

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Background

Critical thinking is a mental and emotional process that involves scientific analysis, evaluation, and improvement based on new situations and criteria. It requires the disciplined application of effective and unbiased thinking, as well as the ability to conduct thorough examination and inquiry in the pursuit of knowledge (Özelçi & Çalışkan, 2019). Critical thinking plays an important role in enhancing students' ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information, which in turn strengthens their problem-solving skills (Raj et al., 2022). Without an adequate understanding of critical thinking, students will face various challenges, such as a lack of clear and rational thinking skills, making it difficult for them to analyze information and make sound decisions. Moreover, they will struggle to solve problems systematically and effectively. A lack of creative thinking skills is also a consequence of poor critical thinking ability, which hinders their capacity to generate innovative solutions. Finally, without critical thinking skills, students will find it difficult to cope with uncertainty and solve complex problems (Hidayati, Sari, Mellisa, & Maharani, 2023).

Research on the implementation of critical thinking in English language learning has been conducted by several scholars with the aim of understanding how the use of critical

thinking can enhance English language skills, particularly among ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. Gandimati and Zarei (2018) concluded that the application of critical thinking in learning can help students engage in reflective and independent thinking, which in turn improves their problem-solving abilities. Furthermore, a study by Liang and Fung (2021) revealed that students who actively participated in group discussions demonstrated clear critical thinking through the use of explicit reasoning and the exploration of new ideas, which contributed to the improvement of their language skills.

In addition, there have been studies examining strategies to develop critical thinking skills in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. Koukpossi et al. (2024) highlighted several effective approaches to enhancing critical thinking skills, such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based teaching, and problem-solving tasks. They also emphasized the importance of integrating real-world issues into the curriculum to facilitate the development of critical thinking abilities. Yin et al. (2023) identified six key techniques for integrating critical thinking in writing, including the explicit teaching of critical thinking concepts, creating a socially interactive learning environment, and utilizing online technologies that support the learning process. Srisudarso (2024) also indicated that teaching English literature through a narrative approach not only enriches students' linguistic competence but also encourages them to think critically.

Other studies have revealed a strong correlation between critical thinking skills and the improvement of English language proficiency. Isawi and Al-Mahmoud (2021) stated that effective English language instruction can enhance critical thinking skills, with the use of authentic tasks and group discussions being the most effective strategies. Todorovska (2024) emphasized that teachers' understanding of the value of critical thinking is crucial in the language learning process. Furthermore, Gajić (2024) found a significant correlation between students' critical thinking abilities and their success in learning a foreign language, indicating that students with stronger critical thinking skills tend to perform better in learning English. This correlation was also evident in critical thinking tests that measured deductive reasoning, which was shown to have an impact on English language learning success.

Although numerous studies have explored the importance of critical thinking in English language learning, there remains a research gap regarding the implementation of critical thinking within the context of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) for junior high school students. Existing research has primarily focused on adult or higher-level ESL or EFL learners, while critical thinking skills among younger students—particularly at the junior high school level—have not been extensively examined. Furthermore, despite the availability of various strategies for developing critical thinking skills, no study has specifically investigated how PjBL can be applied to enhance critical

thinking abilities among eighth-grade students in junior high school.

Previous studies have shown that critical thinking plays a vital role in English language learning, particularly in enhancing the skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information, which ultimately lead to improved problem-solving abilities (Raj et al., 2022). Several studies have also revealed that inquiry-based approaches, collaborative learning, and the use of group discussions can facilitate the development of critical thinking skills among language learners (Koukpossi et al., 2024). On the other hand, Project-Based Learning (PjBL), as an approach that engages students in real and authentic projects, is expected to promote the development of critical thinking skills through the resolution of relevant and contextual problems.

The implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in the context of English language learning can offer numerous benefits, particularly in fostering students' critical thinking skills. For instance, Gandimati and Zarei (2018) revealed that approaches that facilitate reflective and independent thinking can enhance students' problem-solving abilities. Similarly, the study by Isawi and Al-Mahmoud (2021) demonstrated that group discussions and authentic tasks are highly effective in developing critical thinking skills. By integrating PjBL—which engages students in project-based learning processes—it is expected that a supportive environment can be created to cultivate critical thinking skills among junior high school

students, which in turn may lead to a comprehensive improvement in their English language proficiency.

## **B. Identification of the Problem**

Based on the background previously described, the researcher has identified several key issues in the English language learning process that require attention:

1. Students' lack of understanding of critical thinking leads to poor analytical and decision-making skills.
2. Students struggle to solve problems systematically due to limited critical thinking abilities.
3. Limitations in critical thinking result in weak capabilities to generate innovative and creative solutions.
4. Students find it difficult to cope with uncertain situations due to a lack of flexible critical thinking skills.
5. Existing research on critical thinking primarily focuses on adult EFL learners rather than junior high school students.
6. There is still limited research examining the relationship between Project-Based Learning and junior high school students' critical thinking skills.
7. Critical thinking strategies have not been widely applied in a contextual manner within project-based learning at the junior high school level.
8. The lack of real-world issue integration in learning projects hinders the development of critical thinking among junior high school students.

9. No study has yet evaluated the effectiveness of PjBL in enhancing the critical thinking skills of eighth-grade junior high school students.
10. There is a lack of teacher training in implementing the PjBL approach to support the development of critical thinking skills.

### **C. Limitation of the Problem**

This study is limited to the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) to enhance critical thinking skills in English language learning among eighth-grade students at SMPN 11 Bengkulu Tengah. The focus of the research includes the impact of PjBL on the development of critical thinking, students' experiences during project-based learning, and their perceptions of the process. This study does not cover other grade levels, subjects, or schools, nor does it examine other cognitive skills beyond critical thinking within the context of English language learning.

### **D. Research Questions**

This study aims to explore students' perceptions of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and its contribution to the development of critical thinking skills in the English class:

1. How do students' perceptions in project-based learning contribute to the development of their critical thinking skills in the English class?

## **E. The Purposes of the Research**

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the impact of implementing Project-Based Learning (PjBL) on enhancing critical thinking skills among eighth-grade students in English language learning at SMPN 11 Bengkulu Tengah. The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze how the implementation of Project- Based Learning influences the improvement of critical thinking skills in the English class for eighth-grade students at SMPN 11 Bengkulu Tengah.

Through this research, it is expected to gain in- depth insights into the effectiveness of Project- Based Learning in fostering critical thinking skills and to understand how students' perceptions shape this development. The findings of this study will provide valuable contributions to the enhancement of English language teaching strategies, particularly in promoting critical thinking among young learners.

## **F. The Significants of the Research**

The primary purpose of this study is to explore students' perceptions of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and how these perceptions contribute to the development of their critical thinking skills in the English class at SMPN 11 Bengkulu Tengah.

This study further aims to provide a detailed description of students' perceptions related to the

implementation of Project-Based Learning, particularly in terms of learning engagement, collaboration, and the development of critical thinking skills. Through this research, a clearer understanding is expected regarding how students perceive the role of project-based learning in supporting their critical thinking development in the English classroom.

### **G. Operational Definitions of Key Terms**

In this study, several key terms are used to clarify the concepts that are the main focus. Here are the operational definitions of these terms:

1. *Project-Based Learning (PjBL)* is a learning approach that actively involves students in completing real-world projects to develop critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills.
2. *Critical Thinking* is the ability to think logically and systematically to analyze, evaluate, and solve problems through reflection and evidence-based assessment.
3. *Young Learners* are children aged 6–12 years with characteristics of active learning, a high level of curiosity, and the need for interactive and creative activities to support cognitive and emotional development.