

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

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**CURRENT PRACTICES AND PROSPECTS**

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for the degree of Doctor of Education  
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# **Certificate of authorship**

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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.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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**Date:**

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# List of abbreviations

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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

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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. ■

## **Chapter 1**

# **Introduction: questions and issues in critical thinking in Vietnamese EFL classrooms**

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### **1.1 Critical thinking and language education**

Research has ascribed a number of virtues to critical thinking, although what ‘critical thinking’ means is itself open to debate. It 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). The ability to think critically is seen as a core academic skill due to its importance in the learning process (Paul 2005). Critical thinking skills apply within and beyond formal education contexts; they enable students to assimilate subject-specific course content more thoroughly, and also provide a framework that allows them to engage with and respond to problems they may confront during their lives (Tsui 2002). Ten Dam and Volman (2004) value critical thinking as a crucial aspect of the competence that citizens need to participate in a pluralistic and democratic society: it enables them to make an individual contribution to their society. Critical thinking has been investigated across various nations including the United States (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2004), Australia (Tapper 2004), China (Tian & Low 2011), Iran (Fahim & Sa' eepour 2011), and Singapore (Lim 2015). It has also been a subject of discussion across various subject areas, such as second and/or foreign language (L2) education (Luke 2012; Yamada 2010), social studies (Ten Dam & Volman

2004), economics (Jones 2005), science (Kim et al. 2013), and nursing (Simpson & Courtney 2002).

During the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Alnofaie 2013; Bredella & Richter 2004; Brumfit et al. 2005; Daud & Hustin 2004; Dong 2006; Gunawardena & Petraki 2014; Houghton & Yamada 2012; Kabilan 2000; Richard 2003; Thadphoothon & Jones 2004; Waters 2006). 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).

Over time, however, the relationship between critical thinking and culture has attracted differences of opinion. While some researchers see critical thinking as a cultural practice distinctive of Western cultural traditions (e.g. Atkinson 1997; Ramanathan & Kaplan 1996b), numerous theoretical (e.g. Paton 2005; Tian & Low 2011) and empirical studies (e.g. Stapleton 2002; Tan 2013) negate this argument by positing that critical thinking can be practised in non-Western contexts, such as Asia. The question of non-Western students' critical thinking performance has also been discussed widely in the literature, with scholars debating whether and why non-Western students might demonstrate less competence in the critical thinking activities taught and ostensibly valued in Western learning contexts (e.g. Durkin 2008; Egege & Kutieleh 2004; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010). The same questions have been discussed in studies on Asian students' practices of critical thinking in Asian

educational contexts (e.g. Buranapatana 2006; Luk & Lin 2014; Thunnithet 2011). Some authors (e.g. Ha 2004; Kumaravadivelu 2003) note the assertion of Asian students' lack of critical thinking as a common stereotype about this group of students. Asian students' capacity for critical thinking has been attributed to various factors in the teaching and learning context, e.g. teachers' instruction approaches (Fung & Howe 2012, 2014; Yang & Gamble 2013), and/or students' language proficiency (Luk & Lin 2014; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010). The Confucian tradition, along with other Asian cultural features, has been found to no longer exert paramount influence on students' critical thinking (Dong 2015; Egege & Kutieleh 2004; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010). These studies show that Asian critical thinking practices are more complex than previously thought. Its practices need further investigation as the notions of Asian students and teachers 'only seem to touch upon the surface without understanding them sufficiently' (Ha 2004, p. 52).

Given the importance of critical thinking to language education and the contested views of the applicability of critical thinking in a non-Western educational context, this study set out to investigate the evidence for the practices of, affordances for, and barriers to critical thinking practices in a Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Critical thinking is defined for the purposes of this thesis as an ability in which students 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. The development of this definition is discussed further in the literature review.

Teaching practices and students' learning were scrutinised in a bid to understand the level at which and the manner in which critical thinking was incorporated in the research context. A combination of Barnett's (2015) framework

of critical being and Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive processes were used as the frameworks to analyse related data forms, such as documents (e.g. government documents, syllabuses), observation field-notes, and interview transcripts. The study contributes a voice to the argument in favour of the applicability of critical thinking in a non-Western context, and possible areas for the furtherance of critical thinking in a foreign language program.

This thesis uses some 'meta-geographical' (Tate 2005, p. 351) terms such as Asia, Asian, East, Eastern, West, and Western. These terms carry different meanings for different peoples over time. The term Asia, for example, is neither a homogeneous nor a well-defined entity. It is as heterogeneous and amorphous as 'the West' (Hofstede 2007). The terms in this study, therefore, are used as shorthand to refer to geographic areas, embodying no presumption of cultural homogeneity. The same applies to the use of Vietnamese culture in this thesis; Vietnam is not culturally monolithic.

## **1.2 Background to the problem**

Critical thinking, a 'buzzword' in education, has a plethora of definitions. According to Ten Dam and Volman (2004), three traditions commingle in definitions of critical thinking: logical reasoning (philosophy), higher-order cognitive skills and dispositions (psychology), and a competence for critical participation in modern society (critical theory). From a philosophical perspective, critical thinking focuses on analysing the logic of arguments (e.g. Brookfield 2011; Browne & Keeley 2007). Psychologists view critical thinking as an agglomeration of cognitive and dispositional approaches (e.g. Bloom 1956; Ennis 1987; Facione 1990; Halpern 2001). The critical theory approach aims to increase the learner's capacity to recognise and address injustice (e.g. Barnett 1997; Johnston et al. 2011). The philosophical and psychological traditions are frequently discussed in the

literature on the teaching and learning of critical thinking (Ten Dam & Volman 2004). The critical theory tradition, however, has drawn recent attention in higher education as the sector has been particularly influenced by critical social theories of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. postmodernism (Edwards & Usher 2002), postcolonialism (Rizvi, Lingard & Lavia 2006) and feminism (St. Pierre 2000).

Critical thinking has commonly been seen as an accoutrement of Western culture (Atkinson 1997; Barnett 1997, 2015; Ten Dam & Volman 2004). The applicability of critical thinking to Asian classrooms, and the performance of Asian students' critical thinking, have been questioned and discussed in the international education literature. According to some researchers, Asian students exhibit poor performance in critical thinking. For example, Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas (2000) assert that 'Eastern' international students visiting 'Western' institutions have poor analytical and critical thinking skills. These authors claim that because international students were reliant on textbooks or compulsory materials, they exhibited little accountability for their own learning. Ransom et al. (2006) note that international ESL students in Australia, especially those from Confucian heritage backgrounds, learnt by rote, were inactive, and lacked adequate critical thinking skills. Similar comments about Asian students' critical thinking arguably derive from stereotypical views of Asian students, which are based solely on the observed behaviour of students (Kumaravadivelu 2003; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010). As Lun, Fischer and Ward (2010) argue, Asian students' classroom behaviour does not match the normative expectations of the Western educational cultural system; hence there emerges a debate surrounding the appropriateness of critical thinking instruction to students from non-Western cultural backgrounds. As most of the comments about Asian students' critical thinking appear in studies conducted in Western education systemic contexts (i.e. research investigating Asian students

visiting and studying in Western universities), there is little evidence of, or research into, the practices of critical thinking in an Asian educational context such as Vietnam. An examination of Asian teachers' and students' voices in an Asian educational context will contribute new information on the subject of Asian students' critical thinking and the appropriateness of various types of critical thinking instruction in such contexts. It is this gap that my study sets out to address.

Among the existing studies of the practices of critical thinking in Asian EFL/ESL contexts are those of Mok (2010) in Hong Kong, Thunnithet (2011) in Thailand, and Gunawardena and Petraki (2014) in Sri Lanka. Although these three studies were each conducted in different Asian contexts, they found some common barriers such as English language proficiency and some Asian traditions of teaching and learning in lower levels of education. As English is a second language in Mok's (2010) study, or a foreign language in Thunnithet's (2011) and Gunawardena and Petraki's (2014) studies, English proficiency levels had considerable influence on the students' exercise of critical thinking in this additional language. Moreover, the culture of teaching and learning in the lower levels of schooling in these Asian countries was described as unsupportive of the practice of critical thinking. In short, while the three studies' contributions to the literature centre on the barriers to critical thinking in Asian EFL contexts, they were limited to the views of teachers. The studies were also conducted in the absence of a framework suited to examining the barriers systematically.

Teaching and learning in Vietnam have been described as employing a traditional transmission pedagogy in which teachers transmit knowledge and students passively receive and memorise it (Anh 2015; Ly et al. 2014; Nghi 2010; Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2009). Vietnamese education is

largely curriculum-and-textbook oriented (Anh 2015). According to Ly et al. (2014), knowledge imparted by the teacher and drawn solely from textbooks has been commonly viewed as incontestable. Students are conditioned to passively accept knowledge rather than being provided with opportunities to creatively and critically engage with knowledge. The Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has recognised the need to address this issue if the country is to accomplish its industrialisation and modernisation by 2020 (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2009).

Subsequent to education being identified as a national priority, numerous significant documents were issued by the Central Steering Committee - the highest organisation of the Vietnamese Communist Party - calling for a fundamental and comprehensive reform of Vietnamese education (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam 1996, 2013). In response to the party's resolutions, the Vietnamese Parliament passed the Education Law 2005, which emphasised the country's need to reform its teaching methods. According to this law, teaching in Vietnam should transform from a system of one-way indoctrination to one of promoting active and conscious participation, the aim being to increase the students' levels of initiative and creativity. The call for education reform was also outlined in the Government's Education Development Strategy 2010–2020, which suggests the following guideline to teaching: 'Continue to reform teaching and learning methodology and assessment in the direction of encouraging activeness, self-consciousness, proactiveness, creativity and learning autonomy...' (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2009, p. 10) (author translation).

The term "critical thinking" does not appear in any of the above official documents; however, the phrases and expressions such as shifting from "one-way indoctrination" to "promoting active and conscious participation", "increasing

initiative and creativity”, “activeness, self-consciousness, proactiveness, creativity and learning autonomy” constitute critical thinking, criticality and critiquing ability. Furthermore, critical thinking might be a necessary skill which will contribute to achieving the country’s fundamental and comprehensive reform ‘in the direction of standardisation, modernisation, socialisation, democratisation and international integration’ (The Party’s Eleventh Summit Meeting Resolution). Among these criteria, standardisation means the aim for Vietnamese education to reach the standard quality and structure with education in the world (e.g. ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework). In practice, several Vietnamese education researchers have suggested placing emphasis on integrating critical thinking into the classroom (e.g. Cau 2013; Dung 2006; Huyen 2014; Luyen 2005). However, as Phan and Nguyen (2011, in Anh 2015) observe, studies of pedagogical approaches in Vietnam have concentrated on theoretical rather than on empirical research. There have been few empirical studies of the practices of critical thinking in Vietnamese classroom contexts, with the exception of one study in History secondary-school education (Du 2015), and some in Vietnamese EFL classrooms (see Huong 2012; Manh 2009; Trang 2014a).

Among the studies of critical thinking in Vietnamese EFL contexts, Trang (2014a) investigated the practices of critical thinking in Vietnamese EFL tertiary classrooms and the possible barriers to these practices. Her study found that while the teachers hold positive attitudes towards critical thinking, they have limited understanding of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction. Critical thinking was found not to be the primary aim or objective of the curriculum. Trang’s (2014a) study identified students’ learning habits and time constraints as obstacles to the practices of critical thinking. To date this study stands alone in this regard in the literature. However, critical thinking in her study was limited to reasoning skills.

Moreover, Trang's (2014a) findings relied only upon the teachers' espoused beliefs. She used semi-structured interviews as the sole data collection tool. The students' views were not investigated; for this reason, the study provided a narrower understanding and range of perspectives of critical thinking practices in its research context than is explored in this thesis.

To date there has been no comprehensive study of Vietnamese teachers' espoused beliefs and actual practices of critical thinking in their classrooms. These are the gaps in understanding that a study of critical thinking practices in a Vietnamese EFL context from the perspectives of both the teachers and students, and with the use of classroom observations and participant interviews, can address.

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

The question of the applicability of critical thinking in a non-Western EFL context such as Vietnam needs exploring from the perspectives of Vietnamese teachers and students in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. Such a situated and contextual approach to the practices of critical thinking adds a broader and more comprehensive view to the existing arguments and understanding about critical thinking in non-Western cultures. A thorough understanding of evidence of and barriers to critical thinking practices in the local context will shed light on whether and how an ostensibly Western learning concept such as critical thinking should be promoted in an Asian context such as Vietnam. The research sets out to understand what critical thinking practices might mean and the role they might play in EFL teaching at a university in central Vietnam.

In response to the issues that have been discussed in the literature on critical thinking practices in Asia and in Vietnam, I began to ponder how the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL classroom might be enacted. My own

experience as a lecturer of English as a foreign language in a university in Vietnam has also prompted me to pursue answers to the above question. Personally, I believe in the virtue of critical thinking because it encourages students to use their cognition to interpret and critique received knowledge, to question their own understanding and assumption(s), and then to take action in their own life. Critical thinking has been designated as a Western construct (Barnett 1997), and the promotion of critical thinking in an Asian context such as Vietnam could be viewed as a symptom of neo-colonialism (Pennycook 2007) as well as a hindrance to the Vietnamese one-party political system. This might also be illustrated by a comment made in passing by my twelve-year-old son. Twisting the adage of *facta non verba*, ‘deeds not words’, he observed that in my EFL work, ‘words are more important than deeds’. Nonetheless, I believe that critical thinking is an essential skill for Vietnamese students in any field in today’s world, in accordance with UNESCO’s (International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century & Delors 1996) four fundamental principles of education (learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together). It is with such global and local geopolitical and interpersonal tensions in mind that this study proceeds.

Given the importance of critical thinking to Vietnamese education. I am aware, however, of the possible barriers to the introduction and promotion of critical thinking in such a context. Therefore, I often ponder the following questions: Of what value is critical thinking in a Vietnamese EFL context? Do the virtues of critical thinking merit its pursuit? What practices that could be called ‘critical thinking’ are currently promoted by Vietnamese EFL teachers and performed by Vietnamese EFL students? What practices do they appear unaware of, familiar with, or ready to use, and why (not)? Is culture the only factor that mediates the

students' performance of critical thinking? And are there any other factors that are attributable to teachers' and students' practices of critical thinking?

#### **1.4 Aims of the study**

Having identified gaps in the literature on critical thinking practice in Asia and in L2 education, I undertook this study with the aim of identifying and examining the extent and nature of existing practices of, and barriers to, critical thinking in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. More specifically, this research aims to elicit Vietnamese EFL teachers' and students' understandings of critical thinking. In this study, critical thinking practice is constructed as encompassing both teaching and learning practice. The thesis therefore investigates the extent and manner of the teachers' teaching critical thinking skills and of the students' related performance. The study also identifies barriers to and affordances for critical thinking practices in the research context. In short, this research investigates the mediation or interplay between culture and critical thinking, and language learning (EFL) and critical thinking; and how each helps and/or perhaps impedes the other. The thesis also explores implications for future practice.

#### **1.5 Research questions**

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

1. How do the teacher and student participants understand critical thinking?
  - a. How do the participants define critical thinking?
  - b. What are the participants' attitudes towards critical thinking?
2. How is critical thinking teaching practice undertaken at the research site?
  - a. In what ways and to what extent is critical thinking teaching being practised?

- b. What are the barriers and affordances to the teaching practice of critical thinking at the research site?
- 3. What is the nature of the students' engagement with critical thinking?
  - a. To what extent and in what contexts do the students engage in critical thinking?
  - b. What are the barriers and affordances to the students' engagement with critical thinking at the research site?

## **1.6 Significance of the study**

This study's principal significance resides in its efforts to analyse the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context, about which there is little known in the literature. It sets out to discover the ways in which critical thinking is understood by Vietnamese EFL teachers and students, and offers perspectives on opportunities for critical thinking development in EFL teaching in Vietnam. The Vietnamese EFL students' performance of critical thinking is also examined in this study. By contributing evidence of critical thinking practices in the Vietnamese EFL context, the study provides further information on the potential benefits and limitations of critical thinking in a Vietnamese context, and ways in which critical thinking practice might be enhanced and expanded. The study is also significant for its identification of the factors affecting critical thinking practices in the research context. These factors are investigated from both the teachers' and students' perspectives, and from the dual standpoints of classroom practice and the participants' beliefs. Because the study takes into account the local contextual factors, it affords a thorough understanding of the practices of critical thinking in the research context.

This study makes a substantial contribution to scholarly understanding of the relationships between critical thinking and culture, and between critical thinking and foreign language education. As the study unfolded, the influence of certain Vietnamese contextual factors on critical thinking practices highlighted how certain elements of Vietnamese culture constrained the teaching and practices of critical thinking. However, the evidence of existing critical thinking practice in this context suggests that critical thinking can be promoted, provided that attention is drawn to the cultural and other contextual factors. The study also explores the areas in foreign language programs that lend themselves more to critical thinking development and sheds light on the shape and manner of critical thinking that could be pursued in foreign language study.

## **1.7 Research design**

This study set out to investigate evidence and the nature of, and barriers to, critical thinking practices in some tertiary EFL classrooms in a university in Hue, Central Vietnam. For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln 2005) together with an illustrative case study design (Yin 2013) was adopted.

The study, which was conducted at Hue University College of Foreign Languages, specifically investigates the English program with the cohort of third-year English majors in the 2013/2014 academic year. This university's focus on foreign languages adds to its significance as a site of study. From this cohort, I invited some participants to participate in semi-structured interviews following my observation of English classes. I conducted 14 observations of two Reading 5 (R5) and Writing 5 (W5) courses in the first semester (2013) and six observations of two courses, American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication, in the second semester (2014). In total, 45 hours of observation were undertaken of the eight teachers and 22 students who participated in the study. Hereafter, to distinguish

the two course types I refer to R5 and W5 as skills-based courses, and American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication as content-based courses.

The skills-based courses aim to develop the students' language skills, which belong to the 'language' component of the EFL curriculum. Within the 'content' component, the more advanced courses provide the students with a socio-cultural understanding of the countries where English is used as a mother tongue (e.g. Britain and the US). For the purposes of the study, I collected data from a range of data sources (government documents, classrooms, teachers and students) in order to garner a variety of perspectives on the practice of critical thinking in the research context, its antecedents, nature and outcomes. The data collection tools used in the study included document analysis, classroom observations, and teacher and student interviews. Thematic analysis (Silverman 2014) was the main instrument used to analyse data in this study. Table 1.1 summarises the study's participants.

Data methodology	Semester 1	Semester 2
Type of courses observed	Skills-based courses	Content-based courses
Specific courses for which data was collected	Reading 5 Writing 5	American Issues Cross-cultural communication
Observations	14	6
Teacher interviews	5	3
Student interviews		22

*Table 1.1: The study's participants*

## 1.8 Frameworks

### 1.8.1 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).

In this study, as stated in Section 1.1, critical thinking is 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 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. Further justification of the combination of the two frameworks can be found in Chapter 2 and 3.

### ***1.8.2 Social constructivism and the research into critical thinking practice***

This study set out to understand possible barriers to critical thinking practice through the investigation of teaching and learning in a Vietnamese EFL context. The study was set against a backdrop of social constructivism that views reality as constructed through human activity (Kukla 2000). According to social

constructivism, knowledge is constructed through interaction with others. Interacting through communication helps people to extend their understandings of new information (Vygotsky 1987). In order to understand critical thinking practices and possible barriers to such practices in the research context, I took into consideration the views of the teachers and students, what they did in the classrooms, and the educational policies at the national and university levels. In this way, the reality of critical thinking in the research context could be constructed from members of this community. My cross-analysis of a range of sources at various levels (e.g. classroom, institution, nation) has yielded a complex picture of the reality of critical thinking practice at the research site. According to Crotty (1998, p. 8), truth ‘comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world’.

## **1.9 Outline of the thesis**

Following this introduction to the study, chapter 2 examines existing literature, presents various evidence-based views of critical thinking concepts, and justifies the choice of the critical thinking frameworks used in this study. Chapter 2 also reviews the arguments about the relationships between critical thinking and culture, and critical thinking and foreign language education. The chapter presents a description of the existing instruction methods to promote critical thinking in class and concludes with an analysis of the frameworks used to understand critical thinking practices.

Chapter 3 provides an explanation and justification of the research paradigm, methodology and the theoretical framework. It discusses the selection and recruitment of participants, and the methods employed for data collection and data analysis. The design and structure of the interviews, the research site, the research participants’ backgrounds and ethical considerations are also delineated.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the findings related to the research questions. Chapter 4 describes the participants' conceptualisations of critical thinking. Chapter 5 continues by explicating the practices of critical thinking at the research site. Evidence of and the problems peculiar to the teachers' integration of critical thinking in their teaching are presented. The chapter continues with examples of the students' performance (or underperformance) of critical thinking. Chapter 6 explores the barriers to critical thinking teaching practices and the students' expertise with critical thinking at the research site.

Chapter 7 discusses the critical thinking practices in the Vietnamese EFL context in light of Bloom's (1956) and Barnett's (2015) frameworks, and in conjunction with current views about critical thinking and 'Asian' culture(s). This chapter also discusses the mediation of 'large' culture (Vietnam's socio-cultural context and cultural traditions) and 'small' culture (teaching and learning practices and the EFL field, in both Vietnamese and universal 'human nature' contexts) to critical thinking practices in the research context.

The eighth chapter presents the conclusions from my research study and reflects on the contribution of the setting to research in the field. The limitations of the study, together with recommendations and suggestions for future research, and implications for practice, are set forth in this final chapter. ■

## **Chapter 2**

# **Literature review: relevant literature and studies**

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### **2.1 Introduction**

As stated in Chapter 1, this study examines the evidence of and barriers to critical thinking practices in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. It also addresses the question of how cultures and subject matter (English as a foreign language in this case) mediate critical thinking. Chapter 2 will review the theoretical background to the related research questions. Through the gaps identified in the literature, an argument will be established for conducting a study on critical thinking practices in the research context. Much of the discussion in this thesis presupposes that critical thinking is a worthy dimension of good pedagogy.

### **2.2 The notion of critical thinking**

This section of the literature review briefly tracks the history of the development of our understanding of critical thinking, through both Western and Eastern antecedents. It presents a conceptualisation of critical thinking from the ideas of reflective thinking, a two- or bi-dimensional conceptualisation of critical thinking, resources for critical thinking development, and criticality. The section then introduces and examines the working conception of critical thinking used in this study. The final part in this section summarises empirical studies on critical thinking conceptualisations to identify the gaps in this research area. The discussion of research and philosophies on thinking, especially the differentiations between critical thinking and uncritical thinking, also contribute to an

understanding of critical thinking. While there is no space here for such a discussion, the works of Costa (2001), Lipman (2003) and DeBono (1985) are seminal in this regard.

### **2.2.1 Critical thinking as reflective thinking**

The concept of critical thinking can be traced back at least to John Dewey's (1933, p. 9) 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). Many current conceptions of critical thinking trace their definitional roots to Dewey's writing (Bean 2011; Kuhn 1999).

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.

### ***2.2.2 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. Whereas the cognitive aspect of critical thinking involves what an individual is capable of doing intellectually, the dispositional aspect determines the manner in which an individual is going to use that ability. The close relationship between the cognitive

and dispositional aspects has been examined by a number of critical thinking scholars (Ennis 1987; Facione 2011; Halpern 2001; Moon 2012; Siegel 1988).

### **2.2.2.1 Cognitive aspect**

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. Below are the descriptions of the three theorists' models of cognitive skills that have frequently been associated with critical thinking: Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive domain, Ennis's (1987) critical thinking skills, and Paul's (1990) metacognition.

#### ***Bloom's (1956) taxonomy***

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 (see further discussion in Section 2.2.6.2). Bloom's (1956) taxonomy was revised by Anderson, Krathwohl, and Bloom (2001). In the revised taxonomy, the number of cognitive levels remains the same as in the original version; however, 'three categories were renamed, the order of two was interchanged, and those category names were changed to verb form to fit the way they are used in objectives' (Krathwohl 2002, p. 214). The cognitive levels in the revised taxonomy are remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate and create.

Based on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, the National Council for Excellence in CT defined critical thinking as "the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reason, depth, breadth and fairness" (Michael & Richard 1987). The invocation of universal intellectual values is itself open to contestation.

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.

#### ***Ennis' (1987) critical thinking skills***

Ennis (1987) developed an influential conception of critical thinking with a detailed list of the skills and dispositions that critical thinking entails. Ennis's early conception of critical thinking dealt solely with the cognitive dimension. According to Ennis (1962, p. 83), critical thinking was 'the correct assessing of statements'. By this definition, Ennis (1962) referred to critical thinking as a detailed and complex conception of fundamental proficiencies and dimensions of the correct assessment of statements. In his subsequent framework of critical thinking (Ennis 1987), critical thinking skills comprise:

1. Focusing on a question
2. Analysing arguments
3. Asking and answering questions for clarification and/or challenge
4. Judging the credibility of a source
5. Observing and judging observation reports
6. Deducing and judging deduction
7. Inducing and judging induction
8. Making value judgments
9. Defining terms, and judging definitions
10. Identifying assumptions
11. Deciding on an action
12. Interacting with others

From this schema, deducing and judging deductions relates to the interpretation of statements; meanwhile, inducing and judging induction involves generalising data and making inferences from given data. Also, Ennis's (1987) critical thinking is a process rather than a set of levels of cognitive operation.

#### ***Paul's (1990) metacognition***

Later theorists have argued that critical thinking also deals with metacognition: thinking about one's thinking (Paul 1990). Halpern (1999, p. 70) clarified this point by stating that 'when we think critically, we are evaluating the outcomes of our thought processes'. In Paul's view, critical thinking is a systematic way to form and shape one's thinking. Each person can learn how to continually improve their own thinking, and people assess their own reasoning by explicitly using as

analytical and critical tools. According to Paul and Elder's (2002), thinking is responsive and guided by intellectual standards; without these standards, thinking cannot achieve criticality. Their *Intellectual Standards* (Paul & Elder 2002), which comprise clarity; accuracy; precision; relevance; depth; breadth; logic; significance; and fairness, can be applied to assess the process and products of our own thinking.

#### **2.2.2.2 Dispositional aspect**

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).

Scholars identify the dispositional aspect of critical thinking in diverse ways. It is referred to variously as 'critical spirit' (Halpern 1999, p. 70), 'major critical thinking dispositions' (Facione 1990, p. 11; Siegel 1988, p. 23), 'traits of mind' (Ennis 1996, p. 368), 'reflective scepticism' (Paul 1990, p. 54), 'critical reflection' (McPeck 1990b, p. 42) and 'critical attitude' (Brookfield 2011, p. 11).

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. According to Facione, Facione and Giancarlo (1996, p. 72), critical thinking dispositions include a wide range of attitudes (e.g. motivations, values, beliefs) and a level of sensitivity to situations in which critical thinking is required. While the

cognitive dimension of critical thinking involves what an individual is capable of doing, the dispositional dimension concerns the manner in which an individual will use that ability. The dispositional aspect of critical thinking reflects an ethical dimension as Noddings (2015, p. 8) notes “correct critical thinking – logical thinking that culminates in accurate logical conclusions – does not always motivate moral action”.

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), Facione (1990), 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.

### ***2.2.3 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. According to Buranapatanan (2006), weak sense critical thinking is pursued with a purpose of victory rather than discovery. Critical thinking is demonstrated in its strong sense when critical thinkers view an issue objectively from the various perspectives of those whose interests are involved, while recognising their own ego and socio-centric viewpoints. It allows us not only to

critique all claims, but also to examine our own deep prejudices and misconceptions. Paul (1992) described the two forms of critical thinking as follows:

If the thinking is disciplined to serve the interest of a particular individual or group, to the exclusion of other relevant persons and groups, I call it sophistic or *weak sense critical thinking*. If the thinking is disciplined to take into account the interests of diverse persons or groups, I call it fair-minded or *strong sense critical thinking* (pp. 9-10).

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.

#### **2.2.4 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). The resource approach originated from these researchers' dissatisfaction with approaches that essentially propose taxonomies of skills and dispositions. Bailin et al. (1999a, p. 290) contend that

such lists imply nothing about the psychological states, capacities or processes that enable critical thinkers to have the requisite accomplishments, and nothing about the kind of instructional procedures that are likely to be efficacious in bringing them about.

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. They further suggest three pedagogic components as follows:

- Engaging students in dealing with tasks that call for reasoned judgement or assessment
- Helping them develop intellectual resources for dealing with these tasks, and
- Providing an environment in which critical thinking is valued and students are encouraged and supported in their attempts to think critically and engage in critical discussion. (pp. 298-299)

Incorporating Bailin et al.'s (1999b) intellectual resources and Barnett's (2015) three domains of criticality (see more at Section 2.1.5), 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. According to these authors, in order to achieve criticality, different types of knowledge are needed, including declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, ontological knowledge, knowledge why, and knowledge of and how language is used. Johnston et al. (2011) discern the resources of personal qualities and values such as respect for reasons, an inquiring attitude, or open-mindedness. Johnston et al. (2011) suggest investigating students' knowledge resources to help explain the real reason underlying the common assumptions about students' uncritical thinking. In Johnston et al.'s (2011, p. 80) words, 'students are accused of being uncritical, an audit of their knowledge resources illustrates why this might be the case'. Understanding students' resources is,

therefore, useful for identifying where difficulties with criticality arise for students and how they might be addressed.

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.

### **2.2.5 Critical being**

The existing understandings and diverse definitions of critical thinking proposed by many researchers and educators are critiqued by Ronald Barnett. In Barnett's (1997) view, the model of critical thinking generally adopted by Western universities is limited. He 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). Throughout this thesis, I interchangeably use the views Barnett expressed in his two publications. 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). 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.

Regarding the domains of critical thinking, in Barnett's (1997) view, a person is critical of:

1. the world of knowledge: propositions, ideas, or theories
2. the world of oneself: the reflection of one's internal world
3. the world of the outside: the external world

According to Barnett (1997), these worlds correspond respectively to Popper's (1972, in Barnett 1997, p. 65) epistemology of three worlds: the brutal world of spatio-temporal objects, the subjective world of human consciousness, and the world of objective knowledge. Domains are understood as the objects that critical thinking can target and the purposes that it can pursue (Barnett 1997). To evaluate a proposition, to attempt to understand oneself and to take up a stance in the world are the three fundamentally different purposes of critical thinking. It is impossible to say one purpose is complementary to the others. The relationships between the three domains are complex and there is no defined boundary between them.

As regards the forms of critical thinking, Barnett (1997) distinguishes critical reason from critical self-reflection and critical action. Critical reason is critical thinking that focuses on formal bodies of thought and includes such actions as synthesis, analysis or evaluation. Critical self-reflection and critical action are seen to embrace more 'action-based components' (Barnett 1997, p. 66). Critically-minded people closely examine their own thinking and value systems with the aim of attaining a better understanding of themselves. They step beyond themselves to see the world outside and take or at least strive to take appropriate action in response to this world. As Barnett (1997, p. 68) observes:

Students, to some extent, have been exposed to the wider world and, to a limited extent, have been required to take up a stance in it. They have been expected to be able to size up a situation in which they are placed and to act appropriately in it. This is critical thought in-the-world.

This critical thought reflects the ethical values in Barnett's conception of criticality. Thinking can result in changes not only in knowledge and in one's awareness, but also in one's action in the world. With reference to the three forms of critical thinking, Barnett observes that critical self-reflection and critical action remain undeveloped in higher education.

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. Table 2.1 summarises the levels, domains and forms of critical being in Barnett's (1997) framework.

Domains of critical being			
Levels of criticality	Knowledge	Self	World
<b>4. Transformatory critique</b>	Knowledge critique	Reconstruction of self	Critique-in-action (collective reconstruction of world)
<b>3. Refashioning of traditions</b>	Critical thought (malleable traditions of thought)	Development of self within traditions	Mutual understanding and development of traditions
<b>2. Reflexivity</b>	critical thinking (reflection on one's understanding)	Self-reflection (reflection on one's own projects)	Reflective practice (metacompetence, adaptability, flexibility)
<b>1. Critical skills</b>	Discipline-specific critical thinking skills	Self-monitoring to given standards and norms	Problem-solving (means-end instrumentalism)
<b>Forms of criticality</b>	Critical reason	Critical self-reflection	Critical action

**Table 2.1: Levels, domains and forms of critical being**

Source: Barnett(1997, p. 103)

Johnston et al. (2011) share many ideas about criticality with Barnett (1997), for example, the notion of the domains, and the forms of criticality. However, Johnston et al. point out some shortcomings in Barnett's framework of criticality. They suggest Barnett's framework does not identify disciplinary differences in criticality. There is neither a developmental path, nor any intellectual or personal resources leading towards a higher level of criticality. Barnett's levels of criticality are hierarchically, rather than developmentally arranged. Johnston et al. (2011, p. 20) observe that Barnett is primarily interested in 'speculating about the uses of criticality, rather than its detailed structure and components or development or relationships to empirical evidence with regard to undergraduate [students]'.

In Johnston et al.'s (2011) framework of criticality, the developmental path of criticality is emphasised. Johnston et al. propose the following three levels of criticality: early criticality, guided criticality, and late criticality, and they analyse

the developmental path of criticality by describing the continuum of criticality reflected in typical capabilities and observable behaviours:

Early criticality: there exists a tenuous engagement with and control over critical strategies and knowledge, largely in terms of others' understandings and actions.

Guided criticality: more secure control is exerted over critical strategies and knowledge, and inchoate challenges at times to existing understandings and actions of others.

Late criticality: there is evidence of a mastery over critical strategies and knowledge, and where appropriate, an individual can steadily challenge orthodoxies within their own understandings. (Johnston et al. 2011)

Concerning the levels of criticality, Johnston et al. (2011) see as unclear the nature of Barnett's (1997) two middle levels of criticality (reflexivity and refashioning of traditions). They recommend two levels of criticality in their framework, namely instrumental and transformatory criticality (See Table 2.3).

Johnston et al. (2011), whose focus is on the contextual importance of the growth of criticality in higher education, note that the form of criticality will vary according to the specific field. In an observation pertinent to this thesis, they argue that different fields will have different focuses on different domains of criticality.

The domain of the world will be more prominent in applied fields such as Social Work than in the other fields such as Modern Languages, where the domain of formal knowledge is likely to be more important. (p. 73)

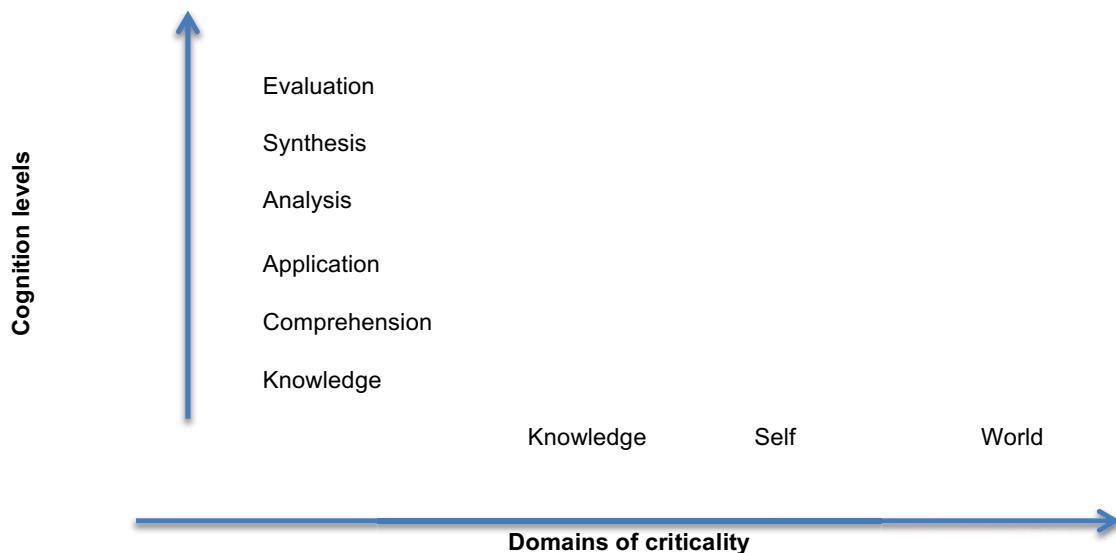
Barnett's (1997) and Johnston et al.'s (2011) frameworks of criticality contribute to the literature of critical thinking regarding their categorisation of criticality according to domains and levels. The three domains of criticality (knowledge, self

and world) are the contexts in which students are expected to perform critical thinking.

### ***2.2.6 A working definition of critical thinking***

The conceptual frameworks of critical thinking used in this study are Barnett's (2015) framework of criticality and Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive domains (Figure 2.1). The categories in the left-hand column in Figure 2.1 indicate the cognitive levels wherein EFL students may operate, while the remaining three columns show the domains or aspects over which EFL students exercise their cognition. Bloom's (1956) cognitive levels, when combined with Barnett's (1997) three domains of criticality, map Barnett's (1997) levels of criticality that one engages. The use of Bloom's (1956) cognitive levels reflects complexity of critical thinking operation across the three domains. When evaluation - the highest level in Bloom's (1956) taxonomy - is exercised across the three domains, some 'actions' have been taken. This resonates with Barnett's (1997) levels ranging from critical reasoning to transformatory critique. The highest level of criticality illustrated from this combination of frameworks is the Evaluation–World pairing, which typifies possible action to take in or towards the world. A detailed description of how the frameworks were used to analyse the data can be found in Chapter 3.

This study aims to investigate critical thinking practices in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. More specifically, it aims to understand the level at which and the manner in which critical thinking is being undertaken in the research context. The study, therefore, requires conceptual frameworks to assist the answering of the research questions. The ensuing sections describe each framework and justify its use as one part of the working operationalisation of critical thinking in this study.



**Figure 2.1 The critical thinking frameworks used in this study**

#### 2.2.6.1 Barnett's (1997) framework of criticality

Barnett (1997) categorises criticality into domains and levels, a classification which appears more advanced than other definitions of critical thinking discussed hitherto, which Thunnithet (2011) describes as in some way inadequate. According to Thunnithet (2011), Barnett's definition and conceptualisation of criticality is distinctive in the way he advocates an integration of criticality in the form of a 'critical being' who possesses the full range of critical knowledge, critical self-reflection, and critical action. As one of the aims of this study is to investigate the manner and extent of critical thinking practice being undertaken in an EFL context, the use of Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality is appropriate. It is useful to test the extent to which and the ways in which the kind of critical approaches espoused by Barnett can be practised in non-western universities such as the one in this study.

Drawing on Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality (Section 2.2.5), the domains in the EFL field can be interpreted as follows:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.

Barnett's (1997) and (2015) notion of criticality has been used in a number of studies in the field of language education (e.g. Brumfit et al. 2005; Houghton & Yamada 2012; Johnston et al. 2011). These studies have investigated the practice of criticality in modern language classes. The contexts of these studies are quite diverse and include British universities (Brumfit et al. 2005; Yamada 2010) and in some Asian tertiary institutions (Houghton & Yamada 2012; Thunnithet 2011). The common conclusion emerging from these studies is a confirmation of the potential for the development of criticality in additional language courses.

The criticality project at the University of Southampton (Brumfit et al. 2005) demonstrates that criticality can be central to additional language teaching (Modern Languages). Johnston et al. (2011) conclude that intermediate and advanced level language courses and content-based courses have a high potential to develop criticality in various ways. Houghton and Yamada (2012) found this potential even in beginners' level language courses, which are routinely presumed

to have the instrumental aim of acquiring the basics of the language. This finding seems to echo Breddla and Richter's (2004) emphasis on the educational goal as well as the instrumental goal of foreign language learning and studying: '[The educational goal] can make us aware of the constraints of our language and world view and allows us to see what we have in common with other forms of speaking and thinking on deeper levels' (Houghton & Yamada 2012, p. 31).

To attain this education goal as explained by Breddla and Richter (2004), language learners use their analytical and reflective capacities to understand and make sense of not only the foreign language, but also their native language. Furthermore, additional language learners are exposed to the complexity of the thinking systems of their own people and those of the foreign language. From those understandings, language learners are thereby better equipped to adopt appropriate language use and communication behaviours so as to be successful users of that foreign language. The educational goal of language study aligns with Barnett's notion of criticality, which complements its inclination to practical skills teaching. The studies mentioned above illustrate the emerging trend of developing criticality in the field of language education, and demonstrate the relevance of Barnett's (2015) framework of criticality to this disciplinary context.

As suggested above (Section 2.2.5), Barnett's framework may be too general for the purposes of this study. Because the distinction between Barnett's (1997) levels, e.g. reflexivity and refashioning of traditions, is not clear (Johnston et al. 2011), it could prove difficult to identify criticality levels embedded in teaching and learning activities in the classroom context. This study investigates the current practices of critical thinking at the undergraduate level; hence, it requires more specific frameworks to align with Barnett's (1997) framework to guide collection

and analysis of data. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive domain has therefore been incorporated in order to interpret cognitive skills.

#### **2.2.6.2 Bloom's (1956) taxonomy**

Bloom's (1956) taxonomy comprises cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. The cognitive domain relates to learners' recall, recognition, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of knowledge and the development of intellectual abilities and skills. The affective domains relate to learners' interests, attitudes, and values; and the psychomotor domain relates to motor skills. The taxonomy has been used to describe curricula, teacher behaviours, instructional methods, and intended student behaviours. It is a highly useful tool for organising and analysing critical thinking skills in language teaching (e.g. Brown 2014; Dumteeb 2009; Rawadieh 1998; Surjosuseno & Watts 1999).

Bloom's cognitive domain comprises six levels which require learners to demonstrate knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The first two levels (knowledge and comprehension) are referred to as lower-level thinking processes. The associated thinking is convergent in nature, meaning that learning moves toward a common, pre-established concept determined either by the text being studied or by the teacher. The last four levels (application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation) are higher-order thinking processes which involve divergent thinking. This thinking deviates from any pre-established concept and is generated by students, with the help of, but not by, their teachers. Students show more creativity when their cognition reaches the higher levels (Bloom 1956).

Bloom's higher-order thinking processes have been employed as the conceptual framework in several studies of critical thinking in education (e.g. Dong 2006; Dumteeb 2009; Surjosuseno & Watts 1999). Despite criticism that Bloom's

(1956) taxonomy failed to acknowledge the interdependence of the levels, its hierarchical levels of thinking and cognitive process serve as tools to assist with appropriate coverage of a variety of types of cognitive demands (Surjosuseno & Watts 1999). This study makes use of the hierarchy to assess the level of critical thinking practice in the documents, the observed teaching activities, and the students' presentations. The use of Bloom's (1956) cognitive levels, in combination with Barnett's (1997) domains, reflects the levels in Barnett's (1997) framework of criticality. An optimal critical thinking curriculum integrates increasingly the higher levels of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy into Barnett's (1997) broadest domain (world) of criticality, where certain 'action' in the world is assumed to take place.

### ***2.2.7 Vietnamese equivalents of critical thinking***

Critical thinking has been translated into Vietnamese in various ways: 'tư duy phê phán' (Luyen 2005), 'tư duy phản biện' (Giang 2010), and 'tư duy biện luận' (Oanh & Dat 2016). The commonality between these Vietnamese equivalents is their translation of 'thinking' as 'tư duy'; and the terms are noun phrases. The difference lies in the authors' translations of 'critical' into Vietnamese. Those who translate critical thinking as 'tư duy phản biện' (Giang 2010), and 'tư duy biện luận' (Oanh & Dat 2016) focus on the negative connotation of the phrase 'phê phán', meaning to criticise or point out the flaw or the inappropriate side of a problem or a person's arguments. According to Giang (2010), the phrase 'phê phán' refers to the action of negating ideas that are different from the mainstream and refusing to approach a problem from different perspectives. Critical thinking does not have that implication; instead, it refers to making judgements (Giang 2010). Oanh and Dat (2016) express disdain for the term 'phản biện', arguing that both 'phê phán' and 'phản biện' tend to be associated with criticism. To these authors, critical thinking reflects the importance of *thinking* to the solution of a certain problem. As

explained by Oanh and Dat (2016) for their adoption of ‘tư duy biện luận’, critical thinking focuses more on the field of logic, dialectic reasoning and arguments. The choice of Vietnamese equivalents for critical thinking by Vietnamese scholars suggests that they want to avoid associating critical thinking with negative feelings. Critical thinking is not a means for occasioning quarrels, disputes, or disrespect – an important element of a face-saving culture; instead, it entails efforts to consider a problem or issue from different angles or perspectives (Dung 2006). Personally, I think ‘tư duy phản biện’ is an appropriate translation of critical thinking because ‘phản biện’ implies a welcoming attitude to non-mainstream ideas and negates assumed, mainstream ones, but in a constructive manner.

#### ***2.2.8 Empirical studies of the conceptualisation of critical thinking***

The overall aim of the empirical studies to date has been to investigate the understandings of teachers and students with regard to critical thinking. However, the focus has mostly been on teachers' or academics' conceptions (Cassum et al. 2013; Howe 2004; Jones 2007; Krupat et al. 2011; Moore 2013b; Moore 2011b). Only one project (Tapper 2004) investigated the conception of critical thinking from students' perspective. Lloyd and Bahr (2010) researched the critical thinking understandings of both teachers and students. The teachers' and students' conceptions of critical thinking were compared with reference to the extant definitions in the literature. A two-dimensional (skill and disposition) conceptualisation of critical thinking and the discipline-specific approach are the conceptual frameworks employed in the above studies.

Another framework for critical thinking conceptualisation that previous studies have employed is a discipline-specific approach. Situated in a broader argument about the generalisability of critical thinking led by Ennis (1990) and McPeck (1990a), some studies (Jones 2007; Krupat et al. 2011; Moore 2013b; Moore 2011a)

adopted McPeck's position, affirming specificity in the nature of critical thinking in various disciplines. For example, Jones (2007) argues that critical thinking forms part of the culturally-mediated structures of meaning that constitute a discipline. She 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).

In terms of methodology, most studies have adopted a qualitative approach in their search for their participants' conceptualisations of critical thinking. A quantitative survey was employed in only one study, that of Howe (2004), who sought a comparative conceptualisation of critical thinking between Canadian and Japanese teachers. Howe (2004) 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. Those studies that adopt a qualitative approach administered 'self-authored surveys' (Lloyd & Bahr 2010, p. 3) in which participants were asked to write a definition of critical thinking in their own words and to describe a situation that involved critical thinking. These studies sought the participants' understanding of critical thinking either in contextualised teaching and learning experiences (Lloyd & Bahr 2010; Moore 2013b; Tapper 2004) or in clinical practice (Krupat et al. 2011).

The settings of the above studies varied, from the US and Australia, where critical thinking practices are deemed relatively commonplace, to Turkey, Japan or China, where the practice thereof has been observed less frequently. There exist no studies investigating how the concept of critical thinking is understood, valued and practised in a Vietnamese context. This study, therefore, aims to address this gap in the literature. However, in order to understand the current practices of critical thinking in a tertiary EFL environment in Vietnam, it is first necessary to investigate arguments about the impact of culture on notions and practices of critical thinking.

### **2.2.9 Summary**

This section has presented various existing approaches to the conceptualisation of critical thinking: reflective thinking, skill and disposition, weak and strong sense critical thinking, resources to critical thinking, and critical being. It justified the combination of Barnett's (2015) and Bloom's (1956) notions of critical thinking as the framework used to understand the practices of critical thinking in a tertiary language classroom context. The review of the empirical studies on critical thinking conceptualisation identified a gap in previous studies: a bifocal understanding of critical thinking from teacher and student viewpoints in a Vietnamese tertiary context.

## **2.3 Critical thinking and culture**

### **2.3.1 The notion of culture**

Before discussing the issues related to the relationship between critical thinking and culture, it is necessary to give a brief review of what culture means in this study.

Culture may be defined as a system of shared meanings among a group of individuals with shared knowledge, beliefs, values and behavioural norms (Merriam & Kim 2008). By this definition, culture can be classified on the basis of common views and understandings shared by group members. People of the same culture hold ‘shared social meanings; that is, the various ways we make sense of the world’ (Barker 2004, p. 45). There exist, therefore, differently normed ways of reasoning and acting.

According to Frisby (1998), culture can be understood as being common to a national, racial, ethnic, language or religious group. Most cross-cultural research is based on comparison between nations (Smith & Bond 1999), which is possibly because nations are ‘usually the only kind of units available for comparison and better than nothing’ (Hofstede 2003, p. 812). This ‘large’ culture (Holliday 1999; Tian & Low 2011) treats people from a certain area as relatively homogeneous, and distinct from those from other areas. Clark and Gieve (2006) cast doubt on this view as it may see culture as both static through time and internally consistent.

In applied linguistics, alongside the large culture paradigm, Holliday (1999) suggests a small culture paradigm which refers to small social groupings or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour. This view of culture, claims Holliday (1999), avoids culturist ethnic, national or international stereotyping. It is also less normative and more flexible, being ‘the sum total of all the processes, happenings or activities in which a given set of people habitually engage’ (Clark & Gieve 2006, p. 64). Studies on the influence of small culture (e.g. classroom culture) on a certain practices (e.g. critical thinking), therefore, have attracted researchers’ attention (Jones 2005; Schendel 2015; Tian & Low 2011; Tsui 2001).

### **2.3.2 Critical thinking and culture**

The relationship between critical thinking and culture is considered a vital topic worthy of exploration (Davies & Barnett 2015). Often seen as an important goal of Western higher education (Barnett 1997; Norris 1985), critical thinking has been argued as a social practice rooted in Western cultures, one that has proven very difficult for students from Asian and other non-Western cultures to learn and use (Atkinson 1997; Fox 1994). This line of thought has led to the argument for non-Western students' deficiencies in critical thinking, and to questioning the appropriateness of critical thinking for students from non-Western cultural backgrounds (Lee & Carrasquillo 2006; Robertson et al. 2000). Several scholars have explored the suitability and applicability of critical thinking in non-Western cultures, such as Asian or Arabic traditions (see Bali 2015; Dong 2015).

Among the discussions about critical thinking difference between Western and non-Western cultures and people, the Asian-Western comparison has drawn much research attention (Li 2003). This section of the study, which explores critical thinking practice in an Asian context, examines and questions the 'Asian/Western' dichotomy when examining the cultural influence of critical thinking in higher education. The following section examines the relationships between critical thinking and Western cultures, and critical thinking and Asian cultures. As suggested in the Introduction chapter, the use of such terms as East, Eastern, West, Western, Asia, Asian, or Confucian is used for illustrative purposes. I concede the complexities and diversities of such terms in discussing cultural differences (Ryan & Louie 2007).

### **2.3.3 Is critical thinking representative of Western thinking and culture?**

Critical thinking is widely considered to be very much a Western concept (Atkinson 1997; Canagarajah 2002; Pennycook 2007) that originated from the

thought of ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato (Thayer-Bacon 2000). According to Tweed and Lehman (2002), Socrates tended to question and evaluate his own and others' beliefs and knowledge. Overt questioning and argumentation are two characteristics at times deemed peculiar to Western classrooms. In Western cultures, critical thinking is frequently associated with volunteering questions and answers in class, expressing opinions, critiquing instructors or textbooks, challenging others' ideas, or actively participating in classroom discussions (Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010).

Some authors, Bali (2015) and Dong (2015), among them, analysed Western thought patterns to explain the origins of critical thinking. Bali (2015), who argues the relevance of Western thought to the common traits found in critical thinking definitions in the North American tradition, states that critical thinking is composed of a set of cognitive skills and dispositions. He draws upon Nisbett et al.'s (2001) observation vis-à-vis the differences between Asian and Western thinking. Nisbett et al. consider Asian thinking

to be holistic, attending to the entire field and assigning causality to it, making relatively little use of categories and formal logic, and relying on 'dialectical' reasoning, whereas Westerners are more analytic, paying attention primarily to the object and the categories to which it belongs and using rules, including formal logic, to understand its behaviour. (p. 291)

For Bali (2015), the analytic tradition in Western thought is congruent with critical thinking. Zhou and Pederson (2012) associate critical thinking with core Western values, such as individualism and science exploration, which foregrounds skills such as analytical thinking, active thinking and abstract reasoning.

Critical thinking is construed as a social practice 'rather than being a well-explicated and educationally usable concept' (Atkinson 1997, p. 72). Discussing the practice of critical thinking in TESOL, Atkinson (1997) asserts that critical thinking is a social construct rooted in Western culture. He further suggests, however, that critical thinking is based on assumptions and habits of mind deriving from Western culture and that this way of thinking is considered the most sophisticated, intelligent and efficient by only a tiny fraction of the world's peoples. Atkinson adds that critical thinking has an unconscious nature; that is, people [Westerners] exercise critical thinking naturally and unconsciously. Even though he rejects notions of superiority of Western thought, his argument effectively implies that cultures other than Western ones are not habituated to practising critical thinking.

Atkinson (1997) highlights the differences between Western and non-Western traditional norms in terms of individualism, self-expression, and the use of language for learning. He argues for the pre-eminence of critical thinking in Western cultures, according to the above features. For Atkinson,

notions of the primacy of the individual and their consequences underlie the social practice of critical thinking at a fundamental level ... The very concept of critical thinking presupposes that individual conflict and dis-sensus are a social reality, if not a tool for achieving socially desirable ends, while thinking assumes the locus of thought to be within the individual. (p. 80)

Regarding self-expression, Atkinson (1997, p. 82) asserts that Western cultures encourage the direct expression of ego via language, which 'seems to be substantially proscribed in many cultures'. Atkinson (1997) quotes Scollon's (1991, p. 4, in Atkinson 1997) observation that: 'The stance of self-expression ... is so productive in North America because it is so squarely based on the Western, individualist sense of self'. The cultural difference in the use of language explicitly

to affect thinking and learning is the third premise that Atkinson (1997) uses to argue for the exclusivity of critical thinking in Western cultures. He notes that talking to others casually is a notion typical of American people, while being reticent and quiet is commonly found in Asian groups. Arguing that ‘verbal evidence of critical thinking is the surest sign that someone is a critical thinker or that critical thinking has taken place’, Atkinson (1997, p. 83), insists that critical thinking is a practice common to Westerners.

Some researchers (e.g. Egege & Kutieleh 2004; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010; Turner 2006) argue that critical thinking has been normally substantiated in Western contexts based on forms of expression rather than on matters of intellectual substance (Egege & Kutieleh 2004). Lun et al. (2010) claim that what has been associated with critical thinking is concern for learners’ behavioural expression: this seems appropriate for Western people. By contrast, according to Turner (2006), critical thinking should be understood as ‘reflecting on existing knowledge in a relational manner and reconsidering information from the perspective of newer knowledge gained’ (p. 9). This line of argument implies that critical thinking may be supra-cultural and might find a fit within ‘typical’ Asian cultures.

#### ***2.3.4 Is critical thinking embedded in Asian culture/s?***

Assertions that critical thinking is exclusively a Western construct and that Asian students are deficient in critical thinking, have been counter-argued. Three trajectories of research can be discerned: theoretical studies of the existence of critical thinking in Confucian thought (Kim 2003; Lam 2016; Li & Wegerif 2014; Tian & Low 2011), empirical studies on critical thinking practice in Asian contexts (Tan 2013), and critical thinking performance of Asian students (Stapleton 2002). These authors have collectively made worthy contributions regarding Asian

thought on critical thinking (see also Tan 2013; Yoneyama 2012). Studies of factors affecting critical thinking practices among Asian students or in Asian contexts have also lent their voices in support of the potential of critical thinking practices in non-Western contexts. The following sections explore each of the above-mentioned research trends.

Since most East Asian cultures are influenced by Confucianism to some degree (Thanh 2010), researchers – in their attempts to demonstrate the existence of critical thinking in Asian cultures – have based their arguments on analyses of Confucius' thought and ideology (See Kim 2003; Lam 2016; Li 2015; Li & Wegerif 2014; Tian & Low 2011). Lam (2016), for example, argues for the logic and rationality of Confucius' thought. According to Lam, analogical argumentation, a common feature in Confucian thinking, is evidence of rationality. Confucianism has its own rational norms: benevolence, righteousness, ritual and wisdom. Lam (2016) concludes that the use of 'logical thinking' or 'rational thinking' to distinguish Western from Chinese or Confucian cultures is inappropriate and misleading. Confucius is argued to have effectively advocated critical thinking by emphasising reflective thinking, inquiry, deep thinking, and equality between students and teachers (Kim 2003).

Rather than arguing that Asian cultures do not abide critical thinking, some researchers suggest that the expression of critical thinking in Asian cultures assumes a different form. Cortazzi (1996, in Kennedy 2002), rather than labelling Chinese students 'passive', considers them reflective. They are less talkative than their Western counterparts because they value thoughtful questions with sound reflection. In line with this thought, Li (2015, p. 51) contends that the thinking that Confucius advocated and practised was 'reflective' and 'correlative', yet different from critical thinking or creative thinking as constructed in the West. Kim (2002),

who employed the think-aloud method to capture what the students thought in class, concludes from the experiment conducted on the relationship between talking and thinking that Asian students remain silent in the classroom simply because they are cognitively engaged. She suggests that 'the assumption of talking as a good tool for better thinking may not apply for people who do not share the same set of assumptions' (Kim 2002, p. 839). The above comments seem to support Chalmers and Volet's (1997) and Kumaravadivelu's (2003) assertions that the claims about Asian students' critical thinking are misconceptions and stereotypes. Perhaps further confounding this, certain Asian jurisdictions appear to excel in international tests (Biggs 1994). Such results are not conclusive, as related associated assessment regimes have been criticised for testing lower-level cognitions (Sjøberg 2015), which puts in question the West's claim to its own practice of critical thinking. The results do, however, challenge notions that Asian students are incapable of critical thought.

Nevertheless, evidence of critical thinking among Chinese students is less than compelling (Tian & Low 2011). This comment may also hold true for other Confucius-heritage cultures. Tian and Low (2011, p. 68) maintain that research needs to 'look in more detail at the impact of recent cultural history, and especially current educational practices and students' learning context, on the thinking habits and preferences of Chinese students'. Dong (2015) argues that culture plays an important role in hindering critical thinking education in China, albeit in a different way from what might be assumed. He asserts that, contrary to the arguments presented in the literature, traditional collectivism is not a barrier impeding the development of critical thinking education in China. According to Dong (2015), an implicit dogmatism about truth and knowledge constitutes the internal and

persistent impediments to critical thinking education in such a context: the cognitive authority of knowledge induces passivity in students.

A culturally contextual approach to critical thinking has met with some support. Egege and Kutieleh (2004) maintain that academic history and traditions strongly influence how people understand critical thinking. They argue that what counts as critical thinking in the West is not universal. This contention appears to have some empirical backing. In a study of the adaptation of East Asian Master's/postgraduate students to western norms of critical thinking and argumentation in the United Kingdom, Durkin (2008) found that East Asian students opted for a 'middle way' (Nagarjuna & Kalupahana 1986). After some time of exposure to the scholastic culture in the UK, the students became competent in critical thinking and developed expertise in this skill. However, they were found to consciously refuse to acculturate this pattern of thinking: they resisted taking part in a 'wrestling debate' (Durkin 2008, p. 23). Durkin (2008) argues that East Asian students prefer 'a conciliatory approach which allows ample space for diversity of opinions' or a 'sensitive openness to another's viewpoints' (p. 23). Tan (2013) concludes that critical thinking practised in China has its own characteristics, which she alludes to as the 'Chinese-style critical thinking'. This form combines critical thinking with exam preparation. Furthermore, while exercising critical thinking, Chinese students logically arrive at a reasonable conclusion which is socially and culturally acceptable in a Chinese context. This might contradict Western critical thinking which demands challenging the status quo (Benesch 1993). It may thus be suggested that critical thinking is understood and practised differently in different cultures.

Yoneyama (2012, p. 240), who sees critical thinking in its deepest sense as connected knowing, argues for the contribution of an Asian emphasis on empathy

and positive human relationships to the understanding of critical thinking. For Yoneyama (2012) and Clinchy (1994), critical thinking involves not only logical analysis, but also a sense of connectedness with oneself and another. Critical thinking, in this sense, means a collaborative endeavour among critical thinkers as they try to understand each other's viewpoint by reflecting upon their own points of view. Durkin's (2008) discussion of Asian students' 'middle way' critical thinking is indicative of this 'Asian' characteristic. According to Durkin (2008), the students considered it important to have empathy for another who holds a different view, while at the same time trying to engage in meaningful discussion.

Regardless of critical thinking's origins, the question of whether critical thinking is 'at home' in non-Western (Asian in this thesis) cultures has drawn the attention of numerous researchers, as outlined above. The question may prove productive, as it demands answers to questions about the extent and manner in which critical thinking can be nurtured in a non-Western context.

### ***2.3.5 Does, or should, critical thinking operate regardless of culture?***

Given that critical thinking is a concept developed and widely practised in the Western world (Barnett 1997), the promotion of critical thinking in non-Western cultures, including Asian cultures, may be seen as a form of 'cultural invasion' (Yoneyama 2012, p. 238) or neo-colonialism (Pennycook 2007). In education, neo-colonialism tends to view everything connected with Western education as superior and applies everything from 'the West' to 'the Rest' (Rizvi, Lingard & Lavia 2006). For example, Pennycook (2007, pp. 18-19) discusses the concepts of 'Occidentalism' and 'Orientalism', or 'the Self' and 'the Other' as cultural constructs of colonialism in the context of English language teaching (ELT). According to Pennycook (2007), the Occidentalist or 'the Self' refers to the image of the British people and the benefits and glories of the English language. The

Orientalist signifies the cultures and characters of those who learn English. The cultural constructs of neo-colonialism have engendered multiple discourses in education, including the construction of Asian learners as passive, rote and uncreative memorisers (Pennycook 2007). This discourse has given rise to controversial arguments concerning learners from different cultures (e.g. Western and Asian) with particular emphasis on aspects such as their learning approaches (Biggs & Watkins 1996; Marton 1983), learning autonomy (Holec 1979), and critical thinking ability (Atkinson 1997; Ennis 1985; Paul 1992).

The common conception that Western learning theories or Western learners are superior to those of the East has been subjected to scholarly criticism (Biggs 1994; Ha 2004; Pennycook 2007). When Western ideas are constructed as the standard, Asian students' ways of learning are often interpreted in deficit terms (Clark & Gieve 2006; Volet & Renshaw 1996), which often leads to a stereotypical account of the teaching and learning practices in Asian cultures (Cheng 2000; Kumaravadivelu 2003). The term 'deficit' model finds currency when comparative researchers come from a perspective that privileges Western standards, and any differences from that standard are perceived as aberrations. Ha and Li (2014) provide the example of Chinese students and silence. The deficit model tends to stereotype these students as passive learners who are reluctant to speak in the classroom. In this model, their reticence is often linked to: obedience; lack of critical thinking; absence of spontaneous oral participation; rigid and traditional approaches including those to education; and, reluctance to think laterally (Ballard & Clanchy 1997; Samuelowicz 1987).

In reality, the view about Western preference for critical thinking has been well critiqued (Biggs 1994; Ryan & Louie 2007). In the process, the criticism of Western or Confucian cultures as stable and fixed across time and space has been

questioned (Dong 2015; Ryan & Louie 2007). According to Ryan and Louie (2007), the stereotyping of Western education across time and space and the characterisation of Western students as assertive and independent critical thinkers is as problematic as the stereotyped image of reticent, uncritical Asian or Confucian students. These authors assert that Western students may not invariably hold these attributes as they derive from their social and cultural contexts, which are constantly changing.

Applying policies across cultures without recognising their distinctive social and cultural dimensions runs the risk of ‘false universalism’ (Rose & Mackenzie 1991, p. 450). As Phuong-Mai et al. (2009) argue regarding the application of cooperative learning in Vietnam, if educators are to adapt Western theories and practices, they need to apply them in the classroom with rigorous research and consideration. Attention should be paid to cultural aspects of pedagogy. The direct implantation of pedagogic practices is likely to prove problematic, whether from East to West or West to East. The application of critical thinking in an Asian context such as Vietnam must pay particular attention to its cultural appropriateness.

A two-way or both-ways approach has been mooted as one solution to the question of what is the appropriate way to develop critical thinking in such contexts by Chirgwin and Huijser (2015). A both-ways framework requires an understanding not only of Western worldviews, but also those of a range of other Indigenous communities. Chirgwin and Huijser (2015), who explored the practices of critical thinking in Indigenous higher education in Australia, found that the both-ways approach could be applied to critical thinking, and could overcome some of the potential conflict and ambivalence that has marked Indigenous Australian’s attitudes towards Western academia.

### **2.3.6 Empirical studies of Asian students' critical thinking**

Researchers (e.g. Jones 2005; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010) have conducted empirical studies to identify the possible factors influencing Chinese students' low level of critical thinking when they studied in international education contexts. Jones (2005) examined the influence of the teaching and learning context on critical thinking in a cross-cultural study of Chinese-speaking international students and English-speaking local students, and found that the two groups showed no difference in their descriptions of critical thinking tasks. The Chinese-speaking students were not found to be more reluctant to engage in critical thinking than their local peers. Jones, attributing these findings to the clear teaching guidelines and assessment task, concluded that 'critical thinking is limited not by cultural background but by [teaching and learning] context' (Jones 2005, p. 351). The quantitative results of Lun et al.'s (2010) research drew the same conclusion: the difference in critical thinking between New Zealand European students and Chinese students studying in New Zealand was not a matter of culture; their level of English proficiency discouraged the students from overtly expressing their critical thinking in the classroom. These small-scale studies do not necessarily substantiate the existence of critical thinking in Asian contexts, but provide evidence suggesting its practice.

Studies (e.g. Mok 2010; Tan 2013; Thunnithet 2011) that have investigated critical thinking practices in Asian educational contexts revealed a clear, albeit limited, picture of critical thinking teaching and learning in this context. Tan (2013) and Thunnithet (2011) found evidence of critical thinking in the teaching and learning in Chinese and Thai contexts, respectively. Tan's (2013) observation of a Chinese language class at a senior secondary school in Shanghai, China, identified some elements of critical thinking in practice. Drawing upon Lipman's (1987)

definition of critical thinking, Tan (2013) found that the lesson featured some elements of critical thinking: the lesson necessitated a judgment which relied on certain criteria (e.g. standards of an essay), was self-correcting (e.g. compared and contrasted, and pointed out the errors in the students' own thesis statement) and was sensitive to context (e.g. differentiated between nuanced perspectives or points of view). Subsequent to this evidence of critical thinking practice, Tan recommended a 'Chinese-style' critical thinking (Tan 2013, p. 16) that combines critical thinking and exam preparation, and helps students understand how they reach a conclusion rather than opposing or challenging said conclusion.

Thunnithet (2011) conducted a longitudinal study on criticality development in English Literature classes in an undergraduate English program in Thailand. Consistent with Tan's (2013) study, Thunnithet (2011) observed opportunities for the students' criticality development, and the teachers' assistance and encouragement to promote this ability in the research context. Despite positive evidence of criticality development, Thunnithet (2011) identified certain impediments to critical thinking, including aspects of traditional Thai cultural values and characteristics, some characteristics of the learning and teaching environment, and some limitations on intellectual resources such as background knowledge or knowledge of critical thinking standards and language ability.

Contrary to the positive picture of critical thinking practices in Tan's (2013) and Thunnithet's (2011) studies, Mok (2010) found very little teaching of critical thinking in her research. Mok (2010) attempted to discern if a critical thinking syllabus was translated into the classroom practices of some English teachers at a secondary school in Hong Kong. Her analysis of 1600 minutes of classroom recordings and five teacher interview transcripts revealed that no teachers perceived critical thinking as an objective of learning. The teacher participants did

not implement the critical thinking syllabus because they believed that 'changes had to be made in the school and broader contexts before the critical thinking syllabus could be successfully implemented' (p. 283).

The investigation of critical thinking practice in the education systems in Asian contexts provides a view of the applicability of critical thinking in Asia. In order to confirm or refute Asian students' ability to think critically and whether critical thinking can be taught in Asian classrooms, more research into the practice of critical thinking in this context is necessary.

In short, the literature on the relationship between cultures and critical thinking suggests the potential for critical thinking in Asian contexts. The Confucian heritage in Asian cultures unarguably exerts a certain influence on critical thinking practices; however, other possible factors potentially affect the exercise of critical thinking in such contexts. As in Tuyet's (2012) argument against the over-generalisation of a passive learning style of Asian students, the decisive factors affecting student learning may derive from 'the specific educational system, its requirements, the workload placed on students and also related issues of curricula, exams, teaching methodology and other specific problems related to student study context and environment' (Tuyet 2012, p. 64). Similar constraints are common to any system, 'Eastern' or 'Western' alike. There has been little research that comprehensively investigates the practices of critical thinking in an Asian context to identify and examine its affordances and barriers.

### ***2.3.7 Cultural features influencing Vietnamese classrooms***

Vietnam is considered to conform to Confucian-heritage norms (Phuong-Mai, Terlouw & Pilot 2005), as will be discussed further. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2001), Vietnam is one of a group of cultures which score high in

collectivism, power distance, certainty and feminism. Although Hofstede and Hofstede's (2001) work has faced claims of superficiality and essentialism, their research offers some useful insights for a study such as mine. In the following sections, I examine two cultural features influencing teaching and learning in Vietnam: Confucianism, and collectivism.

#### **2.3.7.1 Confucianism**

While the extent to which the following traits can be ascribed to Confucius is difficult to ascertain, it seems that certain ways of operating in classrooms appear to be heavily influenced by Confucianism. The tradition of respecting teachers ('tôn sư trọng đạo' – 'Respect the teacher, value morality') is nurtured in Vietnamese classrooms (Dung 2006; Ellis 1994). Vietnamese students regard their teachers as superior, and construe that knowledge is to be promulgated by teachers (Huong 2015). This cultural trait underpins Vietnamese students' reluctance to question ideas or express their opinions or individual preferences. Since remaining quiet in class demonstrates respect for teachers, interrupting or challenging teachers is not typical of Vietnamese culture or classrooms (Thanh 2007). Thus, in Vietnam teachers tend to be active knowledge transmitters and students tend to be passive knowledge receivers (Wang 2003).

Confucian heritage also defines another role for teachers: a moral model. Teachers teach not only knowledge but also how to behave in life: 'In Vietnam ... tradition dictates that teachers are honoured and respected, even more than one's parents. The teacher guides the students not only in academic matters, but also in moral behaviour' (Kramsch & Sullivan 1996, p. 206). This traditional role of teachers in Vietnam impels students to respect their teachers.

### **2.3.7.2 Collectivism**

As the terms suggest, individualistic societies privilege the individual, while collective societies focus on ‘the group’. In collectivist societies, harmony is valued among the members of a group; therefore, when interacting in different situations, students tend to avoid drawing attention to themselves. They do not wish to cause conflict or offence by appearing superior or more intelligent than other members of the group (Yamachi 1998). Thus, students try to ‘build on each other’s responses’ in collaborative ways; as a result, the atmosphere is not competitive among individuals, but collaborative among group members. The students set out to establish ‘collaboration of the group as a whole’ (Kramsch & Sullivan 1996, p. 203). Yamachi (1998) and Kramsch and Sullivan (1996), who used Vietnam as an example, pointed out that Vietnamese learners of English customarily answer their teachers’ questions in chorus.

Arguing that Vietnamese people appreciate harmony among members of in-groups, Le Viet Dung (2002) nominated conformity as an important characteristic of Vietnamese people. When communicating with members of the same group, people are expected to maintain harmony and to compromise. They are not expected to behave ostentatiously. They avoid criticising others to their face, especially in front of others, as that might destroy harmony. Should they do this, this would be seen as destroying the collectivistic spirit.

The concept of ‘face’ (Brown & Levinson 1987) is highly protected in cultures which value collectivism (Dong 2015; Hofstede 1986). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face is expressed in the individual’s desire for approval, and freedom from imposition. In Confucian heritage cultures, however, the concept of face is understood as the harmony of individual behaviour with the judgment and acceptance of other people, rather than the pursuit of individual desires (Nhung

2007; Nhung 2014a; Trang 2014b). In Vietnamese culture, people have a strong orientation towards face protection and an awareness of possible social disapproval (Nhung 2014a). They tend to conceal any aspect of their behaviour they think may incur social criticism, and damage their face or the face of the community they belong to. Therefore, face presents a major challenge to the introduction of interactive learning modes among Vietnamese students (Trang 2014b; Watson 1999; Yates & Nguyen 2012).

In summary, cultural dimensions in general and those of Vietnamese culture in particular are considered to influence the practice of teaching and learning in Vietnam. While the Confucian tradition of respecting teachers seems to widen the gap in teacher-student status and relationship, the collectivist spirit, which puts high value on harmony making and face saving, influences the student-student interaction. These cultural traditions appear to hinder classroom behaviours which are often associated with critical thinking (as discussed in Section 2.3.3). The practice of critical thinking in the classroom is accordingly affected by such features.

### ***2.3.8 Critical thinking in Vietnamese classrooms***

It is commonly claimed that Vietnamese students lack critical thinking or are passive learners. The culture of learning and teaching in Vietnam is often described as being teacher-centred, given its predilection for rote learning or memorisation (Canh 2011). The extant teaching and learning style is noted to have existed throughout Vietnamese educational history. Huyen (2002, in Canh 2011, p. 13) describes the Vietnamese teaching and learning strategies of days past as follows:

Very little attention was given to developing the critical spirit which was of no avail in a system based on the absolute respect of books ... The students, due to being constantly in this passive role, became incapable of reflection and personal judgment.

Recently, Vietnamese education has been recently critiqued for its quality (Dai 2008; Hao 2008). Vietnamese educational quality is viewed as low both in terms of knowledge and methodology, especially regarding the resultant practical ability and application on the part of the students (Kieu & Ch  u 2000). The Vietnamese education system fails to equip students with critical thinking and creativity (Hao 2008). As Canh (2011, p. 17) comments: 'As in the past, learners emphasise repetition, recitation, memorisation of factual information from the textbook while they are uncritical of the information they receive from their teachers or from the textbook.' It would seem incontrovertible from the above comments that Vietnamese students are deemed unfamiliar with critical thinking practice.

Empirical studies of students' expectations, however, show that Vietnamese students harbour a desire to express their thoughts orally and to share their experiences with their class (Littlewood 2000; Tomlinson & Dat 2004). The problem appears to be attributable to a tradition of teaching in Vietnam. In Tomlinson and Dat's (2004) study, the students admitted that they experienced a classroom atmosphere that did not stimulate discussion. Hoa (2009, p. 209) observed an absence of critical dimensions in Vietnamese foreign language classes: 'English lessons do not attempt to link language study with their life outside the classroom ... Vietnamese students are not familiar with a style of teaching that persistently ask[s] them to examine the reasons for their actions and question themselves, their peers and experts.' However, when given the opportunity, it appears that Vietnamese students can perform critical thinking-based tasks quite well. Hoa

(2009), who undertook an experimental study using problem posing pedagogy in an EFL Speaking class, found that the students were very eager to participate. Moreover, some students were very critical in their thinking. It can be inferred from those studies that the Vietnamese teaching traditions alienate students from critical thinking activities. However, to date there has been no research into the teaching and learning in a Vietnamese tertiary context to determine whether Vietnamese teachers and students practise critical thinking.

### **2.3.9 Summary**

In short, critical thinking does embody numerous Western traits even though it cannot claim exclusively Western antecedents. By definition, it might be relatively new in Confucian contexts; however, Confucius indeed promoted a critical spirit in his philosophy. The discussion of the relation between critical thinking and cultures raises the awareness of the dangers of superimposing cultural values.

Cross-cultural research into the influence of culture on the educational practice of critical thinking has revealed that, to some extent, culture influences the conceptions and practices of critical thinking (Jones 2005) and associated skills and dispositions (Tiwari et al. 2006) differentially in students from Western and Asian traditions. However, according to Lun, Fischer and Ward (2010, p. ii), culture ‘does not necessarily impede the application of critical thinking instruction in international classrooms’. Davidson (1998) notes that critical thinking is still essential at a higher level of discourse despite being less practised in some cultures.

## **2.4 Critical thinking and language education**

### **2.4.1 Critical thinking: discipline-specific or discipline-generic?**

A debate exists in the literature as to whether critical thinking should be conceptualised as (a) a set of general cognitive skills that applies across fields or

subjects (Ennis 1989), or (b) as a list of skills that varies as a function of their contextual fields or subjects of study (McPeck 1981, 1990a). The debate focuses on questions of generalisability, applicability and transferability of critical thinking. The two schools of thought (generic and subject-specific) focus on the role of background knowledge, the transferability of critical thinking dispositions and abilities from one domain to another and the effectiveness of general critical thinking instruction.

Scholars who support the generalist position (e.g. Ennis 1989; Facione 1990; Paul 1993) argue that critical thinking comprises a defined set of constitutive skills which can be applied across all academic disciplines. General thinking skills, therefore, can be taught in isolation, with little attention to content. Subscription to generic critical thinking is the theoretical foundation of many critical thinking programs that offer stand-alone critical thinking courses designed to develop in students a set of critical thinking dispositions, habits and abilities. Consistent with the application of a generic critical thinking approach is the field of critical thinking tests (e.g. Cornell CT Tests, The California CT Skills Test: College level, Ennis-Weir CT Essay Test, Watson-Glaser CT Appraisal, etc., See more in Ennis 1993). Candidates from any disciplinary background may take these tests.

By contrast, McPeck – the main proponent of subject specificity – argues that there can be no completely general set of skills that can be applied across all fields or domains. For McPeck (1981), thinking must be about something. Thinking derives from sufficient knowledge or information specific to a field or subject. The subject specificity of critical thinking is also explained by the argument that valid reasons and beliefs in one field may not count as significant in another. The development of students' critical thinking ability, therefore, is always best pursued within the context of their study within disciplines (McPeck 1990a). Consistent with

this view, McPeck (1981) casts doubt on the effectiveness of any general critical thinking instruction. He gives more credence to the infusion of teaching critical thinking into teaching content.

Other scholars (Davies 2006; Moore 2004; Siegel 1991; Ten Dam & Volman 2004), however, support either generalist or specific positions, less absolutely than Ennis or McPeck. These scholars, while aware of the role of subject-specific content knowledge, subscribe to the generalisability of critical thinking. They posit that while knowledge and cognitive skills are interdependent, certain general principles of critical thinking exist and transcend specific subjects and are applicable to a range of disciplines and problems (Moore 2004; Ten Dam & Volman 2004). Siegel (1991) takes the position that the skills and criteria for testing someone's reasoning ability are partly generalisable. Siegel analyses the generalisability of critical thinking by distinguishing its aspects of skills, epistemology underlying critical thinking and critical spirit. Siegel concludes that critical thinking is fully generalisable in terms of its epistemology and critical spirit. Davies (2006) maintains that underlying any diversity is a set of core thinking skills, which 'can be applied to the forms of discourse of the disciplines' (Davies 2006, p. 181). Brown (1997, in Ten Dam & Volman 2004) supports the view that critical thinking must be taught in the context of specific subject matter, in such a way that transfers to other domains is possible. She argues that one cannot expect children to progress in the development of thinking unless they are given something to think about; that is, unless they are engaged in serious learning about meaningful, rich, domain-specific subject matter.

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 and their practices of critical thinking in this field

are expected to be specific to that field. This study investigates current practices of critical thinking in EFL classes at a university in Vietnam. It is consonant with Johnston et al.'s (2011) argument 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). Language education in the research context is similar to the Modern Languages program in Johnston et al.'s (2011) study; hence, their conclusion about field-specific aspects of criticality is a useful reference for this study.

#### ***2.4.2 The role of critical thinking in language education***

Critical thinking has recently been recognised as an important component of language education (Alnofaie 2013; Bredella & Richter 2004; Brumfit et al. 2005; Dong 2006; Gunawardena & Petraki 2014; Houghton & Yamada 2012; Kabilan 2000; Morton 2013; Richard 2003; Thadphoothon & Jones 2004; Waters 2006). Kabilan (2000) observes that a learner's proficiency in a language is reflected in his/her competence not only in using the language and knowing its meaning, but also using creative and critical thinking through that language. In the context of Modern Languages teaching in the UK, Brumfit et al. (2005) stress the benefits of teaching students to think. According to these authors, critical thinking can help students to communicate in the new language, to produce various types of spoken and written language, and to demonstrate creativity in using the foreign language. Similarly, Daud and Hustin (2004) consider critical thinking-focused tasks in language classes as good platforms to promote, motivate, and stimulate language acquisition and increase students' language competence.

The role of critical thinking or criticality in foreign language education has been discussed in terms of its instrumental or educational goals (Bredella & Richter

2004). As quoted previously, Bredella and Richter (2004) use part of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis to argue for the necessity of critical thinking in foreign language learning.

According to the SWH (Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis), learning and studying a foreign language does not only have an instrumental goal but also an important educational one. It can make us aware of the constraints of our language and world view and allow us to see what we have in common with other forms of speaking and thinking on deeper levels (p. 523).

If foreign language learning focuses exclusively on language skills and proficiency, it merely fulfils an instrumental goal (Brumfit et al. 2005; Houghton & Yamada 2012; Yamada 2010), even though one might argue that instrumental goals are also educational. According to Houghton and Yamada (2012, p. 35), much of the current language curriculum inclines towards mainly skill- and knowledge-oriented teaching and learning, especially in the earlier stages. Consequently, Houghton and Yamada express fears that the language curriculum lacks educational aims due to over-emphasis on skills and lack of ‘content’ with a potential for the development of criticality.

There have been a number of studies on the contribution of language component and content component to critical thinking development (Brumfit et al. 2005; Houghton & Yamada 2012; Pally 1997; Yamada 2010). The term ‘content’ curriculum refers to literary, social and political studies relating to the world of the target language native speakers. The language curriculum equips learners with linguistic tools (Brumfit et al. 2005). Generally speaking, beginners’ level courses focus more on the usage of linguistic form, while higher levels focus more on content. According to Houghton and Yamada (2012, p. 155), focusing on content brings the nature of language study closer to that of an academic discipline, while

focusing on usage approximates it to the acquisition of practical and instrumental skills. With empirical evidence of the opportunities for criticality development in the beginner language course, however, Yamada (2010) concludes that foreign language learning itself can contribute to the development of criticality; moreover, it is possible to develop criticality for language learners, even at the beginner stages. As for the role of content component, the Criticality Project at the University of Southampton concluded that the content elements of intermediate-to-advanced level language studies and academic content subjects make a significant contribution to the development of criticality (Brumfit et al. 2005).

The role of critical thinking in English language education is further confirmed when English is seen as 'no longer merely a language but a cultural tool which sets certain norms or helps learners adjust themselves according to the world's needs and changes depending on how they use it' (Sung 2012, p. 35). In this sense, in today's education, English is charged with being a critical tool for expanding democracy and world citizenship (Ahn 2015; Sung 2012). Accordingly, Sung (2012) has called for a critical EFL pedagogy, whose function is to engage in critical dialogue and action related to diverse political, sociocultural, economic, and environmental issues and events.

#### ***2.4.3 The role of language and critical thinking***

Language and thought are closely interrelated. Vygotsky (2012) claimed that communication through language exercises powerful effects on thought by transferring ideas from one mind to another mind. Language helps learners to move into and through the next layer of knowledge or understanding. Language, according to Vygotsky, serves to mediate higher order thinking. This argument may help answer the question about whether improved language ability (L1 or L2) will improve critical thinking. To the best of my knowledge, however, no research

has touched on this question. While the causal relationship between improved language and critical thinking development is not clear yet, a more persuasive argument may be that the improvement of language will improve the quality of critical thinking communication. This in itself arguably validates L2 learning as a site for critical thinking development. Articulating one's thoughts through language can be seen as a subset of taking action in the world in Barnett's (1997) framework of criticality.

The operation of such a higher order thinking process as critical thinking in the first language, and in subsequent ones, has attracted the attention of several researchers (See Floyd 2011; Luk & Lin 2014; Paton 2011; Wallace 2002). Floyd (2011) concludes from her review of the relationship between language and critical thinking performance that most complex cognitive functions appear to be impaired by operating in a second or subsequent language. Consistent with Floyd's (2011) conclusion, Paton (2011) was cognisant of the differences in critical thinking operation in a language other than the first language. Paton (2011) delineated this difference:

The comparative lack of 'critical' quality in the academic work of Asian international students in universities where English is the medium of instruction is due to the difficulties of study in the context of edge of knowledge discourse in a second, third, or fourth language. (p. 27)

Floyd (2011) and Luk and Lin (2014) claim that students studying in an L2 struggled to perform at the same level as in their L1. In Floyd's (2011) study, two groups of Chinese students undertook a critical thinking test in both Chinese and English. The difference between the two groups was in the order of the tests. One group took the first half of the critical thinking test in English, then the second half in Chinese. The second group undertook the first half in Chinese and the second

half in English. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Floyd (2011) found that students in the first group (English, then Chinese) scored better in the second half of the critical thinking test, while the second group of students scored higher in the first half of the test. Floyd's (2011) findings suggest that critical thinking performance is more difficult in an L2 (English, in this case). Similarly, Luk and Lin (2014) observe the differences in critical thinking evident in Chinese (L1) and English (L2) in an ESL class in Hong Kong. The same group of Hong Kong students was observed – they discussed the same topic in Chinese and presented it in English. When analysing the students' literary talk, Luk and Lin (2014) found that the students were able to display some evidence of critical thinking in their L1. Meanwhile, in their L2, the students' talk featured highly-reduced content and lexico-grammatical structures. Although Floyd's (2011) and Luk and Lin's (2014) studies adopted different research approaches, they both confirmed the difficulties in performing critical thinking in an L2. This argument corresponds to Wallace's (2002) assertion that foreign language learners usually have the ability to deploy well-developed literate talk when critiquing a range of texts in their first language, but are often denied the opportunity to develop such discursive resources in the foreign language classroom. Such a stance is defensible, given the primary or competing goal of L2 acquisition.

In ESL or EFL contexts, the students' proficiency in the target language (English) has been empirically found to exert limitations on their critical thinking practice (Grosser & Nel 2013; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010; Manalo, Watanabe & Sheppard 2013; Rashid & Hashim 2008). Manalo, Watanabe and Sheppard (2013), for instance, who investigated the relationship between the students' L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English) in their critical and evaluative thinking practice, found a higher proportion of evaluative sentences in the students' Japanese writing than in their

English writing. Furthermore, the students' Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores were found to be significantly correlated with their English writing scores. Manalo et al. (2013) concluded that the students' English or L2 proficiency could be a limiting factor in the production of evaluative language. In another study, Lun, Fischer and Ward (2010) conducted experimental studies to empirically examine the critical thinking skills of Asian-background and European-background New Zealand students. Lun and colleagues found that New Zealand European students performed significantly better than Asian students in two objective measures of critical thinking: The Halpern critical thinking Assessment using Everyday Situations (Halpern 2007) and The Dialectical Self Scale (Spencer-Rodgers, Srivastara & Peng 2001, in Hamamura, Heine & Paulhus 2008). The study, however, suggested that English proficiency accounted for the difference. They concluded that the difference in critical thinking appeared to be more of a linguistic issue rather than a cultural issue. Consistent with the two previous studies, Grosser and Nel (2013) drew a similar conclusion about the role of language proficiency in the execution of critical thinking. In their study, conducted in a South African context where English was a second language, Grosser and Nel (2013, p. 11) found that 'the students could possibly experience problems with understanding and interpretation in all fields of study where prescribed learning materials and textbooks are mainly in English'.

Thus, in a second or foreign language classroom, target language proficiency plays an important role. Lack of L2 proficiency reduces the person's ability to use higher order strategies such as discourse processing (Koda 2005) and employ deep-learning processes (Kirby, Woodhouse & Ma 1996). L2 learners might encounter difficulties in understanding the meanings of a text, and lack of vocabulary knowledge may cause them to read more slowly than L1 students (McLean &

Ransom 2005). L2 students have been found to devote time to comprehension, but less time on critical reflection (Floyd 2011), which is at Bloom's (1956) lower order ability. Cook (1993, p. 111), therefore, called for consideration of 'the general phenomenon of L2 cognitive deficit' when explaining any research finding suggesting lower performance by L2 users.

#### ***2.4.4 Areas for critical thinking development in foreign language education***

Three categories have been identified as potential areas for the development of critical thinking in a foreign language class: language, process of language learning, and culture (Brumfit et al. 2005; Byrnes 2012; Houghton & Yamada 2012; Thadphoothon & Jones 2004). The language or language awareness dimension assists language learners in developing their criticality by reflecting on the linguistic components of the target language. This means that critical learners use appropriate language to reason. According to Thadphoothon and Jones (2004), when language learners ask appropriate questions or build connections among ideas, they are thinking critically. In other words, learners are expected to question the validity of texts or discourses, and/or judge the ideas of others. They filter knowledge of all sorts through their reasoning in a bid to identify logical flaws and alternative responses instead of accepting knowledge inputs without question.

The language learning process is another component open to the development of criticality. This component requires learners to reflect on their own language learning; for example, on their level of proficiency or on the techniques and strategies they employ to improve their ability. As Yamada (2010, p. 43) observes, learners of Japanese language as an L2 expressed their critical thinking by reflecting on their own learning process to offer critical comments on their peers' hypotheses about the difficulty of the Japanese language. In a group discussion the students in Yamada's (2010) study used their own experience of learning Japanese

as an analysis tool to challenge and question their previously formed hypothesis (e.g. learning Japanese is not especially difficult compared with European languages).

The third component for criticality development in foreign language education suggested by researchers in the field is culture or cultural awareness. L2 learning is considerably compromised if it does not engage culture. Contact with a foreign language can be seen as an encounter with otherness (Houghton & Yamada 2012, p. 58) during which learners notice the similarities and differences between their own culture and that of the target language's native speakers. Learners also have opportunities to reflect on their own cultural assumptions, and to make adjustments to cultural stereotypes. The intercultural awareness skills gained from these processes will familiarise learners with other cultures and encourage them to critically engage with the issues that are raised. The cognitive process of comparison and contrast is, therefore, a condition for critical thinking development in a foreign language class. Incorporating critical thinking into English language learning can also be justified on cultural grounds, to the extent that critical thinking is deemed a Western concept as Barnett (1997) claims.

While the language and language learning process are related to the 'language' component, the culture dimension is part of the 'content' component (Houghton & Yamada 2012). The 'language' and 'content' components have a close relationship regarding criticality development. Learners need good linguistic skills to engage critically with materials in an L2. In addition, in order to operate at the highest level in an L2, learners need to be able to engage with abstract and complex concepts and theories. Given the relationship between language learning and critical thinking and between language itself and critical thinking, researchers (e.g. Kamali & Fahim

2011; Thompson 1999; Wilson 2009) suggest the integration of critical thinking skills to advance or at least complement opportunities for language learning.

#### **2.4.5 Critical thinking in EFL contexts**

Long (2003) argues that critical thinking remains important to Asian learners although some elements of critical thinking may be new to Asian cultures. In recent years, a number of researchers have investigated the issue of teaching and learning critical thinking in non-Western EFL contexts: China (Luk & Lin 2014; Mok 2010; Shen & Yodkhumlu 2012), Iran (Fahim & Sa' eepour 2011; Seker & Komur 2008), Japan (Houghton & Yamada 2012; Stapleton 2001, 2002), Thailand (Jantrasakul 2012; Thunnithet 2011) and Vietnam (Huong 2012; Manh 2009; Trang 2014a). These studies have investigated the issue of critical thinking in different content areas of EFL including Reading Comprehension (Fahim & Sa' eepour 2011), Writing (Dumteeb 2009), Speaking (Huong 2012) and Literature (Thunnithet 2011).

Critical thinking has been taught in language education using various means; for example, using computers in an EFL reading class (Daud & Hustin 2004), reflective audio-taped journals (Dantas-Whitney 2002), dialogical teaching (Benesch 1999), and classroom discussions (Paul & Elder 2002). Positive outcomes are claimed for each of these methods in enhancing EFL university students' critical thinking skills.

Some of the studies affirmed the impact of critical thinking teaching on the students' linguistic competence, vocabulary (Jantrasakul 2012) and reading comprehension (Fahim & Sa' eepour 2011). These studies employed certain interventions using critical thinking-based lessons. They employed various approaches to measure the impact of the intervention. Jantrasakul (2012) used

classroom observation and document collection to assess the enhancement of students' critical thinking, while Fahim and Sa' eepour (2011) employed a quasi-experimental method to measure the students' improvement in English reading comprehension. These studies have made a substantial contribution to the literature.

Factors relating to teachers were also found to affect the development of students' critical thinking. Thunnithet (2011), Dumteeb (2009), and Shen and Yodkhumlue (2012) note that teachers' teaching approaches and questions, as well as questioning techniques play an important role in assisting and encouraging students to think critically. Thunnithet's (2011) and Dumteeb's (2009) exploration of EFL tertiary teachers and students' attitudes towards critical thinking found that both the teachers and the students held positive attitudes towards lessons which aimed to develop critical thinking. This line of research appears closely linked with the research into the impacts of the faculty's attitudes towards and perceptions of critical thinking (Halx & Reybold 2005; Tsui 2001), and teachers' instruction and students' critical thinking performance in first language contexts in the United States (Tsui 1999). These studies further affirm the important role of teachers in promoting critical thinking in the classroom. Ketabi, Zabihi and Ghadiri (2012) state that English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers lack a true understanding of what critical thinking means. While studies of the role of teacher input into critical thinking development are of great significance, it is also important to understand the role of students and how the interaction of factors from both teachers and students may jointly affect critical thinking practice in an EFL context. Studies of critical thinking in EFL contexts, however, have paid little attention to such issues.

### **2.4.6 Summary**

This review of the literature on critical thinking in language education and in Asian EFL contexts demonstrates that they warrant attention. It appears that the researchers have been mainly concerned with the influence of factors from 'small culture' (Tian & Low 2011, p. 72), that is, the teaching and learning context. The focus has shifted from the influence of national culture ('big culture') to the question of whether critical thinking is encouraged and practised in Asian educational contexts. However, the latter question has to date attracted little attention.

## **2.5 Critical thinking instruction**

### **2.5.1 Approaches to critical thinking instruction**

According to Ennis (1989, pp. 4-5), there are four approaches to critical thinking instruction: general, infusion, immersion and mixed. A general approach entails a discrete course to teach the generic principles of critical thinking. This approach separates the teaching of critical thinking from the presentation of the content of a particular subject. The infusion and immersion approaches encourage students to think critically about the subject matter; in effect, critical thinking is incorporated into the learning of the course contents. However the infusion and immersion approaches differ vis-à-vis which generic principles of critical thinking dispositions and abilities are introduced. In the infusion approach, the principles are made explicit; this does not occur in the immersion approach. The mixed approach is a combination of the general approach with either the infusion or immersion approaches.

While there have been studies of the effectiveness of each instructional approach (Niu, Behar-Horenstein & Garvan 2013; Tiruneh, Verburgh & Elen 2014), no consensus has been reached on whether critical thinking skills should be taught

in domain-independent (general) courses or whether they should be integrated within the existing subject-matter courses (Tiruneh, Verburgh & Elen 2014).

Nickerson (1988) clearly elaborated the risks involved in both the general and discipline-embedded approaches:

A risk of teaching a specific aspect of thinking only in a ‘content-free’ way is that the student will acquire some understanding of that aspect but fail to connect that knowledge to the many situations in life in which it could be useful. A risk of teaching the same aspect of thinking only within the context of a [standard subject matter] course is that the student will fail to abstract from the situation what is really context independent and again will not transfer what has been learned to other contexts (p. 34).

The possible merits or drawbacks of each instructional approach relate to the transfer of the learned critical thinking skills to real life situations.

#### **2.5.1.1 Critical thinking instruction strategies and techniques**

There is evidence suggesting that the ability to think critically can be improved through critical thinking instruction (Tiruneh, Verburgh & Elen 2014; Tsui 2002), despite the lack of consensus on the effectiveness of critical thinking teaching strategies (Garside 1996; Halpern 1993; Tiruneh, Verburgh & Elen 2014). Two instructional strategies that are often discussed in the literature are explicit and implicit instruction (Lihong, Ning & Wenshuang 2012; Niu, Behar-Horenstein & Garvan 2013; Plath et al. 1999; Tiruneh, Verburgh & Elen 2014). Explicit or direct strategies involve specific explanation of critical thinking, whereas implicit strategies embed critical thinking without any explicit emphasis on this competence. Having compared the effectiveness of the two strategies on critical thinking development, Tiruneh, Verburgh and Elen (2014) conclude that explicit

instruction in thinking skills appears to consistently result in greater critical thinking improvement than implicit instruction.

Active learning is seen as a means of developing critical thinking skills (Browne & Freeman 2000; Garside 1996; Meyers 1986; Nelson & Crow 2014; Ten Dam & Volman 2004). Browne and Freeman (2000) define active learning as students' engagement with the material and giving consideration and careful evaluation of their own arguments and those of their teachers and peers. According to Meyer (1986), the keys to developing critical thinking are encouraging and welcoming participation rather than passivity, and providing opportunities for emotional engagement with the material. Meyer's observations also highlight the importance of emotional or affective engagement with texts and ideas, as a feature of critical thinking. As Meyer (1986) argues, stimulating students to move from passive to active agents maximises the impact of the material upon the students, thereby provoking them into discussion and evaluation. Active learning helps in the generation of new ideas; moreover, a richer understanding of the material arises naturally from active participation, including engagement with texts and topics, in class (Browne & Keeley 2007).

In addition to active learning techniques such as problem-based learning, group discussions, student-led seminars and role-play, group discussion is widely advocated in the literature (Garside 1996; Ten Dam & Volman 2004; Walker 2003). Discussion facilitates critical thinking because it provides an opportunity for students to check their thinking against each other's. Breaking a class into small groups provides more opportunities for students to interact with each other, think out loud, test their ideas, and see how other students' thinking processes operate. In this way, verbal interactions among group members play a role. According to

Vygotsky (2012), the process of making sense of the world is profoundly influenced by one's interactions with and perceptions of one's environment.

The strength of group discussion in promoting critical thinking has been empirically examined (Fung 2014; Fung & Howe 2014; Garside 1996). Garside (1996) conducted an experimental study to assess the effectiveness of two modes of instruction – lecturing and group discussion – on the students' critical thinking development. His study did not identify significant differences between the two instruction modes in developing critical thinking. However, he (1996) found that group discussion is better than lectures for facilitating the use of higher-level critical thinking skills. Garside also measured the students' differences in learning degree from pre-tests and post-tests and compared the proportion of the answers to the types of questions (lower-level versus higher-level) between the students who received the lecturing mode and those involved in group discussion activities. Fung's (2014), and Fung and Howe's (2014) studies took into consideration some cultural aspects of group work such as the role of group leaders (shepherd leaders) and ground rules.

Browne and Freeman (2000) have argued that the classroom that supports critical thinking usually allows for frequent questions, engagement in active learning, developmental tensions that challenge students to think beyond their comfort zones, and an acknowledgement of the tentative nature of conclusions. Teachers must challenge students' assumptions and help them consider alternative ways of thinking and acting if they hope to encourage critical thinking (Brookfield 2011). Garside (1996) proposed some features of critical thinking classroom activities, including active student participation, meaningful interaction with material, and student-to-student verbal interaction. Smith (1977) noted three kinds of instruction that influenced classroom interaction and, by extension, critical

thinking. They are the extent to which faculty members encouraged, praised or used students' ideas, the amount and cognitive level of student participation in class, and the amount of interaction among students in a given course. Ten Dam and Volman (2004), who conducted a meta-analysis of theoretically informed proposals and empirical studies on the effectiveness of critical thinking instructional strategies, summarised the characteristics of instruction that are most likely to enhance critical thinking as follows: (1) paying attention to the development of the epistemological beliefs of students, (2) promoting active learning, (3) a problem-based curriculum, (4) stimulating interaction between students, and (5) using real-life problems to stimulate motivation.

Various teaching and learning activities to promote critical thinking in class have been suggested in the literature. Tsui (1999), who conducted a quantitative study of the impact of instruction modes on critical thinking development in some universities in the USA, found that instruction modes – not course types – greatly affected progress in critical thinking. The modes of instruction that were found to relate to the students' self-reported growth of critical thinking included: student papers critiqued by an instructor, independent research projects, group projects, class presentations, and essay-style (as opposed to fact-based) exams. In another study, Tsui (2002) noted the effectiveness of writing and class discussion in promoting students' critical thinking. In terms of class observation and interviews with teacher and student participants, Tsui (2002) found that in schools where students' self-reported critical thinking was high, the instructors frequently asked the students to write and discuss in class. Some researchers (e.g. Browne & Keeley 2007; King 1995; Walker 2003) suggest inquiry-based learning as an effective teaching activity for critical thinking development in class. They claim that as it is a

student-centred and active learning approach focused on questioning, it helps to develop an inquiring mind, the hallmark of a critical thinker (King 1995).

Some researchers have highlighted the contribution of material selection to critical thinking development (Ivey & Fisher 2006; Le 2005; Paran 2003; Richard 2003; Shukri & Mukundan 2015; Yang & Gamble 2013). For example, Le (2005) argues that development of materials can lay the foundation for critical thinking. She suggests using texts of genuine interest to students, and texts including knowledge about other cultures. Her suggestion assumes teacher knowledge of students' interests and the correspondence of their interests to the course matter. In an experimental study of the effectiveness of critical thinking-enhanced EFL instruction, Yang and Gamble (2013) identified specific course design principles that are important for developing critical thinking skills in EFL classrooms. The principles include the use of sustained content, the provision of a variety of perspectives and sources, and the use of issue-based and relevant topics. Richard (2003) designed materials to promote critical thinking for EFL learners based on the following conditions:

1. The topic is of interest and relevance to the students.
2. The issue is controversial and clear.
3. The topic is presented with an impact.
4. There are activities to help students recognise and understand different points of view, and then express their own beliefs.
5. The activities include structural support (p. 76).

Topics that deal with controversial issues and multiple perspectives are essential criteria for materials that aim to promote critical thinking.

Scaffolding is seen as a useful technique to assist students' development of critical thinking (Sharma & Hannafin 2004; Wass, Harland & Mercer 2011). As a teaching strategy originating from Vygotsky's '(1987) sociocultural theory and his concept of zone of proximal development, scaffolding is the support a learner receives to attain a goal or engage in a task beyond his/her capability as an individual agent. Consistent with the metaphor, teachers may remove the scaffold when the students master each element of a task. Common scaffolding strategies for facilitating critical thinking include modelling, externalising reflection and metacognition, and Socratic questioning (Sharma & Hannafin 2004).

#### **2.5.1.2 Questioning – a critical thinking instruction technique**

Researchers have recommended a variety of teaching techniques to promote critical thinking in class. Examples of these techniques include asking structured questions that build on students' cognitive skills (Browne & Keeley 2007), modelling critical thinking as an instruction technique (Brookfield 2011; McKeachie & Svinicki 2006), providing ample time for constructive feedback (Tsui 1999), offering enough 'wait time' (Walker 2003), making explicit what is expected of students as critical thinkers (Cromwell 1986; McKeachie & Svinicki 2006), and supportively challenging students to explain and defend their answers (Browne & Freeman 2000).

Questioning has been seen as an important technique to stimulate critical thinking in class (Elder & Paul 1998; Gall 1970; Salvage 1998). Clasen (1990, in Salvage 1998) stresses not only that teacher questioning is the strategy that has the greatest impact on student thinking, but also argues that the depth of student thinking is commensurate with the complexity of questions asked, provided that the questions are within the students' capabilities. This view is shared by Elder and Paul (1998), who argue that thinking is driven not by answers but by questions.

Browne and Keeley (2007) claim that asking the right questions is a demonstration of the ability to think critically. When exploring the importance of questioning in the classroom, researchers have found that teachers spend a large amount of class time asking questions. However, up to 60 per cent of teachers' questions do not stimulate student thinking (Gall 1970) because they are merely factual questions which ask students to recall facts or information.

There are various ways to categorise questions, which are typically categorised as dichotomies. These include closed and open questions (Peacock 1990), display and inferential questions (Long & Sato 1983), lower-order thinking and higher-order thinking questions (Bloom 1956), and outcome-leading and thought-provoking questions (Golding 2011). Table 2.2 presents a summary of the basic features of each type of question.

<i>Types of questions</i>		
<b>Peacock (1990)</b>	<i>Closed questions</i>	<i>Open questions</i>
	Anticipate a small number of acceptable responses	Assume a wide range of acceptable answers
<b>Long and Sato (1983)</b>	<i>Display questions</i>	<i>Inferential questions</i>
	The teacher already knows the answer(s).	The teacher does not know the answer(s).
<b>Bloom (1956)</b>	<i>Lower-order thinking questions</i>	<i>Higher-order thinking questions</i>
	Knowledge, comprehension	Application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation
<b>Golding (2011)</b>	<i>Outcome-leading questions</i>	<i>Thought-encouraging questions</i>
	Get to the answer that is 'predetermined to be right' (Dillon 1994, p. 22), and of factual nature.	Go beyond facts and use knowledge and inference in the exercise of judgment.

**Table 2.2 Types of questions**

By definition, not all types of questions can equally stimulate thinking in the classroom. Open, inferential, higher-order thinking and thought-provoking questions are believed to engage critical thinking more effectively (Dumteeb 2009; Golding 2011; King 1992; MacKnight 2000). The common characteristics of these questions include that they do not ask students to recall pre-determined facts or solutions; instead, they require students to transcend recall of facts to consider them in ways that are different from what is presented explicitly in class or the text (King 1995). Students need to exercise higher-order thinking processes such as analysing, synthesising and evaluating input.

Originally developed by an influential Greek philosopher Socrates, what has been known as Socratic questioning is now widely used to promote critical thinking (Paul & Elder 2008). A firm subscriber to the strength of questioning, Socrates never provided a direct answer to a question; instead, he responded by asking more questions to provide students with more questions to lead themselves to an answer (Tweed & Lehman 2002). The Socratic questioning model suggests asking questions about origin and source; support, reasons, evidence and assumptions; conflicting views; and implications and consequences. Through exploring a problem with such questions, students might reach a more thorough understanding of a problem (Tweed & Lehman 2002).

According to King (1995), Wu (1993), and Dumteeb (2009), language classroom interaction such as teachers' questioning is essential in language teaching because it requires students to exercise cognitive skills and practise the use of the target language. Questioning leads to a sequence of acts, for example, an initiation act, a response act, and an evaluation act. All are considered highly important processes in encouraging students to apply their cognitive skills to encode, transform,

organise, integrate, categorise, store, and call on evidence to formulate their own responses (Dumteeb 2009).

Applying the Socratic questioning model to Asian educational contexts, however, requires caution. According to Tweed (2000), due to differences in cultural practices, culturally Western learners will be more likely than culturally Chinese learners to overtly question knowledge presented by an instructor. In Confucian-heritage cultures, overt questioning has the potential to disrupt social harmony. For teachers who are seen as the authority in a Confucian-heritage culture class, overt questioning of teacher knowledge can threaten social harmony by disrupting the power distance between teachers and students. It could prove inadequate for assessing the students' practice of critical thinking in Asian contexts based solely on the students' questioning behaviour.

### ***2.5.2 Teachers' knowledge of critical thinking instruction***

Given the importance of critical thinking instruction to critical thinking practice and the emphasis on the learned nature of critical thinking, several authors (e.g. Che 2002; Elder & Paul 1998, 2003; Lauer 2005; McCormick, Clark & Raines 2015; Stedman & Adams 2012; Yang & Gamble 2013; Yeh 1999) have recognised the role of teachers' knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction. McCormick et al. (2015), with reference to the relationship between teachers' knowledge of critical thinking instruction and students' critical thinking, reported: 'when instructors received training and support while preparing to incorporate critical thinking skills into instruction, better student outcomes were achieved' (p. 107). Teachers' knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction also affects the teaching practice of critical thinking. Insufficient professional training was found to result in the teachers' lack of confidence in implementing critical thinking instruction in Che's (2002) study, which reported a project in teaching

critical thinking to junior classes in a secondary school in Hong Kong. Yeh's (1999) suggests professional knowledge of critical thinking instruction is one of the three required factors for effective critical thinking instruction. The other two factors are teachers' personal critical thinking abilities and positive teaching behaviour.

The role of teachers' knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction has been confirmed in empirical studies on barriers to critical thinking practice (Aliakbari & Sadeghdaghghi 2013; Allamnakhrah 2012; Alwadai 2014; Onosko 1991; Paul, Elder & Bartell 1997). In these studies, the lack of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction knowledge was identified as one of the barriers. Allamnakhrah (2012) observed that none of the lecturers in a university in Saudi Arabia taught critical thinking. Through semi-structured interviews with the teachers, Allamnakhrah found that they had never been instructed, advised, or encouraged to teach critical thinking. Also in Saudi Arabia, in the elementary school context, the teachers fail to teach critical thinking skills due to their own lack of expertise (Alwadai 2014). A specific compounding factor in Saudi Arabia may be its strong 'religion of the book' tradition, but discussion of that is beyond the scope of this thesis. Behar-Horenstein and Niu (2011), in their review of teaching critical thinking in higher education, concluded that the training that instructors received was one of the four elements that are imperative to bringing about change in students' critical thinking. The four elements are: explicit rather than implicit teaching of critical thinking; learning environment; student-teacher interaction; and the training that instructors receive.

Given the role of teachers' knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction, it is significant that 'teachers have been offered remarkably little in the way of concrete examples of what these skills are: what form they take, how they will know when they see them, how they might be measured' (Kuhn 1999, p. 17).

Paul et al. (1997) suggested giving priority to nurturing teachers' critical thinking so as to foster critical thinking in their students. The appropriate place for this nurturance is in the teacher education program because 'only prospective teachers with good critical thinking and problem-solving abilities will be able to educate a generation of critical thinkers and problem solvers' (Paul, Elder & Bartell 1997, p. 1).

### **2.5.3 Summary**

In conclusion, the literature on critical thinking instruction indicates the effect of 'small culture' – teaching and learning context – on critical thinking practice. As Schendel (2015) asserts, it is the nature of the academic experiences provided at universities that has the most profound effect on the development of students' critical thinking skills. Schendel (2015) outlines academic experiences from both teacher and student perspectives. In terms of teacher responsibilities, academic experience requires an appropriate level of challenge, a cohesive and progressive curriculum, active and collaborative learning, assessment and feedback, and a field of study. From the perspective of students, the interaction patterns between students and their teachers, and between students and their peers contribute to the development of students' own critical thinking skills. Although Schendel's (2015) framework describes the factors affecting students' critical thinking development, his focus on their academic experiences may be used to investigate critical thinking practice in a classroom context.

## **2.6 Barriers to critical thinking practices in EFL/ESL classrooms**

### ***2.6.1 Studies on the barriers to critical thinking practices in EFL/ESL classrooms***

To date, numerous studies have been conducted on the challenges to critical thinking practices of Western learners (Garside 1996; Onosko 1991; Tsui 2001), Asian learners in Western universities (Egege & Kutileh 2004; Lun, Fischer &

Ward 2010), or in the Middle East (Allamnakhrah 2012). Enquiry into the barriers to the practices of critical thinking in Asian EFL/ESL contexts, however, remains limited (Gunawardena & Petraki 2014), except for three studies: Mok (2010) in Hong Kong, Thunnithet (2011) in Thailand, and Gunawardena and Petraki (2014) in Sri Lanka.

Mok's (2010) study helps elucidate the teaching practice of critical thinking in an educational environment where critical thinking is an explicit objective. Mok's (2010) focus is on whether a critical thinking syllabus transferred successfully into the classroom practices of some English language teachers in a secondary school in Hong Kong. Specifically, Mok (2010) sought answers to two questions: Do the teachers create space for the practice of critical thinking? and Is critical thinking a perceived learning objective? Using qualitative tools such as class observation and teacher interviews, Mok identified only two critical encounters during 1600 minutes of class time. Critical encounters, as defined in Mok's (2010) study, are opportunities created (1) for students to think critically and purposefully in a teaching and learning context that supports and values critical thinking, and (2) to cultivate important qualities associated with critical thinking in students, such as openness.

Mok found the teachers did no, or very little, teaching of critical thinking in their classes. Furthermore, the teachers used ineffective questioning techniques incorporating only brief wait time. The teacher participants blamed the absence of critical thinking in their teaching for the lack of readiness for higher levels such as the school system and culture. They felt they had no time to familiarise themselves with the enormous number of recommendations and teaching activities compiled by the education authority and to learn how to implement them in class. They suspected that critical thinking would soon be replaced by something new. The

teachers argued that in order for the critical thinking syllabus to be successfully implemented, changes had to be made either in the school system or in its culture. Mok (2010) alluded to other factors including the institutional constraints, external pressure, and student factors. However, those barriers were not explored further in the study.

In Thailand, Thunnithet (2011) analysed two students' development of criticality in one EFL Literature class. The study employed a qualitative case study design to observe possible affordances as well as barriers to criticality development within this context. Thunnithet (2011) found that the students' learning habits, their cooperativeness, their open-mindedness, the influence of Buddhist doctrine, and the assistance and encouragement provided by the teachers were supportive of criticality development in the research site. However, aspects of traditional Thai values and characteristics, some characteristics of the teaching and learning environment, and some limitations on intellectual resources and language ability were identified as obstacles to the students' practice of criticality. It is worth noting that the barriers identified in Thunnithet's (2011) study emanated from 'big culture' – Thai national culture, as well as from small culture – the culture of teaching and learning – and from the students themselves.

Gunawardena and Petraki (2014) investigated the challenges and tensions encountered in negotiating critical thinking practices in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classrooms in Sri Lanka. Ten EAP practitioners were interviewed. The researchers sought informants' perceptions of critical thinking practices and possible challenges in their integration of critical thinking in EAP classrooms in Sri Lanka. Regarding critical thinking perceptions, Gunawardena and Petraki found that the participants possessed a solid understanding of critical thinking. The participants viewed critical thinking as a sequence of steps comprising the

comprehension and analysis of input, reflective thinking by identifying arguments, and reaching logical conclusions or forming opinions based on evidence.

Concerning the challenges to critical thinking practice, Gunawardena and Petraki (2015) identified the following barriers: the students' English language proficiency; a lack of consistent attention to critical thinking in the curriculum; the students' lack of motivation and poor attendance in EAP classes; and, their educational experiences in primary and secondary schooling.

Although each of these three studies was conducted in a different Asian context, there emerging from them are some commonly identified barriers such as English language proficiency and customary Asian cultural practices of teaching and learning in lower levels of education. As English is a second language in Mok's (2010) study, or a foreign language in Thunnithet's (2011) and Gunawardena and Petraki's (2014) studies, the varying levels of L2 proficiency had considerable influence on the students' command of critical thinking in English. Moreover, the culture of teaching and learning in lower levels of schooling in these Asian countries was described as unsupportive of the practice of critical thinking. In short, the three studies have contributed to the literature by reviewing the barriers to critical thinking in some Asian EFL contexts; however, they do not provide a comprehensive view from both teachers and students. They also lack a framework to examine the barriers systematically. The following section introduces Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological theory and Schendel's (2015) framework of factors affecting critical thinking improvement in universities. These are the frameworks used in this study to describe the barriers to the practices of critical thinking.

## **2.6.2 Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological theory**

### **2.6.2.1 Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development**

Bronfenbrenner's (1976) theory of human development is represented in various empirical works on families and their relationships. Bronfenbrenner's theory has been applied in education to investigate how people learn in educational settings.

The theory was in a continuous state of development from the time of its introduction in the 1970s until Bronfenbrenner's death in 2005. Thus, over a period of time, it underwent alteration, revision and extension.

Bronfenbrenner himself made continual modifications to his early theory in the 1970s, from an ecological to a bioecological theory. His theory includes three phases. In Phase 1 (1973-1979), the theory is known as an ecological approach to (or model of) human development. Phase 2 (1980-1993) focused more on the role of the individual and developmental processes. In Phase 3 (1993-2006), the theory was developed to its most advanced form, emphasising the importance of proximal processes and introducing a research design with a Process-Person-Context-Time (PPcritical thinking) model. The theory at this phase is named the bioecological theory (Rosa & Tudge 2013). Theory development implies that the theory concerns not only the influences of context on children's or adolescents' development, but also the proximal process and how a person's characteristics, context, and historical time cumulatively influence these processes.

Scholars who have based their studies on Bronfenbrenner's theory used different iterations of the theory or chose some of the major concepts of the developed version. When engaging with the theory application, researchers are advised to explicitly state the specific version of Bronfenbrenner's theory they are using to avoid ambiguity (Tudge et al. 2009). In the context of the current study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory is adapted and applied to identify and analyse

barriers to the practice of critical thinking in some tertiary EFL classes in HCFL, Vietnam. As the study takes a contextual approach to critical thinking (Praslova 2013), its application of the first (and also the least developed) version of Bronfenbrenner's (1976) theory is appropriate. The following section includes a detailed description of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory.

#### **2.6.2.2 Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development**

The concept of ecology in Bronfenbrenner's theory refers to 'how environments change, and the implications of this change for the human beings who live and grow in these environments' (Bronfenbrenner 1975, p. 439, in Rosa & Tudge 2013). Bronfenbrenner argued that ecological studies should examine the interrelationships between the developing person and the changing micro and macro contexts. Bronfenbrenner conceived of the environment as an arrangement of four interconnected structures: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. In other words, his focus was not simply on the immediate environment, or context, but on the broader ecological system that enveloped the developing individual.

When applying the ecological structure in educational environment, Bronfenbrenner (1976) interpreted the four structures as follows.

- Micro-system: an immediate setting containing the learner (e.g. home, day care centre, classroom)
- Meso-system: the interrelations among the major settings enveloping the learner at a particular point in time
- Exo-system: an extension of the meso-system embracing the concrete social structures, both formal and informal, that impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings surrounding the learner (e.g. the world of work, mass

media, agencies of government, communication and transportation facilities)

- Macro-system: the overarching institutions of the culture or subculture (e.g. economic, social, educational, legal, political systems).

The structures are interconnected as a nested set of strata. Each system is contained within the next. These structures correspond loosely to immediate, institutional, national and global scales.

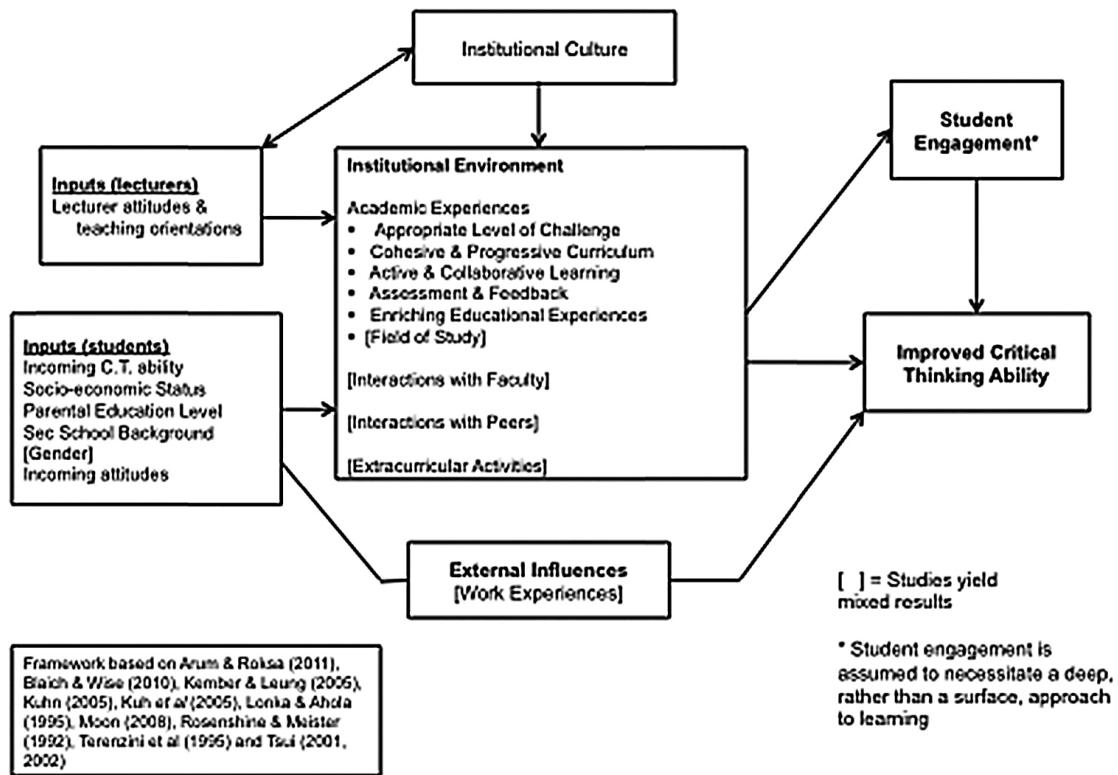
Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory is useful for describing how people learn in educational settings. Researchers examine the relationships between the characteristics of learners and their surroundings (for example, home, school, workplace, neighbourhood, community), and the interconnections that exist between these environmental strata. Bronfenbrenner's terms are of high value when identifying the different layers of contextual factors in an educational setting. They also indicate the mutual dependence among the factors. An 'ecological theory', therefore, can be used in a study which examines the contextual influences on the practice of critical thinking as in the current study.

### ***2.6.3 Schendel's (2015) frameworks of factors affecting university students' improvement of critical thinking***

Schendel (2015), after examining the evidence of critical thinking improvement of students in three Rwandan universities and possible influences on improvement in this context, compiled a conceptual framework of related factors. His framework, which was based on Astin's (1970) model, suggests that learning outcomes at a university result from the combination of inputs (such as demographic characteristics, family background) and institutional environments. Astin's (1970) model was an Input-Environment-Outcome model. Schendel (2015) provided more flesh to his framework's skeleton by using findings from various studies such as

Kuhn (1999), Kember and Leung (Kember 2000), Terenzini et al. (1995), and Tsui (Tsui 2001, 2002). Figure 2.2 outlines Schendel's framework.

In Schendel's (2015) framework, the most profound effect on the development of critical thinking skills is the nature of the academic experience. Academic experiences are divided into two sections related to inputs from lecturers, and from students. Institutional culture was seen to have a correlation with the input from lecturers. The input from the students combined with external influences, e.g. work experience, to effect improvement in critical thinking skills.



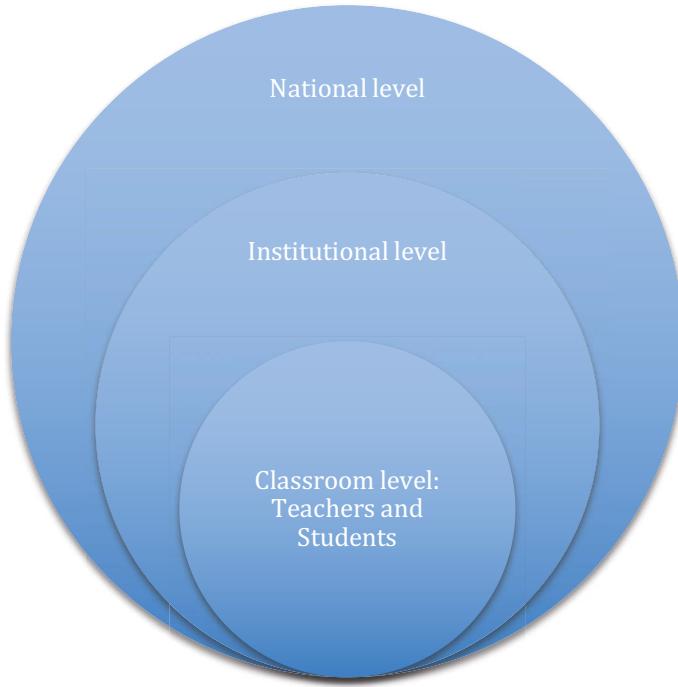
**Figure 2.2: Schendel's (2015, p. 98) framework**

Schendel's (2015) framework includes factors pertinent to both teachers and students. It also indicates the causal relationship between each of these two sources of input, and the corresponding teaching and learning. Since, as stated above, the

framework incorporated the findings from empirical studies, it appears feasible to duplicate the framework for inclusion in other studies. Schendel's (2015) framework, however, does not indicate the influence of national culture on the factors categorised in the input and academic experiences. Moreover, in Schendel's (2015) Rwandan study, critical thinking improvement was assessed in classes conducted in the students' mother tongue. Therefore, the factor of L2 proficiency was not incorporated.

#### **2.6.4 Summary**

This section has reviewed previous studies on critical thinking practice in ESL/EFL contexts and the frameworks that have been used to describe possible factors affecting educational practice. The review has provided a comprehensive picture of the possible barriers to critical thinking practice in a Vietnamese EFL context. Within the contextual approach to critical thinking (Praslova 2013), a new framework is constructed by adapting from the frameworks of Bronfenbrenner (1976) and Schendel (2015). Possible factors that might affect critical thinking practices are illustrated in Figure 2.3.



**Figure 2.3: Possible factors affecting critical thinking practices (adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological framework and Schendel's (2015) framework)**

## 2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a review of literature related to critical thinking conceptualisation, critical thinking and cultures, critical thinking in language education, critical thinking instruction, and barriers to critical thinking practices. It examines studies involving Asian students studying in English-speaking countries, and comparisons of Asian and Western students in Western educational contexts. Studies of critical thinking practice in Asian educational contexts, however, are limited. Furthermore, there have been few studies of critical thinking practice which investigated the issue from the perspectives of both teachers and students. This constitutes a gap in the literature on the practice of critical thinking in an Asian EFL context. This study addresses that gap by exploring critical thinking practice in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. The voices of the Vietnamese teachers and students in an EFL context will not only help to broaden the extant

perspectives of critical thinking practice, but also contribute to recommendations to policymakers regarding a possible method to improve its higher education delivery. Chapter 3 will introduce the research questions of this study and justify the research approach and methodologies used to answer them. ■

## **Chapter 3**

# **Methodology: a qualitative case study of current critical thinking practices**

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### **3.1 Introduction**

Chapter 2 identified gaps in the literature about critical thinking in foreign language education in Vietnam. This chapter describes and justifies the methodological framework and the research design used in the study, including the interpretive paradigm, qualitative approaches, and case study method. It then outlines the study's setting and participants, followed by a detailed explanation of the data collection instruments. Following a description of the data processing and analysis, the study's ethical considerations and limitations are discussed.

This study explores current critical thinking practices in Vietnamese tertiary EFL classrooms. It investigates the affordances and barriers to critical thinking practices in some tertiary EFL classrooms in a university in Central Vietnam. The study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How do the teacher and student participants understand critical thinking?
  - a. How do the participants define critical thinking?
  - b. What are the participants' attitudes towards critical thinking?
2. How is critical thinking teaching practice undertaken at the research site?

- a. In what ways and to what extent is critical thinking teaching practice being undertaken?
  - b. What are the barriers and affordances to the teaching practice of critical thinking at the research site?
3. What is the nature of the students' engagement with critical thinking?
    - a. To what extent and in what contexts do the students engage in critical thinking?
    - b. What are the barriers and affordances to the students' engagement with critical thinking at the research site?

The theoretical underpinning of these research questions is the way both culture and EFL mediate critical thinking, particularly in the research context. This research does not undertake any intervention or experimentation on the teaching and learning practices at the research site. Rather, it employs qualitative approaches with an illustrative case study design (Yin 2013).

## **3.2 Research design**

### ***3.2.1 Interpretive paradigm***

Interpretivism focuses on the nature of social phenomena. The epistemological stance of interpretivism emphasises the understanding of human behaviour (Bryman 2001). Interpretivist researchers believe that educational reality is socially constructed and that the goal of educational research is to understand what meanings people ascribe to their reality (Check & Schutt 2012). It differs from a positivist point of view, wherein there is a concrete, objective reality that can be understood by scientific methods. The goal of interpretivist research relies as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied and understood (Creswell 2013).

The interpretive paradigm is appropriate for this study, which aims to understand the possible affordances and barriers to critical thinking practices in the research context. The reality of critical thinking practices was sought by eliciting the teachers and students' interpretations of their own teaching and learning. Through examination of multiple sources including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon emerged.

### ***3.2.2 Qualitative approach***

Stemming from the interpretive tradition, a qualitative approach is suitable for studies about human actions and behaviours. An understanding of the subjectivity and authenticity of human experience is a strong feature of qualitative research (Silverman 2010). In qualitative research, a problem or phenomenon is seen through the eyes of the people involved; thereby, the world of the research participants becomes better understood (Carr & Kemmis 1986). The detailed description of the problem or phenomenon helps one to understand it deeply and comprehensively.

A qualitative approach allows researchers to investigate a problem in its natural setting. Bryman (2001) notes that contexts are emphasised in qualitative studies. According to Brewer and Hunter (1989) the qualitative approach involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means qualitative researchers seek to study phenomena in their natural setting and attempt to understand or interpret them in terms of meanings revealed in the setting via the 'players'.

#### ***3.2.2.1 The qualitative approach and its appropriateness to this study***

The employment of a qualitative approach is appropriate in this study because it investigates how Vietnamese EFL teachers and students understand critical

thinking and how critical thinking is reflected in their teaching and learning practices. The participants' understandings of critical thinking are explored not only through their words but also their observed behaviours in their teaching and learning settings.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000, in Bouton 2008, p. 27) qualitative researchers 'study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings the people bring to them'. From this viewpoint, a qualitative approach can contribute to the understanding of classroom activities with a focus on critical thinking practice. Therefore, a qualitative approach is considered best to answer the research questions raised in this study. This study focuses on insights, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam 1998).

Qualitative approaches have some potential shortcomings. According to Bryman (2001), qualitative research may be critiqued for being too subjective, difficult to replicate and impossible to generalise. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the emphasis of qualitative study is on rich, in-depth, vivid, unique descriptions rather than the issue of generalisability, which is referred to as transferability or naturalistic generalisations by qualitative researchers (Tracy 2010, p. 845). The contribution of qualitative research is a thorough understanding of a case, including its context, which may provide an insight into problems in similar contexts. In this study, I took note of what they did in the classroom and what they said in interviews because I am interested in learning how they interpreted and made sense of critical thinking practice and any barriers to this practice.

### **3.2.2.2 Research approaches and studies on critical thinking**

Previous studies on critical thinking appear overwhelmingly to have employed quantitative approaches (Tsui 2002). Tsui (2002) notes that 'researchers tend to use

standardised multiple-choice tests to measure critical thinking and students' responses on questionnaire surveys to measure classroom and out-of-class experiences' (p. 742). These tests are used to measure students' critical thinking skills and dispositions. Tsui points out further that the common use of the standardised test has its own weaknesses and limitations. For example, in order to measure students' critical thinking development over a semester after using an instructional method, a standardised test has been used. In this case, there is doubt about the validity of the instrument. Given that critical thinking is an abstract construct, the researcher might be unable to measure or infer what is intended to be measured. Furthermore, it might not be culturally appropriate to use standardised tests that are designed in the West to measure non-Western students' critical thinking. Another concern is whether the duration of the experiment is sufficient for such a high-order thinking skill to develop. Numerous researchers (e.g. Costa 2001; Tsui 1999) agree that qualitative methods such as classroom observations and interviews should be employed to measure critical thinking.

Some studies on the conceptualisation of critical thinking have used qualitative approaches (Baildon & Sim 2009; Cassum et al. 2013; Jenkins 2011; Jones 2007; Moore 2011a; Phillips & Bond 2004; Sng 2012; Tapper 2004). The interview is the most common data collection tool in such studies. The participants are typically asked to describe their experiences of critical thinking. Through the descriptions, researchers can gain insights into the participants' perceptions of critical thinking. Apart from interviews, some studies employ text analysis (Jones 2007; Moore 2011a) or observations (Baildon & Sim 2009) to triangulate the interview data. The findings from these studies with multiple sources of data provide a more complex picture of how the participants perceive critical thinking.

This study does not aim to assess students' critical thinking ability using a standardised test or to measure the development of critical thinking following an intervention. Instead, its purpose is to understand critical thinking practices in some Vietnamese EFL classrooms through which the researcher can identify the potential influences on these practices, and thereby understand the mediation of culture and the field of EFL to critical thinking practices. Therefore, the study employs a qualitative approach.

### ***3.2.3 Case study as a qualitative approach***

As defined by Creswell (2013, p. 97), case study research is 'a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection'. It is a research method that provides extensive and in-depth description of some social phenomena (Yin 2009). According to Cohen (2000), case studies provide unique examples of real people in real situations. This approach follows the interpretive tradition of research: seeing the situation through the eyes of participants. The case study can be used as a research framework in studies that seek the answers to 'how' or 'why' questions. Case studies allow direct observation of the events being studied and the interviews of the persons involved in the events (Yin 2009). The unique strength of case studies is that they can deal with a wide variety of evidence. A case study investigates a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control (Yin 2009, p. 13).

#### ***Case study and its appropriateness to this study***

With a primary focus on the real situation of what exactly transpired in an EFL classroom and the participants' perceptions and understanding of critical thinking in the class, I consider case study as the most appropriate method for my study. In the case study, I followed the teaching and learning of some teachers and the

students of the same cohort for a certain period of time in order to understand their critical thinking practices. As a researcher, I had no control over the teaching and learning practices. The case study's unique strength in dealing with a full variety of evidence enabled me to use different methods such as classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The data from these different sources offered a deeper insight into the participants' understanding of, attitudes towards, and engagement with, critical thinking.

Some concerns when choosing the case study include its limitations in rigour, its potential for scientific generalisation, and its extended duration (Yin 2009). Concerning limited rigour, Yin (2009) advises researchers to report all the evidence fairly and correctly. This will increase the accuracy and thoroughness of a scientific work. As for generalisability, Nisbet and Watt (1984, cited in Cohen 2000, p. 184) argue that case studies 'provide insights into other, similar situations and cases, thereby assisting the interpretation of other similar cases'. Researchers who use case studies are also reassured about generalisation thereof because case studies are 'generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universe' (Yin 2009, p. 15). My research was designed with careful examination of these considerations in mind.

### **3.3 Setting and participants**

#### ***3.3.1 Sampling***

Sampling involves decisions not only about which people to observe and interview but also choices of settings, events and social processes (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2014, p. 30). The main mode of sampling in this study is purposive sampling. The intent of purposive sampling, according to Emmel (2013, p. 33), is 'to select information rich cases that best provide insight into research questions and will convince the audience of the research'. I used purposive sampling to

select the specific contexts of investigation in this research: Hue University College of Foreign Languages (HUCFL) as the setting, a cohort of third-year English majors and two skills-based and two content-based courses (see the definitions in Chapter 1). I am a former lecturer from this university; therefore, the selection of this research site constituted convenience sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011). In order to select the teacher and student participants, I used random purposive sampling (Miles & Huberman 1994, in Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 230). The random purposive sampling was also employed to determine participants for the group discussions to be audio-recorded for later analysis of the students' cognitive involvement.

### ***3.3.2 Setting***

#### **3.3.2.1 The university**

My study was conducted at Hue University College of Foreign Languages (HUCFL), which was founded in July 2004 after merging departments of foreign languages from other affiliated colleges in Hue University. At HUCFL, there are approximately 450 staff members, as well as 2700 regular full-time students and 1500 part-time students who are enrolled in various training programs and courses in a number of flexible forms: regular and irregular, on- and off-campus, in-service, distance education, continuing education, and full- or part-time study. The languages offered include English, French, Chinese, Russian, Japanese, Korean and Thai. The training programs include pedagogy, translation and interpretation, language and culture, and tourism. The college's mission is:

Hue University College of Foreign Languages is a centre for education and research in the fields of Vietnamese and foreign languages and culture; offering educational programs and translation-interpretation services to

students from the central provinces and other countries in the region (Hue University College of Foreign Languages)

My study specifically investigated the English program with the cohort of third-year English majors in the 2013–2014 academic year.

Although HUCFL was chosen as part of convenience sampling, its selection was also due to its leading position in language education in Vietnam. The college has been chosen as one of the six regional centres nationwide to offer training programs for English language teachers across the country in the scope of the nation's 2020 Project. The ultimate aim of the 2020 Project is that by the year 2020 most graduates of Vietnamese junior colleges, senior colleges, and universities will reach a sufficient level of foreign language capacity; be able to use it independently; be confident in communication; and be able to study and work in a multilingual and multicultural environment (Project 2020).

Consistent with convenience sampling, HUCFL is accessible both geographically and academically. As a lecturer from the university, I am familiar with the university's organisation, facilities and staff members. This purposive selection of the research site helped me to establish the most productive relationships with the participants, thereby helping me to answer the research questions (Maxwell 2012, p. 99). Moreover, being aware of the possible impact of my familiarity with the research context emanating from convenience sampling, I strictly followed some principles to minimise its effects (see more in Section 3.3.4 – The role of the researcher). I also tried to minimise the influence of purposive selection of the research setting by using a more random sampling of student participants for semi-structured interviews and of classes for observations. Class selection and teacher selection were both mediated by the type of courses.

### 3.3.2.2 The English undergraduate curriculum at the research site – an overview

English is one of the training disciplines offered by HUCFL. The English discipline has four specialisations, including Interpretation–Translation, Tourism, English Language, and Teacher Training (Pedagogy). The English undergraduate program comprises a four-year course. The program consists of three strands of knowledge: knowledge in general education; fundamental knowledge of the discipline; and knowledge of the specialisation. In fundamental knowledge of the discipline, there are three sub-strands: Language practice, Linguistics, and Literature and Culture. The specialisation knowledge group includes subjects distinctive to each specialisation. The observed classes belong to the Language Practice group (Reading 5 and Writing 5) and Literature and Culture group (American Literature, Cross-cultural Communication and American Issues). Reading 5 refers to the fifth and final subject in the series. Relevant parts of this course structure are indicated in Table 3.1.

Knowledge in general education	Fundamental knowledge of the discipline		Knowledge of the specialisation
	Language practice	Linguistics	Literature and Culture
	- <i>Reading 5</i>		- <i>Cross-cultural Communication</i> - <i>American Issues</i>
	- <i>Writing 5</i>		

**Table 3.1: EFL curriculum and the location of the observed courses (in italics)**

### 3.3.3 Participants

#### 3.3.3.1 The third-year English major cohort

As mentioned earlier, the teaching and learning of the cohort of third-year English majors in the 2013–2014 academic year was the case under investigation in this study. There were 504 students in this cohort. In the first semester of the 2013–2014 academic year, the entire cohort undertook the same nine courses, most of which

were designed to develop their English skills in the four communication modes (Listening 5, Speaking 5, Reading 5 and Writing 5). In the second semester, after five semesters of general instruction in the English language, the students were divided into four specialisations: pedagogy, translation-interpretation, language-culture and tourism. The division was made on the basis of the students' initial choice of specialisation, their academic achievement in the previous semesters and their own interests. The students of the pedagogy specialisation made their choice when they sat the university entrance test. These students were not permitted to change their specialisation. The students eligible for the translation-interpretation specialisation were those with the highest scores.

The third-year English major cohort was selected for this study in order to guarantee sufficiently high language proficiency for critical thought in English. As reported by previous studies (e.g. Alagozlu 2007; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010; Razaei 2011) low English proficiency is an impediment for Asian EFL learners to think and express themselves critically in English. The students at this stage are at the upper intermediate level of English competence. According to Johnston et al. (2011), intermediate and advanced level language courses, and content-based courses have greater potential to develop criticality as opposed to beginners' language classes.

At the site of the study, skills-based courses refer to those developing the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Content-based courses, on the other hand, provide students with specialised knowledge pertaining to pedagogy, translation-interpretation, the English language itself, and tourism, as well as the literary and cultural knowledge of the countries whose native language is English. The latter field of knowledge, pertaining to literature and culture, is covered in the content-based courses under investigation in this study.

### **3.3.3.2 Interview participants and their recruitment**

Eight teachers and 22 students in this cohort participated in the semi-structured interviews following my observations of English classes in the 2013-2014 academic year. I conducted 14 observations of Reading 5 (R5) and Writing 5 (W5) classes in the first semester (2013) and six observations of two classes including American Issues, and Cross-cultural Communication in the second semester (2014) (see Table 3.2).

### **3.3.3.3 The process of choosing observation classes**

The process of choosing observation classes in this study reflects the flexibility of sampling in qualitative studies. Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014, p. 30) assert that 'qualitative studies call for continuous refocusing and redrawing of study parameters during fieldwork'. During the first field trip, I collected information about the curricula for the selected cohort. The head of the Language Skill division stated that reading and writing would be taught in an integrated manner.

Moreover, the main course material for this integrated course is 'Skills for Success' (Daise, Norloff & Carne 2011). The examination of this material indicated that critical thinking was one of the main components to be developed. With the aim of investigating the current practices of critical thinking in the research context, I chose to observe the two skills-based courses, namely R5 and W5.

The first field trip, however, revealed that these courses were not taught in the way they had been designed. Although the data from the first field trip were meaningful for answering questions about the barriers to critical thinking practice in the research context, I remained unsatisfied with the findings. Through the interviews with the teachers, I was advised that there would be more opportunities for critical thinking practice in other types of classes such as content-based ones. A second field trip with a focus on some content-based classes was undertaken. The

courses offering cultural and literary knowledge were chosen in the second field trip because it was considered that studying the cultures of the English native speakers and the issues in communication across cultures, would offer students a greater number of opportunities to reflect on their own cultural practices; learning about other cultures entails understanding more about one's own culture (Levine & Adelman 1993). Therefore, critical thinking is of great importance in the teaching and learning of these courses.

#### **3.3.3.4 Teacher participants**

The heads of the Language Skills and the Culture and Literature divisions were asked to provide a list of teachers in charge of R5 and W5 courses, and American Literature, Cross-cultural Communication and American Issues courses. These 17 teachers were then contacted by email to request their voluntary participation in the study. A clear description of the participants' rights and responsibilities was outlined in the emails with the attachments of the information sheets about the study (see Appendix 1). As a result, five teachers of skills-based courses agreed to be observed and interviewed. Three teachers of the content-based courses also agreed to be interviewed, but only two of them agreed to be observed. Of the eight teachers, only one is male. The gender ratio of the participants is similar to the gender ratio of the college's academic staff. Table 3.2 summarises the details of the observed classes.

Skills-based courses (September–October 2013)			Content-based courses (February–March 2014)		
Courses	Teachers	No. of observations	Courses	Teachers	No. of observations
<b>Reading</b>	Teacher 8	4	<b>American issues</b>	Teacher 2	3
	Teacher 4	1	<b>Cross-cultural communication</b>	Teacher 1	3
<b>Writing</b>	Teacher 3	5	<b>American Literature</b>	Teacher 7	0
	Teacher 5	3			
	Teacher 6	1			

**Table 3.2: Summary of observed classes**

### 3.3.3.5 Student participants

I recruited the student participants for semi-structured interviews on my second field trip. As explained in Section 3.3.3.3, my first field trip did not yield substantial evidence of critical thinking teaching practices; hence, I decided not to collect data from the students until my second field trip. I recruited the student participants on the first date that I came to each observed class in the second field trip. I briefly introduced the research project, asked for the students' consent for them to be observed and their learning recorded, and invited the students' voluntary participation. As a result, 22 students agreed to be interviewed. Of the 22 students, 12 were from the Cross-cultural Communication course, and 10 were from the American Issues class.

### 3.3.4 The researcher's role

In this study, I see myself as both insider and outsider. This research was conducted at the university where I have worked as a lecturer of English. This insider status afforded me certain benefits, consistent with observations by Atkins

and Wallace (2012). The first benefit was easier access to the institution, the colleagues and the students. I am familiar with the organisation of the university, and therefore knew whom to contact for necessary information and how to contact such people. Second, I had already established interpersonal relationships with other lecturers who are my colleagues, and this helped me to build trust, thereby increasing the opportunities for richer and more reliable data. Third, the students were more likely to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts about the teaching and learning practice in this context because I was once a teacher at the university.

Despite the benefits of being an insider researcher, I was also aware of some challenges raised by some qualitative researchers (Atkins & Wallace 2012; Maxwell 2012; Richards & Morse 2013; Wellington 2015). My familiarity with the university and the participants might affect the study's rigour, credibility and reliability. My values, beliefs and even biases from my prior experience in the research context might prevent me from seeing critical thinking practice objectively. Confidentiality, political and other constraints on participants, and the reporting and disclosure of data are other issues that an inside researcher needs to consider. Also, some people, particularly colleagues, might feel more uncomfortable sharing with a person they know. Another challenge for me was the power relations that I as an insider might exert on participants, thereby, affecting the quality and reliability of the findings.

Being aware of the challenges, I strove to maintain an outsider status as far as possible. I am on the university staff; however, I did not teach there during my doctoral study abroad. There were some new policies which took effect during that time such as the application of the Common European Frameworks of Reference (CEFR) into the English curriculum. Moreover, I did not teach any of the courses that were observed apart from the Cross-cultural Communication course. As a result, I knew little about what had been taught in these courses, and how. As for

my relationships with the students, I had not taught the cohort of students under investigation in the study. This diminished any power gap between them and me. To the students, I was the outsider because I was unfamiliar with this cohort. Some of the staff used to be my teachers and some are my age. Therefore, the concern about the power that I might exert on the teacher participants was minor because in Vietnamese culture, the older teachers tend to be more powerful than the younger ones.

The tension of being an insider or outsider in the research context was real to me as a researcher. As pointed out by Atkins and Wallace (2012, p. 48), the researcher in such circumstances assumes a dual role as a professional in some situations and as a researcher in some others. However, I made one explicit disclosure to the participants: the research investigated what was naturally happening in their classrooms; therefore, they did not need to make any adjustments to their daily practices. Having explained specifically that I was interested in the usual behaviour in the classrooms, I was nonetheless aware that my presence as a researcher, and my recording equipment, were likely to influence behaviour somewhat (Bryman 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007).

### **3.4 Data collection**

#### ***3.4.1 Data collection process***

In the first field trip, I observed 14 lessons of the skills-based courses (R5 and W5). The five teachers in these observed classes were interviewed once following the observations, at a time convenient for the teachers. Consistent with the first field trip, the three teachers of the content-based classes in the second field trip were also interviewed once, after the observation of their classes. Twenty-two students accepted invitations to participate in semi-structured interviews in the second field

trip. The students had not been recruited in the first field trip because of my decision to conduct another field trip during the following semester.

I collected data concerning the students' engagement with critical thinking only during the second field trip. As explained earlier in the process of choosing observation classes (Section 3.3.3.3), little evidence of critical thinking teaching practice manifested during the first field trip. There were few teaching activities which promoted critical thinking in these classes; hence, it was difficult to discern the students' critical thinking performance in order to evaluate it.

### **3.4.2 Data collection tools**

Classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, and document analysis were the tools used to collect data in this study.

#### **3.4.2.1 Classroom observations**

##### *Rationale for the use of observations*

In qualitative research, observations and interviews are often used to collect data. With observations, the researcher describes the setting, the activities in that setting, the people in the activities and then derives meanings 'from the perspectives of those observed' (Patton 2002b, p. 262). Silverman (2010, p. 9) calls observation data the 'first-hand information about social process in a naturally occurring context'. The 'live' data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 456) enable the researcher to look directly at what is occurring in a specific context at a particular time rather than relying on second-hand accounts. According to Silverman (2010), the strength of observations lies in their description of what people actually do in reality rather than what people think or disclose about what they do.

Despite these strengths, observations have potential drawbacks. One challenge is the subjectivity of observational data. Angrosino (2005, cited in Denzin & Lincoln 2005) concedes the possibility of observers affecting what they observe. In direct

observations, the observer may interfere with the people or activities under observation. Bias may also occur due to the observer's subjective interpretations of situations (Denzin 1989). The subjectivity of observational data therefore shares a weakness associated with participants' self-reporting. A further possible shortcoming of observations derives from the validity of this method of data collection. In the presence of the observer, participants are likely to modify their behaviours (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Patton 2002a) and the observational data may not truly reflect what is happening in the setting. This obstacle can be mitigated when the observations are video-recorded or audio-recorded, although the potential for bias remains. Moreover, the presence of recording material might further constrain or otherwise affect participants' behaviour. Another limitation of observations is their focus exclusively on external behaviours (Patton 2002a). The researcher can observe people's outward behaviours, but not their thoughts or feelings. Sometimes, however, these can be inferred from facial expressions, tone of voice, 'body language' and the like. Again, though, subjectivity comes into play here.

#### ***Observations in this study***

The ultimate aim of this study is to attain an understanding of possible affordances and barriers to critical thinking practice in a Vietnamese EFL context. I investigated teaching and learning practice in some Vietnamese EFL classrooms with a particular view on critical thinking practices, and the observational data provided information about what the teachers and students were doing in the classrooms. This element of the research concerns itself with what is happening in the classroom regarding critical thinking, as well as what the participants report about these practices. Furthermore, observations help transcend the selective perceptions of others, as is often encountered in interviews (Patton 2002b). In this study,

observations enhanced my understanding of critical thinking practices through my exposure to the reality of teaching and learning in Vietnamese EFL classrooms. The combination of observations and interviews gave me scope to compare, triangulate and verify findings (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Wellington 2015).

I maintained a sharp focus on critical thinking practices; however, it required a holistic view of the context, including the teaching and learning process and teaching materials. I looked closely at the teachers' teaching activities, their questioning and assessment methods. With regard to the students, my observations focussed on their behavioural interactions with the teachers, their peers, and the materials. The students' cognitive involvement expressed via their talk in class or group discussions was also audio-recorded. A checklist of the observations (Table 3.3) was prepared during these observations. This checklist was constructed from Tsui's (2002) study on how effective pedagogy helped foster critical thinking in four tertiary institutions in the US. These classroom behaviours are associated with critical thinking (Browne & Keeley 2007; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010). The recordings of the class observations were replayed a number of times during the analysis stage.

<b>Classroom behaviours</b>		<b>Interpretations</b>
<b>1</b>	Students question Teachers	The students asked the teacher questions, voluntarily or compulsorily.
<b>2</b>	Students answer Teachers' Questions	The students offered answers to the teacher's questions.
<b>3</b>	Students question Students	The students posed questions to their peers.
<b>4</b>	Students answer peers' Questions	The students answered the questions from their peers.
<b>5</b>	Critique textbooks	The students expressed disagreement with some content in the textbooks or articulated flaws in the author's arguments.
<b>6</b>	Critique teachers	The students expressed their disagreement with the teacher or articulated flaws in the teacher's arguments.
<b>7</b>	Critique peers	The students expressed disagreement with their peers or articulated flaws in peers' arguments.
<b>8</b>	Express opinions in class	The students voluntarily expressed their opinions in front of class, e.g. making a comment.

**Table 3.3: Classroom behaviour meanings / interpretations**

Source: Tsui (2002)

During the observations, I did not participate in the activities. I positioned myself at the back of the classroom, detached from the teaching and learning process. However, as mentioned earlier, I was aware that as the observer and researcher I might influence the observed behaviour. The teachers and students may change their normal teaching and learning practices to satisfy what they perceived as my aim (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011), a phenomenon known as the 'Hawthorne effect' (Adair 1984). They may anticipate that I was expecting a certain level of critical thinking in their teaching and learning; as a result, they may try to incorporate this into their behaviour. With this risk in mind, I clearly stated the nature of the study to the participants, especially the teachers. I did not use the term 'naturalistic inquiry', instead, I explained that the study aimed to explore

what was naturally occurring in the teaching and learning in some EFL classes, and the purpose of the study was not to evaluate teaching and learning practice.

Most of the classes were observed more than twice, except for two skills-based classes that were observed on only one occasion. The purpose of repeated observations was to reinforce the validity of the observational data. With a number of observations of one class, I could avoid as much as possible the participants' adjustment of behaviours in the observed lessons. My presence in the room appeared to become 'natural' so people became almost unaware that I was there. I could, therefore, obtain the data that reflected what routinely happens in the research.

The number of the observations per class varied as a result of diverse factors during the data collection period. For the first field trip, three teachers agreed to be observed for five continuous lessons; however, I could conduct only three and four observations of two classes. In the second week, a severe typhoon affected the region, and the entire city ceased working for a day. Moreover, a professional development seminar took place in the fourth week (October, 2013). Two other teachers only agreed to be observed once. Concerning the second field trip, I could only arrange a one-month field trip; hence, I could conduct only three observations for the American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication course classes.

### **3.4.2.2 Interviews**

#### ***Rationale for the use of interviews***

Interviews were chosen as another appropriate data collection method in this study. According to Tuckman, interviews allow researchers to understand a person's inner mind (Tuckman 1972, cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Wellington 2015). Interviews help measure what a person knows, what a person likes or dislikes and what a person thinks. These data cannot readily be obtained

from direct observations. Patton (2002a, p. 341) asserts the strengths of interviews in uncovering ‘feelings, thoughts and intentions … behaviours that took place at some previous points in time … situations that preclude the presence of an observer’. Patton, therefore, sees interviewing as a way to share the other person’s perspective.

One of the critiques of interviews concerns their internal generalisability (Maxwell 1992). Due to time pressure and a resulting interview being brief, the interviewer may draw false inferences of ‘what happened during that brief period [compared] to the rest of the informant’s life, including his or her actions and perspectives’ (p. 294). Patton (2002a) also addresses this limitation. He states that interviews can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview. This limitation is closely related to concerns about the trustworthiness and reliability of qualitative interviews (Atkins & Wallace 2012, p. 86). These limitations pertain to whether an interviewee is telling the truth or whether an interviewee’s responses to the same question by two different interviewers are the same.

### ***Interviews in this study***

I used interviews in this study for three reasons. First of all, interviews would assist in understanding the participants’ conceptualisation of critical thinking. The use of interviewing for this purpose is appropriate because ‘the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework in which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms’ (Patton 2002a, p. 348). I did not provide participants with the study’s working definition of critical thinking used in the study; instead, the participants were asked to define the terms according to their own understanding. However, I was aware that my use of the Vietnamese equivalence of critical thinking, ‘tư duy phản biện’, might

influence the participants' responses. I tried to avoid using the Vietnamese equivalence; instead I kept using the English term 'critical thinking'. If I happened to use the Vietnamese equivalence, I told the participants that I just used it temporarily and that they could use their own term(s).

The second purpose of interviewing in this study was to understand further the practices of critical thinking from the perspectives of both the teachers and students. The classroom observations conducted earlier explored critical thinking practices only from the view of the researcher but the interviews with the student participants explored the students' unobservable thoughts, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the students' engagement with critical thinking. This combination of observations and interviews helped minimise the subjectivity and bias which are the common critiques of these two data collection methods (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Patton 2002a; Silverman 2010). The third purpose of interviewing in this study was to help in attaining a more thorough understanding of possible affordances and barriers to critical thinking practices in the research context.

I applied a general interview guide approach (Patton 2002a) or semi-structured interviews. The interviews were guided by a loosely defined series of questions covering different themes related to critical thinking practices. The themes for both teacher and student interviews included (1) their understanding of critical thinking and their attitudes towards critical thinking, critical thinking in Vietnamese context and in an EFL context; (2) their critical thinking practices; and (3) possible barriers to the practice of critical thinking. An advantage of the general interview guide approach is its 'flexibility and individualisation' (Patton 2002a, p. 347). Depending on the issues that emerged during the interviews, additional or alternative questions were asked. Although the topics and issues to be covered were specified

in advance, I adapted the sequence and wording of questions during the course of each interview, following the initiatives and directions introduced by the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011).

#### ***Teacher interviews***

I used one-to-one teacher interviews to investigate the teachers' conceptualisation of critical thinking, their teaching practices in relation to critical thinking, their perceptions of the students' critical thinking and any barriers to critical thinking practices. The teachers were invited to participate in a one-hour in-depth interview after I had observed their classes. The interviews were audio-recorded. Some teachers chose to speak in English while some preferred to speak in Vietnamese during the interviews. Most of the interviews took place on the university campus. Two interviews were conducted at the home of the teacher participants.

Four teachers were interviewed once and four were interviewed twice. After analysis of the teacher interview data gained from the first interviews, some ideas emerged but remained unclear. One theme was the issue of teachers' lack of knowledge about critical thinking or critical thinking instruction. The eight teachers were then contacted further for a subsequent interview via email, but only four teachers consented to be interviewed a second time.

#### ***Student interviews***

The 22 students were interviewed individually to seek their opinions about their conceptualisation of critical thinking, their own engagement with critical thinking, the teachers' critical thinking teaching practice and possible barriers to critical thinking practice. Individual interviews rather than group interviews were conducted. Although group interviews may yield a wide range of responses (Watts & Ebbutt 1987), individual interviews appeared more suitable in this study because they elicited personal experiences. The students were asked to tell about any

moments when they thought critically but did not express their thoughts and any moments when they had articulated their critical thinking but felt regretful subsequently. During group interviews the students may have felt uncomfortable sharing critical moments in the presence of peers. Another reason for the choice of individual interviews over focus groups was time constraints. With the credit training system, the students attended different courses at different times, therefore, it was difficult for the researcher to arrange a time for a group of five or six students to meet up for a group interview. All of the student interviews took place at a coffee shop near the university. They were conducted in Vietnamese, the students' language of choice, and audio-recorded. I replayed the recordings many times while analysing the transcribed interview data.

Several rules and conditions were applied in response to the concerns about data quality. I piloted the questions with a group of students in the same cohort. These students were then excluded from the main study. I also piloted the questions with two peer Vietnamese researchers who are also teachers of English. After these pilots, some changes were made to the wording of the questions, especially the wordings in Vietnamese.

According to Wellington (2015, pp. 149-150), poor rapport with interviewees, ambiguity in interviewing questions, leading questions or excessive prompting, overlong schedule, distortion of truth from both interviewers and interviewees, and errors while taking notes are likely to compromise the quality of data. Being the teacher participants' colleague helped me to build rapport with them through our shared experiences of the job, the students and the university system. With the student participants, I did not begin the interview immediately, but asked about their personal life or shared with them my experiences studying in Australia. A teacher or researcher's asking Vietnamese students about their personal life and

sharing her personal life with them indicates caring about the students (Dung 2002). This helped to ‘break the ice’ and build up a close rapport between me and the students.

In terms of the schedule, I tried to restrict the interviews to less than one hour’s duration. During the interviews, I stopped once to ask if the participants needed to take a rest, but none of the interviewees needed to pause the interview due to fatigue. To reduce the risk of participants saying things simply to satisfy me, I emphasised the aim of investigating the current practices of critical thinking without making any evaluation. This helped to put the interviewees at ease and encouraged them to honestly share what they were thinking.

### **3.4.2.3 Document analysis**

#### *Rationale for the use of document analysis*

Documents in educational research are seen as secondary sources of data (Wellington 2015). The use and analysis of documents may form the main focus of a piece of educational research or a complement in conjunction to other sources and research methods. ‘Documents’ for educational research might include paper sources, visual sources or aural sources. One advantage of analysing written and visual documents is that their enduring form allows them to be subject to extensive scrutiny. There are four criteria used to assess documentary sources: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (Scott 2014). Authenticity ensures the genuineness and unquestionable origin of a documentary source. Credibility assesses if a source is free from error and distortion. Representativeness evaluates the typicality or atypicality of a source. Meaning relates to the extent to which a source is clear and comprehensible.

***Documentary analysis in this study***

Documents were used in this study as complementary sources of data throughout the research process. Vietnamese government papers or decisions regarding education and language education, the university's curriculum documents, and the courses' syllabuses were analysed to identify the inclusion of critical thinking at the respective levels of education – the government, the institution and the teachers. The analysis of these documents helped uncover possible affordances and barriers to critical thinking in the research context.

Among the three sources of documents used in the study, the government papers and the university's curriculum documents are openly published documents. I had free access to these documents via websites of the Ministry of Education and Training, and HUCFL. Concerning the courses' syllabuses, these were written by individual teachers who were in charge of a course and distributed to the students at the beginning of a course. I asked the participating teachers to provide me with these documents.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

#### ***3.5.1 Qualitative data analysis***

Data analysis in qualitative research involves 'organising, accounting for and explaining the data' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p. 537). It is a search for general statements about relationships and underlying themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1997, cited in Marshall & Rossman 2011, p. 207). Marshall and Rossman (2011) see this process as the combination of data organisation, theme development and interpretation.

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative process (Bryman 2001). The analysis begins after some of the data have been collected, and the implications of that analysis then shape the next steps in the data collection process. Cohen, Manion

and Morrison (2011, p. 359) call the process ‘progressive focusing’ because it selects key issues for further investigation. Qualitative data analysis is inherently language-based (Dörnyei 2007). Most qualitative data are transformed into a textual form and analysed in words.

There are varying views about data analysis strategies in qualitative research. Bryman (2001) mentions two general strategies, namely analytic induction and grounded theory. Crabtree and Miller (1992, cited in Marshall & Rossman 2011) propose a continuum of analysis strategies, ranging from prefigured technical to emergent intuitive. Dornyei (2007) makes a distinction between the use of a specific and coherent methodology such as grounded-theory, and the employment of general and generic analytical moves that he broadly terms ‘qualitative content analysis’ (p. 245). Acknowledging the flexibility in qualitative data analysis, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p. 538) establish the principle of ‘fitness for purpose’. These authors advise researchers to choose the mode of analysis according to the purpose of that analysis.

### ***3.5.2 Data analysis in this study***

In this study, the data include the observational field notes, interview transcriptions, conversation transcriptions and documents (government documents, curriculum, syllabuses). The analysis of these data set out to construct an understanding of critical thinking from the perspective of the participants in their context; to describe their attitudes towards critical thinking; to explore the teachers’ teaching practice and the student participants’ engagement with critical thinking; and to reveal any possible factors affecting critical thinking in the research context. The preliminary research questions and the related literature on critical thinking served as the guidelines for data analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. One of the characteristics of thematic analysis is to discern the particularities of a problem under study from participants' perspectives (Silverman 2014). This characteristic corresponds to the nature of qualitative data analysis. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p. 541) explain,

It's important not only to examine a situation and events through the eyes of the researcher, but also to use a range of data and to ensure that these data include the views of other participants in a situation and to focus on actual things that happened and which can be corroborated by other participants.

According to Silverman (2014), thematic analysis attempts to locate themes in qualitative data. Participants' meanings are sought through the consideration of data and categorised into themes. The themes are then illustrated with extracts which represent the theme in question. The major themes arising from analysis of the qualitative data are presented in full and sufficient detail to support the themes.

Themes or categories may be pre-established from past research and previous literature (*a priori*), or derived from the data (*posteriori*) (Wellington 2015). In this study, both processes were used; the study used two analytic strategies, namely theoretical position analysis strategy (Yin 2009) and inductive analysis of data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011).

### **Use of frameworks for analysing data**

Two aspects of the students' engagement with critical thinking were investigated: their classroom behaviours and their cognitive involvement. Prior studies and previous literature were sources used to support the data coding process. The themes for classroom behaviour analysis were modified from Tsui's (2002) study (Table 3.3); meanwhile, the data about the students' cognitive involvement were

analysed based on the study's working definition of critical thinking. Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality and Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive skills were also used to analyse the data concerning the teaching practice, as explained in Chapter 2. I identified in advance the areas of relevance including course objectives, teaching activities, teachers' questions and assessment methods. Similarly, the EFL curriculum and relevant government documents were analysed according to these two frameworks.

Critical thinking is conceptualised in this study as an ability which requires certain cognitive skills such as analysing, synthesising and evaluating (Bloom 1956). Critical thinking also encourages students to use their cognition to interpret and critique received knowledge, to question their own understanding and assumption(s), and then to take action in their own life (Barnett 1997, 2015). The combination of these two frameworks produces pairs of values to assess critical thinking practices in an academic context (see figure 2.1). For example, a Knowledge–Knowledge pair signifies what the EFL students recognise about linguistic features of English or cultural aspects of English speaking people. A Comprehension–Self pair may indicate how the EFL students interpret their own usage of a language pattern that is often a source of misunderstanding (e.g. answers to negative questions such as 'Don't you agree with me?'). An Analysis–World pair may illustrate the process of comparing and contrasting EFL students' knowledge of their own and target language patterns and/or cultural features affecting the language patterns, thereby, adjusting their English use so as to avoid misunderstanding.

The following is an example of my use of the frameworks to analyse the data. The example is from the American Issues course. The course's objectives are stated 'to have students analyse the issues in current American society; and, to have

students practise critical thinking while discussing those issues'. The analysis based on Bloom's (1956) cognitive levels and Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality shows that a higher-order thinking level (analysis) was the aim of the course objective, and the domain of critical thinking was about 'the world'; that is, to exercising thinking about issues peculiar to American society. The domain of 'self' was referred to in the teacher's expectation that the students would express personal opinions. However, the effort to understand oneself, for example, one's own assumptions or biases, was not clearly demonstrated in this set of data. The use of the frameworks to analyse data is explained in more detail in Chapter 5.

A straightforward juxtaposition of the two frameworks was adopted. I decided to use only Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality in combination with Bloom's (1956) six cognitive levels. The levels, though described as nouns, when combined with the three domains (knowledge, self, and world) could indicate a *process* of thinking (See examples of the illustrations of these processes above). Therefore, this combination can still retain Barnett's (1997) notion of critical beings who are 'able to critically engage with the world, with knowledge and with themselves' (p. 1).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework and Schendel's (2015) framework of factors affecting university students' improvement of critical thinking were adapted to code the data about the barriers to critical thinking practice. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework originally included the following levels: student, microsystem (day-to-day interaction with parents and teachers), mesosystem (interactions between parents and the school), exosystem (parent work, teacher education and school policies) and macrosystem (cultural values, attitudes towards education, educational policy, child rearing values, economic policy). After examining the characteristics of this study, I chose three levels in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework to code the data. These are microsystem

(classroom level), exosystem (institution level) and macrosystem (national culture and human-kind levels). The contribution of Schendel's (2015) framework to this study is its focus on the role of academic experiences. According to Schendel (2015), the most profound effect on the development of critical thinking skills is the nature of the academic experiences. Academic (classroom) experiences are divided into two components related to the inputs from lecturers and students. Schendel's (2015) framework was therefore helpful for the analysis of this study's data.

### **Inductive analysis of data**

I used inductive analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011) to analyse the data concerning the participants' conceptualisation of critical thinking. I did not use any specific frameworks to analyse this set of data. The choice of a loose framework of critical thinking facilitated acceptance of a broad view of the participants' diverse definitions of critical thinking. After reiterating the data, some themes that had not been discussed in the literature but were specific to the research context emerged. One of these was the view that critical thinking meant (or included) expressing personal opinions and the right/wrong dichotomy as the aim of critical thinking.

#### **3.5.3 Stages in data analysis**

There is no single, accepted approach to analysing qualitative data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Creswell 2012; Silverman 2014). This study followed Creswell's (2012) six steps of analysing data: preparing and organising data for analysis; exploring and coding data; using codes to produce descriptions and themes; representing and reporting findings; interpreting findings; and validating the accuracy of the findings (Creswell 2012, p. 237)

##### **3.5.3.1 Preparing and organising data for analysis**

The study's data were quite large and derived from various sources. There were two field trips entailing observations of different classes and interviews with the

teachers and students. I also collected the documents such as government policies, the EFL curriculum, and the course syllabuses. Therefore, I organised the data into different folders and computer files. At least three copies of the data were kept at three different places.

During the data collection field trips, after each class observation or interview with a teacher or student, I wrote a summary of the data. The interview data were then transcribed in the language that was used in that interview (either Vietnamese or English). This preparation process saved a great deal of time subsequently, and assisted with the process of familiarisation with the data.

Initially, I intended to use NVivo software to assist my data analysis. However, I realised that the use of the software would take me much time as I am a low-tech person. Therefore, I decided not to use it to assist my data analysis.

During this step, two concerns arose: the amount of transcription data, and language issues. Regarding transcription, I had to make the decisions about whether or not to transcribe all the observation and interview recordings. Finally, I decided to transcribe all of the 22 student interviews and the eight teacher interviews. As for observation recordings, I retained only a summary of each observation. As part of the analysis process, I listened to the observation recordings several times to identify pieces of data for analysis.

As previously indicated, both English and Vietnamese were used for the analysis. This study was conducted in EFL classes where English was the main language of teaching and learning. However, Vietnamese was used on occasion during the lessons. The observation data, therefore, were primarily in English. Two teacher interviews were conducted in English and the remaining interviews (six teacher and 22 student interviews) were in Vietnamese. In order to ensure the

quality of data, I did not translate the transcriptions of those interviews into English. I only translated the quotes to be presented in the dissertation. In similar vein, I translated into English just some parts of the government's decisions, the EFL curriculum, and the course syllabuses.

To prepare for the analysis of the data, I anonymised the participants and sources. For the interview data, the participants were coded numerically. The codes were marked separately for teachers and students, for example *Teacher 2, I11314* means an interview with Teacher 2 on March 11, 2014. For observation data (with audio-recordings), the data were coded according to the type of course and lesson number. If a recording is of group discussion, this information was marked as GD; of whole class learning, WCL; and of whole class discussion, WCD. For example,

- CCC-L1-WCD means Cross-cultural Communication course, Lesson Number 1, group presentation followed by whole class discussion.
- CCC-L1-GD1 means Cross-cultural Communication course, Lesson Number 1, Group discussion 1.

### **3.5.3.2 Exploring and coding the data**

Exploring the data by immersing in it is a process recommended by a number of qualitative researchers (e.g. Creswell 2012; Wellington 2015). This first step in data analysis helps obtain a general understanding of the data before proceeding to the coding process. In this study, the observation notes and summaries, and the interview transcriptions were read fully several times. Some first impressions of the data were written in the margins of the texts.

After the initial exploration of the data, I began the coding process. Coding is a major feature of qualitative data analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Dörnyei 2007). Dörnyei (2007) notes that all qualitative coding techniques are

aimed at ‘reducing and simplifying the data while highlighting special features of certain data segments in order to link them to broader topics or concepts’ (p. 250).

The coding process reflects the iterative nature of qualitative data analysis.

Researchers normally initiate coding by highlighting any interesting-looking passages. After reading the passages several times, researchers notice the patterns that recur across the individual accounts. Revisiting the data a number of times also helps researchers recognise salient emergent categories, and link them to various topics.

I explored and coded the data according to the research questions. In the first instance, I searched for data to answer the research question about the participants’ conceptualisation of critical thinking. Thirteen thematic codes were discerned at this stage: scepticism/inquiry, evidence-based, personal voice, open-mindedness, logical thinking, comparing, analysing, applying, evaluating, objectivity, scientific-thinking, deep thinking, reflecting on one’s own knowledge.

With regard to critical thinking teaching practice, I focused on four areas: course objectives, teaching activities, teachers’ questions and assessment methods. I first described these areas based on the data from observations of the skills-based and content-based classes. From the working critical thinking frameworks, I identified various codes and assigned them to: observational data; documents (government documents, EFL curriculum, and course syllabuses); and the teacher and student interviews.

The codes concerning the students’ performance were identified from classroom behaviours (Table 3.3) and classroom talks. Based on the critical thinking framework used in this study to analyse classroom talks, examples of the students’ performance were educed.

The codes regarding the factors affecting critical thinking practices were identified from different data sources: classroom observations, and teacher and student interviews. The data from each source were coded separately and the codes were then compared and combined. For example, when listening to the recording of the American Issues classes, I identified one problem besetting the students: poor English language proficiency. This code also featured in the transcript analysis of the teacher and student interviews. I then crosschecked these data sources and explored further the relationship between them.

### **3.5.3.3 Using codes to construct themes**

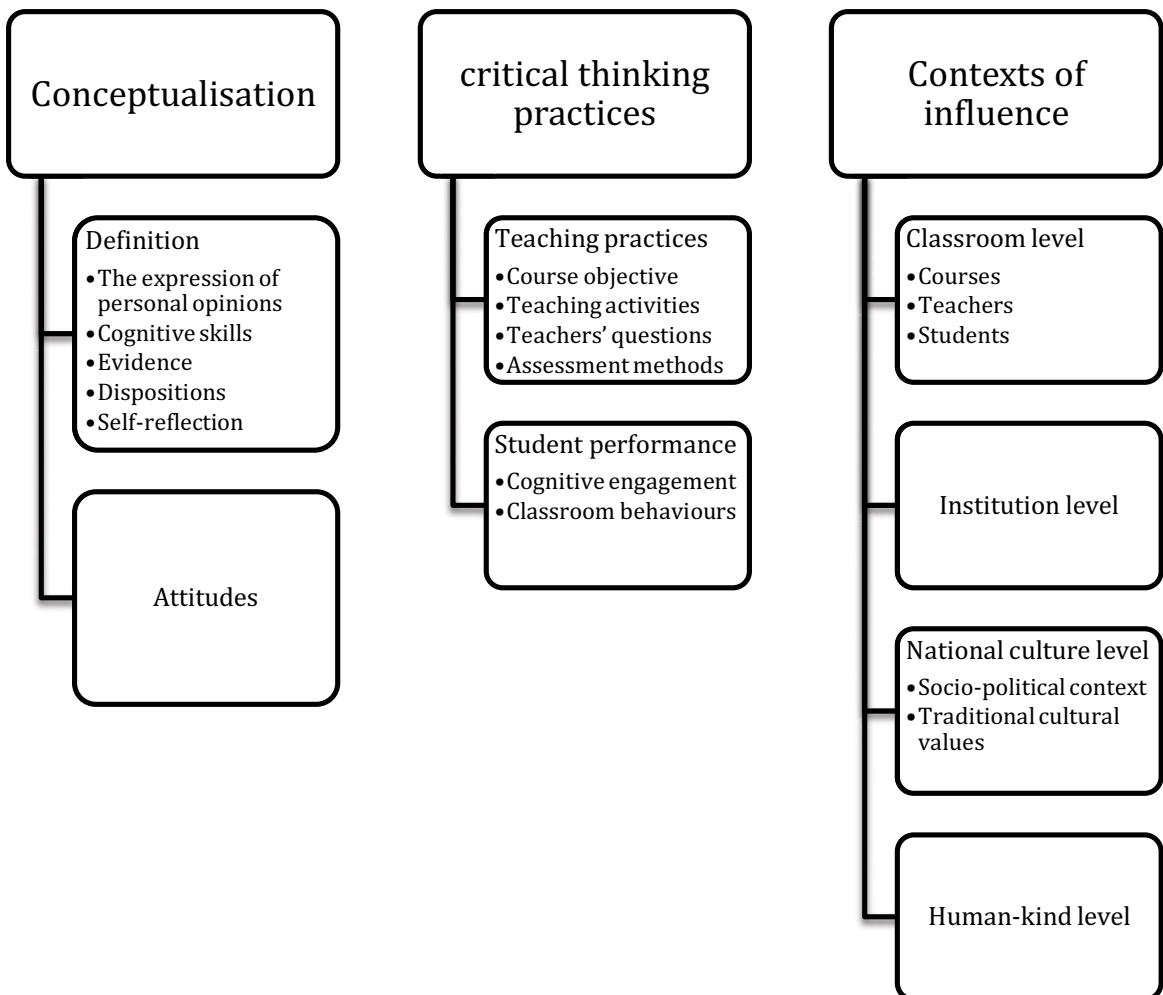
After the initial coding process, the codes were revisited. Similar codes were aggregated to form certain broader themes. The aggregation of codes into themes is seen as a process of eliminating redundancies (Creswell 2012). I rearranged the codes to form three major themes: conceptualisation of critical thinking, critical thinking practices, and factors affecting critical thinking practices. Under each major theme, there were two or three minor themes, each in turn composed of from one to five micro themes. Figure 3.1 describes the relationship between major and minor themes.

### **3.5.3.4 Presenting and reporting findings**

I displayed the findings in tables and figures or constructed in narrative form to explain what was found in response to the study's research questions.

### **3.5.3.5 Interpreting findings**

I then reflected on the findings and explored them in relation to the literature and previous studies. The product of this step is presented in chapters 7 and 8.



**Figure 3.1: Major and minor themes**

### 3.5.3.6 Validating the accuracy of the findings

Accuracy and credibility of findings is of utmost importance in qualitative research (Creswell 2012). In order to ensure the credibility of qualitative findings, several qualitative researchers (e.g. Creswell 2012; Lincoln & Guba 1985) suggest strategies such as triangulation and member checking.

In order to accurately understand the current practice of critical thinking and the barriers to this practice in the research context, the data were triangulated according to varying categories such as people (e.g. students and teachers), types of data, and methods of data collection. For example, the findings about language proficiency as one of the barriers were triangulated from the perspectives of the researcher, the teachers and the students. Similarly, the findings about evidence of the students' engagement with critical thinking were viewed not only from observational data but also from the student interviews. Different methods of data collection such as teacher interviews and document analysis were used to compare data about the influence of the CEFR on the teaching practice at the research site. With the multiple sources of informants, data types, and processes, I was able to maximise the credibility of the study's findings.

Member checking was also used to ensure the accuracy of the data, further increasing the credibility of the findings. I invited a doctoral student to independently code some of the data (interview and observation) with me. Three interview transcriptions and two classroom observation transcriptions were coded by this associate researcher. Before the coding, I provided her with the definition of the critical thinking construct, especially the meanings of the domains of criticality and levels of cognitive domains. At first, there were some differences between the associate researcher and me concerning the 'knowledge' and 'world' domains. For example, I coded as 'knowledge' for the teaching task in which the students were asked to explain the concepts in the reading text about Hofstede's (1986) cultural dimensions, while the associate researcher coded it 'world'. After discussing this with reference to Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality, we agreed that this belonged to the 'knowledge' domain, as studying about cultural dimensions is a part of studying the principles in Cross-cultural Communication, which is

categorised as knowledge in EFL teaching and learning. Member checking thus helped me to ensure the credibility of the findings.

Besides triangulation and member checking, back translation (Brisline 1970) of the Vietnamese quotes and data was also employed. This will be discussed in the next section.

### ***3.5.4 Concerns about translation issues***

The core of qualitative research is the interpretation of meaning (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011; Van Nes et al. 2010), and language is the primary vehicle in this process. Deriving meaning constitutes a challenge in qualitative research conducted in a single language, but even more so in cross-language qualitative studies (Santos, Black & Sandelowski 2014). In this study, the researcher and the participants speak the same native language (Vietnamese); however, the study's findings are presented in English. Translation of some data from Vietnamese to English was therefore required.

Translation in qualitative research faces a number of challenges. Concepts in one language may be understood differently in another language (Van Nes et al. 2010). Due to the close relationship between language and culture (Brown 2000), the translation of a word or phrase from a source language to a target language needs an understanding of the cultural background of the source and target cultures (Bazeley 2013; Twinn 1997) to keep faith with the intended meaning. While translating quotations, attention should be paid to the issue of voice. Using more words than in the original quote may change the voice of the participant (Van Nes et al. 2010), and the translation of concepts may also insert new ideas (Van Nes et al. 2010). All these possible challenges may compromise the validity and reliability of qualitative data.

Being aware of the challenges in the translation task, I decided not to translate all the interview data conducted in Vietnamese. I followed Van Nes et al.'s (2010, p. 315) advice to retain the original language where possible. I read the transcriptions in Vietnamese multiple times for coding. The codes, however, were written in English. During the analysis process, I frequently returned to the codes and preliminary findings in the source language to re-examine interpretations.

I then translated Vietnamese quotations where necessary into English. These quotations were selected on the basis of their potential to provide choice and vivid explanations for the themes emerging from the data. Back translation (Brisline 1970) was used to safeguard the reliability of the translations. I asked a colleague to render the translations of the quotations back into Vietnamese. This colleague has been a Vietnamese lecturer of English for more than 10 years and she has done a great amount of translation between English and Vietnamese. There were exchanges back and forth between me and my colleague to reach agreement on the translation versions.

### **3.6 Ethical considerations**

I carefully considered and managed several ethical issues: the participants' time; attitudes to the researcher and the study, including the observations and interviews; confidentiality; and data storage. All of these issues were stated in the participant information sheets (Appendix 1) and consent forms (Appendix 2), which contained the University of Technology Sydney's (UTS) Human Research Ethics Committee approval number. Strategies to deal with these ethical issues have been discussed in previous sections. For example, in deference to time considerations, all the decisions about the time and place for the interviews were made by the participants. As well, individual student interviews were chosen to save the students' time (Section 3.4.2.2). Concerning the possibility that the

participants might modify their regular teaching and learning, I emphasised that the study was of an exploratory nature and that the aim was not to assess the teachers' teaching or the students' learning (Section 3.4.2.1). I ensured that the results of the study were not reported to any members of the university's management board. I assured the students of the confidentiality of the information they were to share with me (Section 3.4.2.2).

The data from a small number of classroom observations and interviews were subjected to intense analysis. This means that people known to them could infer the identities of the participating teachers and students, and possible risks to the participants may arise from compromising the confidentiality of the teachers and students' identities. I therefore used pseudonyms to de-identify the participants. Moreover, every piece of information was treated with the strictest confidentiality.

All recordings and other data will be stored securely for UTS statutory period of five years, after which they will be destroyed.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

The chapter has outlined and explained the methodological framework I used in the conduct of this study. I justified the relevance of the interpretivist paradigm, qualitative approaches, and the case study method to this project. The chapter proceeded to describe the study's setting and participants and to detail the data collection instruments. Following the description of data processing and analysis, I discussed the study's ethical considerations.

The next three chapters will report the resultant findings in terms of the research questions. It will present the participants' conceptualisations of critical thinking and then describe some evidence of critical thinking at the research site. A

more thorough picture of critical thinking practice will be provided through the descriptions of the barriers identified in the research context. ■

## **Chapter 4**

# **Findings: conceptualisation of critical thinking**

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### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter is the first of three findings chapters, the others being Chapters 5 and 6. Presented here are the data specific to the participants' understandings of critical thinking and their attitudes towards critical thinking and critical thinking development in an EFL class. Chapter 5 presents the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese EFL context and Chapter 6 analyses the factors affecting these practices. The main data sources of this first set of findings are the teacher and student semi-structured interviews. The quotations shown in italics are direct quotations of the interviewees. Quotations translated from Vietnamese into English are presented un-italicised. And, because Vietnamese does not have distinct male and female third person pronouns, I will use the pronouns 'one' or 'they' or 'them' in my translations.

### **4.2 Conceptions of critical thinking**

The key themes from the participants' understanding of critical thinking will be outlined in this section. Employing a deductive approach (Yin 2009), the themes were identified from the literature about critical thinking definitions (e.g. critical thinking engaging cognitive skills or related dispositions, as discussed in Chapter 2). Some themes, however, emerged directly from the data (e.g. critical thinking as a means of expressing personal opinions).

#### **4.2.1 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 5, 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).

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 Chapter 7.

#### ***4.2.2 Critical thinking engages 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. Reflecting Bloom (1956), 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).

#### ***4.2.3 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, I25214). 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.

#### ***4.1.4 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.

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, I13314). 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, I13314).

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.

#### ***4.2.5 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).

Overall, 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 participant referred to critical thinking in reference to taking action against unfairness or inequality in society.

I noted some features in the participants' conceptions of critical thinking that have not manifested in other studies. 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 (a 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.

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. This might be explained by my questioning during the interviews. I avoided referring to action in the world to avoid leading the participants, but none referred to it spontaneously. 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. This will be examined further in the Discussion chapter.

### **4.3 Attitudes towards critical thinking**

When asked about the significance of critical thinking in tertiary education, all the teacher and student participants stressed the need to develop critical thinking for university students. However, the two groups of participants nominated different reasons for this assertion. Whereas the student participants discussed the conditions for critical thinking development at the tertiary level, the teacher participants nominated lack of critical thinking among students as the main reason for introducing critical thinking at the tertiary level.

From the student participants' viewpoint, changes in approaches to learning at the tertiary level, that is, towards being more independent and taking a deep learning approach, are the conditions for critical thinking. Eleven of the 22 student participants referred to the autonomy of university students, how they need to learn to find information and assess its accuracy and appropriateness by themselves. Being autonomous means thinking independently, not depending totally on the knowledge transmitted by other people or texts. As Student 19 argued: 'When you are at university, you are mature enough to investigate an issue on your own. Not everything said by other people is true and there are various thoughts on an issue' (Student 19, I7314).

When independent learning is encouraged at university level, students need to change their approaches to processing information and interacting with the world. The students appeared to be saying that they can no longer study at a surface level; instead, they consider a deep learning approach (Biggs 1987; Marton 1983) more appropriate. Student 17 said: 'Learning at university is mainly to study independently and to investigate a problem fully and deeply. We cannot be so shallow... We need to see things from different perspectives and compare or

contrast them. Besides, we need to do research' (Student 17, I6314). Student 20 also explained why students should take a deep approach to learning:

If we just hear something without thinking, it's hard to apply what we heard... Something sounds very simple but if we think about it again, evaluate and put it into practice, we'll see it differently. We need to think further, not just listen and accept what other people say. (Student 20, I7314)

The students expressed a change in their attitudes towards their teachers, compared to what has been typically observed about teacher-student relationships in Confucian heritage cultures (e.g. Phuong-Mai, Terlouw & Pilot 2005; Shi 2006). In these students' minds, what the teacher says is no longer unquestionably true. They feel that they no longer accept every word uttered by their teachers. Some added that not all of the information imparted by their teacher is true and appropriate (Students 5, 10, and 14). As Student 10 explained: 'Of course, the teacher is right, but not always. In life as well as in education, there are different ways to understand a problem' (Student 10, I4314). According to Student 12, the role of teachers at the tertiary level is that of a guide; the way to approach a piece of information depends on the students. Students need to use critical thinking to make judgments about the information their teachers give them. This line of thought is contrary to the Confucian tradition, which appreciates the knowledge of superiors, and presumes the superiority of teachers (Dong 2015; Thanh 2010).

Apart from changes on the students' part, certain teaching methodologies were also found to be favourable for critical thinking development at the tertiary level. Students 7, 8 and 14, for example, mentioned changes in teaching methodology at their university in the credit training system, student-centred teaching, group work and teamwork. The recent change from academic year training system to credit training system (Ly et al. 2014) has enabled students to work more at home.

Lecturing time is reduced and more time is allocated for independent study outside the classroom. Students have more opportunities to learn from sources beyond the classroom, such as the Internet, social media, and even real-life conversations. Nonetheless, students still require critical thinking abilities to assess information from such sources.

Changes toward student-centred teaching in education generally, and in university education in particular, are also catalysts for critical thinking development. As Student 8 commented: 'There have been changes in teaching methodology, encouraging students to talk more than teachers, to tell their real opinions, not repeating what is said in books or searching whatever in the Internet' (Student 8, I4314). This student-centred approach helps students to explore an issue by themselves rather than being subjected to rote learning of what is delivered, as has been the case to date (Biggs & Watkins 1996; Mayer 2002). Recognising this change, some interviewed students mentioned the prevalence of group work and teamwork in university learning. According to Student 7, teachers always spend time in class on group discussions or group presentations, or they ask open-ended questions that will require students to really think deeply about an issue. Students no longer have to study the subject matter they are taught. Student 7 concluded that university education now offers numerous opportunities for critical thinking. Student 14 ranked critical thinking very important because teamwork is prevalent in universities. She argued that when working in teams, people normally propose different ideas. To better defend one's own opinions, she said: 'We need to explain at our best if we are to persuade other members in the group. That is when critical thinking was required' (Student 14, I5314).

It may be seen from this discussion that the student participants analysed some characteristics of university students and university teaching and learning as the

background for critical thinking development at the tertiary level. The teacher participants, however, emphasised the importance of critical thinking in tertiary education. They focused more on the students' low engagement with critical thinking at the tertiary level and all believed that their students were not performing well in the practice of critical thinking. The teachers stressed the necessity to teach critical thinking to these students due to the students' lack of associated capacities. As Teacher 1 explained: 'It is necessary to teach critical thinking because our students lack this skill. In fact, the students know what critical thinking is, but they cannot perform it. I don't see our students perform critical thinking' (Teacher 1, I13314). Sharing the same view, Teacher 2 stated that Vietnamese students are poor at critical thinking.

Six of the eight teachers traced this weakness to the teaching and learning tradition in lower levels in Vietnamese education. Teacher 2 recalled a traditional Vietnamese view of a good classroom and a good student: 'A good classroom should be a silent place in which students sit in rows with their hands on the table. Good students listen attentively to the teacher' (Teacher 2, I11314). According to Teacher 2, it is this viewpoint that discourages the opportunities for students to develop critical thinking at an early age; the students just memorise and repeat what is said in books. Due to this restrictive teaching doctrine, students neither learn autonomy nor express their own opinions (Teacher 5, I131013). Teacher 1 discussed this further:

They not only appear to passively accept whatever other people say, but seem easily convinced by any random piece of information. They do not see a problem from the other side in order to have a more thorough understanding of the problem. (Teacher 1, I13314)

From their analyses of some Vietnamese students' weaknesses, the interviewed teachers confirmed the necessity to develop their students' critical thinking. For example, Teacher 2 stated: 'At tertiary level, critical thinking is so important. If the students just describe or memorise things, they are not learning at this level ... At university level, students need critical thinking...' (Teacher 2, I11314).

In short, both the interviewed students and teachers held positive attitudes towards critical thinking and critical thinking development in their current context. The students emphasised the necessity for critical thinking by analysing the current teaching and learning practices at their university. The interviewed teachers, on the other hand, analysed the weaknesses of their tertiary students to highlight the urgent need to develop their critical thinking.

#### **4.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter has presented the findings about how the Vietnamese teachers and students in the research context made sense of what critical thinking is, and how they valued critical thinking in said context. The participants evinced a positive attitude towards critical thinking and its application in this Vietnamese EFL context. Furthermore, they were positive regarding the recent changes they had seen in teacher–student relationships, teaching methodologies, and the students' cognitive growth. These attitudes constitute affordances to critical thinking practice in the research context in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the participants' conceptions of critical thinking were still limited and at a rudimentary level; critical thinking seemed new to them, especially the students. ■

## **Chapter 5**

# **Findings: the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese EFL context**

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### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapter 4 synthesised how the participants made sense of and valued critical thinking in their EFL tertiary context. This chapter presents the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese EFL setting. Critical thinking is defined in this study as an ability which requires one's own cognition to interpret and critique received knowledge, to question their own understanding and assumption(s), and then to take action in their own life and beyond [see Chapter 2]. A combination of the six cognitive levels in Bloom's (1956) taxonomy and three domains of criticality in Barnett's (1997) framework is used to code data concerning evidence of critical thinking practice. These are working frameworks to illuminate what was observed in the classrooms. The categorisations based on these frameworks might be the most logical ones, but they are not absolute answers.

### **5.2 Critical thinking teaching practice**

#### ***5.2.1 Content-based courses***

I found evidence of critical thinking teaching practices in two content-based classes: American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication. The evidence was scrutinised in the course objectives, teaching activities, teachers' questioning and

assessment methods. Table 5.1 summarises the evidence of critical thinking teaching practices in the two content-based classes.

Themes	American Issues	Cross-cultural Communication
<b>Inclusion of critical thinking in course objectives</b>	Explicitly	Implicitly
<b>Teaching activities</b>	Discussions (whole class)	Discussions (group work), problem solving, jigsaw reading, group presentation
<b>Materials/topics</b>	controversial issues in American society	the Alligator River, the cultural dimensions (Hofstede 1986)
<b>Teachers' questioning</b>	Both lower- and higher-order thinking	Both lower- and higher-order thinking
<b>Assessment</b>	Essays Focus on arguments	Essays Focus on arguments

**Table 5.1 Evidence of critical thinking teaching practices in the content-based classes – a summary**

#### **5.2.1.1 Course objectives**

The American Issues course is for the third-year students who major in English Language. The students have already completed ‘American Culture 1’ and ‘American Culture 2’ in previous semesters. According to the teacher in charge of the American Issues course, he aimed to promote critical thinking for his students in this course. However, the aim was stated merely in the course syllabus, but not explained to the students, at least while I was observing the classes. He expected the students to share personal opinions on some American social issues (Teacher 2, interview). The course description objectives were ‘to have students analyse the issues in current American society; and, to have students practise critical thinking while discussing those issues’ (Course syllabus – American Issues – author translation). Based upon the conceptual frameworks used in this study, it appears that a higher-order thinking level (analysis) was the aim of the course objective.

The domain of critical thinking was about the ‘world’; that is, to exercising thinking about issues peculiar to American society – the socio-cultural aspect of a country where English is used as the mother tongue. The domain of ‘self’ was referred to in the teacher’s expectation that the students would express personal opinions. However, the effort to understand oneself was not clearly demonstrated in this set of data. Understanding Vietnamese culture might be counted as a part of understanding self in this class.

Cross-cultural Communication is a core subject for all third-year students who major in Teacher Education, Interpretation, Translation, Tourism and English Language. The term ‘critical thinking’ was not explicitly stated as one of the course’s objectives in the course document. However, in the course description, the objectives were: ‘In terms of skills: to help students practise four language skills in Cross-cultural Communication and the skills of analysing, criticising and evaluating while researching issues in Cross-cultural Communication’ (Course syllabus – Cross-cultural Communication – author translation). In terms of Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956), the course aims to let students practise such higher-order thinking skills as analysing, criticising and evaluating. The course objectives implied that the students were expected to perform critical thinking in the domains of ‘knowledge’ (issues in cross-cultural communication), ‘self’ and ‘world’ (e.g. cultural traditions in the world). During my class observation of this course, ‘critical thinking’ was not specifically mentioned. However, in practice, the teacher used different teaching techniques to promote the students’ critical thinking. In her interview, Teacher 1 affirmed her efforts to develop this skill in the students. She added that she did not include this skill in the course objectives in the syllabus because the syllabus was for all the teachers who taught this course. She explained that she left this to the discretion of each teacher (Teacher 1, I13314). This revealed

that the decision of whether to include critical thinking in their teaching depended upon each individual teacher. In the absence of any specific guidance, it seems unlikely that other teachers would include critical thinking.

#### **5.2.1.2 Teaching activities**

Three aspects of teaching activities, namely, tasks, techniques and materials were scrutinised for evidence of critical thinking being integrated into the teaching practices at the research site.

##### ***Teaching tasks***

###### ***Cross-cultural Communication class***

In the Cross-cultural Communication class, Teacher 1 organised various activities in her lessons such as question-initiated learning, think-pair-share reading, problem solving and group presentation. For the question-initiated learning, the students were required to discuss the material in pairs after they had read it individually at home. This first chapter introduced key terms and principles in Cross-cultural Communication such as culture, verbal and non-verbal communication, stereotypes, and prejudice. Teacher 1 did not deliver a lecture, but interacted with the students by responding to their questions (see Extract 1, Section 5.1.1.3). After reading the materials individually, the students worked in pairs. They were expected to ask each other questions about matters that they did not understand from the reading. After some time, the teacher asked if the students had any questions. Through her in-class instruction, 'comprehension' (Bloom 1956) was the cognitive level at which the students should operate when executing this task. In the interview, however, Teacher 1 articulated her expectation about the students' questions: 'They didn't ask me such questions as 'I don't see it [the problem] that way', or 'Vietnamese people don't do things that way' (Teacher 1, I13314). Based on the analysis of Teacher 1's expectation, this question-initiated

activity functions in the ‘knowledge’ domain but the teacher aspired to higher-order thinking levels on her students’ behalf.

In the think-pair-share activity, Teacher 1 asked the students to work in pairs to discuss one part of the reading about cultural dimensions according to Hofstede (1986). Hofstede’s framework divides the cultures in the world according to six continua:

- large and small power distance,
- individualism and collectivism,
- low and high attitudes to uncertainty,
- instrumental and expressive orientation,
- high and low context dependence,
- high and low contact cultures.

The students were asked to read this material at home in advance. During their pair work, they needed to: (1) provide an explanation of the concept; (2) give examples of national cultures at various levels on the continua; and (3) describe the positioning of Vietnam based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. After approximately 10 minutes of working in pairs, the students were randomly assigned to groups of six (corresponding to the six cultural dimensions outlined in the textbook) as part of a jigsaw activity. This time, each person presented their section of the reading and the others offered comments. If anyone did not understand or had a question that group members could not answer, the designated secretary had to note this down and raise the issue in subsequent classroom discussion.

Analysis of each question in this task showed that the students were required to perform at the ‘comprehension’ level of Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy. The students exercised their thinking within the domain of ‘knowledge’ in questions 1 and 2 (explaining the cultural dimension concepts and providing examples for each concept), and within the domain of ‘self’ in the last question (3). In this activity, the first two questions only required lower-order thinking. The answers to these two questions were clearly presented in the reading materials. The students only needed to paraphrase the concepts to demonstrate their understanding. However, for the third question, which required the students to identify the positioning of Vietnam, the students needed to analyse the characteristics of Vietnamese culture and their understanding of them, based on their reading of Hofstede’s framework of cultural dimensions. In this process, the students exercised higher-order thinking according to Bloom’s taxonomy.

Teacher 1 also used a problem-solving exercise, which centred on a morality story named ‘The Alligator River’ (see Appendix 6). In the story, a girl named Rosemary needed to cross a river containing many alligators, to meet her fiancé. She agreed to sleep with Sinbad so that he would take her across the river on his boat. The story described the reactions of Sinbad (the boatman), Geoffrey (Rosemary’s fiancé), Frederick (her acquaintance), and Dennis (another friend of hers). The students were asked to judge the characters in terms of whom they approved of the most and least, and identify which cultural values affected their judgment and where they learned these values. After 15 minutes of working in groups of four, students volunteered to represent their groups in front of class explain the reasons for their choices.

The two components of this task required the students to engage the higher-order thinking processes (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) of Bloom’s (1956)

taxonomy. The first component functioned within Barnett's (1997) 'knowledge' and 'self' domains, while the second functioned within the domain of 'self'. In order to stipulate the ranking, the students analysed the complexities between the characters and their behaviours. This was done based on an analysis of the characters themselves; therefore, the domain here is still within 'knowledge' and a small amount of 'self'. To identify the cultural values affecting their ranking/judgment, the students needed to reflect on themselves and their cultural lives to identify any influence. That was where the domain of 'self' came into play.

Group presentation was the teaching activity observed last. From the second lesson onwards, each group of four or five students gave a presentation about any topic of their choice, provided it was related to issues in Cross-cultural Communication. Each group member would then search the topic further for their individual written assignments. Their end-of-semester assignment required them to undertake a literature review of that topic. The presentation was to last about 20 minutes. After each presentation, the rest of the class was encouraged to comment on their peers' talk using both positive and negative comments. Teacher 1 reminded the students not to present facts; rather, she encouraged them to analyse the underlying reasons or phenomena. This task required the student presenters to exercise higher-order thinking processes. The student listeners were required 'to listen with evaluative minds, then provide comments' (Teacher 1, I13314). In accordance with the teacher's requirements, all the three domains of criticality were expected to be covered in this activity.

#### ***American Issues class***

In the American Issues class, the main activity in the three lessons I observed was a group presentation followed by a question-and-answer session. For the rest of the semester, the class was organised in the same way. Teacher 2 divided the class into

12 groups, and each group was responsible for one presentation during the semester. The presentation group briefly presented one topic assigned by the teacher (e.g. Multiculturalism, Education, or Immigration). The presentation aimed to serve as a stimulus for subsequent discussion or debate. During the presentations, the teacher maintained a neutral stance. He appeared not to offer comments on the students' opinions; instead, his comments were mainly confined to what the students should do to communicate main ideas effectively to the peer audience so that the latter could engage in the discussions. He also indicated his efforts to promote critical thinking by asking the students to identify a controversial issue raised in the material. This required the students to use analytical skills while they were reading the material. They were expected not only to understand the material, but also to make an inference about any controversial issues in it.

This task required the students to use higher-order thinking processes according to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. Teacher 2 in effect promoted critical thinking through the teaching task that he designed for the students. The domains of criticality were 'world' and 'self'. The students were expected to be critical of issues in American society (Barnett 1997) and of their own reflections on those issues. Consistent with what was observed, Teacher 2 explained his aim of developing the students' critical thinking through the discussion task. Concerning the topics for discussion, he indicated that he did not expect the students to present comprehensive solutions to the current issues in American society. Instead, he used the topics as the stimulus for them to express their opinions or standpoints.

### ***Teaching techniques***

Observation of the various teaching activities revealed that asking questions was the skill that Teacher 1 aimed to promote in her Cross-cultural Communication

classes. In every teaching activity, she encouraged the students to ask questions. Based upon her own teaching experience, Teacher 1 shared in her interview her understanding of the reasons the students were reluctant to ask questions. She said some students doubted their language proficiency and were not sufficiently confident to ask a question in English. She also noticed that the students did not express opinions when asked to work individually in front of the class. Therefore, most of the activities were organised in groups. Teacher 1 advised the students to highlight what they did not understand in their books and to write down the questions in English at home. They would then compare their questions with friends at school. She also encouraged the students to discuss the questions, and to try to answer them by themselves. They were asked to write down or bring the questions to her if they needed help in answering them. The aim of these activities may have been to help the students to understand the material. However, in her interview it was revealed that Teacher 1 wanted to train the students to ask questions and to express personal opinions. This was indicative of her efforts to facilitate an inquiring learning attitude among the students.

Teacher 1 explained the necessity of students asking questions about her viewpoint on learning. She said that she encouraged her students to learn how to learn, not what to learn. She observed:

The content in this Cross-cultural Communication course is already out-of-date, or it may be still new, but will be out-dated next year or even tomorrow, or it is already backwards but we are not aware of it. The content is just the means for us to acquire learning methods. In the future, it is important that students know how to continue their learning without teachers or friends.

That's the most important, I think. (Teacher 1, I13314)

The topics covered in this course include cultural influences on communication, cultural influences on teaching and learning, and culture and verbal or non-verbal communication. These topics helped the students to understand the influence of cultures on various aspects of communication – daily or classroom, verbal or non-verbal. According to Teacher 1, the content embedded in these topics might be out-dated because culture is in constant flux. For her, therefore, asking questions is a demonstration of critical thinking and an essential skill which helps learners to explore knowledge independently in their future lives. Teacher 1's comment about information being out-dated quickly is a persuasive call for critical thinking versus mere knowledge accumulation.

### ***Teaching materials***

Evidence of critical thinking teaching practice emerged in the materials that the teachers used for their lessons. In the American Issues class, for example, Teacher 2 chose readings that addressed controversial issues and he expected the students to identify the issues and address them in class discussions. The students needed to exercise critical thinking in order to understand the controversies implied within the texts. Once exposed to controversial issues, the students could develop and identify their own standpoints on the issues. In this way, the students were conditioned to practising critical thinking when dealing with the reading materials.

Teacher 1's use of the Alligator River story in the Cross-cultural Communication class succeeded in promoting the students' critical thinking, albeit with rather limited scope. The students were able to engage in the story because it was about love and friendship, two universal themes. Furthermore, the story portrayed different ways in which the various characters reacted to the protagonist's dilemma. The students were provided with a story eliciting different perspectives. By ranking the characters, the students were able to state their

personal opinions from their own perspectives. As the story was rather heteronormal, the students might have been willing to critique the story if they really applied critical thinking. Nonetheless, it appears that Teacher 1's choice of the story was an effective way of encouraging critical thinking, particularly the eliciting of communication, for students with little experience of critical thinking ability.

Teacher 1's selection of Hofstede's (1986) framework of cultural dimensions was another productive example of her content choice. The students were able to compare and contrast the cultures in the world according to Hofstede's (1986) categorisation. In addition, they had the opportunity to reflect on their own culture while they were discussing the positioning of Vietnam. A framework or typology like Hofstede's (1986) may raise the issue of essentialism in which the students could form certain stereotypes about peoples or cultures, including their own. Perhaps significantly, none of the students raised such misgivings. Nevertheless, the Alligator River story seems to have been an effective source of critical thinking as it required the students to reflect on their own cultural practices and made possible comparison and contrast among cultural features. The students had some knowledge to bring into the activity. It was, therefore, a stepping stone towards a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of other cultures.

In an experimental study on the effectiveness of critical thinking-enhanced EFL instruction, Yang and Gamble (2013) identified the specific course design principles important for developing critical thinking skills in EFL classrooms in Taiwan. These include the use of sustained content; the provision of a variety of perspectives and sources; and the use of issue-based topics relevant to the student. Engaging topics that deal with controversial issues and multiple perspectives are among the criteria for resources that promote and assist critical thinking. The

materials that the teachers of the two content-based classes under observation used when teaching met these criteria to some extent. The issues discussed such as cultural cohesion and fragmentation, racial discrimination or dis/advantages of immigration are of a controversial and unresolved nature. Moreover, the students almost certainly have some familiarity with US culture (through previous courses in American culture or other sources such as the media and movies). Their knowledge of ‘two ways’ of doing things, incorporating their knowledge of American and Vietnamese ‘cultural ways’ (the shorthand simplicity of which is acknowledged here) allows for a metaphorical conversation between the two. The success or failure in the use of these materials in relation to the students’ engagement of critical thinking will be analysed further in Section 5.3.

#### **5.2.1.3 Teacher questioning**

The functions and types of questions used by the teachers in the observed classes were examined to assess the teachers’ promotion of critical thinking.

##### ***The American Issues course***

In the American Issues course, of the few questions that Teacher 2 asked in each lesson, almost half were at the higher-order thinking level (Table 5.2).

Lesson	Lower-order thinking questions	Higher-order thinking questions
1. <b>Cultural diversity</b>	1. I want to make clear that your point is America should maintain multiculturalism. Is that right?	2. ... 'cause you are talking about why America should maintain multiculturalism, but why are you talking about religious diversity?
	4. Do you understand? Or do you have any questions?	3. What's the relationship between religious diversity and multiculturalism?
	7. Is that okay for you?	5. Again, what's the connection?
		6. What's your point?
		8. What do you want to say here?
2. <b>American Education</b>	9. So, what policy?	12. You've mentioned 2 ideas about the solution of the government. What's the issue? What policy?
	10. ... How can they answer your question?	14. So, what policy? What do they do to help black students?
	11. Are you talking about bussing the children to school or affirmative action?	16. If you say that they should open schools for students, for free, how can the school manage the funding? Will the government sponsor [it]? If the government pays no tuition fee, how can the school manage funding?
	13. Do you understand what they said?	17. How can the school have money to run?
	15. When you said so, do you mean...?	18. I think if you think so, it means the government has to raise tax. Are you willing to pay higher tax?
3. <b>Immigration</b>	19. I just think that you should stop and ask for your friends' ideas point by point. So what are you going to do next?	20. Are you with him or her? [Do you agree with her?] What's your point?
	21. Can you explain that? I don't think your friend [peers] can understand your point.	23. Why do you think immigrants may threaten the country's cultural values?
	22. So, what's the next point?	24. Can you give an example?
		25. Why so? [Why may marriages between people from different cultural backgrounds threaten the country's cultural values?]

**Table 5.2: Types of questions – Examples – American Issues**

Table 5.2 offers examples of the questions that Teacher 2 asked in three observed lessons of the American Issues course. For the sake of brevity, these questions are taken from their contexts; however, the order of the questions (from 1 to 25) was left unchanged so that the functions of the questions may be better understood. The teacher asked questions mostly following the students' presentations. For example, in Lesson 3, after all of the members in the presentation group had taken their turn, he asked the whole class if they agreed with the presenters (e.g. Are you with him or her? What's your point?). The number of questions that the teacher asked in one lesson was small, fewer than 10 questions during a 90-minute lesson.

#### ***The Cross-cultural Communication course***

In the Cross-cultural Communication course, Teacher 1 asked a number of open-ended questions which invited her students to articulate their understanding or thinking about something, for example, How do you understand this concept [cultural generations]? What are the examples of values? How are they [cultural generalisations and stereotypes] different? Although these questions resembled display questions (Long & Sato 1983) because the teacher may know the answers, they were able to stimulate the students' thinking. The teacher also required the students to employ their higher-order thinking through inferential questions such as: 'Where have you learned the values that caused you to rank the characters as you did?' and 'Think about this story. If I ask another group of people to read it and do the same exercise, a group of people from different nationalities, what do you think their responses will be, different or similar?'

A number of lower-order thinking questions were asked in the classes I observed. Teacher 1 asked the students to provide examples of or explanations for some terms such as communication style, stereotypes, or generalisations (e.g. Do you know [understand] communication style? Give me one example of a

communication style? Can you give me an example of a stereotype? Can you explain it a little more?). I noticed that these lower-order thinking questions were at a comprehension level; however, some of them seemed to require slightly higher-order thinking. The following extract is an example. The teacher's questions appeared to check the students' understanding of such concepts as cultural generalisations, patterns, or generalisations.

***Extract 1: [at 25:45, CCC-L1-WCL]***

1. S: Can you explain the difference between cultural generalisations and stereotypes?
2. T: Okay, cultural generalisations and stereotypes, what are they and why are they different? Please think about cultural generalisation. What is it? How do you understand this concept?
3. S: It is a description of commonly observed patterns.
4. T: Yes, it is a description of commonly observed patterns. They may not hold true for every member of one culture. Come back to the example of values... Is it a pattern? If you say it's a value, is it a pattern? Do you know what a pattern is? What's the Vietnamese equivalent for patterns?
5. S: khuôn mẫu
6. T: Is the value common?
7. S: Yes
8. T: Yes, that's why it becomes [a] value. Is it a cultural generalisation?
9. S: Yes
10. T: So the example of cultural generalisation is a value in a culture, right? For example, self-reliance ... Self-reliance is a cultural

generalisation. Again, be careful. This may not hold true for every member of a culture [...] Can you give me one example of a stereotype?

11. S1: For example, [not heard]
12. S2: Người Nhật khi gặp người nào đó thì cúi đầu chào. Đó là một ví dụ. [Japanese people greet someone by bowing.]
13. T: Thank you, but what examples in your real life?

However, when Teacher 1 asked the students to provide an example of a stereotype, she seemed to challenge the students to explain the reasons they thought this example was a stereotype. The teacher's ultimate purpose in that particular case may have been the students' understanding of the stereotype concept. She required the students to apply what they understood about stereotypes to explain the example in real life. Her questions might also have helped balance the talking between the teacher and the students; however, the speculation is beyond the focus of this study.

During the interview, Teacher 1 highlighted the importance of thought-provoking questions in promoting students' critical thinking. She said that the questions should help to stimulate the students' thinking, adding that the students did not need to think much if they were asked questions of a factual nature only. For this teacher, the types of questions she asked and the manner in which she responded to the students' questions were of great importance.

#### **5.2.1.4 Assessment**

In both the American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication classes, the teachers expected the students to engage with critical thinking in both group presentations and individual written assignments, the marks from which when

combined comprised 100% of the total marks awarded. Regarding the criteria to assess the students' critical thinking in their written assignments, both teachers stated that they paid little attention to grammatical mistakes; they were more concerned with the students' reasoning, their analytical minds, and their reflection upon a particular issue. The methods that the teachers adopted to set the written assignment questions were also significant. The students were given considerable freedom to choose a topic or topics of personal interest to write about in their end-of-semester assignments.

In the American Issues course, the assessment of this class was based on group presentations (40%) and individual assignments (60%). There were four or five students in each presentation group. Teacher 2 gave each group a short reading on a topic and asked them to identify a controversial issue addressed in the reading, find relevant information, and prepare a class presentation. For the assignment, each student could choose any topic presented in the class, and write their personal opinions about that topic in a journal. In total, there were three journal entries, which took the form of argumentative or persuasive essays.

Not only was critical thinking the focus of the course, it was also the sole criterion for assessment. Due to the poor performances of some students during group presentations, Teacher 2 made some adjustments to his assessment. With the presentations, he did not assess the students' critical thinking; instead, he merely assessed if the students knew how to deliver a presentation, how to conduct a discussion, and how to engage their classmates in a discussion. Critical thinking was assessed more in individual assignments. The teacher emphasised that he would not assess the students' writing skills, only their reasoning and criticism. He would not judge if the students' ideas were right or wrong, only their ability to

address and argue a problem. The teacher's ability to be impartial might seem implausible.

Regarding the Cross-cultural Communication course, Teacher 1's encouragement of students' critical thinking was reflected in her overall requirement for the student presentations. These were not to be only about cultural facts. Rather, she expected the students to provide explanations about the reasons underlying those facts. Her comments on one student's presentation about non-verbal behaviour clearly illustrated this point. During her interview, she offered an explanation for how and why critical thinking is assessed in the students' oral presentations. She said that 'oral presentations need analysis of factual information since this subject is about the hidden part of an iceberg; that is, the intangible aspects of cultures. If the students were to present only cultural facts, the material would be of little use' (Teacher 1, I13314). The teacher explained to the students that facts could be easily recalled. Although facts can be contested, the teacher's explanation in the class about her expectation of the students' focus on analysis rather than facts affirmed her efforts to assess their critical thinking through their oral presentations.

Teacher 1's assessment of the students' critical thinking was also included in the final assignment. Each student was required to write a review of the literature on the topic chosen for their group presentation, and they had to find related material independently. The teacher instructed the students on how to use the university's database to find relevant readings and references. She explained that she assessed the students' critical thinking on the basis of this written assignment. By writing a literature review, the students had to read, then synthesise and analyse the information they had read. Since the students were not familiar with this kind of writing, the teacher explained that they needed to determine the

difference between their own viewpoints and those of others, to learn how to state their own opinions while writing about others' opinions, and to understand the need to back up views with evidence. Teacher 1's analysis of her requirement for the students' final assignment demonstrates that she aimed to assess their critical thinking.

Consistent with the course objectives, teaching activities, and teachers' questioning, the teachers tended to focus their assessment on the domains of knowledge and self. They did not aim to assess the students' knowledge of the course content (i.e. current issues in the US society, or Hofstede's cultural dimensions), only their knowledge of how to make and justify arguments using existing cultural facts and their own reflections.

### **5.2.2 Skills-based courses**

My observations of the skills-based courses (Reading 5 – R5, and Writing 5 – W5) revealed little evidence of critical thinking teaching. Table 5.3 summarises critical thinking practices in these classes. In this section, I describe these classes in more detail.

Skills-based classes	
<b>1. Inclusion of critical thinking in course objectives</b>	No
<b>2. Teaching activities</b>	Activities to complete reading and writing tasks
<b>3. Teachers' questions</b>	Outcome-leading and display questions
<b>4. Assessment methods</b>	Tests with fixed formats

*Table 5.3: Critical thinking practices in the skills-based classes – a summary*

#### **5.2.2.1 Course objectives**

##### **W5 course**

The W5 course is undertaken by the third-year students of all specialisations (see more in Section 3.3.3.1). Prior to this course, the students are required to complete

Writing 1, 2, 3 and 4. This course aims to provide opportunities for students to practise different genres of writing, from descriptive and narrative to argumentative and discursive writing. The students are expected to attain a C1 certificate according to the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) after graduation; this course is their final Writing course.

Although the course syllabus did not include critical thinking in its objectives, Teacher 3 said that critical thinking was part of the course objective, especially during the second half of the course when the students study argumentative and discursive essays. According to the teacher, the first half of the course requires a low level of critical thinking because the students learn to write descriptive and narrative essays. Discursive forms of writing require the students to have higher levels of critical thinking, and to express opinions by citing other sources or reflecting on different points of view before being able to convince other people.

#### **R5 course**

Consistent with the W5 course, the R5 course was also for third-year students of all specialisations. This is their fifth course in Reading skills. Prior to this course, the students are required to complete previous courses in reading skills; that is, Reading 1–4. However, a mismatch became apparent between the objectives stated in the course syllabus, the reality of the classroom teaching and learning, and what the teachers said about the course objectives during the interviews. While the course syllabus described the course objectives focusing on Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-based (TOEFL iBT) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the teachers organised the teaching activities based on the C1 test format. In the course syllabus, the aims of the R5 course were to ‘provide learners with updated information about the formats of TOEFL iBT and IELTS

reading tests, typical reading skills required by each test format, and effective test-taking strategies' (Course syllabus, R5).

In terms of skills, the course was designed 'to have learners practise skills in taking reading comprehension tests and master necessary methods to do a test within allotted time with the best results to one's capability' (Course syllabus, R5). At the time when this study was conducted (2013), the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) had been operational for one year. The adjustment in the content focus of the R5 course (C1 tests instead of TOEFL iBT or IELTS tests) resulted from this change; however, the change had not been updated in the course syllabus.

Consistent with W5, critical thinking was not set as a discrete aim of the course or in the R5 course syllabus; however, Teacher 4 stated that she implicitly considered critical thinking development an additional aim in her Reading class. She elaborated: 'It's impossible to say that I don't have that objective. While I teach the reading skills and strategies, or ask open questions, I develop the students' reading and critical thinking' (Teacher 4, I30913). Although critical thinking was not stated explicitly as the course objective, Teacher 4 reiterated that she aimed to develop critical thinking in her teaching.

### **5.2.2.2 Teaching activities**

#### ***W5 course***

Five W5 course lessons were observed. In the first four lessons, the students learned narrative and descriptive genres of writing. Specifically, the lessons were about descriptions of people, of festivals, and story telling. In the last observed lesson, the genre of writing was 'for and against' essays, or discussions (Derewianka 2003). The common teaching activities in these lessons were peer

feedback or peer review, error correction, and completing exercises in textbooks. The students were organised into groups, or as a whole class for learning.

The students in this class were instructed to sit in groups of four, and to provide feedback on their group members' writings at the beginning of each lesson. For example, in lesson 2, the students were required to spend approximately 10 minutes sharing the outlines of a festival (e.g. Mid-Autumn festival, Lunar New Year, Hue Festival) they intended to describe. The feedback that the students were expected to provide was about the structure of the outline (i.e. what to include in the Introduction, Body, and Conclusion paragraphs). In the third lesson, the students reviewed their friends' writings, identified mistakes and/or errors, and corrected them where possible. In the fourth lesson, the teacher gave each student a peer review worksheet, which asked the students to provide comments on their friends' writings in terms of organisation, cohesion and coherence. The feedback activities focused solely on technical errors in writing. The students were not encouraged to evaluate or challenge their friends' ideas.

In the third and fourth lessons, Teacher 3 provided each student with a set of pictures as a prompt to create a story. Working in groups of four, the students exchanged ideas with their friends to develop a story from the pictures. The students seemed eager and excited during this activity. They volunteered to share their stories in front of the class.

The analysis of the teaching and learning activities in the first four lessons shows that Bloom's (1956) higher-order thinking levels were encouraged through the act of developing a piece of writing, though the writing was merely descriptive or narrative in nature. As for Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality, the activities covered were mainly in the 'knowledge' domain. As conceded by the teacher in her

interview, descriptive and narrative writing, which covered nearly the first half of the course, does not elicit much critical thinking. During the class activities, there was little evidence that the teacher aimed to develop the students' higher-order thinking across the three domains of knowledge, self and world. In some instances (e.g. providing feedback), the teacher seemed to integrate some elements of critical thinking (evaluating peers' work); however, the feedback just focused on form, not on higher-order thinking such as ideas, structures or arguments.

The lesson in the fifth week centred on for-and-against essays. Apart from error correction at the beginning of the class, Teacher 3 brainstormed ideas on the topic of animals as medical specimens. At first, she asked a general question: 'What do you think about animals as medical specimens?' The whole class remained silent. After some minutes, the teacher asked the students to raise their hands if they agreed or disagreed with such experimentation. Then she encouraged each side to provide explanations or reasons for their answers. After some efforts from the teacher, some students expressed their opinions. The lesson then continued with a small lecture on how to write a for-and-against essay. There were opportunities for the students to express their opinions during this lesson; however, they were still reluctant to comment.

In short, the Writing class entailed few activities that promoted critical thinking. The reasons offered included time limitations and the writing genres. Somewhat apologetically, Teacher 3 said:

I don't think we have enough time to go systematically in developing students' critical thinking. And that's why for the first few weeks when we have descriptive and narrative essays, I don't see a lot of chances for students to develop critical thinking skills. Basically, they have to go back to very basic skills like using descriptive words in descriptive essays. (Teacher 3, I71013)

Furthermore, the teacher tended to believe that the students expressed their critical thinking in their writing. She elaborated, 'Writing is considered more academic than other skills ... You do think from collecting ideas from different sources, you analyse it, synthesise it and present your own point of view or something. That's very well demonstrated in writing' (Teacher 3, I71013). This Writing teacher did not organise many activities that could stimulate the students' critical thinking; nonetheless, she was aware of reasons for this lack of critical thinking opportunities in her class.

#### ***R5 course***

The main activities in the observed R5 class were reading exercises (from the course book) and doing sample tests (designed and administered by the students). Before dealing with the reading exercises in the book, Teacher 4 conducted a pre-reading activity. The students were asked to discuss the topic of the reading text (the difference between work and fun). A short whole-class discussion followed. While the students were doing these exercises, the teacher asked them to work in pairs. She frequently initiated interaction by eliciting the answers to the reading questions that come after each reading text in the textbook and asking the students to explain their answers. The teacher invited different students to provide answers or explanations to the reading questions.

Conducting the reading test and gaining feedback on it accounted for one third of the class time (30 of 90 minutes). At the end of the lesson, the students sat a 20-minute test prepared by one group of students. They were responsible for finding reading texts and questions that corresponded to the structure of a reading test in accordance with the European framework (C1 level). The students in charge had to provide the answers and be prepared to respond to any questions posed by their classmates concerning the test in the following lesson. At the beginning of the

observed lesson, one group of students wrote down the answers to a reading test on the classroom board. After the teacher returned the test papers to the class, she encouraged the students to ask the test designers to explain any answers that they had found hard to understand or were unhappy with. According to Teacher 4, the test was included in every lesson because she wanted to familiarise the students with the form of a test that every student had to sit as a requirement for their graduation. Subjecting the students to the pressure of time while doing a test was the teacher's other purpose in organising this activity.

The teaching and learning activities in the R5 class mainly focused on the 'knowledge' domain. The questions in the reading tasks and the reading tests might require the students to use their higher-order thinking processes (Bloom 1956). No evidence of 'acting' in the world was observed in this class. The preoccupation with preparation for the end-of-term test with CEFR format might be one of the reasons for this.

As suggested earlier, the teacher of the R5 course revealed that critical thinking was not an explicit objective in this course. However, she believed that she paid attention to developing the students' critical thinking by always asking the students to substantiate their answers or by directing their thinking towards selecting materials for a reading test. The teacher referred to various other activities that contributed to the development of critical thinking in a Reading class, for example, sharing reflections in class or writing reflections in portfolios as a post-reading exercise. Teacher 4 said

I just helped the students to comprehend a reading, but not yet facilitating them to reflect on it: agreeing or disagreeing with its content, with its author and at what level. I think I can promote the students' critical thinking through those activities. (Teacher 4, I30913)

This teacher confessed that during the present academic year, she had only been able to implement the pre-reading activity. She did not have enough time to include any post-reading activities due to a change in the Reading curriculum. The teacher evidently understood the necessity for critical thinking in a Reading course, but was not in a position to implement the relevant activities to promote this competence in her class.

### **5.2.2.3 Questioning**

As mentioned earlier, the students in W5 classes spent most of their class time working in groups providing feedback, developing an outline, or crafting a story. Teacher 3 did not ask many questions. The few that she asked in the lessons I observed were at low levels according to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. They mostly derived from the activities the students undertook in the textbook exercises. Therefore, they were merely comprehension and outcome-leading questions. For example, at the beginning of the lesson on how to write a people description essay, Teacher 3 asked exclusively display questions.

#### ***Extract 2: (at 11:52, W5-L1-WCL)***

- 1 T: What is the first part of an essay [describing people essay]?
- 2 S: [...]
- 3 T: What's in the introduction of this type of essay?
- 4 S: [...]
- 5 T: The next part is body paragraph, right?
- 6 S: [...]
- 7 T: What do you say in the conclusion of this essay?
- 8 S: [...]

While these display questions served to check the students' knowledge, they were too superficial to stimulate any critical thinking among the students.

During the R5 course, the teacher asked most of the questions at lower-order thinking levels, targeting the students' answers to the questions after each reading task. The following is a typical conversation in this Reading class.

***Extract 3: (42:20, R5-L1-WCL)***

[Whole class teaching, vocabulary exercise followed by a reading passage; the teacher read the questions, the students answered in chorus.]

1. T: Number 11? [The odds are you prefer playing sport to doing the laundry]. A short sentence ... Can you guess the meaning of 'the odds' is, A, B or C?
2. Ss: A
3. T: Why do you think A? A, B or C?
4. S: [silence]
5. T: Is it true that you prefer playing sport to doing the laundry?
6. Is it true or false here?
7. Ss: No
8. T: No, it's not a matter of true or false here; so, A is an incorrect answer. How about B? Is it obvious that you prefer playing sport to doing the laundry?
9. Ss: [silence]
10. T: Sure? Are you sure? No, right?

Most of the teacher's questions in this observed class were outcome-leading questions or display questions, as the answers to the questions were stated or

inferred from the reading text. Although her questions sought the students' explanations or evidence of their choices or answers, these questions did not require substantial student critical thinking. In order to answer the questions, the students simply needed to garner factual information from the reading texts. Multiple-choice answers were even less conducive to critical thinking. In effect, the students were simply required to comprehend the reading of the text, rather than critique it.

#### **5.2.2.4 Assessment**

According to the W5 teacher, critical thinking was a central component for assessment in the said course, especially in the discursive forms of writing (argumentative essays, cause and effect essays, for and against essays). Teacher 4 expected the students to demonstrate critical thinking in a systematic way in their writing. They were required to collect ideas from various sources, analyse them, synthesise them and to present their own points of view about them.

As critical thinking was not stated as one of the course objectives, it was not seen as a criterion for assessment in the R5 course. Although Teacher 4 integrated critical thinking into her teaching, she admitted that she did not include critical thinking in her assessment. She said that in previous academic years she had assessed students' critical thinking in part through the reflection component in reading portfolios, even though this accounted for only 10 per cent of the overall assessment. However, she had discontinued doing that in the current year due to a new rule which required EFL undergraduates to attain C1 level according to the European framework. The new requirement placed more constraint on the teachers of third year students because they now had insufficient time because they had to familiarise the students with the test format and let them practise as much as possible. The assessment, therefore, focused on the product – the C1 Certificate –

rather than the process. Hence there was no place for critical thinking assessment in the new curriculum.

In short, observations of the skills-based classes revealed that critical thinking was not extensively practised in these classes. The teachers organised teaching activities that mainly helped the students either to practise a genre of writing, or to complete comprehension tasks. The questions that the teachers asked in the observed classes were mostly at lower-order thinking level. Critical thinking was not included as a criterion for assessment in these courses. The teachers of these classes appeared well aware of the importance of critical thinking, however. The barriers to the promotion of critical thinking in the skills-based classes emanated from the curriculum (lack of focus on critical thinking development) and the examination regimes (emphasis on a form of test – CEFR). Sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 provide a deeper analysis of these barriers.

### **5.3 Students' engagement with critical thinking**

The students' engagement with critical thinking was investigated from two perspectives: their classroom behaviours and the content of their in-class talk.

#### **5.3.1 Classroom behaviours**

The data about the students' classroom behaviours were collated from my classroom observations and student interviews. The interview data helped to reveal some behaviours that could not be observed during the observations. The two data sources helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the students' engagement with critical thinking.

##### **5.3.1.1 Classroom observations**

Among the total of 490 minutes of classroom observations, eight critical thinking-related behaviours (see Section 3.4.2.1) were discerned in the two courses

(American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication) in the seven classroom sessions. Tables 5.4 and 5.5 summarise the frequency of the eight classroom behaviours in the observed American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication classes, respectively. Instances of the behaviours are subsequently tallied.

Tables 5.4 and 5.5 illustrate that no students in any classes expressed disagreement with or pointed out the flaws in the teachers' arguments or textbooks. These interaction modes were entirely absent in both whole-class learning and group discussions. By contrast, the students critiqued their peers. It was observed that the students seemed more comfortable critiquing their peers during group discussions rather than in whole-class learning.

The students posed questions to the teacher, but only at the teacher's bidding. In the question-initiated activity in the Cross-cultural Communication class, the students asked questions prompted by Teacher 1, who encouraged a question-initiated learning style. The teacher taught the lesson by answering or helping the students to answer their own questions (see Section 5.2.1.2).

American Issues			
Lesson number	1	2	3
Classroom behaviours	Whole class –debate -	Whole class –debate -	Whole class – debate -
Topic of activity	Multi-culturalism	Education	Immigration
Duration of activity	90 mins	90 mins	90 mins
<b>1</b> Students question Teacher	0	1	0
<b>2</b> Students answer Teacher's questions	4	2	4
<b>3</b> Students question Students	3	4	2
<b>4</b> Students answer Students' questions	3	3	2
<b>5</b> Critique textbooks	0	0	0
<b>6</b> Critique Teacher	0	0	0
<b>7</b> Critique peers	0	1	2
<b>8</b> Express opinions in class	1	1	1

**Table 5.4: Students' classroom behaviours and their number of instances in the American Issues course**

Cross-cultural Communication				
Lesson number	1	2	3	
Classroom behaviours	Whole class – question- initiated	Group discussion	Group discussion	Whole class – group presentation
Topic of activity		Cultural value	The Alligator River	
Duration of activity	90 mins	40 mins	60 mins	30 mins
1 Students question Teacher	5	0	0	0
2 Students answer Teacher's questions	6	0	3	0
3 Students question Students	0	25	30	0
4 Students answer Students' questions	0	30	40	0
5 Critique textbooks	0	0	0	0
6 Critique Teacher	0	0	0	0
7 Critique peers	0	4	1	0
8 Express opinions in class	0	0	3	5

**Table 5.5: Students' classroom behaviours and their number of instances in the Cross-cultural Communications course**

### 5.3.1.2 Student interviews

During classroom observations, there were no instances when the students expressed disagreement with or challenged the teachers. However, during the interviews, some students referred to moments when they did not agree with the teachers. Student 2, for example, described a situation when she did not agree with the teacher's opinion about a person's innate talent:

In one lesson, the teacher said a person might be very good at one thing that other people might be not, although they tried all their best. At that moment,

I thought he was not completely true. It is said that only 1% [of a person's success] is thanks to his/her innate talent. Training and practice accounts for 99% of his/her success. I intended to oppose the teacher's opinion but then I thought he just shared life experience, so I decided not to. I asked myself why he imposed his thinking on us. The teacher should evoke our inspiration for studying instead of mentioning innate talent. (Student 2, I25214)

The student in this example disagreed with the teacher's opinion about the role of innate talent in a person's success. Moreover, she did not think the teacher's mentioning of such a topic was appropriate in an educational context. This example indicates that the student had her own viewpoints independently of the teacher's.

In another example, Student 14 reported an instance when she decided not to argue with the teacher over the topic of homosexual love:

In my presentation, I showed some photos from the 'Pink choice' gallery. In the photos, some men expressed love to each other. I saw a negative attitude from the teacher. She even said 'Oh, it's terrible.' Then, she asked us how we felt when we saw that image on the street. I replied that I might feel surprised at first but I would get used to it soon. The teacher shared that she would feel terrible. At that time, I really wanted to argue against the teacher but I didn't. I was afraid that I did not have enough time because I had received a lot of questions from my peers. (Student 14, I5314)

Student 14 shared there was a struggle inside her mind. She wanted to extend the argument with the teacher over attitudes towards homosexual love. However, she did not because of her fear about class time limitation. That might be not the only reason. Another could be the high stakes nature of the activity where the student's presentation was assessed. From the two quotes above, it can be seen that these

students did not always agree with what the teacher said. They had their own viewpoints; however, for several reasons, they withheld their opinion.

When being asked if there were any moments when the students engaged in critical thinking and decided not to express critical thinking in class for any reason, all of the students said yes. They reported some examples when they challenged their teachers' ideas. Student 19, for example, described her thinking in a Speaking class. In this class, the students discussed different aspects of genetically modified products. Student 19 reported:

People often think genetically modified products (GMP) are bad, so many students in my class argued in support of this view. The teacher also agreed.

To me, I think differently. I once watched a TV program mentioning the positive aspects of GMP. For example, with GMPs such as rice or tomatoes, they have 'becarote' – a substance to increase red colour. The consumers of these products, hence, will get more vitamin A. I think it's good. Normal rice or tomatoes can't provide sufficient amounts of this vitamin. I thought every argument had two sides. If GMPs are not good, why do people create them?

(Student 19, I7314)

From this extract, it can be seen that Student 19 had her own belief, which differed from those of her peers and teacher. The student's final question might have been a good springboard for further discussion.

These findings reveal some moments when the students were willing to disagree with their teachers. However, these moments were not overt in class; they only manifested during the student interviews. The students made no attempts to criticise assigned readings or course materials. For example, no one criticised or questioned Hofstede's methodologies to divide the cultures into six pairs of dimensions, or criticised the Alligator River story as being heteronormal. The

Alligator River story almost demands questioning one's viewpoints and their origins. The students indeed only questioned assumptions tentatively, and did not question their own cultural assumptions about their own reactions they had been in the situation of the characters in the story. They appeared unready for that depth of critical thinking.

### **5.3.2 Classroom talk**

#### **5.3.2.1 Some evidence**

On several occasions in the Cross-cultural Communication classes, the students demonstrated critical thinking by using the cognitive processes defined in Bloom's taxonomy. They exercised critical thinking mainly in the domains of knowledge and self (Barnett 1997). The following examples provide evidence of three levels of engagement that progress higher with the classroom talk activities and critical thinking processes: under teacher duress/direction; semi-spontaneously; and totally independently.

#### ***Under teacher direction: Cross-cultural Communication, Lesson 3, The Alligator River***

Recordings of the three discussion groups indicated how seriously the students engaged in the task. They all justified their ranking of the characters with their own reasons.

#### ***Extract 4: (at 12:20, CCC-L3-GD1)***

S2: In my opinion, I will approve [of] Rosemary the most because I think she is very honest. She has a very strong love. She dares to tell the truth with her lover. She is also very sacrificed [aggrieved]. The person I don't approve of at all is Frederick. Because Frederick is Rosemary's friend, but when she told him her difficulty, he doesn't [didn't] care about her story. If he is her friend, he should give her some advice or some help. (Group discussion 1, Lesson 3)

***Extract 5: (at 5:30, CCC-L3-GD2)***

S2: I rank Rosemary as number 5 [the worst] and Geoffrey as number 1 [the best] because I can't accept Rosemary who slept with a guy before getting married to another guy. I rank Geoffrey as number 1 because in my culture it is normal for a guy to deny marrying a girl who had a night with another guy. (Group discussion 2, Lesson 3)

***Extract 6: (at 6:43, CCC-L3-GD3)***

S1: As far as I said, I approve of Dennis the most. Dennis is a good friend of Rosemary. It's not his responsibility but his sympathy, something like that ... It means he is sympathetic with Rosemary's situation. [The person] I approve of the least is Geoffrey because he is Rosemary's fiancé. He doesn't understand his fiancée's situation. (Group discussion 3, Lesson 3)

These extracts indicate that the students were cognitively and affectively engaging in group discussions and reflecting on their cultural assumptions about human relationships. However, their discussions were ultimately based on the questions assigned by Teacher 1. While offering their personal rankings and discussing reasons for their choices, the students referred to their own personal contexts ('In the future, if this situation happens with my brother...'), previous knowledge (American culture, Vietnamese culture) and sets of personal values. Nevertheless, this seems substantially more productive than the students' painful silence in the American Issues class. More in-depth analysis of possible reasons for this will be presented in the Discussion chapter.

***Semi-spontaneously: Cross-cultural Communication, Lesson 2, cultural dimensions***

As the discussions were facilitated by Teacher 1's questions, in group discussions the students were asked to: (1) clarify the meaning of Hofstede's cultural dimension concepts; (2) cite examples of countries belonging to each dimension; and (3) reach an agreement on the positioning of Vietnam. The questions regarding

the first purpose were mostly at the comprehension level. Some examples were as follows: ‘Can you explain the first point?’ ‘How do you understand collectivism?’ and ‘What does *expressive* mean?’ Apropos of the questions about the example countries, the students asked each other additional higher-order thinking questions such as: ‘Can you explain more about the example?’ ‘Are there any cultures that stay in the middle?’ ‘Why [do you think Korea is in between]?’ ‘Does it [attitudes towards uncertainty] mean risky?’ ‘What’s the disadvantage of individualism?’ and ‘Could you compare masculine and feminine orientations?’ The students’ discussions about the first two groups of questions were within the domain of knowledge (Barnett 1997) as they talked about the framework of categorising cultures in the world.

Regarding the positioning of Vietnam, the students in all three discussion groups asked ‘why’ questions in their attempts to seek their peers’ explanations. One student in group 1 even stopped her friend to ask her opinion about gender inequality in Vietnam. The students appeared to demonstrate inquisitiveness during the group discussions. Their thinking functioned in the domains of ‘self’ and ‘world’ (Barnett 1997) during this discussion.

***Totally independently: Cross-cultural Communication, Lesson 3, The Alligator River***

In the following examples, the students demonstrated greater engagement with their allotted tasks. They did not simply complete a task in response to Teacher 1’s requirements; they appeared able to exercise control over the topic and question under consideration.

The students in discussion group 3 suggested the topic for discussion independently. To discuss the members’ reactions if they were in each character’s situation, they posed conditional questions such as How do you feel about Sinbad? If you were in Rosemary’s situation; that is, if Sinbad required you to sleep with

him, how would you react? How [What] do you think about Frederick? If you were Geoffrey, what would you do [how would you deal] with your girlfriend? If you were Rosemary and your fiancé said that he would not marry you anymore, what would you do? The analysis questions asked by this group required the members to put themselves in the characters' situations and to try to explore the circumstances in a different way. This line of questioning allowed the students to freely express their personal opinions from various perspectives. It also enabled them reflect on and articulate their own values and cultural assumptions. This also indicated the possibility of 'acting' in the world outside of the class. The students even asked further questions of their friends. Extract 7 below is an example:

***Extract 7: (at 45:35, CCC-L3-GD3)***

1. S1: Imagine I am Rosemary, I think...
2. S2: If I was Rosemary, I would not return because I think he [Sinbad]'s terrible.
3. S3: How about your fiancé? You love him so much.
4. S2: I know that I love him so much but I don't come back.
5. S3: So you and your fiancé will not meet each other?
6. S2: Because I am a girl. If I stay overnight with a man, I will not be a girl anymore. I will not have face to meet other people.
7. S1: I think I never come to Sinbad for help. Although I tried my best to meet my fiancé, I think I give myself poorly [I don't want to lose my virginity]. [laugh]
8. S2: Give me your opinion.

9. S3: I think Rosemary is an unlucky girl because her fiancé, I think, doesn't understand and love her enough. Because there are many good to love that
10. he forget every mistakes [She may have many good virtues that can
11. compensate for that mistake]. Sometimes I think I will drop ... I will not meet my fiancé. I [will] come back to my home and take a rest [stay there].

In the above extract, the students showed the degree to which they were actively engaged with the task. Students (S2 and S3) asked questions of their friends (turns 3 and 5) or invited friends to give opinions (turn 8). S3's questions to S2 demonstrated that she wanted S2 to explain further the reason why S2 would not agree to meet her fiancé. Later, S2 asked S3 to give her opinion. It seemed that the students were quite absorbed in the conversation. S1 took her turn naturally in turn 7 without being prompted.

This discussion also revealed the impact of Vietnamese culture on the students' attitudes towards the characters in the story. In turn 6, S2 alluded to the concept of face to explain her decision not to meet Sinbad at any cost. Here the prevailing Vietnamese cultural expectation regarding the social image of a woman is reflected. The student was expressing a commonly held view in Vietnam that women should keep their virginity until marriage. It is this social norm that constitutes a woman's 'face'. During this conversation, S1 and S2 showed that they were strongly influenced by this particular Vietnamese cultural tradition.

The students did not mention some details that could have triggered further critical discussion, namely, the potentially laden nature of the name 'Sinbad', a discussion of the option of not telling the fiancé, or different standards for men and

women in such instances. Nevertheless, throughout the conversation, the students evinced a self-reflective attitude, contemplating their own reactions while at the same time analysing the cultural assumptions that underpinned these reactions. As is evident, the students' English was not always conventional, and may have been compromised or 'sacrificed' in the process of completing the exercise. While this might raise concerns in terms of standard English communication, the goal of critical thinking was met in this instance.

I also observed that the students in the three recorded group conversations discussed the purpose and background of the story. After stating their ranking, the students in discussion group 1 anticipated that the teacher wanted them to make links to their previous lesson (Cross-cultural terms and principles). In discussion group 3, the students discussed the implications of the story. They asked each other about the values that the writer aimed to teach them in the story, which by extension implied an evaluation question. People in discussion group 2 raised questions regarding the background of the story. They pondered whether the story originated in Western or Eastern countries. The students had to closely examine inferences in the story to answer this question.

In the transcripts above, I have provided examples of the students' critical thinking. They actively engaged in learning tasks, using analytical skills to complete and extend a given task according to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. Regarding the domains of criticality, the students extended their critical thinking across Barnett's (1997) domains as required in the teaching tasks.

In sum, my study found some evidence of critical thinking during classroom observations. The students exercised analytical processes, and seemed inquisitive and open-minded regarding the information they received from their peers and

teachers, at all times ready to refute it. However, there was little evidence of the students questioning their own thinking. They seemed critical of what other people did or said, and attempted to contest their peers' opinions. The students expressed critical thinking more to their peers than to their teachers.

My analysis of classroom interactions and students' discussions demonstrates that the students were more likely to exercise critical thinking during group work and in content-based classes. However, they seemed to only engage in critical thinking 'on cue', rather than intuitively. While the students undertook certain levels of critical thinking, their engagement with critical thinking was at best superficial and limited. Moreover, they appeared to implement critical thinking more effectively in some contexts than in others. In other words, as far as the students were concerned, some contexts were more conducive to critical thinking than others. Besides the evidence of critical thinking, I found some concerning examples where the students struggled to perform tasks requiring critical thinking. These are outlined in the following sections. Possible reasons will be explored further in Chapter 6 and discussed further in Chapter 7.

### **5.3.2.2 Some concerns**

Critical thinking was identified as the main objective of the American Issues course. My observations revealed that Teacher 2 conducted the teaching activities consistent with that objective. However, analysis of the classroom discourse showed that the students did not exercise critical thinking as expected. During my data collection period, the teacher himself complained to me about the failure of his class in some of our small conversations. He also thought of some adjustments to the course assessment and requirements for future cohorts of students. The following examples illustrate some of these unsuccessful moments.

**Example 1 (Lesson 1)**

In the first lesson, the topic of which was Americanness and national identity, the students presented at length about known facts; but they could not focus on a controversial issue to evoke discussion. Furthermore, they did not link the facts or the content to the overall purpose of their presentations, for example, discussing a controversial issue. Teacher 2 had to stop them and guide them on how to link the purpose of their presentations to the content of what they said. In this lesson, the teacher spent 28 minutes in total giving advice to the presentation group. After a long student presentation, the teacher spoke of their need to have a focus in their talk so that the audience could understand the main arguments and be able to participate in the discussion. In the following extract, the students seemed not to understand the message that Teacher 2 was attempting to convey.

***Extract 8 (at 23:51, AI-L1-WCD)***

1. T: What's the connection?
2. P1: The connection I want to say is the value of America is equality.  
Equality is the value of America.
3. T: What's your point?
4. P1: My point is that the US Government should maintain the economy and the society for everyone, every immigrant.
5. [silence]
6. T: You mentioned many terms: equality of resources, affirmative action, many... But I don't see why you are talking about them.
7. P1: I talked about American and [the] national identity of [the] American people.

8. T: [to the whole class] Do you have any questions? If you don't understand, you need to tell him.
9. [to the presenters] Why are you talking about equality of resources? I don't
10. know why you are talking about them. What's your point here?
11. P1: My point is that equality is one of the values. This equality should be maintained in America for ... [not heard]
12. P2: In America, equality is the most important value, so all people value it. All 19 religions and races ... so they have national identity...

This extract shows Teacher 2 was not satisfied with the students' answers, and he was pressing the students fairly hard. He repeated his questions three times in two minutes (turns 3, 6, 8). Speaking in Vietnamese, the teacher clarified this point again at the end of the lesson. He used the techniques to write a paragraph with a clear topic sentence at the beginning, and supporting sentences to follow, to highlight the need for a focal point in the students' presentations. He concluded with the following comment: 'It seems that you don't understand what to do and what you should do' (Teacher 2, Lesson 1). It appears from this example that the teacher's harshness combined with limited scaffolding, task difficulty level, and the students' unfamiliarity with critical thinking methods were possible impediments to critical thinking practices in the research context. These barriers will be discussed further in Sections 6.3.2 and 6.3.3.

**Example 2 (Lesson 3)**

The presenters in Lesson 3 could not explain some of the terms that they utilised in their talk, for example, self-government, or failed to offer an example to illustrate their point. In the extract below, the presenting students failed to provide an

example to support one of their claims, that immigration may affect the US's cultural values.

***Extract 9 (at 14:25, AI-L3-WCD)***

1. P: I think America should restrict immigration because immigrants may threaten American values.
2. T: Can you explain that? I don't think your friends can understand that. Why do you think immigrants may threaten the nation's cultural values? Give me an example.
3. P: Through my research, many American people worry that American society ... [not heard] into a separate and unequal society because the society is divided by people of different colours, social backgrounds, languages and cultures.
4. T: But why threatening the American values? Just explain in your words and to your understanding. Do not depend on the slides. Why do you think immigrants may threaten the nation's cultural values? Can you give some examples?
5. P: When America has immigrants, it means that in America, they have people [from] all around the world. [When] They come to America, they bring their own culture to America. So America has different ethnics, skin colours. So maybe America has ethnic conflict. That affects America.

The presenter's answers in the extract above show that they lacked an in-depth understanding of the topic. The evidence suggests that they could not offer a specific example to illustrate their point, although they could point out the possible influences of the immigrants' home cultures on American culture. This finding raises the question about the students' familiarity of the issues in the US society – a

country that is geographically distant from Vietnam. This question is further discussed in Sections 6.3.3.3 and 7.5.1 on the influence of teaching materials.

**Example 3 (Lesson 2)**

It seems that the students did not argue strenuously to generate discussion. In a similar manner, at the end of the presentation, Students S5 and S6 in the following extracts asked questions of the presenters. Although their questions indicated a critical response to the information they received from the presenters, they seemed not to argue strenuously with the presenters. When listening to their friends' answers or explanations, the students who posed the questions and the rest of the class did not have any responses. The following extracts provide examples.

***Extract 10 (at 51:12, AI-L2-WCD)***

1. S5: You give [have made] some suggestions to stop discrimination between black and white students. Could you give me some reasons why opening some schools for black and poor students is suitable?
2. P: I don't talk about opening schools for black students. I mean opening schools for poor children who cannot go to school.
3. [silence] ...

In this extract, S5 asked the presenter to explain the suitability of opening schools to black and poor students (turn 1). Instead of answering S5's question, the presenter corrected a piece of information: 'I don't talk about opening schools for black students. I mean opening schools for poor children who cannot go to school.' Interestingly, S5 did not respond to the presenter's clarification of the subjects of the school policy – poor or black children. As a result, S5's question was then ignored by both herself and the presenter. In this case, student 5 should have asked the presenter to answer her question after the latter had corrected the information.

**Extract 11 (at 52:30, AI-L2-WCD)**

1. S6: First of all, I'd like to give you some comments. First, about positive points... You have [made] a good presentation. ... However, your presentation had some negative points. ... I think you should pay attention to the main point... I think you should divide equal time for all of the members in your group to present. And, I think you should utilise presentation skills such as eye contact. One more thing, I think you talked too much, most of the time... And I have one question for you.
2. [class laughed]
3. P: No worries.
4. S6: ... Can you compare the policy in America towards the black and white and the policy of Vietnam towards the ethnic minorities?
5. P: Thank you for your comments. But first, I want to ask you. What point I talked is not a main point? Where [what part in my presentation do you think does not relate to the main point?]
6. S6: No, it is just my comments
7. P: ... Now I will answer your question ... [She continued with the comparison between American and Vietnamese policies]
8. [silence]

S6 responded to the presenter's reaction by confirming that it was just her comments (turn 6). It seems that she wanted to send a message to the presenter saying that she did not mean to challenge her. Consistent with S5's comment in Extract 10, S6 did not engage in further discussion with the presenter. The questioning behaviour of S5 and S6 therefore seemed artificial. This might be

because the students wanted to save face for each other and maintain harmony, or because the classroom ‘debate’ was conducted in a concocted and scripted nature. The students appear to have asked questions to please the teacher, and this appears constrived and not generated by their own curiosity. In this extract, students S5 and S6 did not question the presenter’s replies to their comments and questions. During the conversation, the presenter seemed to defend her argument and her presentation directly. It appeared that S5 and S6 did not want to involve themselves in a robust discussion, especially about the presenter’s viewpoints or performance. They did not feel comfortable confronting their peers.

It is significant that the classmates laughed after student S6 said ‘And I have one question for you’ (turn 2). This detail demonstrates the artificiality of how critical thinking was operating in this moment. Up to that point in the interaction, almost no one in the class (except S5) had asked a question of their peers; hence, when the audience laughed, it was somewhat unexpected. Possible reasons for this laughter may be speculated on from the observed behaviour. The class may have been uneasy, and laughing was like a way to restore harmony in Confucian tradition (Hiep 2001). It was possible that S6’s questioning was far from normal or she was known for doing this sort of thing and was sounding like a teacher in that conversation. The presenter’s reply (‘No worries’, turn 3) might have been meant to encourage S6 to continue with her question and signal that she felt comfortable with S6’s questioning, and was ready for any questions from this student; whether or not she actually felt comfortable is more difficult to discern. Or perhaps the class laughed because there was an assumption that asking a question for the presentation group would create difficulties for them, and that’s why the presenter replied ‘No worries’. As stated above, such motives can only be inferred here.

In summary, this example reveals the artificiality in the students' performance, and from the analysis of the transcripts three possible impediments can be inferred: assessment, and the culture of saving face and maintaining harmony. Further discussion of these potential barriers will be provided in Sections 6.3.3, 6.3.4, 7.4.2, and 7.5.1.

#### **5.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter has portrayed a picture of critical thinking practices in the research context. There is evidence of the teachers' implementing of critical thinking more in the two content-based classes than in the two skills-based classes. The analysis of the students' performance in the two content-based classes reveals a diverse picture: the students performed critical thinking in some activities, but not in others. The analysis of the critical thinking practices also identified possible factors affecting these practices. These factors will be further analysed in Chapter 6. ■

## **Chapter 6**

# **Findings: factors influencing critical thinking practices in a Vietnamese EFL context**

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### **6.1 Introduction**

Chapter 5 presented the findings regarding critical thinking practices in the research context. This last findings chapter proceeds with deeper analysis of the reasons why critical thinking was not practised in a more advanced and sophisticated manner. Teaching and learning is a reciprocal process: teaching influences learning, and learning influences teaching (Loughran 2013). However, for the sake of clarity, I have disaggregated the teaching/learning processes into critical thinking teaching practices and to the students' engagement with critical thinking.

### **6.2 Factors influencing critical thinking teaching practices**

The barriers to critical thinking teaching practices were identified through document analysis, teacher interviews and classroom observation. They include the absence of an explicit objective in critical thinking development in the national policy, the EFL curriculum and the examination system, and the teachers' lack of critical thinking instruction knowledge.

#### ***6.2.1 The national policy and critical thinking development***

The analysis of the documents concerning Vietnamese tertiary education indicated that critical thinking is not explicitly evident in the government's educational

policy. In the Vietnamese government's strategy for educational development stage 2010–2020, five criteria have been specified: standardisation, modernisation, socialisation, democratisation, and international integration (The Prime Minister 2012, p. 7). The strategy outlined specific targets for Vietnamese tertiary education. They include: educating citizens with creativity; independent thinking; citizenship responsibilities; morality; professional abilities; foreign language competence; labour discipline; industrial lifestyles; employability, adaptability to the changes in the labour market; and, equipping citizens with capabilities to compete in the region and the world (author translation) (The Prime Minister 2012, p. 7).

Although the documents do not mention the term 'critical thinking' directly, it is nonetheless implicit in some of the education targets. For example, in order to fulfil the country's democratisation and international integration aims, the Vietnamese education system needs to develop its students' critical capacities so that they will become active and responsible citizens. These capacities are important for the task of equipping citizens with creativity, independent thinking and citizenship responsibilities.

In response to this strategy, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education issued a set of learning outcomes expected of every university undergraduate:

The ability to fulfil complicated tasks which require the application of theoretical and practical knowledge of the trained field in different contexts; the ability to analyse, synthesise and evaluate information and data, summarise collective opinions and apply scientific advancement to solve concrete or abstract problems in the trained field; the ability to use professional knowledge to solve problems at regional or local levels (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2010, p. 4).

The strategy recommends the following modifications to teaching: ‘Continue to reform teaching and learning methodology and assessment in the direction of encouraging activeness, self-consciousness, proactivity, creativity and learning autonomy...’ (The Prime Minister 2012, p. 10) (author translation). Again, critical thinking was implicit rather than explicit in these documents.

Consistent with the above government strategy, the obligatory framework of the ELT curriculum in Vietnam does not include critical thinking. English language undergraduates are required to achieve sufficient professional knowledge and skills, political and ethical qualities, working styles, and good health that will enable them to work effectively in their careers, and to satisfy the social demands and requirements of globalisation (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2006) (author translation). It became evident that critical thinking is not a specific skill that Vietnamese education aims to develop for its citizens.

To date, there have been no guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education and Training about how to develop specific skills, including critical thinking. There have been no special programs to develop critical thinking in any specific field of study.

In my study, the teachers’ desire to integrate critical thinking in their teaching appeared to derive from their personal beliefs in virtue of this competence for their students. The Cross-cultural Communication teacher, for example, revealed her disappointment that she couldn’t extend her efforts to other courses. She said, ‘I only teach them and apply these methods in only one course that I am teaching. It’s not enough’ (Teacher 1, I13314). She implied that other courses did not attempt to develop the skills that she was doing. Although her estimation might be wrong (as at least one other teacher that I observed aimed to develop this skill for the

students), it could be said that these teachers aimed to promote critical thinking in their classes solely because of their own teaching philosophies, rather than in response to any regulations from the university or the Ministry of Education and Training.

### **6.2.2 Testing and examination system**

In the content-based classes that I observed, there appeared to be more opportunities for critical thinking development than in the skills-based classes. Neither the teachers nor the students referred to any pressure from examinations or curricula in the content-based courses. The students and teachers engaged in these courses did not face the pressure of a standard exam. Moreover, there was greater flexibility in the course content and assessment methods in these courses. Comparison of the two types of classes (skills-based and content-based) showed that the set curricula and examination system exerted considerable constraint on the practice of critical thinking in the research context. Teaching and learning in the skills-based courses were conducted with a view towards the final exams, rather than towards the development of skills such as critical thinking.

The differences between the content-based and skills-based classes could be an outcome of the examination system currently employed at the research site. In 2012, the Ministry of Education imposed a regulation – Decision No. 7274/BGDDT-GDDH (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2012) – which regulates that all graduates of English must attain C1 level in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

#### **The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)**

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was produced by the Association of Language Testers in Europe and commercially published by the Council of Europe in 2001. The purpose of the CEFR is to provide

'a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examination, textbooks, etc. across Europe' (Europe 2011). The CEFR divides learners into three bands with six levels (A1, A2 – Basic user; B1, B2 – Independent user; C1, C2 – Proficient user). It assesses what learners can do and achieve via a language.

The CEFR was first used in the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Vietnam in 2012. In 2014, the Ministry of Education issued a new framework, the Six-level Framework for foreign language proficiency in Vietnam (Khung năng lực ngoại ngữ 6 bậc dành cho Việt Nam) (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2014). The Vietnamese framework for foreign language proficiency (VNFFLP) was developed with reference to CEFR and other countries' frameworks for English Language, and the realities of teaching, learning and using foreign languages in Vietnam. The VNFFLP has three bands with six levels (1, 2 – Elementary; 3, 4 – Intermediate; 5, 6 – Advanced). The general descriptions of each level from 1 to 6 correspond to those of levels A1 to C2 in the CEFR. A close examination of the CEFR and the VNFFLP indicates that the Vietnamese framework is exactly the same as the CEFR. The VNFFLP is 'embryonic with most of the descriptors for language skills and can-do statements being closely translated from the CEFR English version' (Huy & Hamid 2015, p. 64).

At the research site, all of the participating students sat a graduation examination which tested their four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The skills-based classes were the students' final courses in language skills; therefore, the teachers seemed to acknowledge the pressure and demands of the C1 tests. Teacher 4, for example, said:

I think the introduction and application of the Common European Framework of Reference creates more work for the teachers. If the teachers

use certain books to teach without letting the students practise the test format, the students will feel unfamiliar [with the test format] and confused.

The teachers were put [under] much pressure. (Teacher 4, I30913)

Teacher 3 also mentioned the Common European framework as one of the reasons why she had to teach descriptive and narrative essays for the first weeks of the current semester.

[To help the students reach] the C1 level in the Common European framework, we have to deal with different genres or different forms of essays at the same time. So we have to have [teach] more forms [text types] including descriptive or narrative which we considered in Writing 3 or Writing 4 already, but we have to repeat them in the form of essays. (Teacher 3, I101013)

The teachers of the skills-based class (Reading 5 – R5 and Writing 5 – W5) had to teach in a way that would ensure their students' success in their end-of-semester examination that was designed according to a fixed format. Although the skills-based class teachers preferred some teaching activities that they viewed as favourable for critical thinking, they felt compelled to compromise their teaching interests. They had to choose a teaching style and content material that could help their students in the exams as 'the students were assessed according to product (B2 or C1), not learning process ... I had to be practical' (Teacher 4, I30913). This meant that Teacher 4 opted to not conduct post-reading activities such as discussions or journal writing, activities that she thought could promote the students' critical thinking. Instead, she spent more time during each lesson having the students undertake a practice test in the CEFR format. In similar vein, the W5 teacher reduced the teaching time for discursive essays, although she believed that critical thinking would be developed more in this type of essay.

It could be argued that the new requirement placed more pressure on those teachers who were teaching third-year students. The teachers had little time to engage in critical thinking because they needed to familiarise their students with the test format, and to let them practise it as much as possible. Their teaching and learning, therefore, focused on the product – the C1 certificate – rather than on the process. The teachers, especially those teaching the skills-based classes, seemed to perceive critical thinking and the CEFR as two mutually exclusive objectives.

The CEFR was introduced to Vietnamese education as a solution to the failure of a large number of Vietnamese workers to meet global demands of foreign language proficiency (Vallely & Wilkinson 2008). However, the adoption of the CEFR in the Vietnamese context was found to be ‘mainly for accountability and administrative purposes rather than an effective remedial solution to the current language problem in its language educational system’ (Huy & Hamid 2015, p. 71). Huy (2015) tells us that the introduction of the CEFR is primarily for assessment purposes in Vietnam, rather than for learning, teaching and assessment, as originally described in the CEFR document. The findings in this study are supportive of Huy’s (2015) observation. The CEFR or VNFFLP tests exerted pressure on critical thinking practices in the research context via classroom testing practices. The Ministry’s decision to use the levels in the CEFR or VNFFLP as a norm against which to assess language students’ linguistic competence raises a question about how much EFL curriculum orientations should be about language skills or criticality. This question will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

### ***6.2.3 Students’ language proficiency***

According to six of the eight teachers, the students’ language ability influenced their integration of critical thinking into their lessons. The teachers of both American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication courses described their

students' low language proficiency as a barrier to their critical thinking teaching practice. Teacher 2 ascribed the students' unsatisfactory level of language proficiency as the cause of his failure to facilitate the students' practice of critical thinking in his American Issues classes. Teacher 1 tailored her teaching methods after her earlier efforts to ask the Cross-cultural Communication course students to think critically had failed.

In the American Issues course, Teacher 2 identified critical thinking as the main objective of the course (Section 5.2.1.1) but he expressed his dissatisfaction with the students in the observed course. Based on his five years of teaching this course, the teacher realised that the success in obtaining the course's objective depended on the students' ability. However, he complained that their language proficiency was inadequate and they could only master comprehension level while reading. Their proficiency was inadequate to engage with texts at a more sophisticated level. While they could understand the literal meaning of a reading passage, they were unable to determine the writer's underlying message or inherent purpose for writing the text. They fell far short of offering feedback or criticism about that particular piece of writing. Specifically, he said:

They read an article but had to struggle to understand it. In order to express personal opinions about a problem; they need to comprehend it thoroughly first ... To discuss a problem in Vietnamese is different. Here, they had to speak in English. They need to understand it before moving to the next step – discussing it. (Teacher 2, I11314)

As a result, Teacher 2 decided to change the course's objective, from having the students practise critical thinking to having them familiarise themselves with critical thinking practice. As well, he expressed his intention to change the task that he had assigned the students. He would identify a controversial issue for them

rather than simply offering them a piece of reading and asking them to identify a controversy from which to develop a discussion with their peers.

The teacher of the Cross-cultural Communication course also noted the influence of the students' low language proficiency on her intentions to pursue critical thinking in class. For Teacher 1, encouraging the students to explore knowledge by themselves and to ask questions were the techniques she believed useful for developing their critical thinking. As with Teacher 2, Teacher 1 faced the challenge of the students' poor English. She reported her students' silence when she conducted the question and answer session in her class. She responded to their silence by applying strategies to encourage the students to explore knowledge by asking questions. She required them to read the materials at home, write down their questions or opinions in Vietnamese, and then translate them into English. Teacher 1 believed that if the students used these methods, they would feel more confident expressing their opinions in class. For Teacher 1, the students' language proficiency influenced her choice of teaching methods when encouraging critical thinking in her classes.

#### ***6.2.4 The teachers' lack of critical thinking instruction knowledge***

Two of the eight teacher participants conceded their lack of critical thinking instruction knowledge as one of the barriers to critical thinking practice at the research site. They admitted that they lacked a clear understanding of what critical thinking was and of the optimal strategies vital to promoting critical thinking in class. Teacher 6, for example, explained that she had thought a lot about the integration of critical thinking into her lessons; however, she was aware of the limitations in her knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction methods. It is significant that these two teachers received their education in Vietnam. The other six teachers who did not refer to factors of teachers' critical

thinking instruction knowledge had experienced some training in Western nations – the US, Australia, or New Zealand. Two of these teachers recounted that they gained their knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction while studying abroad. Teacher 2, for example, asserted:

When I was in America, I had opportunities to study with extremely critical professors in such courses as Sociolinguistics or Cross-cultural Perspectives. The professors did not teach us how to think critically, but we learnt to be critical from their methods to approach an issue. (Teacher 2, I13314)

Apart from learning from professors during his course of study in America, Teacher 2 might also learnt criticality from fellow students in the US. Disregarding the role of modeling in Teacher 2's assertion, the difference between the two groups of teachers concerning their views about the role of critical thinking instruction knowledge raises the issue of the relationship between teacher training and critical thinking development in education. Within the research context, there was some concern about the lack of knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction among teachers who had not experienced a critical thinking-embedded education.

#### **6.2.5 Summary**

The analysis of the teachers' teaching practice in the four courses revealed the barriers to the practice of critical thinking teaching: students' low language proficiency, some teachers' own lack of knowledge of critical thinking instruction, testing and curriculum, and the absence of a specific policy at national level. The teachers of the content-based courses found the students' low level of language proficiency to be the most insuperable barrier, while the teachers of the skills-based courses tended to blame the absence of critical thinking teaching in the testing system and curriculum. The study findings suggest that some courses in the EFL

curriculum may lend themselves more to critical thinking practice. However, the question of whether the content-based classes are more appropriate for critical thinking practice than skills-based classes remains inconclusive. There was potential for critical thinking development in the skills-based classes, and the teachers were aware of related possibilities. However, they did not integrate critical thinking due to pressure from the curriculum. Further discussion of how the EFL field mediates critical thinking will be provided in Chapter 7.

### **6.3 Factors influencing students' engagement with critical thinking**

This section explores the barriers to the students' engagement with critical thinking. It is based on analysis of the examples in Section 5.3.2.2 and on the interviews with both the teachers and students. The barriers identified are: the students' language proficiency; their lack of knowledge of critical thinking methods and strategies; teaching methodologies; and Vietnamese cultural traditions.

#### ***6.3.1 The students' language proficiency***

At the classroom level, language proficiency was found to be the most obvious barrier to the students' performance of critical thinking. The observation of the American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication course classes suggested that the students had difficulties with English language proficiency. There were numerous errors in grammar, tense and word choice in the students' class discussions and group discussions, even though they could communicate their messages in a basic form. Sometimes the students in the American Issues class were unable to explain certain terms in their own presentations. Similarly, their peers tended not to understand completely what was presented; the students' poor English appeared to impede them from communicating their thoughts. Some either failed to understand the issue properly, or could not explain what they

thought in fluent English, for example, in response to two questions about the meaning of a symbol on a slide, and to a summary of reasons America should not maintain multiculturalism. However, they talked at length, repeating what they had said before. It appeared that the students were not confident to speak without looking at the slides; or, repeating what they had prepared in advance. The students seemed to have difficulty speaking in English extemporaneously.

The students' switch to Vietnamese, and the difference in the quality of their discussions when speaking in English and in Vietnamese was further evidence of the barrier impeding the students' language proficiency. In the American Issues class, for example, when the students discussed whether immigration was the cause of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, they switched to Vietnamese when trying to explain the logic of their own arguments and why they did not agree with each other's argument. The following is an extract from that conversation.

***Extract 12 (at 29:30, AI-L3-WCD)***

1. S1: Do you think immigrants caused the terrorism on September the eleventh?
2. P: Because the terrorists killed a lot of people in this event... [more explanation in Vietnamese]
3. S1: Mình nghĩ dân nhập cư không gây ra sự kiện ni mà là do xung đột tôn giáo ... [I think this event [terrorism] was not caused by immigrants but by religious conflicts...]
4. P: Mình đồng ý. Ý mình là có quá nhiều dân nhập cư. Nhiều người nhập cư vô Mỹ quá nên chính phủ không kiểm soát được... Minh lấy ví dụ ni là để nói là an ninh của Mỹ bị đe doạ. Minh không có ý nói dân nhập cư gây nên cuộc tấn công khủng bố.[I agree. I meant there were too many immigrants. There are many reasons for the conflicts.]

Too many immigrants have come, so the government cannot control...

I gave this example to imply that the country's internal security is being threatened. I do not mean that immigrants caused the terrorist attack.]

The students expressed their opinions (turns 3 and 4) and defended their opinions either by providing explanations (turn 2) or by analysing the cause and effect of the issue (turn 4). Regarding the length of the talk, the students maintained the discussion for approximately six minutes after they switched to Vietnamese. This example provided evidence of the students' performance of critical thinking when they spoke in their mother tongue. Three interviewed teachers mentioned the critical abilities of the students when they were allowed to use Vietnamese.

Teacher 6, for example, seemed positive 'when the students discussed a problem, they were actively involved in the discussions. They dared to speak their minds' (I51014).

Both the teachers and students believed that the issue of comprehension by both the presenters and the audience prevented them from exercising critical thinking in English. Teacher 1 expressed her understanding of the reasons the students hesitated to ask questions, even though she encouraged a question-initiated approach. According to this teacher, the students did not feel sufficiently confident to ask questions in English because of their low language proficiency. Some students confirmed this. Student 21, for example, described her feelings at the time: 'I didn't dare to raise my hand to speak. I didn't feel confident enough. It was because my English was not fluent. I could not express fully what I wanted to say' (Student 21, I13314). It may also be that the students were afraid of losing face if they made mistakes. Language proficiency was clearly the basic cause of their

hesitation; but, beyond that, it may be attributable to the country's face-saving culture, as discussed in Section 6.3.4.2.

### **6.3.2 Critical thinking methods and strategies**

Examination of the data revealed the students' lack of critical thinking methods and strategies. They appeared unfamiliar with methods for conducting a discussion or debate, and ways to frame a critical question.

#### **6.3.2.1 How to conduct a discussion**

In the American Issues class, the main objective of which was to promote the students' critical thinking, the teacher asked the students to conduct a presentation on a controversial topic within a guided theme (e.g. education, immigration or multiculturalism). This presentation was to serve as a stimulus for discussion among the class members. In effect, the students were expected to prepare a presentation in a way that could involve their peers in the discussion. However, the students encountered numerous difficulties with this activity (see Section 5.3.2.2 – Example 1). They failed to address the key points of their presentation as a focus for their peers' thinking. They appeared not to know the techniques for presenting an issue so that it would be sufficiently intriguing to engage their peers in the discussion. Nor did they know how to ask critical questions to guide the discussion.

#### **6.3.2.2 How to frame a critical question**

Both the teacher and student participants were concerned about the latter's ability to ask questions. Asking questions was highlighted in the data as one of the critical thinking strategies.

In the American Issues class, in Lesson 2, the presentation group tried to communicate the main point of their talk by showing an introductory question in one slide at the beginning: 'Do you think that policies of government are suitable

for American citizens?' However, the question had its own problems. Although the presenters wanted to refer to the policies to reduce inequality in education, the term 'policies of government' seemed too general for the audience. With the help of Teacher 2, the group finalised the question for discussion: 'Do you think the affirmative action policy is suitable for American people?'

Both the teacher and the student participants linked the students' critical thinking difficulties to the latter's inability to ask questions. However, this prompted both the teachers and students to express their concerns about the reasons for the lack of this ability. Students 7 and 12 confessed that they did not know how to ask questions. Student 7, for example, said: 'Sometimes I have something to ask but I did not know how to frame them into questions. I don't know how to ask so that other people can understand my inquiries' (Student 7, I4314). Based on her use of the word 'inquiries' [thắc mắc], it seems that the student saw asking questions as a means of asking for an explanation or comprehending. The teachers, however, held a different view. Teacher 2 identified the ability to ask questions as the ability to recognise a problem. He said: 'The students did not know how to ask a question. This means they did not know how to identify a problem in a reading' (Teacher 2, I13314).

Despite different connotations of the critical questions, both the teachers and the students saw student difficulties in framing a question as a possible barrier, since the ability to ask a question can be seen as a measure of one's ability to express and elicit critical thinking. It is not exclusively a language issue; it is a matter of knowing how to express critical thinking-related questions and make critical thinking-related (i.e. provocative or contentious) statements. In the research context, asking a question does not always mean asking a critical question. But, the mere fact of asking a question shows that the students wanted to take a step

beyond their fear or concern about showing lack of respect for their teachers, especially in a Confucius-heritage culture such as Vietnam.

As a resource for critical thinking, students need strategies or heuristics for guiding performance in a variety of thinking tasks. In this study, the data revealed that the students lacked strategies vis-à-vis how to ask questions – a classroom behaviour associated with critical thinking (Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010). This factor is consistent with procedural knowledge, that is, knowledge of how to do something (Johnston et al. 2011). Johnston et al. (2011, p. 76) use an example of writing a literary commentary to illustrate this type of knowledge. In my study, the students' difficulty with holding a debate/discussion substantiates their lack of procedural knowledge.

### **6.3.3 Teaching methodologies**

The study exposed a range of factors related to teaching methodologies: teacher scaffolding, the difficulty level of tasks, material selection, teacher questioning, and in-class assessment.

#### **6.3.3.1 The difficulty level of tasks**

The study observed that the students in the American Issues class were experiencing multiple problems, possibly due to the difficulty of the assigned task. The American Issues class teacher attempted to foster the students' critical thinking by asking them to (1) identify controversial issues in the assigned reading materials; (2) convey those issues to peers; and (3) conduct a discussion. This task requires numerous analytical skills for recognising controversial issues and building up arguments while discussing with peers; preparing a presentation that can highlight focal points for discussion; and engaging peers in a presentation and discussion. Aiming to undertake several relatively unpractised skills concurrently can make the task more difficult and render success less likely.

The students in all three group presentations failed to meet their teacher's expectations. They could not identify a controversial issue implied in a text and they did not know how to ask thought-provoking questions that would involve their peers in critical discussion. They were also confused about how to conduct a discussion. The task that the American Issues teacher gave to the students appeared too challenging for them; it required orchestrating several skills simultaneously, with many of them new. It seems that the task required the students to function beyond their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1987). This study's findings support Bailin et al.'s (1999b, pp. 298-299) recommendation that students should be apprenticed into the art of critical thinking; that is, be given challenging but achievable tasks in a supportive environment.

#### **6.3.3.2 Teacher scaffolding**

The students' struggle in performing the teacher's tasks in the American Issues class was partly due to insufficient scaffolding from the teacher. The students were not clear about what they should do to conduct the tasks in the way that the teacher expected. The students complained that they did not understand what the teacher wanted them to focus on. Student 21, for example, said: 'The teacher gave us a one-page long article and asked us to study it and then prepare a presentation. He did not say anything further' (Student 21, I13314). As a consequence, the students only learned what they should do from the failures of the earlier presentation group. Student 22 explained:

After earlier presentations, I came to understand what the teacher expected us to present. In previous courses [American Culture 1 and 2], I saw all the positive aspects in American culture, but in this course, I need to investigate the negative aspects as well. For example, concerning equality in American education, I thought the education in America always targeted equality, but

in fact, there also exists inequality in American education. That is what the teacher wanted us to present. (Student 22, I13314)

The mismatch in expectations between the teacher and students in the American Issues class shows that the teacher needed to explain more clearly and make explicit the course's objective (critical thinking). The teacher wanted the students to invoke critical thinking to identify the controversial issue and then turn it into a discussion topic.

It emerged from the data that the students felt vague about the tasks and how to complete them in the American Issues class. In reality, the subsequent groups in weeks 2, 3 and 4 seemed to perform better than their peers in week 1; however, their performance was still problematic in some parts (see Section 5.3.2.2). This suggests that the teacher should have offered more guidance and scaffolding to the students. Some strategies about critical thinking should have been shared with the students. Had this been done, it is likely there would have been a greater uptake of critical thinking among the students.

Although the teachers in the two content-based classes promoted critical thinking in their classes, their teaching seemed somewhat unstructured. The teachers, for instance, asked the students to choose topics of their own interest to write about in their written assignments. The teacher of Cross-cultural Communication course class allowed the students to choose a topic for group presentation within 20 minutes. There were no guidelines or limits for the tasks. It seemed like the teachers equated being critical with being autonomous, and promoting critical thinking meant letting the students do things on their own. The limited scaffolding was inadequate, as indicated by the students' engagement with critical thinking and the revelation of some students in the interviews.

In the two content-based classes, the teachers would have been able to help the students to perform critical thinking better had they clearly explained the courses' aim of promoting critical thinking explicitly in the course syllabuses. A definition of what critical thinking means and what they expected the students to do to perform critical thinking would have benefited the students more. In class, the teachers may have helped more by offering scaffolding strategies such as modelling, externalising reflection and metacognition, and Socratic questioning, as Beyer (1987) suggested.

The finding about the students' lack of knowledge of how to ask critical questions (Section 6.3.2) can be closely linked to the issue of teacher scaffolding. This difficulty was due not only to the students' low language proficiency, but also to their lack of questioning skills and limited understanding of the purposes of questioning. Here too the students needed scaffolding from their teachers. It could be argued that the students did not perform critical thinking as extensively as the teacher expected, not necessarily because they lacked critical thinking ability, but because they were not provided with sufficient guidance and instruction regarding critical thinking methods and strategies. Further discussion of scaffolding can be found in chapters 7 and 8.

#### **6.3.3.3 Choice of material**

The material selected by the two content-based teachers was found to influence the opportunities for critical thinking by the students of the two classes. Although the two observed classes covered the cultural content, the American Issues class focussed more specifically on issues in contemporary American society. The students' lack of real exposure to, and hence lack of deep understanding of, American society appeared to impede their attempts to identify any controversial issues in the US and discuss them as the teacher had expected. This problem

manifested itself when the students tried to discuss the topic of multiculturalism in the US. Although both the teacher and the students claimed that they had gained certain knowledge about American culture in the two previous courses (American Culture 1 and 2), the students nonetheless failed to identify the controversy surrounding multiculturalism in the US. According to Teacher 2, the exercise should have taken the form of a debate on the issue of how the US maintains diversity without fragmentation. This seems a fairly narrow acceptable response rate, which might not be conducive to critical thinking.

By contrast, the material chosen by the teacher of the Cross-cultural Communication course class appeared comprehensible to the students. The Alligator River story concerns love and people's behaviour, and might be seen as more proximal or relevant to the students' concerns. The students demonstrated a genuine and natural interest in the topic. The Alligator River story could be seen as somewhat frivolous; however, it might serve as a springboard for critically considering issues of broader consequences, such as whether to tell the truth to your partner, having sex before marriage, or the qualities of a good partner. Another topic undertaken by this class concerned different cultural dimensions across the world. The teacher chose Hofstede's (1986) framework as the reading material for the students to discuss. Again, this topic seemed comprehensible to the students because they referred to the cultural aspects they had experienced in life (e.g. teacher-student, parent-children relationships).

#### **6.3.3.4 Teachers' questioning attitudes**

Consistent with the teachers' reported harshness in Example 1 of Section 5.3.2.2, the student participants mentioned the teachers' questioning attitudes as a negative experience in their critical thinking practice. Students 16 and 21 said that they felt pressured when the teachers asked them repeatedly for their opinions. For

example, Student 16 felt that she was forced to express an opinion when the teacher continuously asked her questions. She felt stressed when being interrogated by the teacher with a strict demeanour: 'The teachers' faces or attitudes sometimes embarrassed us. They asked with a strict facial expression, I mean, too strict' (Student 16, I 6314). This finding reveals the students' feelings when asked to engage in critical thinking. If such resistance is to be overcome, the teacher must establish an environment for effective rapport and implement strategies for effective questioning practices (See Pagliaro 2011, pp. 1-11).

In another example, Student 21 revealed that she simply could not think when the teacher kept asking the same question. She said: 'The more the teacher asked, the more pressure I underwent. I could not think of anything then. The teacher kept asking 'Who has different ideas?' I looked around. The whole class kept silent. I felt stressed' (Student 21, I13314). Clearly in this example, when the students had no opinions to offer, repeated questioning was of little use; the students feeling pressured when they cannot think of a response to the question. This pressure, in turn, may block their thinking, and it could serve to jeopardise teacher-student interaction and rapport. This raises a concern regarding the appropriate amount of pressure to elicit answers without intimidating the students. It also raises a question about the possible impact of the teachers' questioning manner on students' critical thinking practice. For this reason, teachers need to be cognisant of the 'fine line' between encouraging the students and becoming counterproductive by pushing them too far, and of the power differential that exists between students and teachers. Rephrasing the question, and/or offering the students some prompts might be more helpful in such circumstances. In this case, had the teacher rephrased the question or the students felt free to articulate their thoughts, the situation might have been less pressured. These two students' comments about

their feelings reveal the possible impact of the teachers' questioning manner on the students' critical thinking practice.

#### **6.3.3.5 Assessment**

Although the teachers of the two content-based classes employed assessment methods that appeared to encourage the students' critical thinking (Section 5.2.1.4), their in-class assessment constrained the students' engagement with critical thinking. The analysis of the examples in which the students performed critical thinking poorly showed that there existed artificiality in the students' performance (Section 5.3.2.2). The students did not argue in spirited fashion to generate discussion and the questioners did not defend their views. They tended to ask questions to please the teacher – asking questions 'on demand'. The way the students commented on their peers' presentations also appeared unnatural: the comments sounded like those of the teachers, whom, it seems plausible, they were attempting to mimic (Extract 8, Section 5.3.2.2). This might be because the activity was assessable, which made the peer students hesitant to criticise the presenters' ideas.

The influence of assessment on the students' performance of critical thinking was further confirmed when some students revealed that being critical of their peers meant causing trouble for them. They did not want their peers to receive low scores for their performances. They also feared that they, in turn, would receive negative feedback from their peers, thereby affecting their own scores correspondingly. Student 22, for example, felt uncomfortable and at times even guilty. She said: 'I asked them but they could not answer me. The teacher questioned them why they [presenters] themselves did not understand what they were talking [about]. I felt guilty' (Student 22, I13314). Student 8's revelation shed further light on this. She recounted:

Once I gave a negative comment for one of my peers. After that, she asked me privately why I had said [that] in such a way. I then thought I should have not given that comment. I was worried that my peers would have such negative comments on my presentation later on. (Student 8, I4314)

Assessment in this case is closely related to the students' culture of face saving and harmony maintenance (see Section 6.3.4). My findings show that the teachers' assessment in class in part affected the students' engagement with critical thinking. This raises the issue of whether and how the teachers in the research context should assess the students' group presentations in the classes that aim to promote critical thinking.

In sum, the factors deduced from the students' and teachers' comments are classified as at classroom level, which is the microsystem level according to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory. The students' low language proficiency, their lack of critical thinking methods and strategies, and some issues in the teachers' pedagogical methods are collectively identified as barriers to the students' critical thinking performance. The students' poor language proficiency and, in some cases, the teachers' limited knowledge of critical thinking instruction exerted a certain influence on the teachers' efforts to promote critical thinking in the research context.

#### ***6.3.4 Traditional cultural values***

Although examples of critical thinking were found in the research context, the data suggest that certain Confucian and collectivist factors stemming from Vietnamese cultural values also influence the practice of critical thinking. These are respecting teachers and experts (Phuong-Mai, Terlouw & Pilot 2005), maintaining harmony

(Hofstede 1986; Triandis 1990; Triandis 1995), and face saving (Nhung 2007; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi 1998).

#### **6.3.4.1 Confucianism: Attitudes towards teachers and experts**

The observation of student performance in the content-based classes (Section 5.3.1.1) revealed that none of the students in any classes expressed disagreement with or pointed out the flaws in the teachers' arguments or in the textbooks. The students' reluctance to challenge their teachers or textbook content and the manner in which they delivered their questions indicated that they still felt uncomfortable arguing with their teachers or with book content. The interview data revealed the students' concerns about the teachers' knowledge and their respect for their teachers.

##### ***The teachers' knowledge***

The belief rooted in Confucianism that teachers are the most knowledgeable people in the classroom (2001) appeared uppermost in the students' minds. This belief dissuaded them from arguing with their teachers (Students 3, 6, 8, 14). The students explained that they tended to accept their teachers' words, even though they sometimes found their ideas not entirely persuasive. They presumed that the teachers must be in possession of greater knowledge and experience. For example, as Student 14 reported:

The teachers must be the masters in their fields. Their arguments would be much stronger, so it was no use to argue against the teachers. Due to this thought, I did not dare to have an argument or debate with the teachers.  
(Student 14, I5314)

This impression regarding the superiority of their teachers extended to both language and content knowledge. A language student, for example, might feel more hesitant to argue against the teacher in class. This belief in the teachers'

superior content knowledge and language proficiency gave rise to another hesitation among the students. They heeded their teachers more than their peers. They paid little attention when their peers were presenting or speaking. Student 21 analysed why she thought her peers did not engage in a debate guided by her group. She said: 'The students think the teachers are always right. They believe in just what the teachers say. They did not care about what we were saying. They did not listen to us. Therefore, they could not criticise' (Student 21, I13314). Expressing a similar view, Student 17 said that when she raised a question for the teacher, she did not want the teacher to transfer it to the whole class for discussion. She preferred listening to the teachers, whose opinions would be more trustworthy than those of her peers.

Teacher 3 appeared to be aware of the students' expectations about teachers' knowledge in skills-based classes like Writing. She commented: '*For the skills, like Writing, usually the teacher is considered as [the] authority in the classroom; the power, and the students take them as a good example of writing performance*' (Teacher 3, I101013). This teacher, while understanding her role as an authority in the classroom, believed it to be a barrier to the students' practice of critical thinking. She added:

They still consider me as an authority in the class and they don't trust their own ability and their friends' ability. They just want to double check to make sure that it is the mistake that they have correctly identified in their peer's writing. That is not, I guess, that the kind of critical thinking skills that we expected from them because they're trying to search for a resource that can confirm their performance rather than asking for critiques or criticising something or the teacher, something like that. (Teacher 3, I101013)

In a language class, the teacher's authority is demonstrated in their mastery over the language. The students expect the teacher to be proficient in the language and/or able to model the use of the language. The feeling of inferiority to the teacher in terms of language proficiency further discouraged the students from engaging in debate or discussion in the classroom.

***Respect for the teachers***

Influenced by Confucianism, Vietnamese teachers are accorded full respect from students and parents. But this renders the power distance between teachers and students broad. During their classes, students tend not to interrupt their teachers. This cultural characteristic was referred to as a barrier to critical thinking practice in the research context (Students 9, 12, 13, and 14). Students 12 and 13 did not dare to interrupt their teachers to voice their opinions because they saw interrupting the teacher as disrespectful. Students 9 and 14 were concerned with the possibility of the teachers interpreting their words as defiance. As Student 14 said: 'During the debate with the teacher, I might choose the inappropriate words, so the teacher might think I was opposing her. I thought I'd better keep silent' (Student 14, I5314).

For these students, the effect of Confucianism on their decisions to avoid making critical comments remained strong and did frustrate some teachers' attempts to invite opposition from the students. However, for some other students and teachers, this cultural feature was no longer of great concern. Student 19 did not think that having a debate with the teacher meant showing lack of respect for them. Consistent with other interviewed teachers, Teacher 2 affirmed that the students felt some fear of their teachers, but it was less pervasive at the tertiary level. He believed that things are changing and that the distance between the teachers and students was not as large as before. According to Teacher 2, showing respect for teachers is not a barrier to critical thinking practice.

#### **6.3.4.2 Collectivism: Keeping harmony and concerns for peers' reactions**

In the American Issues class discussions, while the students raised questions, they received no response from the presenter in the form of answers or explanation. Even when the presenter expressed her disagreement with one student's question about opening schools up to black and poor students, the student did not respond (Extract 12). This silence had a number of implications. While the students could ask questions 'on command', they did not put serious consideration into their questions. As required by the course, the class was organised in the form of a discussion and questioning was an assumed activity. The students appeared to ask questions to appease the teacher.

The influence of collectivism (Hofstede 1986; Triandis 1990), as opposed to individualism, was clearly indicated in the student interviewees' concerns about peer reactions, which were considered barriers to the students' performance of critical thinking. The majority of student respondents (15 out of 22) mentioned peer reactions as a consideration when deciding to voice opinions in class or not. Seven of the students expressed fears that their peers would think they were doing this in order to be considered outstanding or different.

Sometimes, I wanted to say [something] but I didn't. It is no use to speak out.

My peers even thought that I wanted to show off ... I don't want to be a super star! (Student 19, I7314)

I don't want to express myself in front of a crowd. I am afraid that I would become someone too different from my classmates. (Student 16, I6314)

Being different is seen as undesirable in the research context, for it is here that the collective spirit appears to dominate in class. For this reason, the students struggled to comply with their teachers' requests to contribute to the discussion. Student 6, for example, described a process during which her peers influenced her.

When this student had a question to ask, she consulted her friend who was sitting nearby as to whether she should ask the question. This friend advised her to accept the argument rather than raise the issue. Student 6 reported that although she had decided to ask a question, she was dissuaded by the excuse that her friend thought she ought not to. Accordingly, she decided to remain silent (Student 6, I6314).

Student 6's feeling tended to be common in the class. Some other students confessed that they did not say anything because of the silence from their peers. Student 20 said that she was often guided by the thought that 'I shouldn't ask because my peers don't' (Student 20, I7314). The collective spirit appears to have had a constraining effect and to have reinforced its own power of conformity in this case. It prevented this student from expressing herself or engaging more actively in the class debate. For such students, asking questions or challenging peers seemed inappropriate in class.

***Face-saving culture (Brown & Levinson 1987) – maintaining a positive face***

Keeping one's face ('thể diện' in Vietnamese) was a big concern among the student participants. More than half expressed their fear of face loss as one of the reasons for not voicing their opinions in class. The students were afraid of losing their positive face; that is, the desire to be loved, supported and admired (Brown & Levinson 1987; Nhong 2007; Nhong 2014a, 2014b). This links logically with collectivism and harmony maintenance.

The students expressed the fear that their teachers and peers might judge their knowledge, their English language capability or their classroom behaviour. As a consequence, they could be ridiculed and devalued by their peers or misjudged by their teachers. Student 13, for example, confessed that he was really afraid of being ridiculed by his classmates. He said: 'It will be okay if you raise an intelligent question. If the question is not of the focus (*lêch lạc*), I feel uncomfortable. That

concern makes me hesitate to speak' (Student 13, I5314). The students showed great concern regarding their peers' opinions of them. As Student 8 explained: 'I was worried what my classmates thought about me. I was afraid that they might say something outside the classroom' (Student 8, I4314). As regards their teachers, the students were afraid that they might be judged as disrespectful students if they said something in opposition to the teachers. Student 14 said that she worried that the teacher might think she was a disobedient student who did not understand the expected ritual towards teachers.

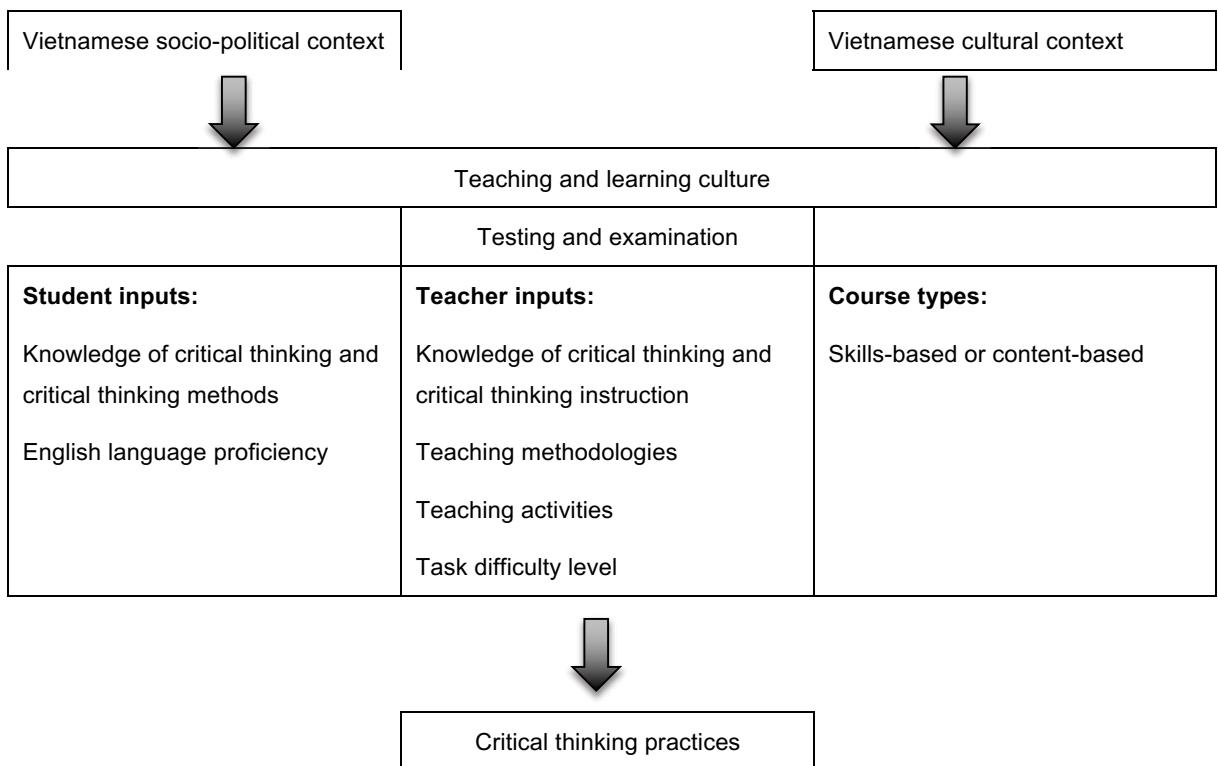
In short, the participants feared being misjudged by their teachers and peers; they felt that their positive image would be jeopardised. The concern surrounding keeping a positive face was, therefore, a probable barrier to critical thinking practice at the research site.

To conclude, the participants revealed their concerns about the influence of Vietnamese cultural traditions on the students' practice of critical thinking, although the participants sometimes contradicted one another about the impact of cultural factors. For example, some student participants referred to a change in their attitudes towards their teachers' knowledge: they did not see their teachers as unfailingly right (Section 4.3.2). Nevertheless, their explanations for declining to be critical of their teachers revealed the influence of this cultural factor to some degree. This hints at the complexity of culture, as noted by Hannerz (1992) and Lessard-Clouston (1997). In addition to the contradictions among the student participants, there emerged a further difference between the teacher and student participants. While most of the teachers underplayed the influence of Vietnamese traditional culture, the student participants commented on the effect of this factor on their own engagement with critical thinking. Even so, some of the cultural

traditions that were found to affect the practices of critical thinking seem to be universal. This will be discussed further below and in the following chapters.

#### **6.4 Chapter summary**

Figure 6.1 below summarises the factors affecting critical thinking practice at the research site. This figure was modified from Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological theory and Schendel's (2015) framework.



**Figure 6.1 Factors affecting critical thinking practices in a Vietnamese EFL tertiary context**

*Source: modified from Bronfenbrenner's (1976) and Schendel's (2015) frameworks*

The identification of the barriers in this study indicates a need to adopt a contextual approach to understanding the practices of critical thinking in an educational environment. As evident in Figure 6.1, teachers and students' inputs have a direct impact on critical thinking practices. The reciprocal relationship

between teachers and students' inputs reflects their roles as the primary stakeholders in the teaching and learning process. The differences between course types in an EFL context are significant. Courses that place emphasis on the language component are less conducive to critical thinking than those with a content focus. In the research context, the types of courses exerted their influence according to their distinctive features in assessment; that is, whether they followed a standardised test form (e.g. CEFR) or not. The teachers, therefore, had to choose a teaching style which best suited the course characteristics. Figure 6.1 also shows that testing, examination, and curriculum affect teachers and students' willingness and readiness to exercise critical thinking in class. A lack of emphasis on critical thinking development in the EFL curriculum and in the government's educational policy has resulted in a lack of detailed and clear guidelines and assistance for teachers. In efforts to successfully develop students' critical thinking, comprehensive and consistent efforts at all levels would be needed.

Figure 6.1 illustrates the relationship among the socio-political and cultural factors affecting critical thinking practices at the research site. However, the demarcation of the barriers was not always clear cut. Multiple elements contribute to the existence or deficiency of critical thinking practices. The phenomenon of the students' hesitation to voice their opinions serves as an example. The students hesitated to express their personal viewpoints in class largely because they lacked confidence in their English language speaking ability. They also feared that they would bring shame upon themselves if they spoke English poorly. Hence, the reason for the students' hesitation to talk was their fear of losing face, a cultural characteristic commonly attributed to Asian cultures (Phuong-Mai, Terlouw & Pilot 2005; Tuyet 2012). In this case, the two factors appear to have exercised their impact in combination on the students' critical thinking behaviour in a concerted manner.

And while language proficiency may be seen as the root cause, the face-saving culture is most likely another determinant of the students' avoidance of expressing their opinions or critical thinking in the English language. It is also difficult to discern which barriers exercised the stronger effect on the students' critical thinking practices in this example. It is, moreover, problematic to isolate any one factor, such as teacher effect (Hattie 2003) in this fairly complex ecology of factors and dynamics. Further research may shed light on this ecology.

My analysis of the barriers to critical thinking practices in a Vietnamese EFL tertiary context demonstrates that both teachers and students experienced difficulties in engaging with critical thinking. The teachers were concerned about the students' language proficiency, the teaching methods, the decision to include critical thinking or not because of curriculum pressure, the critical thinking instruction methods, and their own lack of training. The students were conscious of their limited language proficiency and risk aversion, and their need to save face, retain signs of respect for their teachers, and maintain harmony among peers. The students' language proficiency was a concern of both the teachers and students.

The teachers appeared to encounter tension between the students' low language proficiency and the need to develop their critical thinking as an essential skill in university education. The tensions they experience when setting the learning tasks for their students was also evident. For example, the American Issues class teacher was faced with making a decision whether to provide the students with a topic in advance, or to ask them to identify a topic themselves. The teachers felt forced to choose between a critical thinking-enhanced teaching approach or a teaching approach that ensured the students' success in tests in the skills-based courses. The teachers also expressed their concerns regarding critical

thinking instruction methods, some being interested in integrating a critical thinking lesson but unsure about how to achieve that pedagogically.

The students had to struggle within themselves: Should they articulate their thinking in class? Might it betray their low language proficiency? and Might they be constrained by Vietnamese cultural traditions? Being aware of their low English proficiency, the students spoke of the anxiety they felt when articulating their thinking, and their fear of losing face, of being assessed as boastful by their peers, or being misunderstood as not showing respect to their teachers. The students' hesitation to speak also demonstrated their struggle with practising the target language, and with taking risks in language learning. While they wanted to speak, they felt afraid of making mistakes. They feared being looked down upon by their teachers and peers.

In addition to the abovementioned factors, my findings reveal that the notion of authority along with its relevant features – authenticity, risk avoidance and confidence – appeared to exert their influence here. Taken together, they represent a unified feature of human behaviour (Peters 2015), despite operating differently at a cultural level and at a humankind level. Authority refers to the right to have one's voice considered and challenged. A relation of authority exists 'when one person (or group of people) tends to obey, act on, or accept without questioning the statements or commands of another person (or group of people or any entity capable of producing statements or commands)' (Amit & Fried 2005, p. 147). Apropos of critical thinking, the nature of authority determines a person's confidence to voice their opinion and/or challenge other people's ideas. The more real or perceived authority one has, the less scope remains for that authority to be challenged. Similarly, the more the scope that one has to challenge things, the more authority one has.

The impact of the nature of authority on critical thinking tends to be a unified factor affecting all people. However, people of different traditions may see it somewhat differently. Australian students, for example, might have more authority to challenge their teachers and textbooks because the power distance between teachers and students in Western culture is smaller than in Vietnam (Golish & Olson 2000; Hofstede 1986). The authority from the social environment of a country, whether from the West or the East, might also affect the cultivation of critical thinking in a classroom (Yoneyama 2012). To illustrate her point, Yoneyama (2012) cited Noddings's (2006, in Yoneyama 2012) example of the ban from talking about the 2003 Iraq war in American classrooms during the conflict. Attitudes to authority form a part of human interactions. They may bear more universal commonality than considered *prima facie*.

In the L2 context of this research, the authority of native speakers of English is open to question in English language education (Faez 2011; Llurda 2004). Controversies result from whether native speakers are accorded greater authority on that basis. There have been arguments in the English language literature about who are seen as English-native speakers, their 'authority', and about what constitutes Standard English (Canagarajah 1999; Jenkins 2009; Kirkpatrick 2009; Widdowson 1994). In any case, the authority of native or more competent speakers of English exerted its influence in the research context. The students' concerns about their English language proficiency were evident in their worries about their use of English (i.e. correct grammar and pronunciation, as well as comprehensibility – presumably to a native or more able speaker). In the skills-based courses, the students were not inclined to listen to peers because they believed their teacher to be a more correct model of a native speaker. It has

emerged from this study that in an L2 context, the real or perceived authority of native speakers influenced the students' performance of critical thinking.

Figure 6.1 was constructed on the basis of Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological theory and Schendel's (2015) framework of factors affecting university students' improvement of critical thinking. The figure inherited the hierarchy of factors demonstrated in Bronfenbrenner's (1976) theory and the role of academic experience in Schendel's (2015) framework. The formation of the figure is based on the two frameworks, which are hybrids themselves, and reflects the hybridity from these two schemata. This study confirms the usefulness of these two features and advances the debate from Schendel's (2015) framework by adding the influence of the students' English language proficiency (student inputs) and the teachers' knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction (teacher inputs). Figure 6.1 demonstrates the relationship among the factors, from the upper to lower levels. This figure could be used as a framework for future studies on or the improvement of critical thinking practice in a language learning context in Asia. ■

## **Chapter 7**

# **Discussion: current critical thinking practices in a Vietnamese EFL context: barriers and prospects**

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### **7.1 Introduction**

The previous chapters (4, 5, and 6) presented the study's findings regarding the participants' conceptualisations of critical thinking, the practices of critical thinking in the research context, and the factors affecting these practices. In this chapter, after briefly summarising the research findings (Section 7.2), I draw on these findings and the literature to discuss the critical thinking practices in the Vietnamese EFL context (Section 7.3). The discussion then extends to the mediation of 'large' and 'small' cultures (Sections 7.4 and 7.5, respectively) on the practices under investigation. 'Large' culture covers the Vietnamese socio-political context while 'small' culture refers to the teaching methodologies, the students' English language proficiency, and the EFL teaching and learning.

### **7.2 Summary of findings**

This study set out to understand the current practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context. For the purpose of quick reference, its findings are briefly summarised according to the research questions as follows.

### ***7.2.1 How do the Vietnamese EFL teachers and students understand and value critical thinking?***

The participating teachers and students appeared to have quite a rudimentary grasp 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 domains of criticality in Barnett's (1997) framework: the concept of critical thinking is understood mainly within the domains of 'knowledge', less in 'self', barely at all in the domain of the 'world'. The findings revealed three characteristics distinctive in the participants' conceptions of critical thinking: expressing personal opinions as an indication of critical thinking, right/wrong dichotomy as the aim of critical thinking, and others' rather than one's own opinions or arguments as the subject of criticism.

Within the bounds of the aforementioned Hawthorne effect, both the students and teachers harboured positive attitudes towards critical thinking and critical thinking development in current context. The students emphasised the necessity for critical thinking by analysing the current teaching and learning practices at the site. The interviewed teachers, on the other hand, analysed the weaknesses of their students to highlight the urgent need to develop their critical thinking.

### ***7.2.2 How is critical thinking being practised in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context?***

Critical thinking practices were analysed from the perspectives of the teachers' teaching and the students' engagement with critical thinking in class.

#### **7.2.2.1 Teachers' teaching practices**

The study found that critical thinking was differentially integrated in the teaching of the skills-based (Reading 5 – R5, and Writing 5 – W5) and content-based (American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication) classes. The investigation of the courses' objectives, teaching activities, teachers' questioning, and their

assessment methods revealed that critical thinking was not extensively practised in the skills-based teachers' teaching; it was more in evidence, however, in the teaching by the content-based classes' teachers. In the content-based classes, the teaching practices were aligned with Bloom's (1956) higher-order thinking levels and Barnett's (1997) domains of 'knowledge', 'self' and 'world'.

#### **7.2.2.2 Students' engagement with critical thinking**

The students' engagement with critical thinking was found to differ between whole-class learning (group presentations followed by whole class discussions) and group discussion activities. During group discussions in the Cross-cultural Communication course class, the students were more spontaneous in sharing ideas – they appeared to talk more freely and comfortably and they challenged one another more than during the class discussions (Section 5.3.2.1). In contrast to the lively small group discussions in the Cross-cultural Communication course class, the group presentations in the American Issues class were characterised by awkward silence on the part of fellow class members. The presenters could neither communicate interactively with, nor elicit discussion from, their peers (Section 5.3.2.2).

The analysis of classroom behaviours showed that the students did not perform some behaviours which are often associated with critical thinking such as challenging or critiquing teachers, authors, and materials. However, the students revealed via interview that they did not always agree with their teachers' ideas.

Consistent with the findings about the teaching practice, the study found that the students thought critically across the three Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality; however, in the main they could only exercise lower-order thinking (Bloom 1956), especially in the American Issues class.

### ***7.2.3 What are the factors affecting critical thinking practices in Vietnamese tertiary EFL context?***

Taking all the evidence together, the students in this study were capable of thinking critically but still at a rudimentary level. The study has revealed a complex of factors affecting the students' practices of critical thinking. These factors range at levels of classroom, institution, nation and human nature.

Classroom level: Factors at this level include those of the students (English language proficiency, knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking methods), of the teachers (knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction, teaching methodologies), and of the types of EFL courses (skill versus content).

Institutional level: Assessment and examination regimes, and curriculum are the factors operating at this level. These are influenced by nationwide policymaking.

National level: Vietnam's socio-political context and historico-cultural traditions are the two factors at the national level.

Humankind level: Some common features of humankind might affect critical thinking practices including authority, risk avoidance, peer pressure, confidence and student 'solidarity'.

## **7.3 Critical thinking practices in a Vietnamese EFL context**

### ***7.3.1 Level and manner of critical thinking practices***

Drawing on the findings related to the teachers and students' conceptualisations of critical thinking and their actual practice of this competency, it is evident that critical thinking operates in the research context – a Vietnamese EFL tertiary setting. In light of the combined framework outlined in previous chapters, critical thinking is deemed in practice to be a cognitive process that assists in interpreting and critiquing received knowledge, and in questioning one's own understanding.

Barnett's (1997) 'world' domain was not evident in the participants' conceptualisations.

In my study, both staff and students understood critical thinking as a process which requires critical skills, dispositions and reflection. They collectively defined critical thinking as a rational process which engages certain cognitive skills such as analysing, synthesising, and evaluating (Bloom 1956). While the participants typically equated the ability to think critically with the expression of personal opinions, a few considered personal reflections an element of critical thinking. In the participants' definitions of critical thinking, the domains of criticality were limited to Barnett's (1997) domains of 'knowledge' and 'self'. The participants considered critical thinking to be operative when a person was critical of the knowledge of their field (knowledge domain) and when reflecting on their internal world (self domain). No participants mentioned attempts to take action in the outside world as indications or implications of critical thinking.

The analysis of the teachers' teaching practices and the students' actual performance in class demonstrates the differences between these two aspects in terms of the levels and manners of critical thinking. The practices of critical thinking reflected in the teachers' teaching tasks were aligned with Bloom's (1956) higher-order thinking levels and Barnett's (1997) domains of 'knowledge', 'self', and 'world'. By contrast, the students, especially those of the American Issues class, tended to exercise mainly at lower-thinking level (e.g. comprehending reading texts). As clarified earlier (Section 2.2.6), with the combination of Bloom's (1956) and Barnett's (1997) frameworks, students operate critically at the highest level when they perform the highest cognitive level (evaluation) on the broadest domain (world). The purpose of critical thinking – taking action in the world – is not fulfilled until then. In the research context, although the students thought across

Barnett's (1997) three domains as assigned through the tasks, they did not extend this to taking any 'action' in the world (Barnett 1997). This raises the question as to why the students could not attain that level of criticality. The study found a range of possible reasons from the teaching pedagogy, which will be discussed further in Section 7.5.1. The following section discusses the existence or absence of the 'world' domain, and 'action' level in this domain.

The existence of the 'world' domain has been discussed in previous studies on critical thinking practices, for example, Yamada (2010), Johnston et al. (2011), and Thunnithet (2011). The absence of the 'world' domain may be explained by the characteristics of the study fields that the student participants were pursuing. As Johnston et al. (2011) observed: 'The domain of the world will be more prominent in applied fields such as Social Work than in other fields such as Modern Languages, where the domain of formal knowledge is likely to be more important.' In the studies of Johnston et al. (2011), Thunnithet (2011) and Yamada (2010), critical thinking was investigated in Language learning classes (or Modern Languages, as used in British universities, in contrast with Classical Languages). Therefore, Johnston et al.'s (2011) observation may explain the absence of the 'world' domain in the study's research context. Furthermore, like the three studies just mentioned, this study was conducted in an L2 context wherein Vietnamese students learned English as a foreign language. The proficiency of the participating students' L2 (English) might have impaired their ability to express views that transcend their classroom contexts. They might have been preoccupied with the knowledge of the language they were studying and the methods involved in that learning process. They might also be risk-averse, a characteristic ascribed typically to Asian students (Golish & Olson 2000; Hofstede 1986) and other language learners using a target language (Beebe 1983; Oxford 1994).

Yamada (2009) attributed this absence of ‘acting’ in the world domain to the classroom learning context: critical thinking is focused more upon individuals and their development as thinking beings within school contexts. The ‘action’ of the world domain extends towards the community outside the classroom. Yamada’s (2009) observations potentially explain the lack of action in this study’s research. And yet, Yamada’s (2009) argument is less than persuasive, as a degree of action should nevertheless result from an encounter with social issues such as discrimination or other negative social impacts in class. It was not possible to witness critical actions in the school settings observed. A related study would need to be longitudinal and incorporate in-depth interviews to capture the students’ thoughts about, for example, what actions they would take in a situation. Suffice it to say that the students’ observed behaviours appeared pragmatic in nature – to improve their English skills in order to meet the demands of immediate and distal assessment tasks.

The findings of this research reassure me that the ‘world’ domain can be extended into the classroom context, and I propose here some ways to modify the activities found in the research setting so as to make them more conducive to ‘world’ domain outcomes. In Barnett’s (1997) framework, the domains refer to objects that critical thinking can investigate and the purposes that it can target. In the ‘world’ domain, the object of critical thinking is the external world, beyond the world of a person’s field or major. The purpose of critical thinking corresponding to the ‘world’ domain is the uptake of a stance or action in or on the, or one’s, world. In the EFL field, the world beyond EFL learners or users can be the (influential) world of the English native speakers or people they encounter when communicating in English, as well as typical socio-cultural value systems of such

people. Taking up a stance in this world, therefore, is to act in a way that minimises possible misunderstandings when communicating cross-culturally.

Given this circumstance, I suggest the teachers in the research context could have redesigned the tasks to facilitate more, higher-order exchange of ideas. For example, the Alligator River story could be supplemented with similar such scenarios. After helping the students apprehend the messages underlying the activities with the Alligator River (people respond idiosyncratically, and from their cultural worldviews, to a phenomenon), the teacher could provide the students with a more complex scenario or a stimulus text about American aged parents residing in nursing homes, for comparison with the students' views and experiences. This way, the teacher could provide the students with a focus for action. The scenario could be a good exercise for the students to demonstrate their action in the world, as expected by Barnett (1997).

Although critical thinking in the research context was found to apply itself more to both the 'knowledge' and 'self' domains of Barnett's 2015 framework, the 'self' domain was less focused. This was reflected in the participants' views of critical thinking as a means to express personal opinions, with other people rather than oneself being the subject of critique.

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. Student 1, for example, defined critical thinking as 'the way we refute other people's thinking and defend ours' (Student 1, I24214). 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. 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.

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. Practising critical thinking appeared akin to attempting to win an argument; i.e., 'Their [the teachers'] arguments would be much stronger, so it was no use to argue against the teachers' (Student 14,

I5314). 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).

### ***7.3.2 Silence versus critical thinking?***

The readiness of students to question or challenge their peers, teachers, and experts has been considered a strong indicator of critical thinking (Atkinson 1997; Durkin 2008; Ennis 1989; Tweed & Lehman 2002). Earlier studies have portrayed Asian students as learners with limited critical thinking capacity (See Ballard & Clanchy 1991; Biggs 1994; Samuelowicz & Bain 2001; Turner & Acker 2002; Watkins & Biggs 1996). Biggs (1994, p. 42), for example, found that 'overseas Asian students rarely ask questions or volunteer answers, let alone making public observations or criticism of course content'. The fact that the students learn

overseas, and how this mitigates their levels of confidence, might be factors in Biggs' comment. Regarding attitudes towards teachers, Liu and Littlewood (1997) observed that East Asian students were reticent to express their views or ask questions, especially when they disagreed with the teacher. Thus, based on their observed classroom behaviour, especially in the context of international education, Asian students are viewed to lack critical thinking capacity (Ballard & Clanchy 1997; Samuelowicz & Bain 2001). Contrary to this common perception, this study has found evidence of critical thinking practised by Vietnamese students.

Classroom observations showed that there was variance in the participating students' interactions with their teachers, the materials and their friends. In one Cross-cultural Communication course class, the students only asked a few questions that the teacher had required them to ask. These questions mainly concerned the content presented in the material (e.g. Why is culture like an iceberg? Can you explain the difference between cultural generalisations and stereotypes?). In effect, the students attempted neither to oppose or challenge the teachers' viewpoints, nor to ask any questions or express any disagreement about the material with which they were presented.

As opposed to the class observations, during the interviews the students did reveal some instances of critical thinking in response to teacher comments, for example, when Student 2 reported her disagreement with the teacher's opinion about a person's innate talent (Section 5.3.1.2). This indicates the students did not always accept what was imparted, even if they may not have disputed it in class. While they might remain silent or decline to challenge their teachers verbally, they nonetheless appeared to hold different opinions from those of their teachers. That the students opted not to contradict their teachers overtly does not establish that they were uncritical of their teachers. This finding resonates with Ha and Li's

(2014) argument about silence as respect and protest: the Chinese participants in their study wanted to show their attitudes and protest in a respectful manner, and hence silence was the best choice for them (Ha & Li 2014, p. 241).

The student's silence after her peer responded to her critical question in Extract 12 (p. 187) might be interpreted as a way to avoid confronting that peer. The way this student replied to her peer ('No, it's just my comments') after this student seemed to disagree with her feedback is another indicator of this avoidance of confrontation. Although in-class assessment might play a role in this situation, as analysed in Section 6.3.3.5, keeping silent or avoiding conflicts due to the culture of maintaining harmony and keeping face might hide the students' critical thinking. Silence in this case is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, in the way that it has been treated in the literature (Bao 2014). Rather, it is 'a positive indicator of a deliberate role being played in classroom communication, of inner speech being used in response to and preparation for language use and of mental processing of language taken in' (Bao 2014, p. vi). The roles and meanings of silence in language learning and its relationship to critical thinking should be investigated further. One conclusion that can be reached from this finding is that assessing students' performance of critical thinking based on their classroom performance is inadequate. It is premature to judge students' performance of critical thinking based solely on their classroom behaviour.

Beyond these inferential observations, in the absence of expression of critical thinking in classrooms, it is difficult to discern evidence of critical thinking and its practical application. 'Silent dissent', being unobservable, is of limited value for analysing classroom behavior, and will be ineffectual with regard to generating change. However, it is a starting point for critical thinking, and this study shows that the students were not all accepting knowledge passively; they formed their

own responses to the information provided by teachers. In a Vietnamese classroom where students remain reticent to express opinions and challenge others, the encouragement of such classroom behaviour patterns forms a valuable foundation for critical thinking. Such encouragement may help liberate the students' minds from the cultural tradition that dissent constitutes disrespect for teachers and experts and, thereby from a self-consciousness or reluctance to voice opinions.

Apart from 'dissent silence' as discussed above, the study found that while the students performed critical thinking, it was still at a rudimentary level. The mediating influences revealed in this study demonstrate that both the traditional culture and the socio-political context have influenced the participating teachers and students' practices of critical thinking in this context. In Chapter 2, following Tian and Low (2011, p. 62) I distinguished these as the 'large' cultural influences. However, these are not the sole mediating factors. In effect, the practice of critical thinking was influenced by factors at multiple levels, the most significant of which was the 'small' (p. 62) culture of the teaching and learning context.

#### **7.4 'Large' culture and the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese EFL context**

In this discussion of the relationship between 'large' culture and critical thinking, I address the influence on critical thinking practices of, first, the Vietnamese socio-political context, and, second, the country's cultural traditions.

##### ***7.4.1 Influence of Vietnamese socio-political context***

This study shows that the participating teachers were supportive of promoting critical thinking development for their students. To date, however, there has been no apparent explicit focus in Vietnamese government document policies (e.g. Vietnamese Education Law 2005, Vietnamese Communist Party's Resolutions, Vietnamese education law, Vietnamese strategy for educational development 2010-

2020) on developing critical thinking practices in Vietnamese EFL contexts. Bottom-up advocates might oppose the argument for stronger and clearer guidelines from the Ministry of Education. However, in a country where centralisation is common practice (Fritzen 2000) and typical of a hierarchical society, and given a universal tendency to follow curricular guidelines, implementation of critical thinking at lower levels is unlikely in the absence of a national policy. What may now be necessary for implementation of critical thinking into the nation's education system is the explicit imprimatur of the central government.

An important consideration is the extent to which Vietnam's political leadership wishes to promote critical thinking among its people. As a communist, one-party state, Vietnam is under the control of the Vietnamese Communist Party. To ensure Communism's power monopoly (Vuving 2010), the Party exercises hegemonic control over various aspects of its people's lives (Thayer 2009), a circumstance that appears at odds with the virtue of critical thought that empowers people to exercise democratic, autonomous life-choices (Barnett 2015).

The tension between a country's political institution and its promotion of critical thinking has been examined in Singapore (Ab Kadir 2016; Lim 2014, 2015). Singapore's 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' educational policy, which emphasises critical thinking in schools, was launched in 1997 (Ab Kadir 2016). According to Singapore's then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, the policy was 'a formula to enable Singapore to compete and stay ahead economically' (Goh 1997, in Ab Kadir 2016). In reality, the country's 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' campaign has had minimal impact on the students' critical thinking development (Ab Kadir 2010). Ab Kadir (2016, p. 13) ascribes this to the political and sociocultural context that have been guiding and shaping Singapore as a nation.

Singapore, notes Lim (2014), is ruled by ideologies of anti-liberalism and meritocracy, and these ideologies pose a number of tensions for the teaching of critical thinking in its schools. In anti-liberal societies, critical thinking may be considered as ‘potentially challenging to the state’s definition of the common good’ (Lim 2014, p. 696). Ab Kadir (2016, p. 16) sees the challenge as ‘a matter of the mediation and recalibration (rather than abolition) of [a nation’s] values, philosophies and practices that now seem to sit uncomfortably and incongruently with the critical thinking educational reform agenda’. He therefore calls for further research into the nature and manner of the existing tensions and the ways to mediate them. It is conceded here that research in such matters is not extensive. My study can be seen as one response to Ab Kadir’s (2016) recommendation.

#### ***7.4.2 Influence of Vietnamese cultural traditions***

Confucian-heritage traditions cultivate social harmony, authority reverence and conflict avoidance (Cheng 2000). Students from East Asian societies strongly influenced by Confucianism have typically been deemed reluctant to engage in argumentative discussion or to express public disagreement (Liu & Littlewood 1997). This study reveals a similar picture of the influence of Vietnamese traditional cultural values on critical thinking practices: One of these traditions is to view teachers or seniors’ knowledge as an authority.

Bearing this out, questioning or challenging teachers or book authors was rarely observed in the classrooms. Although some students referred to changes in their attitudes towards teachers’ knowledge (Section 4.3), these findings demonstrate that the tradition of respecting teachers and regarding them as an authority in class prevailed at the research site. The teachers’ authority derived from their knowledge, especially knowledge of and through a foreign language. The students demonstrated a preference to learn from their teachers rather than

from their peers. As one student participant observed, her peers did not pay sufficient attention to her presentation to offer criticism because they expected to learn more from the teacher. A belief in teachers' status and knowledge mastery was also reported by participants as a reason the students did not dare to engage in a discussion with their teachers.

This attitude towards teachers' knowledge was a barrier to the students' practice of critical thinking, and it is congruent with Dong's (2015) argument that cognitive authority of knowledge, not the social authority of the teacher, presents the main challenge to critical thinking. The emergent finding regarding the difference between the students' espoused beliefs and their actual practice regarding teachers' knowledge implies that the students still experience difficulties in turning their beliefs into practice.

Another Vietnamese cultural tradition – maintaining harmony – was also found to inhibit critical thinking practices. Classroom observations revealed that the students did not engage in robust discussion with their peers, with student participants typically referring to concerns about peers' reactions being a hindrance to their efforts to express critical thinking. Compounding this, they did not wish to jeopardise their peers' opportunities during assessable presentations or discussions. While assessment probably plays an important role here (see Section 6.3.3.5), the students seemed to demonstrate a collectivist spirit and sense of solidarity by helping their peers to save face as a means to maintain harmony among friends in the classroom. Such behaviour, though, may manifest not only in Eastern traditions, but is probably universal. This is discussed further below.

It is important to stress that this study supports the argument that East Asian students' low performance of critical thinking is not attributable solely to their

cultural background (Jones 2005; Kim 2003; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010; Tian & Low 2011). During the interviews there were some moments when the participating students seemed to resist apparent cultural influences, and were willing to express disagreement with their teachers (Section 5.3.1.2). On such occasions, the students did not verbalise their disagreement or dissenting attitudes, only disclosing them subsequently at interview. Some students considered that they maintained a critical mindset to what the teachers said because they were sufficiently mature not to question their teachers' knowledge invariably as incontrovertible truth (Section 4.3).

As intimated above, some of these cultural influences are arguably universal (Schwartz & Bilsky 1990), as may be other educational policies and practices. In Western contexts, similar dynamics have been observed. In a study on the impact of faculty teaching on students' critical thinking in the United States, Shim and Walczak (2012) found that some student-implemented course practices such as class presentations or group projects hindered the development of first-year students' critical thinking prowess. Reasons for this included the students' preference to learn directly from an instructor than from a peer, and their fear of disrupting the group and potentially receiving negative feedback from both peers and instructors. These American students had similar explanations for their refusal to engage in critical thinking tasks as the Vietnamese students in my study. Shim and Walczak's (2012) findings suggest that the demarcation between Eastern and Western ways of doing things is blurred. Asian culture, therefore, may be but one of many influences to consider when promoting critical thinking.

Although the Vietnamese socio-political context and cultural values (e.g. Confucianism and collectivism) partially explain barriers to critical thinking, this study's findings give credence to the argument that the influence of those cultural

values is perhaps less pervasive than previously asserted (Dong 2015; Jin & Cortazzi 2011). As one teacher stated:

To me, the influence [of Vietnamese culture] is small. If the students can approach a problem in Vietnamese, it [the students' performance] will be different. The tradition of respecting teachers is still on, but not much at the tertiary level ... The difference between East and West just exists at lower level of education. Moreover, things have changed a lot now, not like before... (Teacher 2, I13314)

This teacher's opinion accords with some studies' conclusions regarding the declining impact of Confucianism on the Chinese culture of learning (e.g. Ha & Li 2014; Jin & Cortazzi 2011; Shi 2006). The shift that was discernible in this study's student participants seemed to begin internally – its locus being the students' minds – rather than in their verbal behaviour. From this evidence of what might be called 'nascent critical thinking', it is difficult to discern confidently whether students were thinking critically or not. The reasons for the slow shift, however, are not only culturally mediated. A mixture of overlapping elements should be considered, including those from the 'small' culture.

### **7.5 'Small' culture and the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese EFL context**

The findings of this study indicate the influences that 'small' (Tian & Low 2011) culture of teaching and learning exerts on critical thinking practices, which resonates with previous studies (Clark & Gieve 2006; Jones 2005; Schendel 2015; Tian & Low 2011; Turner 2006). The 'small' culture in this study is defined to include the teachers' teaching pedagogy, the students' English language proficiency, and EFL teaching and learning. This section will discuss these three themes sequentially.

### ***7.5.1 The mediation of teaching pedagogy***

The analysis of teaching methodology in relation to the students' performance in the two content-based courses (Section 6.3.3) revealed the methodological problems that beset the promotion of critical thinking in this EFL context: students' motivation and familiarity with the tasks, the topics under discussion, teachers' scaffolding, teachers' assessment approaches and regimes, and pressure from the audience (peers and teacher). Although the two content-based classes aim to develop the students' critical thinking, the differences regarding the students' quality of critical thinking engagement are illustrative of the influence of teaching pedagogy on critical thinking practices.

The study noted numerous problems encountered by the students in the American Issues class, which may have resulted from the difficulty of the assigned task. As mentioned in Section 6.3.3.1, the students had to perform multiple activities, which appeared somewhat contrived. While on the surface, it seemed very democratic and student-led, it actually followed quite a tight script. Furthermore, the students had to play the role of a teacher in this activity by facilitating the class discussion. Playing the role of a teacher in the presence of the real teacher might prove an unreasonably difficult task for many students. The task is made even harder in the context of Vietnam wherein students still regard teachers as the authority in their classes. This was compounded by the use of an L2 in the presence of the L2 teacher, whose English expertise is presumably, and in practice, better than that of the students. In this observed class, the teacher was the examiner who assessed the students' performance. Not surprisingly, the student participants expressed their fear of the teacher's assessment of their own performance and those of their peers. This not only affected the presenters, but also

their peers, whose consequent reluctance to contribute, ironically made the presenters' job more difficult.

While the literature on the teaching of critical thinking recommends the use of challenging tasks to promote this form of thinking (Bailin et al. 1999b; Lin & Mackay 2004), the level of challenge needs to be considered carefully. It should not exceed the students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1987). As the students in the research context are unfamiliar with such a critical thinking-integrated teaching and learning approach, as well as the cultural assumptions that may be said to underpin it, the choice of tasks that are suitable for the students' capacity is of considerable importance.

With the orchestrating tasks as analysed above, teacher scaffolding might be helpful as it has been considered a necessary condition for the students to perform critical thinking (e.g. Sharma & Hannafin 2004, 2005; Vygotsky 1987; Wass, Harland & Mercer 2011). As evidenced in my study, the students would have performed better if they had received more scaffolding from the teachers. For example, the Cross-cultural Communication course teacher could have told the students the types of questions they could ask in the question-initiated lesson, and/or demonstrated this in a trial run of the exercise. The students in this class, in reality, asked questions only at comprehension level (See Extract 1, Section 5.2.1.3). American Issues teacher could have scaffolded the activity with individual sub-tasks before asking students to do some in orchestration. Allowing the students to use L1 (Vietnamese) in some cases, especially when they have to express complicated thoughts, is also another scaffolding method. This will be discussed further in the next section (7.5.2) about the role of the students' English language proficiency. According to Young (1993, in Dabbagh 2003), scaffolding involves supporting novice learners by limiting the complexities of the learning context and

gradually removing those limits as learners gain the knowledge, skills, and confidence to cope with the full complexity of the task. Scaffolding can be undertaken both formally, e.g. in curriculum planning and course activities, and in less formal and controllable social experiences, through peer support, peer and teacher conversation, and teachers acting as role models (Wass, Harland & Mercer 2011).

However, teachers need to consider how much scaffolding is necessary depending on the students' familiarity with critical thinking tasks and their ability. In Trang, Newton and Crabbe's (2015) study, the students did not welcome too much teacher scaffolding; they wanted space to be creative and original. This study was conducted in an elite high school in Vietnam. The students' high level of English language proficiency might in part explain such an attitude. In my study, in addition to being unfamiliar with critical thinking-integrated tasks, the students' English proficiency was low. Scaffolding, therefore, might be needed as intimated above.

Although the literature indicates that questioning, especially Socratic questioning, is a useful technique to scaffold critical thinking in class (Dumtee 2009; Elder & Paul 2003), in my study, the students reported problems with the teachers' questioning manner (Section 6.3.3.4). In order to enhance students' critical thinking through the use of questioning, EFL teachers need to establish a safe, risk-friendly, non-threatening, encouraging and mutually respectful, and yet challenging environment in the classroom (Seker & Komur 2008).

The findings of this study suggest there were inherent limits to the use of questioning for promoting critical thinking in the research context. Evidence for this assertion is in the observation of silence in the American Issues classes in the

face of some higher-order thinking questions from the teacher (Section 5.3.2.2), and the limited number of student questions in the question-initiated lesson in the Cross-cultural Communication course class (Section 5.2.1.3). Apart from the questioning manner as discussed above, the students' unfamiliarity with this teaching approach may also have been a limitation. As one of the participating teachers conceded, during the students' earlier education years, they were exposed to a learning environment in which they were expected to listen and conform (Teacher 2, I110314). The students' reluctance to ask questions is, therefore, understandable. Nevertheless, questioning should not be abandoned at the research site. With the current trend in education, globalisation, and the deeper integration of Vietnam with the world, critical thinking will inexorably extend to Vietnamese schooling, just as it has begun to do in the tertiary sector. If the Vietnamese education system intends to equip students to cope with this change, it should encourage them to engage increasingly in questioning. Students should be encouraged to practise posing, interpreting and responding to questions of their own and of others. A gradual increase of fit-for-purpose questioning in the classroom is one way forward in this regard.

The differences in the students' engagement with critical thinking between the American Issues and Cross-cultural Communication course classes might also be attributed to the materials chosen. In the Cross-cultural Communication course class, the topics and materials (the Alligator River story and Hofstede's cultural dimensions) provided a good stimulus for critical thinking because they were of genuine interest and relevance, controversial in nature, and offered different perspectives. These topics had the capacity to motivate the students to exercise critical thinking by applying higher-order thinking processes and expressing and exchanging opinions. Meanwhile, the American Issues class focused more on issues

in contemporary American society. Although the students almost certainly have some familiarity with US culture (through previous courses in American culture or other sources such as the media and movies), the controversial issues in American society seem to be more distant from the students' concerns, experience and knowledge.

Observations of the materials used in the content-based classes echoed some previous researchers' assertions about the contribution of material selection to critical thinking development (Ivey & Fisher 2006; Le 2005; Paran 2003; Richard 2003; Shukri & Mukundan 2015; Yang & Gamble 2013). For example, Le (2005) suggests using texts of genuine interest and relevance to students that feature knowledge about other cultures, especially the target culture/s in an ESL context. Le (2005) argues further that learning about other cultures and their perspectives is crucial for EFL language learners because it helps shape their view of themselves and of the world. However, as shown in the American Issues class, knowledge about culture needs to be close to students' lives and their concerns so as for them to think critically. Finding texts that bridge the gaps between target culture and student knowledge may prove to be a challenging quest, but one that is likely to pay dividends.

A final factor resulting from the 'small' culture is the teacher's in-class assessment and its authenticity. According to Armstrong and Boud (1983), the assessment of class participation can impose artificial constraints on classroom discussion. Students may present themselves differently from when they are not being assessed, thereby undermining the educational aims of the exercise.

In the absence of teacher assessment during group discussions in the Cross-cultural Communication course class, students seemed more comfortable and

willing to participate in discussions. This finding suggests that group presentations followed by question-and-answer sessions may be useful as a practice platform for the students to learn how to recognise an issue, to see the issue from different perspectives, or to perform critical observations of it. Their critical thinking could be assessed in written assignments, after they accumulate sufficient experience and knowledge from the discussions generated by presentations. However, if assessment is needed to motivate the students to contribute to class (Armstrong 1978), teachers should create a relaxed atmosphere and project themselves in a supportive manner. Armstrong and Boud (1983, p. 37) recommend that classroom participation assessment should only be commenced 'several weeks after the course begins and a satisfactory classroom atmosphere has been established'.

### ***7.5.2 The mediation of students' English language proficiency***

English (L2) proficiency was found to be an obstacle both to the participating students' engagement with critical thinking and their teachers' efforts for critical thinking promotion. The qualitative data of the study reveal that the students' deficiency in English was demonstrated in both their receptive and expressive skills (Grosser & Nel 2013). In some instances, the students could neither make sense of the main ideas implicit in the assigned readings, nor understand the teacher's message implicit in his questions (e.g. the American Issues class). As Teacher 2 explained, the students need higher language proficiency to exercise critical thinking in English given that their current capacity limited them to merely understanding English texts superficially. He reported that the students,

Read an article but had to struggle to understand it. In order to express personal opinions about a problem, they need to comprehend it thoroughly first ... To discuss a problem in Vietnamese is different. Here, they had to

speak in English. They need to understand it before moving to the next step – discussing it. (Teacher 2, I11314)

The students also reported that their lack of confidence in speaking English was due to their low proficiency level. Many errors were observed in the students' spoken English. The participating teachers' reporting of the influence of low language proficiency on critical thinking articulation is consistent with Grosser and Nel's (2013, p. 13) assertion that 'students could possibly experience problems with understanding and interpretation in all fields of study where prescribed learning materials and textbooks are mainly in English'.

The students' frequent switching to Vietnamese (L1) during discussions and their apparent relative ease while expressing ideas in Vietnamese added more weight to the existing research on the contribution of language proficiency to critical thinking performance. The students appeared more eager to disagree with their peers, and their discussions were more sustained than when they spoke in English. This finding supports Mackee et al.'s (2006) assertion that thinking in, or mentally translating from, a second language is generally considered to impose cognitive limitations on processing information. Floyd (2011) similarly concludes that students studying in a second language struggle to perform at the same level they are capable of in their first language. According to Cohen (1995, p. 4, in Dong 2006), the best way to learn to achieve native-like control of a target language is to make an effort to think in that language. In the process of achieving the native-like cognitive process, one transitional strategy for EFL/ESL learners is to think in L1 and verbalise their thoughts aloud in L2 (Storch & Wigglesworth 2003).

Researchers have debated the roles of L1 in an L2 learning setting (Cook 1996, 2001; Halliwell & Jones 1991; Storch & Wigglesworth 2003; Willis 1996). Cook (2001, p. 404) reviewed the history of the focus on L2 from 'Ban the L1 from the

classroom', to 'Minimise the L1 in the classroom', and then to 'Maximise the L1 in the classroom'. In its latest iteration, L1 has been seen as a rich resource in linguistic scaffolding to facilitate learners' comprehension and interaction in the target language (Moore 2013a; Tavares 2015). The use of L1 to encourage critical thinking in the researched EFL context also raises concerns. If critical thinking is an objective in a language classroom, teachers need to consider whether they encourage students to apply higher-order thinking and to express opinions in L1, or in L2. If L1 is tolerated or encouraged, teachers need to balance the critical thinking and the language objectives. The teachers of the content-based classes appeared to sacrifice language proficiency for critical thinking when they discussed assessment criteria for students' written assignments. They shared in the interviews that they would not assess their students' English but their arguments and reasoning instead. This raises the question: Even if they could be impartial in reality, could they, as language teachers, avoid paying attention to their students' language use and assess only their ideas and arguments?

In an EFL context like Vietnam, learners are exposed to English only in the classroom. Therefore, if the EFL students are not encouraged to speak English in class, the outcome of developing English ability for EFL learners might not be achieved. However, if students are not allowed to use Vietnamese when they struggle to express themselves in English, as they did in this study, it would be very difficult for them to exercise critical thinking or at least to provide any evidence of it. Given the findings pertaining to the contribution of English language proficiency to critical thinking engagement, the students' desire to switch to Vietnamese is plausible. The concerns here are when and how much L1 (Vietnamese) is acceptable or optimal in an EFL class that aims to encourage the

students to exercise critical thinking, and the extent to which L2 proficiency can be sacrificed.

The findings regarding the students' performance of critical thinking and the impact of English proficiency on their performance suggest the question: How can EFL learners be helped to transfer their critical thinking from L1 (Vietnamese) to L2 (English). This gives rise to other questions such as: What and how much support should EFL teachers and EFL curricula incorporate to develop EFL students' critical thinking? and When should critical thinking be integrated into an EFL program – at the beginner or at more advanced stages? Possible support mechanisms might include national policy development, institutional attention to curriculum design, assessment, and examinations, and teachers' support for critical thinking in their teaching, by means such as outlined above. Critical thinking should also be incorporated gradually from the beginning courses in language skills to the content courses in the later period.

### ***7.5.3 The mediation of EFL teaching and learning***

In this section, I discuss the mediation of EFL teaching and learning itself on critical thinking practices in the Vietnamese EFL context with regard to types of language courses and their opportunities to develop critical thinking.

The possibility of developing criticality for language learners has been affirmed, previously not only in intermediate-advanced level classes (Brumfit et al. 2005), but also at beginner levels (Yamada 2010). The differences in critical thinking teaching practices between the content-based and skills-based classes might suggest the need for further studies into the relationship between types of language courses and critical thinking development. In this study's context, skills-based classes provide the students with language skills such as listening, speaking,

reading and writing; meanwhile, the content-based classes, building on the former courses and their content, aim to equip the students with both the cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries (such as the US and Britain) and opportunities to practise and apply language skills in English. The cultural elements in the content-based classes provide fertile ground for critical thinking because the students are exposed to unfamiliar cultures that may either resemble or differ – perhaps markedly – from their own. Students can also explore differences within an imagined, homogenous ‘American culture’ or ‘Vietnamese culture’. Through cultural comparisons and contrasts, the students can develop a critical view of their own culture/s and of those of others, as well as of themselves and the world. Additionally, to the extent that critical thinking is deemed to be a common practice in English-speaking countries, it is worthy of study as a part of a cultural understanding of such countries.

The contrast in the teaching practices of critical thinking between the skills-based and content-based courses in the research context revealed that some courses were more conducive to critical thinking than others. In the literature, the potential to develop criticality in the content-based classes was mediated by the content of the courses, and by the students’ (presumed) ability levels. For example, Brown (2014) observed that content-based courses provide language students with meaningful input, which serves as a necessary stimulus for students to produce critical output. Content-based classrooms are also deemed to ‘have the potential to increase intrinsic motivation and empowerment since [or, at least provided that] students are focused on subject matter that is important to their lives’ (Crocker & Bowden 2011, p. 665). This view resonates with Richards and Rodgers’ (2000) observation that language learning is more motivating when students are focusing on something other than language. Although determining what might be of

interest to a large group of students presents a further challenge for educators, an outcome-based curriculum (i.e. acquiring the skills of critical thinking or equipping the students with issues in Cross-cultural Communication course) offers greater flexibility for teacher and student choice of material, than does a more basic and preliminary skills-based course. In this study, the cultural contents of the content-based courses appeared conducive to critical thinking development, bearing in mind that 'learning a foreign language may help with understanding of different world views and in becoming more critically aware of one's own' (Bredella & Richter 2004, p. 523).

Nevertheless, the extant literature argues that skills-based language courses are also appropriate for promoting critical thinking (Yamada 2010; Yang & Gamble 2013). A large number of skill courses employ a critical approach, e.g., Critical Reading (Wallace 2003), and Critical Writing (Huang 2012). Moreover, the uptake of critical thinking in Asia is gaining momentum: in the 13<sup>th</sup> AsiaTEFL conference held in China in November, 2015, and attended by the researcher, there were nine paper presentations on the integration of critical thinking into English skill classes in Asian contexts (China, the Philippines, Japan): Grammar (Priscilla Angela Cruz, in Asia TEFL 2015), Listening (Yan Wang, in Asia TEFL 2015), Reading (Xiaoying Wang, Zubaedah Wji Lestari, in Asia TEFL 2015) and Writing (Aidatul Chusna, in Asia TEFL 2015). In this study, classroom observations and teacher interviews also unearthed opportunities for critical thinking development in skills-based contexts; however, the teachers did not always avail themselves of such opportunities to integrate critical thinking into their lessons, mainly as a concession to the pressure from CEFR test formats (Section 6.2.2).

The paucity of critical thinking practice in the skills-based courses in the research context was explained by external factors such as testing and examinations

(Section 6.2.2). The teachers in charge of these courses blamed the CEFR and the testing and examination requirements based on this framework for the lack of critical thinking in their teaching. It emerged from this study that the assessment policy based on the CEFR standards in accordance to Decision No. 7274/BGDDT-GDDH (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2012) led to an instrumental response (Bredella & Richter 2004) in the skills-based classes. This assessment policy resulted in ‘the perceived effect of reductive and narrow language curriculum, pedagogy and teacher professionalism’ (Huy & Hamid 2015, p. 71). As observed above, it was evident in this study’s findings that the teachers of the skills-based classes taught, plausibly, to the CEFR-formatted tests.

The implementation of Decision No.7274/BGDDT-GDDH (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2012) appears to have been a counterproductive step with regard to critical thinking development. The requirement to achieve a C1 level for English major students ensures the learning outcome of an EFL program; however, this is merely an instrumental one. Drawing on this regulation, language proficiency appears to be the highest objective in a language education program. This regulation orients teachers and students towards an arguably limited objective in language teaching and learning; that is, to achieve a certain level of language proficiency for assessment purposes. The instrumental nature of the language outcome test was further confirmed specifically in the research context wherein the students were required to take a high-stakes test on practical skills in their final year. If the students failed this test, they were not awarded their Bachelor’s degree. The reality was that only 10% of the student cohort participating in the study passed the 2015 test at the first attempt, according to the University’s office of records. The unsuccessful students had to re-sit in the test until they passed. Knowledge of this reality must have percolated through to the subsequent cohort

(and their teachers), and have precipitated anxiety among students, which might lead to a preoccupation with the test. The aim of educating a 'critical being' (Barnett 1997, p. 1) in higher education seemed to have been usurped by assessment preoccupations in this case.

In the third millennium (CE), foreign language teaching has been called towards 'a more reflective, interpretive, historically grounded and politically engaged pedagogy' (Kramsch 2014, p. 302). Kramsch (2014) advises foreign language teachers against focusing on discrete and testable skills; instead, they should use the opportunity to reflect on language and language use. Moreover, in a context of at times dire intercultural troubles and misunderstandings globally, L2 teaching and learning is being increasingly pressed into the service of intercultural understanding (Byram 1997; Houghton & Yamada 2012), and the lofty aspiration of peace-building, which surely require a measure of critical thinking.

The development of critical thinking might evolve from Barnett's (1997) lower (critical skills and reflexivity) to higher levels (refashioning of traditions and transformative critiques) and expand from simple (critical reason and critical self-reflection) to complex forms (critical action). In order to reach the highest strata of the continua, gradual increase of integration of critical thinking should be applied. As Byrnes (2012) notes, the introductory levels of the curriculum should be designed with a view to developing the skills that will ultimately be required at more advanced levels. The introduction of basic reasoning skills into skills-based language courses will help EFL students to exercise more higher-order thinking processes in subsequent courses. Similarly, EFL students are more likely to develop the habit of critiquing what they encounter if they are systematically asked to interpret the implied messages in whatever they read or hear.

Critical thinking should also be applied across a range of courses in the EFL curriculum. Additionally, critical thinking may be integrated in the Vietnamese language curriculum at lower levels of education as recently observed in the Vietnamese language tests with more inclusion of discursive essays about social issues (e.g. hoc.vtc.vn 2016).

A concluding remark on the mediation of the EFL field to critical thinking practices should be a reiteration of the necessity of critical thinking in EFL. Returning to the comments of my son (chapter 1), he might be right when observing that in my field (EFL teaching and learning), ‘words are more important than actions’. Learners of a foreign language may aim ultimately at using that language (written and spoken) fluently. This might hold true when thinking about the pragmatic or instrumental purpose of learning English (Dörnyei & Ushioda 2013). English has been widely seen as ‘a key to the economic success of nations and the economic well-being of individuals’ (Tollefson 2000, p. 8). In Vietnam, the review of foreign language history shows that English has been a popular foreign language since 1989 (Denham 1992; Thanh S. 2011) because of its capacity to deliver ‘the miracles of science and technology plus a better standard of living that Vietnam craves’ (Denham 1992, p. 64). Vietnamese learners of English may choose to study English not because they want to enter into the debate of critical thinking or social justice, but to be in a well-paid job or to travel or migrate.

However, words (written and spoken) are possibly the most efficient way to change somebody and to communicate ideas, as Norton and Toohey (2004, p. 1) comment

Language is not simply a means of expression or communication; rather, it is a practice that constructs, and is constructed by the ways language learners

understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories and their possibilities for the future.

Like me, through this written work, I've explained more about what I believe and what I do. In this sense, my response to my son and to those who are still doubtful about the significance of critical thinking in EFL teaching and learning finds voice. Foreign language learning is an apt locus in which to apply critical thinking, despite the difficulties that this might entail. This response appears to be justified by the study's findings. The evidence from the research context, especially the content-based courses, indicated that there were opportunities for critical thinking development in this EFL context, and that, particularly when circumstances were favourable, some of these were being adopted by the teachers and students.

The above belief in the relationship between critical thinking and EFL, especially regarding the focus on 'action' in and through foreign language learning prompted me to integrate Barnett's (1997) domains, e.g., the objective world, the subjective self, and the external world, into Bloom's (1956) cognitive levels in understanding the practices of critical thinking. Although not all aspects of Barnett's (1997) framework were used in this study, the analysis of critical thinking in relation to its possible domains appears to assist in the students' development of themselves and their contribution to the world (Barnett 1997). This view resonates with Bredella & Richter's (2004) argument for both instrumental and educational goals of foreign language learning and teaching.

The discussion concerning the mediation of culture in critical thinking practices in the research context shows the dynamic nature of culture and the complexity of this concept (Lessard-Clouston 1997). While the 'large' culture of Vietnam seemed to be in tension with the philosophy of critical thinking, what was happening in the 'small' learning and teaching context indicates that critical thinking was being

promoted, albeit in an unequally distributed way, and could be further extended if some conditions are met. With this approach to culture, critical thinking practices everywhere in the world are influenced by cultural conditions. A contextual approach to understanding the practices of critical thinking is therefore necessary.

## **7.6 Chapter summary**

The literature has included studies which question the stereotypes about Asian learners' critical thinking capabilities (Biggs 1994; Kember 2000; Kennedy 2002; Kubota 2001; Kumaravadivelu 2003; Li & Wegerif 2014; Lun, Fischer & Ward 2010; Stapleton 2001; Tan 2015; Tian & Low 2011). The present study explored the practices of critical thinking in some EFL classes in a university in Central Vietnam. The findings of some evidence of critical thinking practice, albeit rudimentary, among both teachers and students, suggest that critical thinking can operate in a language class in a Vietnamese context. This empirical evidence gives heart to those who support the feasibility of teaching a 'Western concept' (Barnett 1997) in an Asian context (Kabilan 2000; Kumaravadivelu 2003; Long 2003; Stapleton 2002). However, as with the application of any unfamiliar concepts such as learning autonomy, collaborative learning or learner-centeredness, the practice of critical thinking in the research site faces numerous obstacles. Wu (2015, p. 75) responds to this condition as follows:

All foreign ideas are implemented with a twist as a result of local constraints and become hybrid in praxis (p.75).

In order to promote critical thinking most effectively in this context, there should be an alignment among the stakeholders at the three levels: classrooms (teachers and students), institutions and the nation. In the final analysis, to make such a change in critical thinking practices requires both time and may need to embrace hybridity and flexibility.

The next chapter – Chapter 8 – will analyse the study’s contributions and present the recommendations made from the study’s findings. It also suggests areas for future research. ■

## **Chapter 8**

# **Conclusions and recommendations**

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### **8.1 Introduction**

This study has set out to explore the affordances and barriers to the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, has sought to investigate the mediation or interplay between culture and critical thinking, and language learning (EFL) and critical thinking; and how each helps and/or perhaps impedes the other. Its primary aim has been to answer the following three core research questions and six sub-questions:

1. How do the teacher and student participants understand critical thinking?
  - a. How do the participants define critical thinking?
  - b. What are the participants' attitudes towards critical thinking?
2. How is critical thinking teaching practice undertaken at the research site?
  - a. In what ways and to what extent is critical thinking teaching practice being undertaken?
  - b. What are the affordances and barriers to the teaching practice of critical thinking at the research site?
3. What is the nature of the students' engagement with critical thinking?
  - a. To what extent and in what contexts do the students think critically?
  - b. What are the affordances and barriers to the students' engagement with critical thinking at the research site?

In this final chapter of the thesis, I will analyse the contributions that the study has made to the knowledge of: (1) critical thinking practices in an Asian context; (2) critical thinking practices in an EFL context; (3) a conceptual framework of critical thinking; and, (4) the factors affecting critical thinking practices in an Asian EFL context. The chapter also looks at the implications of the study for informing teaching practices of critical thinking and students' engagement with critical thinking. I then outline the limitations of the study and conclude with suggestions for future research.

## **8.2 Contributions of the study**

### ***8.2.1 Contributions to the knowledge of critical thinking practices in an Asian context***

The study has contributed to identifying the practice of critical thinking in Vietnam, an Asian context, a gap that has been identified in the literature (Gunawardena & Petraki 2014). This study's significant contribution is its challenge to the stereotyping of Asian students' limited critical thinking in an Asian context. Stapleton (2002, p. 253), who challenges such generalisations, posits that, 'the idea that the Japanese, as collectivist and hierarchy-oriented people, are unable to overcome these cultural attributes to express individual voices and think critically may be open to question'. Stapleton's (2002) argument was, however, based on the findings regarding only the attitudes of students towards critical thinking. My study is of an empirical nature; it explores and compares the learning practices and attitudes of EFL learners at a Vietnamese university college. As such, it contributes a piece to the mosaic of information on Asian students in the literature.

The limited evidence from this study of the students' engagement with critical thinking in this study indicates that the stereotype about reticent Asian students is

not entirely false; however, it has been exaggerated and appears disproportionate to reality. The stark differences between the students' presentations in the American Issues class and the small group discussions in the Cross-cultural Communication class show that they could have performed critical thinking under more favourable conditions.

The teachers' integration and the students' engagement with critical thinking in the research context were limited and rudimentary. The study identified numerous dynamics ranging from classroom (e.g. language proficiency, the teacher's teaching methods) to national levels (e.g. socio-political context, cultural traditions), and even some universal human classroom characteristics (e.g. authority, student solidarity) that exerted their mitigating influence on critical thinking practices in the research context. Nevertheless, as suggested above, critical thinking did manage to find a voice in such circumstances, albeit in nascent fashion.

Because critical thinking is viewed largely a 'Western concept' (Barnett 1997), arguments surround its applicability for Asian students (Atkinson 1997; Kubota 2001; Kubota & Austin 2007; Kumaravadivelu 2003; Peacock 1990; Tan 2015). In light of this study's findings, it is unhelpful to differentiate Eastern and Western traditions, as both traditions can claim to have made some contributions to critical thinking, as discussed in Sections 2.3.3 and 2.3.4. To the extent that critical thinking is accepted as an essential competence in today's world, it should be an integral part of every educational system. With time, a hybrid critical thinking may emerge, one with inherent Western and Eastern characteristics, particularly when practised in the East.

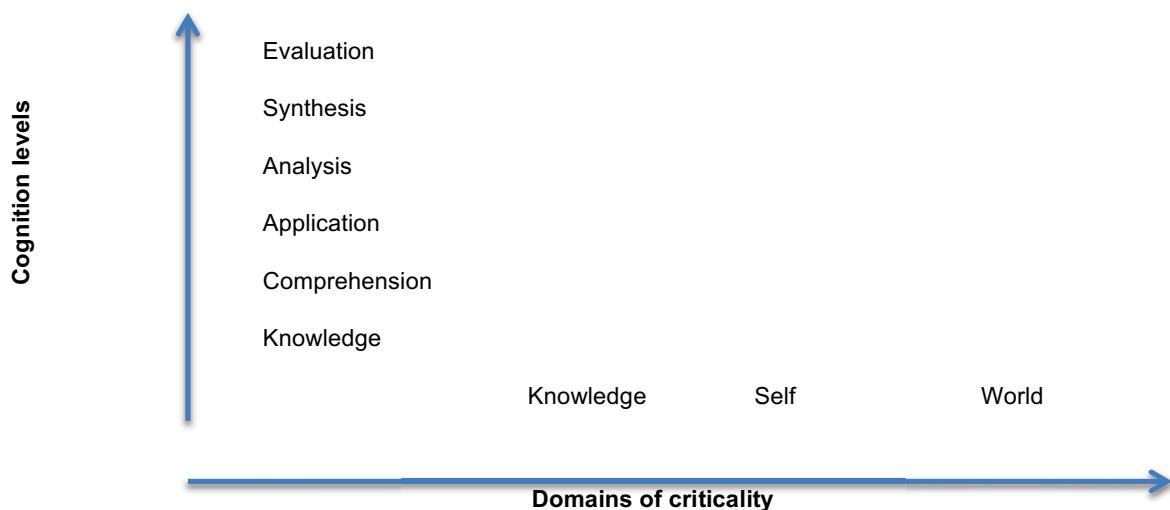
### **8.2.2 Contributions to the knowledge of critical thinking practices in an EFL context**

The study has contributed to the knowledge of critical thinking practices in an EFL context, particularly regarding the opportunities for critical thinking development between language and content courses, and the influence of the target language proficiency on critical thinking. It emerged from the findings that the focus of a language class, that is, language or content, affected opportunities for critical thinking development. This causal relationship was intensified by the policy that required the students to pass a C1-level test at the end of their Bachelor program. As a result, the teacher and student participants in the study prioritised linguistic competence over critical thinking in the skills-based classes. By contrast, there were more opportunities for critical thinking promotion in the more advanced content-based courses. The ‘content’ component of a language curriculum may therefore be more conducive to critical thinking development. This empirical study supports Djiwandono’s (2013, p. 44) observation that ‘when the learning goal is the enhancement of language proficiency, critical thinking does not take on paramount importance’.

The study identified interference between the L2 (English) and critical thinking in an EFL class. The students’ English language proficiency was one of the impediments to critical thinking practice. Where the students’ L2 was more advanced, they appeared to practise critical thinking more naturally. In order for EFL students to perform critical thought in English, it is logical to improve their language skills beforehand. However, this raises a question as to whether critical thinking elements should be introduced in the earlier years or later, when the students’ English skills are more advanced. Recommendations regarding this issue, including a national policy in critical thinking and what teachers can do to develop students’ critical thinking, are provided in Sections 8.3.1 and 8.3.2.

### **8.2.3 Contributions to a conceptual framework on critical thinking**

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 (Figure 8.1). Although the findings did not fit in the whole framework (see Section 7.3.1), 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.



**Figure 8.1. Suggested framework for critical thinking in an EFL context**

As explained in Methodology chapter (Section 3.5.2) and presented in the Findings chapters (4, 5 and 6), the analysis of the data in this study was based on the above combination. For the purpose of analysis, the combined frameworks helped in evaluating the level and manner of critical thinking practices in the teaching and

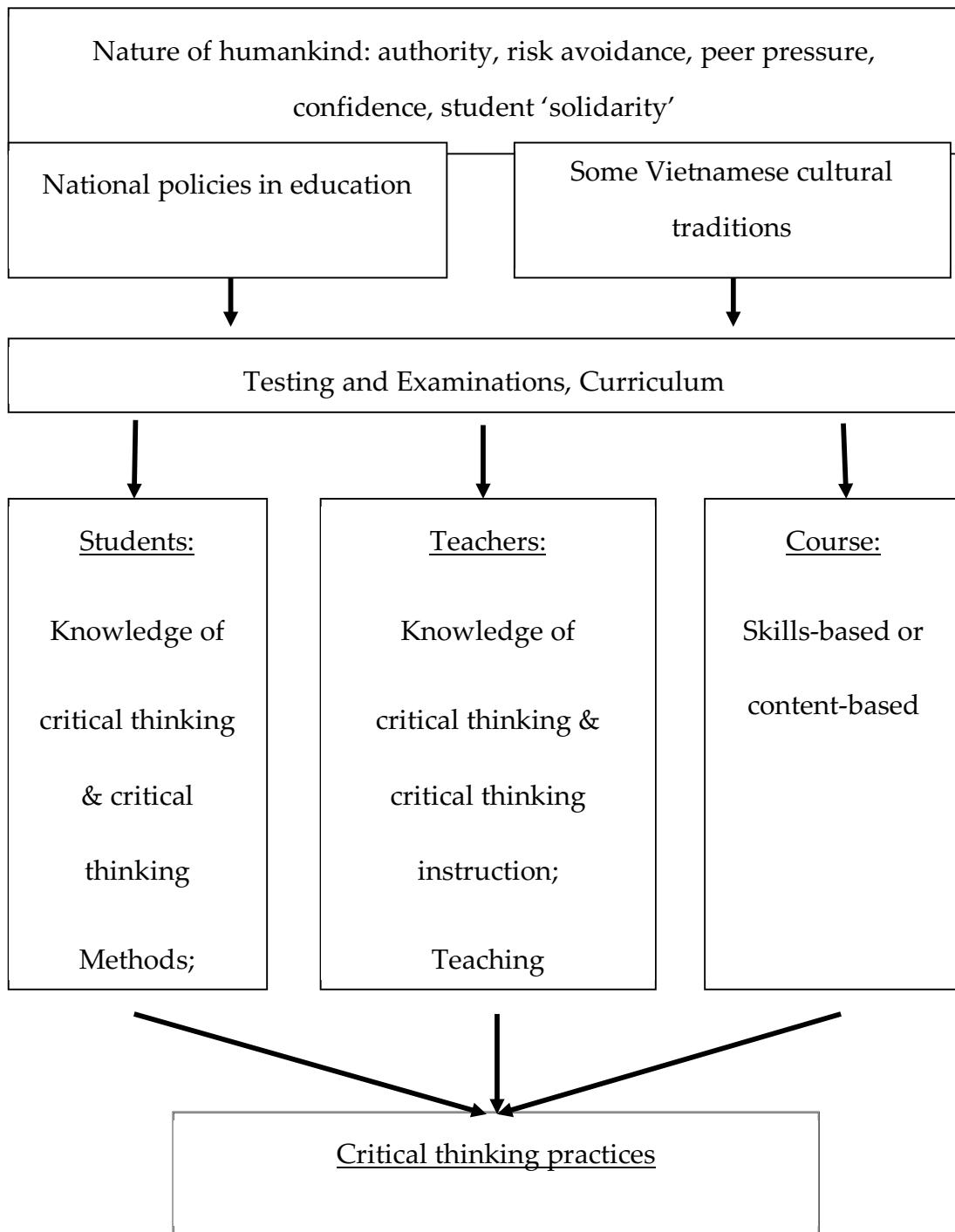
learning activities. The level and manner of critical thinking practices are manifested in the levels of cognition and aspects/areas that those activities can cover. An optimal critical thinking curriculum would do well to integrate increasingly the higher levels of Bloom's (1956) cognitive domains (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) into the 'self' and 'world' domains of criticality.

The potential of expanding the practices to the 'world' domain (as might be evidenced in classroom discussions) indicates the feasibility of applying Bloom's (1956) higher-order thinking levels to all three of Barnett's (1997) domains. Although this can only be inferred from this study's findings, it is suggestive of the potential of combining Bloom's (1956) and Barnett's (1997) frameworks for insightful understanding of critical thinking practices in a specific context as a focus of future research. This, in turn, will possibly inform curriculum and course design, as well as teaching, learning, and assessment.

#### ***8.2.4 Contribution to the knowledge of the factors affecting critical thinking practices in an Asian EFL context***

My findings have also led me to posit a further framework for future analysis. This hybrid framework has been adapted from (a) Schendel's (2015) framework for factors affecting improvement of students' critical thinking in Rwanda; and (b) Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological theory. In Schendel's (2015) framework, improvement in students' critical thinking ability depends on the combination of inputs and institutional environments. The barriers identified in the present study match the levels proposed in Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecological theory. The four structures or levels of barriers are classroom, institution, nation, and humankind.

Figure 8.2 illustrates my suggested framework.



**Figure 8.2: Framework of factors affecting critical thinking practice in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context**

(Adapted from Schendel's (2015) framework and Bronfenbrenner's (1976) theory)

Figure 8.2 illustrates the complexity and multiplicity of layers affecting critical thinking practices in the research context. Critical thinking practices are influenced by teacher and student inputs. Teachers' knowledge of critical thinking and critical thinking instruction, together with their teaching methodologies, will shape and direct critical thinking practices. Students' language proficiency and knowledge of critical thinking methods and strategies are among the factors affecting critical thinking practices in the classroom. Another layer of influence derives from the classroom environment. Barriers and opportunities may originate from classroom behavioural and cultural norms. Relevant academic experiences and conditions include appropriate levels of challenge, active and collaborative learning, questioning, feedback, and assessment. The nature of the courses determines the potential to develop certain aspects of critical thinking.

At the university level, institutional factors include examination and testing, and curriculum (see Chapters 5 and 6). Moreover, the process of introducing or applying a new policy or a new exam regime may also create difficulties or potentially, affordances, for the practice of critical thinking. At the national level, the absence of a national policy for critical thinking, together with various traditional cultural features, also exert their influence. It could be viewed as ironic that practitioners need to be directed to undertake critical thinking. Nevertheless, teachers and students take their lead from curricular directives, anointed as they are with the authority of assessment. In the absence of an explicit imprimatur for critical thinking, its practice is less likely to flourish. This may be a challenge for a one-party system of government such as Vietnam's.

It was also inferred from the study's data that some factors are of a universal human nature, even if they operate in different ways in the East and West. Such factors as authority, risk avoidance, peer pressure, confidence, and solidarity can

affect the readiness to think critically of people in any cultural context, although the degree of influence may vary. For example, people in the West may be more willing to take risks than those in the East (Hofstede 1986; Sánchez-Franco, Martínez-López & Martín-Velicia 2009), but students everywhere tend to avoid risks in the classroom, as assessment is an ever-present driver of classroom behaviour.

### **8.3 Implications for practice**

It may thus be concluded from the practices of critical thinking uncovered in this study that critical thinking is an emerging practice in Vietnamese education. The study identified limited evidence of critical thinking being practised by both teachers and students. To the extent that critical thinking is deemed to be a positive and productive educational practice, this limited evidence might be seen as discouraging. However, by the same reasoning, it should not be abandoned in Vietnamese EFL contexts. The identification and recognition of the barriers to critical thinking practices offers pathways to better outcomes. This study's implications for enhancing teaching practice and students' engagement with critical thinking are discussed in the next section.

#### **8.3.1 Teaching practice of critical thinking**

Teachers alone cannot make changes in the class. They need support if they are to help their students improve their critical thinking, and the support might come from several levels.

##### **8.3.1.1 A national policy for critical thinking development**

One feature found in this study was the teachers' positive disposition towards critical thinking, a positivity that was evident not only in what they reported during the interviews, but also in their classroom practice. Although there have been no decisions or guidelines explicitly formulated for critical thinking teaching

at the national and university levels in Vietnam, some teachers have attempted to integrate the goals of critical thinking development into their teaching. This indicates a positive disposition towards critical thinking teaching at the ‘chalkface’. If the national government were to promote critical thinking, a national policy would be beneficial – one that focuses specifically upon supporting teachers’ efforts to develop this skill.

While there are varying views on the respective advantages of top-down or bottom-up strategies in educational reform (Fullan 1994), this study suggests that a policy or strategy from the top level to develop critical thinking for Vietnamese learners is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for critical thinking to occur. Despite possibly facilitating contrived criticality, akin to Hargreaves and Dawe’s (1990) contrived collegiality, a top-down policy will complement and abet what is already happening at the grass roots level. Such a policy or strategy will not only serve as a guideline to consistently instruct stakeholders to integrate critical thinking effectively in class; it will also reward them for doing so, particularly if it is transparently linked to assessment. When employing such a top-down strategy, consideration should be given to the process of translating the policy into practice (Morris & Scott 2003; Wang 2003).

Given the importance of a critical approach and that it has attracted the attention of numerous language educators (e.g. Benesch 1993; Benesch 1999; Johnston et al. 2011; Pennycook 1999; Sung & Pederson 2012), a national policy is recommended that will promote and develop a critical approach to language learning such as Critical English Language Teaching (Sung 2004; Sung 2012) in Vietnam. According to Sung and Pederson (2012), English language teaching (ELT) is not merely a field of teaching language and culture. ELT pedagogues should educate learners to critically examine issues that arise from their lives and the

forms of knowledge they are exposed to through educational curricula. Buoyed by this new focus, ideally teachers will be provided with sufficient rationale and guidelines for the teaching of critical thinking in their language classrooms.

#### **8.3.1.2 Testing and examination system**

As indicated above, assessment is closely intertwined with policy. Both, along with curriculum, need to demonstrate alignment. The requirement for English-major undergraduates to pass a C1 test as a graduation criterion has proven problematic. The exam practice might be the best way to enhance students' language performance; however, both teachers and students appeared to be subjected to a great deal of pressure during the observation period. This requirement perhaps unintentionally diverts language education towards a more instrumental goal. Moreover, only 10 per cent of the cohort met the C1 test graduation requirement, a result that has prompted the following questions: (a) Were the teachers and students inadequately prepared for the test? and (b) Were the teaching and learning oriented for the CEFR, as observed in the skills-based classes sufficient for the students' improvement in language skills? These questions are beyond the scope of this thesis, and further research needs to be undertaken to explore them. However, one conclusion may be reached in this study: teaching and learning towards the CEFR test proved counterproductive for critical thinking. Therefore, this study's recommendation for language policy makers is to consider carefully all factors and possible consequences before applying a new rule or regulation in education, so as to balance the linguistic requirements with other objectives in language education, and monitor outcomes accordingly in the early stages.

#### **8.3.1.3 Teacher professional development**

Professional development is a vital accompaniment of any educational innovation. From this study it emerged that the teachers lacked knowledge of critical thinking

and critical thinking instruction. Teachers would benefit from additional professional development programs at the pre-service and in-service levels if they are to develop and maintain familiarity with developments in language teaching methodologies, including critical English language teaching. Teachers could participate in international learning exchange programs. The study also revealed that in the main the teachers acquired their critical thinking teaching prowess during a period when they studied in Western jurisdictions. While this finding might whisper cultural imperialism, it suggests the need for teacher professional development that will enable teachers to learn more about and observe this ostensibly Western practice. They can learn about methods to develop students' critical thinking such as collaborative learning (Gokhale 1995), online discussion (2011), problem-based learning (Yuan, Williams & Fan 2008), or dialogue journal writing (Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini 2005).

Some other implications of the study's findings are as follows. Teachers could also possibly enroll in internationally based courses online; such courses are unlikely to be as effective and satisfying – or as expensive – as international exchange. Encouraging international experts to visit Vietnam is another possible strategy, as would be watching videos of classroom practices in the West. There is, of course, a need to provide teachers with sufficient time to reflect on changed conditions of teaching and learning in Vietnam and to make the necessary adaptations. This could be achieved by reducing teacher workloads (limiting class numbers) and teaching time, and by requiring less face-to-face teaching. These, however, are expensive options. With the passing of time, it may be that the emergence of a local community of practice (Wenger 2011) will emerge to offer another source of professional development for teachers.

### **8.3.2 Students' engagement with critical thinking**

It is evident from this study that Vietnamese EFL students in the research context could perform critical thinking, albeit at a rudimentary level and in an 'on-command' mode. This finding verifies the students' capacity to acquire critical thinking skills in this specific context. However, the students' expertise in this regard is limited by corresponding teacher capacities. Emerging from my analysis of the extant barriers to critical thinking practices, some recommendations can be made to enhance the students' engagement with the subject.

#### **8.3.2.1 Language proficiency support**

Students need support in English language proficiency to engage in critical thinking in and through English. While the causal relationship between English language proficiency and critical thinking has not been clearly defined in the literature, it is apparent from this study that the students' critical thinking has been impaired by their limited English speaking ability. Universities and teachers are the two main (re)sources that can help remedy this shortcoming. To address this problem, the introduction of an EFL curriculum with a systematic focus on critical thinking would be vital. This might enable extending the footprint of critical thinking, which could be pursued more broadly across the curriculum, and introduced in earlier years of students' experience. Critical thinking should be a focus both in the beginning English classes and beginning skills-based classes. It can be integrated with the teaching of vocabulary, grammar, and basic skills including reading, listening, writing, and speaking. In Speaking, as in Writing, students learn the phrases and expressions that convey their personal voice. This helps them to understand others' voice as well. They will also learn how to use their spoken language to achieve a certain aim in a conversation specifically, and in life generally. Critical thinking in these courses should be more focused on the

domains of knowledge and self. The domain of the world might be introduced in the more advanced content-based courses. Such content courses as American or British Literature, American or British Culture, which were not observed in this study for pragmatic reasons, are suitable loci for this level of criticality.

Further recommendations for change in practice can be inferred from the findings of this study. During the course of their teaching, teachers can use and teach specific language structures to support critical thinking. They should introduce language related to critical thinking, or to the topic and critical thinking, thereby knowing the vocabulary to use in critical discussion. For example, the teaching of the words 'diversity' and/or 'fragmentation' would link Barnett's (1997) knowledge and world domains. When teaching vocabulary, various nuances of a word or phrase could be introduced. To this end, Halliday's (1994) functional grammar may prove an appropriate aid. When familiarised with this approach, students may become aware of the pragmatic power of language; that is, using language to 'do something', not just say something. A critical approach to literacy (Freebody & Luke 1990) could also be introduced. This approach will inform the students' understanding of audience and purpose, and encourage and enable them to grasp and respond to the more subtle messages implied in a given text. A problem-posing pedagogy which encourages students to speak their minds about real-life problems could be included in a Speaking class (Hoa 2009).

The students' switch to Vietnamese (L1), and its apparent effectiveness in helping them to articulate their critical thoughts, supports some authors' views on the significance of L1 in a foreign language classroom (Atkinson 1987; Canagarajah 2006; Storch & Wigglesworth 2003). Allowing students to use their mother tongue at times in class may be a tolerable way of encouraging them to think critically in a foreign language class even though some may lament the lost opportunity for L2

improvement here. Atkinson (1987) views bilingual language models as a scaffolding tool to develop language students' critical thinking skills.

### **8.3.2.2 Starting earlier with simple tasks to delve deeper in later years strategy**

Drawing on the study's findings, it would be helpful if EFL teachers begin incorporating critical thinking earlier, if possible with simple tasks, and then delving deeper in later years. This process can be illustrated by practices that involve:

- task difficulty level: from simple to complicated, from single to multiple tasks
- scaffolding: gradually withdrawn overtime
- arrangement/audience: from small group to whole class, and potentially to broader audience, through, for example, digital technologies.

#### ***Task difficulty level***

As revealed in Section 6.3.3.1, the teacher of the American Issues class appeared to require new skills to be undertaken in an orchestrated way. He asked the students to perform at least four sub-tasks more or less concurrently for at least one component of one assessable task. My analysis of the students' performance in this class showed that the task presented an overwhelming challenge for them (Section 5.3.2.2). It is suggested from this finding that teachers should consider the level of difficulty of assigned tasks. If tasks are too challenging or complex, or demanding of too many new skills at once, the students will be unable to accomplish them successfully, and may resist attempting to do so. One outcome may be that the students will become frustrated and fail to practise critical thinking. Tasks requiring orchestration of several 'new' components should be avoided, to minimise 'task overload'. Giving the students a task, the challenge of which is

within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1987), is optimal for their engagement with critical thinking. This is especially important in a context wherein critical thinking is still new to students.

### ***Scaffolding***

Scaffolding should be provided by teachers to assist in the apprenticeship of students to undertake critical thinking tasks. As critical thinking has not been practised widely in Vietnamese classrooms, students are unfamiliar with critical thinking activities such as debate or critique. Teachers can scaffold by modeling, or showing videos outlining the methods for conducting a debate or the types of questions that students should ask to initiate a debate. Having viewed a debate, students would comment on the most effective arguments and why this was so. In the Cross-cultural Communication course subject, for example, it would be more effective to model some questions that the students could ask. The teacher and students could jointly construct a list of phrases they could use to compose questions and the types of questions they should pose to explore an issue. Students could also explore, with teacher guidance, types of questions that are most likely to deepen their thinking. A teacher in Dong's (2006, p. 11) study, for instance, encouraged the students to ask three types of questions: 'questions about the text and the author, questions connecting the text with the reader, and questions connecting the text with the world around them'. This method is akin to Barnett's (1997) three domains of criticality, and to Freebody and Luke's (1990) four roles of texts: code-breakers, text-participants, text-users, and text-analysts. These constitute frameworks teachers could use to guide their students in formulating questions. Teacher guidance should, however, be gradually withdrawn over time (Young 1993, in Dabbagh 2003).

### ***Arrangement/Audience***

This study also discerned a difference between the students' engagement with critical thinking during group discussions, as opposed to group presentation followed by whole-class discussions. Most evidence of the students' engagement with critical thinking was found in the small group discussions, whereas whole-class discussions exposed the difficulties encountered by the students. Numerous factors were postulated to explain the students' poor performance during group presentations: the assessment regime; pressure from the audience (whole class and, as discussed above, the teacher); the task difficulty level, or the students' unfamiliarity with the tasks or topics.

From this study, it appears that group discussion should be encouraged in classes that aim to develop students' critical thinking. Group presentations followed by whole-class discussions seemed to present a higher order of difficulty. This form of classroom arrangement would be of more benefit for the students if it is used towards the end of the course when the students gain more familiarity with critical thinking tasks during small group discussions.

#### **8.3.2.3 Adjustment of some existent teaching techniques**

In the research context, the teachers used some techniques that can presumably facilitate critical thinking, for example, think-pair-share (Davidson & Worsham 1992), debates (Kennedy 2007; Long 2003), group discussion (Garside 1996). The teachers could have used various existing techniques and adjusted or combined them in new ways. Examples are:

- Asking students to devise critical questions with teachers' scaffolding at the beginning of a course or a lesson. In a Reading class, for example, teachers can provide one or two illustrative critical questions for a pre-reading text, ask students to devise more critical questions to present to the class, and

consider the answers to the teacher's and their own answers to such critical questions.

- Up-scaling small group discussions to whole-class discussions. Teachers can use whole-class discussions as a platform for critical thinking if they find ways to reduce the artificiality (i.e., removal of the chairperson, and lowering the risks involved (removal or reduction of assessment stakes)).
- Making more effective use of individual or group presentations. Teachers can apply a more interactive mode of presentation, for example, a 'show, ask, tell' presentation format. Consistent with this mode, students might be required to initiate a discussion by showing something to the class such as an image, short text or slogan, asking the class to respond verbally to something about that stimulus text, and only then talking briefly to the whole class about the image.

#### **8.3.2.4 Vietnamese cultural traditions**

When introducing critical thinking, teachers should take into consideration the influence of Vietnamese cultural traditions such as saving face, maintaining harmony, and respecting teachers. Because some students in the study revealed their stress when seeing the stern look of one of the teachers, it may be helpful for teachers to be alert to any personal behaviour that may create or widen the distance between them and their students. For example, teachers could be alert to facial and verbal expressions when posing questions or providing feedback. A smile will motivate students a great deal; they may feel less distant from their teachers, and more emboldened to continue the discussion. To avoid the appearance of intimidation, teachers could also show that they welcome criticism and challenges in the classroom. Teachers could create a classroom culture in which risk taking is encouraged, valued and rewarded. In these ways, students

may be released from the fear of showing disrespect for their teachers. It is conceded here that overcoming such deep-seated, power-distance norms may be difficult for teacher and student alike.

### ***8.3.3 Implications for student behaviours***

Apart from and along with receiving help from other agencies (e.g. teachers, institutions, the Government), students themselves can improve their critical thinking if they are committed to make some changes of their own. As reported by most of the student participants, they were not confident in their English language proficiency. They had entertained certain fears with regard to speaking their mind in English. Students need to assume shared responsibility with their teachers for improving and broadening their own ‘critical language’ skills by adopting a language awareness approach (Bolitho et al. 2003) or critical language awareness (Fairclough 2014). They should also become more aware of the importance and value of taking risks and making mistakes in language learning. Reluctance to do so can inhibit progress in language learning (Lin & Mackay 2004). If students can overcome such fears, increased confidence in speaking English should ensue. Moreover, preoccupations about their peers’ and teachers’ dis/approval may diminish.

## **8.4 Limitations of the study**

The main limitation of this study is that it was a case study conducted in a single setting with a small number of participants. For the sake of data management, it was confined to some EFL classes in a public university in Vietnam. However, the study has wider applicability. This study was conducted in a way that allows others in similar situations and contexts to make decisions about whether any of the findings and implications could be transferred to and adapted to their own

contexts. The findings and implications gained from this study are suggestive rather than conclusive of the circumstances.

Another possible limitation of this study is its inconclusive evidence of the students' critical thinking in 'silent' moments. The argument for the existence of critical thinking derives from the students' self-reported examples of their critical thoughts behind their silence. Disapproval or dislike of what the teacher was doing is a fairly weak form of critical thinking; it did not appear to be backed by any pedagogical, moral or other philosophy. This evidence lacked an overt connection with what these students were doing in the observed classes. The argument for the Vietnamese students' critical thinking in the research context would be stronger if some participants were observed more closely. Some students could have been interviewed immediately after each observation using stimulus recall techniques (Gass & Mackey 2000). In this way, their 'critical thinking capital' might be more fully captured through the discovery of what they were thinking moments beforehand in the observed classes. Although this method might produce unreliable data due to possible interferences such as the 'Hawthorne effect' (Adair 1984), wherein the research intention influences the responses, this method can enrich the evidence for the relationship between silence and critical thinking. This could form a focus for future research. Other recommendations for future research are set out below.

## **8.5 Recommendations for future research**

This exploratory study, which set out to examine the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese tertiary EFL context, found evidence of the teachers' integration of critical thinking and, to a lesser extent, students' engagement with critical thinking. In all likelihood, there will be a lag time in which changes in student behaviour follow changes in teacher behaviour, which in turn lag behind curricular changes.

The study also identified barriers at various levels: from the classroom to the nation and beyond. This exploratory study serves as a basis for further research into critical thinking practices in this or similar research contexts. Shown below are three of the areas that could be considered for future research. The areas being discussed here are interrelated; however, for the sake of clarity, recommendations for future research are presented according to the listed categories.

***The mediation of culture on critical thinking practices:***

- Compare critical thinking practices in Vietnamese students' mother tongue and in a target second language.
- Investigate students' actual thinking, e.g., via stimulated recall or journal writing, to better understand their classroom behaviours such as silence.
- Examine how authority, and related behaviours such as approval granting or withholding, are differentially or similarly constructed and enacted in the East and the West. At the heart of this study are issues of authority and power, and their influence on critical thinking. Currently there appears to be little research on such issues.

***Critical thinking practices in EFL:***

- Undertake action research or experimental research into the effectiveness of the integration of critical thinking in EFL classes at the more basic 'language skills' and/or more advanced 'content' components in order to measure any improvement in English language proficiency and critical thinking.
- Conduct action research or experimental research into the application of one or more of the methods recommended in section 8.3.2.1 (e.g. functional grammar, critical literacy in reading) to examine the impact of these

methods on EFL students' engagement with critical thinking and resulting competence.

***The application of the frameworks used or proposed in this study:***

- Conduct an exploratory study of critical thinking practices in other EFL contexts in Vietnam or other Confucian contexts, using the critical thinking framework and the framework of factors applied in this study would test the frameworks to identify and inform necessary modifications for future research in the field.
- Conduct a study on the application of the critical thinking conceptual framework into an EFL curriculum to assist in examining the applicability and effectiveness of applying a combination of Bloom's (1956) framework of cognitive domains and Barnett's (1997) domains of criticality to the design of an EFL curriculum, and/or to the corresponding teaching and learning.

## **8.6 Concluding thoughts**

Critical thinking in language education has emerged as a means to promote democracy and social justice (Benesch 1993, 1999; Sung 2012). However, debate still surrounds the applicability of critical thinking in Asian contexts. This study set out to understand the practices of critical thinking in a Vietnamese EFL context. In addition, it set out to identify opportunities for critical thinking development in a Confucian-heritage culture such as Vietnam. The study revealed that critical thinking has been integrated into the research context and that the students have demonstrated some evidence of critical thinking capability. Despite being a case study in a specific university, the study has made a contribution to the existing literature addressing critical thinking practices in Vietnam. My analysis of the barriers to critical thinking practice suggests ways to enhance the practice of this 'Western' concept in an 'Eastern' context. To the extent that democracy and social

justice are deemed universal ideas, they should be applied universally, across all cultures and education systems, even if their expression may differ culturally. In order to make a tree grow well in a new land, it is necessary to feed it with nutrients suited not only to the characteristics of the tree, but to the local context as well. ■

# Appendices

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## Appendix 1: Information sheet - Students



### INFORMATION SHEET *for Students*

#### CRITICAL THINKING IN VIETNAMESE EFL CLASSROOMS:

#### AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CURRENT PRACTICES (UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-446A)

##### WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is NGUYEN, THI THANH BINH and I am a doctoral student at Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney. My supervisors are Dr. Lesley Ljungdahl and Assoc. Prof. Liam Morgan.

##### WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This study explores current critical thinking practices in Vietnamese tertiary EFL classrooms. It investigates the affordances and barriers to critical thinking practices in some tertiary EFL classrooms in a university in Central Vietnam.

##### IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

I will ask you to:

- let me observe you and your classmates 4 lessons (2.5 hours per lesson). The classroom observations will be audio-recorded.
- take part in an interview to get your ideas about critical thinking practices in your class. Besides, I will ask for your opinions about critical thinking teaching in EFL classrooms and in the Vietnamese educational context. The interviews will be

audio-recorded. I will also collect your written assignments or attend your oral presentations and audio-record them.

**ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?**

There are very few if any risks because the research has been carefully designed. However, it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable and anxious while your learning is being observed and audio-recorded and your written works are collected. You may also feel inconvenient and nervous when being audio-recorded. What is more, you may fear that your participation will affect your score. I understand that you may be afraid of being identified when the results of my research is published.

**WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?**

You are able to provide me with the information of your attitudes and beliefs about critical thinking, your own engagement in critical thinking and the teaching of critical thinking in Vietnamese EFL classrooms.

**DO I HAVE TO SAY YES?**

You don't have to say yes.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?**

Nothing. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

**IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?**

You can change your mind at any time until data is de-identified and you don't have to say why. I will thank you for your time so far and won't contact you about this research again.

**WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?**

If you have concerns about the research that you think I or my supervisor can help you with, please feel free to contact me (us) on [Lesley.Ljungdahl@uts.edu.au](mailto:Lesley.Ljungdahl@uts.edu.au).

If you would like to talk to someone who is not connected with the research, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer on 02 9514 9772, and quote this number (*UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-446A*)

## **Appendix 2: Consent form - Students - Interviews**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (participant's name) agree to participate in the research project CRITICAL THINKING IN VIETNAMESE EFL CLASSROOMS: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE CURRENT PRACTICES (UTS HREC REF NO. 2012-446A) being conducted by NGUYEN, THI THANH BINH, a doctoral student at Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of technology, Sydney, +84 54 914425002, email: binh.nguyen@student.uts.edu.au for her doctoral degree.

I understand that the purpose of this study is explores current critical thinking practices in Vietnamese tertiary EFL classrooms. It investigates the affordances and barriers to critical thinking practices in some tertiary EFL classrooms in a university in Central Vietnam.

I understand that I have been asked to participate in this research because I am a Vietnamese student of English at Hue University College of Foreign Languages, and that my participation in this research will involve being observed and audio-recorded in 4 lessons with 2.5 hours per lesson and sitting in a one-hour interview with audio recording. I understand that I might feel inconvenient, uncomfortable or stressful as a result of my participation in the study. However, I understand that I can suggest suitable time and place for an interview or can stop the interviews at any time for a break. My identity will be de-identified and all the information that I provide will be kept confidential at any time. Moreover, there will be no forms of evaluation over my learning and my score will not be affected.

I am aware that I can contact NGUYEN, THI THANH BINH or her supervisors, Dr. Lesley Ljungdahl at +61295145255 / Lesley.Ljungdahl@uts.edu.au and Assoc. Prof. Liam Morgan at +61295143871 / Liam.Morgan@uts.edu.au if I have any concerns about the research. I also understand that I am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time I wish, without consequences, and without giving a reason up until the data is de-identified. My withdrawal from the research will not prejudice my academic progress.

I agree that NGUYEN, THI THANH BINH has answered all my questions fully and clearly.

I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that does not identify me in any way.

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Signature (participant)

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Signature (researcher or delegate)

**NOTE:**

This study has been approved by the University of Technology, Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any aspect of your participation in this research which you cannot resolve with the researcher, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer (ph: +61 2 9514 9772 Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au) and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

## **Appendix 3: Teacher Interview Guideline**



### ***TEACHER INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE – A Sample***

#### **Part I: Teachers' perceptions of critical thinking**

1. What image or thought comes to your mind when I mention critical thinking?
2. In your opinion, what is critical thinking? Would you share your definition of critical thinking?
3. How important is it to teach about critical thinking in university? And why?

#### **Part II: About the course**

4. What are the objectives of the course?
5. What are the requirements of the course? Assignment?
6. What do you expect your students to do/perform?
7. Do you assess critical thinking in this class? Why or why not?
8. If yes, how do you assess critical thinking in this course?

#### **Part III: Students' performance**

9. Are you satisfied with what your students did? Why or why not?
10. Do your students demonstrate any critical thinking behaviours? Why and why not, and if so, in what ways?

#### **Part IV: Factors affecting critical thinking**

11. What do you think are the factors that may affect your practice of critical thinking in the classroom?

Prompt: Can you identify times when you tried to engage your students in critical thinking? What did you do? How did your students do? Did it seem to work?  
How/why/why not?

## **Appendix 4: Student Interview Guideline**



### ***STUDENT INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE***

#### **Part I: Students' perceptions of critical thinking**

1. What image or thought comes to your mind when I mention critical thinking?
2. In your opinion, what is critical thinking? Would you share your definition of critical thinking?
3. How important is it to learn about critical thinking in university? And why?

#### **Part II: Learning practice**

4. In your opinion, what are the classroom behaviours that are associated with critical thinking?
5. Do you practise any of these behaviours? Why or why not, and if so, in what ways?
6. Do your friends practise critical thinking? Why or why not, and if so, in what ways?
7. Have you ever wanted to ask a critical thinking question, but decided not to? Also, have you ever asked a critical thinking question and wished you hadn't?

#### **Part III: Teaching practice**

8. What do you think about your teachers' teaching approaches (questioning, waiting time, feedback, teaching activities, etc.)? Do they have any effect on your development of critical thinking?
9. What do you think about the significance of these approaches to your critical thinking?
10. What do you believe to be the instructor's responsibility for stimulating critical thinking in the classroom?

**Part V: Factors affecting critical thinking**

11. What do you think are the factors that may affect your practice of critical thinking in the classroom?

Prompt: Can you identify times when your teacher has tried to engage you in critical thinking? What did the teacher do? Did it seem to work? How/why/why not?

## **Appendix 5: Observation checklist**



### **CLASSROOM OBSERVATION CHECKLIST**

Course: .....

Instructor: .....

Lesson No.: .....

Date: .....

No. of Students: .....

Materials collected: .....

Main activities: .....

.....  
Class arrangement: .....

<b><i>Classroom behaviours</i></b>	<b><i>Interpretations</i></b>	<b><i>Times observed</i></b>
<b>1</b> Students question Teachers	The students asked the teacher questions, voluntarily or compulsorily.	
<b>2</b> Students answer Teachers' Questions	The students offered answers to the teacher's questions.	
<b>3</b> Students question Students	The students posed questions to their peers.	
<b>4</b> Students answer Students' Qs	The students answered the questions from their peers.	
<b>5</b> Critique textbooks	The students expressed disagreement with some content in the textbooks or articulated flaws in the author's arguments.	
<b>6</b> Critique teachers	The students expressed their disagreement with the teacher or articulated flaws in the teacher's arguments.	
<b>7</b> Critique peers	The students expressed disagreement with their peers or articulated flaws in peers' arguments.	
<b>8</b> Express opinions in class	The students voluntarily expressed their opinions in front of class, e.g. making a comment.	

## **Appendix 6: The Alligator River**

### **CHARACTERS**

Rosemary: Main character

Geoffrey: Rosemary's fiancé

Sinbad: Boat owner

Frederick: Rosemary's acquaintance

Dennis: Rosemary's second friend

Rosemary is a woman of about 21 years of age. For several months she has been engaged to a young man named Geoffrey. The problem she faces is that between her and her fiancé there lies a river. No ordinary river, but a deep, wide river filled with hungry alligators.

Rosemary wonders how she can cross the river. She remembers Sinbad, who has the only boat in the area. She then approaches Sinbad, asking him to take her across. He replies, 'Yes, I'll take you across if you'll spend the night with me.' Shocked at this offer, she turns to another acquaintance, Frederick, and tells him her story. Frederick responds by saying, 'Yes, Rosemary, I understand your problem – but – it's your problem, not mine.' Rosemary decides to return to Sinbad and spends the night with him, and in the morning he takes her across the river.

Her meeting with Geoffrey is warm. But on the evening before they are to be married, Rosemary feels he must tell Geoffrey how she succeeded in getting across the river.

Geoffrey responds by saying, 'I wouldn't marry you if you were the last woman on earth.'

Finally, Rosemary turns to her friend Dennis. Dennis listens to her story and says, 'Well, Rosemary, I don't love you... but I will marry you.' And that's all we know of the story.

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