

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, an overview of the study's background was presented with a brief introduction to the Vietnamese educational system's approach to teach and learn English. Subsequently, the chapter outlined the statement of the problem, the rationales behind conducting this study, the research objectives, the research questions, and the significance of the research. Finally, the chapter delved into the scope of the study and provided definitions of key terms used throughout the research.

1.1 Background of the Study

Education in general emphasizes the vital roles of Critical Thinking and language skills for graduates.

1.1.1 English Public Speaking (EPS) in Vietnamese context

English Public Speaking (EPS) has been considered an essential skill for students in the 21st century, significantly enhancing their critical thinking skills and language abilities, as agreed by scholars such as Chalkiadaki (2018), Helmawati (2019), Trilling and Fadel (2009), and Yulianti and Sulistyawati (2021). According to Iberri (2009), public speaking assignments, including presentations, debates, and focus group discussions, require students to explore beliefs and theories, analyze arguments, distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, evaluate sources' credibility or bias, and formulate their own positions. Moreover, students are encouraged to engage deeply by identifying inconsistencies, asking questions, analyzing differences and similarities, examining potential implications and outcomes, formulating and evaluating solutions to problems, and drawing conclusions.

Additionally, EPS improves language abilities by offering opportunities to practice all four language skills-listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As Iberri (2019) explains that tasks involving presentations and debates reinforce these skills. There is a strong focus on speaking, as delivering clear and coherent speeches. Peer evaluation in EPS promotes meaningful listening, enabling students to take notes and generate ideas for debating their peers' speeches. Reading and writing skills are developed during task preparation when students skim and scan a wide variety of sources. Burhanuddin (2021) and Yulianti and Sulistyawati (2021) suggest that the profound insights gained during the preparation phase help students approach material critically, and these

skills can be effectively transferred to new materials and contexts later. In the context of Vietnamese tertiary education, EFL students have faced challenges related to vocabulary usage, grammar, and fluency, which are significant barriers to effective English Public Speaking performances (Nguyen et al., 2017; Pham et al., 2022). There is a research gap specifically addressing the improvement of students' critical thinking skills and English Public Speaking performances through the combination of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS).

1.1.2 Critical thinking skills in Vietnamese context

Critical Thinking skills (CTs) is widely acknowledged as crucial skills for students' success in both university and post-university life in the 21st century. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report highlights the rising importance of CTs, noting that it moved from the fourth most important skill in 2015 to the second in 2020 (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Ristanto et al., 2020; Schöning & Witcomb, 2017). The World Economic Forum's Global Human Capital Report (2017) emphasizes the disconnect between current education systems and the CTs demanded by today's labor markets, a gap widened by rapid technological and economic changes. Consequently, CTs have become a critical skill appreciated in evolving and dynamic workplaces, gaining global recognition as one of the most desired skills by employers.

The significance of CTs in higher education institutions has increased due to globalization, as seen in countries like China (Yuan & Stapleton, 2020), Japan (Houghton & Yamada, 2012), and Thailand (Jantrasakul, 2012; Thunnithet, 2011). Similarly, CTs have established its importance in Vietnamese education (Chau & Cunningham, 2021; Do, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2020). Vietnamese education is not the exception, it is increasingly future-oriented and internationalized, addressing both domestic and global challenges. One of the most dramatic challenges is the overload of information, which demands that Vietnamese tertiary students possess CTs to assess various sources of information, determine their usefulness and reliability, and make informed decisions (Yang & Gamble, 2013, p. 398).

A study by Aldwairi and Alwahedi (2018) underscores the role of CTs in combating fake news, clickbait, and media hoaxes, highlighting its importance for students' academic success. Furthermore, Luan and Cunningham (2021) emphasize that CTs are essential for Vietnamese students in the information age, helping them pursue advanced degrees and achieve higher positions in the workplace. Consequently, Vietnamese higher education institutions are gradually incorporating CTs into their curricula to equip students with these essential skills, extending this practice across various disciplines, including English Linguistics and Literature (Tran, Le &

Marginson, 2018). Despite its significance, integrating CT into English language teaching curricula poses challenges. It remains a notable scarcity of studies focusing on concrete pedagogical guidelines for integrating CTs integration in Vietnamese EFL contexts. This gap underscores the need for further research to effectively embed CTs in English language classrooms in Vietnamese context.

1.1.3 English language teaching and learning in Vietnamese context

The Vietnamese educational system has witnessed great changes in the 21st century. One major area of transformation has been the teaching and learning English, along with fostering global communication, enhancing educational opportunities, meeting the demands of the nation's growing economy (Lam et al., 2021). Specifically, the National Foreign Language Project (2008-2020) and its extension (2017-2025) have dramatically influenced English education at all levels for Vietnamese students (Lam et al., 2021). The implementation of these projects has led to substantial investments in infrastructure and profound changes in English language teaching methodologies. Traditionally dominated by the Grammar-Translation Method, English teaching in Vietnam has gradually shifted towards Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching to meet the critical communicative purposes in foreign language learning and teaching orientation (Lam et al., 2021). One of the most vital missions of this project is to improve both teachers' English proficiency and their pedagogical skills to facilitate the shift to communicative-oriented approaches. Additionally, the government's decision in this context has encouraged teachers to upgrade their professionalism by attending official training workshops or pursuing higher education. These efforts are aimed at contributing positively to educational innovation and improving students' English language proficiency levels (Cao, 2018; Lam et al., 2021; Whitworth & Chiu, 2015).

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has influenced the Vietnamese educational landscape over recent decades. Generally, TBLT has become prominent in research and teaching practices in many EFL contexts due to its facilitative conditions for English exposure, which are essential for developing students' English competence and preparing them to work in various international environments (Dao, 2017; Huynh & Nguyen, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen & Tran, 2017). Actually, studies on TBLT have attracted interest among Vietnamese scholars aiming to improve students' critical thinking skills (Chau & Cunningham, 2021; Do, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2020). For example, TBLT have received strong support from both policymakers and curriculum developers within Vietnamese higher education. The Vietnamese government has performed numerous workshops and conferences to promote TBLT among educators (Le, 2008;

Le & Do, 2012). Furthermore, English lecturers and teachers across various educational levels in Vietnam have adopted TBLT in their teaching practices, achieving favorable outcomes in helping students reach B1 proficiency levels according to the CEFR (Nguyen et al., 2015; Yen & Halili, 2015). This shift has led to a notable increase in the use of English both as a medium of instruction (Vu & Burns, 2014) and as a compulsory subject taught primarily through TBLT methodologies in numerous Vietnamese universities (Cao, 2018).

However, the implementation of TBLT in Vietnam has not been without challenges. Studies have highlighted a discrepancy between the core principles of TBLT and local teaching practices (Barnard & Viet, 2010; Cao, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2015). Factors such as the overuse of the mother tongue (Carless, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 2000), large class sizes (Bruton, 2005; Carless, 2004), rigid syllabus schedules (Yim, 2009), and teachers' familiarity with TBLT practices (Chaikimongkol, 2007 cited in Duong & Nguyen, 2021) have hindered the effective adaptation of TBLT. Additionally, the roles of teachers in the three stages of task-based lessons (Ellis, 2003) remain an area requiring further development to align local practices.

1.2 Statement of the problems

This section elaborated the crucial role of CT from the perspectives of lecturers and tertiary students.

1.2.1 The inappropriate current instructions in Vietnamese context

There are some inappropriate current instructions for tertiary students in English Public Speaking classes. In fact, the culture of education and assessment systems in Vietnam has not effectively facilitated students' active learning, as teacher-centered classrooms remain dominant. Nguyen et al. (2020) and Tran (2013) provide evidence that textbooks are designed in a way that limits students' motivation to think beyond the content. Additionally, homework burdens teachers with excessive correction demands, and tests become a meaningless platform for grade competition. Chau and Cunningham (2021) also highlight these disadvantages from a student's perspective within this educational system. Despite English being compulsory at all educational levels from primary schools to universities, the focus in primary and high schools is mainly on grammar. Typically, English classes begin with a teacher presenting a specific grammatical point and end with related exercises, leaving little room for communicative practice or discussions. As a result, only a small number of Vietnamese students can effectively communicate in English. Consequently, Vietnamese students tend to memorize the information rather than developing a profound understanding

and critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills, therefore, have become a luxury that teachers cannot prioritize, particularly in English Public Speaking classes. However, studies in second language acquisition, such as studies by Stapleton (2002), and Kumaravadivelu (2003), demonstrate that these limitations do not accurately represent the situation. Asian students, including Vietnamese, show readiness to engage in critical thinking skills and extend their thoughts beyond the provided materials when given suitable opportunities. They prefer to be questioned about what they've learned and actively engage with both materials and classroom content. This implies that Vietnamese students should be critically questioned about what they have read and been told, boosting their thinking beyond textbook perspectives through Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

There is a need for complementary studies to address the lacking critical thinking skills of tertiary students who have completed English Public Speaking courses in a University in Vietnam. A short survey conducted to identify these weaknesses revealed significant gaps in students' abilities of analyzing, evaluating, and creating information for speech preparation. The questionnaire, adapted from Broeckelman-Post and Ruiz-Mesa (2018), Morreale et al., (2017), and Yulianti and Sulistyawati (2021), categorized responses into low, medium, and high proficiency levels. The findings indicated that most of the 78 surveyed students struggled with various aspects of critical thinking and public speaking skills. Specifically, Table 1 showed that over 40% of students reported moderate weaknesses in several areas: identifying logical fallacies in arguments, finding quality sources of information for research, evaluating the quality of evidence and reasons in arguments, assessing how assumptions and norms privilege certain perspectives, evaluating the use of logic, emotion, and credibility in messages, creating personal perspectives on topics, and providing appropriate source citations. As a result, the content and language of students' speeches suffered from irrelevant arguments and overlapping key points. Given these issues, it is necessary to conduct a study to provide implications for lecturers to improve Vietnamese students' critical thinking skills and English Public Speaking performances.

Table 1.1 Summary of students' weaknesses in critical thinking skills

Items	Mean	SD	Difficult level		
			Low	Medium	High
Item 1.1 - Identifying logical fallacies in an argument	2.37	1.45	29.4% (23)	43.7% (34)	26.9% (21)
Item 1.2 - Finding a variety of quality sources of information when conducting research to support ideas/ arguments	2.15	1.42	32% (25)	47.4% (37)	20.5% (15)
Item 1.3 - Evaluating the quality of evidence/ reasoning used in an argument	2.29	1.41	28.2% (22)	51.3% (40)	20.5% (16)
Item 1.4 - Evaluating how assumptions and norms privilege certain perspectives and experiences	2.28	1.49	29.5% (23)	48.7% (38)	21.8% (17)
Item 1.5 - Evaluating the use of logic, emotion, and credibility in the reading message	2.20	1.44	35.9% (18)	43.6% (34)	20.5% (16)
Item 1.6 - Creating personal perspectives towards the topic	2.17	1.48	33.3% (26)	44.9% (35)	21.7% (17)
Item 1.7 - Providing appropriately individual solutions for the topic	2.14	1.57	39.7% (31)	35.8% (28)	24.3% (19)
Item 1.8 - Providing appropriate source citations for evidence	1.91	1.41	39.7% (31)	43.5% (34)	16.7% (13)

1.2.2 The teaching methodology for Vietnamese students' critical thinking skills improvement

Despite the introduction and application of various English teaching methodologies in Vietnam over the past decades, students' critical thinking skills have not significantly improved (Chau & Cunningham, 2021). This lack of progress is likely due to insufficient opportunities for students to engage with critical questions that encourage different viewpoints and recognition of multiple sides of an issue. Critical thinking (CT) has become a primary focus in Vietnamese education, as highlighted in the background of this study. Asian learners of English are often perceived as more passive, shy, and less capable of critical thinking skills, making them less enthusiastic about debating controversial topics compared to their Western counterparts (Atkinson, 1997; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). Nonetheless, research suggests that Asian students are willing to think critically if provided with appropriate learning opportunities (Chau & Cunningham, 2021; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Stapleton, 2002).

Currently, according to Decision 36/2004/QĐ-BGD-ĐT, all tertiary training programs are required to equip students with a solid foundation of knowledge in their specific fields, professional soft skills, ethical behavior, and the ability to communicate in English and think critically in international workplaces. However, there is a gap between the Decision and its practical implementation, particularly in effectively

incorporating CTs into EFL classrooms. there has been a lack of studies exploring effective ways to improve students' critical thinking skills in the Vietnamese EFL context, specifically through the combination of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Higher - Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). A small survey of 50 tertiary lecturers indicated that inappropriate teaching and learning styles may hinder students' language education. These styles often focused on theoretical transference through presentation tasks and focus group discussions in English Public Speaking courses (Burhanuddin, 2021; Iberri-Shea, 2009; Yulianti & Sulistyawati, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to identify solutions that encourage students to be more critical in their learning. HOTS-based task application may offer a viable solution to these challenges, fostering an environment where students can develop both critical thinking skills.

1.3 Rationale of the study

There were three main rationales behind this study. Firstly, English proficiency and critical thinking skills have been important for graduates, especially EFL students in Eastern contexts in the 21st century. Critical thinking, which originated in ancient Greece, has predominantly been utilized in Western educational institutions, particularly in the United States (Atkinson, 1997; Day, 2003). Although critical thinking has recently been recognized as an essential skill for 21st-century students, its foundations and teaching methods are deeply rooted in Western academic traditions. Significant differences in values, social structures, and relationships exist between Western societies and Eastern societies like Vietnam, China, and Japan. According to Atkinson (1997), Day (2003), and Stapleton (2002), Western societies tend to prioritize individual-oriented approaches, whereas Eastern societies lean towards group-oriented approaches. Recognizing these contrasts, Atkinson (1997) cautioned against introducing critical thinking skills into EFL education in the East due to the ties of social and cultural practices, posing challenges for EFL students in mastering these skills. However, some scholars contest Atkinson's viewpoint. Ennis (1998) argued that culture does not affect the fundamental skills of critical thinking. Similarly, Day (2003) discovered that students from Asian countries are open to learn critical thinking and do not encounter significant difficulties in engaging with it. The disagreement among researchers regarding the cultural bias of critical thinking arises from insufficient empirical evidence within EFL contexts. Therefore, further research on developing critical thinking skills among EFL students in Eastern cultures is necessary. Such research could provide insights and contribute to the effective integration of critical thinking instruction in these educational settings.

Secondly, critical thinking integration may improve the quality of English Public Speaking due to its dual improvement of both English proficiency and critical thinking skills. Specifically, English Public Speaking with the focus of persuasive speech provides an excellent context for fostering critical thinking skills. Studies by Burhanuddin (2021), Iberri (2009), and Yulianti and Sulistyawati (2021) support the well-established connection between critical thinking skills and English public speaking. English Public Speaking is integral to the development of critical thinking and serves as an effective platform for enhancing these skills (Iberri-Shea, 2009). The processes of analyzing, evaluating, and creating information required in English Public Speaking with persuasive speech are directly applicable to critical thinking for quality content and language use improvement. Consequently, English Public Speaking is inherently intertwined with critical thinking skills (Iberri-Shea, 2009). This integration necessitates students actively employ critical thinking skills during their content preparation and language construction, making it a powerful tool for comprehensive skill development. The productive content might become more robust, thoughtful, and compelling, ultimately leading to more effective communication.

Thirdly, Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have been grounded in the need to improve learners' cognitive and communication competencies. This approach not only fosters deeper understanding and critical thinking skills but also equips students with essential speaking skills for effective communication in terms of real-world relevance and collaborative active learning. In this study, HOTS-based tasks will engage students in real-world topics that require them to apply these skills. Furthermore, TBLT allows students to work collaboratively on tasks that stimulate authentic scenarios, thereby promoting engagement and motivation. This method shifts the focus from memorization to active learning where students must analyze information, evaluate options, and create solutions.

1.4 Research objectives

This study was carried out to fill in the gap as explained in the previous sections—rationale of the study. This study aimed at:

- a. Examining the effects of HOTS-based tasks on students' critical thinking skills
- b. Investigating the effects of HOTS-based tasks on students' content quality and language use in EPS
- c. Exploring students' perceptions of HOTS-based tasks

1.5 Research questions

This study targeted to investigate the effects of HOTS-based tasks on students' English oral presentations in terms of content quality, language use, and their critical thinking skills at a university in Vietnam. Three following research questions were formulated to achieve the earlier-mentioned objectives:

- 1) What are the effects of HOTS-based tasks on students' critical thinking skills?
- 2) What are the effects of HOTS-based tasks on students' English Public Speaking performances in terms of content quality and language use?
- 3) What are the students' perceptions of HOTS-based tasks?

1.6 Significance of this study

This study was implemented at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, a university in Vietnam with 30 second-year English – majored students who enrolled in English Public Speaking course during the third semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. The potential findings of this study could contribute to HOTS training in ELT, especially how to teach English Public Speaking in several aspects and improve critical thinking at the same time.

For theoretical significance, this study focused on developing critical thinking skills among tertiary-level students, emphasizing the cultivation of critical thinking skills rather than mere knowledge transfer, as highlighted by Davies (2011), Fahim and Masouleh (2012), and Tsui (2002). The theoretical framework integrated Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-based tasks, grounded in Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy and principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (Ellis, 2003). These tasks aimed to improve critical thinking skills through structured stages of analyzing, evaluating, and creating within the context of English Public Speaking.

Regarding methodological significance, this study distinguished itself by employing a pre-experimental research design, setting it apart from previous studies that mainly used either qualitative or quantitative research methodologies. Specifically, the integration of critical thinking skills into the EFL domain was explored extensively through both quantitative (Faravani & Taleb, 2020; Purnama & Nurdianingsih, 2019) and qualitative studies (Bahrudin, 2020; Singh et al., 2020). However, these studies predominantly employed pre-post research designs to provide empirical evidence of critical thinking skills development, often lacking in-depth exploration of the developmental processes, especially within the context of English Public Speaking. By combining quantitative data on performance outcomes with qualitative insights from students' oral presentation transcripts, portfolio, reflective journal, and interview, the

study sought to offer a nuanced perspective on the effectiveness of integrating critical thinking skills in the Vietnamese ELT tertiary context. Furthermore, the findings from this study contributed significantly to the field of critical thinking in Vietnamese ELT, offering practical insights that could inform educational practices and curriculum development aimed at fostering critical thinking skills among EFL students.

1.7 Scope of the study

This study was conducted within the following scopes. Firstly, this study primarily focused on enhancing critical thinking skills for Vietnamese tertiary students by using Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-based tasks. These tasks were designed to stimulate students' critical thinking ability which mainly focused on analyzing, evaluating, and creating more coherent and well-supported presentations. Especially, critical thinking skills in this study were measured by specifically designed rubric, portfolio, and reflective journal as compared to the previous studies. Secondly, public speaking in this study was preferred to oral persuasive presentation with only attention on content quality and language use. Thirdly, participants in the study were grouped voluntarily. Such a grouping strategy did not allow for a comprehensive exploration of how students at different proficiency levels respond to and benefit from the HOTS-based tasks, not providing insights into their effectiveness across diverse learner profiles. Finally, one group design for pre-experimental design in this study might cause limitations for the final findings' generalization.

1.8 Definition of terms

Critical thinking, based on Facione (1990), is self-judgement from personal interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference together with the related evidential, conceptual, methodological, or contextual thoughts. However, critical thinking skills, in this study, were simply described as the students' application of analyzing, evaluating, and creating skills in conducting tasks based on students' different personal perspectives.

Public speaking, as defined by Abella and Cutamora (2019), is the skill of making use of language in terms of appropriate voice, suitable uttering words, background knowledge, and language production for making informative or persuasive speech. Public speaking performances in this study were oral persuasive presentations produced by the students after they learned with HOTS based tasks. It consisted of introduction, bodies, and conclusion. It referred to individual or collaborative verbal performances on a particular topic for the audience in the classrooms.

HOTS-Based Tasks in this study were the tasks designed by combining TBLT (Ellis, 2003) and Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). It was an 8-session training package. It contained 4 sessions for HOTS-based tasks with topic 1 (Is a university degree necessary to get a good job?) for both individual and group tasks. It also offered other 4 sessions for HOTS-based tasks with topic 2 (Is nuclear energy the solution to global warming problems in Vietnam?) for both individual and group tasks. They were designed for students to practice three main sub-skills of critical thinking including analyzing, evaluating, and creating to improve their critical thinking skills, content quality and language use in English Public Speaking context.

1.9 Summary

Briefly, the overall introduction on the Vietnamese educational system and the teaching and learning English in Vietnamese context were described as the study's background. Then, the related problems and the research gap were identified. The research objectives and research questions were subsequently formulated. After that, the significance of the study in relation to the expected benefits was described. Finally, the definitions of the essential terms appeared in this study were provided. The relevant literature review and previous studies were presented in the next chapter.