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The Effect of Group Discussion Learning on Improving Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Essay Writing

Laylatul Musoffa*, Astri Widyaruli Anggraeni, Dina Merdeka Citraningrum
Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia, Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, Jember, 68121, Indonesia

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* *Corresponding author:*

E-mail: laylatulmusoffa2004@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to evaluate the impact of the group discussion learning approach on improving students' critical thinking skills in writing essays for Indonesian language subjects at SMP Negeri 1 Tempurejo. This study uses a quantitative approach with a pretest-posttest design with a non-equivalent control group. The participants consisted of two classes: IX B as the control group and IX D as the experimental group, each containing 20 students. Data were collected using essay writing assessments and direct observation to evaluate student engagement during classroom learning, after which they were evaluated using a paired sample t-test. The results showed an increase in the average score of the experimental class from 77.5 to 91.3 (an increase of 13.8 points), while the control class increased from 56.8 to 66.9 (an increase of 10.1 points), indicating a significant difference between the two classes. The experimental class experienced a percentage increase of 17.81%, indicating a relative effectiveness that was 36.63% superior to the standard learning method. As a result, the group discussion method significantly improved students' critical thinking skills in essay writing.

1. Introduction

In the classroom learning process, students are trained to become accustomed to facing and overcoming various challenges, discovering aspects that are beneficial to themselves, and interacting with various ideas. The essence of this process is that teachers need to design learning activities that encourage students to develop and build their own knowledge through active participation during the learning process. In this way, students do not only function as passive recipients of information, but also as individuals who learn independently and can reflect on their knowledge. This approach emphasizes the importance of students' active involvement in finding meaning in every learning experience they undergo (Citraningsum, 2016). Independent learning is not the same as learning alone. Many people still mistakenly interpret independent learning as a learning process without the help or involvement of others. In fact, independent learning does not always mean learning

without others, but rather a learning process that is carried out on one's own initiative, even without guidance from others (Anggraeni, 2022).

Critical thinking is an advanced cognitive skill that involves analyzing and evaluating concepts to improve the quality of thinking for specific purposes. This methodology can be used in various actions, including problem solving, decision making, and conducting research (Fithriyah, 2024). Critical thinking skills are very important in the learning process because they improve students' educational methodologies and outcomes. Furthermore, this ability equips students with important tools to face various obstacles in the future (Maylia, 2024). Through this ability, a person will become accustomed to examining and considering various views, thereby being able to determine which are appropriate and inappropriate, as well as distinguish between what is right and wrong. By developing critical thinking skills, a person is also able to draw accurate conclusions based on data and facts found in the field according to (Susanti, 2022).

Critical thinking skills play an important role in honing essay writing skills, as they help writers express ideas, analyze information, and enrich their knowledge of the topic being discussed (Khuzaemah, 2017). The results of this thinking process can be applied in daily activities as a tangible manifestation of the knowledge that has been acquired. Thus, essay writing has an important function in improving and training critical thinking skills, because through this activity students learn to assess, interpret, and organize ideas logically and systematically (Maryani, 2023).

Writing is the final phase in language acquisition, after mastering listening, speaking, and reading. Writing goes beyond transcribing words, phrases, or sentences; writing requires the ability to articulate ideas in an organized manner and in accordance with applicable writing rules. Many writers commit plagiarism due to the complexity of the subject and a lack of references or reading materials (Triwidayati, 2020). One form of writing that is often used to express ideas is the essay, which is a piece of writing that contains the author's views or opinions on a particular social issue or phenomenon. In an essay, the author elaborates on the topic in depth by providing analysis and personal responses. Essays have distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from other types of writing, especially in terms of the style of language that reflects the author's personality and way of thinking. The choice of diction, sentence structure, and writing style greatly affect the quality of an essay. Experienced writers usually have a distinctive style that is easily recognizable because it is formed from consistent writing habits (Khuzaemah, 2017).

SMPN 1 Tempurejo, especially in grade IX, was chosen as the research location because it has diverse characteristics of grade IX students in terms of academic ability and critical thinking. The results of the observation showed that many students still experienced challenges in writing essays, especially in developing ideas, constructing logical arguments, and connecting ideas in an organized manner. This indicates that students' critical thinking skills have not developed to their full potential. Teachers have made many efforts to improve students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, one of which is by using the discussion method. The

discussion method is a learning method that confronts students with a problem (Widiastuti, 2021). Therefore, the use of the group discussion method is considered an appropriate learning approach to apply. Through discussion, students can exchange ideas, express their thoughts, and learn to build strong arguments together. This practice deepens students' understanding of the essay topic while honing their critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. Therefore, the application of the discussion approach at SMPN 1 Tempurejo is expected to improve students' critical thinking skills in writing essays.

Group discussion is considered an effective pedagogical approach because it facilitates problem solving and encourages active student engagement during the learning process (Citraningrum, 2016). This exercise enhances the meaning of learning by actively engaging students intellectually and emotionally, thereby fostering a sense of collaboration and familiarity among group members. Students can communicate perspectives, share experiences, and develop social skills such as communication, negotiation, and leadership through conversation (Putri, 2024). The purpose of the discussion plays an important role in keeping the activity on track. Clear objectives help students focus on the topic being discussed, understand concepts, and develop critical thinking skills. In addition, student involvement in setting objectives can increase a sense of responsibility and cooperation in achieving the expected learning outcomes (Humairoh, 2022). Therefore, group discussions not only serve as an effective learning method but also provide various benefits for the participants. Through the discussion process, participants can practice their thinking skills, foster a democratic attitude, appreciate differences of opinion, broaden their horizons, and hone their public speaking skills (Budiyono, 2021).

This study is in line with a study entitled “The Effect of Applying the Discussion Method on Students' Critical Thinking Skills at SMP Negeri 1 Tabongo, Gorontalo Regency” (Amrain, 2024) in the Damhil Education Journal on the subject of Integrated Social Studies at SMP Negeri 1 Tabongo. The findings of this study are considered appropriate for comparison in this study. The study used a quantitative method with a correlational (non-experimental) approach, in which the researcher did not provide direct treatment but merely identified the relationship between two variables: the application of the discussion method as the independent variable and students' critical thinking skills as the dependent variable, using inferential statistical analysis through correlation and significance tests. The findings of the study indicate that the discussion method has a positive relationship with the improvement of students' critical thinking skills and is an effective strategy for fostering students' analytical and reflective abilities.

The novelty of this study lies in the application of the discussion method in a more focused context, namely in essay writing activities in Indonesian language classes, using a quasi-experimental research design in the form of a non-equivalent control group design. This differs from the study by Amrain (2024), which only measured the relationship between the discussion method and critical thinking skills in social studies learning. In this study, the researcher applied direct treatment to assess the extent to which the group discussion method can impact students' critical thinking

skills when writing essays. This study aims to enable students to write essays using critical thinking skills through the application of the group discussion learning method. In addition, this study has contextual novelty because it is applied to ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Tempurejo, who have diverse characteristics in terms of participation and thinking skills.

2. Methodology

This study applies a quantitative method, which focuses on the collection and processing of data presented in numerical form. The data is analyzed using statistical techniques to ensure that the results are objective. The data collection process is carried out through a written test in the form of an essay writing activity. The accuracy of the data is tested using validity and reliability tests. In quantitative research, each variable is measured systematically to determine the relationship between variables (Sahir, 2022). This study uses a Quasi-Experimental Design with a Pre-Test and Post-Test with Non-Equivalent Control Group Design model involving two classes, namely the experimental class and the control class (Isnawan, 2020). "Quasi-experiment, also known as pseudo-experiment, is a form of development from the true experiment design (Hartono, 2019). This research design is one of the most commonly applied designs in educational research. The form of this research design can be illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1. Non-Equivalent Control Group Design Scheme

Group	***Pretest***	**Treatment**	***Posttest***
Experiment	Y_1	X	Y_2
Control	Y_1	-	Y_2

Description:

1) Y_1 : Treatment or action in the form of applying group discussion methods in Indonesian language learning in essay writing
2) - : No treatment
3) X : Initial test (*pretest)*
4) Y_2 : Final test (*posttest*)

This study covers two different variables, namely:

a) Independent variable (X): the application of group discussion methods in Indonesian language learning.

b) Dependent variable (Y): improvement in students' critical thinking skills in essay writing.

The treatment given to the two classes differed in terms of how essay assignments were given:

a) Experimental class (IX D): assigned to write essays in groups using the discussion method.

b) Control class (IX B): assigned to write essays individually using conventional learning methods without applying the discussion method.

According to Darwin et al. (2021), a population is a group of individuals or objects that share certain characteristics and are the focus of a researcher's study and conclusions. The population of this study included all ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Tempurejo, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Population of Grade IX Students

No	Class	Number of Students
1.	IX A	34
2.	IX B	34
3.	IX C	31
4.	IX D	33
Total		**132 student**

This study used a purposive sampling strategy for sample selection. This method determines the sample based on specific criteria that are in line with the research objectives. Among the 132 ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Tempurejo, the researcher selected two classes for this study: class IX D as the experimental group and class IX B as the control group. Sample selection was carried out when the population size was too large, making it impossible to study the entire population due to limitations in time, energy, costs, and facilities available to the researcher. The selection of these 20 students was carried out with the involvement of the Indonesian language teacher, who had insight into the character and abilities of each student in the class. The research data was collected from 20 students in class IX D and 20 students in class IX B, resulting in a total of 40 students with complete and representative data for analysis, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Number of Samples of Students in Class IX B and IX D

No	Class	Number of Students
1.	IX B	20
2.	IX D	20
Total		**40 student**

The essay writing test was used to assess the effect of the group discussion learning approach on students' critical thinking skills in completing essay writing assignments. The test subjects were taken from Indonesian language teaching materials. The researcher evaluated students' ability to generate ideas, formulate logical arguments, and write systematically through this assessment. This study used assessment and direct observation to evaluate student participation and engagement in classroom learning activities. Observations included student engagement in articulating perspectives, their capacity for collaboration, and their responsiveness to peers' ideas. These instruments were developed based on critical thinking ability indicators and essay writing skill indicators, so that they could provide a comprehensive picture of the effect of the group discussion method on improving students' critical thinking skills.

3. Result and Discussion

Based on the results of the research conducted, this study was carried out at SMP Negeri 01 Tempurejo, located at Jalan Padang Golf No. 2 Glantangan, Jember Regency. The focus of this study was the essay writing skills of ninth-grade students. The research process was carried out by giving essay writing assignments in two stages, namely pretest and posttest, to two classes: class IX B, as the control class, and class IX D, as the experimental class. Among the 132 ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Tempurejo, the researchers selected two classes for this study: class IX D as the experimental group and class IX B as the control group. The selection of 20 students was carried out with the involvement of the Indonesian language teacher, who had insight into the character and abilities of each student in the class. The research data was collected from 20 students in class IX D and 20 students in class IX B, resulting in a total of 40 students with complete and representative data for analysis. This section presents the research results obtained from the application of the group discussion learning method and the conventional learning method. The data presented includes quantitative results showing the pretest and posttest scores of students' critical thinking skills in essay writing, as well as qualitative data obtained through observation of learning activities during the learning process.

This study uses a Quasi-Experimental Design with a Pre-Test and Post-Test with Non-Equivalent Control Group Design model involving two classes, namely the experimental class and the control class (Isnawan, 2020). "Quasi-experiments, also known as pseudo-experiments, are a form of development from true experiment designs (Hartono, 2019). Researchers evaluate students' abilities to generate ideas, formulate logical arguments, and write systematically through this assessment. An essay writing test was used to assess the effect of the group discussion learning approach on students' critical thinking skills in completing essay writing assignments. The test subjects were taken from Indonesian language teaching materials. This study uses assessment and direct observation to evaluate student participation and engagement in classroom learning activities. Observations include student engagement in articulating perspectives, their capacity for collaboration, and their responsiveness to peers' ideas.

The collected data were then analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to show the average learning outcomes of students, as well as inferential statistical tests (paired sample t-test) to determine the significance level of the increase in critical thinking skills. The results of this analysis were used as the basis for discussion to answer the research questions and test the hypothesis regarding the impact of the group discussion learning method on improving students' critical thinking skills when writing essays.

Research Results

The results of the students' critical thinking skills test were obtained through pre-tests and post-tests. The average pre-test and post-test scores for each class can be seen in the following table:

Table 4. Average Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Students

Class	Average Pretest	Average Posttest	Difference (Δ)
IX B (Control)	56,8	66,9	+10,1
IX D (Experiment)	77,5	91,3	+13,8

The data in the table shows an increase in the average score in both classes. However, the increase was greater in the experimental class (Δ = 13.8) than in the control class (Δ = 10.1). This indicates that the group discussion method had a positive impact on improving students' critical thinking skills in essay writing. In addition, the higher increase in scores in the experimental class shows that students who actively participated in group discussions had a deeper understanding of the topics discussed, were able to develop ideas more coherently, and were able to critically evaluate arguments before putting them into essay writing. Comparison Diagram of Average Pretest and Posttest Scores in Classes IX B and IX D can be seen in figure 1.

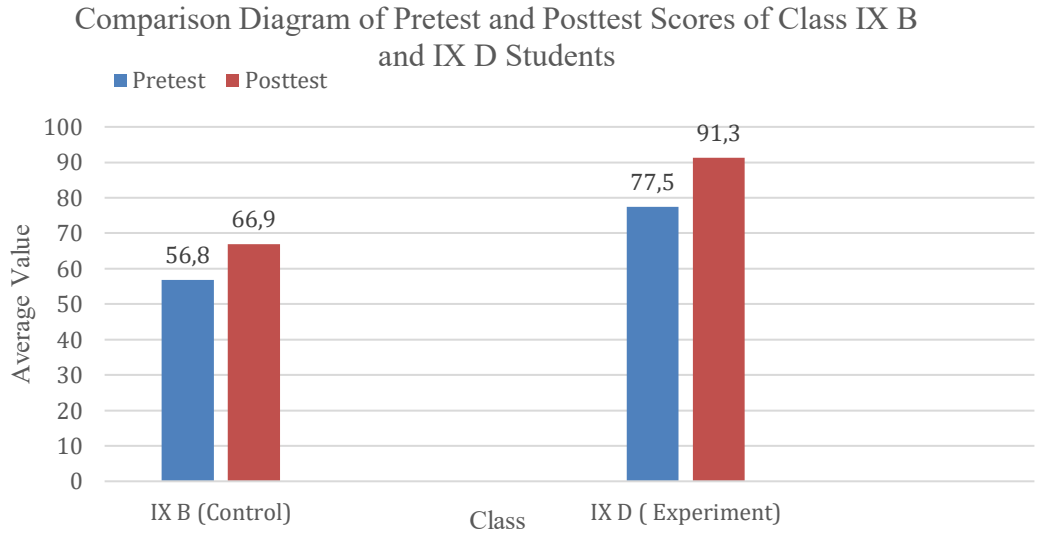

Figure 1. Comparison Diagram of Average Pretest and Posttest Scores in Classes IX B and IX D

The bar chart illustrates the comparison of the average pretest and posttest scores between the control class (IX B) and the experimental class (IX D). It can be seen that the experimental class showed a more significant improvement after the group discussion method was implemented.

Statistical Analysis

Paired Sample t-test

To see how much students' critical thinking skills had improved, data analysis was conducted using a paired sample t-test, which showed that the experimental class scored 17.79% and the control class scored 17.81%, with an effectiveness improvement of 36.63%. These results indicate that the group discussion learning

method is 36.63% more effective in improving students' critical thinking skills than the conventional learning method.

Discussion

Based on the results of the two classes studied, both the experimental and control classes showed an increase in their scores after the learning process. However, the experimental group achieved superior and more consistent results than the control group. Statistical analysis shows that class IX B (control) achieved an average pretest score of 56.25 and a posttest score of 66.15, reflecting an increase of 17.60%. Class IX D (experimental) achieved an average pretest score of 77.50 and a posttest score of 91.25, showing an increase of 17.74%.

This difference shows that the group discussion learning method significantly improves students' critical thinking skills in writing essays. The experimental class not only achieved a higher average score but also had a lower standard deviation (SD) of 5.00 on the pretest and 4.79 on the posttest, in contrast to the control class, which had standard deviations of 10.72 and 8.13, respectively. This indicates that the learning outcomes of students in the experimental class were more evenly distributed and stable, while significant diversity in abilities remained among students in the control class.

Educators can use various methods to improve the efficacy and efficiency of the learning process, one of which is by fostering student motivation. To foster this motivation, educators must identify the right teaching strategies. One recognized effective strategy is group discussion (Hutahaean, 2019). This way, students have the opportunity to work together and complete tasks. This strategy allows students to collaborate and do their homework in an organized and systematic manner. Discussion activities encourage collaboration, facilitate problem solving, enrich learning experiences, and make education more meaningful by engaging students academically and emotionally. As a result, group conversations can increase engagement, creativity, and facilitate collaboration among students in achieving educational goals (Masrik, 2018). Thus, learning becomes meaningful because students actively participate in achieving educational goals (Harahap et al., 2022).

Critical thinking skills are essential in both educational settings and everyday life. These skills help individuals make wise decisions and protect themselves from the effects of false or misleading information. In the academic world, critical thinking supports the development of advanced talents, including problem solving, creative thinking, and analytical skills. To improve critical thinking skills, one can engage in logical reasoning, recognize errors in arguments, and conduct thorough and systematic reasoning analysis. Critical thinking skills can be improved through critical reading and writing exercises, engaging in discussions, and developing the practice of reviewing and challenging the material at hand. Furthermore, an educational framework that prioritizes active and reflective learning substantially enhances the development of concentrated and effective critical thinking skills (Ariadila, 2023).

According to Utomo (2014), an essay is a short prose piece that allows the writer to express their perspective, concept, or personal thoughts on a particular subject. An essay usually consists of three main components: introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction provides context and an overview of the issue, allowing readers to understand the flow of the discussion from the outset. The body of the essay elaborates on the main thesis through descriptions, illustrations, or arguments that reinforce the author's perspective. The conclusion synthesizes the discussion by repeating the main ideas, summarizing important elements, or offering final observations and perspectives on the topic. This structure allows the essay to articulate the author's perspective while displaying logical, systematic, and critical thinking in the development of ideas.

Group discussion techniques were used to increase students' active involvement in articulating their points of view and to improve their critical thinking skills in essay writing tasks. This study consisted of two classes: class IX B, which was designated as the control group, and class IX D, which was designated as the experimental group. The control group followed traditional learning methods without group discussions, while the experimental group engaged in essay writing through collaborative discussions.

The results of this study indicate that group discussions significantly improve students' critical thinking skills. Throughout the conversation, students hone their ability to articulate ideas, engage with their peers' arguments, and formulate conclusions drawn from the dialogue. These exercises develop the capacity to analyze, evaluate, and formulate logical arguments, which are hallmarks of critical thinking. Budiyono (2021) states that group discussions provide opportunities for students to learn to respect differences of opinion, emphasizing that group conversations enable students to cultivate respect for diverse perspectives, broaden their perspectives, and improve their critical speaking and writing skills. This is consistent with research findings, which show that students who are actively involved in discussions demonstrate superior skills in composing essays characterized by coherent and logical argumentative frameworks.

From a cognitive perspective, discussion activities encourage students to organize their ideas and evaluate the material before writing. This cognitive process facilitates the development of analytical and synthesis skills in students, which are important for essay writing. This study supports Maryani's (2023) statement that critical thinking skills are important for organizing ideas and arguments. From an emotional perspective, group discussions increase students' confidence and courage in articulating their opinions. Students who were previously inactive develop greater confidence in articulating arguments, refuting their peers' points of view, and organizing ideas independently.

Furthermore, the group discussion method encourages collaboration and collective accountability for educational outcomes. When students collaborate in groups, they help each other understand the material, correct mistakes, and formulate optimal answers. This collaborative process improves reflective and critical thinking skills, as evidenced by (Amrain, 2024), who found that group discussions have a positive

effect on the development of students' critical thinking skills. The results of this study indicate that the application of the group discussion approach improves learning outcomes numerically while comprehensively refining students' cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Students involved in learning through group discussions show improvements in critical thinking, reasoning, and essay writing skills compared to those who use traditional techniques.

This study shows a clear focus on evaluating the effectiveness of group discussion learning methods on students' critical thinking skills in essay writing. The research objective is specifically aimed at improving writing skills in the context of Indonesian language subjects, which is an important aspect in the development of higher-order thinking skills at the junior high school level. The quantitative approach with a Non-Equivalent Control Group Pretest-Posttest design shows that this study attempts to measure the impact of learning interventions objectively by comparing the control and experimental groups. The selection of two classes with the same number of participants also helps to maintain sample balance in testing the hypothesis.

In terms of methodology, the use of essay writing assessments and direct observation as data collection tools strengthens the validity of the research results, as it combines cognitive (writing results) and affective (student engagement) aspects. Data analysis using paired sample t-tests also shows that the researchers applied appropriate statistical procedures to test differences in results before and after treatment in the same group. The quantitative results presented—a significant improvement in the experimental group compared to the control group—confirm the positive influence of the group discussion method on students' critical thinking skills.

Overall, this study describes a well-planned study and presents strong findings regarding the effectiveness of collaborative learning. The 17.81% increase in critical thinking skills and the 36.63% relative advantage over conventional methods show that group discussion can be an effective and applicable learning strategy in junior high schools. This study not only provides empirical evidence of the benefits of group discussion, but also contributes to the development of active learning methods that emphasize student participation, argumentation, and critical reflection in the writing process.

4. Conclusion

Based on the research that has been conducted, it can be concluded that the application of the group discussion learning method has a significant impact on improving students' critical thinking skills in writing essays in Indonesian language subjects at SMP Negeri 1 Tempurejo. This method has been proven to encourage students to participate more actively, express their opinions, and develop logical and systematic arguments in essay writing. The uniqueness of this study lies in the application of the group discussion method in the context of essay writing, which was previously more commonly applied in oral learning. The results of this study

contribute to Indonesian language learning development strategies that focus on improving higher-order thinking skills, especially in writing. Thus, the application of the group discussion method can be used as an innovative approach to improve the quality of students' learning processes and outcomes, both cognitively, affectively, and socially.

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