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The Implementation of Problem-Based Learning to Enhance Students' Critical Thinking in Learning English

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abstrak—Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji efektivitas penerapan Problem-Based Learning (PBL) dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berpikir kritis siswa Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (SMK). Latar belakang studi ini didasari oleh lemahnya keterampilan berpikir kritis siswa yang cenderung pasif dan mengandalkan hafalan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode observasi dan wawancara pada siswa kelas X di salah satu SMK di Jawa Timur. Hasil observasi menunjukkan bahwa penerapan PBL mampu meningkatkan keterlibatan siswa, mendorong kolaborasi, serta memperkuat pemahaman terhadap struktur teks analytical exposition. Siswa mulai menunjukkan kemampuan analitis, mengevaluasi argumen, serta merancang solusi kreatif dalam diskusi kelompok. Wawancara mendalam mengungkap bahwa siswa lebih reflektif dan rasional dalam menyikapi informasi, menunjukkan kebiasaan mempertanyakan dan mengkritisi pernyataan yang diterima. Dengan demikian, PBL terbukti mendukung peningkatan keterampilan berpikir kritis sekaligus memperkuat proses pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris secara bermakna.
Kata kunci—Problem-Based Learning, berpikir kritis, pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, SMK, analytical exposition

Abstract—This study aims to examine the effectiveness of implementing Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in English language instruction to enhance the critical thinking skills of vocational high school (SMK) students. The background of this research is based on students' weak critical thinking skills, which tend to be passive and rely heavily on memorization. This study employs a qualitative approach using observation and interviews with tenth-grade students at a vocational school in East Java. Observation results indicate that the implementation of PBL can increase student engagement, encourage collaboration, and strengthen their understanding of the structure of analytical exposition texts. Students began to demonstrate analytical abilities, evaluate arguments, and develop creative solutions during group discussions. In-depth interviews revealed that students became more reflective and rational in responding to information, showing a habit of questioning and critically analyzing received statements. Thus, PBL has proven to support the enhancement of critical thinking skills while also reinforcing meaningful English language learning.
Keywords—Problem-Based Learning, critical thinking, English language learning, vocational school, analytical exposition

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, critical thinking has become one of the essential competencies that students must possess. Critical thinking refers to the ability to examine, assess, and organize information in a logical and systematic manner. (Facione, 2011) states that critical thinking consists of six core components: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. These abilities enable individuals to approach complex problems in a structured and thoughtful way.

In the context of education, critical thinking plays a vital role as it encourages students to solve problems, make informed decisions, and think independently. (Elder & Paul, 2020) also emphasize that critical thinking includes the ability to recognize bias, evaluate the validity of evidence, and communicate ideas clearly and effectively.

Unfortunately, the reality in the field shows that many vocational high school (SMK) students still struggle to develop these skills. They tend to be passive during the learning process, have difficulty analyzing problems, and rely heavily on rote memorization. In fact, in English language learning, critical thinking is crucial for understanding text content, developing arguments, and solving problems logically and systematically.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as one of the promising approaches to address various educational challenges. This method places students at the center of learning by engaging them directly in solving real-world and contextual problems. PBL has been proven to facilitate active learning, encourage student collaboration, and foster higher-order thinking skills. However, the implementation of PBL in Indonesian schools, especially at the vocational level, remains relatively limited. (Rozak & Matin, 2024) emphasize that approaches requiring active student participation can create a learning environment conducive to developing higher-order thinking skills.

Various previous studies have shown that PBL is effective in fostering critical thinking skills. (Jumhur et al., 2024), in a study on mechanical engineering at a vocational school, found that the implementation of PBL significantly improved students' critical thinking abilities, from an average of 52.70% (categorized as low) to 75.64% (categorized as critical) after three learning cycles. Similar results were reported by (Nurlaelah, 2023), who showed that PBL enhanced student participation and analytical skills in English language learning at the vocational level. Furthermore, research by (Mayasari, 2022) revealed that the PBL approach not only improved mathematical literacy but also fostered critical thinking skills through contextual problem-solving.

This study aims to examine the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning method in English language instruction and investigate its influence on students' critical thinking skills. Specifically, the study focuses on how PBL is applied in English classes, the challenges and opportunities encountered during its implementation, and the extent to which this approach contributes to enhancing students' critical thinking in understanding English materials. Through this focus, the study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of PBL as a learning strategy that supports both language acquisition and the development of higher-order thinking skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research on Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in enhancing students' critical thinking employs a qualitative approach. The qualitative method is used to study natural phenomena, with the researcher serving as the key instrument in both data collection and analysis. In qualitative research, data is gathered in a natural setting, primarily through observation and interviews as the main data collection techniques and sources.

The data sources in this study consist of 36 tenth-grade students from the LPFKK class at SMK Negeri Dander. In addition, data was also obtained from the English teacher who designed and implemented the Problem-Based Learning approach in the classroom. The tenth-grade class was selected due to the alignment of time and subject matter, where Problem-Based Learning was applied in conjunction with the Analytical Exposition Text material.

The researcher conducted observations by examining the implementation of problem-based learning carried out by the teacher over two class sessions, aiming to evaluate how the PBL method was applied in English language instruction. Furthermore, two out of the 36 students were selected for structured interviews to collect additional data. Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive approach, aiming to understand how Problem-Based Learning can enhance students' critical thinking skills in English learning. After the data was collected, the next steps included analyzing, describing, and drawing conclusions from the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study were obtained through observations and interviews. Observation was used to directly examine the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in teaching analytical exposition texts, while interviews were conducted to explore the impact of PBL on students' critical thinking skills. These two data sources complement each other to provide a comprehensive picture of the process and outcomes of PBL implementation in the classroom.

A. Integrating Problem-Based Learning (PBL) into the Instruction of Analytical Exposition Texts

In the first meeting, the teacher began the lesson with routine activities such as greeting, prayer, and attendance check. Unlike conventional methods, the teacher immediately posed a triggering question related to a current issue about the impact of plastic use at school. This was intended to build students’ interest in the topic.

During the core activity, students were divided into small groups of 4–5 members. Each group selected its own problem topic and was provided with a mind map as a guide. They conducted independent exploration to find examples of analytical exposition texts from various sources in order to understand the text structure, including thesis, arguments, and reiteration. The teacher actively acted as a facilitator, offering guidance and encouraging participation, especially from students who appeared passive.

Although some students initially seemed confused, their engagement increased as the group discussion progressed. One group member actively took notes on their peers’ ideas, while a few others appeared disengaged and simply observed without

contributing. The teacher addressed this by approaching these students and asking questions to prompt their involvement in the discussion. The lesson concluded with a reminder about the assigned task and a brief reflection session.

The second meeting continued with group presentation activities. Each group was given time to present the results of their discussions and participate in a question-and-answer session. During this process, questions emerged that reflected students' critical thinking abilities. Some students questioned the validity of the arguments and the real-world impact of the topics presented, such as comparing the effectiveness of SMEs that sell digitally versus conventionally, and questioning the effect of large discounts on the profits of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

The discussion prompted one group to clarify and narrow the focus of their argument after receiving input from other groups. The teacher acted as a moderator, ensuring the discussion remained relevant and focused on high-quality arguments. After the presentation session, students provided written feedback using an assessment rubric. The lesson concluded with a reflection and a general evaluation conducted by the teacher.

Based on the observations, the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) succeeded in increasing student engagement in learning analytical exposition texts. Students not only learned to understand the structure of the text but also practiced critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. Although challenges remain in ensuring equal participation among all group members, this approach provided space for students to be more active, independent, and reflective in the learning process. The teacher's role as a facilitator and moderator also proved essential in maintaining effective and focused learning dynamics.

B. The Influence of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) on Enhancing Students' Critical Thinking in English Education

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is an effective approach to developing students' critical thinking skills. Through this method, students are guided to identify real-world problems, analyze information in depth, and evaluate various possible solutions. This is reflected in their ability to complete complex tasks, such as composing analytical exposition texts using logic and evidence-based reasoning.

The effectiveness of PBL is also evident in students' learning experiences, as expressed in the following interview excerpts:

> Now I don't immediately believe information without questioning it. For example, when a friend said, SMEs will definitely lose money if they go digital, we looked for data first before drawing conclusions. PBL made me think and ask why, and how to find a solution. **(Student 1, Interviewed on May 6, 2025)**

> Now I always think, is this really true? before accepting any information. For instance, when someone said, plastic is always harmful, we looked for both its positive and negative impacts first. PBL taught us not to easily trust things that aren't clearly sourced. **(Student 2, Interviewed on May 6, 2025)**

These quotes clearly demonstrate that PBL contributes significantly to transforming students' thinking into a more critical and reflective mode. They no longer accept information at face value but develop habits of questioning, seeking supporting data, and weighing various perspectives before drawing conclusions. This healthy skepticism is an early indicator of higher-order thinking development, particularly in testing the truth and validity of statements.

The critical thinking skills developed through PBL can be explained through the revised Bloom's Taxonomy. At the analysis level, students demonstrated the ability to break down information into smaller parts in order to understand the relationships among the components. For instance, when evaluating the issue of SME digitalization, they did not view it from a single perspective but considered various aspects such as operational costs, market expansion potential, and competition levels.

In the evaluation domain, students showed a tendency to assess the validity of general claims. For example, when hearing the statement that plastic is always harmful, students did not accept it blindly. Instead, they sought supporting information before drawing any conclusions. This shows an improvement in their ability to evaluate the reliability of sources, and the strength of the arguments presented.

At the creation level, students began designing creative solutions to real-life problems encountered in school. In one discussion, a group that initially concluded that e-commerce negatively impacts SMEs eventually developed a more balanced and in-depth argument after engaging in a critical discussion process.

This entire process reflects the principles of critical thinking as outlined by (Ennis, 2011), who emphasized the importance of reflective and rational thinking in responding to information. Through PBL, students are facilitated to deeply reflect on their understanding, test existing assumptions, and revise their thinking based on evidence. These abilities form the core of critical thinking development, which is essential in the field of education.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in English language instruction, particularly in teaching analytical exposition texts, has a positive impact on enhancing student engagement and their critical thinking skills.

Through direct classroom observations, it was evident that the PBL approach encouraged students to be more active in the learning process, whether through group work, discussions, or the verbal expression of arguments. The teacher's role as a facilitator was also crucial in ensuring that the learning process remained focused and conducive.

In addition, interview data supported the finding that students were beginning to develop habits of critical thinking in their daily lives. They no longer accepted information at face value but demonstrated a tendency to question, verify, and evaluate statements based on available evidence.

Thus, PBL has been proven not only to support students' understanding of academic material but also to serve as an effective medium for fostering critical thinking skills. This approach is particularly relevant for vocational high schools (SMK) as an effort to prepare students to face the demands of complex thinking in the future.

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