

## Delegating Critical Thinking Skills in Learners through Effective Questioning Technique in the Class

Ho Thi My Linh<sup>1\*</sup>, To Minh Thanh<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> Hoa Sen University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

\*Corresponding author's email: [linh.hothimy@hoasen.edu.vn](mailto:linh.hothimy@hoasen.edu.vn)

\*  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8836-6346>

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### ABSTRACT

The 21st century is known as the "flat world" where people can communicate from anywhere, anytime. It is imperative that educators ensure their students have the necessary skills for adapting to the modern world, such as communication, creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration. By learning English, students will not only shorten their learning gaps for new opportunities but will also increase their chances of becoming global citizens. However, since most Vietnamese students do not know how to practice or promote their critical thinking skills while learning English, it is crucial that teachers understand and apply a variety of techniques and strategies to activate and guide students' critical thinking. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) state that well-structured- questions raise students' awareness of using their knowledge and comprehension of a subject at lower-order thinking skills (remember-understand-apply) to higher-order thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation). To learn how Vietnamese teachers delegate critical thinking questions to their students and how often they do so, the researchers conducted the study using a quantitative method to figure out how teachers' questioning techniques promote students' critical thinking skills. This study uses a quantitative methodology in which the researchers developed the questionnaires based on Bloom Taxonomy's thinking orders and contributed to Vietnamese Teachers for data collection. The results showed that most Vietnamese teachers know how to use questioning techniques and frequently develop them during their teaching. They use questions to evaluate learners' conceptual understandings and provide them with feedback on their thinking processes from simple to complex concepts and provide hints or alternative explanations, which boost the development of students' critical thinking skills.

#### Keywords:

Thinking Process,  
Critical Thinking,  
Scaffolding  
Questions,  
Questioning  
Technique

### Introduction

Critical thinking, one of the four pillars of the 21st-century skill along with communication, collaboration, and creativity, not only describes the ability to "focus on deciding what to believe

or do," (Ennis, 2011, p.10) but also the ability to analyze, argue, clarify and refine the viewpoints, as well as to suppose or integrate the logic of viewpoints and then to apply these skills to real-life problems. Furthermore, according to the Society for Human Resources Management (2006), critical thinking is ranked as the highest skill - even more than creativity or the application of information technology. That reflects how critical it is for teachers to instill in their students. Meanwhile, educators must recognize that critical thinking is a skill that must be developed rather than intelligence. As a result, critical thinking should be taught in the classroom in a structured way that allows and encourages students to think for themselves, question hypotheses, analyze, and synthesize the information and facts to make a decision.

Moreover, the findings in Nguyen and Lo's research (2022) indicated that Vietnamese society only considers students to be excellent if they can communicate fluently in English and not just if they have high test scores. In addition, it is noted that Vietnamese students' language proficiency is not as high as expected, suggesting that educators should adapt teaching methods or conduct additional research to improve students' learning outcomes (Le & Le, 2022). Moreover, the way EFL teachers approach their classes will profoundly impact their students' attitudes about English learning and their learning outcomes in general. Thus, teachers should use questioning techniques to help students develop their critical thinking skills, which in turn results in students improving their learning outcomes.

## Literature review

### *Thinking*

The history of thinking research is determined by the time when people realize that they are thinking. It is clear that thinking is unique to human beings, and that also is the main feature that distinguishes humans from other living things. According to Halpern (2003, p.84), intervention or transformation of internal representation is called thinking.

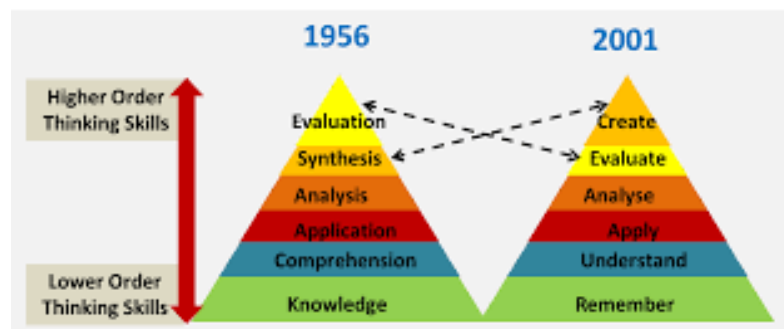
Thinking is the basis of any cognitive activities and processes, including manipulation and analysis of information received from the environment. The manipulation and analysis occur through abstracting, reasoning, imagining, problem-solving, judging, and decision-making. Obviously, the thinking process of the brain is involved in the processing of information that a person perceives before performing an action or making a decision.

### *Critical thinking skills*

According to McGregor (2007), thinking is reasoning, and that reason is a chain of simple concepts connected by using strict rules of logic. Students will develop their thinking through a lot of activities, and one of many important activities that students can enhance their thinking is to learn. Remarkably, both learning and thinking are the concepts that support and complete one another. Brockett & Roger (1991) state that learning is a personal act of an individual to make full use of the potential, which happens to insight learners and leads them to actualize their self-experience through new comprehensions. In addition, the learner is perceived as a very active participant in the learning process in which a learner undertakes knowledge based

on the form of rules and concepts. He/she organizes and relates new information to existing knowledge in memory. He/she will connect all knowledge together and analyze or evaluate them before having the final decisions in the different contexts (Jonassen, 1991b). Critical thinking is defined as the process involving analysis, evaluation, and a synthesizing of facts, ideas, opinions, and theories. In other words, critical thinking is regarded as a way that a thinker takes charge of his/her thinking, and it is as a reflective and reasonable thought process embodying depth, accuracy, and astute judgment to determine the merit of a decision, an object, or a theory (Alwehaibi, 2012). Similarly, Paul and Elder (2006) interpret critical thinking as the ability to withdraw conclusions based on observation and information through learning. Thus, students must develop critical thinking skills so they can collaborate effectively, think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems effectively in the workplace (Nor & Dishes, 2021).

In the learning process, learners are not only involved in how they process, store, and retrieve information but also in their thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and values. It is crucial for teachers to understand the process of learning, which is divided into two levels- lower thinking order and higher thinking order in order to design lesson plans to activate students' appropriate thinking order to help them develop their thinking effectively. One of the thinking order theories widely used and developed that were based on various taxonomies of learning is the one mainly and originally developed by Benjamin Bloom (Sue, 2020).



A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson et al., 2001)

Bloom's Taxonomy of thinking skills includes six levels of thinking, starting with knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The later revised version began with remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, revising, and creating. The first three levels in Bloom's Taxonomy, Remembering, Understanding, and Applying, are regarded as lower-order thinking skills. It means that before students can understand the facts, they must remember them. Then, they must understand them; they are able to apply the facts.

Higher-order thinking skills are reflected by the top three levels in Bloom's Taxonomy: Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating. Students at these levels are able to analyze the facts or process before they evaluate them, and from the completed evaluation, they will create an accurate conclusion of their own. Using these skills, students are more likely to widen their

perspective on the world and be able to make good decisions, both in school and in life. According to John (2018), it is the goal of teachers to help students promote higher-order thinking. One of the ways to help teachers is to improve students' critical thinking skills by encouraging them to reach a deep level of understanding and thinking through questioning (Dalton & Smith, 2000). Hence, delegating questioning techniques in the classroom will help students dig deeper into the reasoning process, as well as learn how to think critically.

### *Questioning techniques*

#### *Questioning definition*

Questioning can be a useful tool, as it opens lines of communication; provides information; facilitates analysis and diagnosis of a situation; forces us to think outside the box; motivates us to learn; spurs creativity; and, most importantly, promotes scientific inquiry, explanations, and its application (Neirotti, 2021). Lorsch and Ronkowski (1982) assert that questioning is effective in helping students develop critical thinking skills, reinforce their understanding and correct misunderstanding, as well as provide feedback. Moreover, questioning, known as a powerful and dynamic form of communication, requires expertise and time to master. Especially in a learning environment, questioning strategies describe how questions are used to enhance students' learning, and these strategies should be incorporated into a series of procedures in the classroom (Cunningham, 1987; Wilen, 1991). In the meantime, Cotton (1988) argues that teachers must not base that on simply increasing the number of questions. By using questioning techniques effectively, teachers encourage students' critical thinking without focusing on the number of questions asked. Generally, student thinking is influenced by the level of questions that the teacher poses; if teachers systematically raise the level of their questions, students respond accordingly (Orlich et al., 2013).

#### *Questioning techniques*

Several types of questions are used for many different purposes, including procedural, divergent, and convergent questions (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Typically, procedural questions have to do with classroom routines, while divergent questions encourage students to express their opinions or judgments rather than recall previous information. Alternatively, convergence questions demand students to recall prior information. On the other hand, according to Yang (2010), open and closed questions are two different kinds of questions. Questions with only one correct answer are defined as closed questions, whereas questions with more than one correct answer are described as open questions. In addition, Kao and Weng (2012) state that display and referential questions depend on the nature of the interaction. A display question is a question where the teacher knows the answer, whereas a referential question is one whose answer is unknown by the teacher. As a result, it is crucial for teachers to consider the types of questions that should be used so that students will have opportunities to use the target language as they answer these questions (Erlinda & Dewi, 2014). For example, the types of questions that teachers use during the teaching-learning process may serve several purposes, such as cultivating student curiosity, improving students' critical thinking abilities,

stimulating the expression of information, and motivating students' active participation (Cotton, 1998; Padmadewi et al., 2017:102). Studies (Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Wu, 1993) have demonstrated that there is a tendency for language teachers to use closed/display questions rather than open and referential questions. As a result, students' responses are limited and simple. Tan (2007) asserts that the prevalence of low-level and closed questions "places the students in a passive position by depriving them of opportunities to think independently and critically" (p. 100). Therefore, it is evident that teachers need to enhance their questioning strategy that can be used to develop their students' critical thinking skills.

### *Using questioning techniques to enhance critical thinking skills*

According to Shanmugavelu, Ganesan, et al. (2020), engaging students through questioning is one of the most effective strategies for teaching because teachers can practice a number of questioning techniques during a question-and-answer session, which motivates students and encourages their thinking.

### *Using Bloom's Taxonomy questions*

An instructor can strengthen a student's critical thinking skills when they inquire about the student's viewpoint on a discussion topic by asking for clarification, explanations, and justifications from the student. Using the bloom taxonomy, teachers will have an idea of what questions they need to use to build and design curriculum and lesson plan, then encourage and develop students' thinking order from low to high order.

To promote students' thinking, Dalton and Smith (1986) point out that teachers can use sample questions in the potential activities in the classroom to promote students' thinking order from low order to higher.

### *Remember*

It is to recall or remember adequate information previously learned to produce factual (usually correct) answers. Utilize keywords and phrases such as: memorize, define, identify, repeat, recall, state, write, list, name and etc., when asking questions, aim to get factual answers, and test students' memory and comprehension. The following are some sample questions that teachers should ask during activities such as discussion or making a list of the main events:

- What happened next?
- How many...?
- What was the name of the person...?
- Can you list the events in the ...?
- What is the reason...?
- Are these statements true or false?

### *Understanding*

This low level of thinking order is intended to help students understand the meaning of informational material. Questions using keywords or phrases like explain, estimate, predict,

identify, differentiate, etc., to encourage students to translate, interpret, and extrapolate. The following sample questions can be asked:

- Can you write a brief outline in your own words...?
- Can you predict what happens next?
- How would you generalize...?
- How would you differentiate between...?
- What do you think the definition of...?
- How can you interpret...?

### *Application*

Being able to apply previously learned information (or knowledge) to new and unfamiliar situations helps students develop high-order thinking skills. To encourage students to apply knowledge to scenarios that are new and unfamiliar, teachers can ask questions with words such as: demonstrate, apply, describe, elaborate, solve, classify, experiment, etc. such as:

- What factors would you change if...?
- Could you provide a set of instructions based on the information given?
- What facts would you choose to illustrate...?
- What is the best approach to...?
- How would you classify...?
- How would you demonstrate...?

### *Analyze*

Students need activities during the teaching process that will help them develop their analytical skills in order to reach deeper layers of problems, such as drawing a diagram to illustrate data or gathering evidence to support an argument. It will promote students the skills to break down information into parts, try to understand the organizational structure of information, or find subdivide information and show how it is put together. As a result, with the aim to help students attain this level, it is vital to ask some specific questions that use words and phrases such as: what are the differences, analyze, explain, compare, separate, classify, arrange, etc.

- In what ways was this similar to...?
- How would you describe the underlying theme of...?
- What are other possible outcomes?
- What caused these ...?
- Would you be able to compare your ... to the one presented in...?
- What inference can you draw...?
- What evidence do you have...?

### *Evaluation*

By analyzing all the information, students are able to develop their evaluation skills, which allow them to judge or decide according to some criteria without realizing whether their answer is right or wrong. In evaluation questions, students are encouraged to develop opinions about issues and make value decisions based on specific criteria by using keywords, and phrases like

assess, decide, measure, select, explain, conclude, measure, summarize, etc., in the following questions:

- What would you select...?
- What is the best way to prove...?
- Do you know how effective... is?
- What do you think about ... is a good or a bad thing?
- In what way would you have handled...?
- What changes to ... would you conclude?
- Could you provide some information to support...?
- How would you summarize this...?

### *Create*

Students who develop this level of thinking will be able to apply prior knowledge and skills to combine elements into a pattern that was not previously apparent. To stimulate students to create something new using a combination of ideas from different sources in a new way, questions are made with descriptions or phrases like: arrange, invent, compose, construct, design, imagine, devise, etc. Specific questions include:

- Is there anything that could be changed to improve...?
- What would you do to test...?
- How would you design this?
- How would it be if you devised a unique solution?
- What are some unique and unusual uses you can imagine?

### *Research questions*

With the aim to study how teachers delegate questioning techniques to promote students' critical thinking skills, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) What kinds of questions do teachers use in the class in order to promote students' critical thinking skills?
- 2) How often do teachers use Bloom Taxonomy questions in their teaching to improve student's critical thinking skills?

## **Methods**

### *Research design*

In this study, quantitative methods were used to collect data about how Vietnamese English questions and how frequently teachers use them in their classes to improve students' critical thinking because the quantitative methodology can easily be utilized in large groups to collect data. With the quantitative methodology, the researchers developed a descriptive survey method based on Bloom Taxonomy Questions in order to collect data in this study that includes six questions with six orders of thinking skills in Bloom Taxonomy. Moreover, the questionnaires were converted to a Google Form for Vietnamese teachers to easily answer them, and the

researchers could collect and analyze the data more conveniently. A Likert scale was used for data analysis which described each item ranged from 0 to "never", 1- "rarely", 2- "sometimes", 3- "often", 4- "always"(see Appendix 1).

### *Participants of the study*

In total, 100 Vietnamese teachers at VUS participated in the study by filling out surveys on Google Forms. The questionnaire was only completed by 80 randomly selected VUS teachers due to the time limit. As a result, it allowed the researchers to be able to analyze the data to learn more about which questions and how often they use questions in their teaching to help learners develop their thinking order. The researchers were thus able to analyze the data in order to find out which questions teachers use in their teaching and how often they do so to help them develop their thinking order. Since it is particularly important to know how their teaching experiences affect their questioning techniques, the first part of the survey looks at their teaching experiences. The following table 1 summarizes the teaching experiences of 80 teachers.

**Table 1.** VUS English Teachers' Experience

Years of teaching	No of teacher	Percentage
1-3 years	10	12.5%
3-5 years	3	3.8%
5-10 years	7	8.8%
> 10 years	60	75%

Surprisingly, it indicates that most teachers who accepted surveys have reached 75% with over ten years of experience. It is unquestionably beneficial for researchers to determine what types of questions they typically utilize in the classroom.

### *Data procedure*

The study was developed in the following steps. As a first step, the researchers contacted the school managers to ask for their support in sending out questionnaires to all Vietnamese teachers at VUS. After that, participants were free to complete questionnaires within two weeks. The researchers will then send a thank you note to VUS managers and teachers for their contribution. After collecting data and analyzing it, some conclusions were drawn.

## **Results/Findings and discussion**

### *Data analysis*

In quantitative research, data can be analyzed using a variety of techniques. A descriptive analysis of data was carried out in this study using statistical techniques. This term describes the basic characteristics of versatile types of data used in research. It presents data in such a meaningful way that the patterns in the data begin to make sense. In addition, descriptive analysis often provides absolute numbers, and the study's research will elaborate on what the



numbers mean.

There are six different types of questions based on Bloom's Taxonomy that are designed to collect data from lower to higher levels of thinking ability.

The first level of thinking skill is collecting what questions teachers use to check student's remember. Because 75% of teachers who have done this questionnaire have more than ten years of experience, the number of teachers who use all questions to check students' memory falls to these types of groups. Very few teachers with more than three-year experience share their never use of these questions. That means they use them sometimes or often. Figure 1 in the following is to show more in detail the frequency of questions that are used to check students' remembering and understanding.

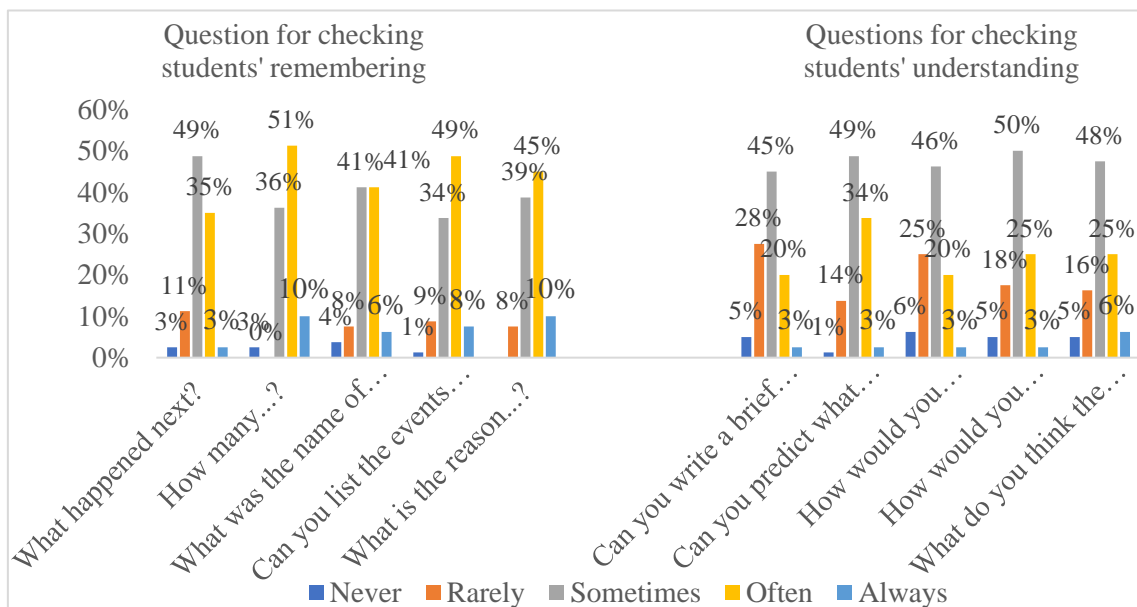


Figure 1: Percentage of questions used to check students' remembering and understanding

In this figure, the vast majority of teachers who frequently use these questions are teachers with more than 10 years of experience. Especially most questions are often and sometimes used by 34% of ten-year experience teachers, and among the most common questions used to test students' remembering, 51% and 49% of them often ask "How many...?" and "Can you list events...?". In the meantime, "What's next?" can be used by below five-year experience teachers, reaching 49%. About 3% of teachers with 10 years of experience never use the question "What was that person's name ...?". However, there are also about 20% and nearly 75% of teachers with the above five-year experience who never or rarely use some unfamiliar questions to check students' understanding.

Next, the results of the questions used to check students' applications are not surprising. All the questions that are used to check students' applications are sometimes used by teachers, particularly 10 years of experience teachers reaching 50%. Figure 2 shows the percentage of

questions used to confirm students applying and analyzing.

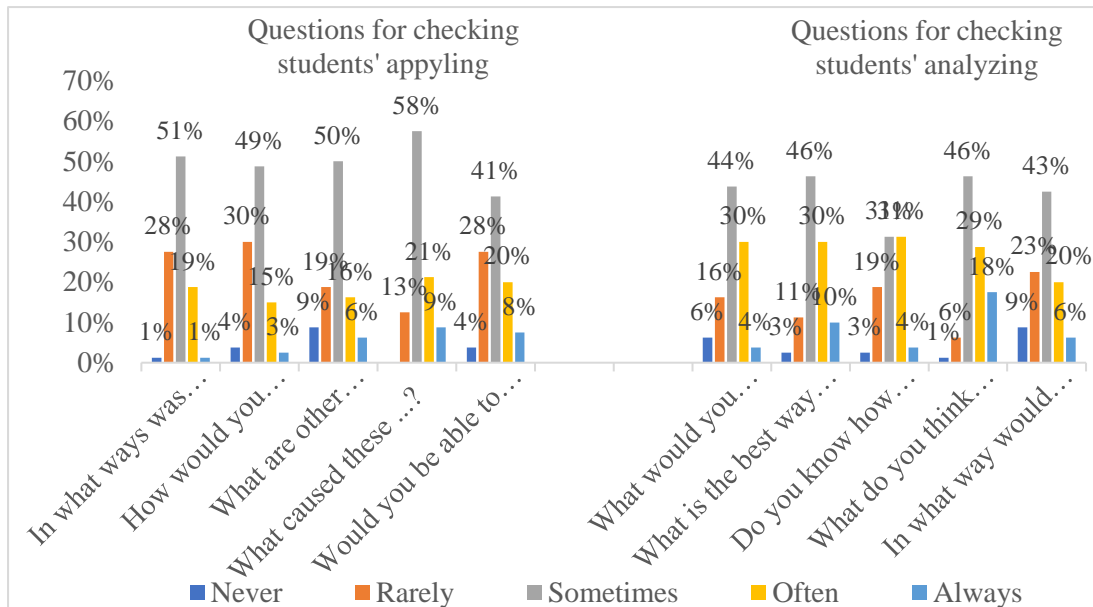


Figure 2: Percentage of questions used to check students' applying and analyzing

Almost 50% of all teachers use questions as a way to test students' analytical and application skills. At the same time, about 30% of these questions are hardly ever used, and the percentage of always use reaches as low as 10%. Around 20% of the questions are asked frequently, which means that teachers may skip checking the analyzing skills of the students. As a result, there are not enough opportunities for them to practice their middle-high level thinking skills. The last two levels of Bloom's thinking order include students evaluating and creating skills. The following figure 3 shows the results of a questionnaire that teachers can use to help their students reach these levels.

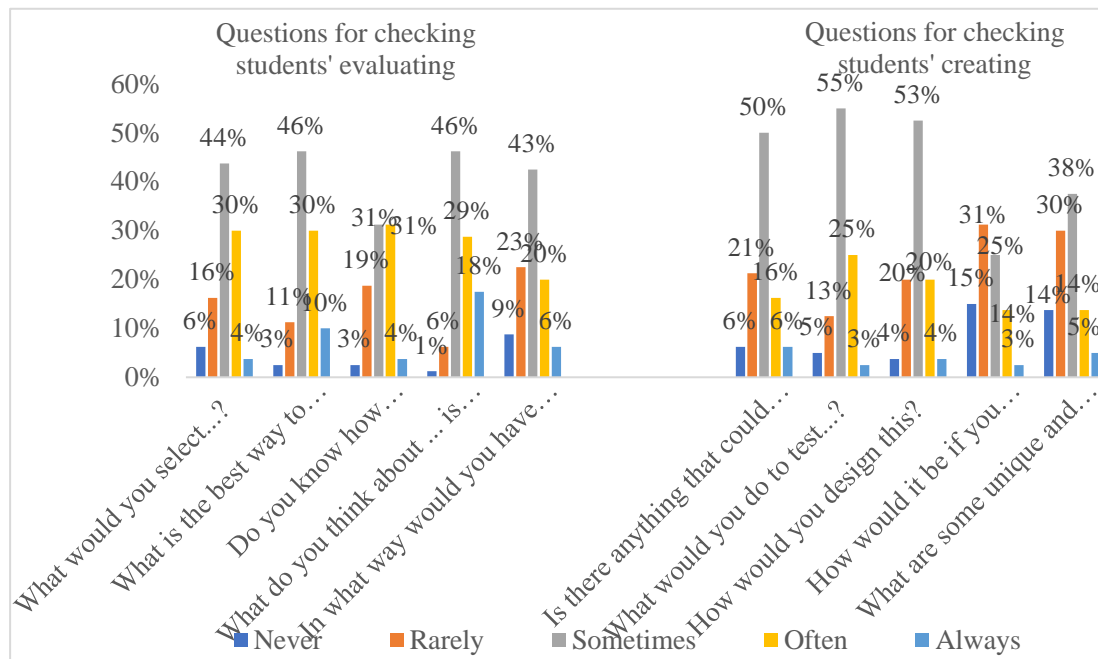


Figure 3: Percentage of questions used to check students' evaluating and creating

In figure 3, there are more than 45% of questions aimed at improving students' evaluation skills are sometimes used, while 30% of these are frequently used.

Fewer than 10% of the questions are rarely asked, which may mean that most teachers give attention to promoting students' evaluation skills. Meanwhile, about 30% of total teachers rarely use these questions to build up students' creating skills. Moreover, it is surprising to learn that teachers with more than 10-year experience use 55% to promote students' creative skills.

## Discussion

Teachers who understand critical thinking involve assessing, examining, and reflecting on existing information, ideas, and beliefs should consider some other techniques with questioning strategies.

Remarkably, due to the fact that most classes have teachers dominate the interaction between them and their students by exchanging questions and answers quickly, students are accidentally placed in passive roles, and their critical thinking and creativity are dampened (Fisher, 2011). As a result, when teachers ask high-level questions, students should be given adequate time to think, develop their reasoning skills, then formulate coherent responses (Orlich et al., 2013). With the questionnaire results, it is clear to see that most teachers understand and sometimes use questions to activate students' high-order thinking skills. The fact is that according to the results, it seems that teachers are not always active in students' critical thinking skills, using questioning techniques frequently. They are quickly sometimes or often use all these question types, but it is not frequently to help learners realize the benefits of answering the questions. Moreover, students are not able to challenge their thinking skills by asking questions to the others at each level of thinking. They are not familiar with asking questions to others and

understanding why they have to ask questions. That's why there are needed pre-training teaching workshops for teachers to get used to this method and delegate them effectively to promote students' critical thinking skills.

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

In brief, this article has demonstrated the importance of delegating critical thinking skills in the classroom through questioning strategies. In addition, it provides some suggestions on how teachers can incorporate questions and question types in their teaching and learning processes to enable students to learn how to think critically and prime their reasoning abilities. It provides educators with a new insight into how to develop critical thinking skills through questions.

The act of questioning provides students with intellectual stimulation and empowers them to take responsibility for their own learning (Rothstein & Santana, 2017; Salmon, Campo, & Barrera, 2019). Thus, it is suggested that by engaging students in the process of questioning, teachers can encourage them to explore techniques to promote their critical thinking skills and to take responsibility for their own learning. It is advisable for teachers not to answer their own questions after a short silence that diverts the learners' attention from the task of thinking. Hence, it would be better for teachers to set students to work in active groups that allow more interaction and provides students more opportunities to exchange ideas, take responsibilities, and become critical thinkers (Slavin, 2011).

Last but not least, according to Simpson (1996), students can improve critical analysis and understanding of texts by asking questions and sharing responses, so it is vital for teachers to stimulate students' reasoning process through reciprocal peer questioning. Simply, using the sample kind of questions for each different purpose, teachers encourage students to work together in pairs or small groups to tackle these types of questions. For instance, the teacher will ask them to make questions for clarification to their partners, and the students will take turns to ask their prepared questions. They will answer each other's questions. Additionally, King (1992) concludes that students using peer questioning groups provided more coherent explanations, asked more critical thinking questions, and acquired higher levels of learning than students using single questions or engaging in discussion without the use of questions. The discussion should highlight the special and outstanding points of the research and explain research results and the impacts; compared with previous studies. Thus, teachers should delegate questioning techniques and combine them with a variety of teaching methods that will result in the formation and enhancement of learners' critical thinking skills.

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## Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Dear Teachers,

This study aims to gain insight and understanding about what types of questions you are using in the classroom to encourage learners to develop their critical thinking skills. This study also helps teachers improve their questioning techniques to help learners develop critical thinking skills. I would appreciate it if you read through the questions below and highlighted the option(s) that you selected. The results will only be used for research purposes.

Thank you very much for your help!

Part 1. Please share your teaching experience, how long have you been teaching English?

1. 1-3 years
2. 3-5 years
3. 5-10 years
4. >10 years

Part 2. Please choose the frequency of the following questions that you use in the class

1. How often do you use the following questions to check students' remembering?

Questions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
What happened next?					
How many...?					
What was the name of the person...?					
Can you list the events in the ...?					
What is the reason...?					



2. How often do you use the following questions to check students' understanding?

Questions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Can you write a brief outline in your own words...?					
Can you predict what happens next?					
How would you generalize...?					
How would you differentiate between...?					
What do you think the definition of...?					

3. How often do you use the following questions to check students' applying?

Questions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
What factors would you change if...?					
Could you provide a set of instructions based upon the information given?					
What facts would you choose to illustrate...?					
What is the best approach to...?					
How would you classify...?					

4. How often do you use the following questions to check students' analysis?

Questions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
In what ways was this similar to...?					
How would you describe the underlying theme of...?					
What are other possible outcomes?					
What caused these ...?					
Would you be able to compare your ... to the one presented in...?					

5. How often do you use the following questions to check students' evaluation?

Questions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
What would you select...?					
What is the best way to prove...?					
Do you know how effective... is?					
What do you think about ... is a good or a bad thing?					
In what way would you have handled...?					

6. How often do you use the following questions to check students' creating? How often do you use the following questions to check students' evaluation?

Questions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Is there anything that could be changed to improve...?					
What would you do to test...?					
How would you design this?					
How would it be if you devised a unique solution?					
What are some unique and unusual uses you can imagine?					

### Biodata

**To Minh Thanh** received a Master's degree in Bilingual Education from the University of Massachusetts, the USA, in 1998 and a Ph. D's degree in Linguistics & Literature from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam in 2006. She was promoted to Associate Professor in Linguistics in 2012 and was awarded with the title of Meritorious Teacher by the President of Viet Nam in 2014 for her outstanding scientific research achievements and significant contribution to the educational development of the country. She is currently a lecturer of Department of English/American Language and Culture, Faculty of International Languages & Cultures, Hoa Sen University, Viet Nam. She has been teaching at higher education in Viet Nam for more than 40 years. Her research interests include Applied Linguistics, Contrastive Linguistics, Bilingual Education, TESOL Methodology, Measurement and Assessment in Higher Education, and Current Issues in Linguistics. She has published five books in English Linguistics and two dozen of journal articles, using both English and Vietnamese as a means of expression and communication.

**Ho Thi My Linh** is a doctoral candidate in Educational Management at Horizon University. She has obtained her M.A degree in TESOL. Currently, she is Associate Dean of the Faculty of International Languages and Cultures at Hoa Sen University. Previously, she held the position of Training Director at Language corps Asia and Training Quality Manager at VUS The English Center. She is particularly interested in ESL, EFL teaching methodologies, learning approaches or strategies to help teachers bring the most engaging and creative learning environment to their students.