

# Critical Thinking Representation in Junior High English Textbook Reading Materials: Systematic Review

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Received: April 3, 2026

Accepted: May 12, 2026

Published: June 9, 2026

## Abstract

Critical thinking is an essential competency in twenty-first-century learning that should be integrated into English textbooks, particularly in reading materials. This study aimed to identify research trends, analyze research methods and theoretical frameworks, map critical thinking indicators, and formulate recommendations for English textbook development. This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework. A total of ten studies meeting the inclusion criteria were systematically reviewed and synthesized. The findings revealed an increasing trend in research on critical thinking representation in English textbooks during 2022–2025. Most studies employed content analysis and adopted the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy as the primary analytical framework. The review further demonstrated that reading materials were predominantly characterized by Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS) activities. Indicators related to information analysis, reasoning, and information comparison were most frequently represented, whereas evaluation, reflection, problem-solving, and decision-making appeared less frequently. These findings suggest that English reading materials have not yet comprehensively fostered critical thinking skills. Therefore, English textbook developers and teachers should systematically incorporate Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) activities into reading instruction to promote students' critical engagement, reflective thinking, and problem-solving abilities.

**Keywords:** *critical thinking skills; English textbooks; reading materials; systematic literature review; HOTS.*

## 1. Introduction

The rapid development of the twenty-first century has required students not only to acquire knowledge but also to develop critical thinking skills to cope with increasingly complex challenges. (Facione, 2015) states that critical thinking encompasses a set of purposeful and reflective cognitive processes through which individuals interpret information, analyze alternatives, evaluate evidence, and formulate well-reasoned judgments and decisions. As a result, fostering critical thinking has become a major priority in educational settings, given its important role in preparing learners to navigate the demands of modern society.

In the Indonesian educational context, the importance of fostering critical thinking is reflected in the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly through the dimension of critical reasoning. As explained by (BSKAP, 2022), this dimension emphasizes students' ability to obtain, process, analyze, and evaluate information responsibly in order to make sound judgments and decisions. Achieving this objective requires support from various components of the educational process, including instructional materials that encourage learners to engage in higher-order thinking activities. Consequently, textbooks should not merely function as sources of information but should also serve as tools for cultivating students' critical thinking abilities.

Within English language teaching, reading activities have considerable potential to promote critical thinking development. (Grabe & Stoller, 2020) explain that reading is an active process involving comprehension, interpretation, integration of ideas, and evaluation of textual information. Accordingly, well-designed reading activities can encourage students not only to understand texts at a literal level but also to question, assess, and reflect upon the ideas presented in them.

English textbooks continue to play a significant role as one of the primary learning resources used in classrooms. The quality of questions and tasks embedded in reading materials determines the extent to which students are provided with opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. Activities that focus predominantly on recalling and understanding information tend to restrict students' cognitive engagement. In contrast, tasks that require analysis, evaluation, argumentation, and problem-solving can create more meaningful learning experiences while simultaneously promoting higher-order thinking skills.

Despite their importance, previous studies have indicated that the representation of critical thinking skills in English textbooks remains less than optimal. (Muhsinin et al., 2025) found that reading questions in EFL textbooks were predominantly categorized as Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS). Similarly (Laila & Fitriyah, 2022) reported that most reading comprehension questions focused on recalling and understanding information, whereas opportunities for students to engage in analytical and evaluative thinking were relatively limited. Furthermore, (Hasnah et al., 2024) revealed that critical thinking indicators, including reflection, evaluation, and argumentation, were not evenly distributed across the textbooks examined.

On the other hand, several studies have documented efforts to integrate critical thinking skills into reading materials. (Zakiyah et al., 2023) reported that various indicators of critical thinking had been incorporated into reading activities, particularly those related to analysis and evaluation of information. Nevertheless, indicators associated with problem-solving and decision-making remained underrepresented. This finding was supported by (Pratama & Arsanti, 2024) who demonstrated that English textbooks had included tasks with the potential to foster critical thinking skills, although such tasks were not proportionally distributed across different activity types. Moreover, (Linia et al., 2025) emphasized that teachers continue to play an essential role in enriching textbook activities by providing cognitively challenging questions and supplementary tasks that further stimulate students' critical thinking.

Collectively, these findings suggest that research on critical thinking within English textbooks has expanded in recent years. However, most existing studies have concentrated on analyzing the cognitive levels of textbook questions or evaluating textbooks in general. Studies that specifically synthesize the representation of critical thinking skills in reading materials of junior high school English textbooks through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) remain limited. In addition, few studies have integrated evidence regarding research trends, methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, representations of critical thinking indicators, and recommendations for textbook development within a single comprehensive review.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how critical thinking skills are represented in reading materials contained in English textbooks. Specifically, this study seeks to: (1) identify research trends concerning the representation of critical thinking skills in English reading materials; (2) analyze the research methods and theoretical frameworks employed in previous studies; (3) map the critical thinking indicators represented in reading materials; and (4) formulate recommendations for English textbook development and future research directions. To achieve these objectives, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021), ensuring that the synthesis process is systematic, transparent, and academically rigorous.

## 2. Method

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the representation of critical thinking skills in reading materials contained in junior high school English textbooks. SLR is a research method that enables researchers to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize findings from previous studies in order to develop a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon (Page et al., 2021)

The review process followed the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 (Page et al., 2021). The study consisted of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of relevant articles. The PRISMA framework was adopted because it provides systematic, transparent, and replicable procedures that help minimize potential bias throughout the review process (Snyder, 2019).

The literature search was conducted through several electronic databases, including Google Scholar, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), ScienceDirect, ERIC, and Garuda. These databases were selected because they provide access to both national and international publications relevant to English language education and critical thinking research.

The search strategy employed combinations of keywords derived from the focus of the study, including "critical thinking" AND "English textbook" AND reading, "critical thinking skills" AND "EFL textbook" AND reading, and "critical thinking representation" AND "English textbook" AND "critical thinking indicators". These keyword combinations were intended to identify studies specifically addressing the representation of critical thinking skills in reading materials contained in English textbooks.

Inclusion criteria were established to ensure the quality and relevance of the reviewed studies. Articles were included if they: (1) examined the representation of critical thinking skills in English textbooks, particularly in reading materials; (2) were published between 2016 and 2025; (3) appeared in SINTA-indexed national journals, Scopus-indexed international journals, conference proceedings, or other scholarly sources relevant to the research topic; and (4) were available in full-text format. Conversely, studies were excluded if they were duplicate publications, irrelevant to the research objectives, or lacked sufficient empirical evidence.

The instruments used in this study consisted of a systematic review protocol developed based on the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. These instruments were designed to ensure that the article selection process was conducted objectively, systematically, and consistently throughout each stage of the review. Operationally, the research instruments comprised four components aligned with the PRISMA stages: an identification form, a screening checklist, an eligibility checklist, and a data extraction form.

During the identification stage, a search record form was used to document the databases accessed, search keywords, the number of retrieved articles, and the removal of duplicate records. In the screening stage, a screening checklist was employed to assess the relevance of article titles, abstracts, research focus, and publication types. The eligibility stage involved the use of an eligibility checklist to evaluate the alignment of each study with the research objectives, the clarity of its methodology, the relevance of the reported data, and the availability of the full-text article. Finally, in the inclusion stage, a data extraction form was utilized to collect essential information from the selected studies.

**Table 1.** Research Instruments Based on the PRISMA 2020 Stages

| PRISMA Stage   | Instrument            | Indicators Assessed                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Identification | Search Record Form    | Databases, search keywords, publication years, number of retrieved articles, duplicate records                                                         |
| Screening      | Screening Checklist   | Relevance of titles, abstracts, research focus, and publication types                                                                                  |
| Eligibility    | Eligibility Checklist | Alignment with research objectives, methodological clarity, relevance of data, availability of full-text articles                                      |
| Inclusion      | Data Extraction Form  | Article identification, research objectives, research methods, theoretical frameworks, critical thinking indicators, key findings, and recommendations |

The article selection process followed the four stages outlined in the PRISMA 2020 framework. During the identification stage, all articles retrieved from the selected databases were compiled, and duplicate records were removed. The screening stage involved reviewing article titles and abstracts based on the predetermined criteria. Articles that passed the screening process underwent a full-text review during the eligibility stage. Finally, studies that satisfied all inclusion criteria were incorporated into the systematic review.

Following the selection process, 10 articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis. Data from the selected studies were extracted using the data extraction form, which gathered information regarding publication year, research objectives, research methods, theoretical frameworks, representations of critical thinking indicators, and key findings.

The extracted data were subsequently analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach to identify recurring patterns, similarities, differences, and emerging trends across the reviewed studies. The findings of the synthesis were then interpreted to address the research objectives and formulate recommendations for the development of English textbooks that better support the enhancement of students' critical thinking skills.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### Findings

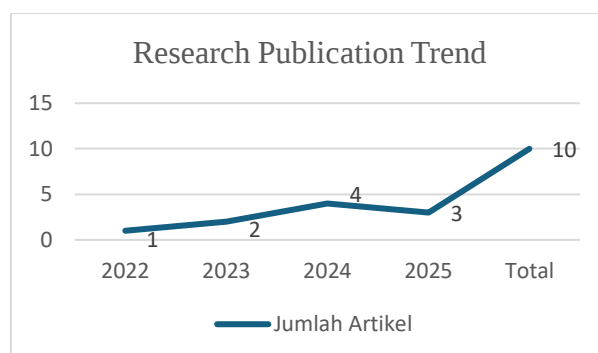
##### 3.1. Research Trends on the Representation of Critical Thinking Skills in Reading Materials of English Textbooks

The synthesis of the ten studies that met the inclusion criteria revealed that research on the representation of critical thinking skills in English textbooks has shown considerable development in recent years. The increasing number of publications reflects a growing concern regarding the cognitive quality of learning activities embedded in textbooks, particularly within reading materials. This trend aligns with the demands of twenty-first-century education, which recognizes critical thinking as one of the essential competencies that should be fostered through educational practices.

The distribution of studies by publication year indicates that scholarly interest in this topic began to increase noticeably from 2023 onward. Of the ten articles reviewed, one study was published in 2022, two studies in 2023, four studies in 2024, and three studies in 2025. The substantial increase in publications during 2024 suggests that the issue of critical thinking representation in English textbooks has gained increasing attention among researchers and educational practitioners.

**Table 2.** Distribution of Reviewed Articles by Publication Year

| Year  | Number of Articles | Percentage |
|-------|--------------------|------------|
| 2022  | 1                  | 10%        |
| 2023  | 2                  | 20%        |
| 2024  | 4                  | 40%        |
| 2025  | 3                  | 30%        |
| Total | 10                 | 100%       |



**Figure 1.** Research Publication Trends (2022–2025)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the number of publications increased steadily from 2022 and reached its peak in 2024. Although a slight decline was observed in 2025, the number of studies published remained higher than that recorded during the initial years covered in this review. This pattern suggests that evaluating the quality of English textbooks, particularly in relation to the promotion of critical thinking skills, has become an emerging area of interest in language education research.

In addition to publication year, research trends were also examined based on the indexing status of the journals in which the studies were published. The analysis demonstrated that most of the reviewed studies appeared in nationally indexed journals. Of the ten articles analyzed, **nine** were published in SINTA-indexed journals and one appeared in a Scopus Q1-indexed international journal.

**Table 3.** Distribution of Articles by Journal Indexing Status

| Journal Index | Number of Articles | Percentage |
|---------------|--------------------|------------|
| SINTA         | 9                  | 80%        |
| Scopus Q1     | 1                  | 10%        |
| Total         | 10                 | 100%       |

These findings indicate that studies concerning the representation of critical thinking skills in English textbooks remain predominantly situated within the Indonesian context. The dominance of SINTA-indexed publications reflects the substantial attention devoted to this issue in national educational discourse. However, the relatively limited number of internationally published studies suggests that this area of inquiry still offers considerable opportunities for further exploration in broader global contexts.

With regard to the object of investigation, most studies focused on English textbooks used at the secondary education level. Several investigations specifically examined government-issued textbooks developed to support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, such as English for Nusantara. The emphasis placed on these textbooks highlights the need to ensure that instructional materials employed within the new curriculum framework effectively facilitate the development of twenty-first-century competencies, including critical thinking skills.

The synthesis further revealed that previous studies have generally explored critical thinking within textbooks from a broad perspective. Research specifically investigating the representation of critical thinking skills in reading materials remains relatively limited. Most studies have evaluated textbooks as a whole or concentrated on the cognitive distribution of textbook questions without examining in depth how critical thinking indicators are manifested within reading activities.

These findings point to several research gaps that warrant further investigation. First, studies focusing specifically on the representation of critical thinking skills in reading materials contained in junior high school English textbooks remain scarce. Second, much of the existing literature continues to rely primarily on evaluative approaches that classify the cognitive levels of textbook questions, with limited attempts to integrate multiple critical thinking frameworks into the analytical process. Third, cross-contextual and cross-national investigations are still underrepresented, resulting in an incomplete understanding of how critical thinking skills are represented in English textbooks across different educational settings.

Overall, the findings indicate that the representation of critical thinking skills in English textbooks constitutes a growing field of inquiry. The increasing number of publications over recent years reflects a heightened awareness of the importance of promoting critical thinking through instructional materials. Nevertheless, more in-depth investigations, particularly those focusing on reading materials, are required to ensure that the development of English textbooks aligns more closely with the demands of twenty-first-century learning.

### 3.2. Theoretical Frameworks and Research Methods Employed in Studies on the Representation of Critical Thinking Skills

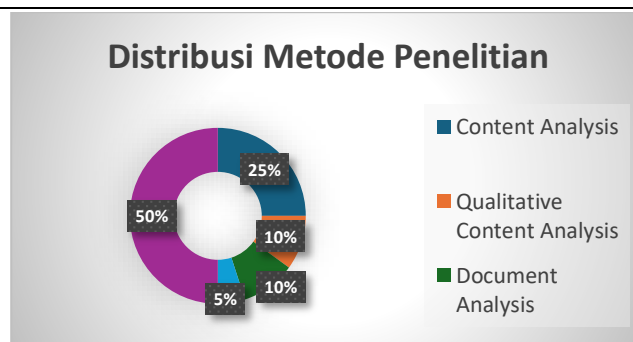
The analysis of the ten reviewed articles revealed that studies investigating the representation of critical thinking skills in English textbooks employed a variety of methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks. This diversity indicates the absence of a universally accepted standard for evaluating critical thinking skills within reading materials. Differences in theoretical perspectives and research designs have also influenced the analytical focus and the findings generated by each study.

### 3.2.1. Research Methods Employed in Previous Studies

The synthesis demonstrated that content analysis was the most frequently adopted research method in previous studies. Of the ten reviewed articles, five employed content analysis, two utilized qualitative content analysis, two adopted document analysis, and one implemented a case study design. The distribution of research methods is presented in Table 3.

**Table 4.** Distribution of Research Methods Used in the Reviewed Studies

| Research Method              | Number of Articles | Percentage |
|------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Content Analysis             | 5                  | 50%        |
| Qualitative Content Analysis | 2                  | 20%        |
| Document Analysis            | 2                  | 20%        |
| Case Study                   | 1                  | 10%        |
| Total                        | 10                 | 100%       |



**Figure 2.** Distribution of Research Methods

The predominance of content analysis suggests that previous researchers primarily sought to identify and categorize representations of critical thinking skills through the examination of textbook activities, questions, and tasks. This method has been widely employed because it enables systematic analysis of documentary data without requiring direct intervention in classroom practices.

Furthermore, the use of document analysis reflects the continuing perception of textbooks as a primary source of evidence for evaluating the quality of English language instruction. However, this approach is limited in that it focuses exclusively on textbook content and does not adequately explain how the proposed activities are implemented by teachers in authentic classroom settings.

In contrast, only one study adopted a case study approach. The study conducted by (Linia et al., 2025) combined textbook analysis with observations of teachers' instructional practices. This finding indicates that research on critical thinking skills has been largely dominated by document-based evaluations, whereas investigations incorporating the experiences of teachers and students remain relatively scarce.

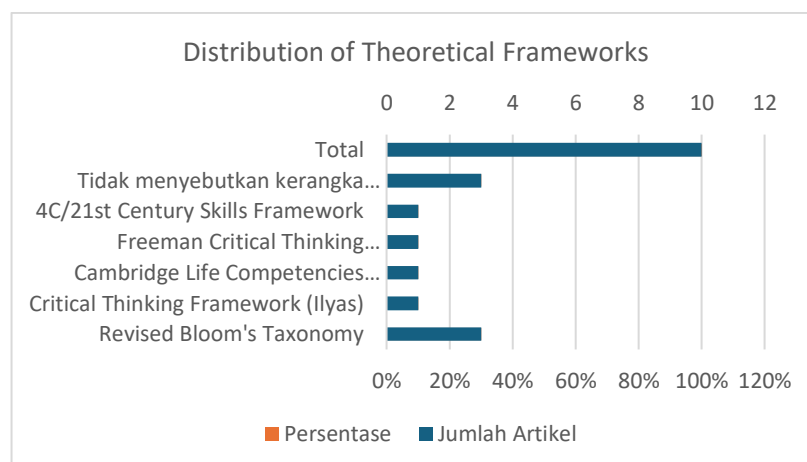
### 3.2.2. Theoretical Frameworks Used in Previous Studies

In addition to methodological variations, the synthesis revealed considerable diversity in the theoretical frameworks employed to examine critical thinking skills in English textbooks. Based on the ten reviewed articles, six major analytical tendencies were identified, as presented in Table 4.

**Table 5.** Distribution of Theoretical Frameworks Used in the Reviewed Studies

| Theoretical Framework                 | Number of Articles | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Revised Bloom's Taxonomy              | 3                  | 30%        |
| Critical Thinking Framework (Ilyas)   | 1                  | 10%        |
| Cambridge Life Competencies Framework | 1                  | 10%        |
| Freeman Critical Thinking Framework   | 1                  | 10%        |
| 4C/21st-Century Skills Framework      | 1                  | 10%        |

| Theoretical Framework           | Number of Articles | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| No Specific Framework Mentioned | 3                  | 30%        |
| Total                           | 10                 | 100%       |



**Figure 3.** Distribution of Theoretical Frameworks

The findings indicate that the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy was the most frequently employed framework. This taxonomy was commonly used to identify the cognitive levels of questions and activities within reading materials, particularly in distinguishing between Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS) and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). Studies conducted by (Muhsinin et al., 2025), (Laila & Fitriyah, 2022), and (Zebua et al., 2021) exemplify this approach.

Despite its widespread application, Bloom's Taxonomy primarily emphasizes cognitive processes and does not explicitly address broader dimensions of critical thinking, such as argument evaluation, reflective thinking, or decision-making. Consequently, several studies have adopted more specialized frameworks.

For instance, (Zakiyah et al., 2023) utilized the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework to analyze critical thinking indicators represented in reading materials. This framework enabled the identification of skills related to problem-solving, decision-making, and information evaluation. Similarly, (Hasnah et al., 2024) employed the Critical Thinking Framework developed by Ilyas to examine the representation of critical thinking in Indonesian EFL textbooks.

Meanwhile, (Pratama & Arsanti, 2024) adopted the Freeman Critical Thinking Framework, whereas (Nuraeni et al., 2024) employed the 4C/21st-Century Skills Framework to investigate the integration of twenty-first-century competencies within the English for Nusantara textbook. The diversity of these frameworks reflects the multifaceted nature of critical thinking and suggests that researchers conceptualize and assess this construct from different perspectives.

### 3.2.3. Research Tendencies and Their Implications

The synthesis revealed two dominant tendencies in studies examining the representation of critical thinking skills in English textbooks. First, most studies relied on document-based analyses aimed at evaluating textbook quality. Second, the theoretical frameworks employed tended to focus more on classifying cognitive levels than on comprehensively examining critical thinking indicators.

These tendencies suggest that research on critical thinking representation in English textbooks still requires further development. Integrating multiple analytical frameworks, such as the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy, Critical Thinking Framework, and Cambridge Life Competencies Framework, may contribute to a more comprehensive evaluation of the quality of reading materials.

Moreover, future research should consider adopting more diverse methodological approaches, including mixed-methods designs, to move beyond textbook evaluation and explore how textbook activities are implemented in classroom practice and contribute to the development of students' critical thinking skills.

Overall, the findings indicate that the research methods and theoretical frameworks employed in studies of critical thinking representation remain diverse and have yet to reach a consensus. At the same time, this situation presents opportunities for future researchers to develop more comprehensive analytical models for evaluating the quality of reading materials in English textbooks.

### 3.3. Representation of Critical Thinking Skills in Reading Materials of English Textbooks

The third objective of this study was to map the critical thinking indicators represented in reading materials contained in English textbooks. The synthesis of the ten reviewed studies revealed that critical thinking skills have begun

to be integrated into reading materials. However, the representation of these indicators remains uneven in terms of both the types of skills emphasized and their frequency of occurrence within learning activities.

The analysis showed that the most frequently represented critical thinking indicators involved activities related to identifying information, comparing ideas, analyzing textual content, and providing reasons to support claims or opinions. In contrast, indicators associated with argument evaluation, decision-making, problem-solving, and reflection on information appeared much less frequently.

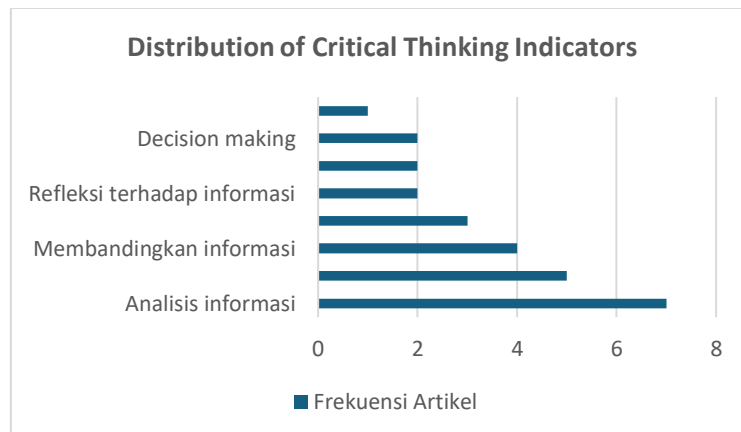
These findings are supported by (Zakiyah et al., 2023), who reported that reading materials incorporated eight out of eleven critical thinking indicators identified in the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework. Nevertheless, indicators related to decision-making and problem-solving remained underrepresented in reading activities.

Similarly, (Linia et al., 2025) found that critical thinking skills had been integrated through activities requiring students to compare information, justify opinions, and express viewpoints regarding textual content. However, such integration had not been implemented systematically across all instructional units.

Other studies further indicated that critical thinking representation was more commonly manifested through indicators associated with basic analytical skills rather than evaluative or creative thinking. For example, (Zebua et al., 2021) reported that HOTS-oriented activities in the English for Nusantara textbook were largely confined to the analytical level and seldom extended to evaluation or creation.

**Table 6.** Representation of Critical Thinking Indicators in Reading Materials

| Critical Thinking Indicator     | Frequency of Occurrence |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Information analysis            | 7                       |
| Providing reasons/argumentation | 5                       |
| Comparing information           | 4                       |
| Argument evaluation             | 3                       |
| Reflection on information       | 2                       |
| Problem-solving                 | 2                       |
| Decision-making                 | 2                       |
| Creating alternative solutions  | 1                       |



**Figure 4.** Distribution of Critical Thinking Indicators

As illustrated in Figure 4, more complex critical thinking indicators remain insufficiently represented in reading materials. This finding suggests that the development of reading activities should provide students with broader opportunities to engage in evaluation, reflection, decision-making, and the formulation of solutions to issues presented in texts.

Overall, the findings indicate that the representation of critical thinking skills in reading materials remains in a transitional stage. Although several indicators have been incorporated into textbook activities, their distribution remains uneven and does not yet fully reflect the broad range of critical thinking dimensions required for twenty-first-century learning.

### 3.4. Recommendations for Textbook Development and Future Research Directions

The fourth objective of this study was to formulate recommendations for the development of English textbooks that support the enhancement of critical thinking skills and to identify future research directions based on the synthesized evidence.

The review of the ten selected studies revealed that most researchers recommended increasing the proportion of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) activities within reading materials. Reading tasks should not be limited to literal comprehension but should also encourage students to analyze, evaluate, reflect upon, and make decisions regarding the information presented in texts.

Furthermore, five studies emphasized the importance of systematically integrating critical thinking indicators throughout all instructional units. These findings suggest that critical thinking should not be confined to specific text types but should instead become an integral component of textbook design.

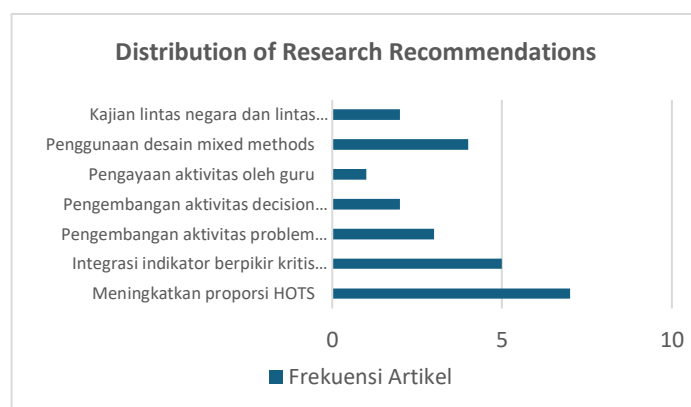
Several studies also highlighted the need to expand activities that promote problem-solving and decision-making, given that these indicators were found to be relatively scarce in existing reading materials. Activities such as case studies, contextual issue analysis, and problem-based discussions may provide students with more meaningful opportunities to apply critical thinking skills in authentic situations.

In addition, (Linia et al., 2025) underscored the crucial role of teachers in addressing the limitations of textbooks. Teachers can enrich textbook activities by supplementing existing questions and tasks with cognitively challenging activities that further stimulate students' critical engagement.

From a methodological perspective, several studies recommended the adoption of mixed-methods designs in future investigations. Such approaches may offer more comprehensive insights by not only evaluating textbook content but also examining the implementation of learning activities and their impact on students' critical thinking development.

**Table 7.** Synthesis of Recommendations Identified in Previous Studies

| Recommendation                                         | Frequency of Articles |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Increasing HOTS-oriented activities                    | 7                     |
| Systematic integration of critical thinking indicators | 5                     |
| Expanding problem-solving activities                   | 3                     |
| Expanding decision-making activities                   | 2                     |
| Teacher-led enrichment of activities                   | 1                     |
| Adoption of mixed-methods designs                      | 4                     |
| Cross-national and cross-curricular studies            | 2                     |



**Figure 5.** Distribution of Research Recommendations

As shown in Figure 5, the recommendation most frequently proposed by researchers was the need to increase HOTS-oriented activities within reading materials. This finding suggests that strengthening critical thinking skills through textbooks cannot be achieved through isolated efforts. Rather, it requires improvements in the design of learning activities, the construction of questions, and the implementation strategies employed in classroom practice.

Overall, the synthesis indicates that the development of English textbooks aimed at promoting critical thinking skills should be guided by three major considerations: (1) expanding the representation of critical thinking indicators within reading materials; (2) systematically enhancing the quality of HOTS-oriented activities; and (3) strengthening collaboration among textbook developers, teachers, and researchers to design more meaningful learning experiences for students.

## Discussion

### 3.5. The Dominance of Lower-Order Thinking Skills in Reading Materials

The synthesis findings indicate that reading materials in English textbooks are still predominantly characterized by activities oriented toward Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS). This finding is evidenced by six reviewed studies reporting that most reading questions merely require students to recall information, identify explicitly stated information, and understand the literal meaning of texts. (Muhsinin et al., 2025) reported that 96.74% of reading questions fell within the LOTS category, whereas activities targeting the create level were not identified at all. A similar finding was reported by (Laila & Fitriyah, 2022), who found that 83% of reading comprehension questions remained concentrated at lower cognitive levels.

These findings suggest that reading instruction continues to emphasize the acquisition of factual information rather than the development of critical thinking skills. In fact, reading within the context of English language learning should be viewed as a process of meaning construction involving interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and reflection on the information obtained from texts (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). When reading activities focus solely on locating explicit answers, students are not provided with sufficient opportunities to develop higher-order thinking skills.

From the perspective of the critical thinking theory proposed by (Facione, 2015), the dominance of LOTS indicates that most reading materials have not adequately accommodated the six core critical thinking skills, namely interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Reading activities that merely require students to remember and comprehend information are insufficient to prepare them for the increasingly complex challenges of the twenty-first century. Therefore, the findings of this study reinforce the view that English textbooks need to undergo a transformation from a content-oriented approach toward an approach that places greater emphasis on the development of students' thinking processes.

### 3.6. The Representation of Critical Thinking Skills Has Not Yet Been Comprehensive

Although several critical thinking indicators have begun to be integrated into reading materials, the synthesis findings reveal that such representation remains partial in nature. The most frequently identified indicators include the ability to analyze information, compare ideas, and provide reasons to support opinions. In contrast, more complex indicators, such as argument evaluation, decision-making, problem-solving, and reflection, are still rarely incorporated.

These findings are consistent with the study conducted by (Zakiyah et al., 2023), which demonstrated that reading materials had incorporated eight out of the eleven critical thinking indicators outlined in the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework. Nevertheless, the aspects of decision-making and problem-solving were still represented to a limited extent. Similarly, (Linia et al., 2025) found that critical thinking activities had indeed been embedded within reading materials; however, they had not been integrated consistently across all instructional units.

This imbalance suggests that the representation of critical thinking skills in textbooks remains more oriented toward intermediate-level cognitive aspects rather than toward the development of reflective and transformative thinking abilities. In fact, critical thinking encompasses not only the ability to analyze information but also the capacity to evaluate evidence, consider multiple perspectives, and make rational decisions based on logical arguments (Facione, 2015).

From the perspective of the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework, problem-solving and decision-making are essential components of the critical thinking process that contribute to students' readiness to deal with various real-life situations. Therefore, the limited representation of these two indicators suggests that reading materials still need to be further developed in order to provide learners with more authentic and contextualized learning experiences.

### 3.7. The Influence of the Merdeka Curriculum on the Development of English Textbooks

The emergence of various studies on critical thinking skills in English textbooks during the period of 2023–2025 indicates a close relationship with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia. This curriculum positions critical reasoning as one of the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile that should be fostered across different subjects, including English (Kemdikbudristek, 2022).

However, the synthesis findings suggest that curriculum transformation has not been fully accompanied by a corresponding transformation in instructional materials. (Hasnah et al., 2024) reported that critical thinking indicators such as argumentation, evaluation, and reflection have not yet been optimally represented in Indonesian EFL textbooks. In addition, (Zebua et al., 2021) revealed that HOTS-oriented activities in the English for Nusantara textbook remain largely concentrated at the analysis level and have not extensively reached the levels of evaluation and creation.

These findings indicate a discrepancy between curriculum objectives and their implementation within textbooks. Although the Merdeka Curriculum has provided broader opportunities for the development of twenty-first-century skills, textbooks, as one of the primary learning resources, have not yet been fully capable of translating these expectations into concrete learning activities.

Therefore, the development of textbooks in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum needs to be carried out in a more systematic manner by integrating critical thinking indicators into every stage of the learning process. Such integration should not only be manifested through the formulation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions but also through the provision of reading activities that encourage students to engage in discussions, construct arguments, evaluate information, and solve problems based on real-life contexts.

### 3.8. Implications for the Development of English Textbooks

The findings of this study have several practical implications for the development of English textbooks. First, textbook authors need to pay greater attention to maintaining a balance between Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS) and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) activities in reading materials. The questions designed should not merely aim to assess students' literal comprehension of texts but should also encourage them to engage in analysis, evaluation, and creation.

Second, the development of reading materials needs to integrate various critical thinking indicators in a proportional manner. Reading activities can be designed in the form of case studies, analyses of social issues, problem-based discussions, and project-based tasks, enabling students to apply critical thinking skills in authentic contexts.

Third, the findings of this study highlight the importance of employing multiple theoretical frameworks in an integrated manner during the process of textbook development. The integration of the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy, the Critical Thinking Framework, and the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework may assist textbook developers in designing activities that not only require higher-order cognitive abilities but also foster reflective thinking and decision-making skills.

Furthermore, teachers also play a strategic role in addressing the limitations of textbooks. As emphasized by (Linia et al., 2025), teachers can enrich existing learning activities by formulating open-ended questions, assigning project-based tasks, and implementing instructional strategies that place greater emphasis on students' thinking processes. Such efforts may contribute to the enhancement of critical thinking skills beyond what is explicitly provided in textbooks.

Overall, the practical implications identified in this study suggest that strengthening critical thinking skills through English textbooks requires collaborative efforts among textbook developers, teachers, researchers, and curriculum designers. Through such collaboration, reading materials can be transformed into learning resources that not only facilitate language acquisition but also prepare students to become critical, reflective, and responsible individuals capable of addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century.

### 3.9. Theoretical Implications and Future Research Agenda

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study indicate that research on the representation of critical thinking skills in English textbooks still requires more comprehensive conceptual development. Most previous studies have relied on the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy as the primary framework for evaluating reading activities. Although this framework is useful for identifying the cognitive levels of questions and tasks, it has not been sufficiently capable of capturing the full dimensions of critical thinking.

Therefore, future studies need to consider the integration of multiple critical thinking frameworks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the quality of reading materials. Such an approach may facilitate a deeper evaluation of reading activities, particularly in identifying aspects related to argumentation, reflection, decision-making, and problem-solving, which have not been adequately represented in existing English textbooks.

From a methodological standpoint, the synthesis findings reveal that previous research has been predominantly dominated by content analysis approaches. Future studies are encouraged to employ mixed-methods designs that combine document analysis with classroom observations, teacher interviews, and assessments of students' critical thinking skills. Such approaches are expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of English textbooks in fostering the development of critical thinking skills.

In addition, cross-national studies should be undertaken to compare how critical thinking skills are represented in English textbooks across different educational contexts. Comparative investigations of this nature may serve as a valuable foundation for developing English textbook models that are more adaptive to the demands of global education and the competencies required in the twenty-first century.

Overall, the findings of this study reaffirm that the representation of critical thinking skills in reading materials contained in English textbooks has demonstrated encouraging progress. Nevertheless, the continued dominance of Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS), the uneven representation of critical thinking indicators, and the less-than-optimal alignment with the aspirations of the Merdeka Curriculum indicate that further efforts to improve instructional materials remain necessary. Consequently, strengthening critical thinking skills through English textbooks requires collaboration among textbook developers, teachers, researchers, and educational policymakers to ensure that the goals of twenty-first-century learning can be achieved more effectively.

## 4. Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the representation of critical thinking skills in reading materials contained in junior high school English textbooks through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. Based on the synthesis of ten selected studies, the findings indicate that research on this topic has shown a growing trend in recent years. Most of the reviewed studies employed content analysis as their primary methodological approach, with the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy emerging as the most frequently used theoretical framework for evaluating the cognitive levels of reading activities.

The findings further revealed that the representation of critical thinking skills in reading materials remains uneven. Indicators related to information analysis, providing reasons or arguments, and comparing information appeared more frequently, whereas indicators involving argument evaluation, reflection, problem-solving, decision-making, and the

generation of alternative solutions were relatively underrepresented. These findings suggest that English textbooks have not yet fully accommodated the comprehensive development of critical thinking skills required for twenty-first-century learning.

This review contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a systematic synthesis of research trends, methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, and critical thinking indicators represented in English reading materials. The findings highlight the need for English textbook developers to integrate Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) more systematically into reading activities.

From a pedagogical perspective, English teachers are encouraged to critically evaluate textbook activities and enrich them with supplementary tasks that foster argumentation, reflection, problem-solving, and decision-making. The incorporation of open-ended questions, problem-based discussions, and contextual reading activities may provide students with broader opportunities to engage in critical thinking during the learning process. Furthermore, future studies are recommended to employ more diverse methodological approaches, including mixed-methods designs, to investigate not only the representation of critical thinking skills in textbooks but also how such activities are implemented in classroom contexts and influence students' critical thinking development. Cross-national and cross-curricular investigations are also necessary to broaden the understanding of effective strategies for integrating critical thinking into English language teaching materials.

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