DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS TO TEACH WRITING SKILLS FOR THE THIRD- YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT HUNG YEN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION

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Abstract: *It is logical to believe that a better thinker who has greater control over the thinking process is likely to get more benefits in his/her life. For students of language in general and of English language in particular, being able to think critically is crucial in developing language proficiency and communicative ability, which helps not only produce good argumentative writing but also join a debatable speech. Inspired by the above benefits, this study aims to assess students' manifestation of critical thinking through 21 argumentative writings on both familiar and unfamiliar topics. The writings were carried out under time pressure during class hours by the third-year English majors of class 113213 at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education (UTEHY). By combining the model proposed by Stapleton (2001) and Ennis-Weir's set of criteria in the investigation quantitatively and qualitatively, the researcher could determine whether content familiarity plays a role in critical thinking. The results not only provide the answer to this inquiry but also show a certain grasp of critical thinking in the students' writings. According to this, students need more training in both writing and reasoning skills to avoid falling into inconsistency and a slippery slope; besides, students' familiarity with a certain topic significantly contributes to the quality of their arguments. Based on such results, some implications and suggestions for both learners and teachers are presented.*

Keywords*: critical thinking skills, writing skills, personal developments, thinking process, argumentative writing.*

I. Introduction

While "critical thinking" is widely recognized as an educational objective because it signifies quality thinking, the concept of critical thinking is still subject to debate across different cultures. Many scholars argue that critical thinking originated in Western societies, particularly influenced by Greek culture and its associated schools of thought and famous philosophers.

As a central goal of education in general, developing critical thinking skills has also become a key objective for educators in both first and second-language education. However, English language

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teachers in the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language), particularly in Vietnam, are often constrained by the language skills of their students. For example, in terms of writing skills, students' essays often seem to disappoint instructors, especially when it comes to argumentative essays. Their essays are considered to lack critical thinking due to the perceptions above. Since both native and non-native speakers alike have to exert significant effort to become 'critical thinkers in English,' this assertion needs careful consideration.

Courses on argumentative writing and critical thinking typically focus on argumentation. In most English teaching programs in Vietnam, there is always a component of argumentative writing training that integrates Western argumentation frameworks and critical thinking skills. To determine whether Vietnamese students have good inference abilities like native speakers, it is advisable to study their argumentative essays.

As an EFL teacher at UTEHY, the researcher of this article understands the importance of critical thinking for third-year English majors because they are about to finish their courses with many paperwork tasks and communication needs. Therefore, when evaluating students' analytical and reasoning skills in a situational study, the researcher wants to explore whether the third-year EFL students here demonstrate characteristics of critical thinking in their English essays and whether familiarity with the content is a factor affecting students' thinking processes.

Research questions

Based on the statement of the problem, this study sought to answer the following two major questions, including the subdivided ones.

1. To what extent do the third-year EFL students at UTEHY display critical thinking in their argumentative essays?

2. To what extent does familiarity affect the quality of critical thinking in those students' writings?

II. Literature Review

2.1. Previous studies related to critical thinking

The first study of the field entitled *"The role of critical thinking skills and learning styles of university students in their academic performance"* by Zohre Ghazivakili Roohangiz Norouzi Nia, Faride Panahi, Mehrdad Karimi, Hayede Gholsorkhi, and Zarrin Ahmadi (2014) aimed to determine the relationship between learning styles and critical thinking of students and their academic performance in Alborz University of Medical Science. The one named *"A study of critical thinking in higher education students"* by Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios Educativos (Colombia), vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 256-279, 2020, shows a proposal on the specific diagnosis of critical thinking skills in higher education students according to literal, inferential and critical reading levels. *Critical thinking skills and their impacts on elementary school students* by Sarwanto, Fajari, L. E. W., & Chumdari. (2021) aimed to examine elementary school students' critical thinking skills and their impact.

2.2. Concepts of critical thinking

Critical thinking is a rich concept that has been developed over the past 2500 years since the time of Socrates, and it has numerous definitions. Presenting a definitive statement about critical thinking is very challenging because it holds different meanings for different people and can be explored through various approaches. Therefore, to gain an overview of prominent conceptions of

critical thinking, it is necessary to consider notable perspectives from multiple angles. While there are literary references emphasizing language acquisition and the views of practitioners and learners, it is important to highlight various angles of critical thinking.

2.3. Argumentative writing and critical thinking

Firstly, it is essential to revisit Baker & Brizee's (2007, paragraph 1) definition: "Argumentative writing is the act of forming reasons, making inductions, drawing conclusions, and applying them to the case in discussion; inferring propositions, not known or admitted as true, from known, admitted, or proven facts or principles." Accordingly, the main function of an argumentative essay is to demonstrate that your viewpoint, theory, or hypothesis about something is more accurate or truthful than other opinions, theories, or hypotheses. Mastering the art of argumentation is never easy. Having a viewpoint does not necessarily mean one can successfully argue with others, even if their perspective seems very logical and reasonable. The definition clearly explains the reasoning process from what is known or assumed to what is unknown, forming reasons, making inductions, drawing conclusions, and applying them to the case under discussion. Without doing this, you do not argue, just an assertion, an opinion without a foundation.

The ultimate goal of writing argumentative essays is to persuade readers to believe in the writer's viewpoint; therefore, writing must authentically reflect the writer's thoughts and ideas. Strategies for presenting arguments, providing appropriate supporting evidence and examples, and refuting counterarguments used by a critical thinker will all be presented in their argumentative essay. This implies that a person with good reasoning skills will create good writing, and a skilled critic will produce a good argumentative essay. Sachs (2004) has indicated a reciprocal relationship between critical thinking and writing, particularly in argumentative writing, which involves both the process of critical thinking and the product of conveying the results of critical thinking. Hence, argumentative texts can be used to measure critical thinking skills. According to observations by Stapleton (2001), although critical thinking receives much attention in the field of second language acquisition, there is little focus on assessments for evaluating critical thinking. Current critical thinking tests tend to assess specifics related to the content of the test. McPeck (1990) declared that at least 26 tests have been designed to measure critical thinking skills, but they are often limited to multiple-choice tools that do not allow any exploration of reasoning behind the examinee's answers. One of the most widely used assessments of critical thinking in writing is the Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Essay Test. It is a general test of critical thinking within the context of argumentation and is considered a diagnostic tool for identifying areas of reasoning or specific arguments (Stapleton, 2001, p.514). "This is the only critical thinking test that requires students to write a response to evaluate the quality of reasoning in a paragraph" (Hatcher, 1995, p.27, as quoted in Paul, 2001, p.515).

In response to the Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Essay Test, Stapleton (2001) agrees that general concepts of critical thinking can stem from this model, but like many other tests of this type, he suggests that these criteria seem specific to the content. Subsequently, he proposes a model to address the issue of inadequate comprehensive critical thinking tests by outlining a plan to evaluate any argumentative passage. Those using

this model rank to identify key elements of critical thinking demonstrated in specific essays, assessing each essay for (a) the number of arguments, (b) the level of evidence, (c) recognition of opposing arguments, (d) corresponding rebuttals, and (e) the number of errors. Critical thinking can be assessed through argumentative essays based on factors derived from Stapleton's proposal and criteria provided by Ennis-Weir.

2.4. Topic familiarity and critical thinking skills

Not only does language proficiency affect the argumentative writing ability of L2 learners, but topic familiarity is also believed to influence students' writing ability. The influence of familiarity with the topic on argumentative thinking has been noted in Stapleton's (2001) and Indah's (2017) studies. Stapleton investigated the impact of becoming familiar with content on students' argumentative thinking ability. Forty-five Japanese university students were asked to write argumentative essays on topics related to rice imports into Japan, which were considered familiar topics as they were widely discussed in Japan at that time. Another topic was gun control in the United States, which was unfamiliar as it involved issues outside the participants' national context. Findings showed that familiar topics encouraged more student argumentation. Content on familiar topics was richer in terms of quantity and diversity of statements and supporting data. However, more counterarguments and refutations of opposing views were found on unfamiliar topics. Errors were also more frequent on familiar topics, mostly related to personal emotional involvement.

Conversely, errors related to unfamiliar topics were fewer and lacked emotional appeal. Fallacies related to familiar topics tended to be more common, overly simplified, and irrelevant. Stapleton concluded that familiar topics enhanced more extensive use of compensation requirements, data, and reference materials. Familiar topics also encouraged diversity of data and evidence, making arguments stronger. However, unfamiliar topics tended to provoke more counterarguments and fewer errors.

III. Research methodology

3.1. Sample

According to Pritha Bhandari (2023), a sample is the specific group that you will collect data from. The size of the sample is always less than the total size of the population. The samples in this study are purposively selected since the study only focused on one of many types of writing tasks the students had learned during all compulsory writing courses. Third-year students wrote the selected essays because at the time of the study, they were practicing argumentative writing in their Writing 5 course. The course instructor, who worked independently of the researchers of this study, provided all 21 essays. The writing exercises were carried out under time pressure during class hours to meet the course assessment requirements.

3.2 Sampling

Muhammad Hassan (2024) explained that sampling refers to selecting a subset of data from a larger population or dataset to analyze or make inferences about the whole population. In other words, sampling involves taking a representative sample of data from a larger group or dataset in order to gain insights or draw conclusions about the entire group. Besides, he emphasized that sampling methods refer to the techniques used to select a subset of individuals or units from a larger population to conduct statistical analysis or research.

3.2.1. Participants

Due to the nature of the study, the researchers also purposively sampled 21 third-year EFL students from the same group at UTEHY. All students were in their first semester of the third year, aged between 19 and 21, and from various localities within Hai Duong province. All of them participated in the Writing 5 course and were taught by the same teacher with the same curriculum, activities, and assessment system.

3.2.2. Topic

With the consent and support of the Writing 5 course instructor, 21 students were inadvertently divided into two equal-sized groups, and the researchers assigned each group a pre-prepared writing topic. There were two topics, one familiar to most Vietnamese people and the other unfamiliar. Accordingly, half of the participants were randomly selected to work on the familiar topic and the other half on the unfamiliar topic. An important note is that before the exam period, students were provided with some topics, including two topics used in this study.

3.2.3 Raters

Due to the subjective nature required in any assessment process, the study relied on the activities of two separate raters to read and score all sample essays. These two raters were both appointed by the Head of the English Department. Both of them were working at the university where this study was conducted.

3.3. Data collection

3.3.1. Instruments

Best and Kahn (1993, as cited in Ghonaim, 2005) consider documents to be one of the most important sources of data collection. This source of information helps provide deeper insights, thereby increasing the reliability of research results. Since the study focuses on evaluating students' actual reflection on their critical thinking abilities in their writing rather than their general awareness, researchers have decided to use students' essay tests as the primary tool.

3.3.2. Procedures

3.3.2.1. Design of the writing tasks

Before explaining the writing tasks as the main source to collect data for this study, the researcher would like to clarify the term "familiarity". It relates to theories on schemata and knowledge structures. Rumelhart (as cited in Stapleton, 2001) described schemata as prototypes of memory arising from familiar experiences that individuals use to interpret related knowledge. When people are given information, those who already know can develop their knowledge by organizing related principles and notions and link to their application. On the other hand, the schemata of people who find the information new may contain certain ideas about the situation but lack knowledge of related principles and their application.

The familiar topic requires students to respond to the statement, *"Tobacco companies should compensate smokers who have become ill as a result of smoking."* The issue of smokers' demand of compensation was selected because of the following reasons. Firstly, it was always one of the most frequently used topics in writing at any level, although the question was modified a little. Secondly, people keep talking about smoking largely on media means with its pros and cons, and the public attention has recently been directed to the rights of consumers with many cases in which the buyers and users filed the producers. All of the information sources related to the issue seemed close and rich enough for the students to get used to the tone of such kind of debate and

easily develop their own arguments. The third reason was that among many topics assigned as homework when informally asked by the researcher, 'which topic would you be most ready to work on?' 19 out of 21 students picked the topic of smoking.

For the unfamiliar topic, the legalization of prostitution was chosen. Students were asked to respond to the statement. *"Prostitution should be legalized because it brings a lot of benefits*. This topic was deemed unfamiliar because prostitution is forbidden in Vietnam, and people quite often avoided talking about it. As an Eastern culture, the question of whether or not prostitution should be legal hardly ever occurs to Vietnamese, let alone discussed openly. Another reason for choosing it was that few students voluntarily worked on such a topic.

It is believed that those two topics would provide participants with a good opportunity to use critical thinking skills to explore the topics' complexities. As Stapleton (2001) pointed out, a potential criticism of using familiar content to elicit critical thinking is that it encourages well-rehearsed reasons and evidence absorbed through exposure to the media, schooling, and parents. On the other hand, Glaser (1984) claimed that people have little familiarity with a topic and lack the schemata with which to infer further knowledge. (as cited in Stapleton, 2001). As such, it is presumed that the benefits of schemata evoked by a familiar topic outweigh its potential hindrance. Therefore, the main aim of choosing both a familiar and unfamiliar topic was to explore how students' rich schemata regarding compensation for smokers with their schemata regarding the legalization of prostitution, which was supposed to be poorer. It was hypothesized that rich schemata would enhance critical thinking abilities.

3.3.2.2. Essay Tests Conducted and Collected

Before taking the argumentative essay test, students were assigned several topics to prepare at home, some familiar and some unfamiliar. With the consent of the course instructor, the researcher included the two test topics in the student's homework. They were advised to gather information from the Internet and read related documents on the assigned topics before actually writing an essay on one of them in the test.

The argumentative essay test was conducted at the end of the course, within a permissible time of 60 minutes, under close supervision of the lecturer and the researcher. Participants did not know which topic they would write about until the test time. Both those who wrote about familiar topics and those who wrote about unfamiliar topics were randomly selected.

Upon completion of the test time, students submitted their essays. The researcher collected all 21 essays, which were then compiled into identical hard and soft copies of Microsoft Word files for archival purposes and the study's evaluation process.

IV. Findings and discussion

4.1. The results of the assessment of critical thinking

4.1.1. The display of critical thinking in students' argumentative writings

The median score represents the middle value in the list of scores when they are arranged in order. It indicates the central tendency of the scores given by each rater, whereas The mode is the score that appears most frequently among all the scores given by each rater. From Table 1 below, generally, the average mark (Median) rater A gave for all 21 papers

was 4.5, with the most popular mark (Mode) being 3.75; meanwhile, rater B gave an average score (Median) of 5 with the most frequently seen (Mode) mark of 5. Based on the holistic rating scale, giving scores ranging from 1 to 9, which two raters consulted when giving scores to the students' writings, their score set often fell within the middle part of the scale. It proves that when being assessed by two different people, students' writing pieces display a certain grasp of critical thinking, with the most popular scores around average scores.

Table 1: Average score (Median) and score with the highest frequency of appearance (Mode) of all 21 writings given by each rater

	Rater A	Rater B
Median	4.5	5
Mode	3.75	5

Table 2 below presents data on the average scores (measured by the median) and the most frequently occurring scores (measured by the mode) for writing pieces on familiar and unfamiliar topics, rated by two different raters (Rater A and Rater B).

Table 2: Average scores (Median) and scores with the highest frequency of appearance (Mode) of each group of writing pieces regarding the topic given

	Familiar topic-Rater A	Familiar topic - Rater B	Unfamiliar topic - Rater A	Unfamiliar topic-Rater B
Mode	4	4	4.5	5
Median	3.75	4.25	4.25	5

As can be seen from the table, the average scores (Median) of 11 writings on familiar topics and 10 on unfamiliar topics given by both raters were 3.75, 4.25, 4.25, and 5, while the scores with the highest frequency of appearance (Mode) were 4, 4, 4.5 and 5, respectively. This table shows that both raters tend to score unfamiliar topics slightly higher than familiar ones, with Rater B showing a more consistent pattern of giving higher scores overall.

As the two tables above indicated, critical thoughts in students' writing samples definitely existed considering the whole sampling of 21 essays and two separated groups on two different topics. Third year EFL students at UTEHY had an average grasp of critical thinking and reasoning in their written argumentation.

4.1.2. The number of arguments, evidence, refutations, and fallacies in the 21 students' argumentative writings.

Table 3: Total number and average number of each element of critical thinking

Variable	Total	Mean
Argument	57	1.6
Evidence	54	1.5
Opposition Recognition/ Refutation	2	0.05
Fallacies	42	1.2
Number of samples (N)	21	

The data in Table 3 showed that students, regardless of the type of topic they worked on, all employed critical thinking elements to build up their argumentation. On average, each writing had at least 1.6 arguments, 1.5 pieces of evidence, and 0.05 pieces of recognition of opposite ideas or refutation, as well as 1.2 fallacies. These raw results, as observed, only reveal the amount of output from each student, that is, the number of critical thinking elements, without revealing its quality.

4.1.3. The differences in critical thinking elements found in two groups of writings

Table 4: Total Numbers and Differences of Elements of Critical Thinking in Writing Samples on Familiar and Unfamiliar Topics

Variable	Familiar Topic	Unfamiliar Topic	Difference (in positive number)
Argument	41	16	25
Evidence	32	22	10
Opposition Recognition/ Refutation	0	2	2
Fallacies	8	34	26
Number of samples (N)	11	10	

The results in Table 4 reveal that participants who wrote on the familiar topic included 25 arguments and 10 pieces of evidence more than those writing on the unfamiliar topic. However, it is interesting to observe that one of the listed elements of critical thinking was found in the writings on unfamiliar topics (2 refutations). In contrast, there was none in the ones on unfamiliar topics. Besides, according to Table 4, participants writing on familiar topics made fewer fallacious arguments than the ones writing on unfamiliar topics, with a difference of 26 fallacies. Although the statistics suggest that familiarity with a topic enhances the number of arguments, evidence pieces and fallacies, it says little about the participants' ability to recognize and refute other viewpoints.

4.2. Pedagogical implications

This study itself is indeed a case in which the participants in this evaluation process demonstrated critical thinking, even though they are Asian or East Asian learners. This point is significant in addressing the viewpoint that Vietnamese individuals, in particular, and English learners in Asia, in general, lack critical thinking skills. Furthermore, English learners in Vietnam may acquire better critical thinking skills if provided with favorable conditions to access and learn the necessary skills. From that perspective, there is a suggestion for educational managers at the university where the research was conducted, as well as at any educational institution concerned with this issue, to consider expanding the curriculum on teaching critical thinking. When taught as an independent subject, students will systematically absorb theoretical knowledge of skills from basic to advanced to acquire the necessary supplementary skills for effective critical thinking. When integrated into other subjects, critical thinking skills will be beneficial in assimilating and upgrading the specific knowledge of each subject or achieving any practical goals of learners. For English teachers in particular, especially those teaching language skills, it would be very beneficial because learners can become familiar with Western thinking and reasoning, thereby gaining a better understanding of language, people, and culture to which native speakers can relate. They can use the critical thinking skills they have learned to support their writing, speaking, reading, and listening skills during their time at school and beyond, honoring and enhancing their English communication skills.

V. Conclusion

5.1. Summary

The results of the study showed that most students had a basic understanding of the critical thinking skills that opinions

needed to be supported. This is crucial because they have not been formally taught about critical thinking skills. Secondly, students working on both topics presented errors in the relationship between assertions and reasons or evidence in an argument, known as logical fallacies. Lastly, students' familiarity with a certain topic significantly contributes to the quality of their arguments. Essays on familiar topics contain deeper and more insightful opinions, while those on unfamiliar topics tend to contain more logical errors. Typical errors found in essays on unfamiliar topics are four times higher than those in essays on familiar topics.

5.2. Limitations of the study

The first limitation of this study is the limited number of information providers and survey samples. Due to the administrative structure of the school, there was only one group of third-year English major students in the academic year 2023-2024. Therefore, all 21 members in the same English class of 113213 were a relatively small number compared to the scope of this article, thus limiting the applicability of the findings from this article to some extent. It is also regrettable that compared to the major issues initially raised regarding research and critical thinking assessment, this secondary study merely represents an initial exploration of the influence of familiarity with knowledge on students' critical thinking performance.

5.3. Suggestions for further studies

During the course of this study, the researcher encountered several ideas that could be explored in future research. This study focused solely on the argumentative writings of one group of third-year students, so the findings may not fully represent the entire student population at the college.

Therefore, a more comprehensive follow-up study involving a larger number of participants from various groups would be beneficial. Since the conclusions in this paper are based solely on teachers' assessments, it would be valuable to conduct a study that also includes perspectives from different teachers and even from students themselves.

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PHÁT TRIỂN KỸ NĂNG TƯ DUY PHẢN BIỆN ĐỂ DẠY KỸ NĂNG VIẾT CHO SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ 3 NGÀNH NGÔN NGỮ ANH TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM KỸ THUẬT HƯNG YÊN

Nguyễn Thị Bích Vân†

Tóm tắt: *Có lẽ rằng một người suy nghĩ tốt hơn và kiểm soát tốt hơn quá trình suy nghĩ có thể nhận được nhiều lợi ích hơn trong cuộc sống của mình. Đối với sinh viên ngôn ngữ nói chung và tiếng Anh nói riêng, khả năng tư duy phản biện rất quan trọng trong việc phát triển trình độ ngôn ngữ và giao tiếp, không chỉ giúp tạo ra một bài viết lập luận hay mà còn giúp ích cho bài phát biểu mang tính tranh luận. Xuất phát từ những lợi ích trên, nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích đánh giá biểu hiện tư duy phản biện của sinh viên thông qua 21 bài viết lập luận về cả các chủ đề quen thuộc và không quen thuộc. Các bài viết được thực hiện dưới áp lực thời gian trong giờ học của sinh viên năm thứ ba chuyên ngành tiếng Anh lớp 113213 tại trường Đại học Sư phạm Kỹ thuật Hưng Yên (UTEHY). Bằng cách kết hợp mô hình do Stapleton (2001) đề xuất và bộ tiêu chí của Ennis-Weir trong quá trình điều tra để định lượng và định tính, nhà nghiên cứu có thể xác định xem sự quen thuộc về nội dung có đóng vai trò trong tư duy phản biện hay không. Kết quả không chỉ cung cấp câu trả lời cho câu hỏi này mà còn cho thấy sự nắm bắt nhất định về tư duy phản biện trong các bài viết của sinh viên. Theo đó, sinh viên thực sự cần được đào tạo nhiều hơn về cả kỹ năng viết và kỹ năng lập luận để tránh rơi vào tình trạng không nhất quán và trượt dốc; bên cạnh đó, sự quen thuộc của sinh viên với một chủ đề nhất định góp phần đáng kể vào chất lượng lập luận của họ. Dựa trên những kết quả này, một số gợi ý cho cả người học và giáo viên được trình bày.*

Từ khóa: kỹ năng tư duy phê phán, kỹ năng viết, phát triển bản thân, quá trình suy nghĩ, bài viết nghị luận.

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