Critical Thinking: What it means in a Vietnamese Tertiary EFL Context

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Abstract

Although research has ascribed a number of virtues to critical thinking, what critical thinking means is itself open to debate. This paper, as a part of a larger qualitative study on critical thinking practice in a Vietnamese EFL context, presents the findings about how Vietnamese EFL teachers and students in a university interpreted critical thinking. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight teachers and 22 students in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context to seek their understandings of critical thinking. A majority of the interviews (28) were conducted in Vietnamese, then transcribed in their entirety, and translated into English. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data. The participating teachers and students defined critical thinking as involving cognitive skills (e.g., analysing, synthesising, evaluating) and affective dispositions (e.g., inquisitiveness, open-mindedness). Their understandings were found to be limited to the first two domains of criticality in Barnett’s (1997) framework. That is, they understood critical thinking mainly within the domains of “knowledge”, less in “self”, barely at all in the domain of the “world”. The findings further revealed three characteristics distinctive in the participants’ conceptions of critical thinking: (i) expressing personal opinions as an indication of critical thinking, (ii) right/wrong dichotomy as the aim of critical thinking, and (iii) others’ rather than one’s own opinions or arguments as the subject of criticism. The findings imply that the participating teachers and students appeared to have quite a rudimentary grasp of critical thinking and that their understandings were influenced to some extent by the Vietnamese culture of teaching and learning, which has some implications for the application of critical thinking in an EFL context.

Key words: critical thinking, definition, EFL, Vietnamese culture

1. Introduction

Critical thinking has variously been appreciated as an aim of education (Dewey, 1933; Elder & Paul, 2003; Paul, 2005), the primary reason for higher education (Halpern, 1999), or the educational aim of
higher education (Barnett, 1997). During the 21st century, critical thinking became a focus in the field of second and foreign language (L2) education. Many scholars have acknowledged its important role in language education (see Alagozlu, 2007; Alnofaie, 2013; Asraf, Ahmed, & Eng, 2018; Brumfit, Myles, Mitchell, Johnston, & Ford, 2005; Gunawardena & Petraki, 2014; Houghton & Yamada, 2012; Kabilan, 2000; Mok, 2010; Richard, 2003; Yuan & Stapleton 2019). Brumfit et al. (2005) claim that critical thinking helps language students communicate in a new language, produce various types of spoken and written language, and demonstrate creativity when using a foreign language. Apart from the benefits of linguistic competence, critical thinking is believed by some to facilitate social justice (Pessoa & Urzêda Freitas, 2012). A critical approach to language learning enables students to be cognisant of oppression and to learn how to fight against it (Norton & Toohey, 2004).

Despite being an essential skill in today’s era, what ‘critical thinking’ means is itself open to debate. Researchers in Western contexts (e.g., Facione, 2011; Lloyd & Bahr, 2010; Moore, 2013), where critical thinking is believed to be a cultural product (Atkinson, 1997) have found critical thinking is neither clearly nor commonly understood. The meaning of critical thinking in the contexts where the practice thereof has been observed less frequently such as Turkey, China or Japan has also been investigated (e.g., Chen, 2017; Howe, 2004), and the findings also revealed the vagueness in the definitions of this concept. The vague understanding of critical thinking was claimed to influence EFL classroom instructional practices as teachers’ pedagogical beliefs closely affect their teaching, decision-making and classroom interaction (Li, 2016). As more and more attention has been paid to developing this skill in EFL field, research on teachers and students’ understanding of critical thinking in a EFL classroom will help stakeholders in this field identify the guiding principles in relation to their classroom work.

It has been argued that critical thinking might be defined differently in different cultures. Howe (2004) who sought a comparative conceptualisation of critical thinking between Canadian and Japanese teachers found that the Canadian participants tended to relate critical thinking to the cognitive domain (higher-order thinking, evaluating assumptions, and rational thinking) whereas the Japanese participants focused on affective domain (being consistent, objective, and fair). These could be seen to represent the ‘Western, empirical’ attitude and the ‘Eastern, face-saving, harmony-building’ approaches, respectively. In a study on Chinese students’ critical thinking, Tan (2013) concludes that critical thinking practised in China has its own characteristics, which she alludes to as the ‘Chinese-style critical thinking’. It may thus be suggested that critical thinking is understood and practised differently in different cultures. Although some research has been done to discover the impact of Asian teachers and students’ social, cultural and educational backgrounds their understanding of critical thinking (e.g., Chen, 2017), little is known about the Vietnamese EFL context.

Informed by the significance of teachers and students’ conceptions of critical thinking to their practice of this competence, and the identified gap in the literature, a study on the Vietnamese EFL teachers and students’ understanding of critical thinking will help cover how the participants in this context define critical thinking. This study is of more importance as EFL teachers and students need to
be able to define and articulate the meaning of critical thinking to promote this skill in their classrooms (Yuan & Stapleton, 2019).

2. Literature review

2.1. Approaches to critical thinking

Critical thinking as reflective thinking

The concept of critical thinking can be traced back at least to John Dewey’s (1933) book How we think. Dewey defined critical thinking as ‘reflective thinking … an active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends’ (p. 9). For Dewey, critical thinking was essentially an active process, one in which people consider and evaluate matters, raise questions, and access and examine information themselves. He contrasted it with the kind of thinking in which a person passively receives ideas and information. When defining critical thinking as persistent and careful, Dewey contrasted it with what he called unreflective thinking. In his view, critical thinking is a subset of a reflective process involving thorough assessment, scrutiny and the drawing of conclusions pertinent to the issue at hand. Finally, in this conception of critical thinking, what matters are the rationales people apply in forming their views, and the sources, validity and implications of their beliefs. Dewey’s idea of reflective thinking is seen as an early conceptualisation of critical thinking (Buranapatana, 2006).

While Dewey’s views may be considered revolutionary, ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle also advocated the idea of reflective thinking. Weil (2004, p. 414) posits that the inner-Socratic spirit is to take seriously the voices of others: ‘what they think, how they form their beliefs, and how their ideas might be tested relative to what they are thinking’. Socrates questioned not only others’ beliefs but also his own. He recognised the limits of others’ knowledge and of his own (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

Reflective thinking has also been found in Confucius’ philosophies (Kim, 2003; Leung & Kember, 2003). Lee (1996, in Leung & Kember, 2003) cited Confucius to substantiate his argument that reflective thinking is to be found in the Confucian tradition:

While there is anything that he has not reflected on, or anything which he has reflected on which he does not apprehend, he will not intermit his labour. While there is anything which he has not discriminated, or his discrimination is not clear, he will not intermit his labour. If there be anything which he has not practiced, or his practice fails in earnestness, he will not intermit his labour. (p. 35)

According to Confucius, a person will/should not rest until he understands something, or they should never cease in their quest for understanding.

Reflective thinking in Confucius’ view, according to Kim (2003), involves the reflection on the substance of knowledge, and the reflection on oneself. Nevertheless, it appears that critical thinking has a stronger tradition from the West than from the East.
A two- or bi-dimensional conceptualisation of critical thinking

The two-dimensional conceptualisation of critical thinking with its cognitive and dispositional aspects is discussed widely in the literature. The cognitive aspect of critical thinking has been associated with the mental capability to comprehend a problem, and the ability to make sound judgments and to arrive at rational decisions. A critically literate person is assumed capable of employing critical thinking skills in reasoning about real-world situations and problems. Among the models of critical thinking skills (e.g., Bloom, 1956; Ennis, 1987; Paul, 1990), Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of the cognitive domain has been used to characterise critical thinking skills (e.g., Dumteeb, 2009; Waters, 2006).

Bloom’s original taxonomy comprises six levels, which are used to identify a learner’s progress from lower order to higher order thinking through: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This taxonomy of cognitive domain attempts to establish a sequential and cumulative hierarchy depicting the stages of learning and thinking from the most elementary to the most complex. Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy was revised by Anderson, Krathwohl, and Bloom (2001). The higher-order thinking processes in Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy have been identified as critical thinking skills (Dumteeb, 2009; Ennis, 1987) and used as the conceptual framework in several studies on critical thinking in education (e.g. Dong, 2006; Dumteeb, 2009; Surjosuseno & Watts, 1999). However, Ennis (1987, 1993), for whom critical thinking does not equate to the application of higher-order thinking skills, has argued that the concept of higher order levels is too vague and not accompanied by criteria for judging critical thinking assessment.

A critical thinker needs not only cognitive skills and abilities but also the readiness and preparedness to use those skills in appropriate contexts (Halpern, 1999). As opposed to cognitive skills, which pertain to reasoning and logical thinking (Siegel, 1999), critical dispositions are seen as the motivational and intentional aspects of critical thinking (Ennis, 1985; Halpern, 2001). Siegel (1999) describes a ‘critical spirit’ (p. 79) as the inclination or disposition to think critically on a regular basis in a wide range of circumstances. Passmore (1972, in Kennedy, Fisher, & Ennis, 1991) suggests that critical disposition is like a character trait made evident by a willingness to call things into question. In discussing the teaching of critical thinking, Halpern (1967, in Hemming, 2000) claims that it is inadequate to teach college students the skills of critical thinking if they are not inclined to use them.

The combination of cognitive skills and dispositions in critical thinking is prevalent in numerous definitions of critical thinking by seminal theorists in the field such as Ennis (1987), Browne and Keeley (1998, in Browne & Freeman, 2000), and Halpern (Halpern 1999). Browne and Keeley (1998, in Browne & Freeman, 2000, p. 302) state that ‘critical thinking focuses on a set of skills and attitudes that enables a listener or reader to apply rational criteria to the reasoning of speakers and writers’. The bi-dimensional definition of critical thinking has also been conceptualised by Black (2005, p. 7) as the analytical thinking which requires an open-minded yet critical approach to one’s own thinking as well as that of others.
Weak and strong senses of critical thinking

Paul (1992, p. 9) distinguishes two forms of critical thinking: weak and strong. A weak sense of critical thinking is identified when skills are used to detect mistakes in others’ thinking. A weak sense critical thinker uses thinking to defend one’s own understanding, convincing others that their own point of view is correct or superior. The classification of critical thinking into its weak and strong manifestations is also evident in Browne and Keeley’s (2007) work. For Browne and Keeley (2007), a weak sense of critical thinking refers to a method for defending initial beliefs, while critical thinking in its strong sense requires us to apply critical questions to all claims, including one’s own. Gieve’s (1998) definition of critical thinking—defending and questioning oneself—shares the thoughts by Paul’ (1992) and Browne and Keeley’s (2007). According to Gieve (1998, p. 126), critical thinkers examine the reasons for their actions, their beliefs and their knowledge claims, requiring them to defend themselves and question themselves, their peers, their teachers, experts and authoritative texts, both in class and in writing.

Resource approach to critical thinking

Critical thinking has been discussed in terms of associated resources for critical thinking development by some critical thinking scholars including Bailin, Case, Coombs and Daniels (1999a) and Johnston, Ford, Myles and Mitchell (2011). Bailin et al. (1999b) characterise critical thinkers with regard to intellectual resources, including background knowledge, operational knowledge of the standards of good thinking, knowledge of key critical concepts, knowledge of heuristic devices and habits of mind. Incorporating Bailin et al.’s (1999b) intellectual resources and Barnett’s (1997) three domains of criticality (see more at the next section), Johnston et al. (2011) extend the notion of resources to the domains of not only ‘knowledge’ but also of the ‘self’ and the ‘world’. They maintain that the resources need to be critical across the three domains, and to involve distinctive types of knowledge and certain personal qualities and values.

The resource approach to critical thinking is useful in understanding the intellectual resources for critical thinking to occur; however, it is criticised for not explaining the relationship between resources and the social and cultural background of students (Johnston et al., 2011). Certain students may have access to more resources or social capital than others by virtue of their personal and socio-economic circumstances.

Critical being

The existing understandings and diverse definitions of critical thinking proposed by many researchers and educators are critiqued by Ronald Barnett. Barnett (1997) proposes that higher education should develop students as critical persons. This view was reiterated in his recent book chapter, ‘A curriculum for critical being’, in Palgrave handbook of critical thinking in higher education, edited by Martin Davies and Ronald Barnett (2015). Barnett (1997) argues that critical persons are more than just critical thinkers.
Critical persons are ‘able to critically engage with the world, with knowledge and with themselves’ (Barnett, 1997, p. 1). Barnett (1997) identifies the levels of criticality ranging from critical thinking skills, critical thought to critique. Critical thinking skills involve a set of cognitive skills. They can be context-specific or context-independent, that is, discipline-specific or generic skills. Apart from the skills, students are expected to be aware of their own understanding of the topics they are addressing. Barnett (1997, p. 71) sees this reflexivity or ‘meta-critical capacity’ as fundamental to critical thinking whereby the student understands that all knowledge claims, including his/her own, have elements of openness and contestability. Critical thought is a higher level of criticality than critical skills because it is an attribute of a body of thought. It relates to the contestability within a discipline or intellectual field. By the same token, critique operates outside the conventions of the discipline itself. For Barnett (1997), the goal of study for higher education should not only be to encourage students to attain profound knowledge about what they are learning, or to encourage them to learn about their world and learn about themselves, but to encourage them to develop themselves and contribute to the world. Criticality, therefore, assumes forms of critical reason, critical self-reflection and critical action.

Critical thinking framework
Existing studies of critical thinking practices in specific educational context have employed various critical thinking frameworks adopting cognitive and dispositional approaches, as previously outlined. As these frameworks offer taxonomies which help to map out the ‘territory’ (McGuinness 2005, p. 109), they have proven useful in the areas of development and instruction (Johnston et al., 2011). The view of critical thinking as a set of cognitive skills and dispositions only, however, cannot adequately reflect the objectives and purposes with which critical thinking can engage. Barnett’s (1997) domains of criticality were adopted as a means of filling this gap. According to Barnett (1997), criticality should be understood over a range of domains (knowledge, self, and world). Domains are understood as the objects that critical thinking can target and the purposes that it can target (Barnett, 1997, 2015). Drawing on Barnett’s (1997) domains of criticality, the domains in the EFL field can be interpreted as follows:

- the world of knowledge: linguistic system of English language, theories in socio-cultural aspects of English language, theories in English language teaching and learning, etc.
- the world of oneself: the reflection of EFL learners on their own language, culture (Vietnamese), language learning process or strategies, and their personal biases, presumptions, blind spots, etc.
- the world of the outside: socio-cultural aspects of the people who use English as their mother tongue or those whom EFL learners contact in English, the use of English as a means to attain certain purposes in life (e.g., to avoid miscommunication), socio-cultural problems or issues of the (English-speaking) world, etc.
In this study, critical thinking is defined as a competence which prompts students to use their reasoning in order to interpret and critique received knowledge, to question their own understanding and assumption(s), and then to take corresponding action. As such, both the potential for good, and the minimisation of harm are seen to inhere to critical thinking. This conception of critical thinking is informed by the combination of Bloom’s (1956) and Barnett’s (1997) frameworks. In a bid to fulfil its aim to understand the conceptualisations and practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context, the study uses an amalgam of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of cognitive skills and Barnett’s (1997) domains of critical thinking, as a new way of understanding the operation of critical thinking.

2.2. Studies on conceptualisations of critical thinking

As claimed by some researchers (e.g., Barnett, 1997; Fox, 1994), academics lacked a clear definition of critical thinking as they did not think critically about this concept. According to Barnett (1997) ‘Higher education, which prides itself on critical thought, has done no adequate thinking about critical thinking’ (3). In response to this critique, the question of critical thinking conceptualisation has been investigated in a number of empirical research projects in general education (e.g., Baidon & Sim, 2009; Howe, 2000; Loyd & Bahr, 2010; Lun, 2010; Moore, 2013). The participants in these studies had various definitions of critical thinking. For example, Lloyd and Bahr (2010) found that the teachers and students at an Australian university thought critical thinking composed the state of mind or disposition, techniques or processes, and the ability to critique. In a study by Moore (2013), the teachers at his research context defined critical thinking as a set of skills such as judgment, skepticism, simple originality, sensitive readings, rationality, an activist engagement with knowledge and self-reflexivity. Critical thinking, in Lun’s (2010) study on Hongkong and New Zealand students, was associated with seeing things beyond face values, effortful process or habits of mind to achieve an outcome. It can be concluded that critical thinking has been defined in a diverse way.

Given increasing importance of critical thinking in EFL contexts, the question of how critical thinking is understood in these specific settings has also been empirically studied (e.g., Badger, 2019; Dumteeb, 2009; Ketabi et al., 2013; Li, 2016; Ma & Luo, 2020; Saleh, 2019; Stapleton, 2001; Thunnithet, 2011; Yuan & Stapleton, 2019). The studies found different ways that the participants in different EFL contexts understood critical thinking. In Li’s (2016) study, for example, the Chinese EFL teachers defined critical thinking as the ability to analyse materials, give summary, see things from different perspectives, discover rules and patterns in language learning, make reasonable argument with evidence and apply language in real-life contexts. Ma and Luo (2020) found that the Chinese pre-service teachers defined critical thinking in terms of a critical thinking process of argumentation with much evidence, and critical thinking results which focus on conclusions drawn from the thinking process. In EFL Columbian context, critical thinking was conceived as a set of cognitive skills (Marin & Pava, 2017). Despite the differences among the studies, they shared one conclusion that the EFL teachers and preservice teachers lacked a limited understanding of what
critical thinking means (Yuan & Stapleton, 2019), or they had a general and vague conceptions of critical thinking (Ketabi et al., 2013).

The studies on critical thinking practices in both general education and English language education show that the teachers and students’ social, cultural and educational backgrounds can not only influence their practices of critical thinking but also play an important role in shaping their understanding of critical thinking (Chen, 2017; Ma & Luo, 2020; Moore, 2013; Yuan & Stapleton, 2019). Chen (2017), for instance, found some unique features in her Chinese EFL participants’ definitions of critical thinking. One of those unique features is their emphasis that having own opinions different from the authority is crucial to the critical thinking concept. Moreover, the conceptualisation of critical thinking might also depend on disciplinary contexts where it takes place (Abrami et al., 2015; Johnston et al., 2011; Jones, 2007; Moore, 2011). For example, Jones (2007), investigated the differences in critical thinking conceptualisations by teachers of Economics and History. Her findings confirm that the epistemology of disciplinary knowledge influences and moderates conceptualisations of critical thinking. For Economics teachers, critical thinking constitutes problem-solving; that is, applying a model to a problem or examining the workings of a model within a particular framework. Meanwhile, teachers of History relate critical thinking to the complex and contested nature of knowledge (Jones 2007). Johnston et al.’s (2011) argue that ‘there are general critical dispositions, intellectual (and other) rules, values, qualities and abilities necessary for criticality … but that local manifestations of criticality in the shape of local social practices will differ widely’ (p. 72). In the context of classrooms wherein English as a foreign language is used as a medium and object of teaching and learning, the teachers’ and students’ conceptions of critical thinking in this field are expected to be specific to that field.

Albeit some studies on how critical thinking was conceptualised in different Asian EFL contexts such as mainland China, Taiwan, Hongkong, or Iran, little research has been done in Vietnamese EFL context. A study on Vietnamese EFL tertiary teachers and students’ interpretation of critical thinking will contribute to the literature of the field.

3. Methods and materials

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight teachers and 22 students in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context to seek their understandings of critical thinking. As mentioned in the abstract, the data for this paper were from a bigger study on the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. This study was conducted in 2013-2014 academic year. The participants were second- and third-year English majors, and teachers of English at a university of foreign languages in the central region of Vietnam. The participants were asked to define critical thinking in their own words. The researcher (also the interviewer) did not disclose her definition of critical thinking to the participants at any stage of the interviews. Only an equivalent of critical thinking, “tư duy phản biện”, was employed when the researcher addressed the question to the interviewees. A majority of the interviews (28) were conducted in Vietnamese, then transcribed in their entirety, and translated into English.
As the question about the conceptualisation of critical thinking was the beginning part of the interview which also aimed to seek the participants’ recall of critical thinking practices in their classrooms later on, the interview question about the participants’ understanding of critical thinking was open-ended and the participants were encouraged to express their definition in their own words. The researcher used an additional question to ask the participants to tell an example of critical thinking in their classrooms. This question helped the participants to elicit more ideas to shape their definition of critical thinking.

Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data. The researcher listened to the participants’ definitions several times before coding. Employing both an inductive and deductive approach (Yin 2009), the themes were identified from the literature about critical thinking definitions (e.g. critical thinking involving cognitive skills or related dispositions, as discussed in section 4). Some themes, however, emerged directly from the data (e.g. critical thinking as a means of expressing personal opinions). The findings about the Vietnamese EFL teachers and students’ understanding of critical thinking was further analysed using the conceptual framework of critical thinking in this study.

4. Results
4.1 Critical thinking and the expression of personal opinions
Expressing personal opinions was proposed as an aspect of critical thinking by most of the interviewed participants. In the definitions given by six of the eight teachers, the element of personal voice attracted most mention. As Teacher 5 said:

I think it’s the way that, as a teacher, we can help the students to develop their ability to have a position for any topics so that they can have their own opinions. They must have their own viewpoint to look at a topic and they can develop their ideas. (Teacher 5, I131013)

For Teacher 5, the core concept in critical thinking is personal opinion. She stated that critical thinking had two dimensions – the ability to develop one’s own opinions and the ability to discuss other people’s viewpoints based on one’s own opinions. Other teachers expected critically literate students to develop their own responses to the information they receive. The students should not simply follow what the teacher says. As Teacher 6 explained:

From the information that they [students] received, no matter from what sources, even [from] the teacher, they need to know how to analyse, synthesise, and adapt for themselves, not just following what the teacher said. (Teacher 6, I51013)

Teacher 1 provided examples of personal voice as follows:

[You] can agree, disagree, have some inquiries or a different idea, or think of that issue but in a different context to see if it is relevant or not or still applicable or not. (Teacher 1, I13314)

As with the teachers, the student participants emphasised personal opinions in their definitions of critical thinking. Student 20 defined critical thinking as having one’s own response to a piece of information. Student 16 saw listening, understanding and stating for or against opinions as a manifestation of critical thinking. Four other students reported using critical thinking to position and defend their own ideas. Student 19, for example, said: ‘Other people may not agree with you but you
need to find ways to defend your own thinking.’ (Student 19, I7314). To the students, defending one’s own thinking seemed to be important in being critical. Student 1, for example, defined critical thinking as ‘the way we refute other people’s thinking and defend ours’ (Student 1, I24214).

In general, the participants said that thinking critically means positioning one’s personal standpoint, no matter how negative or positive it is. Their emphasis on expressing personal opinions irrespective of whether they are in opposition to those of a teacher or superior is worthy of attention in the research context. This will be discussed further in Section 5.

4.2 Critical thinking involves cognitive skills

Cognitive skills appeared in all of the interview participants’ responses. For both teachers and students, critical thinking is a cognitive process which requires the selection and comparison of different factors or elements (Student 5), comprehensive analysis and evaluation of an issue (Student 8), or the use of evidence to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of an argument (Student 12). One student stressed the role of these skills by affirming that a person was not seen as a critical thinker if they passively accepted some information from others. In a classroom context, the cognitive process may be an evaluation of whether what the teacher or peers say is appropriate or not (Student 7). Student 11 stated: ‘When [we] listen to an issue, we use our thinking or knowledge to consider that issue from different perspectives to assess if the speaker is right or wrong’ (I5314). Another student considered analysing an opinion in its context to see if it proved acceptable in accordance with Vietnamese social viewpoints or with the Vietnamese ethical norms (Student 15). This raises questions as to who is the arbiter of Vietnamese cultural and ethical norms and how such norms are adjusted. Although Student 15 focused on cognitive skills (analysing), his definition of critical thinking was limited in a sense because it showed a loyalty to a certain set of principles or norms.

As with the students, the teachers saw critical thinking as an ability or process to use cognitive skills in response to a piece of information. Teacher 1 noted: ‘In general, it is the ability to analyse, synthesise, evaluate, do research …’ (I13314). Teacher 2 defined the use of cognitive skills as the way a person reacts to the information or opinions they encounter; critical thinking means using one’s mind to brainstorm ideas, not just accepting a piece of given information. Teacher 2 elaborated: ‘A person assesses the extent to which information is correct or incorrect, good or bad, or whether there is anything useful or valuable in that piece of information’ (I11314). In general, such assessment involves analysis of what one hears, reads or views. Also stressing this characteristic, Teacher 6 noted that a critical student should be ready to analyse, synthesise or evaluate information regardless of the source of that information, such as teachers or friends. She added adaptation or application as one of the cognitive skills that a critical student should have. She stated: ‘[you] analyse, synthesise… then apply to your own situation or your own subject, or apply its use in real life’ (Teacher 6, I51013). Teacher 3 considered cognitive skills such as looking at different sources and analysing and synthesising in response to different viewpoints or different things at the same time, to be essential when presenting one’s own opinions. This teacher saw it as the highest level of critical thinking (Teacher 3, I101013).
4.3 Evidence – a component of critical thinking

Evidence is highlighted as an important feature in a critical argument. Seven of the 22 interviewed students referred to evidence in their definitions of critical thinking. Student 2, for example, said that critical thinking ‘is the ability to oppose another person’s idea by using trustworthy evidence’ (Student 2, I2514). Two interviewed teachers referred to evidence as an aspect of critical thinking. Teacher 4, who acknowledged the importance of evidence in one’s thinking said that she put great emphasis on helping her students to find evidence to support their own answers or opinions.

4.4 Inquisitiveness, curiosity, objectivism, open-mindedness – dispositions of critical thinking

Being inquisitive means not accepting unconditionally what other people say. Instead, according to Student 19, we should ask questions in our minds, or as Student 11 put it, consider from different angles, when assessing whether something is true or not. Student 7 commented: ‘In a class, when the teacher or friends present an issue, in every student’s mind they will assess if what they have just heard is appropriate or not. It’s OK if it is right’ (Student 7, I4314). According to one student participant, inquisitiveness should be applied not only to what friends say, but also to the views of teachers, that is, those with more power in class. Embedded in the idea of inquisitiveness was the true/false or right/wrong dichotomy in the students’ conception of critical thinking, which indicated a relatively limited view of critical thinking. Evidence of such a right/wrong or true/false dichotomy was common in the students’ responses. For example, Student 14 thought critical thinking meant always asking whether other people said something correctly in order to fix it.

Teacher 1, who included curiosity when referring to the characteristics of critical thinking, emphasised that curiosity in this sense was of a scientific nature and critical thinkers need to be ‘curious, but in a scientific way about any piece of information they encounter’ (Teacher 1, I1314). She added: ‘This does not mean that they want to know the information for fun but for a thorough understanding about its source, accuracy or applicability’ (Teacher 1, I1314).

Objectivity was seen as a characteristic of critical thinking; however, only the interviewed students mentioned this disposition. Student 5 saw the action of selecting the most objective options to avoid subjectivity and bias as one essential step in critical thinking. This student argued that the process of selecting the most objective factors of an issue helps someone to criticise their own viewpoint or those of others. Objectivity also means not seeing things from only one viewpoint. Student 17 noted that critical thinking was a sharp way of thinking, seeing things from different sides and from different perspectives. Similarly, Student 8 explained critical thinking as ‘the right assessment of a certain issue, recognising it comprehensively’ (Student 8, I4314).

Open-mindedness was another disposition addressed in the participants’ definitions. Student 19 emphasised a willingness to change his mind when recognising that he is wrong. This student extended this openness to other viewpoints, describing the importance of personal opinions: ‘Other people may not agree with you but you need to find ways to defend your opinions. If you are wrong, you need to accept
that’ (Student 19, I7314). However, nobody referred to open-mindedness in the sense that individuals can disagree without being necessarily wrong or right.

4.5 Critical thinking means self-reflection

In five out of the 28 interviews with the teachers and students, self-reflection was considered an indicator of critical thinking. Teacher 2 pointed out that critical thinking is not just criticising, but reflecting on oneself, connecting the problem with one’s own experience. Student 22 elaborated: ‘When we read or hear about a problem, we think about it, reflecting on our own situations to see if it is true or not’ (Student 22, I13314). Student 16 alluded to reflection as a personalisation process. He considered that a person should not rely too heavily on what other people said; instead, that person needed to personalise it to have a better understanding or to form a better judgment. Student 5 described critical thinking as the process of receiving, selecting and comparing the most objective factors to criticise one’s own arguments or those of other people, and self-reflection is an indication of critical thinking. In this case, the objects of criticism also included ‘the world of oneself’ (Barnett, 1997, p. 71).

5. Discussion

Vietnamese EFL teachers and students’ limited conceptions of critical thinking

The interview data from both the teachers and students demonstrate that the participants saw critical thinking as a cognitive activity that requires certain skills. The participants associated critical thinking with analysing, synthesising and evaluating – the higher order levels of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy. Critical thinking also entails a critical disposition (Siegel, 1991, p. 26) that may include inquiring, curiosity, open-mindedness, and objective capacities. Self-reflection is considered another characteristic of critical thinking, the participants advocating reflecting on oneself to understand a problem better or more comprehensively. As regards the domains of criticality, the participants’ conceptions of critical thinking mainly centred on the domain of knowledge (Barnett, 1997), that is, the language and content input that the students received from their teachers, peers and materials. The domain of self was mentioned less often, while the domain of the world was barely countenanced. Some participants related critical thinking to self-reflexivity or metacognition; that is, reflecting on one’s own thinking about certain issues. However, no participants referred to critical thinking in reference to taking action against unfairness or inequality in society.

The findings about the Vietnamese EFL teachers and students’ limited understanding of critical thinking are consistent with recent studies on EFL teachers or learners’ ways to define critical thinking in other EFL contexts (e.g., Yuan & Stapleton, 2019; Ma & Luo, 2020). In close reference to the extant approaches to critical thinking and its conceptual framework used in this study, it can be said that the Vietnamese participants were able to name some features of critical thinking, but these are just at Paul’s (1992) weak form of critical thinking or Barnett’s (1997) forms of critical reason. The participants failed to link to Barnett’s (1997) self and world domains.
Some features in the participants’ conceptions of critical thinking that have not manifested in other studies were identified. An example was the tendency to see critical thinking as a tool to express personal voice in response to other people’s opinions. Defending or expressing personal opinion with evidence was seen as a product of a rational process and self-reflection. For nearly all of the participants, the concept of critical thinking was closely related to personal voice, and thinking critically equated to expressing that personal voice. Apart from this, the right/wrong dichotomy was highlighted as the aim that the participants were searching for while practising critical thinking. Both the teacher and student participants mentioned the right/wrong dichotomy as one of the criteria for evaluating a piece of information or of their own or others’ arguments. As well, the targets of criticism were, in most cases, other people’s opinions or arguments. Only one participant (Student 5) discussed applying critical thinking to himself. One’s own assumptions were not the main focus of the participants’ conceptions. The idea of defending one’s own arguments against others’ was quite strong in the participants’ conceptions of critical thinking.

The tendency to construct critical thinking as a tool to express personal voice in response to other people’s opinions was common in the participants’ conceptualisations of critical thinking. In particular, the students equated thinking critically with voicing their thoughts in order to defend their own opinions. The students’ understanding of critical thinking reflects Paul’s (1992) weak sense of critical thinking: defending one’s own understanding, convincing others that one’s own point of view is correct. To the students, critical thinking lacks one of the two seemingly contrary components in Gieve’s (1998) definition of critical thinking—defending and questioning oneself.

The idea of defending one’s own argument against those of others was quite robust in students’ conceptions of critical thinking. Also, the subjects of criticism in their responses were, in most cases, either the issue under discussion or other people (their opinions or arguments). Criticism of others can operate in the absence of critical thinking, and might be self-centred in nature. Only one student spoke of the application of critical thinking to himself. The component of one’s own assumptions was far from the main focus in the participants’ conceptions. This suggests that their conceptions of critical thinking were oriented more towards Paul’s (1992) weak sense of critical thinking, meaning critical thinking that serves the interest of a particular individual or group. The participants’ ultimate goal of critical thinking seems to be to defend oneself, which could be seen as ego-centric. The students appeared to defend their initial beliefs rather than try to apply critical questions to all claims, including their own (Browne & Keeley, 2007).

The study uncovered a right/wrong dichotomy as one aim that the participants are seeking while practising critical thinking. The right/wrong dichotomy affects the students’ openness to different viewpoints, an important trait of critical thinking. The right/wrong dichotomy suggests that there is a right answer; such a view might stifle creativity and lateral thinking. Such an approach might also more naturally be applied to lower orders of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy, such as knowledge.
The participants’ emphasis on the right/wrong dichotomy may be attributable to the tradition of teaching and learning in Vietnam. Due to the prevailing hierarchical system, teaching tends to be dictatorial (Tuy, 2000). Knowledge is transmitted one-way, from teachers to students: teachers are seen as the only knowers in the classroom (Ha, 2004; Ly et al., 2014; Thanh, 2007; Tuyet, 2012). Therefore, students tend to think that the knowledge imparted by their teachers is infallible. Although some students in the present study did not hold this belief very strongly, their inclusion of right/wrong criteria when assessing other arguments revealed that the Vietnamese students and teachers are still deeply influenced by the traditional teaching and learning approach that highlight the teachers’ knowledge. This tradition is believed to affect students’ critical thinking (Dong, 2015).

6. Conclusions
In short, the participants in the research context appeared to have quite a rudimentary understanding of critical thinking. Although their conceptualisation of critical thinking was two-dimensional with both cognitive skills and affective dispositions, their understanding was limited to the first two levels of criticality in Barnett’s (1997) framework. The concept of critical thinking is understood mainly within the domains of knowledge and self, not in the domain of the world. The initial findings of the distinctive features in the participants’ conceptions of critical thinking suggest a certain influence of contextual factors on their conceptualisations of critical thinking.

From the research findings, a number of implications can be made for better integration of critical thinking into Vietnamese EFL classrooms or similar EFL contexts.

Firstly, Vietnamese EFL teachers and learners should be offered training programmes or workshops on critical thinking and critical thinking instruction in EFL classrooms. Some unique features of critical thinking identified in this study can be a resource for Vietnamese EFL teachers and students to discuss in those training programmes or workshops so that they can reach a more thorough understanding of this concept. For example, the discussion of whether EFL teachers and learners should care much about the right/wrong answers in their EFL classrooms and how this could prevent them from thinking critically.

Secondly, Vietnamese EFL teachers should try the conceptual framework of critical thinking used in this study. The study used a critical thinking framework that is a combination of Barnett’s (1997) domains of criticality and Bloom’s (1956) higher-order thinking processes. Although the findings about the participants’ definition of critical thinking did not fit in the whole framework, it served some purposes in the study’s context. Barnett’s (1997) triad of knowledge, self and world domains for criticality outlines the foci of a learner’s criticality. In the context of L2 learning, these correspond to knowledge of the target language and its relationship to the cultures of its speakers; the learners’ reflection on their own language and culture and their learning strategies; and the learners’ awareness of the different socio-political norms underlying different languages and cultures. Using Barnett’s domains of criticality could help students and teachers better understand the areas for developing critical thinking in EFL contexts.
References


