
STUDENT'S DIFFICULTIES IN USING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN READING COMPREHENSION**Siti Sofiyatul Janah¹, Nurhaedah Gailea², Udi Samanhudi³**

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ABSTRACT

In the era of globalization and advanced information technology, critical thinking skills are vital for students, particularly in reading comprehension. However, many students need help to apply these skills, especially when reading narrative texts. This study aims to identify students' difficulties when using critical thinking skills in reading comprehension and explores practical strategies to overcome these challenges. A qualitative case study approach was used, with data collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The participants were junior high school students selected via purposive sampling. The data were analyzed thematically to identify themes of critical student difficulties. The results revealed that students needed help with critical thinking sub-skills such as interpreting narrative elements, studying the structure, and drawing inferences from the text. Students needed help to evaluate the moral lessons in the stories and regulate their thought processes. The study highlights that teaching strategies like group discussions and open-ended questions can significantly enhance students' critical thinking abilities. The findings suggest that educators should implement more interactive and collaborative methods in their teaching to foster these skills effectively. Moreover, teacher training in promoting critical thinking is essential to improve learning outcomes. This research contributes to the educational field by offering insights into students' difficulties and potential strategies to address them.

Keyword: Students, Critical Thinking, Narrative Text.

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E-mail: ssofiyatuljanah@gmail.com**INTRODUCTION**

Education is a means to develop one's potential. By developing self-potential, one's mindset will be more advanced. Education can help educate a person's mindset because education can free a person from ignorance and the things that arise from such ignorance (Dewey, 2024). Therefore, everyone is trying to get the highest possible education. If a person has a high education, his knowledge will also increase. In other words, the more significant the increase in knowledge, the greater the chance for a person to improve his life (Vygotsky, 1978).

Every year, education experiences changes and developments. In the 21st Century, science and technology are developing very rapidly. With the development of knowledge and technology, through literacy, someone reads and absorbs information all the time. Today's biggest challenge is sifting through the data, reading it, and conveying good thoughts. Various modes of fraud and dissemination of false or inappropriate information are often carried out by people with bad intentions and irresponsibility so that many people fall into the trap, are deceived, or make wrong decisions.

To deal with these challenges, we all need to be more critical and stay focused on what is conveyed through reading. Essential refraction of thinking can be developed from the most miniature environments, such as family, schools, or the community. This certainly makes the field

of education critical in preparing students to be able to master and develop the value of competent critical thinking skills to form quality human resources in facing the challenges of daily life, such as solving problems, analyzing assumptions, finding solutions, and make decisions (Facione, 1990).

Critical thinking skills are essential because students can build quality thinking to develop good learning. This statement emphasizes how important it is for students to think critically during the learning process because it allows students to follow learning that has been adjusted according to expectations and understand and master the material that is or is currently being studied. They have been studied, as explained by the teacher, and studied by themselves, so student learning outcomes are more optimal.

In addition, critical thinking is helpful in both the educational process and everyday living. This is stated by (Ciftci et al., 2021) state that the capacity for critical thinking in the 21st Century will help people lead their lives, make the right decisions, be productive, and adjust to the quick changes and advancements in their environment. This statement reminds us how important critical thinking is in social life, which aims to develop students into productive human beings who can make correct decisions and become leaders.

Considering how crucial critical thinking skills are in everyday social life and for the educational process, critical thinking skills must be fostered by every student, especially junior high school students, who are classified as early adolescents where adolescent cognitive development is at the formal operational stage. During adolescence, psychological and social aspects greatly influence student behavior, so students must have critical thinking skills to develop good behavior. At this teenage age, students in junior high school need critical thinking skills to prepare for a future life full of challenges, competition, and uncertainty (Kuhn, 1999). Furthermore, critical thinking is intended as correct thinking in seeking relevant and reliable knowledge about the real world. Students will be better equipped to collect relevant information when they have critical thinking skills. Besides that, they will act more efficiently and creatively based on information, be able to put forward logical arguments based on facts, and make conclusions (Siegel, 1988).

In education, one way to free someone from ignorance is by reading. Reading will benefit people, whether they read books, novels, news, or other materials (Snow, 2002). In reading activities, a person exerts his abilities to process information from words and sentences to capture the meaning of what is read. It is not uncommon for a child to experience difficulties in achieving meaning. Therefore, it requires interest and motivation (Duke & Pearson, 2009).

If someone's interest and motivation in reading are high, reading activities will be fun and easy to understand. Reading can provide much knowledge that allows one to understand what has been incomprehensible so far. The more knowledge you get, the more insight you can get, and various entertainment can be obtained through reading. Reading can also help find solutions to the problem at hand. So, it can be said that reading is a self-development activity in addition to fun activities because it can change a person's mindset.

According to the 2013 curriculum, the most essential competency is that students should be able to recognize narrative texts. Narrative text is a sort of text that can carry moral messages, attitudes, and behaviors (Koc et al., 2024). The purpose of this type of text is to amuse the reader or listener. The narrative text has a general structure: orientation, complication, resolution, and re-orientation. Thus, providing students with reading comprehension exercises can help to maximize the introduction of narrative text.

Unfortunately, the results in the field speak of another phenomenon. This phenomenon is inversely related to the expectations that students have good reading comprehension skills. Students are passive, uncreative, frequently complain, and lack self-confidence during learning. Students had difficulty in English exercises (Wahyuningsih, 2022). As a result, learning narrative text in English is not successful.

Critical thinking, reading, and narrative texts are interrelated. This must be included because reading narrative texts uses a vital thinking pattern, so the application of critical thinking must be given more attention so students can implement it more easily. Teachers must also deepen their knowledge about critical thinking to support students in applying critical thinking learning. Teachers must have a variety of interesting critical thinking-based teaching strategies that students can understand. If teachers successfully apply learning methods to students, students can be more interested in independently improving their essential thinking patterns. Therefore, the importance of support from teachers and those around them is in improving students' critical thinking skills even though they experience difficulties.

Based on previous research, the investigation was carried out by (Susanti, 2022), (Syarifah, 2019), (Velayati et al., 2017), who focused on finding out student's difficulties in using critical thinking in reading; it seemed that no research related to how stage of student's critical thinking. According to the statements above, the researcher was interested in conducting the study entitled 'Student's Difficulties in Using Critical Thinking Skill in Reading Comprehension (A Case Study at Grade Nine Students at SMPN 1 Kota Cilegon)'. The research aimed to discover students' difficulties in using critical thinking in reading and the stage of student's critical thinking.

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach to explore the problems among junior high school students at SMPN 1 Kota Cilegon. This research employed a case study approach to investigate the critical thinking abilities of ninth-grade students, focusing on their responses to questions designed to determine how thinking critically supports their development. The researcher aimed to analyze these students in-depth, focusing on individuals and small groups.

The subjects of this research were students from grade nine at SMPN 1 Kota Cilegon. The total population consisted of 124 students, from which a sample of 12 students was selected using purposive sampling. The sampling was based on specific characteristics that aligned with the research objectives.

Data collection involved several instruments, including observation, questionnaires, and interviews. The primary tool was observation, where students were assessed using a designated assessment sheet. Supporting instruments included questionnaires to gather information on student difficulties in applying critical thinking to reading comprehension of narrative texts and interviews to explore students' interests in reading and the challenges they face in utilizing critical thinking skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Result of the Interview

To find out students' reading background and how students improve their critical thinking, researchers conducted interviews with several students. From the results of interviews, several students have a good interest in reading. However, some students read very hard (Paulder, 2013). This has several factors, as explained by S3: "I rarely read books. I prefer to play social media more because social media is more fun than reading, but sometimes there are posts on social media using English, and I tried to understand it", and S9 "I rarely read books, I prefer to watch films. So, to improve my English language skills and critical thinking, I watch films in English and understand the film." Several other students who frequently entirely read said S6, "I usually read on weekends because on weekdays I am busy dance and music practice. To improve my critical thinking, I read and analyze from the books".

After learning about the students' reading backgrounds and how they improved their critical thinking, the researchers asked what the teachers' methods were in learning. From the interview results, S1 explains that teachers use Indonesian and English interchangeably; teachers usually ask us to read something and then read it carefully, sometimes motivating at the end of the lesson. S2

also explained that teachers sometimes use English in the learning process, teachers explain the context of the book and worksheets on blackboard, and teachers like to discuss it again when class is about to end. S8 also explained that the teacher directs when teaching using Indonesian, sometimes English, and the teacher gives an evaluation at the end of the class.

After learning about students' reading interests and the teacher's method during learning, the final stage is determining how effectively reading narrative text improves and improves students' critical thinking. From the interview results, S3 explained that this method helped, but she still experienced difficulties in analyzing the reading text; apart from that, she had trouble sharing with her friends due to language limitations. To overcome this difficulty, I prefer to search for information via Google. S12 said, "The reading method helps improve critical thinking, but I struggle to understand some words in English; this is due to a lack of reading practice in English because I prefer Japanese to English. To overcome this difficulty, I always look for answers to my friends".

Besides interviews with students, researchers also conducted interviews with English teachers. This is done to determine students' characteristics during learning, discuss the difficulties students face in reading, and improve students' critical thinking skills. From the interview results, the teacher explained that S1 was cheerful and active in learning. At the same time, S2 was a shy and quiet person, just like S3, so they were less active in class, and S12 was a person who was less active in learning English because, according to him, English is more complicated than Japanese.

Besides, the teacher said that reading and critical thinking skills cannot be separated; for example, in the reading process, you need to think critically so that students can understand and develop their ideas and find solutions to solving problems. However, students need help improving critical thinking skills in the learning process, especially in mastering active skills such as reading. Even though teachers often train their students by reading various texts such as Descriptive Text, Recount Text, Narrative Text, Report Text, etc. However, teachers believe that the reading process to conclude is much higher than the reading indicators to interpret and analyze them. Apart from that, he stated that students often experience problems that cause them difficulty in understanding issues that have never occurred before, so that when students are faced with new issues, they are confused in understanding the problem.

After the teacher understands the difficulties faced by students, the teacher looks for several solutions to increase students' interest in reading and ways to improve student's critical thinking, including teachers motivating the importance of reading and improving critical thinking skills in everyday life, training students to read frequently, training students to apply the question-and-answer method more often in the learning process, and teachers will also suggest creating a small library in each class or a reading garden in the school environment. This aims to make students more interested in reading to expand their knowledge and improve their critical thinking skills.

The Causes of Student's Difficulties in Using Critical Thinking in Reading Comprehension

The researcher interviewed to determine the stage of their critical thinking. Based on the interview, the researcher saw the variants of the problem that affected the student's critical thinking stage. Many problems arise, from the difficulty of interpreting the meaning of the paragraph to the vocabulary problem, and many more that the researcher will discuss more through the findings.

Twelve students who participated in interviews answered research questions about students' difficulties when using critical thinking skills in reading comprehension. Researchers used semi-structured interviews to find out their challenges. These questions consist of five items that ask about critical thinking skills. However, only one item has been focused on by researchers and used to find problems with students' critical thinking skills. The researcher refers to the statements

in the questionnaire as an interview guide regarding related items to investigate their problems when using critical thinking skills in reading.

After completing the interview, the researcher analyzes the entire interview transcript using data reduction, data visualization, and data verification from five participants to discover present problems with their usability. Critical thinking skills in reading. All the participants had heard about critical thinking in the previous reading but did not clearly understand it and its content. Students also argued that it is essential to apply critical thinking to reading. However, their problems when using critical thinking in reading are various. The issues they encounter are explained clearly in the following paragraphs.

Lack of Confidence

This factor is dominant among students because it is a solid barrier to critical thinking. Self-confidence is essential for every student to have; where self-confidence is a feeling of confidence in one's abilities so that a person does not feel anxious in determining his actions, is not easily influenced by others, can feel free to do the things he likes, is optimistic in acting or speaking according to his wishes, and is responsible for his actions. Self-confidence is one of the aspects that can support the learning process. Students can develop their potential and knowledge by having high self-confidence in the learning process. Self-confidence will encourage students to start thinking critically and questioning things that they believe are illogical (Bandura, 1997). However, the fact is that many students still need more confidence. For example, when learning, someone with a high level of self-confidence will not be shy and afraid to express his opinion critically, in contrast to individuals who have pretty low self-confidence, will tend to be passive because he is scared of whether what he is doing is right or wrong because he does not feel confident in his abilities. The result of low self-confidence can lead to a lack of good interaction and communication (Paul & Elder, 2013). Good communication skills can be an impetus for critical thinking because they allow individuals to sharpen their critical thinking through discussion (Ormrod et al., 2023). This is explained by S3: 'I lack confidence and am afraid to ask the teacher, so I can only invite close friends.'

Lack of Learning Motivation

Critical thinking skills are not directly owned by students but require a means to study motivation. It can be explained that the ability to think critically is seen as a means of fostering student learning motivation and vice versa; learning motivation is seen as a requirement for developing critical thinking skills. Learning motivation can be a driving force that generates enthusiasm for learning so that it can achieve goals. Learning motivation affects essential thinking skills (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Students with high learning motivation will have a higher level of critical thinking than those with lower motivation. Low learning motivation is caused by students' lack of interest, attention, and concentration in participating in learning well so that students do not focus on the learning delivered by the teacher. As a result, students cannot answer questions given by the teacher. In addition, some factors causing low learning motivation are students' laziness in reading so that the absorption of material could be more optimal, students not liking certain subjects, overestimating subjects, students not liking the way the teacher teaches, or the classroom atmosphere being less pleasant. This was explained by S12: 'I am less interested in learning English because I think learning English is more difficult than learning Japanese.'

Lack of Practice

With frequent practice of critical thinking, students will be better able to develop positive things from within themselves and better accept and overcome risk. In addition, by thinking critically, students are not easily provoked and swallow information raw. One simple exercise that can be done independently is reading books, news, articles, or the like. Students can also improve

their critical thinking by getting used to listening from many points of view, asking questions frequently, practicing problem-solving independently, and discussing and exchanging arguments/ideas with others. When practicing listening to different opinions from various points of view, students will become open-minded because gaining a complete understanding of what they want will help students respond positively to the conversation and create productive discussions. This step can help students to assign purpose and value to information.

On the contrary, students lack critical thinking skills; students only rely on feelings, emotions, and irrelevant assumptions. Lazy students, who give up, easily believe, feel enough with the existing results, and rely on other people's opinions, are factors in the lack of students in improving critical thinking. S11 explained, 'I rarely practice improving my thinking skills, so I often look for answers online or ask friends. I immediately trust the answer without thinking again because I assume that the answer from the internet or what friends give is the right answer'.

Lack of Language Understanding

Lack of practice can lead to other problems, such as students studying and needing more understanding of the material due to limited language understanding. Students with insufficient language comprehension will only rely on the basic knowledge they know. In this study, students, as readers, must look for information provided by the author, both explicit and implicit. As we know, not all texts given are familiar to students. As for critical thinking when reading, readers must be able to express ideas, compare statements, or evaluate the authenticity of information. Students who lack language understanding may want to share their ideas with others, and other students may help interpret them. However, students think they are afraid that their shortcomings will become the laughingstock of other students. S5 confirmed this. Here is S5's statement: 'Sometimes I get information from the text, but it is difficult to share it with others because our limited language skills or information make us not dare to do so.' The above statement assumes that the student can understand the text as an interpretive skill, but his ability to communicate, among others, is not helped by his language skills. The student chose to remain silent despite understanding the content. The lack of language understanding to share their ideas with others can be influenced by attitude or psychology, making it difficult for students to speak.

Unsupportive Environmental Factors

Of course, one will never be separated from a problem that comes into one's life. When faced with a problem, students should be able to deal with various situations, including social situations, to more easily solve problems. Critical thinking also allows students to have better adaptability in facing life's changes and challenges so they can more easily adjust to the environment, achieve their goals, and develop their strengths. However, students need more support in a socialized environment to improve their critical thinking patterns. The social climate and support also contribute because support from family, friends, and teachers can enhance critical thinking skills. These environmental factors, such as family, school, and social environments, often hinder students' critical thinking. Lack of attention and communication hinders students from improving their critical thinking skills. Students' opinions are usually not considered. This is because the knowledge of the people around the students is still essential. So, when students ask people around them, they do not get answers but anger. Students often get teased because they do not know the answer to the question. S10 explained, 'I am confused about whom to ask when the teacher gives an assignment because when I ask my parents, I get scolded and considered incompetent in learning at school or tutoring outside school because I cannot answer the assignment.'

Stage of Student's Critical Thinking

After collecting data in the form of an assessment, the researcher analyzed the data and produced the results of the analysis, which will be described in the following table:

Table 1. Results of Analysis Student's Assessment

Name	Skill	Score	Stage
S1	Interpretation	3	Practicing Thinker
	Analysis	4	
	Evaluation	3	
	Inference	2	
	Explanation	4	
	Self-regulation	3	
S2	Interpretation	3	Advanced Thinker
	Analysis	2	
	Evaluation	3	
	Inference	4	
	Explanation	4	
	Self-regulation	4	
S3	Interpretation	0	Unreflective Thinker
	Analysis	1	
	Evaluation	0	
	Inference	0	
	Explanation	0	
	Self-regulation	2	
S4	Interpretation	1	Beginning Thinker
	Analysis	2	
	Evaluation	1	
	Inference	3	
	Explanation	2	
	Self-regulation	3	
S5	Interpretation	0	Beginning Thinker
	Analysis	0	
	Evaluation	2	
	Inference	1	
	Explanation	3	
	Self-regulation	4	
S6	Interpretation	1	Beginning Thinker
	Analysis	0	
	Evaluation	3	
	Inference	2	
	Explanation	4	
	Self-regulation	3	
S7	Interpretation	3	Beginning Thinker
	Analysis	4	
	Evaluation	0	
	Inference	1	
	Explanation	0	
	Self-regulation	4	
S8	Interpretation	1	

Name	Skill	Score	Stage
	Analysis	2	Beginning Thinker
	Evaluation	3	
	Inference	2	
	Explanation	3	
	Self-regulation	3	
	Interpretation	0	
S9	Analysis	0	Challenged Thinker
	Evaluation	0	
	Inference	4	
	Explanation	0	
	Self-regulation	3	
	Interpretation	3	
S10	Analysis	4	Practicing Thinker
	Evaluation	3	
	Inference	1	
	Explanation	3	
	Self-regulation	2	
	Interpretation	1	
S11	Analysis	2	Beginning Thinker
	Evaluation	3	
	Inference	2	
	Explanation	3	
	Self-regulation	3	
	Interpretation	1	
S12	Analysis	2	Beginning Thinker
	Evaluation	3	
	Inference	2	
	Explanation	3	
	Self-regulation	3	

Based on the table above, on average, the students of SMPN 1 Cilegon are in the critical thinking stage of Beginning Thinker. However, there is a student who is in the advanced thinking stage. The rubric of the assessment can be seen in the appendix.

Based on the rubric of assessment, S1 is titled a practicing thinker because she has intermediate critical thinking skills and scored 19 based on the rubric of the evaluation stated above. S2, titled the advanced thinker, because she develops his thinking, scored 20 in critical thinking. S3 got a three score in the critical thinking assessment, so based on the rubric, S3 was classified as an unreflective thinker because she could not understand, analyze, and evaluate the reading text. S4 was classified as a beginning thinker because he scored 12 in critical thinking.

S5 became a challenging thinker because he scored 10 in critical thinking. Even though S6 has good analysis skills, her other skills still have to be improved, so based on the rubric, S6 is classified as a practicing thinker. S7 scored 12 in critical thinking; based on the rubric, she was classified as a beginning thinker. S8 has sharp evaluation and explanation skills scored at 14; S8 is classified as a beginning thinker. S9 got a seven score in critical thinking. S9 is classified as a beginning thinker. S10 got a 16 score in critical thinking.

S10 is classified as a practicing thinker. S11 has 14 scores, and S11 is classified as a beginning thinker. In the end, S12 got a 14 score in critical thinking, so S12 was classified as a beginning thinker. No students fall into the accomplished thinker category because no students have perfect scores and do not have difficulties in the learning process.

After analyzing student assessments, the next step is the determination stage based on the results of the student assessment analysis, which will be described in the following table:

Table 2. Percentage of Students in the Critical Thinking Stage

No.	Critical Thinking Stage	Number of Students (12)	Percentage
1.	Unreflective Thinker	1	8,3%
2.	Challenge Thinker	1	8,3%
3.	Beginning Thinker	7	58,1%
4.	Practicing Thinker	2	17%
5.	Advance Thinker	1	8,3%
6.	Accomplished Thinker	-	-

Based on the table above, the researcher assessed the student students' critical thinking stages student at SMPN 1 Cilegon as beginning thinkers. Still, some of the students indicated that they were in the stage of practicing thinkers, like S2, which gives an evaluation of the task given by the researcher. She answered, 'What should be evaluated on the story above?'. Her answer is, 'The end of the story will be continued by a story of how they met their mom and life after meeting her.' Even though there is a slight vocabulary error, her point of view in evaluating the story based on Asses the credibility of claims and assessing the quality of arguments that were made by inductive or deductive reasoning is sound. On an advanced level, there is a student with a good vocabulary, consistently uses the rules of Standard English and gives a reasonable interpretation of the story. Given the question, 'Give a title for the story above and the reason.' S2 gave an outstanding answer: 'Write on sand and rock. This title is just a figurative word that means we must forget someone's mistakes like we write in the sand and remember all someone's goodness as we write on a stone. So, students are in the accomplished thinker category here. This is because there are no students who have perfect scores and have difficulties in the learning process.

CONCLUSION

The research results, conducted through questionnaires and interviews with 12 selected students, found that students experience difficulties using and improving their critical thinking skills. The results show that students need better language skills and confidence in critical thinking. They often keep their thoughts to themselves due to shyness and insecurity. Moreover, students need to respond better when asked to engage in critical thinking and lack motivation to learn, which can be attributed to laziness or an unsupportive learning environment. Another significant issue is the lack of practice, as students believe they possess enough basic knowledge and, therefore, do not need to engage in critical thinking exercises, except for topics they are personally interested in, such as sports or comics.

About previous studies, the findings of this research confirm the same issues mentioned in earlier studies, such as lack of confidence, motivation, practice, and environmental support. However, this study also uncovered a new problem: students struggle to grasp implied meanings in texts, making it challenging to analyze the author's intent. Students find engaging in deeper critical thinking challenging without understanding the hidden meaning.

Based on these findings, the researcher offers several suggestions to improve students' critical thinking, targeting students, parents, teachers, and the surrounding community. Students are encouraged to recognize their learning styles, manage their time effectively, maintain physical and mental health, and seek help when needed. Parents should actively support and encourage their children, while teachers must create a conducive learning environment, encourage active

participation, and tailor teaching methods to students' learning styles. Friends and the wider community are also expected to support students in developing critical thinking by fostering an environment that values diverse opinions and encourages intellectual curiosity. Implementing these suggestions with patience and perseverance can significantly enhance students' critical thinking skills.

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