STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE BENEFITS OF INTEGRATING CRITICAL THINKING ACTIVITIES INTO AN ENGLISH FOR TOURISM COURSE

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Abstract: Critical thinking has been acknowledged as one of the key competencies essential for all students in the 21st century. Proficiency in this crucial skill significantly influences how well students prepare for their careers in the competitive global environment of the tourism industry. That is why, at the Faculty of Tourism, Hanoi Open University, we recognize the great importance of fostering this skill among our students. We consistently incorporate relevant critical thinking activities into our lessons on various subjects in our training program. As the faculty's English lecturers, the researchers have noticed many benefits of this integration in our English classrooms. However, understanding our students' perceptions of these advantages should help confirm the expected outcomes. As a result, we decided to apply critical thinking activities throughout 14 English lessons with clear objectives, then tracked down our students' perceptions of the benefits of this integration via a survey at the end of the course. The results underscored that it helped them not only improve their English proficiency but also enhance their soft skills.

Keywords: critical thinking, tourism industry, integration, survey, English proficiency, soft skills.

I. Introduction

The United Nations World Tourism Organization highlights that modern tourism is deeply connected to global progress and includes a growing range of destinations. To stay competitive in this evolving industry, students must develop essential 21st-century skills, categorized into learning and innovation, digital literacy, and career and life skills. Among these, critical thinking (CT) is crucial, along with problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation. Recognizing its importance, many universities emphasize CT as vital for career success (Lloyd & Bahr, 2010; Ivlev et al., 2021). Hanoi Open University's Faculty of Tourism aims to train highly skilled professionals to meet global demands, focusing strongly on CT in hospitality and travel service management programs. Given English's role as the dominant global language, enhancing CT skills alongside English proficiency is a key objective in language education. Despite integrating CT into

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the English curriculum, research on its specific benefits for students is lacking. To fill this gap, a research team conducted action research with a class of English for tourism students, aiming for a preliminary assessment before more extensive studies. The investigation focused on two primary questions:

1. What benefits have the students experienced in their English course for tourism integrated with critical thinking activities?

2. What critical-thinking activities do our students prefer?

II. Theoretical basis

2.1. Definition of critical thinking

The Oxford Learner Dictionary defines critical thinking (CT) as the process of analyzing information to make logical decisions about its truthfulness. Research on CT, dating back to the late 20th century, reveals diverse perspectives on its definition. Traditionally, CT is seen as a broad skill for interpreting information and solving problems across various fields (McMillan, 1987; Pascarella, 1989). McPeck (1984, 1990) argued that CT is often limited to analyzing arguments, but it actually extends to practical activities like managing finances and playing games. Scriven and Paul (1987) defined CT as a disciplined intellectual process involving conceptualization, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information from various sources, essential for guiding beliefs and actions. Some scholars challenge the conventional view of CT as a general skill. Kuncel (2011) proposed that CT refers to two distinct concepts: domain-specific expertise developed through practice, which is not easily transferable across fields, and a finite set of specific reasoning skills. For example, CT in veterinary medicine differs from that needed in restaurant management.

Kuncel suggested that college education should emphasize both domain-specific expertise and general CT skills. In 2015, the World Economic Forum recognized CT as one of the 16 essential 21st-century skills, defining it as thoughtful and logical deliberation aimed at forming beliefs or actions. It involves analyzing facts, organizing ideas, justifying perspectives, making comparisons, drawing conclusions, evaluating arguments, and solving problems effectively.

In summary, while CT is widely regarded as a crucial skill, its definition and scope are evolving. It encompasses both general reasoning abilities and domain-specific expertise, essential for effective decision-making and problem-solving in various contexts.

2.2. Benefits of critical thinking for EFL tourism students

Critical Thinking (CT) is fundamental to acquiring knowledge and should be a foundational approach in education (Iyer, 2019). It is crucial for students as they develop intellectually and professionally, enabling them to confidently enter the world. CT enhances engagement and language production, as language proficiency facilitates deeper understanding and inquiry (Davidson & Dunham, 1997). According to Mohan and Lo (1985), language acquisition supports the development of discipline-specific knowledge by providing access to theories and factual information. CT aids in language acquisition by promoting strategic evaluation and synthesis of new linguistic input (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011). Studies show that EFL students using higher levels of CT also employ more metacognitive strategies, such as comprehension monitoring (Xu, 2011). In a globalized world, CT equips students with the skills needed to navigate diverse cultural interactions and complex

information in English (Browne & Freeman, 2000). Language development and CT are interlinked; effective teaching fosters both competencies, creating a cycle of mutual reinforcement (Lipman, 1989; Yeo, 2008). CT enables deeper learning and practical application of knowledge in real-world contexts, enhancing professional development (Halpern, 1998; Liu et al., 2014). It empowers individuals to generate innovative problem-solving approaches, recognize theoretical connections, and construct well-supported arguments (Cook & Wolverton, 2002). A lack of CT can lead to significant errors, underscoring its importance for leadership roles (Inui et al., 2006). In sectors like hospitality and tourism, CT is essential for navigating complexity, making informed decisions, and fostering innovation (Mayburry & Swanger, 2011). The industry's rapid changes and diverse service sectors demand managers with adaptable, cross-cultural skills supported by creativity and critical thinking (Wilks & Hemsworth, 2012). Integrating CT activities into EFL classrooms benefits students in their language studies and future careers, particularly in the tourism sector, by preparing them for success in a dynamic professional environment (Raybould & Wilkins, 2006).

All in all, for students, especially tourism ones, integrating CT activities into EFL classrooms can benefit students in their ELT study and future career development.

2.2. Critical thinking activities for EFL classes

Integrating critical thinking (CT) activities into English lessons can be adapted to meet specific lesson content and objectives. The 2020 booklet, *Cambridge Life Competencies Framework: Critical Thinking* by Cambridge University Press, is a useful resource for EFL teachers. It outlines three core aspects

of CT: (1) understanding and analyzing ideas and arguments, (2) evaluating ideas and arguments, and (3) solving problems and making decisions. The first aspect involves learners categorizing and assessing information to identify patterns and deepen understanding. The second aspect focuses on evaluating the credibility of arguments, helping students distinguish between reliable and questionable information. The third aspect includes skills like identifying issues, gathering data, evaluating alternatives, and making decisions to enhance solutions. Silver (2021) recommends applying Cambridge's strategies by asking frequent "why?" questions to promote analytical thinking without criticism. Open-ended questions foster curiosity and reflection, leading to deeper cognitive abilities. Silver also suggests using debates and reading tasks for evaluation, which encourage engaging discussions and collaborative idea generation. Shabbir (2022) highlights the benefits of debates and mind mapping for organizing complex information and enhancing CT skills. Problem-based learning is another effective strategy, challenging students to apply CT skills to real-world problems, while categorization activities help with concept connection and information recall. Scott (2022) notes that CT involves exploring implications through hypothetical questions, not just validating statements, a view supported by King (1995), who highlights CT's role in understanding and applying knowledge.

In conclusion, integrating CT into English classrooms through various activities can enhance students' analytical and decision-making skills, creating an environment conducive to developing these essential competencies.

III. Methodology

To address specific research inquiries, the researchers integrated critical thinking

(CT) activities into a 14-lesson English for Tourism course from March 5 to April 25, 2023, and sought student feedback on the benefits received. The study was conducted with a class of 32 EFL students enrolled in English for Tourism 4 (EFT4), who had previously completed three EFT courses and achieved a CEFR B1 proficiency level. While CT had been previously incorporated into other English courses, this was the first course explicitly designed to develop CT skills for tourism and hospitality professionals. In the first lesson, the instructor introduced CT as a key learning objective, explaining its definition, importance, and relevance to personal and career development.

Seven CT activities—categorizing, what-if questions, mind mapping, problem-solving tasks, open-ended questions, debates, and pros and cons—were integrated into the course, each used five times at a rate of once per unit or every three lessons. The instructor consistently highlighted each activity's role in promoting CT. Although the course incorporated all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), it emphasized tourism knowledge and communication skills, focusing more on reading, speaking, and listening. At the end of the course, students completed a survey rating their agreement with nine statements about the benefits of CT on a 5-point Likert scale. They also selected their top three favorite

activities from the seven CT activities. The collected data was analyzed and presented in charts to illustrate key findings.

IV. Results and discussions

The data gathered from the survey questionnaire provided valuable insights into our two research questions with compelling statistics as follows:

4.1. Benefits of integrating critical thinking into the EFT4 course

The statistics validated the anticipated benefits that our students gained through incorporating seven critical thinking activities into our classroom.

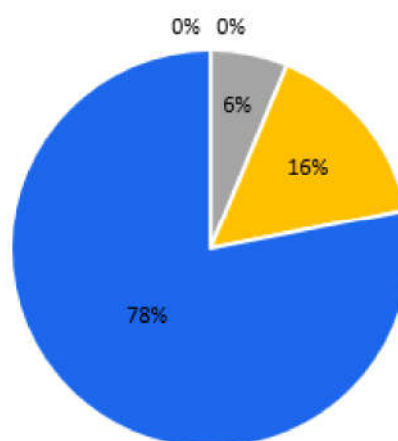### 4.1.1. Enhancing both tourism knowledge and English language skills

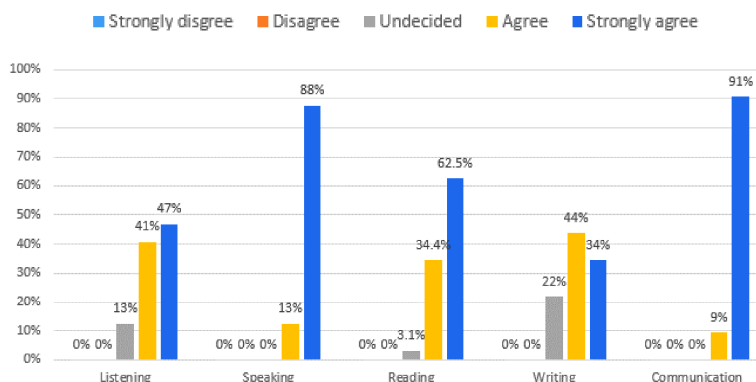*Chart 1. CT activities helped me acquire tourism knowledge better*

Chart 2. CT activities helped me acquire English skills better

(Source: The study survey)

Charts 1 and 2 data highlight the effectiveness of Critical Thinking (CT) activities in the EFT4 course, which aims to boost tourism knowledge and English language skills. Positive student feedback underscores the dual benefits of CT activities in enhancing understanding of tourism content and improving English proficiency. Expressly, 78% of students strongly agreed that CT activities effectively increased their tourism knowledge, reflecting the course's success in integrating language learning with tourism expertise. CT activities proved the most effective for improving speaking skills, with 88% of students strongly agreeing on their benefits. This is notable given the Faculty of Tourism's emphasis on communication skills, as the interactive nature of CT activities fosters dialogue and oral practice, which are crucial for enhancing speaking abilities. However, the impact on writing skills was less significant, with only 34% of students strongly agreeing on the benefits. This may be because CT activities are better aligned with speaking practices than with writing. Despite this, the high agreement rates for reading (62.5%) and listening skills suggest that CT activities positively affect overall language proficiency. The course's emphasis on reading tasks supports its objectives by effectively integrating tourism knowledge with language practice.

In summary, CT activities in the EFT4 course significantly enhance tourism knowledge and English language skills, particularly speaking. The positive impact on reading, listening, and writing highlights the comprehensive benefits of these activities. Future efforts could explore additional strategies to further improve writing skills within the CT framework, aiming for a balanced development of all language competencies.

4.1.2. Enhancing logical thinking, problem-solving skills, and decision-making skills
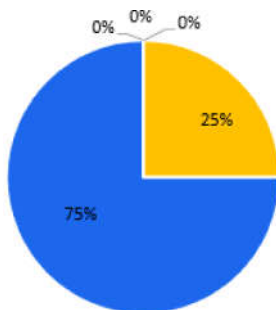

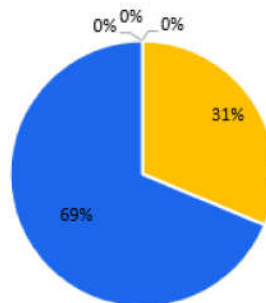*Chart 3. CT activities helped me think in a more logical and structured way*

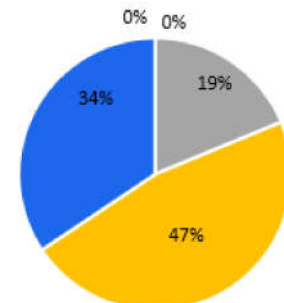*Chart 4. CT activities improved my problem-solving skills*

Chart 5. CT activities improved my decision-making

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Undecided ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

(Source: The study survey)

Charts 3, 4, and 5 data offer insights into how Critical Thinking (CT) activities impact soft skills like logical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making.

Logical Thinking: Chart 3 shows a strong consensus among students about the enhancement of logical thinking through CT activities, with 75% strongly agreeing on this improvement. This high percentage indicates that CT activities effectively foster more coherent and systematic thought processes, essential for problem-solving and decision-making and crucial for students' future professional roles in tourism and beyond.

Problem-Solving Skills: Chart 4 reveals a slight decrease in the percentage

of students who strongly agreed that CT activities improve problem-solving skills, down to 69%. Although this figure is still high, it suggests that there might be room for further enhancement. The reduction in strong agreement compared to logical thinking indicates that problem-solving skills could benefit from more targeted or varied CT activities to achieve a similar impact.

Decision-Making Skills: Chart 5 shows significant variation, with only 34% of students strongly agreeing that CT activities enhance decision-making skills. Despite this, 47% of respondents still recognized benefits, indicating that

CT activities do have a positive effect. The 19% of undecided responses might reflect the complexities of group dynamics during decision-making tasks, where persistent dominance by certain individuals likely limited the participation of others. This could have affected the overall effectiveness of CT activities in improving decision-making skills for some students.

In summary, while CT activities effectively enhance logical thinking and have a notable impact on problem-solving, there is potential for improvement in decision-making skills influenced by group dynamics.

4.1.3. Enhancing student engagement and collaboration
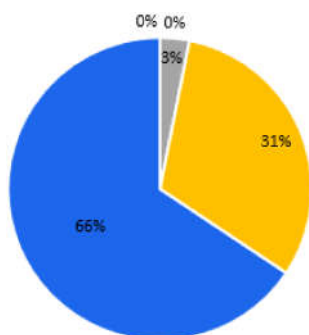

Chart 6. CT activities improved my engagement in tasks
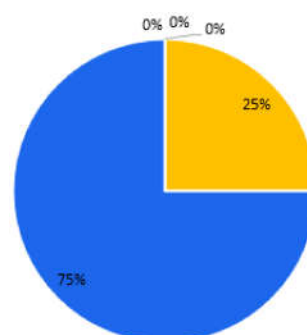

Chart 7. Collaboration was improved during critical thinking activities

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Undecided ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

(Source: The study survey)

The data from Charts 6 and 7 strongly support the positive impact of Critical Thinking (CT) activities on student engagement and collaboration, aligning with existing research such as Lv et al. (2022), which highlights CT's role in enhancing learning experiences.

Student Engagement: Chart 6 shows that 66% of students strongly agreed, and 31% agreed that CT activities significantly boost their engagement in learning tasks. The absence of negative responses and the minimal 3% of undecided students reinforce the overall positive reception. CT activities foster a more engaging learning environment

by requiring active participation and discussion of knowledge, which enhances student involvement and investment. This active engagement is crucial for deeper understanding and retention of content.

Collaboration: Chart 7 reveals an even more substantial impact on collaboration, with 75% of students strongly agreeing and the remaining 25% agreeing that CT activities improve group work. The lack of other response categories indicates unanimous support for CT's role in facilitating effective teamwork. Collaboration is central to CT activities, enabling students to share diverse viewpoints and engage in constructive

dialogue, which enhances their understanding of complex concepts. The emphasis on collaboration within CT activities creates a supportive environment where students feel valued and encouraged to contribute.

In summary, CT activities significantly enhance both student engagement and collaboration, promoting a more interactive and supportive learning environment.

4.1.4. Enhancing students' comfort in sharing viewpoints and their independence
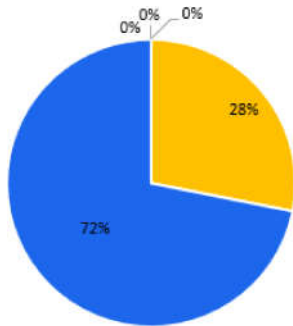

Chart 8. I felt free to share my personal views during CT activities
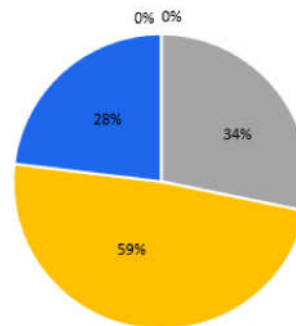

Chart 9. I became more and more independent during CT activities

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Undecided ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

(Source: The study survey)

The data from Charts 8 and 9 provide insights into how Critical Thinking (CT) activities in the EFT4 course have impacted students' comfort in sharing viewpoints and their perceived independence.

Comfort in Sharing Viewpoints: Chart 8 reveals that 72% of students strongly agreed, and 28% agreed that CT activities have effectively fostered a comfortable environment for sharing opinions. The lack of responses in other categories indicates high satisfaction with the atmosphere created during these activities. This positive feedback underscores the success of CT activities in promoting an inclusive and supportive setting, encouraging students to express their personal views confidently and participate actively.

Independence and Group Dynamics: Chart 9 presents a more complex picture regarding student independence. A significant portion, 34%, remained undecided about whether CT activities increased their independence.

This indicates mixed perceptions about the effectiveness of these activities in fostering individual autonomy. The high rate of undecided responses suggests that while students were comfortable sharing viewpoints, their sense of independence was less clear. The reliance on group work, highlighted in Chart 5, might contribute to this issue. Although CT activities aim to develop individual skills, the group-oriented nature of the tasks could foster dependency, especially among less confident or passive students. This dependency can hinder the development of independence, as students with weaker skills may rely on more capable peers.

Overall, the integration of CT activities into the EFT4 course has positively influenced students by enhancing their CT skills, English proficiency, and soft skills. While students feel more comfortable expressing their views, further attention may be needed to address the balance between group collaboration and individual independence.

4.2. Students' preferred critical-thinking activities

The last chart illustrates the critical thinking activities that students preferred most among the seven activities consistently organized throughout the course.
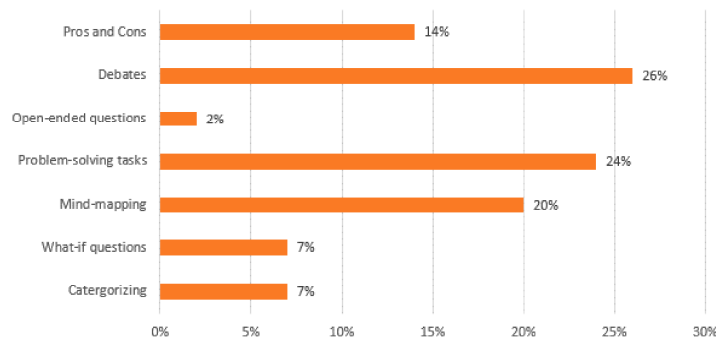

Chart 10. Students' favorite critical thinking activities

(Source: The study survey)

The data reveals student preferences for Critical Thinking (CT) activities, showcasing their appeal and challenges.

Debates: Debates are the most challenging yet most favored activity, with 26% of students preferring them. The competitive nature of debates energizes students, fostering confidence and active participation by validating diverse opinions. The principle of "There is no wrong opinion" creates a supportive atmosphere, enhancing engagement.

Problem-solving tasks and mind mapping: Problem-solving tasks and mind mapping follow, with 24% and 20% of preferences, respectively. Problem-solving tasks stimulate intellectual engagement as students apply critical thinking to resolve issues, though they lack the excitement of debates. Mind mapping, also at 20%, helps students systematically approach problems by visually organizing information, benefiting those skilled at managing complex data.

Pros and cons activities: Ranking fourth with 14% preference, pros and cons activities involve evaluating various aspects of an issue in a structured format, akin to debates. The higher preference for debates indicates their interactive and competitive nature significantly impacts engagement.

What-if questions and categorizing activities: Both received 7% preference. What-if questions encourage creative problem-solving and scenario analysis while categorizing aids in organizing and recognizing patterns. Though valuable for critical thinking, these activities are less engaging than debates.

Open-ended questions: With the lowest preference at 2%, open-ended questions seem less stimulating compared to more interactive activities, leading to their lower ranking.

In summary, students prefer challenging and interactive CT activities, with debates being the most favored. Problem-solving tasks and mind mapping are also valued, while pros and cons, what-if questions, and categorizing activities vary in appeal. The lower preference for open-ended questions suggests room for enhancement, guiding educators in designing more engaging CT activities.

IV. Conclusion

The preliminary study on integrating

critical thinking (CT) activities into our English for Tourism class offers initial insights into students' perceptions of this crucial 21st-century skill. Over 14 lessons, students engaged in activities such as categorizing, what-if questions, mind mapping, problem-solving, open-ended questions, debates, and pros and cons. Students noted various benefits, including increased engagement, improved collaboration, deeper tourism knowledge, enhanced English skills, strengthened logical thinking, and soft skills development. Communication skills received the highest satisfaction ratings, followed by collaboration and logical thinking. Debates, problem-solving tasks, and mind mapping were identified as the most favored activities. To draw more robust conclusions, the study recommends further research on a larger scale, including feedback from students at different levels and other stakeholders like lecturers and recruiters. Qualitative interviews should be added to provide deeper insights. Future research could also explore a wider range of CT activities and techniques to improve their effectiveness. Developing CT skills and English proficiency is vital for graduates' competitiveness in the dynamic tourism industry, making thorough research in this area essential.

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NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN VỀ LỢI ÍCH CỦA VIỆC TÍCH HỢP CÁC HOẠT ĐỘNG TƯ DUY PHẢN BIỆN VÀO KHÓA HỌC TIẾNG ANH DU LỊCH

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Tóm tắt: Tư duy phản biện là một trong những năng lực cốt lõi cần thiết cho tất cả sinh viên trong thế kỷ 21. Sự thành thạo trong kỹ năng quan trọng này ảnh hưởng đáng kể đến cách sinh viên chuẩn bị cho sự nghiệp của mình trong môi trường cạnh tranh toàn cầu của ngành du lịch. Đó là lý do tại sao tại Khoa Du lịch, Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội, chúng tôi luôn khẳng định tầm quan trọng to lớn của việc bồi dưỡng kỹ năng này cho sinh viên. Chúng tôi luôn kết hợp các hoạt động tư duy phản biện có liên quan vào các bài học trong nhiều môn học khác nhau trong chương trình đào tạo. Là giảng viên tiếng Anh của Khoa, nhóm nghiên cứu đã nhận thấy nhiều lợi ích mà sự tích hợp này mang lại trong các lớp học tiếng Anh du lịch của mình. Tuy nhiên, việc tìm hiểu quan điểm của sinh viên về những lợi thế này sẽ giúp xác nhận các lợi ích này. Do đó, chúng tôi quyết định kết hợp sâu các hoạt động tư duy phản biện trong suốt 14 bài học tiếng Anh với các mục tiêu rõ ràng, sau đó lấy quan điểm của sinh viên về những lợi ích của sự tích hợp này thông qua một cuộc khảo sát vào cuối khóa học. Kết quả nhấn mạnh rằng việc kết hợp này không chỉ giúp sinh viên cải thiện năng lực tiếng Anh mà còn nâng cao các kỹ năng mềm của mình.

Từ khóa: tư duy phản biện, ngành du lịch, kết hợp, khảo sát, năng lực tiếng Anh, kỹ năng mềm.

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