



VIETNAMESE EFL STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING VIA REFLECTIVE JOURNALS IN AMERICAN-BRITISH LITERATURE CLASSES

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Abstract: Critical thinking has been recognised as an important skill in ELT. However, research on critical thinking practices or critical thinking development in EFL classes for Vietnamese students is still under-researched. This study aims to investigate how Vietnamese EFL students perform critical thinking. A qualitative approach with document (students' reflective journals) analysis and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Anderson and Krathwohl's cognitive levels and Barnett's criticality domains were combined to form a framework for analysing the data in this study. The results reveal that the students demonstrated their critical thinking. Reflective journal writing was found to assist the opportunities to develop students' critical thinking. It is implied from the study's findings that the critical thinking framework used in this study can be used as a reference tool to develop and assess critical thinking or to design teaching contents with the integration of critical thinking. Reflective journal writing activity can be widely used in EFL content classes, in general, and in EFL literature classes, in particular, to promote students' critical thinking.

Keywords: Vietnamese, EFL, critical thinking, reflective journals, literature

1. Introduction

Critical thinking has been a focus in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Numerous studies on critical thinking practices have been conducted in EFL contexts such as China [6, 32, 34, 40, 45], Iran [5, 23], Japan [25], Thailand [26, 42], Turkey [2, 38], or Vietnam [11]. Critical thinking practices have been investigated in various aspects, including EFL or ESSL Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Literature.

Lazere [30, p. 87] confirms that literature can be considered one of the various academic disciplines that can come closest to embracing the full range of qualities engaged with critical thinking. Langer [29, p. 607] argues that working with literary texts helps students to reflect on the world around them, opening "horizons of possibility, allowing them to question, interpret, connect, and explore". This characteristic of literature as a means of developing students' ability

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to think critically and to explore and discuss social problems is becoming especially valuable nowadays [14]

Reflective journal writing is regarded as one of the tools to develop critical thinking [39] As this sort of cognitive writing requires their self-reflection, students are expected to use evidence from the literary text to support their opinions, to evaluate their thinking process, and to apply their prior knowledge and experience to give judgments, make comparisons, and create hypotheses. According to Bound and Walker [16], from merging themselves with the stories and then relate what they have learned with their response by writing reflective journals, students can practice their knowledge and reason, reflect and then perform an action in their real-life critically. This writing practice corresponds to Barnett's [8, p. 1] notion of "critical being", including thinking, self-reflection, and action. The importance of reflective journal writing to the development of students' critical thinking has been mentioned in the literature; however, no empirical research has been done so far to confirm this relationship.

In reality, research on critical thinking practices or critical thinking development in EFL literature classes is still rare. Thunnithet [42] studies the students' critical thinking development in an EFL Literature class in a Thai university and analyses the writings of two students and their in-depth interviews afterwards. In another study on critical thinking in a literature class in Spain, Bobkina and Stefanova [13] formulate a critical thinking framework and use it to help the students analyse a literary work ("IF" poem). Until present, to our best knowledge, there has been no research on the relationship between reflective journal writing and students' critical thinking in EFL literature classes.

Motivated by the gap in research about EFL students' critical thinking in literature classes, as analysed above, the researchers conducted a study on EFL students' critical thinking via reflective journal writing activities in American-British literature classes. The authors investigated the relevance of literature studies to the development of students' critical thinking and the significance of critical thinking in tertiary education. In this study, critical thinking is defined as the use of cognitive skills to analyse and evaluate received knowledge, to question one's understanding, and thereby to take appropriate action. In this paper, the researchers used reflective journals as a qualitative tool. This study explores the students' attitudes towards the role of reflective journal writing to the opportunities to display or develop critical thinking in EFL American-British Literature classes. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do EFL students display their critical thinking via their reflective journals?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards the role of reflective journal writing and the opportunities for their critical thinking development?

2. Literature review

2.1. Critical thinking and second/foreign language education

Critical thinking has recently been recognised as an important component of language education. Kabilan [28] 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. [18] 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 [21] consider critical thinking-focused tasks in language classes as good platforms to promote, motivate, stimulate language acquisition, and increase students' language competence.

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 that sets certain norms or helps learners adjust themselves according to the world's needs and changes, depending on how they use it' [41, p. 35]. In this sense, in today's education, English is charged with being a critical tool for expanding democracy and world citizenship [1, 41]. Accordingly, Sung [41] has called for a critical EFL pedagogy, whose function is to engage in the critical dialogues and actions related to diverse political, sociocultural, economic, and environmental issues and events.

2.2. Literature and criticality development in EFL students

Developing critical thinking abilities and critical disposition in undergraduate students has always been set as a primary goal in tertiary education. Along with other subjects, literature is considered as an effective tool for engaging students in critical thinking, which has been proved in most recent studies.

Definitely, literature, in its most comprehensive meaning, is an art form deploying distinctive features of the language, including syntactic and structural complexity, as well as metaphorical meaning beyond the surface meaning. We agree with Allan [3], who explains the reason for effective literature teaching to promote students' critical thinking skills. According to Allan [3, p. 8], when studying literature, students are expected to have the ability to make judgment and analysis of the metaphorical or symbolism meaning beyond the surface meaning of a literary text itself. Thus, the delivery of students' judgment is associated with their logical reasoning, reflection, inference, and synthesising information. This observation is supported by

Mandondo [33], who states that literature is a particularly good source for developing students' ability to infer meaning and to make interpretations. This is because literary texts are often rich in multiple levels of meaning and demand that students are actively involved in exploring the unstated implications and assumptions of the text. Obviously, by encouraging students to grapple with the multiple ambiguities of the literary text, we are helping to develop their overall capacity to draw inferences and form hypotheses. This practice helps students to develop the ability to think critically.

Another convincing reason for possible effective enhancement of students' critical thinking in literature classroom is the fact that most literary works are closely related to readers' life, therefore studying literature in EFL classrooms can "foster students' critical abilities through their evaluation of the social, cultural, and historical events which forms the background to a particular short story, a novel or a poem" [30, p. 86]. As literature reflects its society and culture, it provides a way of contextualising how people of a particular society might behave or react in a specific situation. When students interpret and analyse poems, short stories, or play scripts that consist of daily matters, this activity sharpens their ability to criticise various aspects of their lives, either positive or negative. This idea receives the agreement of Oster [35, p. 85], who argues that literature enlarges students' vision and fosters their critical thinking by dramatising the various ways a situation can be. Oster [35] further states that in EFL classes, this characteristic of literature is especially significant as those students are often unfamiliar with the practice of critical thinking in reading, questioning, and analysing literary texts.

The result is, as Carter and Long [20, p. 24] claim, "the analysis of literary texts may directly affect students' lifestyle, their decision-making, and their perspective. It will be easier for students to build the concept of critical thinking in facing a specific case either in fictional situations or in their daily life". Hill [24] agrees with this idea by stating that through literary texts, learners can get a deeper knowledge about a range of cultures and other useful insights that can broaden their worldview and foster critical ideas. In response to the cultural aspects of literature, students are able to not only accept, but also question, evaluate, and if necessary, subvert the underlying cultural and ideological assumptions in literary texts.

In conclusion, enhancing students' critical thinking in the EFL classroom context by teaching literature will be effective as students have more opportunities to critically respond to various literary elements through some critical thinking practices. This conclusion is echoed by Lazere [30, p. 87), who confirms that literature can be considered one of the academic disciplines that can come closest to embracing the full range of qualities engaged with critical thinking.

2.3. Criticality development through reflective journal writing

Writing is a process of metacognition, which can promote effective thinking, especially critical thinking [36]. As Paul and Elder [37] explain, on the one hand, the process of L2 language writing, which is signified as substantial writing in the EFL class, is related to the evaluation of the ideas expressed and giving explanations that will demonstrate to the reader why the subject is worth writing about. This process thus demands critical thinking. On the other hand, this process reflects the metacognitive nature of substantial writing and, thus, helps students to develop effective thinking. During this process, students need not only to think about what to write, but also to evaluate their thinking by assessing “clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness” [37, p. 34]. This argument receives the support of Lin [31, p. 19], who claimed that writing, which focuses on decision making, problem-solving, the expression of arguments, and explanation of opinions, may involve a process of critical and creative thinking that helps the writer to compare choices, seek possible solutions, provide support, and clarify ideas.

The use of reflective journal writing in literature classrooms with its effective functions enables EFL learners to practise and develop their critical thinking. As this sort of cognitive writing requires their self-reflection, students will find it necessary to learn how to use evidence from the literary text to support their opinions, how to evaluate their thinking process, and how to apply their prior knowledge and experience to give judgments, make comparisons, and create hypotheses [15]. This writing practice corresponds to Barnett’s [8] notion of “critical being”, including thinking, self-reflection, and action. According to Barnett [8, p. 1], “critical persons are just more than critical thinkers. They are able critically to engage with the world and with themselves as well as with knowledge”. Here, Barnette makes emphasis on the link among the three different domains, i.e., the formal knowledge, the self, and the world. This idea is supported by Boud and Walker [16], who claim that from merging themselves with the stories and then relate what they have learned with their response by writing journals, students can practise their knowledge, reason, reflect, and then perform an action in their real life critically. Rubenfeld and Scheffer [39] also accept the merit of using reflective writing in the literature class by stating that the process of self-evaluation through reflective writing facilitates critical thinking, which is a core component enabling students to become self-motivated and autonomous learners.

In a word, the practice of reflective journal writing supports autonomous and critical thinking in the analytical and creative response of the students to the literary texts. All these skills will be beneficial to students for their future lives both outside and inside the academic study.

2.4. Critical thinking framework

Critical thinking is a broad term that has thousands of definitions. The conceptual frameworks of critical thinking used in this study are Barnett's [8] framework of criticality and Anderson and Krathwohl's [4] taxonomy or Bloom's [12] revised taxonomy of cognitive domains (Figure 1). The categories in the left-hand-side column in Figure 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. Anderson and Krathwohl's [4] cognitive levels, when combined with Barnett's [8] three domains of criticality, map Barnett's [8] levels of criticality that one engages. The use of Anderson and Krathwohl's [4] cognitive levels reflects the complexity of critical thinking operation across the three domains. When creating—the highest level in Anderson and Krathwohl's [4] taxonomy—is exercised across the three domains, some 'actions' have been taken. This resonates with Barnett's [8] levels ranging from critical reasoning to transformative critique. The highest level of criticality illustrated from this combination of frameworks is the Creating-World pairing, which typifies possible action to take in or towards the world.

Barnett's [8, 9] notion of criticality has been used in several studies in the field of language education [18, 25, 27]. These studies have investigated the practice of criticality in modern language classes. The contexts of these studies are quite diverse and include British universities [18, 44] and some Asian tertiary institutions [25, 42]. The common conclusion emerging from these studies is the confirmation of the potential use of this framework to investigate critical thinking practices in second/foreign language contexts.

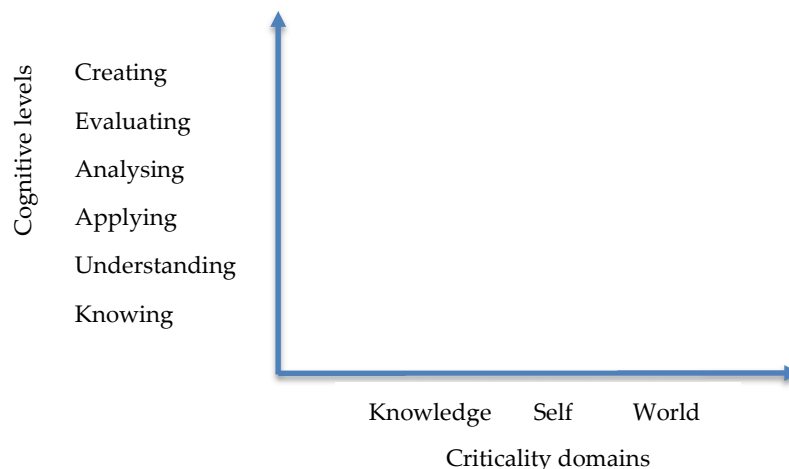


Figure 1. Critical thinking framework

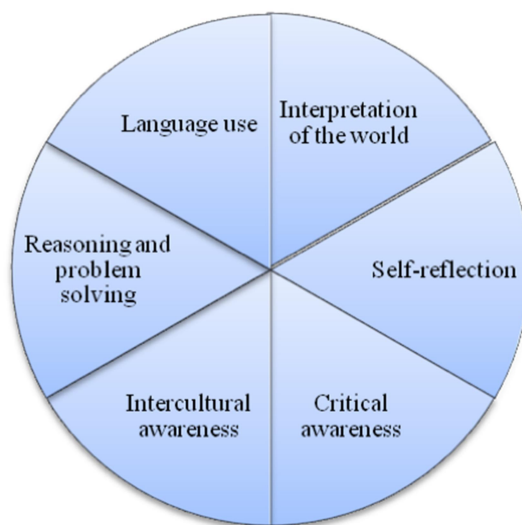


Figure 2. Critical thinking skills required to work with literary texts [13]

The definition and framework of critical thinking used in this study are arguably suitable for the context of EFL Literature classes. According to Langer [29, p. 607], literature helps students question and explore their lives and enable changes in their attitudes towards the world. Bobkina and Stefanova's [13, p. 685] research identifies critical thinking skills that can be used to analyse literary works in EFL contexts, including "the interpretation of the world, self-reflection, critical awareness, intercultural awareness, reasoning and problem solving, and language use" (Figure 2). The authors suggest using this framework of critical thinking to teach literary works via reader-response approach. It can be seen from Bobkina and Stefanova's [13] framework that the critical thinking skills required in a Literature class correspond to the higher-order thinking levels in Anderson and Krathwohl's [4] framework and the three domains of criticality in Barnett's [8] model. Therefore, Bobkina and Stefanova's [13] research helps confirm the scientific relevance of the use of Anderson and Krathwohl's [4] cognitive levels and Barnett's [9] domains of criticality in this study.

2.5. Assessment of critical thinking

To assess critical thinking, standardised critical thinking tests such as the California Critical Thinking Skills Tests, California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory Test, or Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal have been used widely in the world. These tests were designed by Western critical thinking experts, and the contexts of the questions are in

Western countries; hence, the use of these standardised tests in non-Western contexts is warned to be inappropriate [43]. Some researchers [43, 25] suggest employing other methods, one of which is a qualitative one to assess critical thinking.

The diversity in critical thinking definitions affects the assessment of this competence [17]. In qualitative studies, Bloom's [12] taxonomy of the cognitive domain and its revised framework by Anderson and Krathwohl [4] have been used widely [22, 40]. Recently, Barnett's [8, 9] framework of criticality has been employed to assess students' critical thinking [18, 42]. Binh [11] combined these two theories to create a framework of critical thinking and use it to analyse critical thinking practices in some tertiary EFL classes in Vietnam.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research site and participants

The research was conducted at a university in Vietnam in the second semester of the 2017–2018 academic year. The students are third-year English majors studying British Literature and/or American literature.

3.2. Data collection procedure

During the semester, the teachers asked the students to write two or three reflective journals in English. The teachers assigned the topics/questions in class and collected the journals one week later. Fifteen students were chosen to collect their journals according to the following criteria: students with more than two journals, the journals of different topics, and the students' consent to contribute their journals to the research. Accidentally, just 15 fulfilled the criteria, with 30 journals to be analysed.

Specifically, the number of journals for each topic is as follows:

- Thinking about death in the two poems "Leaves of Grass" and "The tide rises, the tide falls": 6 journals
- Writing Rip's future life (Rip Van Winkle): 10 journals
- Creating Mrs. Mallard's soloquil about life of freedom (The story of an hour): 4 journals
- Imagining a visit to an imaginary country: 2 journals
- Thinking about YOLO and writing about what you would do if today were your last day in life: 4 journals

- Giving another title for Sonnet 18: 3 journals
- Comparing flirting cultures in the two poems “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” and “Tát nước đầu đình” (Vietnamese folk lyric of courtship): 1 journal

The students were then invited for semi-structured interviews, which lasted about 10 minutes each. Only 7 out of 15 students could arrange their time to participate. The interviews were conducted individually and recorded, and all of the interviews were in Vietnamese. The researchers transcribed and translated only the parts that were used as direct quotations in the report. The names of the participants used in this article were changed to assure their confidentiality.

3.3. Data analysis

The students’ critical thinking was analysed according to the critical thinking framework used in this study. The rationale for the use of this framework is explained in the previous section (see Literature review). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data on the students’ perception of the use of reflective journals and its relation to the students’ development of critical thinking. The interviews focus on the students’ opinions about the use of reflective journals in EFL literature classes and their perceptions of the possible opportunities to develop their critical thinking via this activity. The data were coded according to these three themes.

To ensure the reliability of the study’s data analysis, the researchers met several times to analyse the assessed constructs of critical thinking on the basis of the frameworks used in this study. Each researcher analysed the students’ journals separately, then compared the assessment among the three researchers. Using more than one rater or coder in this way can increase internal reliability [19].

4. Findings

4.1. Students’ critical thinking indicated in their reflective journals

The data reveal that the students used Anderson and Krathwohl’s [4] higher cognitive levels across Barnett’s [9] three domains of criticality – knowledge, self and the world. After reading the students’ written texts, the researchers categorised two main aspects/functions of critical thinking in their writing. The first category is the analysis and evaluation of knowledge (critical analysis of the characters and the literary works), self (analysis of self’s conditions/situations and explanation of self’s understanding), and the world (linking the literary works and self to the world outside). The second category is creating knowledge

(creating some new knowledge), self (wishes to form some actions to change oneself), and the world (wishes to form some actions to change the world).

4.1.1. Analysis and evaluation of knowledge, self, and the world

Analysis and evaluation of knowledge (literary works)

The students compared the similarities and differences in Longfellow's and Whitman's viewpoints about death. Thuy, for example, analysed each author's perception of death and tried to point out the differences in their viewpoints.

There are different viewpoints on death by Longfellow in "The tide rises, the tide falls" and by Walt Whitman in "Leaves of grass". In "The tide rises, the tide falls", Longfellow think[s] that when humans die, time will delete all things, humans have a time limit here on earth but nature will always overpower. Man think[s] when he die[s], everyone will gradually forget him by time and he will bring all things which he did when he [was] alive. Death will stop all, it is constant and forever and humans can't stop death. Contradictory, in "Leaves of grass", Walt Whitman think[s] death isn't [doesn't] stop all. When humans die but the soul of humans always exist, will live in somewhere. He has a viewpoint on death optimistically. "All goes onward and outward . . . and nothing collapses". He think[s] that everyone should not be sad when die because death is not a bad thing and death will begin a new life (TT – Journal 1).

The students need to understand the two poems to interpret the authors' opinions about death. In this journal, the student used Anderson and Krathwohl's [4] first three cognitive levels in Barnett's [8] knowledge domain. As Dieu Linh shared in the interview, she combined different skills such as understanding, analysing the author's viewpoints reflected in the poems (e.g., death), and evaluating them according to personal experience.

Analysis and evaluation of self: self-reflection

The second form of critical thinking indicated in the students' journals is the interpretation of self. They interpreted various aspects of their selves, such as their viewpoints about death, about ways to live a meaningful life today, their utmost dream in life, and their present life (NA, ND, and QT). In the journal about YOLO (You Only Live Once), and what the students regret in life if they die, QT wrote about her utmost dream – having a family of her own and devoting her time and love to take care of it.

. . . all I wish to have is a truly happy family of my own. I have read many books for parents to raise children. I have prepared myself a lot for being ready to take care of my future family. I have been waiting for my lover for 4 years. We have a long – distance love, but we promise to build our family together in a very near future. If I happened to die tomorrow, there is only one thing I

would regret: not getting married with the one I love, having children whom I have always dreamt of (QT – Journal 2).

QT described in detail her dream and what she has prepared to make that dream come true. She continued to explain the reason why she had that dream.

There is a saying that I love: “Every heart has a story to tell”. My mother passed away when I was seven. I also have my little sister to take care of. We did try to be more mature and independent than our peers, but life was not easy for us. We had to endure lots of fighting and quarrel between our father and stepmother. All we could do is trying to study, to become our support. And one thought that pulled me through those days was that I soon had my family in which there would be just laughter and joy, in which I could devote all my time to take care of my children and prepare meals. And I would be truly happy in my family. That’s the reason why many years have gone by, my dream has never ever changed (QT – Journal 2).

We can see from this student’s journal entry that she reflected on her family condition and realised some philosophies for her own in life: “to become our support” and to have a family “in which there would be just laughter and joy”. The student thought critically by reflecting on her life story. The assigned task for this journal helped the students to realise what is important in their lives.

This form of critical thinking helps the students sharpen their ability to criticise various aspects of their lives, either positive or negative.

Analysis and evaluation of the world

For this form of critical thinking, the students analysed the issues or features of the world around them. The data show that the students observed cultural differences (courtship between Vietnamese and Western cultures), analysed philosophies in life, or anticipated future life.

Minh Thuy observed the differences in the directness level in Vietnamese and Western courtship cultures as follows:

In culture of courtship, the shepherd shows the specific of Western people, they are very direct. The shepherd proposes the nymph by using a direct request “come live with me and be my love” while the man in “Tat nuoc dau dinh” teases this young woman by using a wrong sentence “ Bo quen chiec ao tren canh hoa sen” (Forgot my shirt in the lotus leaf) and we can’t know his purpose until we read half of the poem, this poem is like a confession and we can see that he is so dim. This point expresses the differences in the culture of courtship of Eastern people and Eastern people (MT – Journal 1).

It can be seen that the student analysed cultural differences in courting practice implicit in the two poems. In the interview, Minh Thuy talked about her observation.

From my observations in life or through films, I realise that Western people often express their sentiments openly and directly. This is different from Vietnamese culture. We often make indirect request, go around the bush, as we are afraid to embarrass listeners (MT, interview June 15).

Through this journal entry, the students could broaden their worldview by analysing cultural differences, hence, foster their critical views towards the world.

The students showed other examples of critical thinking when they made several interpretations about philosophies of life: ways to adapt to changes in life, comparing life to a train, thinking about what one needs to do in life, etc.

The nature of life is to change. Need to change while growing up and that change always starts with the old values, and good values should be preserved. That is the way to human existence and rising up in every situation (AT – Journal 1).

By comparing life to a journey on a train, NA used the examples of her life to illustrate different relationships on that journey and how one should prepare to live that life most happily and peacefully.

Life is like a journey on a train . . . When we were born, we boarded the train and met our parents, and we believe that our parents will always be with us. But then, at some stations our parents will step down [get off] and let us go alone. As time passes, the others will board the train with us, our brothers and sisters, our friends, and our half. However, they will get off the train and leave the space permanently that when you think of each time, the sadness can't be forsaken. On the other hand, the train of life is filled with pleasure, anger, love, hate and farewells . . . We do not know what station we will step down. So, we have to live in the best, the most perfect way with loving, forgiving, and giving the best in us. By the time we get on the train and leave the space permanently, we should leave beautiful memories to those who will continue the journey of life (NA – Journal 1).

Besides making observations about their life, the students criticised the lifestyle of some other people in society. QT, for example, argued:

All in all, it would be very nice if each of us knows how to treasure our moments, especially to the young who still have time, energy, and potential to do anything if they really want. However, there are still some youngsters who abuse this life style and use it as an excuse for their overindulgence, their laziness or their rebellion. In addition, this lifestyle may also lead to their hasty when deciding something without thinking carefully (QT – Journal 2).

The reflective journals give the students the opportunities to analyse the problems in today's world, helping them to be more critical of the world around them.

4.1.2. Creating–knowledge, self and the world

There is evidence that the students exercised the highest cognitive level – creating – across knowledge, self, and the world.

Creating – knowledge

Three journal tasks ask the students to retitile the poem Sonnet 18 and reconstruct a soloquial of Mrs. Mallard – the female character in “The story of an hour”, and write another ending of Rip Van Winkle. These journals require the students to create new knowledge on the basis of the analysis of the literary works. In the collected journals, the students showed that they based their creation on their analysis of the literary works, their judgment, evaluation, and reflection.

In the journal asking to reconstruct a soloquial of Mrs. Mallard, the students needed to communicate their understanding of the character and the story in a creative way – from their lens. They were required to turn themselves into Mrs. Mallard and described her feeling/psychology within one hour after the death of her husband. In the following journal, AT described the change in Mrs. Mallard’s psychology from the perspective of a Vietnamese married woman, who is trying to oppose herself to Confucian traditions.

... “I cannot continue anymore, cannot continue.”

It is a sentence that in the past six years that I always think and said to myself that I have suffered enough, it is time to finish it. But I can’t do it. I’m very scared. I am afraid of family members that will decline, I’m afraid of them sad, afraid of feeling scaring people and afraid of this society will against me. ... It’s not a forced marriage and it’s not really bad. However, in this Eastern society, once you have accepted a husband, you will be totally dependent on him, both literally and figuratively. My husband is not, of course, a bad man, he didn’t beat me or insult me. But I still feel stuffy, I feel breathless when living with this man. He is always in control of anything in the home and in social relationships and I must be a perfect wife and obedient wife in his eyes and in this society. There are many people who say, I was determined by fate, so I should think a simple way and I should accept living like that. But I thought differently, maybe because I was stupid, I accepted this life so easily, I just thought, “It’s just a marriage. Every woman is born and raised, married, given birth and lives a normal life for the rest of her life.” And I was wrong, I married, I also gave birth to him [his son]. I have a lovely son; I also lived a normal life as the present, but in my heart am not happy. Why? When my husband came home from work, a decent meal must be served on the table. In the morning, I have to get up early to prepared food, neat clothes, to be a correct and decent lady in works and deeds, hidden all emotions ... Everything must be perfect. I bind myself to something called marriage and I was self-suffering for it. Now, I realize that I want to be self-assertion more than ever. ... Now, though only two people in-house, my son and me, I will still be happy, I will be free to teach him what I want him to be better, I love him in the way I

want to do it, I am alive as a real person, no one forced me to become a woman living being in the pattern and I would never have to hide my tears, hide my emotions at any moment. Just think of it, my heart agitated strangely. I expect many moments that appear soon, to be myself, I do not know how to feel but I hope so. No one will be able to decide what my happiness is, and I will have my way. And this choice will be determined by my heart, from my dream, not any by anyone or social standard. I will step out of life with optimism, courage, understanding my values and to be persevering in pursuit of the path I have chosen. At that time, I'm not to need appreciation or recognition of anyone, I have understood that: "I am the happiest person in the world." (AT – Journal 2)

Mrs. Mallard, a Western lady in a short story, becomes a typical Vietnamese married woman who accepts to be inferior to her husband, to live a boring and unhappy family life, and to serve the husband who seems to see her as no less than a servant. That woman does not dare to live her true life because of the invisible fear of society and its rituals. In this journal, Anh Thu analysed the controversies within the lady herself and could help to understand more about the complication in her psychology. The student succeeded in reconstructing Mrs. Mallard from an Eastern view. To be able to create a soloquil as required in the journal, the student must have understood the character and her psychology well. Besides, the student knew how to integrate her cultural observations into the analysis of the character's mixed feelings. In the journal, the student made certain statements that might imply what she/woman needs to do in life (e.g., no one will be able to decide what my happiness is, and I will have my way. And this choice will be determined by my heart, from my dream, not by anyone or social standards. I will step out of life with optimism, courage, understanding my values, and persevering in pursuit of the path I have chosen). This is categorised as creating – the world form of critical thinking and will be analysed further in the next section.

In another journal entry, the students were asked to imagine the life of Rip—the main character—in Rip Van Winkle after he woke up from a 20-year sleep. This task requires the students to exercise all the cognitive levels in Anderson and Krathwohl's [4] framework as they needed to recall, retrieve, synthesise, and evaluate Rip's personalities, his relationship with family members and neighbours, and the social, cultural and political context of the story to create an ending of the story. The students demonstrated that they applied all in this task. QT, for example, invented two new characters, Little Wolf and the woman, to be Rip's friends in his new life.

Even though now Rip is recognised by many people in the village, he still feels lonely and isolated
...

One day as usual, he was sitting alone under the tree, he heard a bark just like the one of Wolf. He looked around to find out where that sound came from. Out of the blue, a dog jumped over and

happily licked him just like they knew each other. "Is this Wolf?" – Rip wondered. "But he died already". Many questions appeared in his head, but he decided to play with the dog, considering it like a beautiful dream. Suddenly, a woman came over and called the dog Little Wolf, the dog quickly ran back to the woman. She looked really graceful and gentle. She smiled but Rip was sure that she had been going through lots of grieves and sorrows through her sad eyes.

Is this your dog?

Is he sweet?

Absolutely. He's just like my dog 20 years ago – Wolf.

Oh, such a coincidence. His father's name is Wolf so I named him Little Wolf.

The talk kept going. They sat under the tree and told each other their stories. It turned out that her husband had died in the war. So to her, liberty is joy, but an ultimate grieve also because never in her life could she meet her dear man. She lost him forever. In order to earn the independence for the US, there are a lot of people sacrificing their precious lives, their families and their happiness. After having heard the bad news from her husband's friends, she tied her herself in the house. She did not want to talk to anyone or hear anyone consoling her because she knew that one would understand her pain. She felt that the whole world turned dark without him. She hardly smiled for a long time. Thankfully, a neighbor gave her a little dog and it was Little Wolf that dragged her outside, feeling the sunlight again.

Rip saw him in her story. He understood that independence, liberty and unity to a nation are obviously precious. However, losing 20 years of youth or happiness with the ones that we love are irretrievable sacrifice.

They went on talking until sunset. Little Wolf jumped around, catching butterflies.

Day after day, they became soul mates. Every day, they met each other under the tree in the wood, talked about their memories, their old lives, and their new stories. They also went fishing and taking care of flowers.

Sometimes, living in a very strange place, we just need a soul mate that is ready to listen to our stories and understand us. The following days would not be gloomy anymore.

QT showed her creativity in introducing the Little Wolf and the woman to the story. The creation of these two characters is based on the student's understanding of the story. The Little Wolf was seen as the replacement of the Wolf that Rip lost during his long sleep. QT also created the image of a woman who suffers losses. According to QT (interview, June 15), she made up this female character to help Rip have a friend who has a similar situation with him. Additionally, the student linked the story to the socio-political context of America during the revolutionary war. She seemed to refer the woman's losses to those of most American people during this historic period. In the interview, QT confirmed this point. She said,

From what the teacher lectured in class, I understand that any revolutionary war caused loss to both sides. From that understanding, I built up the female character that suffered losses like Rip. When these two people met each other, they might share their feelings from their losses." (QT, interview, June 15).

It can be seen that the student regenerated the knowledge she had learnt in class to create the new knowledge reflected in the journal. The student used the historical events implied in the story, analysed, and evaluated them to introduce an imaginary hypothesis in her writing. She confessed that she had to live the character's life for some time to understand the character's personality and living conditions (QT, interview).

Creating-self: what action they may take

Creating-self form of critical thinking is defined in this study as the statement/voicing of what a person/student should do. This is like what each person realises what is important to his/her life and what s/he should do to improve it. In various journals, there are numerous examples of this form of critical thinking.

QT, in the following extract, asserted her action out of the sad story of her family situation.

There is a saying that I love: "Every heart has a story to tell". My mother passed away when I was seven. I also have my little sister to take care of. We did try to be more mature and independent than our peers, but life was not easy for us. We had to endure lots of fighting and quarrel between our father and stepmother. All we could do is trying to study, to become our supporters. (QT – Journal 2)

It seems that QT determined herself to focus on her study to be successful and thereby be able to be her supporter. This is like her action plan and the guiding light of her life. In another journal, NA wrote about what she needs to do in her life not to feel regretful when she dies: being with her family, her lover, and herself.

If I happened to die tomorrow, I would change nothing. I would live my life that day as I do every day. Firstly, I would spend the rest of my day, seeing my family members and spending time with family. I would tell my parents and siblings that I love them. And I would make a homemade meal for my loved ones . . . The second, I would go all somewhere I like and do what I . . . Next, I would take good care of myself than before. I would eat a healthier diet . . . In addition, I would want someone know how much he means to me. I would always be on time for any important appointment, I would not say something that would hurt his feelings. If having chance, I could still learn from my mistakes, just do it more efficiently. I would pass every single test at school and never make mistakes. Moreover, my time have limited so I would not waste living time of mine.

And most important that I would want have the courage to follow my heart and intuition. I would pursue my passion (NA – Journal 1).

Although this is just writing about a hypothetical/imaginary situation (you die tomorrow), but the student had an opportunity to think about herself and about what she needs to do for a better life. The following thoughts of ND can illustrate the positive influence of this reflective activity.

Although that situation is not real, thinking about it can help me more flexible in dealing with similar situation in the future. For example, when I wrote about YOLO, I think that helps me love more happily and with more objective attitude every day. I thought about the people with cancer, those who value the present life, and thought I needed to tell people about ways to live a healthy life. I think I need to do something big to help other people (ND, interview June 15).

From ND's thoughts, it is expected that thoughts and actions do not have a long distance.

Creating–world: what action people (the world) should take

Creating–world form of critical thinking is different from creating–self one in terms of the domain of criticality. The students voice their opinions on what action people/the world should take. This is like the messages that the students want to send to readers.

In the journal about Mrs. Mallard's soloquid, the students made statements implying what women should do in life (e.g., "No one will be able to decide what my happiness is, and I will have my way. And this choice will be determined by my heart, from my dream, not any by anyone or social standard. I will step out of life with optimism, courage, understanding my values and to be persevering in pursuit of the path I have chosen"). This is evidence for creating–world form of critical thinking.

It can be found from the students' journals the statements about human courage to pursue dreams (QT) or to face difficulties and challenges in life (NA).

We indeed need to be brave enough to do whatever we dream of because we only live once. But meanwhile, we also need to bear in mind that when something has gone, do not regret, learn to accept and prepare for new things because we may have one life to live, but we have still many chances to start all over again. (QT – Journal 2)

Be brave on your chosen path and do not look back. Besides, when you feel like you want to get back or figuring out what will happen if you choose another path, think about why you decided to take this path from the beginning. You should remember that you have the chance to choose the path for yourself is how lucky you were then. So that you don't have to regret what you have decided, be brave to receive the challenge and opportunity. (NA – Journal 1)

4.2. Students' attitudes towards the reflection journal writing activity and its role to the opportunities to develop critical thinking

4.2.1. Students' attitudes towards the reflection journal writing activity

All the interviewed students appreciated the reflection journal writing activity. The students stressed the importance of one's reflections in a Literature class. They stated that this activity helps them express their opinions and their reflections on the literary works they had not done much in the class time or quizzes.

A deeper and more insightful understanding of the literary works and their characters is another benefit of writing reflection journals. For example, ND said, "I like this activity because it helps me understand the literary works more."

We love this task as we were asked to use our imagination and creativity, but not theories, imitations or samples. We can use our experience and knowledge that we have accumulated regarding the cultures and lives around us, thereby can sort out cultural differences of the language that we are studying (ND, interview June 15).

4.2.2. Reflective journal writing and critical thinking

The students were aware of the opportunities to develop high cognitive levels, such as analysing and evaluating through reflective journal writing. They mentioned that they could see things from both sides and could develop their imagination, prediction, evaluation, and creativity. They appreciated the opportunities to learn how to express thoughts and opinions, develop the skills of analysing and explaining a problem, apply issues to life, link to the reality, or share similar thoughts with the authors (HX, NT).

Especially, the students emphasised the opportunities to reflect on their lives. ND, for example, said, "It's hard to say if I can develop my critical thinking through just some reflective journals. However, I see that I could reflect on my life, evaluating what I am satisfied and what I still feel regretful." Similarly, TH analysed the possibilities of critical thinking development from her reflection process, "Critical thinking is developed by reviewing the characters' lives and thinking about the characters from their perspectives or conditions to understand them better or to see how I may react or behave if I were in their situations." When supposing they were in somebody else's perspectives, the students would have opportunities to think about their lives. ND added, "When you imagine you were in somebody's situation, you will think about your reactions or behaviours by reflecting on yourself, on the social context where you are living, and assessing whether your behaviours are appropriate or not."

5. Discussion

The findings from this study can help form certain arguments regarding (i) the forms of critical thinking in EFL Literature classes, (ii) the Vietnamese EFL students' critical thinking, and (iii) reflective journal writing and opportunities for critical thinking development.

5.1. Forms of critical thinking in American-British literature classes for EFL students

In this study, the students' critical thinking was analysed according to the cognitive levels [4] and criticality domains [9]. In the data analysis, we categorised two forms of critical thinking: analysing-evaluating and creating across the three domains: knowledge, self, and world. The lower levels in Anderson and Krathwohl's [4] framework were not presented because when the students exercised analysis and evaluation, they integrated lower thinking levels, such as knowing, understanding, and applying. The creating level was separated since, at this level, the students created a new piece of knowledge (the ending of a story, the soloquid of a woman, or a new title of a poem). When thinking at this highest level, the students included lower thinking levels, as asserted by Bloom [12]. For example, when writing the ending of the Rip Van Winkle story, Quy Tran created two new characters, namely, a little wolf and a woman, to make friends with Rip – the main character. To be able to have such a creation, she must have understood Rip's personality and the relationship between this character and the others in the story; she must have analysed and evaluated Rip's psychology and the social context of the United States of America at the time indicated in the story. Without such understanding, analysis, and evaluation, the student could not create the ending of the story and predicting and describing Rip's new life after a 20-year long sleep. The findings of this study confirm Bloom's [12] observation that it is hard to have a clear division among the cognitive levels. Therefore, the categorisation of the critical levels in this study is relative.

Similarly, in the criticality domains, there is an overlapping among domains of knowledge, self, and world. This observation is supported by evidence from the students' journals. For example, when the student wrote the soloquid of Mrs. Mallard, they combined the analysis and evaluation of the character (knowledge domain) and their experience as a woman or that of Vietnamese women living around them (self and world domains) to get an insightful understanding of Mrs. Mallard's psychology and then to create a soloquid of this character within one hour after her husband's death.

It can be seen that the framework of critical thinking used in this study helps to identify different levels of cognitive involvement (knowing, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating) and to differentiate criticality domains (knowledge, self, and the world). This framework has proved its suitability in understanding different forms of critical

thinking in a Literature class, where students can “foster students’ critical abilities through their evaluation of the social, cultural, and historical events, which forms the background to a particular short story, a novel, or a poem” [30, p. 80]. The findings of this research support Thunnithet’s [42, p. 58] argument that the achievement of critical thinking is together with the achievement of knowledge, and that students can enhance their critical self-reflection from what they have learnt in literary work. According to Thunnithet [42], knowledge and self-reflection are useful factors to help students be able to perform critical actions [9] in different ways, such as problem-solving and practical decision-making. Sharing about the impact of *You only live once* campaign on her attitudes towards people with cancer and her wish to popularise healthy lifestyle, a student shows her critical thinking at the highest level: creating–world.

I thought about the people with cancer, those who value the present life, and thought I needed to tell people about ways to live a healthy life. I think I need to do something big to help other people (ND, interview June 15).

This study implies that critical thinking in Literature classes reflects Barnett’s [8, p. 1] viewpoint of criticality: “Critical persons are just more than critical thinkers. They are able to engage critically with the world and with themselves, as well as with knowledge”.

5.2. Vietnamese students’ critical thinking in American-British literature classes

The analysis of the students’ reflective journals proves that the students demonstrated their critical thinking by being able to analyse, evaluate, and create not only literary knowledge but also themselves and the world.

In this study, the students have opportunities to think critically at the highest level: creating–world, taking action to make changes, although this form of critical thinking is expressed via the students’ writings, but is not verified by their actual actions due to the limitation of this study. However, by writing up their thoughts, the students can “raise awareness of the need to be conscious of and, in some ways, to address oppressive practices in various shapes and at various levels of operation” [27, p. 38]. Johnston et al. [27, p. 70] mention the possibility or necessity of this critical thinking form at the undergraduate level, “It is unrealistic, in most cases, to expect undergraduate students to function at that level . . . Educationists can only aim to facilitate students’ progress somewhat along the critical developmental path”.

There might be some concerns about the influence of the teachers’ lectures or peers’ contributions in class on the students’ critical thinking, indicated in their reflective journals. In this study, the reflective writing task was assigned as homework. After studying one literary work, the teacher assigned the journal questions, and the students would hand in their journals

one week later. All of the questions required the students to relate to their lives and the world around them; hence, the students could not just reproduce what they had heard in class. On the contrary, the knowledge that they had gained in class served as the basis for their reasoning, analysis, and evaluation. Some students stated that they had to live with the character for a long time before writing (TH), or one student shared, "From the teacher's lecture in class, I understood that all revolutionary wars caused losses to both sides. Therefore, I created the character of a woman who lost her husband to be Rip's friend. I thought these two people could share their losses together" (QT). It can be inferred from the students' exchange that what the students learnt in class from the teachers and friends was the foundation for them to think at a higher level and in other domains than knowledge. This is seen as one of the resources for critical thinking development, according to Bailin et al.'s [7] viewpoint. This point will be discussed further in Section 5.3.

5.3. Reflective journal writing and opportunities for critical thinking development

Writing is considered to help develop critical thinking as "writing is both a process of doing critical thinking and a product communicating the results of critical thinking" [10, p.32]. For reflective journal writing, the findings from this study show that this activity does offer opportunities for the students to display their critical thinking. All the reflective journals in this study require the students to do self-reflection according to their awareness and personal experience. The analysis of the collected journals shows that the students know how to link the literary works to their lives, using their knowledge and experience to analyse the stories or poems or even to create new knowledge. For example, QT explained the reasons for her creation of Rip's friend in a new life in a new place in the ending of Rip Van Winkle's story.

In fact, I felt sympathetic with the character in this short story. It was originated from my experience of living far away from home. I felt lonely some time when I went abroad to study. (QT, interview)

Obviously, the student integrated his or her experiences in creating new character of the story.

The students were aware of the role of reflective journal writing.

I think this activity helps students to make judgments and evaluations over a problem by reasoning and seeing a problem from its two sides. In addition, this activity helps us develop our imagination, our ability to predict and evaluate things, and our creativity. (DL, interview)

Given the important role of reflective journal writing to the opportunities to develop students' critical thinking, it is necessary to highlight the significance of the guided questions for the reflective journals. From our viewpoint, the questions encourage the students' critical

thinking, as argued previously. Some researchers, such as Bailin et al. [10], Barnett [8], and Johnston et al. [27], emphasise the importance of resources for developing students' critical thinking like background knowledge, teaching methodologies, and institutions' assistance. In this study, the teachers' assigned questions for the reflective journals seem to promote the students' display of critical thinking. This resonates with Barnett's [8, p. 114-5] statement that "students need appropriate cognitive, personal, and practical space and guidance to develop as critical beings across the three domains (knowledge, self, and world)". From this research, we hope to conduct further studies on the influence of tasks/questions assigned by teachers on the students' expression of critical thinking.

6. Implications and conclusions

From the research findings, the following implications can be made:

1. Reflective journal writing activity can be widely used in EFL content classes, in general, and in British-American literature classes, in particular, to promote students' critical thinking.

2. The critical thinking framework used in this study can be used as a reference tool to develop and assess critical thinking or to design teaching contents with the integration of critical thinking.

This study explores the students' critical thinking expressed in reflective journals in some EFL British-American literature classes in Vietnam. It helps shape the forms of critical thinking in an EFL literature class that proceeds through cognitive levels and domains of criticality. In addition, the study also helps reveal the Vietnamese students' critical thinking, whose evidence has been still little in the literature. It is found that the Vietnamese EFL students display the elements of critical thinking in their reflective journals. This study also offers evidence for the role of reflective journals in encouraging the students to display their critical thinking.

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