Critical Thinking in the Higher Education Classroom: Knowledge, Power, Control and Identities

Introduction

This exploratory study focuses on the what and the how of teaching (and learning) of critical thinking in Vietnamese higher education (HE). It constitutes an analysis of pedagogic practices as 'the medium of reproduction' that theories of cultural reproduction often pay little attention to (Bernstein 2003, 166). The field of critical thinking involves extensive debates over what critical thinking is, what critical thinkers should be like (McPeck 1981; Facione 1990; Ennis 2018), and how critical thinking should be taught and assessed (Davies 2013; Siegel 2010). Whilst such theorisation and methods are useful, it is important also to address the actual pedagogic practices of critical thinking and their impacts on learner identities. This pedagogic decision, according to Bernstein (2000), takes place in fields of power within which different agents try to control what it means to be a critical thinker. Here power relations embedded in institutional pedagogic rules work to structure what is transmitted to students as critical thinking, albeit this is not the same as what research defines as critical thinking. Unfortunately, the literature on critical thinking, in promoting concepts and instructional approaches (see, e.g., Pithers and Soden [2000]; Lai [2011] for exhaustive reviews), has downplayed the impact of such power relations.

This research paper addresses the power relation issue by examining how different agents in two Vietnamese undergraduate programmes perceive and teach critical thinking and the perceived impact of these pedagogic strategies on learner identities. The forthcoming analysis draws on Bernstein's (2000, 2003) concepts of the pedagogic device and mundane and esoteric knowledge. It begins by contextualising critical thinking within the sociological division of knowledge and then the socio-political sector of Vietnamese HE. Subsequently, it continues by outlining the theoretical /conceptual framework, methodology of the research and the analysis of interview data. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion on the impacts of such pedagogy and its implications for educational policy.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking has long been emphasised as a desirable outcome of HE (McPeck 1981; Facione 1990; Siegel 2010). Traditionally, critical thinking is conceptualised as skills and dispositions necessary for engagement in higher order thinking to generate knowledge for problem solving and decision making. Although different theorists tend to treat critical thinking differently, the commonly agreed upon skills and dispositions include abilities to analyse, synthesise and evaluate information (see, for example, Facione [1990]; Siegel [2010]; Ennis [2018]). For knowledge to be recognised as having critical thought, criteria such as breadth and depth have also been emphasised (Paul and Elder 2006; Halpern 2001). Within this cognitive process, critical thinking is argued to be teachable either explicitly through separate courses or implicitly within disciplines (Davies 2013), although empirically the superiority of one approach over the other is debatable (see, e.g., Hatcher [2006]; Bensley et al. [2010]). Similarly, while certain instructional interventions are claimed to improve critical thinking skills, their overall effect appears to be small (see, e.g., Nieu et al. [2013]). A body of research also insists on the democratic or emancipatory essence of critical thinking. In this view, teaching critical thinking involves bringing about change or transformation, e.g. educating students to be critical citizens rather than potential employers (Nussbaum 2004; Westheimer 2008; Giroux 2010). Thus, critical thinking should be understood in its relationship to professional/ meaningful knowledge, self and the world. By this Barnett (1997) means critical thinking skills should be used as a tool for disciplinary knowledge acquisition and thus the development of qualities necessary for students to understand themselves critically and act autonomously and critically in new contexts- producing 'critical beings' (Barnett 1997, 4). Understood in this way, critical thinking may have to embrace an 'aggressive' mode of rationality and argumentation for epistemic advantages (Bailin and Battersby 2020, 2).

Critical Thinking and the Sociological Division of Knowledge

Critical thinking theorisation can be contextualised within the Durkheimian sociological division of knowledge expanded by Bernstein (2000, 2003). In this framework, critical thinking can be viewed as a tool to access esoteric knowledge, which is distinguished from mundane knowledge. According to Bernstein (2000), esoteric knowledge, when theoretically and conceptually strong, has the power of generalisation and explanations across contexts thus allowing thinking 'the unthinkable' (30). In contrast, mundane knowledge is context-based and 'consumed at the point of its contextual delivery' (Bernstein 2000, 160), so it cannot easily be applied elsewhere. With mundane knowledge, students can only think 'the thinkable' (29). Access to esoteric knowledge or mundane knowledge has consequences on learner identities, which Bernstein (2000) defines as 'What they are and what they will become, as a consequence of the projection of that knowledge as a practice in some context' (55). Thus, committing to esoteric knowledge will

promote inner dedication and commitment and the deep structure of the self and eventually construct identities 'oriented to autonomous, non-specialised and flexible thinking' (Bernstein 2000, 68). In contrast, since mundane knowledge takes on context-dependent and market-driven aspects of knowledge, access to this knowledge without a further connection to its wider systems of meanings eventually constructs identities oriented toward 'satisfying external demands' (71).

Seeing critical thinking as a pathway to esoteric knowledge requires curricula to allow disciplinary knowledge to be integrated right from a low level rather than collecting segmental subjects/ knowledge areas for different purposes (Bernstein 2000, 161). Pedagogy also has to provide 'a safe space' for critical engagement (Giroux 2010, 190) as well as being 'sufficiently demanding' (Barnett 2009, 438). This means assimilating disciplinary knowledge and its criteria (Young and Muller 2010; Wheelahan 2010). In the language of Beck (2010), critical thinking and the esoteric knowledge it gives rise to becomes 'a guardian of intrinsic educational value' from the 'pollution' of market demands (84). Unfortunately, such a curricular and pedagogic orientation is not an interest of generic outcome education (Young and Muller 2010; Wheelahan 2010)

Indeed, with the advent of neoliberalism and its market-driven rationality, HE curricula, in responding to external competitive demands, have arguably turned its emphasis on generic abilities/competences measured against employers' desires (Beck 2010; Young and Muller 2010). Giroux (2010) warns that when the marketplace becomes a criterion for the selection of subject knowledge, there is a risk that teaching and learning focuses on generic outcomes thus stripping knowledge from its critical contents and power of reasoning. For example, Allais (2012) and Erikson and Erikson (2019) highlight how the adoption of learning outcomes (LOs) in HE may downplay the acquisition of knowledge and critical thinking. Bowles and Gintis (2002) also raise concerns about how market- driven education socialises students into effective workers rather than critical thinkers:

> Schools prepare people for adult work rules by socializing people to function well and without complaint in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation. Schools accomplish this goal by . . . structuring social interactions and individual rewards to replicate the environment of the workplace (1).

Undoubtedly, instrumental understanding of critical thinking is problematic since it oversimplifies the role of knowledge critical thinking gives rise to and the specific cultural, socio-political and educational contexts where such knowledge is transmitted and acquired.

Critical Thinking in the Socio-political Context of Vietnamese HE

Vietnam, like China and Singapore, provides a distinctive case for understanding critical thinking in the South-East Asian region in that the politics of the critical thinking curriculum are intertwined with Confucian-rooted social traditions and the dominant political ideology of authoritarianism (Chua 2010; Lim 2016). Within this context, the teaching of critical thinking in Vietnam is controversial. The reasons are threefold.

Firstly, tension is caused by cultural traditions and socio-political ideologies that the current one-party state government embraces. Although the communist party of Vietnam (CPV) and its government has recently promoted more democracy, it is still being criticised for being authoritarian in most socio-political and educational spheres (Chua 2010; Gainsborough 2010; Harman et al. 2010). Beside authoritarianism, the state also adheres to Confucian based 'traditional values', such as social hierarchy, harmony and collectivism (Phan 1998; Trần 2001; Nguyen 2016). While these 'values' have secured stable economic development and socio-political order, they discourage self-expression, autonomy, rationality (Phan 1998; Trần 2001; Nguyen 2016). Developing critical thinking within this rigid socio-political structure is undoubtedly challenging.

Secondly, there is tension related to the 'social status' (Phan 1998, 75) of Vietnam as an ex-colonial, young and developing country. Economically, Vietnam has always nurtured a desire to grow out of its inferior status into a future world power (The World Bank Group and Vietnamese Government 2016). This is most evident in the launch of the *Doi moi* policy, to change the Vietnamese economy from being a solely centralised state to a globally integrated (but socialist orientated) one (Gainsborough 2010). To realise this aspiration, state pressure has been put on HE to equip manpower with knowledge and critical thinking skills, to meet labour market demands (Vietnamese Government 2012; Bodewig et al. 2014; Nguyen and Tran 2018). However, this strategic reform is indeed a part of an emerging 'international model' of educational processes (Steiner-Khamsi 2004, 4) from the West that Vietnamese HE, due to its subordinate capital and symbolic resources (Apple 2013), has to borrow to realise the above aspiration (Dang 2009). Thus, the 'recontextualisation' of critical thinking into Vietnamese classrooms undoubtedly faces considerable constraints due to fundamental cultural and socio-political differences.

Thirdly, from the sphere of curriculum reform, further challenges lie in the possible mismatch between critical thinking and other neo-liberal educational policies. One such policy is the reconfiguration of the HE system, arguably to make it responsive to the economic reform and accessible to all groups (Harman et al. 2010; Hayden and Lam 2010; Đỗ and Đỗ 2014). However, the uncontrolled rapid growth of the system has resulted in serious consequences such as poor-quality teaching, shortage of qualified staff and excessive teacher-student ratios, which, in turn, are exacerbated

by rigidities in curriculum management and content-loaded curricula (Harman et al. 2010; Hayden and Lam 2010; Đỗ and Đỗ 2014) Consequently, inadequate development of knowledge and skills has become commonplace, and lack of critical thinking among graduates is frequently raised in the literature (Harman et al. 2010; Pham 2011; Trần et al. 2014). Indeed, effective teaching of critical thinking is argued to be far from the current reality (Tran 2014; Nguyen and Tran 2018). This may come as no surprise as Giroux (2010) previously warns that market- driven rationality in HE education 'withers' (184) critical thinking instead of making it thrive. Critical thinking may also clash with outcome-based learning and learner-centredness, two other neo-liberal driven frameworks, adopted to tackle the deep-rooted didactic/ instructional learning and the issue of quality of training in HE (MOET 2017). Although learner-centredness encourages open classroom interactions, it downplays 'the propositional character of knowledge' (Allais 2012, 257) which is axiomatic to critical thinking.

Presently, there is a lacuna in our understanding of how the above processes work in the Vietnamese context. This paper therefore will bridge that gap by focusing its analysis on the reality of the teaching (and learning) of critical thinking in Vietnamese classrooms. However, before examining those processes, some theoretical/conceptual reflections are needed. As examining how critical thinking is taught in Vietnamese HE requires an understanding of how it is lifted out of its original context and utilised in new pedagogic settings, therefore the application of Bernstein's (2000) concept of the *pedagogic device* provides useful analytic insights into this transformation.

The Pedagogic Device

The pedagogic device is defined by Bernstein (2000) as the principles underlying 'the transformation of knowledge into pedagogic communication' (25). These operate through three hierarchically interrelated rules: distributive, recontextualising and evaluative. Via these rules critical thinking texts are privileged and its teaching and learning experiences are regulated. These rules are necessarily interrelated in that the recontextualising rules are derived from the distributive rules, and the evaluative rules are derived from the recontextualising rules. Significantly, there are always power relationships functioning between these rules.

Within critical thinking, firstly distributive rules function to regulate power relationships between social groups by distributing different forms of critical thinking and thus 'constituting different orientations to meaning or pedagogic identities' (Singh 2002, 2). Secondly, the recontextualising rules regulate the formation of pedagogic discourses. These are rules for 'de-locating a discourse, for relocating it, for refocusing it' (Bernstein 2000, 32). Through recontextualisation, critical thinking moves from its original site of production to be re-located in new curricula and classroom discourses where it is altered to be functional. The recontextualised pedagogic discourse of a subject rarely resembles the original because agents holding opposing ideological interests (ministries of education, curriculum designers, teachers and international fund aiders) work to convert so that 'The text is no longer the same text' (Bernstein 2003, 60). Consequently, when critical thinking, for example, is added to Vietnamese undergraduate programmes, this 'pedagogised' discourse necessarily relays the dominant ideologies of the CPV. In addition, through the feature of 'meaning potential' (27), the recontextualised text inevitably reflects a given distribution of power and symbolic control over the limits of what is acceptable, or not, as critical thinking. Thirdly, the evaluative rules constitute specific pedagogic practices which recognise what counts as valid critical thinking in both instructional (curricular content) and regulative (social conduct, character and manner) discourses.

Central to the pedagogic device is power and control exercised through the concepts of classification and framing, which are 'conceptually independent' from each other (Bernstein 2000, 23). Both classification and framing can be internally/externally strong or weak. In teaching and learning, classification can refer to how a certain area/ category of knowledge is organised to be important, or not, in relation to itself or others. Understanding the classification of critical thinking is understanding power relations between critical thinking and other curriculum subjects it is embedded in, or the boundary insulation 'within' the critical thinking subject itself (Bernstein 2000, 99). Framing, on the other hand, refers to control over both pedagogical relations and instructional practices. The former refers to how open or strict pedagogic relations are in place; the latter involves who has more/less control over the selection, organisation and evaluative criteria of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogic relationship (Bernstein 2000, 13). Thus, framing of critical thinking can refer to how much control teachers give students over what, when and how they receive critical thinking and how strict or relaxed teachers' pedagogies are to motivate students to acquire this knowledge. Control is significant in the way that it has 'the power of reproduction and the potential for its change' (Bernstein 2000, 5). This 'two-faced' feature applies to all pedagogic contexts.

The pedagogic device components of classification and framing provide an analytic framework which is useful in uncovering how teachers' pedagogic modalities of critical thinking may reproduce, negotiate or disrupt the orthodox socialist ideology Vietnamese HE presently aims to socialise students into, through the official critical thinking curriculum.

Methodology

This paper adopted case study as a research method for in-depth investigation (Yin 2014) of the teaching of critical thinking in two different undergraduate programmes called English Studies (ES)-Business English Programme 1 (BEP1) and Business English Programme 2 (BEP2). The former was offered by a well-known private university (Private Elite) and the latter a well-known public university (Public Elite), both located in the South of Vietnam. Compared to Public Elite where all academic activities were overseen by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), Private Elite enjoyed more financial, curricular and pedagogic freedom. The former enrolled more academically successful students; the latter targeted students from more financially successful families. In both programmes, the data analysed included (1) programme specifications and course outlines/syllabi (2) interviews with university leaders, teachers and supervisors in the workplace. Information about the data is summarised in Table 1.

First, programme specifications and syllabi were used to screen for subjects potentially rich in critical thinking. For BEP1, seven subjects were identified at both the foundation and the professional levels. They included political subjects, Listening and Speaking 3 (L&S3), Critical Reading and Writing (CT&W), British and American Literature (Bri&AmeLit), Advanced Business English (AdBzE), Marketing (Mar) and Critical Thinking (CT). For each subject, one teacher was recruited based on the principle of interest, availability and experience in teaching critical thinking. For richness of perspectives, two teachers (one full- time and one part-time) teaching CT were invited. The same process was applied for BEP2 where six subjects were identified. These included Grammar (Gr), Business Reading and Writing (BzR&W), American Literature (AmeLit), Mar, Human Resources (HR), Business Research (BzR), and Business Ethics (BzEth). Since the number of mainstream staff in BEP2 was limited to only five, this resulted in fewer participants being recruited here. The analysis was guided by Bernstein's concepts of the pedagogic device, classification and framing and the first author's insights as a university teacher teaching ES.

Table 1 Summary of data

	Interviews	Documents
BEP1	Vice chancellor (n=1) Department head (n=1) Teachers (n=8) Work supervisor (n=1) Total 11	Programme specification Quality Teaching and learning strategy Syllabi
BEP2	Vice chancellor (n=1) Dean (n=1) Teachers (n=6) Work supervisor (n=1) Total 9	Programme specification Syllabi

Case Description

BEP1 and BEP2 were 'minor discipline' programmes extended from the national curriculum framework of ES 'to accommodate more job opportunities for students' (MOET 2004, Article 4). Although both programmes are given autonomy to further select and organise knowledge, they have to conform to certain fundamental objectives, required areas of knowledge, credits, time, and pedagogic theories specified in the framework. Table 2 below summarised the framework. As the table showed, the curriculum was structured with 70 percent of compulsory pragmatic subjects spreading from general to professional levels. This left very little space for the development of specialised knowledge, which was not the main focus, arguably, until upper levels. Against the backdrop of these employability constraints, BEP1 and BEP2 both claimed 'to train all students to become critical thinkers' (Programme Specifications).

Table 2 ES-BEP Knowledge Structure

Specified levels of knowledge	Required subjects (among others)	Specified credits (140 min.)
General level		46 (min)
	- Political programme	10
	- Research Methodology	2
	- Others	33
Professional level		94 (min)
Foundation		52
	- English skills	40
	- Culture and literature	6
	- Linguistics	6

Core	
Specialised (BEP)	
Elective (BEP)	
Graduation	6

Source: MOET (2004) *min. = minimum

Data Analysis

A total of nineteen face-to face and one email semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author. The interview questions asked how leaders, teachers and supervisors understood critical thinking and how these understandings informed their pedagogic decisions. The interviews took place at various venues, including BEP1 and BEP2's offices and cafes. Each interview lasted sixty minutes on average. The recorded interviews were then transcribed for coding and analysing. Throughout the processes pseudonyms were used for confidentiality purposes. The interviews were then translated into English by the first author.

The analysis followed the six phases of thematic analysis recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). The coding proceeded along two facets, which Yin (2014) calls a two-level approach to making sense of the data. The first level was within- case analysis. In this process, each interview text was imported into Excel before being broken down into chunks to be colour-coded for the classification strength, e.g. for how critical thinking was conceptualised and organised within each programme. A *priori* codes related to Bernstein's two core concepts of strong/weak classification and framing were used initially. Here, a high awareness of the limitation of a *priori* codes (Creswell and Poth 2018) resulted in a number of additional codes emerging during the analysis. First, specific codes were applied. These ranged from very strongly classified (++C), strongly classified (+C), weakly classified (-C) and very weakly classified (--C). These codes were accompanied by extensive analytic notes to justify why critical thinking in each programme acquired a particular code. Next, the texts were coded for framing, using a similar colour-coded scheme and scale (++F, +F, -F, --F). It is important to emphasise here that as with all Bernsteinian analysis, the processes of classification and framing operate independently of each other (Bernstein 2000). The coding process also sought to account for the specific sub-codes of the selection, sequence, pacing and evaluative criteria components the participants generated. Here, underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations were identified to allow latent codes to emerge (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis then continued with the organisation of the individual codes into larger coherent categories.

The second phase, cross-case analysis, focused on points of similarities and/or contrasts between BEP1 and BEP2 pedagogic modalities. When the classification and framing of critical thinking within each programme were identified, similarities/differences emerged. The analysis then sought to interpret these points of similarities/contrasts by considering their unique contexts, e.g. the profile of each programme, its university, and students as well as the socio-political context in which they were all embedded. It was also at this point that the selected categories were grouped into three central themes: the pedagogy of 'the thinkable', the pedagogy of 'the unthinkable' and identities.

Findings and Discussion

The Pedagogy of 'the Thinkable'

The analysis of teachers' modalities in both programmes revealed a dominant pattern of teaching that can be named the pedagogy of 'the thinkable'. Although critical thinking was perceived as important in all subjects, there was little evidence pedagogic interactions engaged students in thinking critically and theoretically about knowledge. Instead, the pedagogy tended to associate critical thinking with anything that could be used to help students achieve certain LOs. There were two prominent features of this pedagogy.

Firstly, it took to heart context- specific knowledge and relied on teachers asserting strong framing over the transmission process. For example, there was strong control over the selection of what students could think critically about although there was recognition of their role:

> And then there were lessons about fallacies. The students loved these lessons because I taught them all types of fallacies … I am very happy when students, after those lessons, begin to dig into all aspects of life to spot fallacies and discuss them with me (Minh, CT, BEP1: 100-105).

> If I assign other topics outside, it will be a waste time, so twelve groups will talk about twelve lessons prescribed in the CO (Nữ, BzR&W, BEP2: 188).

> All specialised subjects require case studies, and I think case studies are the best activity for critical thinking development (Thanh, BzEthi, BEP2: 35-36).

Excerpts of the above type indicated a link between critical thinking and specific subject requirements, e.g identifying fallacies, presentations, and problem solving. Teaching critical thinking was to develop these skills rather than engaging students deeper in acquiring disciplinary knowledge through drawing relations, integrating and synthesising its systems of meanings, so as to address controversial issues in each field. Such a pedagogy decidedly raised the question of quality in the knowledge (re)produced by students. For example, requiring students to solve cases, albeit 'authentic' ones, far from their reality may have discouraged their critical thoughts. Since students 'lacked cultural, social and political understandings' (Thanh: 49-50), it was unlikely that they engaged in the process of seeking a range of possibilities for better understandings of problems. This could become especially serious when the pedagogy viewed students as being central to the learning process and thus expected them 'to find things out themselves' (Thanh: 55).

Secondly, there appeared to be a weak requirement for disciplinary knowledge. One teacher explained why her pedagogy rarely involved high order thinking skills even at a high level:

> I have to ensure the list of questions cover 'what' and 'who' to motivate them to speak first off. When questions turn to evaluation and justification, only a few students who have enough language and cognitive capacity raise their hands. The rest 90-95 per cent of the class stay completely quiet (Phượng, L&S3, BEP1: 169-170).

Another teacher simplified the work to make it 'thinkable' for his 'busy' students:

> Our students are very busy and do not have time for anything. I gave them the reading and *I did the job for them* a bit. I highlighted the chapters that they needed, a few pages . . . I said: Ok, read these 4 pages and try to extract what is important for your literature review (David, Bri&AmeLit, BEP1: 379-383, my italics for emphasis).

Knowledge continued to be controlled for 'the thinkable' even in tutorials for graduation dissertations:

> I showed them all the details. I checked final drafts for them to see if they were fine. Students were walking on the path I had cleared for them (Ngọc, BEP1: 535-538).

In some cases, there was a tendency to accept anything students could produce as knowledge. One example of such cases:

> Our second-year students are still confused while this subject is unfamiliar to them . . . I always encourage using literature to support their arguments but in fact this is a little high of a requirement for them, so I accept the knowledge that students picked here and there and from the lecture slides (Ngọc, CR&W, BEP1: 106-111).

The above examples suggested teachers' pedagogic decisions were based mainly on a pre-assumption that students were weak as a result of failing to acquire a certain level of critical thinking *prior* to taking their classes. This led to an application of pedagogic interventions that secured certain LOs rather than engaging students in creating new knowledge. Presumably, there were few activities that led to an acquisition of the type of knowledge that had power to generalise, explain or reason in new contexts. Critical thinking, if there was any, were activities designed just to keep students as active as possible.

Besides teachers' perceptions of what forms of critical thinking were to be taught, or not, to whom and how, curricular and institutional factors were also identified as common reasons for the choice of this pedagogy. Across both programmes, it was believed that critical thinking was organised in ways which reinforced teachers' beliefs that it was something to be encouraged rather than taught and assessed. For example:

> When it is standardised, I will follow, but not now. I just can't focus on critical thinking and evaluate it. This is related to many other things, such as curriculum and other skills (Vân, BzEth, BEP2: 196-198).

> In the syllabi of the subjects I have taught, there are no specifications of the so-called critical thinking. It should be clearly stated in the LOs, but I do not see anything like that (Trí, AdBizE 1,2,3, BEP1: 42-44).

In Bernstein's (2000) terms, critical thinking in the two programmes was 'weakly classified'. There was little 'space' between it and other subjects. Neither did it have internal rules or explicit evaluative criteria to give it a value. Significantly, this was seen merely as a 'limitation' caused by structural factors, e.g 'waiting for further instructions from the MOET' (Thanh, programme manager, BEP2: 103) or 'swamped with tasks and too busy to think about critical thinking' (Thu, Department Head, BEP1: 27).

Other teachers and institutional leaders raised concerns over the impacts of institutional factors on the critical thinking curriculum:

> The problem with a public university is large class size and lack of teaching staff. In the curriculum we specify that students can choose to write a graduation thesis, but in reality, we encourage them to take two courses as an alternative. It will be easier to manage (Hiệu, Dean, BEP2: 171-174).

> To recruit good and active teachers, we only have to give a priority to those who are trained abroad. Local-bounded teachers are narrow-minded (Văn, Vice Chancellor, BEP1: 358 – 359).

> It would be perfect if we have teachers who are qualified in both the English language and the business discipline- those who got training from abroad. But where are they to be found? (Thanh, Programme Manager, BEP2: 259-261).

It was obvious from the excerpts above that class size, teaching staff and capacity of teachers played their part in the choice of the pedagogy of 'the thinkable'. Since the pedagogy was the outcome of lack of teaching staff and qualified teachers, its failure to commit to critical thinking and disciplinary knowledge was the result of such institutional constraints.

Most significant of all were how socio- political ideologies impacted upon individual pedagogy. Phú's pedagogy provided a clear example:

> I linked socialism with capitalism and related this to the specific context of Vietnam, highlighting our strengths. I highlighted how our socialist-oriented economy supports disadvantaged people and enhances equality (Phú, political subjects, BEP1: 267-270).

As a teacher of the compulsory political subjects and also a member of the CPV, Phú had a mission- 'objectives' in the curricular language- to fulfil: to cultivate socialist ideologies among students. Although he did not impose his political stance directly on students, his accounts above and during the interview suggested an artful cultivation of a sense of 'optimism', 'trust' (Ibid: 179) and loyalty to the State's political ideologies. One may imagine how rarely critical debates of the CPV in Phú's classes drew on other world's political ideologies.

Minh's pedagogy also revealed how ideology impacted upon the teaching of critical thinking:

> Teachers' logics are not the same, but it is this that gives students a practical understanding of life. Honestly, I think any university which aims to provide ideal transparency and equality will literally create a false perception among students that such equality is everywhere while it is not always true in the workplace (Minh, CT, BEP1: 311-315).

The above indicated how Minh's pedagogic decision was underpinned by his ideological belief, which led him to advise a group of students who complained about their academically unqualified teachers to 'try to get used to that, find ways to achieve your goals and try not to confront teachers' (318-319). In the high social hierarchy of Vietnam, such a pedagogic intervention suggested a maintenance of the status quo.

Institutional leaders had their views on this matter:

> Teaching the aggressive Western mode of critical thinking to students won't secure them later. They will suffer the whole of their lives because not only will they encounter problems at a certain workplace nobody else will bother employing them (Văn, BEP1: 286-288).

> Teachers and students' mindsets do not stay in harmony with critical thinking since obedience and docility have become social norms (Hiệu, BEP2: 54-55).

The above comments communicated how different agents' ideological beliefs, which were mediated by wider social relations, regulated their pedagogic decisions. There was a sense of caution and uncertainty about the real utility and the practicality a critical thinking curriculum may bring to students.

Analysis of the data revealed critical thinking in the form of the 'thinkable' was evident across both institutions. This form of thinking hardly went further than the boundaries of pedagogic texts and dominant ideologies. Throughout the processes of organisation, transmission and evaluation, power relations always existed to mediate pedagogic decisions to ensure conforming identities and context specific knowledge rather than critical thinking and integrated knowledge to be achieved.

Despite the depicted constraints above, there was evidence of an alternative that can be called the pedagogy of 'the unthinkable'- but revealingly limited to only two individuals within the interview cohort.

The Pedagogy of 'the Unthinkable'

Significantly, across the two programmes, there also existed an embryonic pedagogy that indicated a shift in epistemology from acquiring fixed contextual knowledge towards creating knowledge that allowed more generalisations, reasoning and explanations. Access to this alternative pedagogy, according to teachers' perceptions, formed critical dispositions amongst students and brought about change in the latter's perceptions of professional knowledge and of themselves.

In BEP1, the alternative pedagogy was evident with Lộc, the teacher of CT. In BEP2, it was also evident with Đoàn, the teacher teaching various subjects at both foundational and professional levels. These included L&S, Mar, HR and BizR. Unlike the pedagogy of the 'thinkable' which was more concerned about content knowledge or LOs, the alternative pedagogy aimed at professional knowledge and dispositions, internalising in students 'values that define how [they] come out of the programme to be different' (Lộc: 368). It communicated a desire to educate students to become 'leaders who think like *scientists*' (Đoàn: 147-148, italics indicated participant's original language) regardless of their intended professional fields. Three key features characterised this pedagogy.

Firstly, the pedagogy of 'the unthinkable' aimed at change in students' perspective about knowledge and cultivated in them critical and independent thinking:

> I keep telling students: My words are not 100 percent correct. You have to think your own way. What you hear from me won't always apply in new contexts. Rather, you have to take into consideration relevant factors such as environment and culture and solve problems on your own (Đoàn, BEP2: 33-34).

> Don't expect I know everything. Now I am more experienced, so I am here to guide you, but in 20 years' time it will be me walking a stick to come and seek your wisdom (Lộc, BEP1: 599-604).

The above efforts to change students' perspective about what knowledge was and their roles as learners were a significant start for critical thinking. It aimed to transform Vietnamese students from depending on teachers for knowledge to taking responsibility for their learning and from accepting unquestionably to challenging given knowledge. The pedagogy also took as centre students' needs and interests and their role in the construction of knowledge, giving students a greater control over the selection of material to think critically about:

> In my class talks never seem to stop; they fight for turns because it is not me who initiate topics' (Lộc: 147-148, my italics for emphasis).

> I let them choose freely one theory . . . take it home and dig more deeply into it. This is where they break the theory down themselves (Đoàn: 119).

It can be said from the above that when the pedagogy of 'the unthinkable' gave students control over the learning process, it thus created a sense of relevance. This motivated students to engage critically and independently in the process of knowledge acquisition and production.

The second key feature was the provision of a safe place for critical thinking to flourish. It was done through a consistent application of rigorous epistemological standards of critical thought. This, in turn, sharpened dispositions such as the commitment and dedication necessary for knowledge production. Lộc emphasised the need for theoretical knowledge:

> On approaching any topic, you need to relate it to literature, both locally and internationally, presenting it in the language that not only for the people in your field but for any ordinary people, including farmers to understand. It is because critical thinking will later help you in your political career (Lộc: 390-395).

Đoàn required epistemic standards for knowledge in her classes:

> The concept *customer insight* is explained in just two or three lines in the textbook. Students must use literature to seek more clarification and full understanding of what it really is. They then have to bring in real-life examples of how customer insight is, or not, applied (Đoàn: 119-127).

It was clear that the focus of the pedagogy of 'the unthinkable' was more than memorising and reproducing specific bodies of knowledge. It insisted on application of knowledge to inform certain actions in new contexts. It moved students

towards conceptual abstract knowledge so that later 'in [their] life as well as [their] political life', students will avoid delivering 'biased' messages- the ones that 'only the people within [their] fields are able to understand' (Lộc: 306 – 308).

For this to happen, the pedagogy of 'the unthinkable' combined open pedagogic relationships with a questioning epistemology. Teachers' strictness with criteria was put in place where necessary, despite students' 'moaning', to force them to 'change the consciousness, change *perception*' (387, the italics indicated the participant's original language) and not to expect given knowledge or easy work. A lack of such demands would result in students continuing to depend on teachers to spoon feed them thus 'remain babies approaching the end of the journey' (Lộc: 389). This became evident when juxtaposing Lộc and Minh's modalities:

> I felt disappointed. They did everything wrong. In group tutorials, I told them to do this and that, say this and that but they did not record or take notes. In the end, they did everything wrong. It was not like I had told them (Minh, CT, BEP1: 543-545).

> You need to internalise values that can tell how you come out of the programme to be different. Without these, you remain the same babies as when you first come to me (Lộc, CT, BEP1: 384-386).

It is worth noting that both pedagogies indicated a desire to facilitate students towards certain outcomes. However, for the pedagogy of 'the thinkable', the outcomes were fixed and prescribed while for the alternative pedagogy, these aimed at a shift from acquiring fixed bodies of knowledge to creating new knowledge and thus from dependent to independent identities.

Thirdly, the pedagogy of the 'unthinkable' relied on teachers' involvement in reorganising curricula in a way that gave critical thinking and knowledge more emphasis. Lộc reflected on how he organised the course in such a way:

> Students have to go through three stages. At 'xé nháp' [binning the draft], students are allowed to redo their work based on teacher and peer's feedback. At 'nâng cao năng lực' [upgrading competences], they choose their own topics, read literature and integrate knowledge to produce a review of a book or a journal article . . . When reaching the '*high skills*' stage toward the end of the course, students have to be able to read and integrate literature both locally and internationally to solve predominant social issues (343-350, italics indicated the participant's original language).

Đoàn devoted similar intervention:

> I often piece subjects together to see their relations. In L&S in Year One and Two, critical thinking centred on answering and questioning based on student's personal opinions. In Mar in Year Three students have to show evidence of deep knowledge about an issue by learning how to use reliable literature to support their arguments. In BizR in Year Four, the use of references is still maintained alongside with word limit, coherence and cohesion (87).

The emphasis on stages of critical development and consistent standards in the examples above undoubtedly aimed at internalising in students a sense of dedication to professional knowledge and certain dispositions that characterised them as critical thinkers. In the language of Bernstein (2000), the pedagogy aimed at developing an 'esoteric' identity. Lôc reflected on how his students' 'shaking' hearts grew bolder:

> In the final example, oh my god, I felt over the moon! It became true! told them at the beginning: the first day I talk, you nod; the second day I talk one you talk back one, but the last day I talk one you will talk back four (512- 514).

Teaching for 'the unthinkable' was not without challenges. One challenge was related to teachers' expertise. For example, Lộc revealed:

> They read one; you have to read ten. Sometimes I have to ask them to give me time because literally I can't read against a class of 30 or a group of 7' (600- 601).

Đoàn talked about a curricular challenge that she faced:

> In final tests it was confusing. It burned me out deciding how much critical thought the tests should require. Of course, I could not allocate 70 percent. 50:50 was also risk; students' capacities were different (325- 327)!

While the pedagogy of 'the unthinkable' depended on teachers' proficiency to overcome such challenges and to preserve

with critical thinking, the pedagogy of 'the thinkable' tended to cite large class sizes or inadequate time as excuses for restricting creative opportunities.

The Problem of Identity Development

The last significant finding was related to relationships between the two critical thinking pedagogies and student identities. As discussed above, although the alternative pedagogy cultivated in some students the qualities of critical thinkers, what dominated pedagogic interaction was the pedagogy of 'the thinkable'. When BEP1 and BEP2 students went out for internship, there was little evidence they could think critically in linguistics or business, according to supervisory perceptions.

The analysis here focused mainly but not exclusively on the interviews with two supervisors-Dũng from a language centre and Diệu from a non-government organisation that funds programmes to treat Vietnamese children with heart diseases.

Firstly, there was evidence that students were able to reproduce but not produce knowledge:

> Some of them [the interns], when being assigned the consultancy task, did quite well because there was a lesson, a procedure for them to memorise and follow. However, when it came to *complaints*, they were unable to solve. Their English was good, but they did not know what to say. . . (Dũng, 146-149, italics indicated participant's original language).

> Their translation was quite naive . . . It's kind of word-by word translation . . . When we, a specialised agency, first receive information from customers' families, the next step is to reword it a bit, so that it makes sense to our context: Well, why is it that…? In what way is the heart related to the lung? Also, is this symptom that the family has reported relevant or not, terminologically? Students do not have that thinking, have not reached that level of thinking! They just literally rewrite what they have heard (Diệu: 338 – 344)!

The above excerpts suggested that there was an absence of theoretical knowledge in students' performances; in other words, they failed to select and synthesise specific knowledge out of its systems of meanings to apply in new contexts to solve emergent problems. In the first case, interns failed to generate ideas or concepts of customer service to engage with the emergent complaints in depth. In the second case, the translation produced by the interns showed no linguistics knowledge; they were unable to decontextualise everyday language to communicate effectively in another specialised context.

Not only were students unable to think critically in their professional fields; their communication showed no indication of critical knowledge of themselves. One teacher and employer raised concerns over this:

> They couldn't tell what they can teach well or who they can work better with . . . They couldn't tell whether they're calm or active. I pointed these out for them but not they themselves. They didn't know who they are and what they want' (Vân, BEP2: 260).

> Most of them still do not know what they want at this stage. I asked them what they set as outcomes of the internship, they said generally they just wanted a report or simply more work experience (Diệu, BEP1: 202-204).

The above supervisory comments indicated once again the ineffectiveness of the critical thinking curriculum in the two programmes. This underdeveloped identity, according to Bernstein (2000), was an unavoidable outcome the social relationships of the pedagogy of 'the thinkable' restricted students to.

Overall, the above analysis portrayed the complex reality of the implementation of the critical thinking curriculum in HE in Vietnam. The transmission of this knowledge was never value neutral. Rather, it was impacted upon by the power relations, arising not only from the wider social orders but also from the pedagogic discourse itself. Interestingly, while control was always there to ensure critical thinking is transmitted in the way that socialises students into expected conforming identities, there were also possibilities for alternatives to happen. In this study, the alternative pedagogy did bring about change in a minority of students' perception of knowledge and who they were. Unfortunately, it was limited to a few individual teachers' efforts.

Concluding Consequences

The teaching of critical thinking and the impact of this upon student identities in HE in Vietnam has a number of consequences for the literature.

Firstly, for the critical thinking curriculum, despite the foci in the literature on concepts (McPeck 1981; Facione

1990; Barnett 1997), modes of teaching (Nussbaum 2004, Westheimer 2008; Ennis 2018) and assessment (Halpern 2001; Paul and Elder 2006), what appears to be crucial is how the perceptions and pedagogy of critical thinking are regulated by power relations within the pedagogic discourses themselves. The reason why the critical thinking curriculum in Vietnamese HE has little positive impact is critical thinking is given less power than other objectives. In the broader setting, disciplinary knowledge is not seen as important as other content knowledge areas. A lack of clarity at the curriculum level about critical thinking conceptualisation and evaluative criteria, together with an obsession with LOs, leads to strong control of teachers over most of the learning process. Such 'strong framing' and 'weak classification' of critical thinking, according to Bernstein (2000), definitely restrict options on which pedagogic decisions can be made about how critical thinking is acquired in each subject. When pedagogic interactions centre on fixed knowledge and skills, there is a high probability that students, upon graduation, will have a very limited understanding of the role of theoretical knowledge. Thus, potentially they will be unable to generate or synthesise specific knowledge from larger systems of meanings to apply in new situations and solve emergent problems they face in the workplace. Overall, this research, in line with previous research (Wheelahan 2010; Lim 2016) highlights the role of disciplinary knowledge and how current HE curricula tend to downplay it.

The second consequence is for the teaching of critical thinking in a high centralised education system and/or an ex-colonial developing and authoritarian country like Vietnam. While the literature highlights a number of teaching techniques that work to enhance critical thinking (Niu et al. 2013), it is teachers' involvement in the recontextualisation of syllabi that brings about fundamental change. As the analysis in the pedagogy of 'the unthinkable' shows, although teachers cannot unilaterally alter the official curricular structure and/ or its division of knowledge, they can make use of their autonomy to rearrange and/ or modify syllabi to give critical thinking and the disciplinary knowledge more focus. In the language of Bernstein (2000), it is about the organisation of the curriculum in a positive way so as to re-define the strongly bounded identities and educational consciousness to which a sense of powerful knowledge can be attached. Strongly classified syllabi then need to be 'sufficiently demanding' (Barnett 2009, 438). Adhering to rigorous criteria provides a safe space for critical debates and also helps construct identities who are ready to engage in critical thinking in any new contexts (Barnett, 1997). However, at present, it is practically unfeasible for all Vietnamese teachers to teach critical thinking in the same way as Lộc and Đoàn did, due to different individual perceptions, academic backgrounds, competences and availability. Moreover, such creative 'unthinkable' pedagogic improvisations are presently always going to be faced with powerful conformist ideological, curricular and institutional challenges which support the 'thinkable' pedagogy. Yet, since 'Control is double faced', carrying 'both the power of reproduction and the potential for its change' (Bernstein 2003, 5), the creative examples of Lộc and Đoàn remain a possible option to which students enrolling in university, either a private or a public, may, on occasion, enjoy access to. Significant as well is how the status of CT in Private Elite contributes to the success of the critical thinking curriculum there. Being elective, CT, indeed, plays the role of a 'guardian of intrinsic educational value' from the 'pollution' of market demands (Beck 2010, 84). This all boils down to the academic and financial freedom a private university in Vietnam enjoys. The conclusion about the relationship between knowledge, power control and identities (Bernstein 2000; 2003) is that however hard external power relations work to uphold conforming ideologies through curriculum knowledge and pedagogy, internal power relations always have the potential to disrupt them.

Finally, the substantive findings of this exploratory study suggest the considerable utility of Bernstein's analysis for future research in teaching and learning of other subjects in different contexts or even critical thinking in other ex-colonial 'subordinate' countries with similar strong ideological controls over HE systems. The probability is similar problems of developing real critical thinking will also be evident in such countries.

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