

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background of the study, problem identification, justification and gap, research questions, purpose of the study, scope of the study, and significance of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

Critical thinking is an important component in EFL practice as it encourages students to construct knowledge and give opinions from a broader perspective (Bachtiar et al., 2024). In the context of language learning, critical thinking enables learners to listen more analytically, read more thoughtfully, and speak and write more logically to identify and understand beliefs, assumptions, and meanings behind the messages encountered in daily life (Hadley & Boon, 2023). Furthermore, language learners today are expected not only to know how to communicate meanings but also to understand the process of meaning-making itself (Kramsch, 2006, as cited in Hadley & Boon, 2023).

In line with this, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are tasked to prepare students for the 21st-century challenges and serve as learning environments where students can develop autonomy in their thinking (Golden, 2023). Moreover, critical thinking skills are often regarded as one of the key outputs of higher education in the workplace, which underscores the significant role that HEIs play in fostering these skills (Indrašienė et al., 2021). HEIs must make these skills a central part of their teaching-learning process by promoting a culture of questioning, epistemic curiosity, joyous exploration, and open-mindedness (Kumar, 2024).

Similarly, second or foreign language classrooms, particularly EFL/ESL contexts, have been considered a great setting for developing critical thinking (Marin & de la Pava, 2017). This is because the tasks in English language learning require students to read beyond the literal, write convincingly, express ideas with evidence, and challenge others' positions (Zhao et al., 2016). Therefore, integrating critical thinking in EFL classrooms is necessary, especially in Indonesia, as the national curriculum has prioritized this skill as one of the compulsory elements of graduate profiles to prepare students for the future workforce (Dhari & Maisarah, 2025; Wilson & Defianty, 2024).

However, promoting critical thinking in Indonesian EFL classrooms remains challenging. Bachtiar et al (2024) found that Indonesian ELT still focuses more on linguistic competency, such as grammar and language communicative competence. In addition, many educators are unsure of how to teach critical thinking and thus tend to rely on traditional teaching methods. Wilson and Defianty (2024) revealed that Indonesia's testing-focused culture makes it difficult for educators to change their teaching practices, despite the emphasis on critical thinking in the revised curriculum, *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Dhari and Maisarah (2025) found that educators are unprepared to teach critical thinking effectively and need more professional training. Collectively, these studies highlight the need for clearer guidance or training and the need for pedagogical approaches that go beyond traditional methods to nurture critical thinking skills in EFL classrooms.

One such approach is Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a discussion-based approach developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine in the early 1990s (Housen, 2002; Yenawine, 2013, 2019). The approach was initially developed for

museum educators to engage students in deep experiences by looking at arts and discussing their meanings together (Hailey et al., 2015; Meyer & Clark-Gareca, 2023). VTS enables teachers to use specific strategies as part of their existing curriculum to develop students' observation skills, social interaction, and language development (Yenawine, 2019). In contrast to traditional teaching methods, VTS cultivates a welcoming and respectful learning environment that encourages students to share opinions without being judged (Connors & Piro, 2024). By promoting such learning environments, VTS encourages students to think reflectively and construct open-minded interpretations. In this way, VTS can support the development of students' critical thinking skills.

Previous studies have explored the implementation of VTS in EFL classrooms. Firstly, Meyer and Clark-Gareca (2023) modified and implemented VTS in a high school classroom with ENL (English as a New Language) students in the USA through a three-phase sequence: teacher modelling, students' small group discussion, and whole-class discussion. Students were given examples on how to conduct VTS conversations, then assigned to do it with peers in small groups before participating in a whole-class discussion facilitated by the teacher. This process helped students become more confident in expressing their assertions. Secondly, Khalil (2024) applied VTS in an Iraqi EFL university classroom by guiding students to observe and discuss visual artwork using the three core VTS questions. This process encouraged students to practice reasoning skills, supporting their ideas with evidence. Lastly, Huyen and Lam (2025) implemented VTS to English department students in speaking lessons at a university in Vietnam. By using images as prompts

and guiding students with the three core VTS questions, students were inspired to express ideas and practice reasoning to support their analyses.

In Indonesia, Halimatussa'diah & Mustadi (2019) applied visual thinking techniques to enhance Elementary School Teacher Education students' critical thinking skills. The study measured five cognitive elements of critical thinking skills, which are analyzing, describing, interpreting, evaluating, inferring, and one affective ability of self-regulation. The study found that strategies such as mindscaping, small groups, and interactive classroom discussions increased both cognitive and affective aspects of students' critical thinking. Similarly, Suryani and Andriyanti (2025) implemented VTS to build critical thinking in Early Childhood Education students using silent books and open discussions. The study found that VTS built students' ability to identify, analyze, and share information.

While these studies were conducted in Indonesia, they are not within the EFL field. Additionally, the only study carried out at university level is the one by Halimatussa'diah and Mustadi (2019), who do not specifically study VTS in EFL departments. This reveals a gap in studying VTS implementation in English Language programs to promote university students' critical thinking skills. Therefore, this study intends to address this gap by observing and describing VTS implementation in the CIaPiE (Current Issue and Policies in Education) course in ELESP (English Language Education Study Program) at a public university in Jakarta. It also aims to explore specific VTS questions used in creating a learning environment that can promote critical thinking skills.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1) How are Visual Thinking Strategies implemented by the lecturer and students in the Current Issues and Policies in Education (CIaPiE) course to promote ELESP students' critical thinking skills?
- 2) What specific questions are used by the lecturer to promote critical thinking during classroom discussions?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to observe and describe the implementation of Visual Thinking Strategies in the Current Issues and Policies in Education (CIaPiE) course at a public university in Jakarta to promote the critical thinking skills of ELESP (English Language Education Study Program) students. Additionally, it aims to explore the specific VTS questions used by the lecturer by classifying them based on how they promote Facione's critical thinking sub-skills.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the implementation of VTS in the CIaPiE course to promote English Language Education Study Program students' critical thinking skills at a public university in Jakarta, Indonesia. It involves how VTS is implemented by the course's lecturer and how students engage in and apply it during classroom activities, as well as how the lecturer's questions reflect Facione's critical thinking skills. The study is limited to several observed sessions within one academic semester.

1.5 Significance of the Study

By exploring the implementation of VTS to promote critical thinking skills among ELESP students, this study contributes to the growing discussion of VTS in Indonesian EFL higher education settings. It also offers insights into the specific questions used by the lecturer to nurture critical thinking. Thus, this study provides insights for several parties:

- 1) For lecturers and educators, it provides practical examples of how VTS can be integrated into their courses to promote students' critical thinking skills. This study's descriptive findings may help educators adapt similar strategies to their teaching contexts.
- 2) For curriculum developers, the findings can serve as a consideration in designing courses or modules that incorporate VTS to ensure a more student-centered and interactive learning experience.
- 3) For researchers, this study expands understanding of VTS implementation in Indonesian higher education settings to promote critical thinking skills. It can open up opportunities for future research to implement VTS in real-life classrooms, exploring their effectiveness in fostering critical thinking skills in other areas outside of English education or at other levels of education.

1.6 State of the Art

Prior studies have demonstrated various ways of implementing VTS in EFL classrooms. Meyer and Clark-Gareca (2023) employ a scaffolded approach that incorporates teacher modelling, bilingual students' group discussions, and whole-class dialogue, which helps students build confidence in expressing their ideas. Khalil (2024) implemented VTS by guiding university students to observe and

interpret artworks using the core VTS questions, which led students to practice their reasoning. Similarly, Huyen and Lam (2025) used images and VTS prompts to help university students articulate ideas and reasoning.

In Indonesia, although Halimatussa'diah and Mustadi (2019) and Suryani and Andriyanti (2025) study critical thinking cultivation through visual-thinking techniques or VTS integration in Indonesian classrooms, neither study is carried out within university EFL programs. Halimatussa'diah and Mustadi (2019) focus on applying visual thinking techniques through mindscaping and group discussions to improve Elementary School Teacher Education students' critical thinking, while Suryani and Andriyanti (2025) focus on using silent books to build Early Childhood Education students' critical thinking.

Collectively, these studies show that VTS has been applied across different educational contexts. However, studies that specifically describe how VTS is implemented in Indonesian EFL university classrooms remain limited. Hence, this study aims to address the gap by describing how VTS is implemented both by the lecturer and students to promote the critical thinking skills of undergraduate English Language Education Study Program students at a public university in Jakarta.