CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

Critical thinking is required in EFL learning, as it enables learners to analyze and assess information effectively (Thomson & Yedidi, 2020). Critical thinking allows deep comprehension, promotes problem-solving skills, and encourages independent learning (Todorovska, 2024). According to Yan (2021), learners who acquire critical thinking can experience a meaningful learning process in which learning a language is meaningful to them. Developing this skill empowers students to deal with complex information, form ideas, and speak differently in various real-life contexts (Cottrell, 2023). In line with the profile of English Language Education graduates, it is essential that students possess critical thinking skills, as these competencies are not only foundational to language learning but also crucial in preparing them to navigate the challenges of the 21st century, where information is abundant and complex.

While critical thinking is crucial, most school systems struggle to incorporate it in their courses since they employ traditional methods that emphasize memorization instead of analysis (Irwan, 2024). Wilson (2024), argues that Indonesia's long-embedded culture of high-stakes standardized testing remains a barrier to introducing critical thinking pedagogy, and that ELT teachers who have been nurtured in a testing culture and have worked and studied in it for years may find it difficult to change their teaching practise, despite the revised curriculum's emphasis on critical thinking. Language barriers in the case of EFL classes makes incorporating critical thinking even harder, as students struggle to read texts and engage in discussions (Pasha et al., 2024). All these barriers result in superficial learning and do not allow students to acquire the critical thinking skills needed for professional and academic success.

To address these problems, Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) have been identified as an effective tool for fostering higher-order cognitive skills by encouraging students to question, analyze, and interpret information meaningfully (Nolan, 2023). VTS is a student-centered approach that uses visual stimuli, such as images and artworks, to

stimulate observation, interpretation, and discussion (Yenawine, 2020). VTS creates activities that can make students think critically, such as analyzing visual content, questioning assumptions, and discussing to gain multiple perspectives. VTS also promotes polite and collaborative classrooms where students speak freely without fear of judgment (Connors & Piro, 2024).

Evaluations of educational programs depend on student perception, as it can be used as an important resource to increase the quality of educational activities (Paduraru, 2023). Seeing how students learn and respond to instruction can indicate a strategy's practicality, engagement, and impact in real classrooms (Nelson et al., 2015). According to Ismail and Groccia (2018), active learners' attitudes and experiences affect learning results. Questioning their comprehension makes it possible to determine the strengths and weaknesses of VTS for adapting the method to student needs and achieving maximum curriculum integration. Also, VTS can signal whether or not it is consistent with significant critical thinking processes such as analysis, interpretation, and evaluation.

Further, perceptions unveil affective and cognitive barriers, such as discomfort in discussion or inability to articulate (Walgito, 2004). Miriam et al. (2021) say that students' motivation and engagement are closely linked to their perception of the usefulness and relevance of teaching approaches. Perceptions explain whether VTS establishes a secure participation, risk, and independent thought space.

Other scholars have also indicated the positive impact of VTS on students' learning and intellectual development. Khalil (2024) emphasized that VTS are a fantastic instrument in developing students' creative expression and level of insight, thus making learning more engaging and insightful in all areas of study. Apart from this, Keogh et al. (2020) ascertained that using VTS improved observation, interpretation, and empathy among students, all of which are clinical practice competencies. Similarly, Aspden (2021) found that VTS helped students to become more analytical and communicative during a guided image-based conversation. Next, Halimatussa'diah and Mustadi (2019) conducted classroom action research using university students and confirmed that VTS significantly improved critical thinking measures of analysis, inference, and evaluation. Most of these studies were conducted outside the Indonesian context and in areas other than English Education. The only Indonesian-focused study of Halimatussa'diah and

Mustadi (2019) was not particularly about VTS in English Education. Therefore, further research on applying the VTS in Indonesian university English Education courses is necessary.

This study seeks to bridge the gap by examining the use of VTS in the tertiary sector. Tertiary students ought to use higher-order thinking and independent learning; therefore, critical thinking is a crucial academic competence. However, many students still struggle to acquire and apply these skills effectively. Learning VTS at this level is needed to gauge its importance and impact in promoting critical thinking development in higher learning settings. The study explores students' perceptions of using VTS to improve their ability in critical thinking, determine how they perceive and respond to VTS, and determine its potential merits and demerits in developing critical thinking.

1.2. Research Questions

1) What are students' perceptions on the use of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in enhancing their critical thinking skills?
2) What perceived benefits and challenges do students associate with the implementation of VTS in their English learning process?

1.3. Purposes

The purpose of this study is to explore students' perceptions regarding the use of VTS in enhancing their critical thinking skills. Additionally, the study aims to identify the perceived benefits and challenges that students experience during the implementation of VTS within the context of their English language learning. By gaining insights from student perspectives, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how VTS can be effectively integrated into English education to support critical thinking development.

1.4. Significance of The Study

Theoretically, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in the areas of visual learning, student perception, and the development of critical thinking skills. Future researchers who are investigating the role of VTS in language education may find this

study a valuable reference. It provides foundational insights and empirical data that can inform subsequent studies in similar contexts, especially those focused on integrating visual-based methods in EFL classrooms.

Practically, the findings of this study are expected to be beneficial for: Educators, Students, and Scools or Institutions. For EFL educators, they may use the findings as a guide to develop more engaging and cognitively stimulating classroom activities that require interpretation, analysis, and reflection. From the students' perspective, the results highlight how visual-based strategies can support their English language development in understanding the english material. For schools and institutions, they may consider adopting VTS as part of their curriculum, especially in English and other language-related subjects. The study provides practical justification for implementing visual learning tools to enhance student engagement and thinking skills. It may also support the Indonesian government in its decision-making processes in curriculum development and teacher training initiatives aimed at modernizing language instruction.

1.5. State of the Art

Prior studies have explored the use of VTS in EFL classrooms, such as those by Khalil (2024), Keogh et al. (2020), and Halimatussa'diah and Mustadi (2019). However, most of these studies were conducted outside Indonesia and did not specifically address the development of critical thinking skills, as their primary focus was on other aspects of learning. Although some studies, like Halimatussa'diah and Mustadi (2019), have examined VTS in Indonesian contexts, they focus on elementary education, not higher education EFL programs. This creates a gap in research regarding VTS implementation in Indonesian university-level EFL classrooms to foster critical thinking. Thus, this study aims to investigate how VTS is implemented in the context of Indonesian higher education, particularly in the EFL courses at a public university in Jakarta, to enhance critical thinking skills in undergraduate English Language Education students.