



Journal of Educational Sciences

Journal homepage: <https://jes.ejournal.unri.ac.id/index.php/JES>



P-ISSN
2581-1657
E-ISSN
2581-2203

The Implementation of Critical Reading in Teaching Reading Comprehension at SMAN 10 Pangkep

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 23 Jan 2026

Accepted: 28 April 2026

Available Online: 05 May 2026

Keywords:

Critical Reading,
Reading Comprehension,
Teacher Implementation,
Pedagogical Challenges

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Article Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.31258/jes.10.5.p.138-148>

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of critical reading in teaching reading comprehension and identifies the challenges faced by English teachers at SMAN 10 Pangkep. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the study involved two English teachers, with data collected through lesson plan analysis, classroom observations, and interviews. The data were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that the implementation of critical reading remains limited and is primarily focused on lower-order thinking skills. Teachers tend to apply pre-reading strategies such as skimming and predicting; however, higher-order thinking strategies, including annotating and contextualizing, are rarely implemented. As a result, classroom instruction remains procedural and text-oriented, with students positioned as passive recipients of information. The study also reveals several challenges, including students' limited vocabulary as a cognitive barrier, passive learning culture influenced by fear of making grammatical errors as a sociocultural barrier, and misalignment between curriculum and assessment practices as a systemic barrier. It can be concluded that critical reading has not yet been effectively integrated into classroom practice.

1. Introduction

English in Indonesia is taught as a foreign language from elementary to university level, aiming to equip students with communication skills required in the global era. However, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners generally use English only in educational settings, which limits their exposure to authentic communication contexts (Hamiloglu & Temiz-Gurkan, 2018). As a result, students often rely heavily on classroom instruction as their primary source of language input. Despite these limitations, English proficiency remains essential for academic advancement and employment opportunities, making effective English instruction a significant educational priority. In this context, reading becomes a crucial skill, as it enables learners to access information, develop knowledge, and support the acquisition of

other language skills, particularly in environments where exposure to spoken English is limited (Hakiki & Avana, 2025).

Reading comprehension is not merely a passive activity but involves active cognitive engagement in constructing meaning from texts. Learners are required to integrate prior knowledge, interpret textual information, and evaluate meaning within a given context. Previous studies have emphasized that effective reading requires learners to interact with texts, develop vocabulary, and build overall language competence (Asmari & Javid, 2018; Yen, 2016). Furthermore, reading also serves as a foundation for developing other academic skills, such as writing and critical thinking. Therefore, reading instruction should move beyond basic comprehension and encourage deeper engagement with texts. In contemporary education, the development of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) has become a central focus, requiring students not only to understand texts but also to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information critically (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2016; Paul & Elder, 2019).

Critical reading plays a significant role in fostering these higher-order thinking skills. It enables learners to question assumptions, identify bias, evaluate arguments, and construct reasoned interpretations rather than simply accepting information at face value. In addition, critical reading encourages learners to connect textual content with broader social and contextual issues, thereby promoting deeper understanding and reflective thinking. This ability is essential for developing analytical thinking, fostering independent judgment, and supporting informed decision-making in both academic and real-life contexts. In the context of 21st-century learning, critical reading is increasingly recognized as a key competency that supports lifelong learning and information literacy (Zhang & Wu, 2019).

However, despite its importance, the implementation of critical reading in classroom practice remains challenging. Several studies have reported persistent issues such as teacher-centered instruction, student dependency, limited instructional materials, and insufficient professional development (Ariyanti, 2020; Rohayati, 2017; Zhang & Wu, 2019). In many EFL classrooms, reading instruction still emphasizes literal comprehension and the identification of textual features rather than critical engagement with texts. This tendency reflects a mismatch between the expectations of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in the curriculum and the realities of classroom practice. In addition, assessment systems that prioritize objective testing often reinforce surface-level learning, further limiting opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills.

Previous studies published in the *Journal of Educational Sciences* have shown that the implementation of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and effective questioning strategies significantly influence students' reading comprehension and critical thinking development (Sulistyoningrum & Mobit, 2026; Nurul'aini et al., 2025). However, the successful implementation of these strategies depends on several factors, including teachers' pedagogical competence, students' readiness, and the availability of instructional resources. In the Indonesian context, studies on

critical reading have primarily focused on students' performance or strategy use, while limited attention has been given to how critical reading is implemented in actual classroom practices and the challenges faced by teachers (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). This indicates a research gap that needs to be addressed, particularly in understanding the interaction between instructional practices and contextual constraints.

This gap is also evident in the context of SMAN 10 Pangkep. Preliminary observations reveal that although teachers recognize the importance of critical reading, its implementation in teaching reading comprehension remains limited and tends to focus on literal understanding rather than critical interpretation (Zhang & Wu, 2019; Nation, 2019). This condition is influenced by factors such as time constraints, limited resources, and a lack of targeted professional training, which hinder the integration of critical thinking strategies in classroom instruction. These challenges suggest that the issue is not only pedagogical but also contextual and systemic.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the implementation of critical reading in teaching reading comprehension at SMAN 10 Pangkep and to identify the challenges faced by teachers in integrating critical thinking into classroom practices. By examining both instructional practices and contextual factors, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how critical reading can be effectively implemented in EFL classrooms.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative case study design to analyze the implementation of critical reading in reading comprehension instruction at SMAN 10 Pangkep. Using a qualitative approach, the research explores teachers' instructional practices, perceptions, and challenges in a natural classroom setting, in line with. The analysis focuses on three key aspects: the implementation of reading instruction through pre-, while-, and post-reading activities; the use of critical reading strategies to promote higher-order thinking, such as questioning, annotating, evaluating evidence, identifying bias, and connecting text to context; and students' reading comprehension, reflected in their ability to understand main ideas, make inferences, analyze and evaluate texts, and generate critical responses. The study also considers contextual challenges, including teacher-related constraints, student readiness, curriculum demands, resource limitations, and school conditions (Ciesielska & Jemielniak, 2018).

Research Subject and Setting

This study was conducted at SMAN 10 Pangkep, a public senior high school in Pangkep Regency, selected due to its relatively recent establishment in 2017 and the identified challenges in teaching critical reading. The primary participants were

two English teachers actively teaching reading comprehension. In addition, students in the observed classes (approximately 30–36 students per class) were involved as secondary participants to provide contextual data on classroom interaction and learning responses.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) having a minimum of five years of teaching experience, (2) experience in teaching reading across various text types, and (3) possession of a valid teaching certification. This selection ensured that participants had sufficient professional background relevant to the implementation of critical reading strategies. In this study, teachers served as the main data sources, while students functioned as supporting participants.

Research Variables and Indicators

In this descriptive qualitative study, variables are used to focus the analysis without quantitative measurement. The independent variable is teachers' implementation of critical reading through pre-, while-, and post-reading strategies aimed at fostering higher-order thinking, while the dependent variable is students' reading comprehension, reflected in their ability to understand, analyze, evaluate, and respond critically to texts. The study also examines contextual challenges influencing implementation, including teacher limitations, student readiness, curriculum and resource constraints, and school environmental factors.

Research Instruments

In this descriptive qualitative study, data were collected using three main instruments: classroom observations, interviews, and a document checklist to obtain rich and in-depth information.

Classroom Observation

Observations were conducted using an observation checklist supported by field notes. The checklist included specific indicators such as: Pre-reading activities (e.g., activating prior knowledge, predicting content), While-reading strategies (e.g., questioning, annotating, identifying main ideas, evaluating arguments), Post-reading activities (e.g., summarizing, reflecting, responding critically), Teacher–student interaction patterns, students' engagement, and participation.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English teachers using an interview guide. Sample questions included: “How do you understand the concept of critical reading?”, “What strategies do you use to teach reading comprehension?”

“What challenges do you face in implementing critical reading?”, “How do students respond to critical reading activities?”

Document Checklist

The document checklist was used to analyze instructional documents, including lesson plans, curriculum documents, student worksheets, and assessment tools. The indicators focused on: The integration of critical reading strategies in lesson plans, Types of reading tasks and questions, Assessment methods used to evaluate students' comprehension.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted three to five times for each teacher during reading comprehension lessons, with the researcher acting as a non-participant observer. An observation checklist, field notes, and concrete examples were used to capture teacher actions, student responses, and classroom dynamics. In addition, individual interviews lasting 30–60 minutes were conducted in a quiet setting. The interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy and transcribed verbatim. Relevant documents, such as lesson plans, curriculum guidelines, student work samples, and assessment rubrics, were also collected and analyzed to identify the implementation of critical reading and related challenges.

Data Analysis

This study applied qualitative data analysis using a thematic analysis approach. The analysis began with data reduction, which involved transcribing interview recordings, reviewing observation notes and document analysis results, conducting open coding to identify relevant data segments, and writing reflective memos to capture emerging ideas and connections. The next stage was data display, where codes were organized into categories and main themes aligned with the research focus and their relationships were presented through tables or diagrams. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified by interpreting the themes in relation to the research questions, triangulating data from observations, interviews, and documents, and formulating the main findings and research implications.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study employed credibility, dependability, and triangulation strategies. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement in the field and member checking, in which the researcher confirmed the findings with the participants to ensure accurate interpretation. Dependability was maintained by applying a clear and systematic research procedure, including detailed documentation of data collection and analysis processes. In addition, triangulation was conducted by using multiple data sources and methods, namely classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis,

to cross-check and validate the findings. These strategies were implemented to enhance the validity and reliability of the qualitative research.

3. Result and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings on the implementation of critical reading (CR) and the challenges encountered by English teachers at SMAN 10 Pangkep. The findings are derived from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis, and are directly interpreted in relation to relevant theories and previous studies.

The Implementation of Critical Reading in Teaching Reading Comprehension

The following findings are derived from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. The findings indicate that the implementation of critical reading remains limited and has not fully reflected higher-order thinking practices. Classroom instruction is predominantly focused on lower-order thinking skills (LOTS), such as identifying main ideas, recalling information, and understanding vocabulary, with minimal emphasis on higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), including analysis, evaluation, and critical response. This finding is in line with previous research indicating that students' critical reading abilities remain limited when instructional practices focus primarily on lower-order thinking skills (Astuti et al., 2026). Furthermore, ineffective instructional strategies may hinder the development of deeper comprehension and critical engagement (Gazela et al., 2026). To provide a clearer comparison between theoretical expectations and classroom implementation, the framework is presented in Table 1

Table 1. Implementation of Critical Reading Framework

| Aspect | Standard Reading | Critical | Actual Implementation | Gaps |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|----------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Cognitive Level | Analyzing, Evaluating, Creating | | Remembering, Understanding | Limited evaluative thinking |
| Role of Student | Critical Inquirer | | Passive Recipient | Rarely question texts |
| Textual Focus | Ideology, Bias, Context | | Structure, Vocabulary | Surface-level analysis |

As shown in Table 1. students are predominantly engaged in surface-level comprehension rather than critical analysis. Learning activities are still oriented toward procedural understanding, limiting opportunities for evaluative thinking and critical inquiry. This finding clearly indicates that students are positioned as passive recipients of information rather than active meaning-makers. As shown in Table 1. students are predominantly engaged in surface-level comprehension rather than critical analysis. Learning activities are still oriented toward procedural understanding, limiting opportunities for evaluative thinking and critical inquiry. The dominance of lower-order tasks positions students as passive recipients of

information rather than active meaning-makers. Which contradicts the principles of critical reading that emphasize analytical engagement (Wallace, 2015; Paul & Elder, 2019).

This finding confirms previous studies which argue that EFL reading instruction often emphasizes literal comprehension rather than critical engagement with texts (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). Furthermore, this condition contradicts the principles of critical reading, which emphasize analytical, evaluative, and interpretative engagement. This also suggests a gap between theoretical expectations and classroom practices. Further analysis of lesson plans reveals that, although they are formally aligned with curriculum standards, they lack pedagogical depth in promoting critical literacy. Instructional indicators tend to prioritize measurable linguistic competencies rather than fostering interpretative and evaluative skills. This finding suggests that teachers are more oriented toward achieving measurable outcomes than developing students' higher-order thinking skills.

This result extends previous findings from which indicate that teachers' instructional strategies often prioritize surface-level comprehension due to assessment demands. It also supports the argument that curriculum implementation in EFL contexts tends to focus on practical outcomes rather than critical engagement (Richards, 2017). Classroom interaction patterns further reinforce this limitation. The dominance of Initiation–Response–Evaluation (IRE) structures positions the teacher as the central authority, while limited wait time and immediate feedback reduce opportunities for students to reflect and construct independent interpretations. This finding indicates that classroom interaction is still teacher-centered, limiting students' opportunities to develop critical thinking skills.

This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that teacher-centered instruction restricts students' cognitive engagement and critical participation (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). However, it also highlights a contextual issue where teachers may rely on such patterns due to time constraints and curriculum demands, indicating that the problem is not solely pedagogical but also systemic. In addition, the absence of metacognitive strategies, such as annotation, reflective questioning, and evaluative discussion, limits students' engagement with texts at a deeper level. Students tend to accept texts as fixed sources of information rather than as constructs open to interpretation and critique. This finding indicates that students lack metacognitive awareness in reading.

This result supports previous studies which emphasize that metacognitive strategies are essential for improving reading comprehension and critical thinking (Zhang & Wu, 2019; McNamara, 2017). Without these strategies, students are unlikely to engage in deeper analysis, which is a key component of critical reading. Although group discussions were implemented, they remained superficial, as tasks focused primarily on summarizing rather than critical engagement. This suggests that collaborative learning activities were not effectively designed to promote higher-order thinking. This finding partially contradicts the assumption that group discussion automatically enhances critical thinking. Instead, it indicates that collaboration must be supported by structured guidance and critical questioning, as

emphasized in critical reading pedagogy. Overall, these findings suggest that the implementation of critical reading is not yet optimal and is constrained by both instructional design and contextual factors. This highlights the need for more structured and intentional strategies to promote higher-order thinking in reading instruction.

Challenges in Implementing Critical Reading

The following findings describe the challenges faced by teachers in implementing critical reading based on classroom data.

Table 2. Comparison of Teachers' Challenges in Implementing Critical Reading

| Aspect | Teacher 1 (Technical-Pedagogical) | Teacher 2 (Sociocultural-Systemic) |
|--------------|--|--|
| Student | Limited vocabulary mastery affecting comprehension | Fear of making grammatical errors |
| Curriculum | Time constraints in covering materials | Misalignment with standardized tests |
| Professional | Difficulty assessing critical thinking | Teacher burnout due to low participation |
| Resource | Limited access to varied texts | Lack of multimedia support |

As presented in Table 2, the challenges are not isolated but interconnected, reflecting both instructional and contextual constraints. Teacher 1 primarily encounters technical and pedagogical difficulties, particularly related to students' limited vocabulary and challenges in assessing critical thinking. These issues indicate that linguistic limitations can restrict students' ability to engage in higher-order thinking, leading teachers to prioritize basic comprehension. The findings show that challenges are interconnected and involve both instructional and contextual factors. Teacher 1 primarily encounters technical and pedagogical difficulties, particularly related to students' limited vocabulary and challenges in assessing critical thinking. Meanwhile, Teacher 2 faces sociocultural and systemic challenges, including students' fear of making grammatical errors and the misalignment between curriculum goals and assessment practices.

These findings indicate that linguistic limitations and psychological barriers significantly influence students' ability to engage in critical reading. Students' limited vocabulary restricts comprehension, while their fear of making errors reduces participation in critical discussion. This finding confirms Nation's (2019) argument that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of reading comprehension and higher-order thinking. It also supports previous studies indicating that students' affective factors, such as confidence and anxiety, play a crucial role in learning engagement. At the systemic level, the inconsistency between curriculum expectations and assessment practices further constrains implementation. While the curriculum promotes higher-order thinking skills, assessment systems remain focused on literal comprehension.

This finding highlights a significant mismatch between curriculum and assessment. This result supports Richards (2017), who argues that assessment practices strongly influence teaching strategies. When assessments emphasize lower-order thinking, teachers are more likely to adopt test-oriented instruction, limiting opportunities for critical engagement. Furthermore, limited access to diverse instructional resources restricts the use of authentic materials that could support critical literacy development. Combined with low student participation, these constraints reduce instructional effectiveness.

This finding suggests that the challenges of implementing critical reading extend beyond classroom practices and are influenced by broader institutional and systemic factors. This result extends previous research by showing that the issue is not only related to teacher competence but also to structural constraints within the educational system (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). Overall, the findings demonstrate that the implementation of critical reading is shaped by a complex interaction of pedagogical, linguistic, psychological, and systemic factors. Therefore, addressing these challenges requires comprehensive efforts involving instructional improvement, curriculum alignment, and institutional support.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of critical reading in teaching reading comprehension at SMAN 10 Pangkep has not yet fully achieved its intended objectives. Although teachers have introduced basic reading activities, classroom practices remain focused on surface-level comprehension and have not effectively developed students' higher-order thinking skills. Students tend to engage with texts as sources of information rather than as materials for critical analysis, indicating that critical reading has not been fully integrated into classroom instruction. The findings reveal both strengths and limitations. While teachers demonstrate awareness of the importance of critical reading, its implementation is constrained by students' limited vocabulary, passive learning habits, and low confidence in expressing ideas. On the other hand, several constraints hinder its effectiveness, including students' limited vocabulary, passive learning habits, and low confidence in expressing ideas. In addition, systemic challenges such as time constraints, misalignment between instructional goals and assessment practices, and limited learning resources further restrict the development of critical reading. Overall, the study highlights that while critical reading has the potential to be implemented, its success depends on more structured instructional strategies, better alignment between curriculum and assessment, and stronger support for both teachers and students in fostering critical engagement with texts.

Acknowledgement

The researcher would like to express her deepest gratitude for all forms of guidance, support, and assistance that have been given during this research process. Special thanks go to the institution, parents, and friends. The researcher really appreciates

every help given, both directly and indirectly. Hopefully, the results of this study can provide meaningful benefits for educators in improving the quality of learning and can be a small contribution that has a positive impact in the world of education.

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How to cite this article:

Amir, V., Hamid, R., & Abdul, N. B. (2026). The Implementation of Critical Reading in Teaching Reading Comprehension at SMAN 10 Pangkep. *Journal of Educational Sciences*, 10(5), 138-148.
