

Experience of Pre-Service English Teachers' Challenges and Strategies in Developing Students' Critical Thinking Skills: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract: Higher order thinking skills (HOTS) among students are very important to develop in the education system to prepare students for the 21st century situation and fulfill student potential. Critical thinking skills must be taught and familiarized from an early age but students' critical thinking skills will not just happen. There needs to be effort and intention, one of which is when daily learning in the classroom that can train students to develop critical thinking skills continuously. This study aims to investigate the challenges faced and strategies used by pre-service teachers during teaching practice. This study was conducted using a qualitative research design. The instrument used was interviews with two pre-service teachers who have conducted teaching practice. The findings of this study show that some of the challenges faced by prospective teachers include teacher knowledge, where teachers are still confused about designing lesson plans. Second, teacher preparation, teachers must prepare teaching activity strategies that contain HOTS. Third is the different abilities of students. While the first strategy used by teachers is preparing relevant lesson plans, teaching strategies through questions are very effective to see the effectiveness and understanding of students and practice before assessment.

Keywords: Experience of pre-service teacher, challenges, strategies, students' critical thinking

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century offers many opportunities to create fluid learning and working experiences with people around the world and to demonstrate the skills students need to succeed in an increasingly connected and complex world (Hidayat & Lestari, 2022). Critical thinking is one of the most important and necessary skills to meet the needs of 21st-century workers. These are the characteristics of 21st-century skills that the next generation must possess (Syawaludin et al., 2019). Individuals are required to make judgments in receiving information, give opinions along with their reasons logically, and objectively, and defend the decisions or conclusions made are correct (Fikriyati et al., 2022).

Someone who can think critically will continue to evaluate their thoughts to ensure that they will not come to the wrong conclusion or decision. However, in reality, the critical thinking performance of students in Indonesia is still unsatisfactory as said by (Galih & Alsa, 2019). Students are different and diverse individuals. Suhartoyo and Ni'mah, (2020) found that students' written work was less critical. Some ideas and opinions tended to be descriptive because there was no argument. Some student have high critical thinking skills and some student still have low

critical thinking skills (Alkurnia et al., 2019). Based on previous research by Fatmawati et al., (2019) that critical thinking skills are not well developed in students.

Although the development of students' critical thinking in the classroom is increasingly studied, critical thinking still receives little attention in pre-service teacher education. This perspective suggests an important need to integrate critical thinking into pre-service programs to promote and teach critical thinking. Regarding to the issue, pre-service teacher training is one of the most important teacher training programs. Teachers must act as facilitators, organizers, guides, and motivators for students to create a good social environment in the classroom (Geng, 2021)

Teachers should always try to evaluate their own beliefs and methods used whether they can improve students' critical thinking skills or not (Mogofe & Athiemoolam, 2023). In addition, the tasks given by teachers in class will also affect students' perceptions of the importance of the material they are learning and improve how they can process newly acquired knowledge in a new context (Halim, 2021). Shalihah et al., (2022) argued that teachers should also provide more HOTS questions both orally and contextually through English textbooks that can help students build higher order thinking skills. On the other hand, Nahar stated that teacher-centered learning causes students to have a closed mindset this is one of the main reasons why education cannot be critical thinking education (Nahar et al., 2022). Because to improve students' critical thinking skills and help they become good critical thinkers, teachers must be good critical thinkers.

Based on the above issues, many previous studies have focused on students. Many of these studies looked at the effectiveness of higher-order thinking skills or their perceptions of questions. Therefore, the current study focuses on teacher voice. Teacher voice is important to integrate critical thinking into other pre-service teacher training programs in promoting critical thinking and preparing their skills to teach it and improve the quality of learning.

METHOD

This research was designed using qualitative research. To conduct this research, the researcher used a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry is a research approach that focuses on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of stories or narratives as a way to understand and detail the human experience (Sudarwati et al., 2022).

This research was conducted in high school at SMAN 3 Malang which is one of schools in Malang. The reason why the researcher chose this place as the research subject is because the researcher did teaching practice also at SMAN 3 Malang. The participant of this research were pre-service English teachers from grade eleven and grade twelve. Both are students who have conducted field practice programs at SMAN 3 Malang.

The data collection methods in this research are non-participant observation, interviews, and documentation. Researchers only observe and sit in place during the teaching and learning process. The researcher will observe and record the phenomenon under study without intervening or involving himself in the activities of the participants. Interviews will be conducted with semi-structured questions to gather in-depth information about the experiences of two participants. Documentation is to make the results of observations or interviews credible. In this technique, researchers collect data by taking photos and videos that show the research process in the classroom.

The data in this study was analyzed by transcription, coding to categorize the interview data into research themes, classify the data, and the researcher will interpret the data and draw conclusions from the research.

FINDING

The research data of this study came from the results of in-depth interviews with semi-structured interview techniques. The informants involved in this research were selected from the students of English Study Program who have conducted PPL. The interview was conducted with two respondents. To find out the challenges faced and the strategies used by pre-service teachers in their experience of teaching English. Therefore, the researcher describes the results of interviews with several informants.

Challenges Faced by English Pre-Service Teachers

Based on the results of interviews with two pre-service English teachers, they still experience challenges in managing an active classroom in learning, the challenges experienced by pre-service teachers include teacher knowledge, teacher preparation, and how students design their tasks.

Teachers' Knowledge

Teachers' knowledge of lesson plans is needed. Teachers will be more effective in knowing various learning methods and techniques in order to design varied and interesting activities, which encourage student engagement and support the achievement of learning objectives in facilitating the learning process.

“Informant-1: For the lesson plan, it starts with making a module, so I determine the learning objectives first according to the material, then I have to determine and divide the activities that will be carried out at each meeting by considering Bloom's taxonomy for students' cognitive levels.”

“Informant-2: I design my lesson plan according to the materials provided by my mentor teacher and I add additional resources from the internet. I also like to organize learning with sequential steps called sequencing activities. So even though I see other people's lesson plans, I still arrange the lesson plan according to the steps in the sequencing activities. Such as warm up, presentation, practice, application.”

Based on the above statement, both in-service teachers have an understanding of how to make lesson plans that will be used in class.

Teachers' Preparation

Teacher preparation for teaching is a very important part to consider. There are several things that must be prepared. Therefore, teacher preparation is an important part of presenting a meaningful performance to bring about an active learning process.

“Informant-1: I use learning strategies that aim to make learning more active, which is not centered on the teacher alone so that students can also participate in the learning process, such as when I explain later students can also ask questions, have the opportunity to re-explain the material, and have the opportunity to provide input to each other.”

“Informant-2: Okay. The strategy I use is the sequencing activities strategy where this can involve students to be active and not get bored. Like bringing up a video at the beginning that they can analyses, this can provoke them to think.”

Based on the statement above, pre-service teachers explained that the challenge is to prepare strategies to build engagement in learning. The sequencing activities strategy used by both teachers aims to get students actively involved in learning by providing a clear structure, opportunities for participation, and relevant context for deeper understanding.

“Informant-1: Usually for HOTS questions, I tend to bring them up when I am about to enter the daily exam, so when I teach there is one stage before the exam, which is an exercise, now in the exercise I include HOTS questions related to the material that has been learned.”

“Informant-2: Of course this comes up in my learning, my lesson plan is related to HOTS, and the HOTS come up when I ask students to analyse, assess and create something according to their understanding. For example, when students learn discussion text, I ask them to design or analyse phenomena that are relevant to the discussion text material.”

From the statement above, both pre-service teachers said that they create HOTS questions and give them to students so that students are encouraged to think more deeply, provide challenging questions during daily tests or practice before exams, so that students use their knowledge creatively and effectively to trigger higher order thinking activities according to the learning material.

“Informant-1: Because the class I teach is a superior class in grade 11, they tend to be superior, from there I am sure that they are able to do this HOTS question, and from the tutor also advised me to give HOTS questions.”

“Informant-2: By continuously engaging students in activities such as analyzing, encouraging them to think, evaluate and create, I am providing them with challenges that match their ability to think critically.”

From the statement, participants attempted to bring higher order thinking skills among the students by asking deep questions, using learning strategies with inquiry-based tasks to familiarize them with critical thinking.

“Informant-1: I include HOTS questions during daily practice, daily tests, and questions before exams. I gave some HOTS questions that I had consulted with my tutor. What should I change and what should not.”

“Informant-2: I look for higher level questions, from the module I design based on the order of Bloom taxonomy that I can use as a reference for learning and I can determine the tasks that must be done by students.”

Based on teacher statements that they incorporated HOTS questions into the practice tasks by designing them first. This is done through the sequencing of activities, the design of learning tasks, or the development of reflective questions at the end of the lesson. This is integrated into the whole learning process as outlined in Bloom's taxonomy.

Students' Ability

In addition to teachers' conditions, the results of this study also highlighted students' abilities. Participants agreed that students' ability also affects their decision to develop critical thinking and affects their decision to prepare for HOTS tasks. Some students showed that students' thinking ability varies.

“Informant-1: Their response was spontaneous and quick, because they understood well. Because when I explain they take a lot of notes on what I say.”

“Informant-2: The students' response is very good, they fill in the exit ticket that I usually give as an evaluation at the end of the lesson happily and honestly.”

From the statement above, students' responses when given feedback are very positive. They received the feedback well and were ready to correct any mistakes or shortcomings that had been identified by taking notes. This shows that students have high self-awareness to improve their performance.

“Informant-1: I think they tend to find it difficult to concentrate, they are easily distracted, like when I give social exercises they ask for songs so that they can focus and relax.”

“Informant-2: Some students face difficulties because not all students like learning English, especially class 12 is given a lot of HOTS questions. They are not used to in-depth problem solving. But through guidance and practice they can get past that difficulty.”

The challenge for pre-service teachers is that students are not used to in-depth analysis and lack the metacognitive skills needed to organize and monitor their own thinking processes.

“Informant-1: To be able to implement higher order thinking into the lessons, I inevitably have to follow their way of thinking, they like new things, and they prefer if they have to think deeply, because sometimes if they are given easy questions they are silent.”

“Informant-2: I am a little bit sure because I am also a beginning teacher, I also have to learn to integrate learning.”

So based on the above statements, being a new teacher also has an effect on them because they are teaching in a school with bright students. So, as pre-service teachers, understanding the needs and ability levels of students is necessary. Because in reputable schools, students are most likely accustomed to a curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking skills. Therefore, pre-service teachers must adjust their teaching approach and select challenging learning materials to meet the needs of these students.

“Informant-1: Students work quickly, conducive, no questions.”

“Informant-2: Students show a deep response, there are also those who feel difficult and lag behind so I use an approach to these students so that students still enjoy and follow every step of learning.”

The above statement shows that student responses vary. Based on these different skills, the teacher uses a differentiated approach to ensure that each student gets support appropriate to their level in developing higher order thinking skills.

DISCUSSION

As previously explained, this research also aims to find out the teacher's strategy in improving critical thinking in learning. To find out these strategies, researchers used interviews as an instrument of this research.

Strategies Used by Pre-Service Teacher

Learning objectives provide direction and focus for the learning process. They help the teacher to determine what the students want to achieve by the end of the learning.

“Informant-1: *When compiling the module I found it difficult to organize learning activities for low to high level thinking activities to achieve the learning objectives. Because of the difference in time allocation between the two classes, I had to organize how to make activities in each meeting to meet the needs of students. The way I overcome if the activities have not reached the target then I will remodel or choose activities that are shorter but still according to Bloom's taxonomy.”*

“Informant-2: *Once I had the material, my strategies was how to create content that was engaging and relevant, and I also overcame my potential difficulties in dealing with my complex delivery with simple but clear explanations, and adjusting to their different learning styles, some of which are audio, visual and kinesthetic. My difficulty is how to divide the activities in several meetings in one material, according to the stages of Bloom taxonomy from lower to upper levels”.*

Based on the above statement, pre-service teachers are challenged in developing modules to match the targeted learning objectives. They try to design learning activities that are relevant, specific, measurable, and appropriate to the level of cognitive complexity from low to high.

Teaching through Questioning

Evaluating the teaching process through questioning is one of the effective strategies to improve students' critical thinking skills. Well-designed and appropriately posed questions can stimulate students' critical thinking, in-depth analysis and problem-solving. Teachers can thus identify strengths and weaknesses in their teaching practices. They can assess the effectiveness of the questions they ask, improve their questioning techniques, and enhance classroom interactions to stimulate students' critical thinking.

“Informant-1: *Yes, in the learning process it is like that, related to my strategy which is that I want the class to be more active which requires a lot of active participation from students. So how do I provoke students by giving some question.”*

“Informant-2: *Yes of course, I ask students questions and provide opportunities for them to ask questions, so this involves their involvement and ensures their understanding of the material that I have conveyed.”*

Based on the statement above, pre-service teachers in every lesson always provide HOTS. This is a form of strategy that they use when teaching to keep students active in class.

“Informant-1: *In a way, when I ask questions that challenge students' assumptions, they tend to respond further and do not stop at that one question, with one question it can develop into several other questions that arise.”*

***“Informant-2:** I look at the students' responses, I look at their active participation in class, I will see whether the results reflect a deep understanding of the material I convey or not.”*

Based on their experience when teaching, they know whether they have succeeded in applying higher order thinking to their students through students' responses when given questions and they continue to encourage students to think more deeply with follow-up questions.

***“Informant-1:** Usually I give students the opportunity when towards the end of explaining the material, I will ask students if they have any questions or just have a statement like that. As for student response, students like to be asked provoking questions.”*

***“Informant-2:** Every wrap up session I ask questions, and most of the students' responses are positive and show their interest in the material.”*

From the above statement, pre-service teachers give students the opportunity to ask questions during the wrap up session. This wrap-up session in learning is important to reflect on what has been learnt, check understanding, and evaluate the learning process.

Practice before Judgement

Teachers give students "practice before judgement" before making judgements or testing students' understanding of new concepts, a teacher can provide practice exercises or activities to help students understand the basics of the concept.

***“Informant-1:** I give students the opportunity to practice after they have learnt certain concepts.”*

***“Informant-2:** I provide opportunities to practice during the application step and practice when students do activities. For example, I give them a debate assignment on discussion texts, so they will know what the steps of the debate are, what needs to be conveyed during the debate, etc. So they practice organizing and exploring the phenomenon they will debate. From there they practice to compile and explore the phenomenon that they will debate.”*

From the experience of both participants, before asking students to complete a specific task or project, teachers provide simpler problem-solving exercises to help students understand the strategies needed to complete the task. By providing practice before assessment, a teacher can help students build strong understanding, and improve their critical thinking.

***“Informant-1:** Yes, by giving questions, at the beginning I give more basic questions but later the questions will develop to be more difficult because I encourage students to continue thinking and giving statements.”*

***“Informant-2:** Yes, the practice that I applied to them was related to critical thinking because they had to analyse the phenomenon they were discussing in order for the debate to run smoothly.”*

The interview result above teacher said that every practice is related to critical thinking. From the questions given by the teacher, the practical tasks carried out in groups allow students to share ideas from various points of view.

Review, Refine, and Improve

This systematic approach to improving student performance or learning outcomes involves evaluation, repair and improvement actions as appropriate. This process aims to ensure that students continue to develop and reach their full potential.

“Informant-1: For reviewing I give in every lesson at the end of teaching activities, I will give questions related to the material, while in the final section I do it with daily tests.”

“Informant-2: To review my learning process from monitoring learning outcomes, their grades, their responses, and reflections on student performance. So that as teachers we can introspect whether our strategies are working to create an active classroom.”

Based on the statements of both participants above, pre-service teachers review the learning process by providing reviews where they may still need additional help or understanding, students and teachers can work together to review the work, provide feedback, and identify what needs to be improved, then students and teachers can set learning objectives based on the results of previous reviews and improvements.

“Informant-1: In class I tend to want students to be more active in class activities, so I improve the way they collaborate with groups, and so far they are more active when in groups because they can discuss, exchange ideas etc.”

“Informant-2: Through evaluation of student learning outcomes, student participation is sufficient or not, so I continue to improve my strategies for learning.”

The above statement shows how pre-service teachers measure the improvement of their strategies. They both see from the evaluation results, how their students collaborate actively in the classroom. Because with groups students show more active and enthusiastic behavior.

Teacher Provide Feedback

Teacher feedback is the process by which teachers provide evaluations, suggestions or comments on student performance, helping students recognize areas for improvement and increasing the bond between teachers and students to strengthen the learning connection.

“Informant-1: Yes, I explain to students about the assessment standards. Such as attendance, their assignments, their active participation etc. So that they can think whether their grades are sufficient or not.”

“Informant-2: Yes, I explain the assessment standards and criteria that must be met.”

Based on the statements above, pre-service teachers explain the assessment standards and criteria to the students so that they can plan and direct their efforts according to the teacher's expectations.

“Informant-1: Incidentally, I hold material about narrative text, so the assessment has 3 stages based on the CP that has been made, introduction to the material, and analysis of the story, to make a story before the daily test based on students' ideas.”

“Informant-2: At that time there was a debate practice, so the assignment was in groups. So I used a rubric, not only me who assessed but his friends also assessed.”

The statement above explains that how pre-service teachers make assessments. They make the assessment in each task sequentially. It also shows a student-centered learning approach and reflects the evaluation stage in Bloom's taxonomy. It encourages students' idea development, engagement and independence in their learning.

“Informant-1: At the end of the lesson, I ask some questions about narrative text. What they know and what they don't know and what you got out of today is like that.”

“Informant-2: Yes, I give it in the follow up session, I give feedback in the form of an exit ticket that they can fill in about what they have learned today, how you feel in learning this time so that it can be used for evaluation.”

The above statement shows that pre-service teachers provide feedback at the end to help teachers understand the extent to which students have understood the material and can identify areas that may require additional attention.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the whole research problems which have been presented above, the researcher concludes this study as follows:

Some of the challenges faced by prospective teachers in the teaching process are three, including teacher knowledge, where teachers must understand how to make learning plans taking into account students' level and cognitive abilities. The second teacher is preparation, the teacher prepares strategies and teaching activities that contain hotspots. Third is the student's ability which shows how the student's abilities are. Lack of self-awareness in student's means teachers have to expend more energy to make activities interesting. Because some students have difficulty concentrating and don't like English. Some students are also active and tend to always take notes on what the teacher says.

The first strategy used by the teacher is to prepare a learning plan that is relevant to the students' cognitive level with consideration of bloom taxonomy. The second is teach through questioning, namely pre-service teachers giving hot questions to see students' effectiveness and understanding. Because when asked a question students are able to respond further and show interest, this can make students think critically in follow-up questions. Third, namely practice before judgment. This strategy is used in class by providing practice before the assessment. The exercises given contain hot spots for critical thinking because they have to analyze the phenomena they discuss. Teachers tend to often give group assignments because when they are in group's students can be more active. The fourth strategy is review, refine, and improve. The teacher reviews the learning process, namely by reviewing it at the end of the lesson by asking several questions to find out which understanding the students still need. Fifth, namely the teacher provide feedback strategy. Every activity has an assessment so that teachers always convey their assessment standards and criteria so that they can plan and direct their efforts according to expectations. They assess each task sequentially. Not only teachers, students are also given the opportunity to assess their themes when there are group assignments.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this research, there are several recommendations that are potentially useful for improving students' higher-order thinking abilities. The English teacher asks students questions in stages from low-level questions to high-level questions. Even though most students' abilities are good, higher level thinking still needs to be trained gradually. Researchers also suggest teachers to develop their teaching strategies to motivate students to learn English and explore their thinking skills.

Meanwhile, for future researchers, this research still has several shortcomings. Therefore, research regarding the development of students' higher-order thinking abilities is still an important and potential area for research. The researcher suggests that future researchers explore students' higher-order thinking abilities with more in-depth analysis, different research designs, varied participant groups, and with more valid instruments.

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