TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES IN MEKONG DELTA INSTITUTIONS, VIETNAM

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Abstract:

This paper reports a descriptive study which explored how teacher beliefs influence their decision-making in teaching critical reading strategies at three different institutions in the Mekong Delta. Using a descriptive mixed method, questionnaires and interviews were undertaken with English as foreign language (EFL) teachers. The findings of this study indicate that these participating teachers believed critical reading strategy instruction plays an important role in enhancing their students' comprehension of reading texts. Findings also reveal that of the four factors influencing teachers' decision-making of utilizing these skills, student-related factors were found to be highest. This propensity for involving students in critical reading strategies gives rise to some pedagogical implications for teachers while designing appropriate tasks and lesson plans.

Keywords: beliefs, critical thinking, critical reading, critical reading strategies

1. Introduction

There has been increased attention to the impact of teachers' beliefs on their decision-making in implementing innovative instructional strategies to enhance student learning in higher education institutions (e.g., Fahim and Masouleh, 2012; Nguyen, 2013; Torff, 2006; Torff and Warburton, 2005). These studies into this area with a particular regard to critical reading have shown a positive effect on promoting student learning outcomes. The article focuses on teacher beliefs about critical reading instruction that

influences their decision making in implementing reading strategies in their classroom practices in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

Critical thinking is particularly vital in Vietnamese universities since in the ever-increasing global integration of information, reading is a process through which students can acquire greater depth of knowledge of science and technology advances and better prepare for the necessary practical skills to respond to the needs of their jobs and also the quality of teaching and learning foreign languages, as advocated by the Vietnamese Government (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2005). Therefore, there is an urgent need for developing students' critical thinking in their learning process since a student's ultimate goal of understanding of a text is "*subject to change with time, as a result of conversations with others, the reading of other works, pondering and reflection*" (Langer, 1990; p. 812), and develops their ability to analyze the information or interpret its meaning from the text itself (Marzban and Barati, 2016; Yu, 2015). However, it is widely held that students do not have the habit of reading, and research has shown that current students spend little time reading (Arum & Roska, 2011). Also, a study conducted by the National Assessment of Education Progress as described in ERICS/RCs Report (Rosenberg, 1987) showed that high-school students had difficulty thinking and explaining what they had read. It is generally assumed that learners from Asian cultures lack the ability to think critically, thereby facing a big challenge in their studies (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Davies, 2011; Floyd, 2011). Likewise, in the context of teaching reading comprehension at Vietnamese schools, students experienced such issue because teaching at the universities is largely based upon traditional lecturing (Nguyen, 2013). That is to say, hardly do they investigate biases, purposes of the texts, or exploit broader social messages of attitudes, opinions, and values conveyed. However, little research has been carried out to investigate teacher beliefs about critical reading skills within the context of teaching and learning such as that in Vietnam. The study is therefore aimed at examining the nature of beliefs and its factors that influence teachers' decisions while implementing critical reading strategies in their classroom practices.

The research questions that guided the study reported on in this paper were:

- '*How do teachers believe in the role of teaching critical reading strategies in their classroom practices*?' and
- '*In what ways do teacher beliefs influence their decision-making in implementing critical reading strategies in their teaching practices?*'

2. The literature

The following section reviews the literature on four concepts: teacher beliefs, critical thinking, critical reading, and critical reading strategies, with regard to how these were defined for this study.

2.1 Teacher beliefs

Teacher beliefs have been examined in different aspects of life by anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers, and educators for more than four decades (e.g., Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968, 1972). Various studies on teacher beliefs provide insightful ideas into the impact and meaning of beliefs on instructional practices. As beliefs are literally the best indicator of teachers' decision-making throughout their career (Bandura, 1986; Dewey, 1933; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968, 1972), they can influence the decisions of teacher actions in specific classroom practices, which is likely to contribute to understanding of how teachers may improve their teaching practice. In particular, there is increasing recognition of the importance of teacher beliefs about how to assist students in developing critical thinking skills in their learning process (Seidman, 2004; Torff, 2005, 2006). In this study, teacher beliefs about critical reading strategies in English as a foreign language (EFL) context are drawn on the Rokeach's (1968) definition. Rokeach (1968) defines beliefs as "*any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase, 'I believe that . . . '* " (p. 113). In his view, teacher beliefs are associated with drawing inferences about their attitudes and set of values (Seidman, 2004) from a continuum of their saying, intentions, and actions (Pajares, 1992).

The focus of this study builds on research into teacher beliefs by investigating how teachers think about the role of providing students with critical reading strategies in their classroom practices for insights into teachers' perspectives (or personal theories of teaching) that may influence their actions.

2.2 Critical thinking

Critical thinking, which literally refer to thinking process of making informed judgment or evaluating information, has become an increasingly recognized term in higher education and particularly it has also taken a significant position in second and foreign language teaching and learning (Atkinson, 1997; Asgharheidari & Tahriri, 2015; Cosgrove, 2011; Davies, 2011; Ennis, 1985; Fahim & Masouleh, 2012; Floyd, 2011; Halpern, 2003; Moore, 2004).

There are a number of perspectives on critical thinking in the literature. According to Ennis (1985), critical thinking involves the ability to think clearly and logically about a particular text or information of a field of study. This concept therefore implies the ability to engage students in reflective and independent thinking; the ability to decide what to do or what to believe (Borg, 2003, 2015; Ennis, 2002, 2016; Thurman, 2009). Halpern (2003) also describes critical thinking as the use of cognitive skills or strategies that enhance the likelihood of a desirable outcome. His view implies that critical thinking is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed. These features of a thinking process involve problem-solving, making inferences, and decision-making. Moon (2008) claims that critical thinking has a significant role in higher education and the professions since it is seen as a fundamental goal of student learning success. From Moon's perspective, it supports the idea that the involvement of critical thinking in the students' learning process can allow them to become critical thinkers, thereby providing them an opportunity to build on new knowledge through thinking at higher levels. However, Floyd (2011) considers the issue of critical thinking which is not valued by Asian students who lack this skill in relation to rote learning, memorization and comprehension. With regard to critical thinking and learning, Mason (2007) presents different conceptions of critical thinking by several thinkers with regard to generic skills (e.g., Ennis, 1996; Paul, 1982), discipline-specific skills (McPeck, 1981; Moore, 2004), rationality-related (Siegel, 1990), disposition-based and morally grounded (Martin, 1992). Given there are varying conceptualizations, attention to beliefs of teachers to student learning process can inform instructional practice in ways that critical thinking is perceived as integrated (Ennis, 2002, 2016; Mason, 2000, 2007, 2009) instead of subject specificity. This integration or adoption of general and subject-specific approaches to critical thinking is viewed by Davies (2006) as complementary when using the term 'infusion' to suggest that critical thinking instruction can be developed in specific academic contexts. In this relationship, Mason (2007) further highlights that if students are to learn to think, they should be encouraged to become active and critical readers or thinkers.

Although there are variations in defining critical thinking, the aspects of reasoning, evaluating, and making decisions to what to learn are conceptualized most relevant to learning to think critically. It is therefore necessary for teachers to think how to engage students to develop critical thinking strategies in advancing their student learning. Closer look at the connection between critical thinking and implementation of critical reading instruction and its strategies in class is examined next.

2.3 Critical reading

Critical reading refers to awareness of the meaning of the texts reflected by the way individuals approach the information, paying no attention to the end product (Freebody & Luke, 1990). This perspective suggests the idea that readers can experience different levels of understanding or comprehending the messages conveyed by the author's intention. Similarly, Özdemir (1997, 2002, 2007) posits that critical reading involves thinking beyond what is written in the text, questioning the rights and wrongs of it as well as interpreting it. Richards and Schmidt (2002) view critical reading as *"reading in which the reader reacts critically to what he or she is reading, through relating the content of reading material to personal standards, values, attitudes or beliefs, i.e. going beyond what is said in the text and critically evaluating the relevancy and value of what is read"* (p.134). Likewise, McDonald (2004) defines critical reading as an alternative way of reading that goes beyond the "*typical approaches to reading such as information processing or personal response*" (p. 118). Critical reading, therefore, requires active involvement in the text in an in-depth understanding of the reason for what is needed rather than factual information on a superficial level.

Given that its effects of providing students with critical reading, appropriate strategies are of importance to help them to access and process information and ideas within a specific text actively, analytically and meaningfully. Or in other words, it can be concluded that critical reading together with active engagement with texts used by teachers become the focus of the study.

2.4 Critical reading strategies

As there has been a growing interest in researching into reading strategies, successful language learners must possess the ability to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their thinking (Duke & Pearson, 2008; Hall & Piazza, 2008; Koda, 2007; Wellman, 1988; Wilson, Devereux, Macken-Horarik, & Trimingham-Jack, 2004; Yu, 2015). Various definitions of reading strategies have been cited in the literature. For instance, Wellman (1988) argues that a strategy has to be "*employed deliberately, with some awareness in order to produce or to influence the goal*" (p. 5). Paris and his colleagues (1991) define reading strategies as "*a wide range of tactics that readers use to engage and comprehend text*" (p. 610). Duke and Pearson (2008) indicate that the strategies good readers use when reading and these are illustrated in Table 1. Drawn on the above literature on critical reading strategies, this article was guided by Duke and Pearson's (2008) definition since it presents a comprehensive view of critical thinking strategies, relevant to this study.

Table 1: *S*trategies that good readers use

1. Good readers typically look over the text before reading, noting such things as the structure of the text and text sections that might be most relevant to their reading goals.
2. They read selectively, continually making decisions about their reading -what to read carefully, what to read quickly, what not to read, what to reread, and so on.
3. Good readers make predictions about what is going to come, construct, revise, and question the meanings they make as they read.
4. Good readers try to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and concepts in the text, and they deal with inconsistencies or gaps as needed.
5. They draw upon, compare, and integrate their prior knowledge with material in the text.
6. They think about the authors of the text, their style, beliefs, intentions, and so on.
7. They monitor their understanding of the text, making adjustments when reading if necessary.
8. They evaluate the text's quality and react to the text intellectually and emotionally.

3. The study

A descriptive-mixed method was utilized in the current study. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative approach is used to collect, analyze, interpret, and report the results of the study. Quantitative approach, on the other hand, involves a collection of information in numbers (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Specifically, for understanding teacher beliefs about utilizing critical reading skills as well as the factors that hindered the decisions in their reading classes, two questionnaires containing 11 items (10 close - ended and 1 open-ended) and 19 items (18 close-ended and 1 open-ended) are designed respectively. The close-ended items were used to collect numerical or quantitative data while the two open-ended items were used to collect narrative or qualitative data.

Sixty-eight EFL teachers in the Mekong Delta participating in the questionnaire survey were asked to report on their beliefs about the role of teaching CRS in their classes as well as the factors that influenced their decisions of utilizing such strategies. Thirty of them were invited to pilot the questionnaires. The teachers have been teaching English at universities (5 teachers), high schools (33 teachers), and foreign language centers (30 teachers). Their ages range from 24 to 50 and they have different years of experience in teaching English (from 2 years to 27 years).

Two questionnaires were employed in the study, focusing on the nature of teacher beliefs and how these influenced their decision-making process of utilizing critical reading strategies in their reading classes.

This study was conducted in four weeks. For the first week, the questionnaires were delivered to thirty teachers and then piloted. Before answering the questionnaires, the respondents were explained the purposes of the study and the relevant terms. For

the second week, thirty questionnaires were analyzed using the computer software statistical package-Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the other thirty-eight questionnaires were delivered to gain teacher beliefs about the use of critical reading strategies. By this way, the reliability and the validity of the data were obtained. For the third and fourth weeks, the data was double-checked, and thirty-two close-ended items and two open-ended items were analyzed respectively. Six participants were randomly interviewed in order to provide in-depth examination of their beliefs about the influence of using critical reading strategies in their reading classes. This case was deemed appropriate way of presenting insights into the teacher beliefs as it is contextually based (Berg and Lune, 2012; Fraenkel and Wallen, 2009). All interview data were transcribed and translated from Vietnamese into English. The interview transcripts were hand-coded using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The themes include teacher beliefs about the nature and implementation of critical reading strategies, and the value of these strategies in relation to their subject-related areas.

4. Findings

4.1 Insights into teacher beliefs about the role of critical reading strategies (CRS)
Findings show that teachers recognized the importance of the implementation of critical reading strategies in their classroom practices, as shown in Table 2. The mean score of the questionnaire indicates that the teacher beliefs were at high level (*M*=3.76).

Table 2: Mean score of teacher beliefs

Teacher beliefs about CRS	Mean	SD	Min	Max
N=68	3.76	.45	3.06	4.29

A *One-Sample t-Test* was administered to evaluate whether the mean score of teacher beliefs about teaching CRS was significantly different from the test value (*t*= 3.0), the accepted mean for average level. The result of the *One-Sample t-Test* indicates that there was a significant difference from 3.0 (*t*=16.35; df= 67; *p*=.00). Therefore, it can be concluded that teachers believed CRS plays a crucial role in helping students enhance their reading ability.

Table 3: One-Sample Test

	Test value=3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
					Lower	Upper
Mean	16.35	67	.000	76103	.6682	.8539

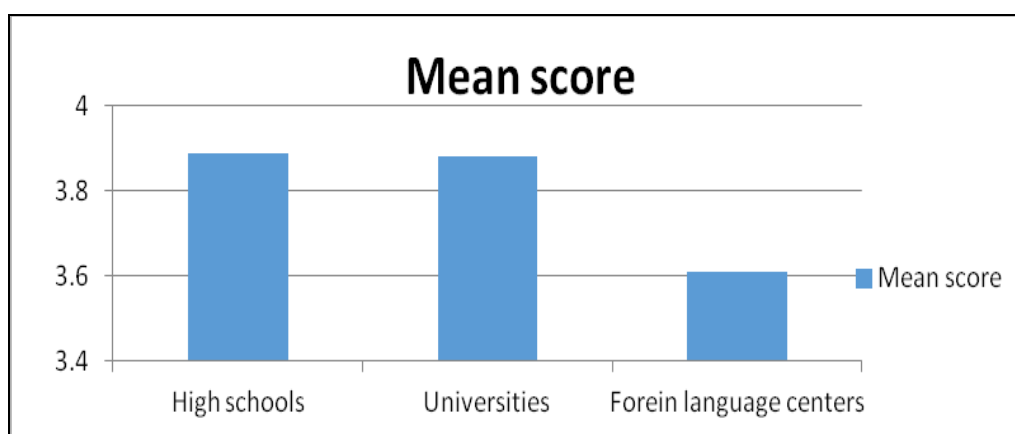## 4.2 Teacher beliefs about the role of CRS in different institutions

Figure 1: The mean scores of teacher beliefs about the role of CRS in three institutions

Figure 1 reveals that the mean scores of teacher beliefs about the role of CRS instruction in high schools and universities were nearly the same (*M* = 3.89 and *M* = 3.88, respectively) while that in foreign language centers was lower (*M* = 3.61). These results indicate that the teacher beliefs about the crucial role of CRS instruction in both high schools and universities were higher than those in foreign language centers. In other words, it appears that if students were encouraged to think critically about their own subject-specific disciplines while learning how to read particular texts, such teacher beliefs about the value of critical reading instruction could engage students in a greater learning experience to explore or construct new knowledge.

Qualitative data using the open-ended questions were collected from six randomly chosen participants. The answers were coded in order to facilitate the interpretation of the data. For example, the coding of Q.1 of the reference quotes stand for the questionnaire answer, which the data are examined. Therefore, Q.1.T.A, 2016 would indicate the quote is from the question with Teacher A, 2016. The interviews were conducted with teachers in Vietnamese to investigate their beliefs of the nature and implementation of critical reading strategies. The responses of these interviewees were similar to some extent, indicating that utilizing critical reading strategies benefited students. In other words, it was found that these participating teachers acknowledged

the value of critical reading strategies that they had implemented in their reading classes, demonstrating their greater understanding of critical reading instruction as a great learning tool, active engagement in problem-solving activities in relation to their future jobs or positioning. For example, Teacher A revealed that critical reading could not only help improve students' high order thinking ability when reading, which was very useful for their learning process and resources but also allow them to expand their understanding and knowledge of more academic or subject-specific contexts. She said,

"Well, critical reading can enhance students' ability of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating reading materials, which is found to be very essential for their own reference, research and further study in English, as well as in other courses or papers (Q.1.TA, 2016)."

Similarly, Teacher B reported that teaching CRS could help students read more actively and effectively along with a deep understanding about the texts, which helped them be more successful in learning at school. Teacher C stated that these strategies were essential for students to think about an issue discussed in the text from different angles before they draw a conclusion for themselves, and equipped with these strategies, students would be able to select appropriate or reliable sources of information for their studies as well as other purposes. In the same vein, Teacher D reported that in education, if student could read critically, they could become active learners with great input and personal voice which was very beneficial to enhance other language skills. Teacher E also said that teaching CRS was important because it was significant to train students with better reading skills or strategies so that they were able to succeed in academic settings where critical reading is highly required. In the same way, Teacher F reported that through making inferences of what is beyond the text messages, students could improve or develop their knowledge of reading. He said,

Critical reading strategies play a significant role in helping students with understanding the whole text and what can be applied because some students only need to make out the text without any detailed information. By doing such things, students can deepen their knowledge (Q.1.TF, 2016).

When asked about what critical reading strategies could benefit students, near the end of the study both Teachers A and B confirmed that teaching CRS could provide students with more understanding about their daily lives and career paths. For example, Teacher A reported that critical reading strategies would be helpful in

developing their creativity and understanding capacity, which is good for their own lives and jobs. Similarly, Teacher B said that students could be more successful at working or living in the real life.

Only Teacher C revealed that students with CRS could help them enhance understanding of problem-solving. He stated,

"Being critical is a high-level quality that helps students to engage in social issues, which have been proven to make the society advance to democracy." (Q.1. TC, 2016)

In contrast, Teacher E indicated a slight shift in his beliefs about the lack of involvement of critical thinking strategies in practices.

"It is important to teach critical reading strategies to students because in the current teaching practices in Vietnam, there is not much focus on reading strategy instruction. As a result, students are not provided with opportunities and activities to develop such strategies" (Q.1. TE, 2016).

This shows his beliefs that students could learn how to think critically if they were placed in the active role of an independent learning, taking responsibility for their own learning process, while they had to study in the traditional mode of lecturing. By the end of the study, Teacher E, in particular, stated how he perceived critical reading underpinned by critical thinking tendency from a different perspective. He said,

"Teaching students to read a particular message critically must come from inside the learners. This strategy instruction must be internalised by them and stimulated by the teacher's questioning or inquiry about what they would like to learn from their own subject matters" (Q2.TE.2016).

This teacher's developing beliefs also included the view that critical reading did not come from the teacher's guide only; rather, it is the interaction and internal motives driven by students. That is to say, learning by discovering or inquiry-based learning appeared to become an integral learning strategy tool that provides students with an opportunity to generate a greater depth of critical reading ability, encouraging higher order thinking skill to move them forward from the set ideas and concepts in their own disciplines.

Table 4 below shows the mean score of factors that influence teachers' decisions of implementing CRS. As Table 4 illustrates, the total mean score was higher than the average (*M*=3.43) in the five-degree scale.

Table 4: Mean score of factors that influence teachers' use of CRS

Hindrances	Mean	SD	Min	Max
N= 68	3.43	.43	2.20	4.35

A *One-Sample t-Test* was administered to find out if the mean score of the factors that influence teachers' decisions of implementing CRS was significantly different from the test value (*t*=3.0), the accepted mean for the average level. The result of the *One-Sample t-Test* indicates that the sample mean was significantly different from 3.0 (*t*=7.69; df= 67; *p*=.00). Therefore, it can be concluded that EFL teachers encountered difficulties in the implementation of CRS.

Table 5: One Sample t-Test

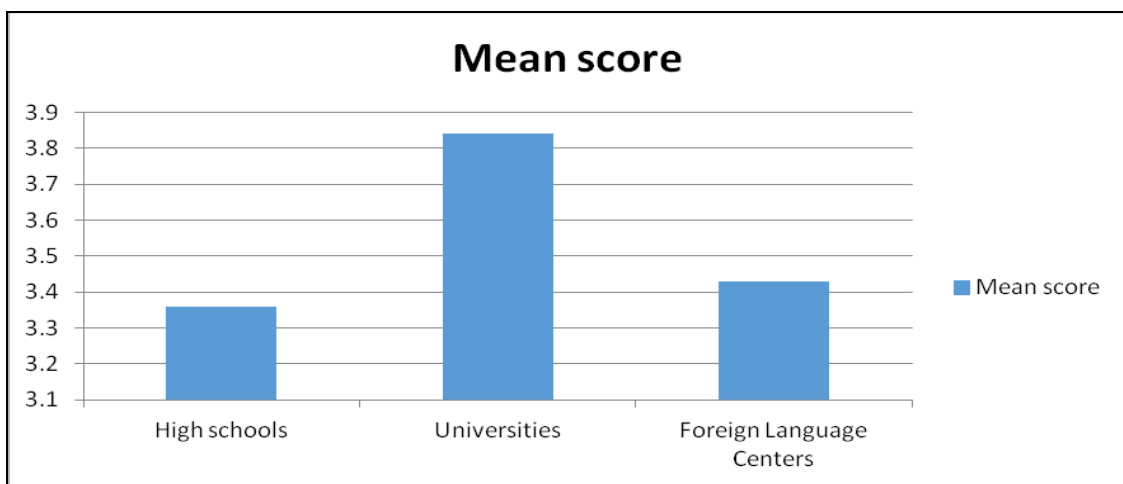|	test value=3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
					Lower	Upper
Mean	7.69	67	.000	.42500	.3148	.5352

Figure 2: Mean scores of factors influencing teachers' use of CRS in three institutions

As Figure 2 illustrates, the mean score of factors that influence teachers' decisions of implementing CRS in universities was at higher level (*M*= 3.85), while those in high schools and foreign language centers were much lower (*M*= 3.35 and *M*= 3.43

respectively). These results indicate that teachers at universities had to deal with more difficulties in teaching CRS whereas those in high schools faced the least.
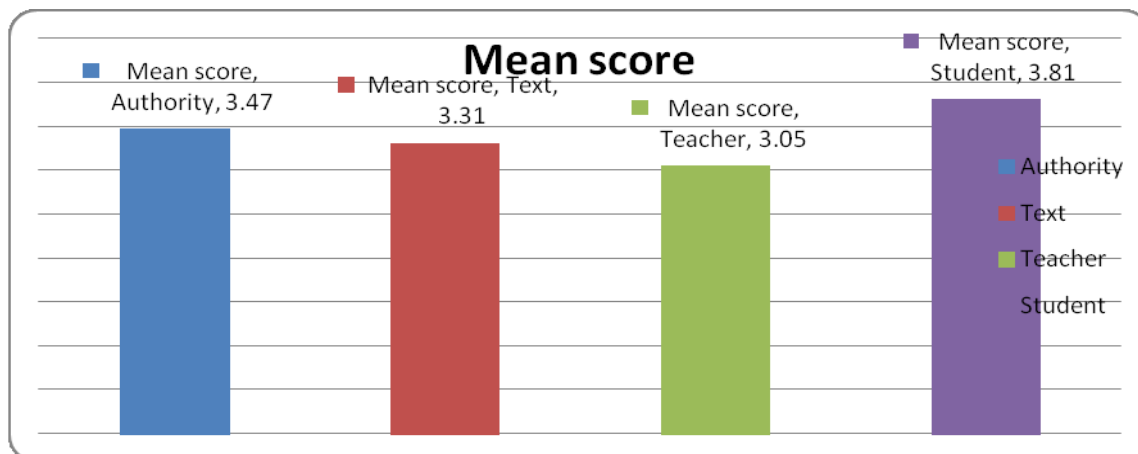

Figure 3: Mean scores of sub-factors that influence teachers' use of CRS

Figure 3 shows that the mean score of the student-related factors that influence teachers' decisions of implementing critical reading strategies was the highest (*M*= 3.8) while that of the teacher-related factors was the lowest (*M*= 3.0). In addition, the mean scores of authority-related factors and text-related factors were in between (*M*= 3.5, *M*= 3.3, respectively). These results indicate that student-related factors were the most frequent hindrance whereas teacher-related factors are the least frequent hindrance.

When asked if there were any factors that might influence their decisions, only six participating teachers said "yes" to the question and stated some factors. In particular, three teachers reported that student background, teaching approaches and learning styles were the three factors that could influence their actions. For example, both Teachers A and B mentioned students' background, while Teacher C suggested that teaching approaches and learning styles might be the case. For example, Teacher A said, *"I think student background should be taken into consideration" (Q.2. TA, 2016).* Nonetheless, Teacher C said, *"I believe there are two other factors that should be included: teaching and learning styles (Q.2. TC, 2016).* These quotes suggest that instructional strategies and student learning ways were vital for engaging students in thinking about a particular learning activity in order to develop critical reading ability for optimal learning outcomes.

5. Discussion

The findings from the first questionnaire on teacher beliefs about the role of teaching CRS showed that the participating teachers in the present study held strong beliefs

about the role of teaching CRS in their classroom practices. Moreover, there were some variations between EFL teacher beliefs in teaching CRS in different institutions, namely high schools, universities and foreign language centers. Particularly, high school and university teachers held stronger beliefs than those in foreign language centers. Qualitative analysis suggests that participating teachers recognized the role of implementing critical reading strategies with regard to student learning, their future jobs and their lives.

The findings of the role of the critical reading strategy instruction in the present investigation are consistent with studies by Alderson and Urquhart (1985) and Wallace (2003). Alderson and Urquhart (1985) claim that critical reading strategies could help students become better readers and thinkers if teachers had strong beliefs about how to involve students in the learning process. Findings also support Duke and Pearson's (2008) view that through critical reading strategies, good readers know what to read selectively, decide, and reason what to read when necessary. These notions suggest that the focus of how to help students to ask critical questions supports the role of teacher beliefs that influence their actions and thus, student learning in the long run. Similarly, Hudson (2007) believes that teachers need to teach critical reading strategies to engage students in their learning high order thinking process so that they know how to utilize word attack skills, context and knowledge to comprehend what is read, or see larger sentences as wholes, thereby involving a process which helps students to read fluently. If students are to be able to use critical thinking in line with previous claims that make sense of cognitive skills, as suggested by Halpern (1998), it would seem to address the need for heightened awareness of teachers to redefine their roles and make informed decisions or changes to their instructional practices.

The findings about the factors that influence teachers' decisions of implementing CRS reveal that the participating teachers in the study faced some difficulties. Of the four categories: authority-related, teacher-related, student-related, and textbook-related factors, the student-related ones were considered to be the most frequent hindrance whereas teacher-related ones are the least frequent. In addition, three factors: students' background, teaching approaches and learning styles provided an answer to the second research question.

The findings of the present study contribute to the critical thinking literature underpinned by teacher beliefs in the way that there are some factors that influence teachers' decisions about their implementation of critical reading strategies in their classroom practices. This sets the stage for the relevance of several studies (e.g., Donnelly & Linn, 2014; Halpern, 1998, 2003; Torff, 2005), suggesting that there is the need to engage students in critical thinking processes so as to make them become fluent

and effective readers in the age of ever-increasing global integration and changes. Moreover, teaching and learning styles which belong to the teacher-related and student-related factors are two factors that contribute to the critical thinking literature with regard to English as a foreign language teaching at a tertiary non-western context.

6. Conclusions

The present study sheds new light on understanding of teacher beliefs about critical reading implementation in EFL classes within a university in Vietnam. In particular, it was found that the participating teachers believed in the role of critical reading instruction, a higher-order thinking skill in their classroom practices. Some pedagogical implications may be drawn on from the findings from this study for teachers and policymakers.

Firstly, teachers of English should be encouraged to utilize critical reading strategies in order to motivate student learning reading at a higher level of thinking process for greater depth of knowledge.

Secondly, teachers of English should take into account the potential problems that may influence their decisions of implementing critical reading strategies in their classes. In doing so, they can modify or monitor their instructional approaches to meet the growing need of the learners in a more engaging and thought-provoking learning environment in a changing world.

Thirdly, given the high quality of teaching and learning, particularly the involvement of developing students' critical thinking skills to respond to the Vietnamese government directives, teachers need to be provided with more opportunities to participate in professional development training workshops or programs, thereby creating their new instructional strategies to teach reading to students through making curricular changes. Such teachers' positive changes will enhance students' critical thinking while taking responsible for their own learning process.

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