Students' perceptions of applying critical thinking to learning and practicing English speaking skills

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study aims to explore English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' understanding and perceptions of applying critical thinking to their practice of speaking skills. Although some research papers have been implemented to understand the impact of critical thinking on learners' language skills, the study specifically investigates how critical thinking can affect speaking ability amongst learners of low-English levels who are from a non-English-speaking country, according to their perceptions. The participants are 190 undergraduate students whose English proficiency was pre-intermediate and who were enrolled in English for IELTS preparation programs at the Creative Language Center (CLC) of Ton Duc Thang University, Vietnam. A survey was sent to collect information about students' learning experiences and opinions on their performance of speaking skills integrated with critical thinking. The findings highlighted some challenges when students used critical thinking while practicing oral communication skills, including their habits of learning and insufficient opportunities to practice the skills. Also, students' awareness of the important role of critical thinking in improving their speaking performance and confidence was successfully noted.

1. Introduction

Critical thinking skills are considered key factors leading to success in the 21st century and must be one of the non-cognitive abilities that should be prioritized in the learning process (Ristanto, Djamahar, Heryanti, & Ichsan, 2020). Especially to college students, critical thinking skills are even more important because they, according to Sadri, Fithriani, Salmiah, and Hamidah (2019), help students to reanalyze, identify, evaluate, consider, re-develop all the concepts and assumptions, and eventually help them with decision making or drawing a suitable conclusion.

The significance of communication skills have also been emphasized in recent years, as the foundation of 'peaceful co-existence' and common thoughts, according to Yusuf and Adeoye (2012, p. 312), which is used for different purposes of persuasion, influence, informing, and exploring information. Excellent communication skills could not only improve students' perspectives about learning discipline, but also help them solve problems of high-order thinking learning (Rochmawati, Wiyanto, & Ridlo, 2019).

In Vietnam, although there has been a shift towards communicative English teaching approaches in recent years, the ineffectiveness of learners' ability to logically speak and express their ideas is widely noticed, which is due to the limitations in curriculum design, cultural

backgrounds, and teaching and learning processes (Hoang, 2010). Also, speaking skills now require more than just the ability to deliver messages verbally. Take the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which is a common standard of English proficiency nowadays in tertiary education in Vietnam, as an example, students have to show both spoken ability and critical thinking when it comes to speaking skills on the test through answering abstract issues and organizing their ideas coherently (Altakhaineh, Al-Tkhayneh, & Rahrouh, 2019).

The importance of critical thinking within oral communication skills is, therefore, necessary to be understood carefully, especially at colleges in Vietnam where proficiency standards using international English testing systems are becoming more popular. The purpose of the study was to understand students' perceptions and opinions on the process of integrating critical thinking in their practice of speaking skills in the context of Vietnamese tertiary education.

The study's research questions were formulated as:

1) What are the habits of practicing English speaking skills in critical ways of low-English level learners?

2) What are the perceptions of low-English level learners when applying critical thinking to their practice of speaking skills?

2. Literature review

2.1. Critical thinking skills

Critical thinking is achieved when students can perform Analysis (focusing on separate parts and their functionality in the whole), Synthesis (focusing on combining separate parts to form a new and original whole), and Evaluation (reflecting upon information) (Yusuf & Adeoye, 2012). Similarly, according to Goodwin and Sommervold (2012), analyzing information is not simply memorizing, but more about synthesizing it and connecting it with prior knowledge; therefore, critical thinking leads to higher self-consciousness, self-awareness, problem-solving, self-confidence, and self-worth.

Critical thinking is also considered a form of intellectual engagement as well as responsible thinking which requires not only assumptions but also knowledge, competence, and self-questioning in order to make a good judgment (Yusuf & Adeoye, 2012). Therefore, critical thinkers often first recognize key questions and problems, then formulate them clearly, collect relevant evidence, use abstract ideas, think open-mindedly, and finally conduct effective communication with others (Hikmawati, Gunawa, Sahidu, & Kosim, 2021).

Critical thinking is also regarded as a reasoned argument that focuses on daily thinking and decision-making (Kuhn, 1991). The author explained that thinking as an argument is when the process of holding beliefs, making judgments, and concluding is achieved. That is, critical thinking as argumentative reasoning includes the abilities to 1) differentiate opinions, 2) support opinions with evidence, 3) propose counter arguments, and 4) provide evidence that supports one's own opinions while rebutting the counter arguments (Anderson & Soden, 2001; Kuhn, 1991). In other words, critical thinking helps students with conceptual clarification, for example, the relation between argument and evidence, and the different types of evidence (Anderson & Soden, 2001). The role of argumentation, in science education and scientific practices, is related to the development of critical thinking skills (Jiménez-Aleixandre & Puig, 2012).

2.2. Oral communication skills

Some indicators of communication skills, according to Binkley et al. (2014, as cited in

Trisnowati & Fermadani, 2020) include 1) the ability to hear and understand variously spoken or written languages; 2) the ability to read and understand different types of data or writing; 3) the ability to write multiple types of paper or data; and 4) the ability to understand the arguments given.

Oral communication skills involve not only words but also symbols and gestures that come along with spoken words, and there is no limit to symbolic action in verbal communication (Rahman, 2010). The skills required, further than words, eye contact, body language, style, understanding the audience, adapting to the audience, active and reflexive listening, politeness, precision, conciseness, etc. In fact, according to Sanavi and Tarighat (2014), speaking, amongst the 04 macro skills, is considered the most demanding in a second or foreign language learning context. This could be explained by the fact that effective oral communication requires learners of foreign languages an appropriately use language in social interactions (Fulcher, 2003; Ramezani, Larsari, & Kiasi, 2016). Therefore, oral communication is necessary for graduates to effectively function in academic and professional settings, and assist them in the globalization world (Dunbar, Brooks, & Kubicka-Miller, 2006; Rahman, 2010).

Excellent communication skills could improve students' perspectives on learning discipline and their ability to solve problems of high-order thinking learning (Rochmawati et al., 2019). Also, learners who possess better speaking performances are more likely to succeed at school and in other areas of life (Malmir & Shoorcheh, 2012; Sanavi & Tarighat, 2014; Ramezani et al., 2016). In contrast, a lack of confidence and information for students in discussion activities often happens in classes with low learning outcomes (Purvis, Neill, & Sutherland, 2014, as cited in Oktavia & Ridlo, 2020).

Therefore, as a role of tertiary education, providing a safe environment in which students can practice oral communication skills using suitable communication techniques, can help students create positive feelings and perspectives on such skills in the future (Rahman, 2010).

2.3. The intersection between critical thinking and communication skills

The improvement of critical thinking skills can help students show their curiosity and concern about the information in both discussion activities and questioning and answering sessions; as a result, they become more flexible with classroom learning and e-learning (Hasanah & Malik, 2020). As a result, students can therefore intensively and confidently communicate with lecturers about learning materials and can discuss the issues with their friends.

Conversely, the flexibility of information gathered by students can enable them to identify, analyze and evaluate the information they need, and so use them to develop their critical thinking skills (Yusuf & Adeoye, 2012). Such a situation can also improve students' communication skills because it minimizes the gap between students and teachers, and students can communicate more effectively with their peers, too (Sriarunrasmee, Techataweewan, & Mebusaya, 2015).

To encourage communication and critical thinking skills, teachers should adopt an integrated-skill approach because there are a strong connection between real-life situations and teaching materials; in other words, activities that require learners to negotiate to mean and interact meaningfully should be utilized (Yusuf & Adeoye, 2012). For that reason, communicative approaches, such as group work, assignments, and information gap activities, according to the author, should be frequently implemented because the effectiveness of those activities can be guaranteed by the application of critical thinking to group discussion and negotiation.

2.4. The effects of critical thinking on students' speaking skills

Malmir and Shoorcheh (2012) investigated the impact of teaching critical thinking on

learners' speaking skills in Iran and found that the teaching of critical thinking plays a crucial role in promoting the learners' speaking ability. Also, according to the authors, critical thinking strategies are necessary to help the learners to be more actively involved in discussing with their peers, understanding, and judging their arguments, responding to their arguments, and finally making their own best decisions. Similarly, Sanavi and Tarighat (2014) revealed that better awareness of critical thinking has a significantly positive impact on the speaking competence of female Iranian intermediate-level English learners. The findings of those papers both agreed on the fact that a critical thinker is usually a better language learner.

The effects of asking higher-order thinking questions on both language learners' attitudes toward critical thinking and their speaking ability were also confirmed by Akatsuka (2019). The paper showed that students, no matter what their level of English proficiency is, benefit from those questions when it comes to using critical thinking while practicing speaking skills. More specifically, Ramezani et al. (2016) found that there is a strongly positive correlation between critical thinking and the ability to speak English in learners' proficiency tests. They concluded that the increase in English learners' critical thinking level results in their better ability to speak the language.

In his case study, Anjaniputra (2020) focused on understanding the prevalence of critical thinking in tertiary students' speaking ability in Indonesia. Although only top students were chosen for the study, not all characteristics of critical thinking, such as encompassing precision, logical correctness, and completeness, were clearly shown. In addition, analogies that could help strengthen their arguments were missing when they presented their points of view. The author eventually emphasized the significance of the pre-teaching process of critical thinking in assisting students' preparation for studying at the tertiary level.

Although the effects of critical thinking on EFL learners' English proficiency have been the interest of some research papers, the specific impacts of such skills on learners' speaking ability have not been widely recognized. The papers all agreed on the impacts of critical thinking on students' speaking skills; however, students chosen for the papers are at high levels of English proficiency - intermediate (Sanavi & Tarighat, 2014), top students of the class (Anjaniputra, 2020) or they could benefit from critical thinking regardless of their English levels (Akatsuka, 2019). Furthermore, the context in which students have few opportunities to practice speaking skills was not clearly mentioned in those papers.

In this study, the paper's main participants are Vietnamese undergraduate students, whose English competence was at a lower level, and who often lack opportunities to practice English speaking skills. As they come from a non-English-speaking country, and speaking skills are considered essential in recent times, challenges to students and their inadequate practice, their perceptions of practicing English speaking skills while integrating critical thinking should be investigated to understand the possibility of adapting those skills simultaneously amongst lower-English level learners.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research setting

The research took place at the Creative Language Center of Ton Duc Thang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, from August 22 to August 29, 2022. The center provides students from all majors, except for English linguistics, with international English programs, such as IELTS or B1 Preliminary (PET), as the requirements of English proficiency during their study at the university and for their graduation.

The programs chosen for this study were IELTS preparation courses for students of the pre-intermediate level, which lasted for 02 months of 23 sessions per course. There were 10 sessions chosen for students to practice their speaking skills while being required to illustrate critical thinking. The sessions included post-reading activities in which students had to use their knowledge from reading practice to form an argument and discuss with their peers the related abstract issues. Also, speaking sessions in which students were required to state their agreement/disagreement and give reasons for their choice were also chosen for the study.

During the course, students were taught to expand their verbal answers by adding explanations or reasons for their opinions by using common cohesive devices such as 'so', 'because' or 'for example'. This process required students to deliver the argumentation characteristic of critical thinking, in which they had to form a clear argument or position, then give explanations or reasons for their argument or position (Jiménez-Aleixandre & Puig, 2012; Kuhn, 1991). Furthermore, students were also encouraged to compare and contrast their points of view with their friends in discussions and strengthen their opinions by giving additional supporting evidence if they could to show higher levels of critical thinking (Anderson & Soden, 2001; Kuhn, 1991).

3.2. Research sample

The participants were 190 undergraduate students who responded to the survey amongst 250 students chosen randomly, and mostly second-year students (55.7%), studying English for IELTS preparation programs at the Creative Language Center of Ton Duc Thang University, Vietnam. Their English proficiency was pre-intermediate.

3.3. Research instrument

The survey was conducted online, using Google forms. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions divided into 03 main categories, beginning with 04 items related to the participants' background information. The following 06 questions elicited information about the participants' habits of learning and practicing English speaking skills in critical ways. The next 12 items collected information about students' learning experiences and perceptions on the application of critical thinking to speaking skills. While the questions in the first two groups were in form of multiple choice, those in the last category were constructed on five Likert-scale, ranging from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*.

3.4. Data analysis

The data were then analyzed and presented in percentage to understand the participants' backgrounds and their familiar ways of practicing English speaking skills critically. Mean was used to illustrate the participants' learning experiences and their corresponding perceptions.

4. Result and discussion

4.1. Participants' background

The survey was completed by 190 undergraduate students, whose English proficiency was pre-intermediate, enrolled in English for IELTS preparation programs. The majority of them were second-year students (55.7%) and had spent more than 05 years studying English (52.6%). Despite spending a certain amount of time studying such language, the students did not prioritize speaking skills, which were mostly practiced less than 02 hours per week (56.3%). This explains their low confidence in speaking skills (59.5%).

In the Vietnamese learning context, students often follow passive learning styles and teacher-centered approaches are more common than student-centered approaches, so many of

them showed low levels of participation in speaking activities (Le, 2011; Tomlinson & Dat, 2004). The effort to promote communicative approaches encounters huge challenges related to the quality of teachers and the mismatch between teaching and testing (Hoang, 2010). Also, the gaps between students' backgrounds (Nguyen & Pham, 2016) and the habits of memorizing, repetition and drills when practicing speaking skills (Briton, 1991, as cited in Nguyen, 2010) are also significant challenges.

4.2. Students' habits of practicing Speaking skills critically

The survey also intended to find out the frequency of students practicing speaking skills in critical ways. The results highlighted students' particularly infrequent practice, which is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency of practicing speaking skills critically (%)

Questionnaire items	Usually	Always
When speaking, how often do you think of a clear argument and try to explain your answers?	19.5	3.7
When speaking, how often do you try to expand your answers by using additional information?	18.9	5.3
When speaking, how often do you use cohesive devices/linking words to connect your ideas?	14.2	7.4
When speaking, how often do you think about a question in different aspects/dimensions?	12.1	4.7
How often do you practice speaking through discussions with your other people?	13.7	3.2

For better understanding, students' concentration on different criteria when it comes to English speaking skills is illustrated in Figure 1, with the range from *1-least attention paid* to *4-most attention paid.*
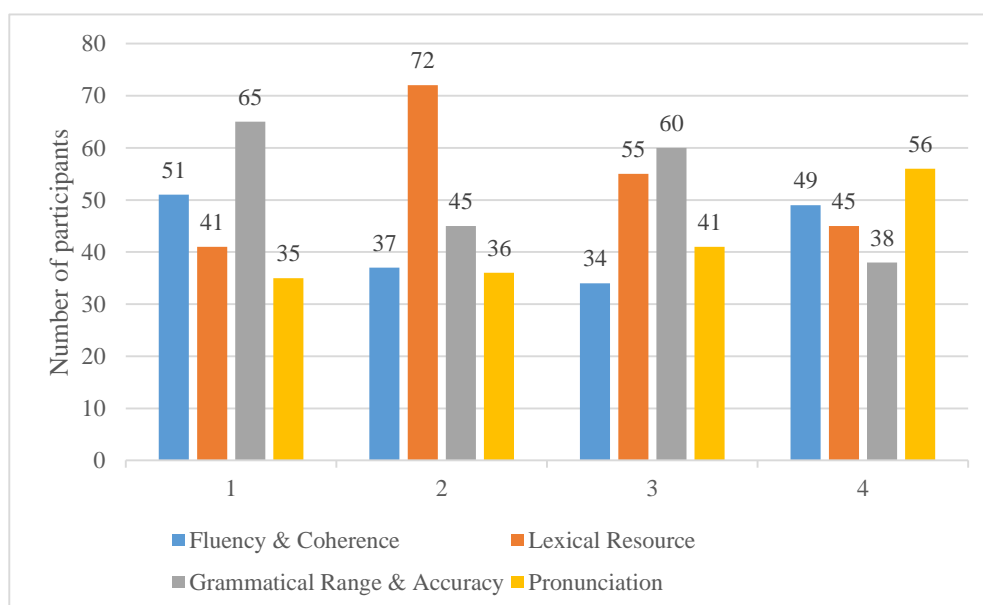

Figure 1. Students' concentration on Speaking criteria

Table 1 shows that students did not set habits of practicing speaking skills in critical ways. Specifically, only 12.1% usually thought about an issue in different aspects. Also, a minority of students (3.7%) always stood at a clear argument when speaking, and only 5.3% of them always expanded their answers by using additional information. The main reason for those numbers is probably because learners of lower-English proficiency are familiar with predetermined answers that they often use their memory to recall from a piece of information, but not able to produce their own thinking (Goodwin & Sommervold, 2012). As critical thinking, according to the authors, requires analyzing and synthesizing information, rather than memorizing, it is more challenging for students whose language proficiency is at low levels.

Table 1 and Figure 1 also reveal that only 21.6% of the participants frequently used cohesive devices to make their answers logical, and 51 of them paid the least attention to Coherence when speaking. These numbers confirm one other obstacle to lower students because critical thinking is reflected only when students can express their opinions clearly and organize ideas coherently (Altakhaineh et al., 2019; Seedhouse & Egbert, 2006), which is only suitable for higher-level students (Kennedy, 2007).

Moreover, students did not show frequent participation in discussions with other people (16.9%). Although group discussion is one of the techniques that can boost learners' critical thinking skills (Hasanah & Malik, 2020; Sriarunrasmee et al., 2015), students in Vietnam are familiar with passive learning which is mostly teacher-oriented (Le, 2011). Passive learning is not suitable for critical thinking (Snider & Schnurer, 2002) and can prevent learners from developing their ability to compare, contrast, and evaluate different ideas, which are necessary for critical thinking skills (Altakhaineh et al., 2019; Seedhouse & Egbert, 2006). Also, classes with low learning outcomes often witness students' lack of confidence and information for discussions (Purvis et al., 2014, as cited in Oktavia & Ridlo, 2020).

4.3. Participants' perceptions

The participants' perceptions on the application of critical thinking to speaking skills are investigated through their reflections on the level of agreement, after 2-month English courses. Mean was used for the illustration of 04 distinguished categories including *Disagree* (M ≤ 2.7), *Uncertain* (2.7 < M < 3.2), *Agree* (3.2 ≤ M < 4.2), and *Strongly agree* (M ≥ 4.2). The findings are presented in Table 2 with the mean from the highest to the lowest.

Table 2

Participants' perceptions

Questionnaire items	Mean	Std. Deviation
Clear instructions and feedback from teachers were necessary for me to understand how to answer a question critically	3.42	1.17
Critical thinking helped me understand the questions better	3.24	1.09
Critical thinking helped me answer the questions better	3.23	1.13
Generally, I think discussions with other people helped me with my critical thinking	3.22	1.14
Critical thinking helped me become more confident and motivated when speaking	3.20	1.12

Questionnaire items	Mean	Std. Deviation
When I disagreed with my friends' ideas, I often gave reasons for my choice	3.17	1.11
When I agreed with my friends' ideas, I often gave some additional information	3.02	1.08
I could discuss with other friends to understand their argument well	2.99	0.97
When discussing, I often compared my friends' ideas with mine	2.99	1.10
I could think of a clear argument/opinion when answering a question	2.93	1.08
I could use linking words and phrases to connect my ideas logically while speaking	2.85	0.99
I could use different ideas to support my argument/opinion while speaking	2.77	0.99

First, students showed uncertainty when it came to presenting a clear argument and developing it with relevant evidence (M = 2.77 - M = 2.93). This is parallel with their insufficient practice of speaking skills in critical ways. Critical thinking is only appropriate for higher-order thinkers who can analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information; and is therefore difficult for lower-order thinking in Bloom's taxonomy (Goodwin & Sommervold, 2012; Kennedy, 2007). The finding aligns with Akatsuka (2019) as low-English proficiency learners are not only often reluctant to express their points of view about higher-order thinking questions, but also experience difficulties when giving reasons and additional explanations in English.

Although group discussions can provide students with situations in which they can discuss, compare, and evaluate different arguments, which are believed to encourage learners' critical thinking skills (Hasanah & Malik, 2020; Yusuf & Adeoye, 2012), those in this study were not familiar with discussing with their peers, understanding, and evaluating their opinions (M = 2.99 - M = 3.17). The lack of practicing speaking skills through discussions may be one of the reasons for the findings. This could be explained by the traditional teaching and learning in the Vietnamese learning context in which teachers may misunderstand that their students are unwilling to participate in speaking activities in class (Tomlinson & Dat, 2004). In addition, critical thinking is often even challenging to higher-level students at colleges because they may not show enough standards of critical thinking such as logical correctness and completeness when they speak (Anjaniputra, 2020). Also, despite the government's efforts to re-design systematic the national examinations, those are mostly in written forms, such as reading comprehension and grammar; thus, the lack of verbal communication practice in studying English is inevitable (Le, 2011).

However, students were aware of the importance of group discussions in building critical thinking ability (M = 3.22), so they agreed that their confidence was boosted (M = 3.20). This is because using some pedagogical methods which create opportunities for students to discuss and negotiate with others by using suitable scientific evidence is believed to help with students' critical thinking development (Crist, Duncan, & Bianchi, 2017) Also, according to Goodwin and Sommervold (2012), critical thinking which is developed can lead to learners' higher self-consciousness and self-awareness, which eventually increase their self-confidence. In addition, providing opportunities for students to develop their critical thinking can make them more active in group discussions with their fellow students (Malmir & Shoorcheh, 2012).

Students also agreed that critical thinking helped them understand questions better (M = 3.24) and thus answer them more successfully (M = 3.23). In fact, the intersection between critical

thinking and communication skills has been widely indicated. Hasanah and Malik (2020) showed that students' curiosity and concern about an issue can be encouraged by the improvement of critical thinking through discussion activities and the processes of questioning and answering. The intensity and confident communication amongst students can therefore be improved. The barrier between students and their peers, and between students and teachers can also be eliminated, and higher levels of communication can eventually be developed (Sriarunrasmee et al., 2015). In agreement with the finding, Ramezani et al. (2016) found that critical thinking can help students perform better in their speaking tests.

Clear instructions and feedback from teachers are considered supportive in students' process of answering questions critically (M = 3.42). Generally, clear instructions on critical thinking in English classes can improve the quality of life of the students, and integrate higher-order thinking into the process of language learning, and English speaking in particular (Sanavi & Tarighat, 2014). Teachers' success in improving students' critical thinking skills, in fact, can be guaranteed by their constant focus and hard work (Udi & Amit, 2011, as cited in Hikmawati et al., 2021). Instant feedback from teachers and peers also play an important role in the students' development of critical thinking skills (Curto & Bayer, 2005). Thus, according to Yusuf and Adeoye (2012), integrated skills should be adopted to the teaching of communication skills to accelerate the connection between real life situations and teaching materials

5. Conclusions & recommendations

The study revealed students' certain awareness of the correlation between critical thinking and English speaking skills. Although they were not used to practicing speaking skills in critical ways, their understanding that more discussion activities could help them understand the questions better and therefore be able to answer them more successfully was recorded. However, the fact that the students did not effectively engage in discussion activities with their peers was also indicated. The common reasons were mostly related to their low levels of English proficiency and their habits of practicing speaking skills.

Additionally, a significant number of students who paid more attention to answering questions more coherently was clearly shown. Also, they agreed that critical thinking could help with the improvement of their verbal ability, as well as encourage their confidence when they speak.

The findings, therefore, strengthen the idea of the positive impact of critical thinking on students' speaking performance; however, they indicate that learners of low-English levels can still be aware of some features of critical thinking and utilize it to improve their speaking ability without being taught or trained about the concepts of critical thinking beforehand. Especially in the Vietnamese teaching and learning context where English is a foreign language and students often have inadequate opportunities to practice speaking skills, applying critical thinking still shows potential advantages in improving their speaking proficiency.

Critical thinking is a complex concept and is mostly used in higher-order thinking. Nevertheless, the study found out that students of lower-English levels were aware of the skills through stating their arguments, using supporting evidence, understanding others' points of view, and comparing their opinions with their peers, all of which could help them with their understanding and ways to give appropriate verbal answers. Thus, some basic techniques for communicative approaches, such as group/pair discussions and presentations, should be promoted in order to encourage students critical thinking. Also, the study concluded that teachers' efforts to provide instant feedback and clear instructions are helpful to form the habits of practicing speaking skills more critically among lower students.

The advantages of developing critical thinking in speaking skills for learners of low English proficiency should therefore be taken into consideration. Especially in Vietnam, where most students follow passive ways of learning English communication, the adjustment and changes to the educational system, teaching, and learning processes, should be prioritized accordingly, to provide students with more opportunities to discuss and reflect on their understanding of their peers and their teachers. Moreover, teachers should be a great source of support for students proper awareness and practice of those skills.

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