

UTILIZING CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the implementation of critical reading strategies in teaching reading comprehension and to investigate students' responses toward these strategies. The study was conducted in a vocational high school in Karawang, using a qualitative method with a case study design. Data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and reflective journals. The results revealed that critical reading strategies such as previewing, annotating, questioning, summarizing, and evaluating text validity were effectively integrated into the reading comprehension process. These strategies helped students engage more deeply with texts, improve analytical thinking, and foster reading interest. Students showed positive responses, indicating increased motivation, comprehension, and critical awareness. However, some challenges were also found, including vocabulary limitations and cognitive overload. The study concludes that critical reading strategies are beneficial in enhancing reading comprehension and critical thinking skills, especially when adapted to vocational learners' context.

Keywords: critical reading strategies, reading comprehension, student response, EFL (english as a foreign language)

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi implementasi strategi membaca kritis dalam pembelajaran pemahaman membaca serta mengkaji respons siswa terhadap strategi tersebut. Penelitian ini dilaksanakan di salah satu sekolah menengah kejuruan (SMK) di Karawang dengan pendekatan kualitatif dan desain studi kasus. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan jurnal reflektif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi membaca kritis seperti *previewing*, *annotating*, *questioning*, *summarizing*, dan evaluasi validitas teks dapat diintegrasikan secara efektif dalam proses pembelajaran membaca. Strategi ini membantu siswa terlibat lebih dalam dengan teks, meningkatkan kemampuan berpikir analitis, dan menumbuhkan minat baca. Siswa menunjukkan respons positif, yang mencerminkan peningkatan motivasi, pemahaman, dan kesadaran kritis. Namun, ditemukan pula tantangan seperti keterbatasan kosakata dan beban kognitif. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa

strategi membaca kritis efektif untuk meningkatkan pemahaman membaca dan keterampilan berpikir kritis, terutama jika disesuaikan dengan konteks pembelajar vokasional.

Kata Kunci: strategi membaca kritis, pemahaman membaca, respons siswa, pembelajaran bahasa inggris sebagai bahasa asing

A. Introduction

The ability to read and understand texts critically is one of the key pillars in language education, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. This ability not only enables students to comprehend the explicit meaning of texts but also trains them to evaluate arguments, identify bias, and develop reflective and logical thinking. Unfortunately, international studies such as PISA (OECD, 2019) indicate that Indonesian students' literacy levels remain relatively low. This suggests that many students are still unable to achieve deep reading comprehension.

In the context of Vocational High Schools (SMK), the challenges of teaching reading become even more complex. SMK students have learning needs that are more contextual and application-based, while English instruction is often still textual and passive. An approach that focuses solely on literal comprehension tends

to be ineffective in equipping students with the higher-order thinking skills needed in the workforce and digital society. Therefore, a teaching method is needed that can bridge the gap between textual understanding and the development of critical thinking.

Critical reading strategies offer a promising solution for enhancing students' literacy and critical thinking skills. These strategies include activities such as previewing (predicting content), annotating (highlighting key ideas), questioning (posing critical questions), summarizing (summarizing content), and evaluating (assessing the validity of information). Through this approach, students are trained to interact actively with the text not merely to read it superficially but to unpack the ideas and the author's reasoning structure.

Previous studies have shown that critical reading strategies can improve students' analytical thinking and reading comprehension skills

across different educational levels (Habók et al., 2019; Zhang, 2020; Nurhayati, 2023). However, the context of vocational education (SMK) remains relatively underexplored. SMK students often face limitations in academic vocabulary, lack of reading motivation, and undeveloped independent reading habits. In addition, reading instruction in vocational schools tends to be exam-oriented, with little emphasis on critical engagement with texts.

This study aims to address that gap by investigating in depth how critical reading strategies are implemented in reading comprehension classes in SMK, and how students respond to these strategies. This study focuses on two main research questions:

1. How are critical reading strategies implemented in teaching reading comprehension at vocational high schools?
2. How do students respond to the use of these strategies?

B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The research subjects were

eleventh-grade students at a private vocational high school (SMK) in Karawang. A purposive sampling technique was used to select five students who were actively involved in reading instruction activities.

Data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and the teacher's reflective journal. Observations were conducted directly during the implementation of reading comprehension lessons based on critical reading strategies. The interviews aimed to explore students' experiences and perspectives in depth regarding the learning process they engaged in. The reflective journal was used by the researcher to record the teaching-learning process and classroom dynamics.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis based on the procedures outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006).

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Implementation of Critical Reading Strategies in Learning

The results of classroom observations and student interviews indicated that the teacher implemented critical reading strategies in a gradual and

explicit manner. Activities such as previewing (predicting the content based on the title or images), annotating (highlighting key points), questioning (developing critical questions), and summarizing (summarizing the text) were consistently used during the learning process.

The teacher provided guiding questions such as: “What is the author’s purpose?”, “Is the author’s argument supported by evidence?”, or “Is there any bias in this text?”. This approach guided students not only to understand the literal content but also to evaluate and analyze the text critically.

As expressed by students:

“Because I learned this strategy, I could understand the text more quickly and identify the important points.” (Participant 1)

“At first, it seemed difficult because it’s in English, but eventually I understood because the teacher guided me.” (Participant 2)

This approach aligns with the theory by Grabe and Stoller (2011), which emphasizes that academic reading strategies must be taught explicitly and contextually they do not develop automatically.

2. Classroom Activities Based on Critical Reading Strategies

The teacher incorporated various critical reading-based activities into the lessons, such as formulating critical questions, analyzing the author's perspective, group discussions, and mini-debates. These activities provided space for students to construct arguments and reflect on both their own and others' opinions.

“If there's a task to make questions from a text, I start thinking about the reading, not just looking for answers.” (Participant 2)

“During discussion, I found out that my friends had different opinions about the same text. It made me rethink my own answers.” (Participant 5)

These activities reinforce socially active learning, as theorized by Vygotsky (1978), where social interaction supports the development of critical thinking through the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

3. Challenges in Implementation

Some challenges were encountered during the implementation of these strategies. First, students struggled with understanding the vocabulary in the texts. Second, students felt confused

when asked to create critical questions without any examples. Third, some experienced cognitive overload when reading long or abstract texts.

“Sometimes I’m confused about what to ask, especially if the text is long and the language is difficult.” (Participant 3)

“The teacher asked me to make questions but didn’t give examples first, so I had to guess.” (Participant 5) These challenges indicate the importance of consistent scaffolding from teachers to support the development of students’ evaluative skills.

4. Students’ Responses to Critical Reading Strategies

Students responded positively to the use of these strategies. They began to realize that reading was not just about understanding content but also about analyzing and evaluating it. Some even expressed interest in applying the strategies outside the classroom, particularly when reading stories or articles.

“I like using this strategy outside the classroom too, because I enjoy reading stories, so it just makes it easier for me.” (Participant 2)

These positive responses indicate that critical reading strategies help foster reading interest and the habit of reflective thinking.

5. The Role of Group Discussion

Group discussions were found to be very effective in helping students understand texts and develop critical thinking skills. Through discussions, they exchanged perspectives, clarified their understanding, and constructed knowledge collaboratively.

“When we discussed it together, I got to hear my friends’ opinions about the text. Sometimes they noticed things I didn’t, and it broadened my perspective.” (Participant 4)

Group discussions support the creation of the ZPD as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), where meaningful social interaction allows more capable peers to assist others in achieving deeper understanding.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that critical reading strategies can be effectively implemented in reading comprehension instruction at vocational high schools (SMK), especially when supported by explicit, contextual approaches and social activities such as group discussions.

Students showed improvements in reading comprehension, critical thinking, and metacognitive awareness of their reading processes.

However, the success of implementation greatly depends on teacher support, systematic instructional design, and students' ability to understand vocabulary and text structure. Therefore, training in critical reading strategies should be provided gradually, tailored to students' cognitive development levels, and reinforced through practical, hands-on exercises.

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