Teaching Critical Thinking to English-Majored Students through the Pathways Coursebooks (2nd edition) at UFLS-UD: Challenges and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: Critical thinking; Pathways coursebooks; language skills; English-majored students.

Critical thinking (CT), a 21st-century skill, not only plays a crucial role in students' academic success but is also a fundamental capacity increasingly sought upon in the competitive global job market. However, there has been limited research in Vietnam on how to foster CT through English language teaching in higher education. This study fills this gap by investigating the challenges of teaching CT through the teaching of four English practical skills at the University of Foreign Language Studies - the University of Da Nang (UFLS-UD) via the *Pathways Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking* (2nd edition), which is a global, innovative academic English coursebook series carefully designed to develop integrated English language skills and CT. Coursebooks have been used in the curriculum at the Faculty of English and the Faculty of Foreign Language Teacher Education since 2021. However, how to effectively explore coursebooks' resources to develop students' critical thinking skills has not been investigated. With the employment of research methods, namely, survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, our study is an attempt to identify the abovementioned challenges, thereby suggesting solutions to enhance the quality of teaching CT combined with language skills for English-majored students.

Introduction

Rapid globalization and advanced technology have resulted in significant changes in the education system, focusing on academic knowledge and development and personal and nonacademic skills (Oliveri & Markle, 2017). It is essential that students be taught soft skills to encounter significant developments in the 21st century. Therefore, critical thinking (CT) has become increasingly emphasized in all educational programs to prepare students for the demands of the future job market (Ennis, 2018). It is believed that students equipped with CT skills and dispositions will become more capable of dealing with challenges and complicated problems in life (McPeck, 2016).

Due to the importance of CT, language teaching and learning should incorporate CT into language classrooms, as teaching CT can help students become autonomous and active in achieving learning goals (D'Alessio et al., 2019; Utriainen et al., 2016). At the University of Foreign Language Studies, University of Danang, CT has been an emphasis in language teaching since the new coursebook Pathways (2018) was introduced into the curriculum. Although coursebooks have been used for two years, little has been done to investigate how to effectively use coursebooks in teaching CT to English major students. Hence, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature and proposes some recommendations for using coursebooks to teach CT effectively.

Literature review

What is CT?

CT has been the focus of many previous studies (Bailin et al., 1999; Paul & Elder, 2007; Facione, 2011). Although there are different ways of defining CT, it is agreed that CT involves individuals' abilities and skills in using logic, justification, and standards of argumentation to analyze problems, find optimal solutions, and achieve goals. In language teaching, Marin and Pava (2017) described CT thinkers as those who are active, are continuously asking questions, and are seeking information that helps them connect what they learn in their language classroom with their daily lives. Moreover, they will use their language skills flexibly to communicate creatively and achieve their learning goals.

The "Pathways" coursebook series

The integration of CT in the "Pathways" series

"Pathways" by National Geographic Learning (2018) is a series of English language learning coursebooks designed to help learners of English develop their language skills and cultural awareness. The series offers a comprehensive approach to English language education and includes various levels, from beginner to advanced. While the primary focus of "Pathways" is language acquisition, it also integrates critical thinking elements into its curriculum. "Pathways" promote critical thinking through discussion and debate activities. These activities encourage students to express their opinions, defend their viewpoints, and consider different perspectives on issues, fostering critical thinking and communication skills.

Additionally, "Pathways" often present language and cultural content in real-world contexts. This approach encourages students to think critically about how language is used in everyday situations and how culture influences communication. The series also includes problem-solving exercises requiring students to use their language skills to solve real or hypothetical issues. This promotes critical thinking and linguistic application simultaneously. In general, "Pathways" aim to help students develop their language proficiency and their ability to think critically in English and engage with diverse cultural perspectives. This integration of critical thinking enhances the effectiveness of language acquisition and prepares learners for meaningful communication in English.

The integration of CT in "Pathways" is a distinctive feature of the series compared to other

coursebooks that have been published worldwide. This is also the first series with the application of CT teaching and learning in every language skill: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Due to the integration of CT throughout coursebooks, teachers' and students' awareness of CT development has increased, which has resulted in the frequent practice of CT skills in all lessons and units carefully designed in "Pathways" coursebooks.

Figure 1.

Integration of CT in Reading Skill (Source: Pathway Level 2: Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking)
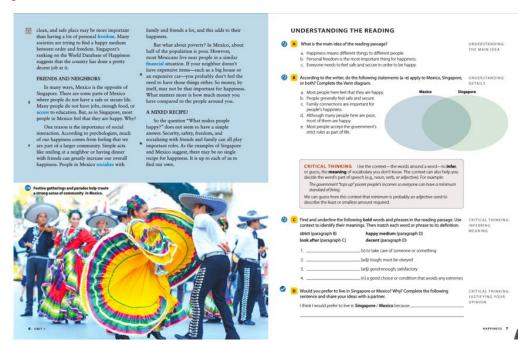

Figure 2.

Integration of CT in Writing skill (Source: Pathways Level 2: Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking)
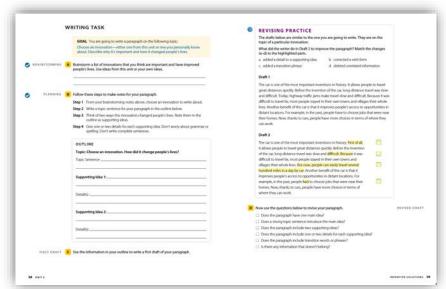
Figure 3.

Integration of CT in Listening skill (Source: Pathways Level 3: Listening, Speaking and Critical Thinking)
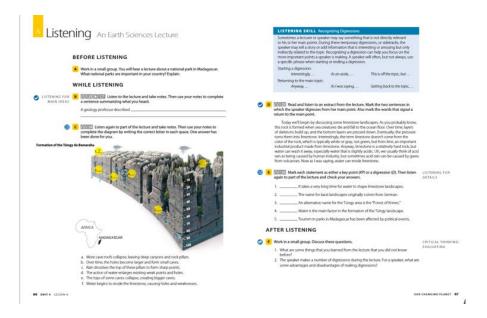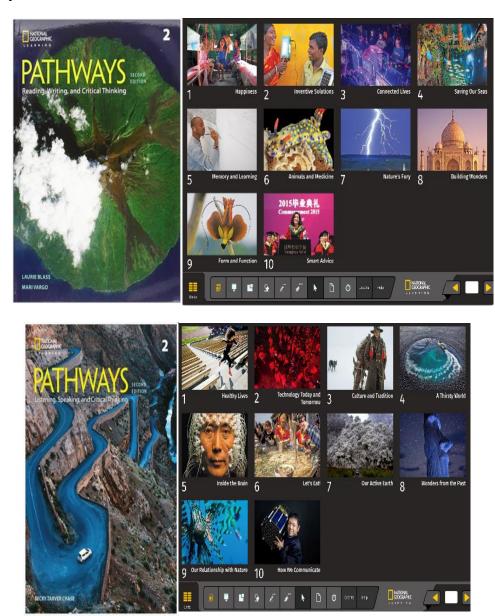

Figure 4.

Integration of CT in Speaking skill (Source: Pathways Level 3: Listening, Speaking and Critical Thinking):

At UFLS-UD, since the 2021-2022 academic year, "Pathways" coursebooks have been selected as the official coursebooks for English-majored students at the Faculty of English and ELT students at the Faculty of Language Teacher Education. The Level 2 and Level 3 coursebooks

are used to teach students integrated skills in the first two years of their training programme. Level 2 coursebooks are for students at the B1 level (CEFR), and Level 3 coursebooks are for those at the B2 level (CEFR). Each level covers 2 categories: Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking, Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking.

"Pathways" Level 2 illustrations:

Level 3 illustrations:

Challenges in teaching CT in the English language classroom

CT plays a crucial role in enhancing students' cognitive abilities, problem-solving skills, and decision-making capabilities (Paul & Elder, 2006). However, it is not always easy to teach CT in English classrooms. Recent studies have investigated several factors that complicate the task of teaching CT in an English classroom. One significant challenge in teaching CT in English classrooms is limited instructional time and curriculum constraints. English classrooms often cover a broad range of content, including literature, grammar, and writing skills. These demands can leave minimal room for explicitly teaching CT skills (Ennis, 2011). Time constraints may lead to a focus on content coverage rather than providing opportunities for in-depth analysis and critical reflection. Regarding curricular constraints, Brookfield (2012) also found that English curricula may prioritize literary analysis and essay writing, leaving little room for explicit instruction in CT. Therefore, teachers may feel constrained by this gap in the syllabi.

Another challenge in applying CT in language classrooms is teachers' background training in CT. Researchers have the same voice over the lack of teacher training and expertise in regard to CT instruction. Many teachers may not have received adequate training in how to teach CT effectively. They may be uncertain about which methods and strategies to employ (Paul & Elder, 2006), or they may not know what techniques to use to promote CT in English classrooms (Halpern, 2014). This lack of training and expertise can hinder the incorporation of CT activities into lesson plans and limit the opportunities for students to develop their CT abilities. Therefore, a number of language teachers admit that they need training in theories and practices to teach critical thinking skills (Al-Kindi & Al-Mekhlaf, 2017; Masadeh, 2021).

Assessing and evaluating CT skills pose a considerable challenge for English teachers. According to Facione (2015), traditional assessment methods, such as multiple-choice tests or rote memorization, often fail to accurately measure students' CT abilities. Evaluating critical thinking skills requires the use of performance-based assessments that assess students' abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information critically. However, designing and implementing such assessments can be time-consuming and demanding for teachers. Additionally, inappropriate assessments in ELT courses trouble teachers in testing CT skills, as more focus is placed on linguistic knowledge rather than CT (Li, 2016). Teachers may feel compelled to "teach to the test", leaving limited time for the development of CT skills.

Research Questions

The study was seeking to answer the following research questions:

1. How can the Pathways coursebooks be used to develop students' critical thinking?

2. What are the difficulties teachers face when using the Pathways coursebooks in teaching critical thinking?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

This study was conducted at the University of Foreign Language Studies, University of Danang, one of Central Vietnam's top universities. The university has applied some innnovations in teaching and learning; for example, Nguyen (2024) did a literature review to redefine translation in language classrooms at university. Vo (2023) also highlighted the importance of e-exams at university level. However, although CT is an important skill for students, it has only been used in English language practice classrooms for two years since the introduction of pathway coursebooks in 2021.

The research participants were all 8 teachers who had used the Pathways coursebooks in the Faculty of English and the Faculty of Foreign Language Teacher Education, the University of Foreign Language Studies, and the University of Da Nang. Among these teachers, four were in charge of teaching listening-speaking-critical thinking, and 4 were in charge of teaching reading-writing-critical thinking. The students were English or ELT majors in their first year and second year at the university.

Design of the Study

This study employs a mixed-method approach to investigate how lecturers make use of the Pathways coursebooks to teach CT to students.

Data collection & analysis

First, an online survey was sent to all the 8 teachers who had used the Pathways coursebooks in the Faculty of English and the Faculty of Language Education, the University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Da Nang. After the survey, the researchers interviewed 04 senior teachers, who represented 4 pairs of teachers in charge of teaching the Listening-Speaking-Critical Thinking and the Reading-Writing-Critical Thinking. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with these 04 senior teachers individually to get their insights into how CT has been taught in their classroom when they use the Pathways coursebooks.

The online survey's data was calculated into percentages using the Google Survey. The semi-structured interviews were first coded into themes by one researcher. After that, the other two researchers checked and validated the coding themes.

The survey has 14 questions divided into 3 main parts. The first part (3 questions) were designed to collect the participants' background information. The second part (4 questions) focuses on participants' rating of the usefulness of using Pathways to teach the four language skills. The last part (7 questions) is to get participants' feedback on (i) the difficulties and challenges of using Pathways to teach CT and (ii) students' development of CT when using Pathways.

The interviews which were conducted to were coded and grouped into 3 main themes as in the survey. The first researcher who did not conduct the interviews did the coding. After that, the coding themes were validated by the other two researchers. The three researchers did the coding individually to ensure the reliability and validity of the coding process.

Results/Findings and discussion

The usefulness of the Pathways coursebooks

Both the survey and interviews indicate the usefulness of Pathways coursebooks in teaching CT. All the lecturers agreed that the coursebooks can help them teach CT effectively in their language classroom. Moreover, all the teachers believe that teaching CT is important in their language classroom. One teacher stated, "The curriculum has given me a fresh approach to teaching critical thinking (CT) in the language classroom, something I have not done before and have not seen in previous curricula. Pathways have encouraged me to change my teaching methods and focus more on how students think and reason, which is the foundation of their cognitive development. I highly appreciate the quality of the CT questions included in the coursebooks. These questions all require learners to have a more multidimensional perspective on natural, scientific, and social issues."

Among the four skills, teachers reported that coursebooks are the most useful for teaching CT in reading and speaking.

Difficulties teachers face when using the Pathways coursebooks in teaching CT

In the interviews, teachers clarified that they had difficulties when the teachers' book did not provide instructions on how to make use of CT in teaching. They suggested that the teacher coursebooks of the Pathways should include this part to ensure that teachers can teach CT effectively, as one teacher said, "The publisher should include a guideline to teach CT, as the current teacher's book does not have this part". Another obstacle for teachers is students' lack of relevant background knowledge; thus, teachers must provide students with background knowledge related to the lesson before the main activities can be conducted.

Teachers' evaluation of students' development in CT in the Pathways coursebooks

According to the survey, teachers believed their students developed CT using pathway coursebooks in their language classroom. However, this development is not measurable, which raises the question of how to optimize teaching CT and how to assess students' CT progress to help them maximize their levels of CT development.

Teachers' professional training in teaching CT in the Pathways coursebooks

All the teachers indicated the need for professional training in teaching CT to assist them in teaching CT effectively. They recommended an online training program offered by the publisher to instruct them on how to use the coursebooks to teach CT: "I have not received any training in CT, so I believe online training will suit me the best to cope with the busy teaching schedule and understand how to use the coursebooks to teach CT".

Regarding difficulties in teaching CT in language classrooms, most teachers admitted that they did not have enough time to organize CT activities due to the inappropriate allocation of time for other language skills. As a result, they sometimes decided to remove CT activities to make room for language practice. This finding is in line with previous studies that consider limited instructional time to be one of the main challenges teachers often encounter when teaching CT in class. In contrast, teachers mentioned a lack of instructional materials that could be used as teachers' guides to help shape their teaching more effectively. This difficulty emerges from their recognition that the existing teachers' book is not effective in guiding their CT teaching practice.

Like previous studies (Al-Kindi & Al-Mekhlaf, 2017; Masadeh, 2021), the teachers in this study were interested in professional training in how to teach CT in the language classroom. Teachers need more training in how to ask questions, which may help to improve students' CT skills. Teachers also suggested that CT skills should be assessed in the final test, and there should be more training courses on how to design assessment rubrics for CT skills. In fact, teachers' requirements for CT training are reasonable, as few courses have been organized at the UFLS-UD to familiarize teachers with CT teaching and learning. Therefore, stakeholders should take into account prior training in CT teaching with the aim of effectively teaching CT embedded with other language skills in the classroom.

Conclusion

CT is undeniably an important skill in educational programs for English-majored students and EFL students because it not only helps students refine their thinking but also fosters their personal growth to prepare them for entry into the workforce. This research is the very first attempt to raise the question of teaching CT in the English language classroom at the university level in Vietnam through the use of the Pathways coursebooks series to identify the challenges teachers encounter and propose some suggestions for improvement. Due to resource constraints, researchers were not able to collect abundant data to investigate the usefulness of using pathways in teaching CT. Further research into classroom practice should be conducted to provide more insights into how to use coursebooks effectively in teaching CT integrated into all four language skills.

Acknowledgment

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Biodata

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