

## AN ANALYSIS OF FIFTH-GRADE STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION AND CRITICAL READING ABILITIES IN JAKARTA ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the reading comprehension and critical reading abilities of fifth-grade elementary students in Jakarta. Motivated by the importance of literacy skills that extend beyond literal text understanding to include evaluative and reflective thinking, the research employed a quantitative descriptive approach. Participants were 745 students from 30 purposively selected public elementary schools across Jakarta. Data were collected using a five-item reading test assessing two dimensions: reading comprehension (identifying main ideas, locating supporting details, and recognizing involved parties) and critical reading (proposing alternative solutions and evaluating the most appropriate solution). Responses were scored using a 4 point analytic rubric and converted to a 0 - 100 scale, categorized into high, moderate, and low levels. Findings revealed a noticeable disparity between comprehension and critical reading abilities. Reading comprehension was relatively strong, with 30% of students in the high category and 60% in the moderate category, whereas critical reading performance was lower, with only 25% in the high category and 45% in moderate. Students often successfully understood and summarized texts but struggled to analyze, evaluate, and reason beyond the literal content. These results align with the Active View of Reading framework, highlighting the need to integrate inference-making, evaluative thinking, and reflective strategies in early literacy instruction. The study provides empirical evidence for designing literacy programs that simultaneously foster comprehension and critical literacy, offering implications for curriculum development and instructional practices in Indonesian elementary education.

**Keywords:** Critical reading; Elementary literacy; Evaluative thinking; Jakarta; Reading comprehension.

### INTRODUCTION

Reading ability is widely recognized as a fundamental foundation for academic success, particularly at the elementary education level. At this developmental stage, reading extends beyond the recognition of symbols and words it involves understanding, interpreting, and evaluating information within a text. The Merdeka Curriculum (Kepala BSKAP & Kemendikdasmen, 2025) underscores the importance of strengthening literacy skills, especially reading comprehension and critical reading, as essential learning outcomes of Indonesian language education in elementary schools. Consequently, reading ability must not be confined to literal understanding but should cultivate students' critical thinking to evaluate meaning and values embedded in texts.

Critical reading represents a higher-order literacy skill that involves analysis, evaluation, and reflection on texts. In Indonesia, despite ongoing efforts to enhance literacy, students' critical reading abilities in elementary schools remain relatively low. (Dewani et al., 2024) reported that while students show adequate reading interest, their literacy skills require improvement through more effective instructional approaches. Similarly, (Setiyadi et al., 2025) identified challenges in Indonesian language teaching at the elementary level, such as limited instructional variation and insufficient use of learning media; yet, literacy-based and structured exercises were found to support reading and writing skill development.

Although students in Jakarta demonstrate relatively strong literal reading comprehension, a significant gap exists in their critical reading abilities. (List et al., 2024) highlighted that while students can understand texts literally, their capacity to analyze and evaluate content remains limited, emphasizing the importance of engaging students in critique during reading to foster critical literacy. In line with this,

(Capin et al., 2025) demonstrated that explicit metacognitive strategies, such as critical questioning, can improve higher-order thinking skills and could be adapted to support elementary students' critical reading development. These findings underscore the need for a more holistic approach to reading instruction in primary education, which goes beyond literal comprehension to actively develop students' critical thinking. Implementing critical literacy models, as evidenced by (Istihari, 2024), can enhance students' reading engagement and critical literacy (ResearchGate). Furthermore, (Rizqiani et al., 2024) demonstrated that project-based critical literacy approaches can strengthen students' analytical and reflective skills, suggesting that such models could be integrated into the Merdeka Curriculum to support systematic development of critical reading in elementary schools.

Recent empirical findings have highlighted ongoing challenges in developing these higher-order reading abilities among Indonesian elementary students. (Saputra et al., 2025) found a significant relationship between critical reading ability and students' achievement in Indonesian language learning. Their study emphasized that critical reading is an essential but underdeveloped component of language learning success. Similarly, (Amelia et al., 2024), through a nationwide MARS based analysis of students' reading literacy, reported that higher-order thinking skills including critical thinking during reading remain weak determinants of national literacy outcomes. These findings collectively suggest that while students are generally capable of literal comprehension, their ability to analyze, evaluate, and reflect on textual meaning remains limited. As (Duke & Cartwright, 2021) argue in their Active View of Reading framework, proficient readers are not only those who understand the text but also those who can evaluate, connect, and use information flexibly an ability that appears underdeveloped among Indonesian elementary learners.

Despite growing attention to reading instruction, there remains a research gap in large-scale quantitative studies that simultaneously map both reading comprehension and critical reading abilities among elementary students. Most existing studies have focused on intervention strategies or model-based instruction to enhance reading skills, leaving limited empirical evidence describing students' actual ability profiles particularly in urban settings like Jakarta, where educational diversity is pronounced.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the reading comprehension and critical reading abilities of fifth-grade elementary students in Jakarta using a descriptive quantitative approach. The findings are expected to provide an empirical foundation for developing more targeted literacy programs and offer valuable insights for teachers to design reading instruction that nurtures critical thinking from the early stages of schooling.

### METHODS

This study employed a quantitative descriptive approach aimed at analyzing students' reading comprehension and critical reading abilities. The design was chosen to provide an empirical description of students' actual performance without applying any treatment or intervention. The participants were 745 fifth-grade students from 30 public elementary schools across Jakarta, Indonesia. Schools were selected purposively to represent various administrative regions (Central, North, West, South, and East Jakarta). The sample included students aged 10 - 11 years, with diverse academic backgrounds and literacy achievement levels. The selection ensured representation of urban and semi-urban contexts. All participants had completed the same Indonesian language learning units based on the Merdeka Curriculum.

Data were collected using a reading test consisting of five open-ended items designed to measure two aspects: (1) Reading Comprehension (Items 1 - 3) assessing students' ability to identify main ideas, find supporting details, and recognize the characters or agents involved in the text; (2) Critical Reading (Items 4 - 5) assessing students' ability to provide alternative solutions relevant to the context of the text, and to evaluate and select the most appropriate solution. Each response was scored using an analytic rubric with a four-point scale (1 - 4) based on established indicators: irrelevant or very weak response, partially correct but unclear, reasonably accurate but incomplete, and fully accurate, clear, complete, and contextually appropriate. The scoring rubric was adapted from Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021) and the Indonesian Language Learning Outcomes in the Merdeka Curriculum (Kepala BSKAP & Kemendikdasmen, 2025).

The data collection was conducted between January and April 2025. The test was administered during regular classroom sessions under the supervision of the researcher and classroom teachers. All responses were collected in written form and scored independently by two raters to ensure reliability. Inter-rater reliability was verified through consistency checks, and discrepancies were resolved through

discussion. Students’ responses were scored and converted into percentage scores. Descriptive statistics were used to categorize performance into high ( $\geq 80$ ), medium (60 - 79), and low ( $< 60$ ) levels, following theoretical and curriculum-based benchmarks ((Duke & Cartwright, 2021); (Kepala BSKAP & Kemendikdasmen, 2025)). The distribution of students’ reading comprehension and critical reading abilities was presented in tables and figures to illustrate comparative trends across categories.

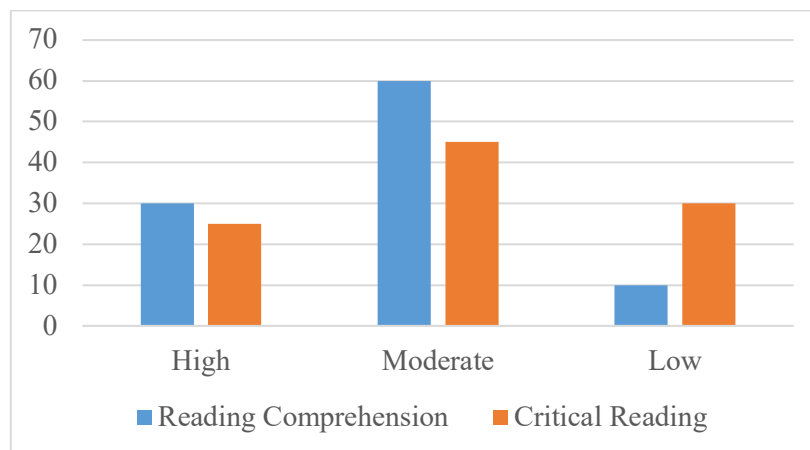
**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Findings**

This study aimed to analyze fifth-grade students’ reading comprehension and critical reading abilities in elementary schools across Jakarta. Data were collected using a five-item reading test that measured two dimensions: reading comprehension (items 1 - 3) and critical reading (items 4 - 5). Students’ responses were evaluated using an analytic rubric on a 4 point scale. The results of the analysis revealed a noticeable contrast between students’ reading comprehension and critical reading performance (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

**Tabel 1.** Distribution of Students’ Reading Comprehension and Critical Reading Abilities

Category	Reading Comprehension (%)	Critical Reading (%)
High	30	25
Moderate	60	45
Low	10	30



**Figure 1.** Distribution of Students’ Reading Comprehension and Critical Reading Abilities

**Reading Comprehension:** Students in the high category ( $\geq 80$ ) consistently identified main ideas, located supporting details, and drew simple inferences. Students in the moderate category (60–79) could identify main ideas but often showed inconsistency in locating details or making inferences. Students in the low category ( $< 60$ ) struggled to grasp main ideas and could only recognize isolated information. Overall, 30% of students were in the high category, 60% in moderate, and 10% in low, indicating that reading comprehension is relatively strong, though consistency in finding details and making inferences still requires reinforcement.

**Critical Reading:** Students in the high category ( $\geq 80$ ) demonstrated the ability to propose relevant alternative solutions, evaluate arguments logically, and select the most appropriate solutions, in line with Paul & Elder (2020) on critical thinking. Students in the moderate category (60 - 79) could suggest some alternatives, but their evaluations were less thorough or lacked consideration of relevance. Students in the low category ( $< 60$ ) struggled to evaluate alternatives and gave simplistic answers without clear justification, consistent with (Duke & Cartwright, 2021) regarding limited cognitive flexibility and literal comprehension. Overall, critical reading performance was lower than comprehension: 25% of students were in the high category, 45% in moderate, and 30% in low.

These findings align with the Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), which posits that effective reading requires not only understanding textual meaning but also constructing and integrating ideas through inference. Students categorized as high achievers exhibited characteristics of active readers, while those in lower categories tended to remain at the literal comprehension stage.

### Discussion

The findings demonstrate a significant gap between comprehension and critical evaluation skills among elementary students. While comprehension appears adequately developed, the ability to critically analyze and reflect on texts remains underdeveloped. This pattern is consistent with recent experimental evidence from (List et al., 2024), who explored how different reading tasks affect students' capacity for critique. In their study, 172 participants were assigned to one of three conditions: comprehension (summarizing), critique (critiquing), or control while reading flawed argumentative texts. Although students who were explicitly instructed to critique did not consistently outperform other groups, the degree of critique generation during reading significantly predicted both critical reading and source recall performance. This suggests that developing evaluative thinking depends less on explicit directives and more on learners' engagement in reasoning and critique while processing texts. In the context of elementary education, where reading tasks often prioritize literal understanding, the lack of structured opportunities to practice critique may hinder the growth of students' critical reading proficiency.

Similarly, (Carter et al., 2024), in a systematic review of 17 intervention studies in South African multilingual classrooms, found that while reading comprehension programs incorporating vocabulary and strategy instruction showed promise, the overall evidence of their effectiveness remained inconclusive due to methodological inconsistencies and limited teacher preparation. The review highlights that successful comprehension development requires not only strategy instruction but also sustained teacher support and contextual adaptation of reading interventions. These findings parallel the challenges observed in the Indonesian context, where literacy instruction often emphasizes literal comprehension rather than inferential and evaluative understanding. Thus, strengthening reading instruction at the primary level demands an integrated approach combining comprehension strategy training, teacher capacity-building, and exposure to interpretive reading tasks that foster students' metacognitive and critical literacy skills.

The observed disparity between reading comprehension and critical reading ability among fifth-grade students may also reflect the broader instructional orientation in Indonesian elementary literacy education. Reading activities in most classrooms continue to prioritize decoding accuracy, vocabulary recall, and literal understanding, rather than fostering higher-order comprehension processes such as inference-making, evaluation, and reflection (Amir et al., 2024). This pattern is further illuminated by (Halimah et al., 2020), who demonstrated the effectiveness of the Critical Literacy Approach (CLA) in enhancing university students' critical thinking and critical awareness through literary appreciation using Indonesian short stories. Their experimental findings revealed that students taught using CLA significantly outperformed those taught through expository strategies in developing analytical reasoning and reflective understanding. These results underscore the potential of critical literacy pedagogy to cultivate evaluative and interpretive skills competencies that remain underdeveloped in elementary classrooms focused primarily on literal comprehension. Accordingly, integrating elements of critical literacy into early reading instruction may provide younger learners with structured opportunities to question, evaluate, and connect textual meanings with broader social and moral contexts. Such an approach aligns with the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes critical reasoning and reflective understanding as integral components of language learning.

Recent studies in literacy pedagogy have emphasized the necessity of integrating metacognitive strategy instruction and critical questioning frameworks to move students beyond literal comprehension. For example, (Capin et al., 2025) demonstrated that explicit metacognitive scaffolding through questioning prompts like "What evidence supports this idea?" and "Whose perspective is missing?" significantly improved students' critical reasoning in upper elementary classrooms. Similarly, (Fatmawati et al., 2022) found that incorporating multimodal materials (e.g., visual, digital, and narrative texts) enhanced students' interpretive depth and capacity to evaluate source credibility, supporting the idea that multimodal literacy strengthens the interplay between comprehension and critique.

These findings resonate with the Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), which situates reading as a dynamic, cognitively integrated act that involves linguistic decoding, inferential construction, and reflective reasoning. Within this framework, students' limited critical reading performance suggests an imbalance between text processing and reasoning engagement. While students

may successfully construct textual meaning (comprehension), they may not yet be guided to interrogate meaning (critique). This gap indicates that comprehension instruction alone without metacognitive and dialogic extensions may not suffice to develop critical literacy. Moreover, the disparity between comprehension and critique echoes (Nation, 2022) model of reading proficiency, which emphasizes the interdependence of language knowledge, strategic awareness, and critical engagement. In multilingual contexts such as Indonesia, where English and Bahasa Indonesia coexist in school settings, insufficient emphasis on metacognitive reflection can compound comprehension challenges.

The observed gap may reflect classroom practices that emphasize literal understanding rather than evaluative or reflective reasoning. (Richard Paul & Elder, 2020) argue that critical thinking in reading involves questioning assumptions, assessing reasoning, and making evidence-based judgments skills that may not yet be systematically fostered in early literacy education. Furthermore, (Aras et al., 2024) demonstrated that implementing a guided-inquiry model significantly improved elementary students' critical thinking, reinforcing the implication that instructional design matters. Similarly, (Putri et al., 2024) argued that weak reading culture and limited reflective reading opportunities hamper the development of critical thinking in Indonesian elementary schools. These findings support our study's results, underscoring the urgency for literacy instruction that encourages metacognitive reflection and cognitive flexibility.

In light of these findings, integrating higher-order thinking-based reading instruction, such as reciprocal teaching or multimodal literacy approaches (Si et al., 2022), could help bridge the gap between comprehension and critical reasoning. The study contributes empirical evidence on the current status of students' reading abilities in urban Indonesian schools and underscores the importance of developing instructional models that align literal comprehension with evaluative and critical engagement.

### CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence on the disparity between reading comprehension and critical reading abilities among fifth-grade students in Jakarta elementary schools. While most students demonstrated moderate to high levels of comprehension, their critical reading performance measured through evaluative and reflective indicators was considerably lower. These findings reveal that although students can extract and summarize explicit information, they often lack the capacity to interpret, critique, and reason beyond the text. This imbalance underscores the need to reconceptualize literacy instruction in Indonesian primary education from a predominantly comprehension-based orientation toward one that equally emphasizes inference-making, evaluation, and reflection. The study provides a theoretical and pedagogical basis for integrating higher-order thinking into elementary literacy curricula. The results also extend empirical discussions of critical literacy in multilingual contexts, illustrating that reading proficiency is not merely a linguistic skill but a multidimensional construct involving reasoning, reflection, and metacognitive awareness.

Despite these contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a relatively small set of test items and analytic scoring, which may not fully capture the complexity of critical literacy processes. Second, the data were collected from urban schools in Jakarta, limiting the generalizability of findings to rural or linguistically diverse regions. Third, the study did not directly examine instructional practices or teacher variables that may mediate students' critical reading development. Addressing these limitations through mixed-method or longitudinal designs could yield richer insights into how pedagogical approaches and classroom environments shape literacy outcomes over time.

Future research should explore how explicit instruction in metacognitive and dialogic strategies can enhance students' evaluative reading. Experimental or design-based studies could test the integration of models such as reciprocal teaching, the Critical Literacy Approach, or multimodal literacy frameworks within Indonesian elementary settings. Furthermore, examining teachers' conceptions of higher-order literacy and their capacity to design HOTS oriented reading tasks would provide valuable information for professional development. Comparative research across different sociolinguistic regions may also illuminate how local language practices interact with comprehension and critique. Ultimately, advancing critical literacy from the early grades is essential for cultivating reflective, independent readers capable of navigating complex textual and social worlds.

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