

Critical thinking in a Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language context:

CURRENT PRACTICES AND PROSPECTS

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Certificate of authorship

This thesis is the result of a research candidature conducted jointly with another University as part of a collaborative Doctoral degree. I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as part of the collaborative doctoral degree and/or fully acknowledged within the text.

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List of abbreviations

AI	American Issues, one of the courses observed during fieldwork
CCC	Cross-cultural Communication, one of the courses observed during fieldwork
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
HUCFL	Hue University College of Foreign Languages
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
L1	First language / mother tongue / Vietnamese
L2	Target language / English
P	Presenter
R5	Reading 5, one of the courses observed during fieldwork
S	Student
T	Teacher
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
VNFFLP	Vietnamese framework for foreign language proficiency
W5	Writing 5, one of the courses observed during fieldwork

Abstract

This thesis explores critical thinking practices in the relatively under-researched context of Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Drawing on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy and Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality, critical thinking is defined in this study as the capacity for students to use their cognition to understand, interpret and critique received knowledge, to question their own understanding and assumption(s), and then to take action in their own life-worlds and beyond.

This qualitative study with a case study design contributes to the contested evidence of critical thinking practices in an Asian EFL context. Data were collected from two field trips involving 20 observations of two class types: 14 (more elementary) skills-based and six (relatively advanced) content-based classes. Observations were complemented by semi-structured interviews with eight teachers and 22 students and document analysis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.

Findings revealed that the participants equated critical thinking with expressing personal opinions, and with a right/wrong dichotomy. They subjected others' opinions rather than their own to criticism. The study found that critical thinking was differentially integrated in the teaching of the skills-based and content-based classes, and that the students' engagement with critical thinking differed between whole-class learning and group discussions, and according to their ability to relate to given texts. Critical thinking practice in the context was shaped by the attitudes and understandings of the teachers and students

themselves, examination regimes, national cultural norms (e.g. face-saving, respect for teachers), and what might be deemed universal human classroom behaviours (e.g. authority, peer pressure).

The findings imply that critical thinking can be implemented in this Asian EFL context provided certain conditions are met, such as sufficient scaffolding, appropriate task difficulty level, relevant material choice, and suitable classroom arrangement. It is also inferred from the study that the content-based classes, aiming to provide a socio-cultural understanding of English-speaking countries are more conducive to developing critical thinking than the skills-based classes, which aim to develop students' language skills.

The application of a combination of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy and Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality opens up a new way of understanding critical thinking practices in a specific context. The study recommends consistent support for critical thinking at national and institutional levels through curriculum design, the examination and assessment systems, and at the classroom level, through pre-service and in-service teacher training, as well as incremental incorporation of critical thinking from the onset of EFL courses. ■