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UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES IN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

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Abstract:
Research into critical thinking has witnessed its role in students' foreign language learning, including English. Of components contributing to students' critical thinking development, teachers are the ones who engage students in thinking about or making judgment of what they are doing in their learning process. As critical thinking and language skills are known as intertwined, argumentative essays allow students to reflect on their own writing. However, research on teachers' perceptions and practices of the interplay between students' critical thinking and argumentative essays is still meagre. This paper, therefore, examines this area of interest. Data collected in this study include a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Participants were 85 teachers at a university in the Mekong delta, and six participated in the interview process. The findings reveal that teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking regarding interpreting, analysing, inferencing, evaluating and self-regulating were at a high level. Debates and group discussions were the two activities teachers used most in writing classes. Recommendations from this study may offer some pedagogical implications for the implementation of critical thinking to hone students' argumentative essay writing.

Keywords: critical thinking skills, teachers' perceptions, argumentative essay writing

1. Introduction

Critical thinking has been widely known as key to developing language students (Halpern, 1998). Recognizing its significance in students' learning process in tertiary contexts is necessary for teachers to get them involved in processing, synthesizing, and evaluating information. One way to encourage students to think and seek decisions for understanding is through writing. While reading and listening are considered receptive

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skills to assist students in acquiring new information or knowledge of a particular subject matter (Harmer, 2007), speaking and writing are productive skills which reflect students' academic competence or improvements (Brown, 2001). Of writing tasks, writing argumentative essays is considered as a writing type that cannot be separated from critical thinking (Hyland, 1990). However, writing is still a complicated task for language learners (Nunan, 1999). To be successful in argumentative writing, teachers' perceptions of their students' critical thinking levels and their practices take the place. Several studies on critical thinking have been documented in different contexts; however, few studies have looked into teachers' perceptions and their practices in argumentative essays within the Vietnamese educational context, especially in the Mekong Delta. The research reported in this paper, therefore, explored the topic of interest.

2. Literature review

2.1 Perceptions

Perception can be defined in several ways. Bunting (1998) views perception as the use of senses such as seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, and touching. Another definition is that perception is related to an individual's ability to understand or interpret information or the world around us based on personal experience (e.g., Michener et al., 2014; Nelson and Carson, 1998). This suggests the idea that different people perceive things differently.

2.2 Critical thinking

There are several perspectives of critical thinking in the literature. Dewey (1933) views critical thinking as reflective thinking in ways that it is an active process requiring careful thought based on reasoning. Thus, this thinking process involves individuals making a judgment or evaluating the information on a specific subject. Critical thinking is presented through Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive behaviors (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst and Krathwohl, 1956). The chart consists of six levels of thinking: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Critical thinking is understood as higher order thinking levels in the chart which denote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Thus, critical thinking involves individuals' ability of mind which enables them to apply their prior knowledge to a new situation (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst and Krathwohl, 1956). Likewise, Ennis (1996) stresses that critical thinking is a reflective, reasonable and decision-making process. His view supports the view that critical thinking is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-oriented, as noted by Halpern (1998). Taken all together, these characteristics entail problem-solving, inferencing, and decision-making, thereby informing teachers of instructional practices that involve students in constructing new knowledge through higher-order thinking levels (Le and Nguyen, 2017).

2.3 Critical thinking skills

There have been a variety of skills as central to critical thinking. The thinking levels according to Bloom's taxonomy (1956) have been updated by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). In the updated taxonomy, creating is set as the highest level of thinking and other levels have been renamed in the six levels as remembering, understanding, applying (the first three lowest levels of thinking), analyzing, evaluating and creating (the last three highest levels of thinking). Thus, learning and understanding how to implement these skills are necessary for both teachers and students (Black & Ellis, 2010).

In order for the assessment and evaluation of the quality of instruction and learning to be effective (Facione,1990), the Delphi report is employed to serve as the framework for critical thinking, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Critical thinking skills and sub-skills

Skills	**Sub-skills**
1. Interpretation	categorization
	decoding significance
	clarifying meaning
2. Analysis	examining ideas
	identifying arguments
	analyzing arguments
3. Evaluation	assessing claims
	assessing arguments
4. Inference	querying evidence
	conjecturing alternatives
	drawing conclusions
5. Explanation	stating results
	justifying procedures
	presenting arguments
6. Self-Regulation	self-examination
	self-correction

2.4 Critical thinking and argumentative essay

Writing is an indispensable part of English language skills that help students communicate with others. Of different types of writing such as academic writing, job-related writing, and personal writing (Brown, 2004), an argumentative essay is thought to be closely related to critical thinking (Halpern, 1998). This relationship is documented in the literature which addresses that the integration of critical thinking into writing instruction could improve students' argumentative essay writing (e.g., Fahim and Eslamdoost, 2014; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2020).

A study by Pei and colleagues (2017) investigated the relationship between critical thinking skills and argumentative writing. Data collected in this study included a test for 110 English majors across three grades in two Chinese universities. Although the findings show that the correlation between the participants' critical thinking skills and English writing proficiency was statistically insignificant, students with a high level of critical

thinking skills outperformed those with a low level of critical thinking with regard to relevance, clarity, logicality, profundity, and flexibility of writing (Pei et al., 2017).

A study by Nguyen (2020) examined the correlation between critical thinking and argumentative essay writing of students at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Data collected in this study included a questionnaire and an essay writing test. The findings from this study indicate that students' critical thinking was at a high level while no significant relationship was found.

Given that the relationship between critical thinking and argumentative essay writing is not consistent, this study reported in this paper, therefore, adds to the literature on critical thinking by examining teachers' perceptions and practices of critical thinking in teaching argumentative essays to university students.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted in form of descriptive, mixed-methods research (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012) that investigated teachers' perceptions and their practices to improve students' critical thinking in teaching writing argumentative essays. Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to answer the two research questions. Participants of this study were chosen based on the convenience sampling technique (Marshall, 1996). 85 teachers (56 females, and 29 males) at a university in the Mekong delta participated in completing the questionnaire and six of them were invited to attend semi-structured interviews. The range of teaching experiences was from two to more than five years.

3.1 Participants for the questionnaire

Convenience sampling used in this study was thought as beneficial to researchers in terms of time, money, and efforts to select the participants (Marshall, 1996). 85 teachers of English in the Mekong delta participated in the research. 56 teachers (65.88%) were female while 29 teachers (34.12%) were male. Four teachers had less than two years of experience (4.70%). 28 teachers had two to five years of experience (32.94%), and 53 teachers had five to ten years of experience (62.36%).

3.2 Participants for semi-structured interviews

After completing the questionnaire, six teachers were invited to join semi-structured interviews. The teachers stated that they experienced critical thinking skills in teaching writing argumentative essays to university students. The teachers' background information was kept confidential during the whole process.

4. Findings and Discussion

This part reports the findings to answer the research questions about teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking skills and their practices of writing argumentative essays.

4.1 Teachers' perceptions of the critical thinking skills

4.1.1 Findings from the questionnaires

Data collected from the critical thinking questionnaire of 36 items were administered to 85 teachers to identify teachers' perceptions of critical thinking skills in relation to students' argumentative essay writings. A scale test was run to check the reliability of the questionnaires. The results showed that Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α) is .884, indicating that the questionnaire was reliable for data collection.

A. Teachers' perceptions of critical thinking skills

A Descriptive Statistics Test was computed to investigate teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking skills in argumentative essays. Table 2 shows the results of the test.

Table 2: Mean score of teachers' perceptions of the critical thinking skills

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Teachers' perceptions	85	1.96	4.65	3.57	.53

Table 2 shows the total mean score of participants' perceptions of students' critical thinking skills was at a high level (M=3.57, SD= .53).

A One sample t-Test was run to check whether the mean score of teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking is different from the test value of 3.4, an average level of agreement on the five-degree scale. The result shows that a significant difference between the mean score (M=3.57, SD= .53) and the test value of 3.4 was observed (t= 2.97, df=84, p= .04<.05). This means that teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking were at a high level.

Table 2: Results of One-Sample t-Test on teachers' perceptions

	Test Value = 3.4		
Teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking skills	t	df	p
	2.97	84	.004

One Sample t-Test was computed to check whether the mean score of teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking is different from the test value of 3.6, a high level of agreement on the five-degree scale. The result in Table 3 indicates that no significant difference between teachers' perceptions and the test value was observed (t= -.522; df= 84; p= .603). In other words, the results supported the conclusion that teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking skills were at a high level.

Table 4.3: One-Sample t-Test on teachers' perceptions

Teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking skills	**Test Value = 3.6**		
	t	df	p
	-.522	84	.603

A Descriptive Statistic Test was conducted to examine the mean scores of six clusters: interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation. Table 4 below shows the results of the test.

Table 4: Mean scores of teachers' perceptions of six clusters

	N	**Min**	**Max**	**M**	**SD**
Interpretation	85	2.00	4.83	3.62	.56
Analysis	85	1.80	4.80	3.48	.66
Evaluation	85	1.00	4.80	3.39	.72
Inference	85	2.33	5.00	3.80	.65
Explanation	85	1.33	5.00	3.85	.76
Self-regulation	85	2.00	4.75	3.45	.65

Table 4 indicates that the mean scores of these clusters including Interpretation (*M*=3.62, *SD*=.56), Analysis (*M*=3.48, *SD*=.66), Inference (*M*=3.80, *SD*=.65), Explanation (*M*=3.85, *SD*=.76), and Self-regulation (*M*=3.45, *SD*=.65) were all at a high level (a range from 3.4 to 4.2 according to the Oxford framework (1990). Of the six clusters, the mean score of the cluster Explanation (*M*=3.85, *SD*=.76) was the highest while the mean score of the cluster Evaluation (*M*=3.39, *SD*=.72) was the lowest.

A One-Sample t-Test was administrated to test whether teachers' perceptions of students' evaluation skill (*M*=3.39, *SD*=.72) was statistically different from the test value of 3.4. Table 5 shows that no difference between the mean score of the cluster evaluation skill and the test value was observed (*t*= -.151; d*f*= 84; *p*=.880). In other words, the data reveal that the teachers perceived students' evaluation skills as at a high level.

Table 5: One-Sample t-Test on teachers' perceptions of evaluation skill

Teachers' perceptions of students' evaluation skill	**Test Value = 3.4**		
	t	df	p
	-.151	84	.880

B. Teachers' perceptions of students' interpretation skill

A Frequency Test was computed, based on the percentage of six items in Cluster Interpretation (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6) to find out what items of this cluster received the most agreement from the teachers. Table 6 shows the results of the test.

Table 6: Percentage of teachers' perceptions of students' interpretation skill

	The content of interpretation skill	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
1	I think students identify the main arguments and supporting ideas.	5	5.9	27	31.8	53	62.3
2	I think students make assumptions based on the main arguments.	16	18.8	31	36.5	38	44.7
3	I think students make notes on the elements of the writing topics' arguments.	16	18.8	26	30.6	43	50.6
4	I think students reframe the knowledge and ideas related to the arguments in their own words to enhance their understanding.	11	13.0	17	20	57	67.0
5	I think students present the main points in their arguments.	1	1.2	12	14.1	72	84.7
6	I think students summarize what they have heard or read related to the topic arguments for more accurate understanding.	18	21.2	29	34.1	38	44.7

Table 6 indicates that most teachers (84.7%) agreed that their students presented the main points in their arguments (n=72). 67.0% of the participants (n=57) confirmed that their students used their own words to reframe the knowledge and ideas which are related to the arguments so as to understand them more clearly. 62.3% of the participants (n=53) agreed that their students identified the main arguments and supporting ideas. However, nearly half (50.6%) of the participants (n=43) agreed that while writing argumentative essays, their students would make notes on the elements of the writing topics' arguments. 44.7% of the participants (n=38) agreed that their students would make assumptions based on the main arguments and summarized what they heard or read related to the topic arguments for better understanding.

C. Teachers' perceptions of students' analysis skill

A Frequency Test was run on the percentage of five items belonging to cluster *Analysis* (item 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) to examine what item is mostly supported by the participants. Table 7 shows the results of the test.

Table 7: Percentage of teachers' perceptions of students' analysis skill

	The content of the analysis skill	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
7	I think students ask questions to better their understanding of the writing topic.	22	25.9	20	23.5	43	50.6
8	I think students break down ideas related to the writing topic to understand how they are structured or organized.	12	14.1	29	34.1	44	51.8
9	I think students think of the opposite meaning to an argument of a writing topic.	17	20.0	26	30.6	42	49.4
10	I think students find out similar ideas between arguments.	12	14.1	30	35.3	43	50.6

11	I think students realize the difference between facts and opinions.	13	15.3	13	15.3	59	69.4

Table 7 shows that 69.4% of the participants (n=59) thought that students differentiated between facts and opinions. 51.8% of the teachers (n=44) said that students elaborated information and ideas related to the topic arguments to observe their developments. Up to 50.6% of the teachers (n=43) believed that students asked questions for a better understanding of the topic. 50.6% of the participants (n=43) thought that their students found out similar ideas between arguments. However, only 49.4% of the teachers (n=42) thought that their students thought of the opposite sites of the arguments, and it is the item that receives the least agreement from the participants.

D. Teachers' perceptions of students' evaluation skill

A Frequency Test was run on the percentage of five items belonging to cluster *Evaluation* (item 12, 13, 14, 15, 16) to find out what items of this cluster received the most agreement from participants. The results are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Percentage of teachers' perceptions of students' evaluation skill

	The content of the evaluation skill	**Disagree**		**Neutral**		**Agree**	
		F	**P (%)**	**F**	**P (%)**	**F**	**P (%)**
12	I think students examine the logic of the argument.	14	16.4	33	38.8	38	44.7
13	I think students check if the argument is strong enough to believe.	19	22.3	22	25.9	44	51.7
14	I think students pay attention to the source and consider if it is appropriate.	7	8.3	27	31.8	51	60.0
15	I think students evaluate if the others' opinions are trustworthy.	14	16.5	39	45.9	32	37.7
16	I think students measure the strength of the writing topic based on specific criteria.	20	23.5	32	37.6	33	38.8

Table 8 the evaluation skill of students received was at a pretty low level of agreement. Only 60% of the participants (n=51) pointed out that their students paid attention to the source of their supporting information and ideas to check whether they were appropriate. More than half of the participants (n=44) believed that their students would check if the argument was strong enough to believe. 44.7% of the participants (n=38) said that their students would examine the logic of the topics' arguments. 38.8% of the participants (n=33) thought students would measure the strength of the writing based on criteria and 37.7% of the participants (n=32) said that students would evaluate if others' opinions were trustworthy.

E. Teachers' perceptions of students' inference skill

A Frequency Test was computed to test the level of agreement of the questionnaire participants for items in Inference cluster. The results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9: Percentage of teachers' perceptions of students' inference skill

	The content of the inference skill	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
17	I think students discuss ideas to further understand the topic.	6	7.1	10	11.8	69	81.1
18	I think students make decisions in choosing the appropriate argument instead of depending on other people's opinions.	5	5.9	30	35.3	50	58.9
19	I think students question if the information is not appropriate or sufficient enough.	10	11.8	23	27.1	52	61.2

Table 9 indicates that 81.1% of the teachers (n=69) thought that their students discussed ideas for further understanding of the topic. 61.2% of the teachers (n=52) believed that their students questioned if the information was inappropriate. More than half of the participants (n=50) thought that their students made decisions in choosing the appropriate argument instead of depending on others' opinions.

F. Teachers' perceptions of students' explanation skill

A Frequency Test was conducted to test the level of agreement of teachers who participated in the questionnaire to items presented in cluster Explanation. Table 10 shows the results of the test.

Table 10: Percentage of teachers' perceptions of students' explanation skill

	The content of the explanation skill	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
20	I think students make conclusions about the information for their acceptance or rejection of the topic.	9	10.6	21	24.7	55	64.7
21	I think students explain their own ideas in a clear way to avoid misunderstanding.	9	10.6	21	24.7	55	64.7
22	I think students explain the reasons for their choice or rejection of the topic.	5	5.9	13	15.3	67	78.9

Table 10 shows that 78.9 % of the teachers (n=67) said that their students explained the reasons for their choice or rejection of the topic. The same percentage (64.7%) was observed for items 20 and 21 in ways that students concluded if the information was accepted or rejected and that students explained their own ideas to avoid misunderstanding, respectively.

G. Teachers' perceptions of students' self-regulation skill

A Frequency Test was run to find out the level of agreement on cluster Self-regulation of the participants who responded to the questionnaire. Table 11 shows the results of the test.

Table 11: Percentage of teachers' perceptions of students' self-regulation skill

	The content of the self-regulation skill	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
23	I think students update various details of the topic to ensure the conclusion is clear-cut or correct.	14	16.5	27	31.8	44	51.8
24	I think students find facts to indicate their argument was appropriate.	15	17.6	16	18.8	54	63.5
25	I think students do not pay attention to emotional language to avoid being influenced by personal opinions.	21	24.8	30	35.3	34	40.0
26	I think students present their argument against a writing topic in an objective way.	6	7.1	34	40.0	45	53.0

Table 11 indicates that 63.5% of the participants mostly agreed with the idea that students found facts to argue (n=54). More than half of the participants (n=45) agreed that their students were evaluated in an objective way. 51.8% of the teachers (n=44) supported the idea that their students updated various details of the arguments to make sure that their prior conclusions were reliable. Item 25 regarding what students did not pay attention to emotional language to avoid being affected by personal opinions.

4.1.2 Findings from the interviews

A. Insights into teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking skills

When asked about students' critical thinking skills, all of the six teachers showed their positive perceptions and understanding of these skills. These extracts illustrate their views.

> *"As what I learned before, critical thinking is the ability to synthesize through analysis, observation, and evaluation to make a judgment, a decision. Well, I know, but it's about writing, maybe it's to counter the topic that they receive or agree or disagree and how*." (Teacher 1, interview extract)

> *"In my opinion, critical thinking is when you give your students a topic and ask them to write, with critical thinking matter, they have to present their points of view whether they agree with what the topic says. They must also have several skills such as analyzing and evaluating so as to protect their perspectives, their arguments or objections to it*." (Teacher 2, interview extract)

> *"I think critical thinking in university students is a long journey in which they have to use their mental ability to think about a given topic. For example, we give students a topic and they have to think about it in a logical way and they must have evidence to present a new point of view from a different perspective. I mean the critical thinking is not like a false*

finding when you try find the mistakes from it without any convincing evidence, just speaking something nonsense." (Teacher 3, interview extract)

"To me, critical thinking skills are when they have a problem, they are able to think about both right and wrong sides of it, then reflect all about it, think if it is reasonable and suitable, if they can apply it in real situation. That's what I think." (Teacher 4, interview extract)

"In my opinion, critical thinking is the way how we think about something or what our belief is. We should also apply our ability to think of, or to reflect to our experiences or what we have already been through. Then we evaluate if it is right based on our experiences." (Teacher 5, interview extract)

"I think that most of the university students' critical thinking skills are very good. When we give them a problem, they can look at it from various perspectives. For example, do they agree or disagree, and then they can explain their reasons, also mention the opposite side's point of view. That's their critical thinking." (Teacher 6, interview extract)

Moreover, most of them were able to prove their perceptions by presenting a variety of evidence for their students' critical thinking skills although their answers mentioned different types of skills. Mostly, skills such as analyzing, evaluating and explaining are listed in their answers.

"First of all, they have to observe, understand, and they analyze, evaluate, synthesize and give comments." (Teacher 1, interview extract)

"The skills that are related to critical thinking, I think, are paraphrasing and others. For example, it is the analyzing skill when they have to analyze the topic, present some of their arguments for their ideas, and explaining skill when they think something is true. Moreover, it is the evaluating skill when they have to evaluate if their arguments or others' are already logic and firm enough? Are they convincing enough?" (Teacher 2, interview extract).

"I think the critical thinking consists of several skills such as analyzing, evaluating, presenting the arguments." (Teacher 3, interview extract).

"The analyzing skill, comparing skill and contrasting skill. Sometimes, it's the evaluating skill that they can evaluate its logical and reasonable level." (Teacher 4, interview extract)

"Ok, to have a good critical thinking, students should have several skills such as analyzing skill, evaluating skill, inferencing skill, interpretating skill, and problem-solving skill. It's also the way how we interpret something and solve it." (Teacher 5, interview extract)

"It's their critical thinking skill when they're able to show their own points of views clearly that they agree or disagree with something. Their point of view is clear, then they can use supporting ideas to support them. They're able to explain and give examples. They can also protect their opinions by acquiring what others from the opposite site are thinking and rejecting their arguments." (Teacher 6, interview extract)

"I think when they are in the university, they have already had the ability to think critically." (Teacher 5, interview extract)

"I think it's about 70% of them have already had a good critical thinking. I think most of them are able to do the activity for discussion. Or some of the students, who have a pretty introvert personality and they don't like to speak or to argue with others, don't directly talk much about their points of view." (Teacher 6, interview extract)

4.2 Teachers' practices to support the development of critical thinking skills

4.2.1 Findings from the questionnaire

Section 3 consists of nine items indicating teachers' practices to support the development of critical thinking skills of university students in teaching how to write argumentative essays.

A Descriptive Statistic Test was run to explore teachers' practices in supporting students' critical thinking skills' development. Table 12 shows the results of the test.

Table 12: Mean score of teachers' practices towards critical thinking skills

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Teachers' practices	85	2.40	5.00	3.79	.51

Table 12 shows that the mean score of teachers' practices of activities to support the development of students' critical thinking skills was at a high level (M=3.79, SD=.51).
A One Sample t-Test was conducted to check whether the mean score of teachers' practices is statistically different from the test value of 4.0. The result indicates that there was a significant difference between the mean score of teachers' practices and the test value of 4.0 observed (t=-3.71, df=84, p=.00).

A Frequency Test was computed to explore the level of participants' agreement with the activities while responding to 10 items in Section 3 of the questionnaire. Table 13 reveals the results.

Table 13: Percentage of teachers' practices of students' CTS

	Items	Never & rarely		Sometimes		Usually & always	
		F	P (%)	F	P (%)	F	P (%)
28	I ask students to recognize related ideas.	9	10.6	14	16.5	62	72.9
29	I ask students to participate in role-play activities with dialogues and scenarios.	20	23.5	15	17.6	50	58.8
30	I ask students to recall prior knowledge related to a writing topic.	11	12.8	12	14.1	62	72.9
31	I ask students to explain the main ideas in texts.	14	16.5	25	29.4	46	54.1
32	I ask students to analyze and explain Related grammatical structures in writing assignments.	11	13.0	20	23.5	54	63.5
33	I ask students to explain the meaning of new words.	18	21.2	23	27.1	44	51.8
34	I ask students to rearrange ideas.	1	1.2	18	21.2	66	77.7
35	I ask students to solve problems.	2	2.4	10	11.8	42	49.4
36	I ask students to explain the reasons for their ideas.	4	4.7	10	11.8	71	83.5
37	I ask students to select the appropriate answer/ choice to the assigned question and debate on it.	2	2.4	13	15.3	70	82.4

Table 13 indicates the group of activities which is organized most by the teachers (n=71), is reasoning activities, which account for 83.5% of the participants. 82.4% of the participants (n=70) claimed that decision-making activities are the activities they use to enhance the development of students' critical thinking skills. 77.7% of the teachers (n=66) say that they usually apply ideas brainstorming to support their learners. There is a similarity in the percentage (72.9%) of teachers (n=62) who mention recalling activities and recognizing activities to foster their students' critical thinking skills' development. 63.5% of the participants (n=54) organize pattern and rules practicing activities for their students. 58.8% of the teachers (n=50) choose experiencing activities while 54.1% of participants point out the concept structuring activities. The least supported activities declared by 49.4% of the teachers (n=42) are reasoning activities.

4.2.2 Findings from the interviews

The interview data indicate the activities for teachers' practices to support the development of university students' critical thinking skills. Four main themes were identified as debating activities, group discussions, brainstorming and writing conferences.

A. Debating activities

When asked about activities to promote university students' critical thinking skills, all six interviewees mentioned debating activities. The following extracts illustrate their opinions:

"Then, I can even organize the class debate, organize a debate about whose opinions are more reasonable." (Teacher 1, line 67-68, interview extract)

"I do not know about other teachers but to me and I think students who have already had good critical thinking skills, the activity for debating seems to be the best to me." (Teacher 2, line 79, 81, interview extract)

"Another activity is that I will divide the class into two groups, it somehow looks like a debate." (Teacher 3, line 68, interview extract)

"For example, it's about the advantage and disadvantage of shopping, some of them will be pushed into the role of the supporters. They have to support shopping and find ideas for it, then debate to the opposite side. (Teacher 4, line 91-93, interview extract)

"As what I've mentioned before, there will be some activities for good classes in which students have excellent speaking skill. They will join a debate to protect their ideas. (Teacher 5, line 74-76, interview extract)

"I mostly organize debating activity. I give students a topic and ask them to choose only one. I divide them into two groups. There may also be some with unclear answer, they can sit together in a group. There are some topics that both sides have their own logic, students can sit in groups and share together, then debate." (Teacher 6, line 41-44, interview extract)

Moreover, two teachers declared that the debating activity was the most effective activity that they organized in their argumentative writing classes since it provided chances for students' own idea exploration.

"Among them, I think debating is the most effective one because when I organize this activity, students will be provided with a variety of other much more specific problems." (Teacher 3, interview extract)

"The most effective activity I think is debating activity when they brainstorm ideas about the topic. It's also a chance for them to know what others think about the topic." (Teacher 6, interview extract)

B. Group discussion

Four teachers shared similar ideas when they said that they used group discussion activities to enhance students' critical thinking skills. They said:

"However, in the long run, this is what I expect to do when teaching critical thinking. To make it easier, we also need the combination with more teacher-controlled activities. For

example, I use discussion because it seems less competitive which helps students more comfortable." (Teacher 1, interview extract)

"Another activity is discussion. I will give them some extended questions to link to their real-life experiences, which push them into a different perspective that they will be the supporter. (Teacher 4, interview extract)

"It's also the part that I've mentioned in discussion activity, is when I give them questions and discuss in groups based on their experiences and share with each other." (Teacher 5, interview extract)

"I think the most effective one in which students greatly participate and learn most is group work, discussing and mind mapping to prepare for ideas." (Teacher 5, interview extract)

C. Brainstorming activities

Four out of the six teachers believed that brainstorming activities were involved in the process of promoting students' critical thinking skills when writing argumentative essays.

"In that situation, I should have a brainstorming activity first. For example, I give them the topic and start to scaffold by making questions, which enables students to answer easily." (Teacher 3, interview extract)

"I think both of them have brainstorming stage. It's the one I choose to check their background knowledge, what levels of critical thinking they are so as to develop both types of learners." (Teacher 4, interview extract)

"To improve their critical thinking skill, as what I've mentioned before, I will let them work in groups or in pairs. They will find ideas and work together. If someone hasn't got the ideas yet, she will be helped by her partners. After that, I will use individual tasks instead. (Teacher 5, interview extract)

"Some students do not have any ideas. It means that when you give them a topic, they don't even know where to start. Therefore, in these classes, I have to work more on the stage of brainstorming ideas. It's important that we should work with them. When they get the ideas, but they don't know where to start, we will work with them to develop the ideas together instead of just teaching them how to do so." (Teacher 6, interview extract)

D. Writing conference

Two out of the six teachers indicated that a writing conference fostered their students' critical thinking skills, and they usually organized it in their writing classes.

"There are some of them that want to experience whole class correcting while others do not. Therefore, I will have an activity as a small feedback conference. (Teacher 2, interview extract)

"The second activity that I usually apply is writing conference. It's an occasion when I meet each of them in person. Some of them do not have a strong interpreting skill. When I meet them individually, I will tell them the way how to look something in a multi-dimensional view, how to interpret something much simpler and they dare to show their opinions. Therefore, writing conference is the one that helps those who are not good at arguing. (Teacher 5, interview extract)

Debating activities, group discussions, brainstorming activities and writing conferences are the four activities that teachers reported using most in their argumentative writing classes.

The findings from the questionnaires and semi-structured reveal that teachers' perceptions of university students' critical thinking skills are at a high level. This is in line with the findings of research by Nguyen (2020), which showed that the critical thinking of university students in the Mekong Delta is at a high level. However, there is a contrast between this study and the current study in that teachers participating in this research have an extremely strong belief in the relationship between students' critical thinking skills and have specific activities to prepare for classes with a low or high level of critical thinking skills classes.

This finding is parallel to the research of Wei (2012), who contends that incorporating other people's perspectives and reflecting on and synthesizing reliable information are two ways that critical thinking is fostered, the researcher concentrated on group activities, information sharing, and discussion while creating learning activities.

The finding of group discussion also shares similarities with the study conducted by Liang and Fung (2021). These researches attest to the fact that group activities, collaboration and discussions help in developing critical thinking skills.

Brainstorming is a method for fostering critical thinking, and this result is supported by the study of Chang and his colleagues (2015) who investigate the synergy of critical thinking and creative thinking in the course of integrated activity in Taiwan. They propose that brainstorming is actually an effective way to support the development of critical thinking.

Writing conference is also an indispensable part of writing lessons that focuses on promoting students' critical thinking skills. This finding is also parallel to the finding of Flynn and King (1993) who argue that writing conferences are able to enhance students' learning and higher-order thinking abilities by giving the beginner writer a supportive social atmosphere where the expert may guide them toward becoming autonomous writers (Flynn & King, 1993).

5. Conclusions

This study explored teachers' perceptions and their practices of students' critical thinking skills in teaching argumentative essays within the teaching and learning context of Vietnam. The findings from this study show that teachers had positive perceptions of students' critical thinking. This would suggest the need for teachers to improve their students' thinking levels by reflecting on their current practices and then importantly integrating critical thinking into their argumentative essay writing lessons.

The findings can serve as a reference for expanding teachers' perceptions of students' critical thinking skills and practices to foster their development in argumentative writing classes. However, time constraints are a barrier as a result of the fact that not many participants or classes were involved in the study. Future studies should be conducted with longer time periods, which enables a more convincing number of participants and the size of the population. Future studies are needed with more research instruments such as classroom observations and writing tests.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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