary. This requires significant actions from pedagogical institutions and schools in Vietnam to address and integrate critical thinking in the teaching syllabus by scientific argumentations and discussions. Also, workshops with practical discussion towards the viewpoint of CT and step-by-step CT guidance organized by the schools and educators would be beneficial and lessen the confusion among teachers. With the increasing emphasis on critical thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the work environment, professional development, careful preparation as critical thinkers, and innovations in teaching practices are of well suggested.

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