

Exploring Teacher's Strategies and Challenges in Enhancing Student's Critical Thinking Skills in Reading at Mtsn 1 Kota Palangka Raya

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the strategies used by English teachers to enhance students' critical thinking skills in reading at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, an Islamic junior high school in Central Kalimantan. A descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of teaching practices within a real classroom context. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers employed various strategies such as interactive read-alouds, divergent questioning, the SQ3R method, group discussions, and project-based learning. These strategies were often integrated with Islamic values like honesty, responsibility, and deliberation. Despite facing challenges such as students' low vocabulary and reluctance to express opinions, teachers addressed these through scaffolding, gradual questioning, and differentiated tasks. The study highlights the importance of culturally responsive teaching strategies that align with Islamic values and suggests practical ways to foster critical thinking in madrasah settings.

Keywords: Descriptive Qualitative; Case Study; Critical Thinking; Reading Strategies; Islamic Junior High School

INTRODUCTION

In the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, critical thinking has become one of the essential skills students must possess. This is particularly relevant in the context of English language learning, which not only requires technical mastery of the language but also demands deep analytical, evaluative, and creative abilities. This need becomes more urgent considering that English is a global communication tool and one of the core competencies of 21st century learning. Similarly, Şendağ et al (2023) emphasize that to compete globally, students must be prepared to think critically and analytically, as well as to solve real-world problems effectively. Unfortunately, the current state of critical thinking instruction in Islamic schools in Central Kalimantan is far from ideal. According to data from the Ministry of Education and Culture (2023), only about 25% of schools in the region actively incorporate critical thinking into their English curriculum (Naiyah & Rachman, 2024). As a result, most students still lack the ability to analyze and evaluate information critically. This is reflected in the region's English learning outcomes, where more than 60% of students remain at a basic level of comprehension, without the ability to evaluate or analyze texts in depth.

This condition highlights an urgent need to develop effective teaching strategies aimed at enhancing students' critical thinking skills, especially in Islamic schools that often face limitations in resources and teacher training (Nasution et al, 2022). The urgency of this research is even more evident when considering the importance of critical thinking in facilitating

students' deeper and more contextual understanding of English texts, as well as the need for teaching approaches that align with Islamic values and modern educational demands. However, various data sources indicate that Indonesian students' critical thinking abilities particularly in reading literacy remain low. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 report, Indonesia ranked 74th out of 79 participating countries in reading literacy (OECD, 2019). Similarly, the National Assessment results released by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Pusmenjar, 2021) show that most junior secondary school (SMP/MTs) students have not yet achieved the minimum literacy competency. These findings indicate that current instructional strategies are not yet fully effective in fostering higher-order thinking skills, especially critical thinking, in English reading comprehension. Within the context of Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) these challenges become even more complex. As Islamic-based educational institutions, madrasahs aim not only to enhance academic competence but also to instill Islamic values in all aspects of learning. Therefore, the teaching strategies employed by teachers must bridge both academic goals and character development, including the cultivation of students' critical thinking skills through reading activities. In this regard, teachers play a central role as designers, facilitators, and evaluators of the learning process. In addition to strategies, it is also important to understand the various challenges teachers face in implementing critical thinking-based instruction. These challenges may include limited instructional time, a lack of relevant materials, varying student abilities, and difficulties in assessing critical thinking skills. Understanding these challenges is crucial in order to develop strategies that are not only theoretically sound but also practical and sustainable in daily classroom settings. Previous studies provide important insights into teaching strategies and challenges in improving students' critical thinking and critical reading skills (Hakim et al, 2020; Sarwari & Kakar, 2023), there are several significant gaps that form the basis for this study. First, most previous studies were conducted in public schools or Islamic boarding schools, while this study specifically focuses on Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) which have different characteristics as part of the formal Islamic education system. Thus, this study offers a new perspective on the implementation of critical thinking strategies in MTs environments that formally apply Islamic values in learning. Second, previous studies tend to discuss critical thinking skills more generally, without paying special attention to critical reading skills. This study attempts to fill this gap by paying special attention to the development of critical reading skills as an important part of English learning. Third, this study integrates Islamic values into teaching strategies, which have not been widely discussed in previous studies. This perspective provides a new contribution regarding how moral and spiritual values can be linked to the teaching of critical thinking skills, particularly in the context of Islamic education. Based on the aforementioned issues, the researcher is interested in conducting a study entitled "Exploring Teacher's Strategies and Challenges in Enhancing Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Reading at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya." This school was selected as the research site because it is a leading Islamic junior high school known for its academic achievements and integration of Islamic values in learning. This study aims to explore in depth the strategies used by English teachers to develop students' critical thinking skills through reading instruction, as well as the challenges they encounter in the process. The findings of this research are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the improvement of reading instruction, not only focusing on literal comprehension but also emphasizing contextual and value-based critical thinking development.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The aim was to explore teachers' strategies challenges in fostering students' critical thinking skills in English subjects,

particularly in reading. The research was conducted at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, a model Islamic junior high school recognized for its high-quality teaching and learning practices in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. The participants of the study were two English teachers who taught eighth-grade students. The informants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria: they were actively involved in designing instructional activities and had experience in integrating critical thinking development strategies into reading instruction. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, direct classroom observations, and documentation of instructional materials (e.g., lesson plans, student worksheets). The primary research instrument was the researcher, supported by an interview guide and an observation sheet. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This technique used to make it easier for researcher to group data obtained in written form, so that data which has been grouped based on their categories can be easily selected and then analyzed. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a research method that involves the identification and reporting of patterns, commonly referred to as themes, within a dataset (Saputra et al. (2023). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights. To ensure the credibility of the data, the study employed triangulation of sources and methods, along with member checking to validate the findings with the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Teaching strategies used by teachers to improve students' critical thinking in teaching reading

Critical thinking is vital in teaching reading, as it helps students analyze, interpret, and evaluate texts for deeper understanding. Teachers play a key role by applying strategies that encourage students to think critically. Based on observations and interviews with English teachers at MTsN 1 Palangka Raya, the researcher identified eight strategies to enhance students' critical thinking in reading: Interactive Read-Aloud, Divergent Questions, SQ3R, Group Discussion, Giving Feedback, Questioning Techniques, Interactive Discussions, and Project-Based Learning (PBL).

Interactive Read-Aloud

The Interactive Read-Aloud strategy was used by both teachers to develop students' critical thinking through guided reading and reflective questioning. During classroom observations, Teacher DL applied this strategy by showing a folklore video ("Timun Mas") with bilingual subtitles and pausing at key moments to prompt students with evaluative questions. Similarly, Teacher AP read a procedural text ("How to Use a Compass") aloud and asked analytical questions to encourage students to reflect on the purpose and consequence of each step.

Interviews with both teachers confirmed their intention to combine visual, auditory, and textual elements to support comprehension and stimulate deeper thinking. The use of bilingual texts and strategic questioning aligns with Vygotsky's scaffolding theory and supports differentiated instruction by engaging multiple learning styles.

Documentation from teaching modules further reinforced the systematic use of this strategy, emphasizing pauses and questions during read-aloud sessions. Triangulated data indicated that Interactive Read-Aloud effectively enhanced students' comprehension while fostering

inferential and evaluative thinking, demonstrating its value as a critical thinking-oriented instructional method.

Divergent Questions

At MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, teachers used divergent questions to enhance students' higher-order thinking by promoting multiple perspectives and solutions. For instance, Teacher DL applied this strategy in narrative text lessons through reflective questions like *"What if Tan Bun An hadn't thrown the gold jar?"* and *"What would you do if you were Timun Mas without magical items?"*, encouraging students to analyze, evaluate, and imagine alternatives.

Meanwhile, Teacher AP used open-ended questions in procedural text lessons to help students infer the consequences of missing steps and understand logical sequencing. Interviews and documentation confirmed that both teachers intentionally used divergent questions to develop students' skills in analysis, inference, and evaluation. Triangulated data from observations, interviews, and documents demonstrated that this strategy was systematically integrated into reading instruction to build critical thinking.

SQ3R

The SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) strategy was consistently applied by teachers to enhance students' reading comprehension and critical thinking. Observations showed that both narrative and procedural texts were taught using each phase of the SQ3R method. In narrative lessons, teachers introduced the context through videos (Survey), posed guiding questions (Question), facilitated group reading (Read), encouraged retelling (Recite), and led reflections on moral values (Review). For procedural texts, students identified key elements, answered reflective questions, and discussed the importance of sequence.

Interviews confirmed that both teachers used SQ3R deliberately to foster analytical thinking and student engagement. They highlighted the use of group work, questioning, and retelling to deepen understanding. Supporting documentation, such as lesson plans and teaching modules, outlined the strategy's implementation in detail, including structured questions and reflective activities.

Group Discussion

Group discussion was employed by teachers to enhance students' understanding and critical thinking through collaborative analysis of texts. Observations revealed that students were grouped to discuss narrative and procedural texts using open-ended questions such as *"What is the main conflict?"* and *"How would you change the story's ending?"*. These activities encouraged students to analyze, evaluate, and create alternative viewpoints. In procedural text lessons, students collaboratively designed simple instructional texts and produced video projects based on group discussions, applying both comprehension and creativity.

Teacher interviews confirmed that this strategy was intentionally used to stimulate higher-order thinking. Teachers guided discussions to ensure active participation and encouraged students to assess moral messages, character decisions, and logical steps in procedures.

Supporting documentation reflected structured group activities aimed at developing teamwork, analytical reasoning, and reflective thinking. Triangulated data showed that group discussion effectively promoted critical thinking through peer interaction and collaborative problem-solving.

Giving Feedback

Giving Feedback was applied by both teachers to guide students in refining their understanding through corrective and reflective input. Observations showed that after group discussions and reading exercises, teachers provided feedback in the form of follow-up questions, corrections, and praise. For example, Teacher DL asked, *"Why do you think this character made that decision?"* to encourage deeper analysis, while Teacher AP asked students to reflect on and revise their answers collaboratively. Interviews confirmed that feedback was used intentionally to stimulate critical thinking, with teachers combining reflective questions and verbal

encouragement to build students' confidence and reasoning. Supporting documents emphasized feedback as part of learning, with instructions for teachers to provide corrections and pose additional questions that deepened comprehension. Triangulated data indicated that Giving Feedback was not only corrective but also promotive of self-reflection and evaluative thinking, effectively supporting students' critical engagement with reading texts.

Questioning Techniques

At MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, Questioning Techniques were effectively used to enhance students' critical thinking. Teachers employed various question types—factual, analytical, and evaluative—to deepen students' understanding. For example, questions like *“What if one of the steps was missing?”* and *“Do you agree that every step should be followed? Why?”* encouraged students to analyze and evaluate procedural texts. Teacher AP emphasized using open-ended questions to go beyond memorization and promote reasoning, such as *“Why is it important to follow every instruction correctly?”* These questions helped students practice evaluation and inference. Supporting teaching modules included prompts like *“How does a compass work?”*, guiding students to explain, connect, and reflect critically.

Overall, the Questioning Techniques strategy enabled students to analyze texts, relate them to real-life contexts, and form reasoned arguments—key components of critical thinking.

Interactive Discussions

At MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, Interactive Discussions were effectively implemented to develop students' critical thinking skills. Observations revealed that teachers used open-ended, analytical, and evaluative questions to encourage deeper engagement with texts. For example, after reading *The Legend of Kemaro Island*, Teacher DL asked, *“What was the orientation of the story?”* and *“What was the moral message of the story?”* These questions prompted students to analyze narrative elements and explore the values conveyed in the story.

Discussions also took place after watching a video adaptation of *Timun Mas*, with questions like, *“What would you have done if you were Timun Mas without the magical items from her mother?”* This encouraged students to think critically, consider alternative solutions, and evaluate their effectiveness. Teacher interviews reinforced the value of this strategy. Teacher DL explained that group discussions and reflective questions guided students in understanding key story elements, evaluating moral messages, and connecting them to real-life situations.

The teaching module also supported this strategy by including activities that involved analyzing text structure and evaluating moral lessons. It instructed teachers to pose reflective and application-based questions to guide discussions and encourage critical assessments of the texts.

Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Project-Based Learning (PBL) was effectively implemented at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya to enhance students' critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills in reading instruction. Observations showed that PBL encouraged students to apply theoretical knowledge through real-world projects. For instance, in a session with Teacher DL on January 24, 2025, students rewrote a folktale using modern settings while preserving its moral message—an activity that fostered both creativity and critical analysis. In another session with Teacher AP on January 17, 2025, students worked in groups to create procedural texts and turn them into instructional videos. This task emphasized real-life application, collaboration, and accountability, with a submission deadline set via WhatsApp.

Interviews with both teachers confirmed that PBL promoted independent thinking and deeper engagement. Students learned to evaluate information critically and collaborate to find creative solutions. Teaching modules supported this approach by guiding students in group projects and promoting values like honesty, responsibility, and discipline.

In conclusion, PBL at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya proved effective in strengthening students' critical thinking and character by integrating academic tasks with meaningful, real-world applications.

The challenges faced by teacher on teaching reading comprehension to enhance critical thinking

Pupil Learning Ability

A challenge in enhancing critical thinking at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya was the variation in student comprehension. Some students quickly grasped material, while others struggled with basic narrative structures. Teacher DL noted this difference, making it difficult to apply higher-order thinking strategies effectively. To address this, teachers used the Gradual Questioning Approach, starting with simple questions and progressing to more analytical ones. This strategy, aligned with Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, allowed students to develop critical thinking skills at their own pace. In conclusion, the Gradual Questioning Approach effectively supported students with varying comprehension levels, helping them develop critical thinking skills progressively.

Pupils' Mastery

A major challenge in enhancing critical thinking at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya was students' varying comprehension levels and limited vocabulary. Teacher AP noted that while some students excelled in critical thinking, others struggled with basic concepts. Similarly, Teacher DL highlighted how limited vocabulary hindered students' ability to analyze and evaluate texts. To address this, teachers implemented Learning Differentiation strategies. Teacher AP adjusted task difficulty based on students' abilities, providing additional challenges for quicker learners and simpler questions for those struggling. Teacher DL used English videos with subtitles to help students improve vocabulary and engage with the language in a more accessible context. Additionally, group discussions were employed to boost students' confidence and facilitate peer learning. These strategies, aligned with Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, effectively supported students' cognitive development. The triangulation of data confirmed that while mastery levels affected critical thinking, differentiated learning, multimedia tools, and collaborative approaches helped students progress.

Planning Domain

Lesson planning was a key challenge in fostering critical thinking during reading instruction at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya. Teachers struggled with creating materials, formulating challenging questions, and designing engaging discussions. Teacher DL emphasized that planning for critical thinking required extra preparation, particularly in crafting thought-provoking questions and effective discussion activities.

Teacher DL also highlighted the need for flexible lesson planning to accommodate varying levels of student comprehension. To address this, she regularly sought student feedback at the end of lessons to refine teaching strategies, ensuring they met students' needs. This approach aligned with research by Li & Zhan (2022), which highlighted the importance of systematic planning and ongoing adjustments to teaching methods.

The triangulation of data confirmed that while planning for critical thinking presented challenges, teachers' flexibility and feedback-driven improvements helped enhance lesson effectiveness and student engagement.

Classroom Environment

The classroom environment was a key factor in developing students' critical thinking skills in reading. A significant challenge teachers faced was students' lack of confidence in expressing their opinions, often due to fear of making mistakes or low self-esteem. Teacher DL highlighted this issue, stating that some students were passive in discussions, hesitant to share ideas due to fear of speaking English or making errors. This challenge was also mentioned by Teacher AP, who acknowledged that students' fear of being wrong hindered active participation.

Observations on January 16 and 17, 2025, showed that while some students actively engaged, others remained passive during class discussions, indicating a lack of comfort in sharing thoughts. To address this, teachers created a supportive environment by using small-group discussions before larger class discussions. This allowed students to share ideas in a less intimidating setting, building their confidence. Both teachers DL and AP emphasized the importance of this approach, stating that it encouraged students to express themselves more freely. Teachers also used positive reinforcement, praising students' efforts to help them overcome their fear of making mistakes. This approach aligned with Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, which suggests that interaction and scaffolding promote learning. The triangulation of data confirmed that, although students' hesitancy remained a challenge, creating a safe, interactive classroom environment helped foster critical thinking skills and boosted student confidence.

Discussion

Teaching strategies used by teachers to improve students' critical thinking in teaching reading

Interactive Read-Aloud

Interactive Read-Aloud is a strategy where the teacher reads a text aloud while involving students in discussions, reflective questions, and connections within the text. The main goal of this strategy is to help students comprehend the text while also developing their critical thinking skills. At MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, this strategy is implemented by introducing folk tale videos and procedural texts, reading the texts with clear intonation, and posing analytical questions. The teacher also pauses at certain points to ask students to predict or analyze the content of the text. This strategy closely aligns with the six aspects of critical thinking outlined by Facione (2011), including interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Each of these aspects is reinforced through this approach. For example, students are trained to interpret texts through clear intonation and supporting media such as folk tale videos. They are also trained to analyze the relationships between ideas in the text and evaluate the decisions made by the characters in the story.

The success of this strategy is supported by research from Fara et al. (2023) and J. Kelly & Taboada Barber (2021), which shows that using higher-order questions during Interactive Read-Aloud sessions improves students' evaluation and inference skills.

Divergent Questions

The Divergent Questions strategy is used to encourage students to think more broadly, deeply, and creatively when understanding texts by providing open-ended questions that allow for multiple answers. At MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, this strategy is applied through various stages, such as discussion starters based on students' experiences, text analysis, and hypothetical scenarios that challenge students to explore alternative solutions.

This strategy supports the development of critical thinking dispositions, such as interpretation, analysis, and evaluation. Students are asked to evaluate various possibilities and justify their reasoning through open-ended questions, such as "What if the main character made a different decision?" or "Do you agree with the character's decision? Why or why not?". This allows students to explore different perspectives and develop deeper argumentation skills.

However, a challenge found at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya is the lack of student confidence in speaking during discussions, which hinders the effectiveness of this strategy. This is related to Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism theory, which suggests that learning is more effective through social interaction, although student participation in discussions can be inhibited by a lack of self-confidence.

SQ3R

The SQ3R strategy (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) is applied systematically to help students understand both narrative and procedural texts. In the Survey stage, students are introduced to the context of the story through videos and illustrations. In the Question stage, initial questions are posed to engage students, while in the Read stage, students are required to read the text thoroughly under the teacher's guidance. Next, in the Recite stage, students are asked to retell the story in English, and in the Review stage, they evaluate the moral of the story and relate it to their own experiences. This strategy closely aligns with Facione's aspects of critical thinking, especially in interpretation, analysis, and evaluation. For example, in the Survey and Question stages, students develop interpretation skills by making initial predictions based on titles and illustrations. In the Review stage, they evaluate the moral of the story and connect it with their personal experiences.

However, this strategy does not develop inference and self-regulation skills as effectively, as it focuses more on systematic text comprehension than on encouraging students to generate hypotheses or construct original arguments.

Group Discussion

The Group Discussion strategy involves dividing students into groups to discuss text content, analyze conflicts, and evaluate moral lessons. At MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, this strategy is applied in teaching narrative and procedural texts, with students being given open-ended questions to stimulate analytical and creative thinking. For example, when teaching narrative texts, students are invited to discuss the main conflict of the story and how they would change the ending. This strategy relates to Facione's aspects of critical thinking, such as analysis, inference, and evaluation. Students are trained to analyze text elements, such as characters and plot, and make inferences about possible alternatives within the text. They also develop evaluation skills by assessing the characters' decisions or the effectiveness of the procedures.

However, like with Divergent Questions, the aspects of self-regulation and explanation are less emphasized because the discussion focuses more on idea exchange than on individual reflection of their thinking process.

Giving Feedback

In reading instruction, feedback was provided after students presented the results of their discussions, either in the form of corrections, reflective questions, or appreciation for their efforts. For example, in narrative texts, teachers used questions like "Why do you think this character made that decision?" to encourage students to explore ideas more deeply. In procedural text instruction, teachers asked students to explain the reasoning behind each step in a procedure and to evaluate the possible outcomes if a step was omitted.

This feedback helped students better understand the text and trained them to think analytically and reflectively. Additionally, it strengthened evaluation (students reassessing their understanding), explanation (students articulating their reasoning), and self-regulation (students reflecting on their thought process and correcting mistakes). This increased their metacognitive awareness, making them more independent thinkers.

However, while effective in fostering evaluation and explanation, the strategy was less focused on developing interpretation and inference (drawing conclusions or making connections from the text), which could be enhanced through open-ended questions or problem-based learning strategies.

Questioning Techniques

This strategy involved asking open-ended, analytical, and evaluative questions to stimulate students' critical thinking. For example, teachers asked questions like "What would happen if the character made a different choice?" or "Can you relate this story to your own experiences?" in narrative texts, and "What if one of the steps is missing?" in procedural texts. The questioning techniques helped students strengthen their analysis (breaking down text components), inference (drawing conclusions based on evidence from the text), evaluation (assessing the

relevance or consequences of actions in the text), and explanation (justifying their reasoning). Through this process, students were trained to think more logically and construct arguments based on the text.

Although effective in enhancing analytical and evaluative skills, this strategy was less focused on self-regulation and interpretation, which could be strengthened with additional techniques like Socratic questioning or problem-based learning. Nevertheless, it still contributed to students' metacognitive awareness by helping them reflect on their thinking processes.

Interactive Discussions

Interactive Discussions strategy was used in reading instruction to deepen students' understanding through active engagement. In narrative texts, students explored moral and cultural values, while in procedural texts, they analyzed the consequences of missing steps. This approach encouraged students to connect texts to real-life contexts, improving their analytical, evaluative, and reflective thinking. Students analyzed key elements in narratives, such as character motivations and conflicts, made inferences by drawing conclusions from the texts, evaluated whether actions in the texts aligned with Islamic values like honesty and patience, and articulated their reasoning behind their interpretations, improving their communication skills. The strategy was supported by Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), which emphasizes understanding both the subject matter and effective instructional methods. It also aligns with Vygotsky's Scaffolding Theory, as teachers provided support, helping students gradually become more independent in their critical thinking.

Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Project-Based Learning (PBL) was used to create a more contextual learning experience. Students rewrote folktales with modern settings or created procedural videos, applying theoretical knowledge to real-world situations. This encouraged interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, and self-regulation throughout the project process. Issa & Khataibeh (2021) highlight that PBL fosters deeper investigation and higher-order thinking, while Vygotsky's Scaffolding Theory suggests that teachers initially guide students, gradually stepping back as students become more independent. Additionally, Dewey's Experiential Learning emphasizes that active engagement in real-world tasks helped students reflect on their learning. PBL also incorporated Islamic values, particularly amanah (responsibility and trust), encouraging students to manage their tasks responsibly and demonstrate ethical behavior in their work. A key challenge in PBL was ensuring that all students, especially those with lower academic confidence, remained engaged. By providing adequate scaffolding, teachers helped students develop their critical thinking skills without feeling overwhelmed. Both Interactive Discussions and PBL at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya were effective in enhancing students' critical thinking. These strategies, grounded in Scaffolding, Experiential Learning, and Islamic pedagogical principles, developed students' cognitive and ethical skills, preparing them to think critically and responsibly in academic and real-world contexts.

The challenges faced by teacher on teaching reading comprehension to enhance critical thinking

Pupil Learning Ability

At MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, differences in student learning abilities presented challenges in enhancing critical thinking skills. Some students excelled in understanding and analyzing texts, while others struggled with basic comprehension. To address this, teachers implemented Differentiated Instruction (DI), modifying tasks based on students' comprehension levels. For instance, stronger students engaged with higher-order thinking tasks, while those with weaker comprehension received simpler guiding questions. This approach, rooted in Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Theory and Vygotsky's Scaffolding Theory, ensured that all students were appropriately challenged, gradually developing their critical thinking skills. Additionally,

multimodal learning strategies, such as using videos and group discussions, catered to students' varied learning styles, enhancing engagement and comprehension. This approach aligns with Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory and has been shown to improve critical thinking (Meriyati et al. (2023).

Pupils' Mastery

The challenge of pupils' mastery, particularly limited vocabulary, hindered students' ability to engage in higher-order thinking tasks like analysis and evaluation. To address this, teachers again used Differentiated Instruction, adjusting the complexity of questions based on students' comprehension and vocabulary levels. Students with stronger skills tackled complex analytical questions, while those with weaker vocabulary focused on simpler tasks, such as identifying the main idea or summarizing key events. This process was supported by scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) and multimedia resources like videos and images, which helped improve vocabulary and comprehension. Research shows that differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and multimedia learning enhance student engagement and critical thinking (Mirawati et al., 2022; Teng (2023). Additionally, the approach reflected Islamic Educational Psychology, emphasizing both knowledge acquisition (ta'lim) and deep reflection (tadabbur), fostering students' intellectual and ethical growth.

Planning Domain

At MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya, lesson planning posed a challenge in enhancing students' critical thinking skills, particularly in selecting appropriate materials and developing thought-provoking questions. To address this, teachers implemented flexible lesson planning that adjusted based on student feedback and evaluation results. This approach, grounded in Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Theory, ensured that all students, regardless of their comprehension levels, could engage in critical thinking activities. Teachers also integrated scaffolding and collaborative learning techniques, gradually reducing guidance as students developed their analytical skills. By using feedback to refine lesson plans and incorporating strategies like scaffolding, student engagement was fostered, allowing students to progress toward higher-order thinking tasks. This approach aligns with Bloom's Taxonomy and Islamic Educational Psychology, emphasizing both knowledge acquisition (ta'lim) and deep reflection (tadabbur).

Classroom Environment

A key challenge at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya was fostering student participation during discussions. Many students hesitated to speak due to fear of mistakes or lack of confidence, hindering their critical thinking development. To address this, teachers implemented small-group discussions to reduce anxiety, helping students build confidence before contributing to whole-class discussions. This strategy, supported by Vygotsky's Scaffolding Theory, allowed for gradual independence. Teachers also fostered a supportive atmosphere by using positive reinforcement to acknowledge students' efforts, even when answers were imperfect. This encouraged students to take intellectual risks and engage more actively in discussions. Furthermore, thought-provoking questions connected to real-life experiences deepened students' cognitive involvement, aligning with Bloom's Taxonomy.

CONCLUSION

This study found that English teachers at MTsN 1 Kota Palangka Raya implemented eight core strategies to foster students' critical thinking skills in reading: Interactive Read-Aloud, Divergent Questions, SQ3R, Group Discussion, Giving Feedback, Questioning Techniques, Interactive Discussions, and Project-Based Learning (PBL). These strategies were applied variatively based on text types and instructional goals. For instance, read-alouds were used to support students' understanding of narrative and procedural texts, while project-based tasks,

such as creating procedural videos or rewriting folk stories, encouraged students to analyze, evaluate, and apply their understanding in meaningful contexts. Teachers also integrated Islamic values such as honesty, responsibility, *musyawarah* (deliberation), discipline, and moral reflection into learning activities. These values emerged particularly in group discussions and collaborative projects, where students were encouraged to express their ideas with confidence and accountability. The application of these strategies reflects key theoretical frameworks in education. Specifically, it supports Facione's (2011) framework by showing how teachers fostered students' skills in interpretation, analysis, and evaluation through reflective questioning and task-based activities, while the use of gradual questioning, differentiated tasks, and scaffolding techniques echoes Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. These theories help explain how students progressed from basic comprehension toward independent critical reasoning through guided instructional support.

Nevertheless, the implementation of these strategies was accompanied by several pedagogical challenges. The primary difficulties encountered included: (1) Pupil Learning Ability, referring to the diverse levels of student reading comprehension; (2) Pupils' Mastery, particularly limited vocabulary acquisition that constrained deeper textual analysis; (3) Classroom Environment, wherein students exhibited reluctance to express opinions due to low confidence or fear of making mistakes; and (4) Planning Domain, which required significant effort in designing questions and structured tasks to elicit critical responses. To address these challenges, teachers adopted a range of responsive pedagogical approaches. Among these were the gradual questioning technique, which moved students from basic comprehension to analytical reasoning, and differentiated instruction, where learning tasks were tailored to students' ability levels. Additionally, the use of multimodal resources, such as bilingual texts and subtitled videos, supported vocabulary development and content accessibility. Small-group discussions were also employed to foster students' confidence in articulating ideas before participating in whole-class interactions.

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