

Socratic Questioning Method (SQM) to Enhance Students' Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

EFL students' reading comprehension and critical thinking remain a challenge, especially in boarding school environments that demand independent learning. This research investigates the Socratic Questioning Method (SQM) in an EFL classroom and its effectiveness in improving students' reading comprehension and critical thinking. The type of this research is Classroom Action Research conducted in two cycles involving planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages. The participants were 50 eleventh-grade students. The data were collected through reading and critical thinking tests, observations, and questionnaires, then analyzed using descriptive quantitative and qualitative methods. The findings of this research showed a significant improvement in students' performance. The mean score increased from 59.8 (pre-test) to 71.2 (Cycle I) and 83.6 (Cycle II), while mastery level rose from 36% to 90%. Qualitative data also indicated increased student critical thinking through participation, confidence, and analytical thinking during reading activities.

Keywords: Socratic Questioning Method, Reading Comprehension, Critical Thinking, EFL.



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Metode Pertanyaan Sokratik (SQM) untuk Meningkatkan Pemahaman Membaca dan Kemampuan Berpikir Kritis Siswa dalam Kelas EFL

Abstrak

Kemampuan pemahaman membaca dan berpikir kritis siswa EFL masih menjadi tantangan, terutama di lingkungan sekolah berasrama yang menuntut kemandirian dalam belajar. Penelitian ini menginvestigasi penerapan Socratic Questioning Method (SQM) dalam pembelajaran EFL serta efektivitasnya dalam meningkatkan pemahaman membaca dan kemampuan berpikir kritis siswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan jenis Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (PTK) yang dilaksanakan dalam dua siklus dengan tahapan perencanaan, pelaksanaan tindakan, observasi, dan refleksi. Partisipan penelitian terdiri atas 50 siswa kelas XI. Data dikumpulkan melalui tes pemahaman membaca dan berpikir kritis, observasi, serta kuesioner, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan metode deskriptif kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya peningkatan yang signifikan dalam kinerja siswa. Nilai rata-rata meningkat dari 59,8 pada tahap prates menjadi 71,2 pada siklus I dan 83,6 pada siklus II, sedangkan tingkat ketuntasan meningkat dari 36% menjadi 90%. Data kualitatif juga menunjukkan peningkatan kemampuan berpikir kritis siswa yang ditunjukkan melalui partisipasi, kepercayaan diri, dan kemampuan berpikir analitis selama kegiatan membaca.

Kata kunci: Socratic Questioning Method, Pemahaman Membaca, Berpikir Kritis, EFL.

INTRODUCTION

English language learning encompasses four fundamental skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These four language skills are interconnected and play a crucial role in developing learners' overall communicative competence. Students are expected to master all of these skills to achieve effective language proficiency. Among these skills, reading is particularly important in today's information-rich society. Through reading, students gain access to knowledge, ideas, and information from various sources, including books, academic texts, news articles, and social media platforms. Critical thinking is an important cognitive skill that every individual should have. This is because the vast amount of information available today requires readers not only to understand the content but also to evaluate its credibility, relevance, and accuracy (Marwan, 2024).

Consequently, reading skills are closely associated with critical thinking, as readers must analyze, and assess information before accepting it as valid.

Several challenges are commonly encountered by students in learning English. Those problems are, 1) Many students have limited vocabulary knowledge, which obstruct their ability to comprehend and use the language effectively, 2) The students often have insufficient opportunities to practice English in authentic communication contexts, 3) Conventional teaching methods may fail to stimulate students' interest and motivation, resulting in passive participation during the learning process (The result of observation at Assalaam Modern Islamic Boarding School on May 4, 2026). These challenges may obstruct the development of students' language proficiency. Therefore, there is a need for innovative and interesting instructional approaches that can enhance students' motivation, and participation in English language learning outcomes.

Paul and Elder in Mahmud (2023) stated that Socratic questioning is a type of disciplined questioning that can be used to pursue though in a variety of directions and for a variety of purposes, including: to explore complex ideas, to ascertain the truth, to open up issues and problems, and to analyze concepts. The implementation of the Socratic Questioning Method (SQM) consists of six stages. First, students present a material related to the learning topic. Second, the students engage in questioning by asking and answering SQM to clarify the ideas. Third, another student or group presents an antithesis by offering alternative or opposing arguments. Fourth, students discuss and examine the evidence from different perspectives. Fifth, the teacher or a designated group synthesizes the arguments to reach a balanced conclusion. Finally, students reflect on the discussion and summarize the key learning points (Telaumbanua, 2025).

Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of Socratic Questioning in English language learning. Abidah (2022) found that Socratic Questioning improved students' critical reading and deeper text comprehension. Meanwhile, Almaliki (2017) reported that it enhanced students' analytical and evaluative thinking skills in EFL classrooms. Gunawan et al. (2024) further revealed that Socratic Questioning fostered critical thinking and increased classroom engagement. Similarly, Saputri et al. (2024) showed that integrating Socratic Questioning with critical reading

strategies significantly improved reading comprehension and interpretation of argumentative texts. Moreover, Awawda (2026) emphasized its role in promoting higher-order thinking skills, including analysis, inference, and evaluation in EFL learning contexts.

Although previous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of Socratic Questioning in enhancing critical thinking and reading skills, several gaps remain. Most studies have been conducted in university settings, with limited research in Indonesian modern boarding school-based EFL classrooms. In addition, prior research has largely focused on either critical thinking or reading comprehension, while the integration of critical thinking and reading engagement has received less attention. Furthermore, few studies have employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach to examine the continuous implementation and improvement of Socratic Questioning in authentic classroom contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by implementing Socratic Questioning through CAR in a modern boarding school-based EFL classroom, focusing on both students' critical thinking and reading engagement.

The research problem that will be answered in this article, include: What are the processes involved in implementing the Socratic Questioning Method to enhance students' reading comprehension and critical thinking in Assalaam Islamic Modern Boarding School. The research questions serve as the foundation of this research. It will guide the investigation of how the SQM is implemented in EFL reading instruction and how it contributes to the enhancement of students' critical thinking and reading comprehension. Through these questions, the research aims to improve the quality of learning in the EFL classroom.

METHOD

This research aims to investigate the implementation of the Socratic Questioning Method based EFL classroom and to examine its effectiveness in improving students' critical thinking and reading engagement during reading activities. The kind of this research is Classroom Action Research (CAR). The research was conducted through four cycle stages of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting to improve classroom practices and students' learning outcomes (Bangun, 2018).

The participants of this research were 50 eleventh-grade students of Assalaam Modern Islamic Boarding School in two classes. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. The eleventh-grade students were chosen because preliminary classroom observations indicated that they experienced difficulties in reading comprehension and critical thinking.

To collect comprehensive data, the research employed four research instruments: document analysis, reading tests, classroom observations, and questionnaires. The reading test was used to measure students' reading comprehension achievement, while the questionnaire was used to assess students' critical thinking skills. Classroom observations and document analysis were employed to support and validate the findings by providing evidence of students' participation, learning processes and classroom implementation. This Classroom Action Research was conducted in two cycles, with each cycle consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages. The stages are explained as follows:

a. Planning

In the planning stage, the researcher identified the classroom problems through preliminary observations and discussions with the English teacher. The researcher also prepared reading materials, classroom activities, observation sheets, questionnaires, reading tests, and other supporting instruments to facilitate the implementation of SQM.

b. Acting

In the acting stage, the researcher implemented the planned learning activities using SCM in the reading lessons. Students were guided through structured questioning techniques to activate prior knowledge, analyze textual information, evaluate ideas, and justify their responses. The learning activities encouraged students to participate actively in discussions and develop both reading comprehension and critical thinking skills.

c. Observing

In the observing stage, the researcher observed the teaching and learning process using observation sheets. Students' participation, engagement, interaction, and responses to the Socratic questioning activities were documented. In addition, students' reading test results, questionnaire responses, and classroom documents were collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the implemented action.

d. Reflecting

In the reflecting stage, the researcher analyzes the data obtained from observations, reading tests, questionnaires, and classroom documentation. The strengths and weaknesses of the implementation were identified to determine whether the planned objectives had been achieved. The reflection results were then used to revise and improve the instructional strategies and classroom activities before conducting the next cycle.

The data analysis methods in this research are quantitative and qualitative. Qualitative data consist of student observation results. Whereas, quantitative data are student scores in the pre-test and post-test. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics which the researcher calculate the average student scores and data were explained descriptively by explaining, connecting, and comparing the information collected during the research. Furthermore, the students' mean scores and the percentage of students achieving the minimum mastery criterion (KKM) were compared across the pre-test, Cycle I, and Cycle II to identify the extent of students' learning progress. The qualitative data obtained from classroom observations were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to describe students' participation and engagement during the implementation of the Socratic Questioning Method (SCM).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The processes involved in implementing the Socratic Questioning Method in a boarding school-based EFL classroom. The implementation of the Socratic Questioning Method (SQM) was conducted through two action cycles, each consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages.

a. Cycle 1

In the planning stage, the researcher prepared lesson plans based on the reading curriculum, selected appropriate reading texts, and designed initial Socratic questioning guides. The questions were mainly focused on basic comprehension and initial critical thinking, such as: "What is the main idea of the text?", "What information supports the author's opinion?", and "What does the word/phrase mean in this context?". In addition, observation sheets, reading tests, and interview guidelines were also developed to collect data.

In the acting stage, the teacher implemented reading instruction using SQM. Students were asked to read the text individually and then respond to guided questions. The questioning process began with clarification questions (What does the author mean by this statement?), followed by evidence-based questions (What proof is provided in the text?), and simple analytical questions (Why does the author give this argument?). However, students still tended to give short and factual answers without deeper explanation.

In the observing stage, the researcher recorded students' participation, responses, and engagement during classroom interaction. The data showed that only a small number of students actively responded to higher-order questions, while most students were passive and hesitant to express their opinions.

In the reflecting stage, the researcher identified several weaknesses in Cycle I, particularly the lack of student confidence and limited exposure to higher-order Socratic questions. Therefore, improvements were made for Cycle II, including more structured questioning sequences, modeling of answers, and increased collaborative discussion activities. The results of the reflection also indicate that students require more opportunities to provide reasons supported by textual evidence and to engage in deeper classroom dialogue. Furthermore, the teacher recognizes the importance of providing adequate scaffolding to help students construct analytical responses, rather than simply recalling factual information.

Table 1. Summary of English Reading Test Results through Socratic Questioning Method (Cycle I)

No	Description	Pre-test	Post-test 1
1	Total Score Obtained	2990	3560
2	Number of Students Achieving KKM (≥ 70)	18	35
3	Number of Students Not Achieving KKM	32	15
4	Percentage of Mastery	36%	70%
5	Mean Score	59.8	71.2

The results presented in table 1 indicate a significant improvement in students' reading performance after the implementation of the Socratic Questioning Method in Cycle I. The number of students achieving the minimum mastery criteria (KKM ≥ 70) increased from 18 students (36%) in the pre-test to 35 students (70%) in the post-test I. In addition, the mean score improved from 59.8 to 71.2, demonstrating that the implementation of SQM contributed positively to students' reading comprehension and critical thinking development.

b. Cycle II

In the planning stage, the Socratic Questioning Method was revised by incorporating more higher-order thinking questions, such as: “Do you agree with the author’s argument? Why or why not?”, “What alternative perspectives can you identify?”, and “What are the possible consequences of this idea?”. Group discussion tasks were also added to encourage interaction among students.

In the acting stage, students engaged more actively in reading and discussion activities. They worked in groups to analyze texts and responded to layered Socratic Questions ranging from clarification to evaluation. The teacher facilitated discussions by encouraging students to justify their answers and challenge each other’s opinions.

In the observing stage, students showed significant improvement in participation and confidence. They were more willing to express opinions, provide evidence from the text, and engage in argumentative discussions.

Finally, in the reflecting stage, it was concluded that the revised implementation of SQM successfully improved classroom interaction and supported students’ critical thinking development. The learning process became more interactive, and students demonstrated higher engagement compared to Cycle I. This improvement was evident in students’ increased participation, more meaningful responses, and greater willingness to engage in analytical discussions. It can be concluded that Cycle II demonstrated a more effective implementation of SQM in fostering both critical thinking behavior in the EFL classroom.

Table 2. Summary of English Reading Test Results through Socratic Questioning Method (Cycle II)

No	Description	Post-test I (Cycle I)	Post-test II (Cycle II)
1	Total Score Obtained	3560	4180
2	Number of Students Achieving KKM (≥ 70)	35	45
3	Number of Students Not Achieving KKM	15	5
4	Percentage of Mastery	70%	90%
5	Mean Score	71.2	83.6

The results in Table 2 show a further improvement in students’ reading performance after the implementation of Cycle II. The number of students who achieved the minimum mastery criteria (KKM ≥ 70) increased from 35 students (70%) in Cycle I to 45 students (90%) in Cycle II. Similarly, the mean score

improved from 71.2 to 83.6, indicating that the revised implementation of the Socratic Questioning Method was more effective in enhancing students' reading comprehension and critical thinking skills.

Discussion

The findings of this research indicate that the implementation of the Socratic Questioning Method (SQM) in EFL reading instruction successfully improved students' critical thinking and reading performance. The improvement can be observed from the continuous increase in students' mean scores and mastery levels across the three stages of the study, namely the pre-test, Cycle I, and Cycle II.

In the pre-test stage, the students' reading performance was relatively low with a mean score of 59.8 and only 36% of students achieved the minimum mastery criteria (KKM). This condition reflected that most students still experienced difficulties in understanding reading texts, particularly in analyzing and interpreting information critically.

After the implementation of SQM in Cycle I, there was a significant improvement in students' performance. The mean score increased to 71.2, and the percentage of students achieving KKM rose to 70%. This improvement indicates that Socratic questioning began to stimulate students' thinking processes by encouraging them to respond to guided questions such as clarification, evidence-based, and simple analytical questions. However, the observation results showed that some students were still hesitant to express their opinions and tended to provide short, factual answers. This suggests that students were still adapting to the new learning strategy.

In Cycle II, after the refinement of instructional strategies, including more structured higher-order questioning, group discussions, and teacher modeling, students showed a more significant improvement. The mean score increased to 83.6, and 90% of students achieved the KKM. Students become more confident in expressing their ideas, providing textual evidence, and evaluating different perspectives. The use of higher-order Socratic questions such as evaluation and implication questions helps students develop deeper critical thinking skills.

These findings are in line with previous studies (Abidah, 2022; Gunawan et al., 2024; Saputri et al., 2024), which state that Socratic Questioning is effective in improving students' critical thinking and reading comprehension. The results also support the idea that interactive questioning strategies promote active learning and meaningful classroom interaction. Furthermore, the improvement from Cycle I to

Cycle II highlights that continuous reflection and improvement in Classroom Action Research play an important role in optimizing instructional outcomes. The iterative process allowed the teacher to adjust questioning strategies and classroom activities based on students' needs, which ultimately led to better learning outcomes.

Compared to previous studies, this research presents several distinguishing features that constitute its novelty. It employs a Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach focusing on instructional improvement through multiple cycles which differs from most prior studies that predominantly utilized qualitative approaches. Furthermore, the research goes beyond merely enhancing reading comprehension by integrating the development of critical thinking skills through the application of the Socratic Questioning Method (SQM). It was also conducted in Islamic boarding school setting, a context where the application of SQM has rarely been explored. The findings demonstrate that integrating SQM into reading comprehension instruction is effective in improving reading comprehension while simultaneously fostering students' critical thinking skills within an EFL context.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the implementation of the Socratic Questioning Method (SQM) is effective in improving students' critical thinking and reading engagement in a boarding school-based EFL classroom. The findings from two cycles of Classroom Action Research (CAR) show consistent improvement in students' reading performance, participation, and learning outcomes.

The improvement is evidenced by the increase in students' mean scores from 59.8 in the pre-test to 71.2 in Cycle I, and further to 83.6 in Cycle II. In addition, the percentage of students achieving the minimum mastery criteria (KKM ≥ 70) significantly increased from 36% in the pre-test to 70% in Cycle I, and reached 90% in Cycle II. These results indicate that SQM contributes positively to students' reading comprehension and critical thinking development.

Furthermore, the implementation of SQM through structured questioning techniques encouraged students to become more active, confident, and analytical in responding to reading texts. The use of higher-order Socratic Questions in Cycle II, such as evaluation and implication questions, played an important role in enhancing students' ability to analyze, interpret, and evaluate information critically.

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