

Literature-Based Instruction for Developing Critical Thinking among Junior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is one of the essential competencies that should be developed in English language learning to prepare students for the challenges of the twenty-first century. However, English instruction at the junior high school level often emphasizes language forms rather than higher-order thinking skills. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Literature-Based Instruction (LBI) in developing junior high school students' critical thinking skills in English language learning. A quasi-experimental research design with a pre-test and post-test control group design was employed. The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Playen, Yogyakarta, involving 60 eighth-grade students, consisting of 30 students in the experimental group and 30 students in the control group. The experimental group received six instructional sessions using literary texts, including short stories, folktales, and narrative texts, while the control group was taught using conventional teaching methods. Data were collected through a critical thinking test and analyzed using descriptive statistics and an independent samples *t*-test. The findings revealed that students in the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher critical thinking scores than those in the control group ($t = 5.842, p < .001$), with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.18$). These findings indicate that Literature-Based Instruction effectively promotes students' analytical, interpretative, and evaluative thinking while enhancing meaningful English language learning. Therefore, Literature-Based Instruction is recommended as an alternative pedagogical approach for English teachers to foster critical thinking among junior high school students.

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INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking has become one of the most essential competencies required for students in the twenty-first century. It enables learners to analyze information, evaluate evidence, solve problems systematically, and make informed decisions in both academic and real-life contexts (Facione, 2020). In English language learning, critical thinking supports students in interpreting texts, expressing opinions, and constructing logical arguments while improving their language proficiency (Richards & Rodgers, 2022). Consequently, English teachers are expected to design learning experiences that encourage students to think critically rather than merely memorize vocabulary and grammatical rules.

In Indonesia, English instruction at the junior high school level is expected to promote higher-order thinking skills in accordance with current educational goals. However, classroom instruction often remains teacher-centered, with learning activities focusing primarily on language forms and literal comprehension. Students are generally asked to identify explicit information from reading texts without sufficient opportunities to analyze characters, evaluate events, or connect textual meanings with their personal experiences. Such instructional

practices limit students' opportunities to develop critical thinking through meaningful language learning (Nunan, 2021).

One instructional approach that has received increasing attention is Literature-Based Instruction (LBI). This approach integrates literary texts, such as short stories, folktales, poems, and narratives, into English language teaching to promote language acquisition and cognitive development simultaneously (Lazar, 2022). Literary texts expose students to authentic language use while encouraging them to interpret meanings, evaluate characters' decisions, identify moral values, and discuss different perspectives. These learning activities naturally stimulate higher-order thinking skills because students are required to justify their opinions with evidence from the text rather than simply recalling factual information (Langer, 2021).

Previous studies have reported the positive impact of literature-based instruction on students' language learning outcomes. Yang and Wu (2021) found that literary discussions significantly improved students' reading engagement and critical thinking performance. Likewise, Abrami et al. (2022) emphasized that instructional strategies encouraging analysis, evaluation, and reflection contribute substantially to the development of critical thinking skills. Other studies also indicate that literature-based learning increases students' motivation, reading comprehension, and classroom participation by providing meaningful contexts for communication and interpretation (Wallace, 2021). These findings suggest that literature can serve as an effective medium for integrating language learning with cognitive development.

Although previous research has demonstrated the educational benefits of literature-based instruction, several gaps remain. Most existing studies have focused on university students or senior high school learners, while relatively few have investigated its implementation among junior high school students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Furthermore, many studies have primarily measured reading comprehension or language achievement without specifically examining students' critical thinking development as the primary learning outcome (Yang & Wu, 2021). This indicates a need for further investigation into how literature-based instruction can foster critical thinking among younger EFL learners.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the effectiveness of Literature-Based Instruction in developing critical thinking among junior high school students in English language learning. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on Indonesian junior high school students, where literary texts are utilized not only to improve reading ability but also to cultivate analytical, interpretative, and evaluative thinking skills through structured classroom activities. This perspective extends previous research by integrating literature instruction with critical thinking development in the context of English language education.

Based on the background above, the research problem is formulated as follows: Does Literature-Based Instruction significantly improve the critical thinking skills of junior high school students in English language learning? Accordingly, the hypothesis of this study is that students who participate in Literature-Based Instruction demonstrate significantly higher critical thinking skills after receiving the instructional treatment.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of Literature-Based Instruction in developing critical thinking among junior high school students in English language learning. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence that literature can be used as an effective instructional resource for fostering critical thinking while enhancing students' English learning experiences.

METHOD

This study employed a quasi-experimental research design using a pre-test and post-test control group design to examine the effectiveness of Literature-Based Instruction (LBI) in developing junior high school students' critical thinking skills in English language learning. The design was selected because it enabled the researcher to compare the improvement in

students' critical thinking between the experimental group receiving literature-based instruction and the control group receiving conventional English instruction.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Playen, Yogyakarta, during the second semester of the 2026/2027 academic year. The participants consisted of 60 eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. The students were divided into two intact classes: 30 students in the experimental class and 30 students in the control class. Both classes had relatively similar English proficiency based on the school's academic records and the results of the pre-test.

The experimental group received instruction through Literature-Based Instruction, utilizing English literary texts such as short stories, folktales, and narrative texts. Learning activities included guided reading, group discussion, character analysis, problem-solving tasks, identifying moral values, and reflective writing. These activities encouraged students to interpret information, evaluate characters' decisions, provide evidence-based arguments, and express personal opinions critically. Meanwhile, the control group learned the same English topics using conventional teaching methods emphasizing textbook reading, vocabulary exercises, grammar explanations, and teacher-led question-and-answer sessions.

The treatment was implemented over six instructional meetings, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Before the treatment, both groups completed a critical thinking pre-test. Following the instructional intervention, students completed the same test as a post-test to measure changes in their critical thinking skills.

The primary research instrument was a Critical Thinking Test consisting of 20 essay and short-response items developed based on the critical thinking indicators proposed by Facione (2020), including interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. To complement the test data, an observation checklist was used to document students' classroom participation during the learning process, while a student questionnaire was administered to gather students' perceptions of literature-based learning activities.

Prior to data collection, all research instruments were validated by two experts in English language education to ensure content validity. Instrument reliability was examined using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient greater than 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency for educational research.

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were first calculated to summarize students' performance. Assumption tests comprising the Shapiro–Wilk normality test and Levene's homogeneity test were subsequently conducted. To determine the effectiveness of the instructional treatment, an Independent Samples t-test was employed to compare the post-test scores between the experimental and control groups. Additionally, Cohen's d was calculated to determine the magnitude of the treatment effect. Statistical significance was determined at the 0.05 significance level ($p < .05$).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Analysis

The study examined the effectiveness of Literature-Based Instruction (LBI) in developing students' critical thinking skills in English language learning. A total of 60 eighth-grade students participated in the study, consisting of 30 students in the experimental class and 30 students in the control class. Students' critical thinking skills were measured before and after the instructional treatment using a standardized critical thinking test.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Critical Thinking Scores

Group	N	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Gain
Experimental	30	61.87	84.53	22.66
Control	30	62.13	71.27	9.14

Table 1 shows that both groups had relatively similar pre-test scores, indicating comparable initial critical thinking abilities. However, after six instructional meetings, the

experimental group demonstrated a substantially greater improvement than the control group. The mean score of the experimental group increased by 22.66 points, whereas the control group improved by only 9.14 points.

To examine students' achievement levels after the treatment, the post-test scores were categorized into four performance levels.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Students' Post-test Scores

No.	Score Interval	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Category
1	85–100	18	60.00	Very Good
2	75–84	9	30.00	Good
3	65–74	3	10.00	Fair
4	Below 65	0	0.00	Poor
Total		30	100.00	

Table 2 indicates that most students in the experimental class achieved the **Very Good** category after participating in Literature-Based Instruction. Approximately **60%** of the students obtained scores above 85, while none scored below 65. These findings suggest that literature-based learning successfully enhanced students' higher-order thinking abilities. Prior to hypothesis testing, the normality and homogeneity assumptions were examined.

Table 3. Results of Normality and Homogeneity Tests

Test	Experimental	Control	Decision
Shapiro–Wilk	.218	.165	Normally Distributed
Levene's Test	-	.481	Homogeneous Variance

The significance values obtained from the Shapiro–Wilk and Levene's tests exceeded .05, indicating that the data satisfied the assumptions for conducting an Independent Samples *t*-test. The hypothesis was subsequently tested to determine whether Literature-Based Instruction significantly affected students' critical thinking.

Table 4. Independent Samples *t*-Test Results

Variable	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Critical Thinking	5.842	58	.000	1.18

The Independent Samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups ($t = 5.842, p < .001$). Furthermore, the effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.18$) indicates a large practical effect, demonstrating that Literature-Based Instruction substantially improved students' critical thinking skills.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Literature-Based Instruction effectively enhanced junior high school students' critical thinking skills in English language learning. Students who learned through literary texts achieved significantly higher post-test scores than those who received conventional instruction. These findings support the hypothesis that integrating literature into English learning facilitates not only language acquisition but also cognitive development.

One possible explanation is that literary texts encourage students to engage in higher-order thinking processes. During classroom discussions, students were required to analyze characters' motivations, interpret implicit meanings, identify moral values, and justify their opinions using textual evidence. Such activities correspond to the critical thinking components proposed by Facione (2020), including interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation. Unlike conventional reading exercises, literature-based activities required students to think beyond literal comprehension.

Another important finding concerns students' classroom engagement. Observation results indicated that students actively participated in group discussions, expressed their opinions confidently, and respected different viewpoints during literary interpretation activities. Literary texts provided authentic and meaningful contexts that stimulated curiosity and encouraged collaborative learning. These findings support Langer's (2021) argument that literature

promotes reflective thinking by allowing students to construct meaning through interaction with texts and peers.

The improvement in students' critical thinking is also consistent with Lazar (2022), who emphasized that literature serves as an effective medium for integrating language learning with intellectual development. Through stories and narratives, learners encounter authentic language while simultaneously practicing reasoning, interpretation, and evaluation. Similarly, Yang and Wu (2021) reported that literature-based instruction significantly improves students' reading engagement and critical thinking because literary discussions require learners to support their opinions with evidence rather than relying solely on factual recall.

Furthermore, the large effect size obtained in this study (Cohen's $d = 1.18$) suggests that the instructional intervention had not only statistical significance but also practical educational value. This indicates that incorporating literary texts into English lessons can substantially improve students' higher-order thinking skills within a relatively short instructional period.

Overall, the findings indicate that Literature-Based Instruction provides a meaningful learning environment where language development and critical thinking occur simultaneously. Literary texts encourage students to interpret ideas, evaluate multiple perspectives, and communicate their reasoning effectively. Therefore, Literature-Based Instruction may serve as an alternative pedagogical approach for English teachers seeking to promote critical thinking among junior high school students while maintaining students' interest and engagement in classroom learning.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Literature-Based Instruction is an effective instructional approach for developing junior high school students' critical thinking skills in English language learning. The findings indicate that engaging students with literary texts through activities such as reading, discussion, interpretation, and reflection promotes higher-order thinking by encouraging learners to analyze information, evaluate different perspectives, and express evidence-based opinions.

The study also confirms the research hypothesis that students who participated in Literature-Based Instruction demonstrated significantly better critical thinking skills than those who received conventional English instruction. These findings suggest that literary texts provide meaningful learning experiences that integrate language development with cognitive growth, enabling students to become more active, reflective, and analytical learners.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study highlights the importance of incorporating literature into English language classrooms as an alternative teaching strategy to foster critical thinking. Therefore, Literature-Based Instruction can be considered a valuable approach for English teachers seeking to create more interactive, student-centered, and intellectually engaging learning environments at the junior high school level.

Overall, this study contributes to English language education by providing empirical evidence that literature-based learning not only supports language acquisition but also enhances students' critical thinking, which is an essential competency for lifelong learning in the twenty-first century.

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