

## The Use of Literary Texts and Questioning to Examine First-Year Central Asian Students' Critical Thinking Skills

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### Abstract

This research project reports the results of the study on freshman Central Asian students' critical reasoning skills before learners actually become familiar with the concept of critical thinking through formal instruction. In addition, the researcher explored the effect of the fourth-level foundation English course upon the development of critical thought of students in the fifth-level foundation English course taught at a major Kazakhstani university. Overall, 37 first-year Central Asian students enrolled in the Foundation English 5 course in Fall 2011 participated in the project. Besides, seven Foundation English 5 course faculty members participated in a small survey with four open-ended questions inquiring their beliefs about critical thought and questioning as well as observations of the possession and use of critical thinking skills demonstrated by the foundation English learners. The researcher used three different types of questions – questions of fact, questions of preference and questions of judgment - as the basis for constructing a more inclusive instrument for grouping questions produced by the students after reading literary texts. The results indicate that many learners who have been taught various critical thinking skills in the lower-level foundation English course asked fewer factual questions, more preferential and almost the same number of judgment questions compared with those asked by the newcomers. The research and teaching implications suggest possible ways for educators to help first-year Central Asian students to further develop their critical thinking skills for study and career purposes.

**Key Words:** critical thinking, questioning, students, texts

## I. Introduction

Many institutions of higher education worldwide have a requirement of formal instruction in critical thinking to be incorporated in diverse academic disciplines in liberal arts, business, economics, law, social sciences and other program curricular. This policy is based on the grounds that university graduates should become intelligent citizens conscious of their rights and responsibilities in the global community. Besides, the ability of graduates to think critically affects their employability in the global markets. Indeed, potential employers expect young professionals to be prepared to face work-related challenges. In other words, novice professionals should be able to develop effective solutions to problems, consider issues from multiple perspectives, apply specific and general knowledge appropriately and reflect on both personal and collaborative short- and long-term performances. However, many university graduates still possess insufficient reasoning skills. Surprisingly, only 6 percent of American graduates in 2005, for example, demonstrated proficiency in critical thinking (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2005). Taiwanese students are even more immature in critical thinking than their western counterparts (Tung & Chang, 2009).

Although American faculty can estimate critical thought potential of their first-year students based on the SAT tasks and results that test high school graduates' ability to think critically, Kazakhstani educators do not have this opportunity. The reason is that prospective university students either present their high school Unified National Testing scores or take a university-created test that indicate only the level of factual knowledge of different subjects, but do not disclose learners' critical thinking skills. For example, to enter the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (thereafter KIMEP), which is considered to be one of the best institutions in Kazakhstan and entire Central Asia and is based on the American educational credit system with English as the main language of instruction, the applicants should pass a special complex test. But again this test checks only their knowledge of math, history of Kazakhstan, native language and English. As a result, both faculty and administrators remain unaware of the admitted students' critical thinking potential.

However, the development of learners' critical thought is a crucial component of higher learning at many Kazakhstani universities. Thus, a lot of effort is placed by their faculty on teaching students how to think critically and express their thoughts in English, which is the students' second or third language, through a variety of in-class activities and self-study assignments. For instance, KIMEP has an institutional policy to provide those students who score below 80 percent on the English Entrance Test with the opportunity to develop their English proficiency, study skills and cognitive thinking through foundation English courses in order to help them prepare better for their further academic courses in their undergraduate or graduate degree programs. Particularly, the aims of foundation English courses are to "offer intensive practice in the use of English in all four skill areas (speaking, listening, reading and writing)" and to "guide students from the outset in the acquisition of effective study methods, sound academic skills, higher-order thinking and problem-solving, and critical thinking" (Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research, 2010, p.61).

In order to find out English language faculty's opinions about their students' critical thinking, the researcher of this paper conducted a quick survey (the method is explained thoroughly in the third part of the study) among seven instructors who teach the Foundation English 5 course (thereafter FE5) at one of the Kazakhstani universities with the Western-style education system (thereafter the University). Overall, all foundation English faculty members observe that critical thought potential differs from student to student, but often their learners

demonstrate insufficient critical thinking ability for succeeding in higher education. One faculty member even stated that the completion of foundation English courses does not significantly affect students' ability to think critically because it is actually an innate feature of a person's mind, in other words, a learner either possess or lack it.

Moreover, four out of the seven surveyed instructors generally agree that lower-level foundation English courses enhance students' critical thinking skills in higher-level foundation English courses. For example, these educators have noticed that most FE5 students who took the Foundation English 4 course (thereafter FE4) possess and use more critical thinking skills than the newcomers whose FE5 was the first course at the University. The latter also differ in their ability to think critically depending on their previous schooling. For instance, several instructors have noticed that those students who finished special schools like international high schools and lyceums and usually possess and use more analytical thinking than those learners who studied in general state Kazakhstani schools.

Since there is no formal evidence yet gathered in Kazakhstan on natural critical ability of the first-year students, this research aims to examine freshman learners' innate critical thought potential. In addition, the researcher will explore the effect of the fourth-level foundation English course upon the development of critical thought of students in the fifth-level foundation English course taught at the University.

The study asks the following research questions:

1. What kind of questions do first-year students in the upper-level foundation English ask after reading a literary text?
2. What is the difference in critical thinking skills between those students in the upper-level foundation English who took a lower-level foundation English course and the newcomers?
3. Why is there a difference, if any, in the upper-level foundation English students' ability to ask reasonable and thoughtful questions that indicate the learners' possession and use of critical thought (graduates of a lower-level foundation English course and the newcomers)?

## II. Literature review

This section will review educational researchers and practitioners' statements and perceptions of critical thinking and the possibility of its development by students through reading and questioning literary texts.

In terms of critical thinking, various educators provide similar definitions of this mental competence. For instance, Dewey (1908) thought that critical thinking includes maintaining some degree of doubt during simultaneous systematic and protracted inquiry. According to Tierney, O'Flahavan, and McGinley (1989), "critical thinking entails making a commitment to thinking about ideas-ideally, from different perspectives-as well as thinking about the quality and nature of that thinking" (p.136). All seven surveyed FE5 instructors consider critical thinking as the ability to raise and examine an issue from different perspectives by providing supporting and opposing arguments and exploring its reasons and consequences. Moreover, this issue examination should be based on reliable evidence gathered from various sources as well as personal opinion, which has to be rather skeptical and questionable to avoid bias.

The choice of literary texts as an effective means of developing both critical thought and English skills is justified with several reasons. First of all, daily literature reading is an important self-study task for foundation English students at the University as well as any learner of English

as a second or foreign language. Secondly, Lazere (1987) claimed that literature as an academic discipline “can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking” (p. 2). These mental capacities include unification and relation of ideas and issues in the text with those in a reader’s experience, engagement in mature moral reasoning, formation of conclusions, demonstration of skepticism resulting into critical examination of an issue in the text, perception of ambiguity and relativity of one’s viewpoint and awareness of multiple aspects of form and meaning (Lazere, 1987). Wallace (1993) also asserted that “literature texts may well, in part at least, encode students’ own experiences and give rise to strong or varied responses”, thus, leading to reasoning within multiple domains (p. 106). The author adds that through interactive reading English language learners can explore even uncomplicated literary texts with complexity because “material which is linguistically simple may invite complex interpretations, that is the demands made on the reader may be aesthetic and intellectual rather than linguistic” (p. 69). Later, Jaffar (2004) echoed Lazere’s statement by noting that critical thinking involves active interaction with the text, good readers bring their own understanding to the text and add to its dimensions.

Recently, Tung and Chang (2009) wrote that “literature reading is a complex process that requires readers to recall, retrieve and reflect on their prior experiences or memories to construct meanings of the text” (p. 291). In addition to the capacities mentioned by Lazere (1987), these authors mentioned the other traits that readers might develop through literary texts: “to differentiate facts from opinions; to understand the literal or implied meanings and the narrator’s tone; to apply what they have learned from this process to other domains or the real world” (p. 291). Finally, one of the surveyed FE5 faculty responded to critical reading as a “deep analysis of texts through posing incisive questions to look for hidden meanings, literary techniques and author’s agenda; it helps to read between the lines.”

In addition to defining critical thinking and validating the choice of texts to be used in this study, the researcher reviewed existing works on the effect of questioning literary texts in relation to critical thought development. Most researchers consent that posing intelligent questions lead to a better examination of a literature piece and, thus, to the reader’s contemplation development. For instance, Tankersley (2003) claimed that proficient readers, in fact, pose questions at any reading stage because such an inquiry enhances their understanding and links existing knowledge with new information through analysis and synthesis. Thus, questioning helps readers to “examine the text, the author’s purpose and style, and their own interpretations of the text they are reading (p.133). The author asserts that only through asking challenging and thoughtful questions students truly develop as literate readers and thinkers. Paul and Elder (2006) argued that “it is impossible to become a good thinker and be a poor questioner” because “thinking is not driven by answers but by questions” (p. 84). Moreover, they emphasized that the quality of questions determines a person’s thinking and learning processes. Therefore, those people who want to enhance their cognitive ability should ask meaningful questions related to purposes, reasons, assumptions, logic, and effects of an article, issue or activity. As for the educational process, Paul and Elder (2006) assumed that “most students ask virtually none of the thought-stimulating questions” (p.86). The learners, thus, tend to ask only dead questions such as “Is it going to be on the test?” or “Who is the protagonist in this story?” that do not encourage students to think critically. Furthermore, Nosich (2009) exemplifies that when asked to solve a homework problem, students often just try to resolve the problem by any method they can think of instead of asking themselves, “How can I best solve the problem?” The

researcher then claims that critical thinking learners need to first question the problem and its possible solutions. Thus, he highlights asking the following questions:

“What are some alternative ways of solving the problem assigned?”

“What is a good way to begin?”

“Do I have all necessary information I need to start solving the problem?”

“What is the purpose behind the problem?”

“Can the problem *be* solved? Does it even make sense?” (p. 6).

As for the surveyed FE5 instructors, they have also confirmed that the ability to ask questions help a learner to develop his or her critical thinking skills. To illustrate, one teacher wrote that “through asking questions we not only get the information we need, but also create a context in which we think and define the direction of how we can apply the work of mind.” However, most of them are positive that only thought-provoking questions do really enhance students’ critical thinking potential.

### III. Research methodology

The researcher has used the descriptive research type with a comparative descriptive design to answer its research questions. With the chosen research design, the researcher aims to compare critical thinking skills of two groups of freshman students – those who were introduced the concept of critical thought in the FE4 course and the newcomers who have not been taught any critical thinking skills in the university courses yet.

#### A. Participants

Overall, 37 local and international Central Asian first-year University students enrolled in the FE5 course in Fall 2011 participated in this research project. Among them were 15 newcomers or students who did not take FE4 and 22 students who finished this course in earlier studies. All participants were either second or third users of English. Most students’ native languages were either Kazakh or Russian followed by the Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tadjik, and Turkmen languages. Four other faculty members volunteered to conduct the same research procedure in their FE5 classes for generating a more representative sample for the study.

Besides, seven FE5 faculty members participated in a small survey with four open-ended questions inquiring their beliefs about critical thought and questioning as well as observations of the possession and use of critical thinking skills demonstrated by the foundation English learners.

#### B. Instrument

The data measuring instrument was based on Paul and Elder’s (2006) question classification table with the three types of questions focused on examining learners’ thinking and learning processes (Table 1).

Table1. *Three types of questions and their impact on people’s thinking and learning*

Question type	Example	Estimated reaction	Possible answer	Effect on thinking and learning
<i>Questions of fact</i>	What is the boiling point of lead?	Require evidence and reasoning within a system	A correct answer	Lead to knowledge
<i>Questions of preference</i>	What is your favorite type of food?	Call for stating a subjective preference	A subjective opinion	Cannot be assessed

<i>Questions of judgement</i>	What is the most important thing we can do to “save” the earth?	Require evidence and reasoning within multiple systems	Better and worse answers	Require reasoned judgement
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Student questions were first grouped into questions of fact, questions of preference and questions of judgement based on Paul and Elder’s question classification table. However, during the data processing stage, the researcher has realized that not all of the various student questions about literary texts can be placed into these three categories because many questions simultaneously encompassed features of two different types. Therefore, for a more effective arrangement of questions and, as a result, a more objective analysis of the results, the researcher had to modify Paul and Elder’s question classification table to include other miscellaneous questions (Table 2).

Table 2. *Five types of questions and their impact on students’ thinking and learning*

<b>Question type</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Estimated reaction</b>	<b>Possible answer</b>	<b>Effect on thinking and learning</b>
<i>Questions of fact</i>	How did Mr. Brock become the murderer of electronic devices?	Require evidence and reasoning within a system	A correct answer	Lead to knowledge
<i>Questions of preference/ fact</i>	Why did people in the story loose hope and were afraid of technology?	Call for stating a subjective viewpoint partly supported by evidence within a system	A subjective opinion partially based on factual information	Can be partially assessed and lead to knowledge
<i>Questions of preference</i>	Do you believe in love at first side like it happened with the characters in the story?	Call for stating a subjective preference	A subjective opinion	Cannot be assessed
<i>Questions of preference/ judgement</i>	Why aren’t most teenagers in real life (like people in the story) interested in art?	Call for stating a subjective viewpoint based on reasoning within multiple systems	A subjective opinion that lead to better and worse answers	Can be partially assessed because require reasoned judgement
<i>Questions of judgement</i>	What is the writer’s philosophical position in this story?	Require evidence and reasoning within multiple systems	Better and worse answers	Require reasoned judgement

**C. Procedures**

**Classroom research**

All participating FE5 students were assigned to read a literary authentic short story at home and then in class to think about and write down several interesting and thoughtful

questions related to the story that the learners wanted to discuss with their instructor and peers. As a result, each participant read five classic or contemporary stories and compiled the total of 17 questions. In order to examine students' natural critical ability expressed through their own questions, the participating teachers neither explained what critical thinking included, nor showed any samples of critical thinking questions.

#### **Student participant survey**

The student participants were also asked to participate in a survey by filling in the questionnaire with some personal demographic (e.g., age, gender, country of origin) and educational background information (e.g., completion of FE4 course). Additionally, they responded to a few open-ended questions about the definition of critical thinking, role of questioning in developing a person's critical thought, types of questions that cultivate reasoning speculations and types of critical thinking skills learned in the FE4 course.

#### **Faculty participant survey**

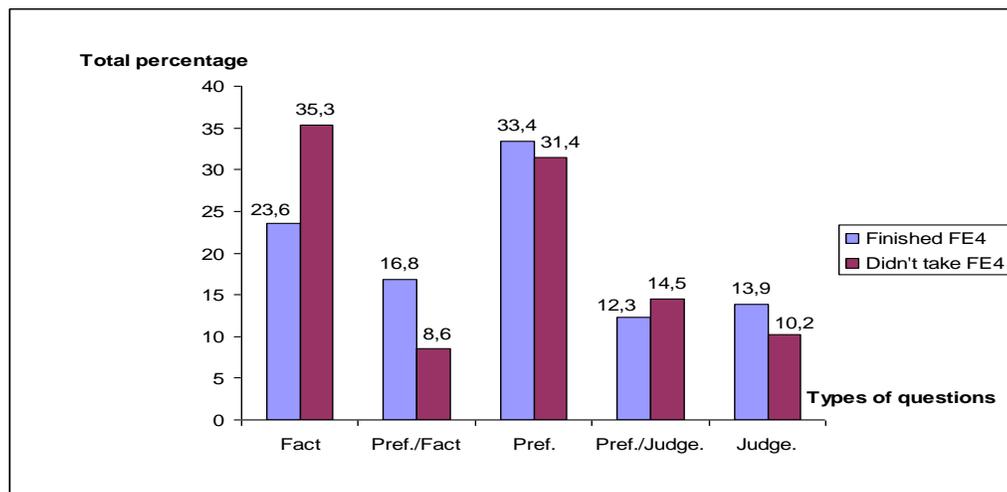
All seven FE5 participating instructors were asked to reply to four open-ended questions aimed at investigating their own definitions of critical thinking and the function of questions in developing a student's critical thinking skills. Also, they shared their observations of critical thought demonstration by their FE5 students. In particular, they commented on (1) what critical thinking is; (2) whether questioning ability helps students to develop their critical thinking skills; (3) whether newcoming students in their classes demonstrate critical thinking skills; and (4) whether those students who took the lower-level of foundation English courses, particularly FE4, possess and use more critical thinking skills than the newcomers.

### **III. Research results**

The research results include both the participants' numerous questions to literary texts and their responses to the following survey inquiries: (1) students' understanding of critical thinking; (2) role of questioning in the development of learners' critical thinking skills; (3) types of questions that enhance critical thought; and (4) learners' critical thinking skills learned in the FE4 course, if applicable.

#### **A. Student questions**

Overall, 37 FE5 students produced 629 questions with 374 and 255 posed by those learners who took the lower-level FE4 course and the newcomers, respectively. According to the results, first-year students in both groups asked many factual and preferential questions (over 70 percent) that do not encourage the development of critical thinking; however, they also constructed questions that lead to critical thought development (25-30 percent). The general tendency is that those participants who had finished the FE4 course asked fewer factual and more thought-stimulating questions than the newcomers with about 9 and 7 percent differences, respectively (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Types of questions asked by FE5 students*

### B. Student responses to the questionnaire items

Besides responding to general demographic and educational background items, the participants replied to the four research-related open-ended questions. First, the participants were asked to explain what they understand by critical thinking. The majority of students in both groups – those who were introduced and practiced critical thinking skills in FE4 and the newcomers - defined critical thinking as the analysis of an issue from different sides, in other words, the consideration of its benefits and drawbacks (52.2 and 45 percent, respectively). Other students who took FE4 (7.8 percent) mentioned that critical thinking includes identification of an issue and its possible solutions as well as development and justification of personal opinions. Ten percent of the newcomers pointed out that critical thinking should be based on examining other people's thoughts about a topic or issue, however, none of the students from the first group noted this component. The complete list of all responses is overviewed in Table 3.

Table 3. *Students' definitions of critical thinking*

Students' understanding of critical thinking	Took F4		Didn't take F4	
	Number	Percent-age,%	Number	Percent-age,%
knowing what an issue is	3	7.8	1	5
finding reasons and main points of an issue	2	5.2	0	0
analyzing an issue from different sides	21	52.2	9	45
finding solutions to issues/situations	3	7.8	1	5
drawing conclusions	1	2.6	0	0
developing and proving own opinion	3	7.8	0	0
criticizing information	2	5.2	1	5
understanding the meaning between the lines	0	0	1	5
asking and discussing critical questions	1	2.6	1	5
researching what other people think about a topic/issue	0	0	2	10
thinking thoroughly about important things	2	5.2	1	5
thinking effectively in critical situations	0	0	1	5

thinking about a question/issue during more time than usual	0	0	1	5
brainstorming	0	0	1	5

Second, all 37 participants believed that questioning does develop learners' critical reasoning skills. The majority (19.4 percent) of learners who practiced critical thinking skills in the FE4 course believed that thinking about and discussing new information through questioning stimulates the development of critical thought, whereas most newcomers (28 percent) indicated that questioning helps learners think about and answer posed questions and, as a result of this mental process, students develop their critical thinking skills. Table 4 lists various students' reasons of why asking questions improves learners' critical thinking skills.

Table 4. *Students' reasoning of why questioning leads to critical thought development*

Reasons why questioning develops critical thinking	Took F4		Didn't take F4	
	Number	Percent- age,%	Number	Percent- age,%
receiving new information	3	8.3	4	16
thinking about/discussing new information	7	19.4	2	8
finding the main idea/details of an issue	5	13.8	2	8
finding reasons of an issue	1	2.7	1	4
analyzing an issue	3	8.3	3	12
understanding a topic/issue better	2	5.5	1	4
raising debatable/relevant questions	2	5.5	3	12
thinking about and answering posed questions	1	2.7	7	28
sharing and learning about different ideas	5	13.8	0	0
building and justifying own opinion	5	13.8	1	4
checking one's intelligence	1	2.7	0	0
being skeptical about something	0	0	1	4
developing logic	1	2.7	0	0

Third, the participants were asked to suggest those types of questions that encourage the development of critical thinking skills. The majority of participants in both groups (18.7 and 16 percent, respectively) are positive that the "Why?" questions support the development of critical thinking skills. The second most frequently occurring questions in both groups include those that are concerned with personal opinions about some issue and personal reasons of making a particular decision or choice. The student choices of these question types are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5. *Students' responses to the types of questions that develop critical thinking*

Types of questions that enhance critical thinking	Took F4		Didn't take F4	
	Number	Percent- age,%	Number	Percent- age,%
what is the issue/its details?	3	6.2	0	0
what are the reasons of something?	3	6.2	2	8
what are the advantages and disadvantages of something?	0	0	1	4

what is the difference between items?	3	<b>6.2</b>	0	<b>0</b>
what are the author's purposes in writing this story?	1	<b>2</b>	0	<b>0</b>
what is the moral/main meaning of the story?	2	<b>4.1</b>	2	<b>8</b>
why did the author create such a character?	1	<b>2</b>	0	<b>0</b>
why was the ending of the story like this?	1	<b>2</b>	3	<b>12</b>
what do you/people think about something?	4	<b>8.3</b>	2	<b>8</b>
why do you think so/choose something?	3	<b>6.2</b>	4	<b>16</b>
what would you do in someone's place?	1	<b>2</b>	1	<b>4</b>
what alternative would you prefer?	1	<b>2</b>	1	<b>4</b>
do you agree or disagree with something?	0	<b>0</b>	1	<b>4</b>
WHY questions	9	<b>18.7</b>	4	<b>16</b>
HOW questions	4	<b>8.3</b>	1	<b>4</b>
WHAT questions	3	<b>6.2</b>	0	<b>0</b>
WHO, WHEN, WHERE	1	<b>2</b>	0	<b>0</b>
questions that require thoughtful answers	1	<b>2</b>	2	<b>8</b>
questions connected with symbolism in a story	0	<b>0</b>	1	<b>4</b>
political, economic questions	2	<b>4.1</b>	0	<b>0</b>
informative questions	2	<b>4.1</b>	0	<b>0</b>
rhetorical, logical questions	1	<b>2</b>	0	<b>0</b>
brainstorming questions	1	<b>2</b>	0	<b>0</b>
I don't know	1	<b>2</b>	0	<b>0</b>

Finally, the respondents from the first group recalled those critical thinking skills they had learned in the FE4 course. Their notes are provided in Table 6 below. Most participants (36.6 percent) learned to analyze information in articles followed by the obtained skills to identify and discuss issues as well as to compare and contrast arguments in essays. One interesting finding is that although all participants believe that questioning develops critical thinking skills of learners, only two students indicated that in the FE4 course they learned how to ask relevant, thoughtful questions to literary texts.

Table 6. *Students' responses to critical thinking skills learned in Foundation English 4*

Critical thinking skills learned in the FE4 course	Responses	
	Number	Percentage, %
to define critical thinking	1	<b>3.3</b>
to identify/discuss issues	6	<b>20</b>
to contrast/compare arguments in an essay	6	<b>20</b>
to find solutions to problems	2	<b>6.6</b>
to analyze articles (finding main points, author's purpose)	11	<b>36.6</b>
to ask relevant, thoughtful questions to literary texts	2	<b>6.6</b>
to think logically	1	<b>3.3</b>
I don't remember	1	<b>3.3</b>

#### IV. Discussion

##### A. Discussion of the results

The first research question aimed to explore and describe a range of possible questions that first-year students in the upper-level foundation English ask after reading a literary text. The results of the project show that freshman students ask various questions ranging from pure factual, content-oriented to critical, judgment-requiring questions (see Figure 1, p. 12). Such a variety of question types can be partially explained by previous students' educational background, for instance, the fact of taking the FE4 course where learners practice using critical thinking skills in different assignments might have caused the creation of more judgment questions by the participants in the first group. The reason why about 30 percent of all questions constituted preferential ones might be the participants' willingness to know their fellow students' opinions about and perceptions of stories' content, characters, processes, choices and other text aspects.

The second research question inclined to examine the difference in critical thinking skills between those students in the upper-level foundation English who took a lower-level foundation English course and the newcomers. The results indicate that those students who took the FE4 course are more likely to ask fewer factual questions compared with the newcomers. This can be explained by the fact that the former were explicitly taught and practiced different critical thinking skills in the lower-level foundation English course. However, since the majority of FE5 students in both groups still asked over 70 percent of factual and subjective, preferential questions, the researcher has concluded that most learners were unfamiliar with the fact that these types of questions do not develop their critical thinking skills and should not be the focus of learners' attention when thinking about or discussing a story. To the researcher's surprise, about a fourth of the entire student sample posed judgment questions that require reasoned analysis and, therefore, enhance one of the important upper-level critical thinking skills. This result indicates that about 25 percent of the participating freshman students use their critical thinking skills regardless of the fact whether they were introduced them in lower-level foundation English courses.

The third research question inquired why there is a difference, if any, in the participants' ability to different questions. The biggest difference exists in the number of factual and preferential/factual questions constructed by the students in two various groups. This variation appears to be linked to factor that the majority of the students who took the FE4 course had learned to analyze issues and information in general from different perspectives (see Tables 3 and 6). Therefore, they might have used this analytical skill to construct less factual, content-related questions to literary texts than the newcomers.

Surprisingly, the results also revealed that there is a minimal difference in the number of judgment questions posed by the participants in both groups. One of the reasons why about 25 percent of the newcomers demonstrated some critical thinking skills expressed in their judgement questions is grounded on their understanding of critical thinking, which mainly includes an analysis of an issue from positive and negative sides (see Table 3). Besides, since another 10 percent of the newcomers highlight the necessity to examine other people's views on some issue, this notion might have directed the learners' attention to posing more objective, analytical questions that require critical considerations of a number of people, not only their own personal speculations. Furthermore, there are two possible explanations why the participants who had finished the FE4 course produced almost the same number of judgment questions like the newcomers. One of them might be that their learning in the FE4 course was not directed to

thinking about and asking more judgment questions to literary and perhaps other texts. Another reason entails a cognitive explanation that many entering young students mentally are not capable of exercising many critical thinking skills during their first year of study, and only subsequent academic studies will help them build such skills. However, the last explanation needs another research study focused on exploring cognitive aspects of learners' performance in relation to their critical thinking skills' development.

The students' choices of types of questions that presumably (from the learners' perspective) lead to developing some critical thinking skills need to be discussed, too. Although most students in both groups consider the "Why" questions as the ones calling for critical thinking, not all of them, in fact, become judgment inquires. For instance, a student might ask, "Why did the family decide to move from city X to town Y?" or "Why do you like character A better than character B in the story?" Such questions might be based only on factual answers or subjective opinions that do not develop critical thinking at all.

### **B. Teaching implications**

There are a few teaching implications based on this project that might be considered not only by foundation English faculty at the University, but also by a wider international education community. First, teaching students to distinguish and construct different types of questions to literary and other texts (and then preferably discuss them in class) might better develop learners' critical thinking skills. Second, since the results have shown no significant difference in the amount of judgment questions produced by the participants in both groups, the focus of learners' attention in foundation English courses need to be directed to producing and employing more judgment queries. These reasoned questions can possibly build a solid foundation for the advancement of students' critical thinking skills. The researcher believes that such an intended and explicit differentiation of questions with the spotlight on those requiring reasoned judgment, which are supported by legitimate reasons and evidence, will nurture the development of critical thinking skills in learners. It is important to address student questions in the classroom to further develop their ideas and thoughts and encourage in- and out-of-class participation. Next, since the students identify all "Why" questions as the ones expanding people's critical thinking skills, language faculty ought to help them differentiate the structure and meaning of the "Why" questions so that learners can focus on producing more judgment than factual or preferential questions.

Finally, both educators and learners are suggested to also explore the deep foundations their critical thinking contemplations through the Socratic questioning approach in in-class small group or whole class discussions for a better understanding of the nature and quality of cognitive resolutions (Paul & Elder, 2006). The "Socratic questioning" method is aimed at "assessing the truth or plausibility of things" through "an integrated, disciplined approach to thinking" (Paul & Elder, 2006, p. 91). The authors claim that it is possible to promote better critical thinking by helping learners understand the foundation of their statements or beliefs, in other words, by asking such questions as "What is the basis of your statement? Can you please explain your reasoning in more detail?" Moreover, connecting ideas and arguments with further thoughts will generate more critical enquiry in the classroom. For example, the teacher might follow up some student's assertion by asking "If what you say is true, then wouldn't another argument be also valid?" Furthermore, Socratic questioning urges people to often clarify and develop their accounts. For instance, faculty might ask, "Can you please elaborate on your suggested solution?" Finally, this approach calls for the recognition of prior, presupposed questions that

students should also explore. To demonstrate, learners might be asked, “To answer this complex question, what other questions do we need to answer?”

### **C. Limitations of the study**

The results of the study might have been affected by a few limitations. First, since the researcher focused on questioning as the only instrument to examine students’ critical thinking skills, there might be more differences in the results based on other data measuring instruments. Second, since the participants represented only about 30 percent of all FE5 students in Fall 2, 2011, this number might still not be a very representative sample. In addition, the researcher studied two unequal groups of learners in terms of their prior educational background, in other words, there were more participants in the group who had taken the FE4 course (22 students) than in another one with the newcomers (15 students). This fact might have affected the representation of diverse question types produced by the second group; consequently, the amount of judgment questions might have been different percentagewise. Finally, with a larger sample size it will be possible to conduct a quantitative analysis for more objective results and conclusions.

### **V. Conclusion**

This research project intended to investigate newcoming students’ critical reasoning skills before they are formally introduced the critical thinking skills they need to utilize in the academic studies as well as to compare their critical thinking skills of those learners who have been taught such skills in lower-level foundation English courses. The researcher used five different types of questions (see Table 2, p. 9) as the instrument for grouping participant-produced questions after reading literary texts. The results indicate that many learners in the FE5 course who have been taught different critical thinking skills in the lower-level FE4 course asked fewer factual questions than the newcomers. However, since the participants in both groups constructed almost the same number of judgment questions, language faculty are recommended to review their teaching practices to provide more opportunities for developing learners’ critical thinking skills through reasoned questioning or other useful methods.

Further research projects might include a quantitative study of a larger first-year student sample with the purpose of conducting a statistical analysis of different learners’ critical thinking skills. In other words, through questioning literary texts, it will be possible to statistically compare the number of factual, preferential and judgment questions generated by those students who have already gained knowledge of and applied various critical thinking skills in lower-level foundation English courses with the those questions produced by the newcomers. Another quantitative research might explore the impact of the explicit introduction and practice of different types of questions through a variety of integrated linguistic, academic and cognitive skill activities upon students’ critical thought development. It will be interesting to compare the differences, if any, in the development of critical thinking skills in the control and experimental groups.

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