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The Alchemist Book Review as a Medium for Strengthening High School Students' Critical Thinking

Trisno Mas'ud Ramadan*, Sabrina, Reilla Amelia, Qonita Luthfiya, Nia Kumaladewi

Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: trisnomramadan@gmail.com

Abstract

The era of globalization necessitates that the younger generation acquire essential 21st-century skills, with critical thinking being one of the most pivotal. However, empirical evidence reveals that adolescents still exhibit relatively low proficiency in this area, despite its vital contribution to academic success, extracurricular achievement, and everyday decision-making. Addressing this concern, a community service initiative introduced an innovative educational strategy through a book discussion program aimed at fostering critical thinking. The chosen text, *The Alchemist*, offers profound narratives on life journeys and personal introspection. Implemented at SMAN 10 Depok, the program engaged 11th-grade students using the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) method, encompassing intensive reading, collaborative dialogue, and reflective presentations. The intervention resulted in notable enhancement of students' analytical, interpretive, and evaluative skills, alongside the cultivation of critical and reflective discourse. Furthermore, the activity contributed to the revitalization of literacy culture among learners. Consequently, the book discussion initiative demonstrated its effectiveness as a contemporary pedagogical approach to strengthening adolescents' critical thinking competencies.

Keywords: book review, critical thinking, community service, the alchemist, literacy, reflective

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of globalization, scientific and technological advancements are occurring at a rapid pace and impacting nearly every aspect of life, including education (Ramadhana et al., 2022). This situation requires students to master 21st-century skills, which include communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, positive character development, and responsible citizenship (Triana & Amelia, 2024). Among these competencies, critical thinking skills are crucial because they play a vital role in logical decision-making processes based on empirical evidence.

Critical thinking skills are cognitive competencies that enable individuals to analyze, evaluate, and draw rational conclusions when faced with various problems (Pamungkas & Wantoro, 2024). This competency not only supports academic achievement but also prepares students to overcome real-life challenges. In the Indonesian context, critical thinking skills are included among the fundamental competencies required for students, tailored to their developmental stage (Anggraeni et al., 2021).

However, several studies have revealed that the critical thinking skills of Indonesian students remain low. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data continues to show that Indonesian students' achievement in scientific literacy and analytical problem-solving skills has not yet reached the expected standard (OECD, 2024). Research conducted by Benyamin et al., 2021, shows that high school students' critical thinking skills remain weak, with an average score of only 43.01%. Furthermore, a study by Rofi'ah & Rokhmaniyah, 2024, revealed that 85% of students fall into the very low category. This situation is further exacerbated by Indonesia's weak literacy tradition, with UNESCO data showing that public reading interest is only 0.001% (Anisa et al., 2021) and Indonesia's literacy ranking is 60th out of 61 countries (Pitri & Sofia, 2022). This condition is in line with the finding that weak literacy quality also contributes to the hampered development of critical thinking

competencies in the school environment (Fitriani et al., 2022).

One way to develop students' critical thinking skills is by strengthening literary literacy. Literary literacy not only encourages students to understand reading material at a simple level but also requires them to interpret, evaluate, and reflect on the substance of a work (Sinaga et al., 2023). Book reviews are a promising learning approach because they encourage students to engage in discussions, express their views, and critique the ideas presented by the author.

Referring to this situation, this research focuses on the implementation of The Alchemist book review activities at the high school level. Paulo Coelho's novel *The Alchemist* was chosen as the object of the book review because it has a multidisciplinary depth of meaning that can be studied from various perspectives. (Imran et al., 2022) revealed that Santiago's journey is not solely about the search for wealth, but rather a psychological journey towards Jungian individuation that emphasizes the importance of self-integration (Khan et al., 2025) highlighting the harmony between materialism and spirituality, where gold, love, and friendship serve as symbols of inner transformation. From an existentialist perspective, (Nuri, 2018) asserts that Santiago's freedom of choice and responsibility reflect the essence of humans as beings "condemned to be free" according to Sartre. Psychological analysis by (Gharizata, 2022) adds that Santiago's inner conflict is the main driver of his personality development, while research (Suhendar et al., 2024) emphasizes the novel's moral dimension, which is rich in the values of responsibility, courage, honesty, and determination, making it relevant for character development. Therefore, *The Alchemist* is worthy of in-depth study because it not only offers an inspiring story but also presents psychological, philosophical, spiritual, and moral reflections that are universal and relevant to contemporary human life.

METHOD

Community service activities were held at SMA Negeri 10 Depok for class XI.4 students on August 13, 2025. In order for the program to run effectively and in a targeted manner, the activities were carried out through the following stages:

1. Observation Implementation Stage

Observations were conducted to determine students' initial conditions, classroom characteristics, and the school's readiness to support activities. Additionally, brief interviews with subject teachers were conducted to identify students' needs and potential in literacy activities.

2. Introduction to Material and Provision Stage

This stage is implemented through a short lecture aimed at providing an overview of the contents of the novel *The Alchemist* and the concept of moral reflection that will be studied. The lecture is combined with *Focus Group Discussion* (FGD) as the main method, in accordance with the view (Kitzinger, 1994) that FGD is effective for exploring understanding through group interaction. FGD has also been proven to be able to encourage active student participation and develop critical thinking (Morgan, 1997; O.Nyumba et al., 2018).

3. Implementation Stages of Book Review Activities

- a. Students are grouped into several small teams.
- b. Each team examines a specific section of the novel *The Alchemist*.
- c. Each team then presented the results of their reflections and discussions in a joint presentation session.
- d. The facilitator guides the discussion, linking the novel's moral message to students' life experiences.
- e. The activity continued with a question and answer session to deepen understanding.

Evaluation Stage: Evaluation activities were conducted through observations of student engagement in FGDs and group presentations. Observation data were classified qualitatively using the teacher and student activity assessment guidelines outlined (Kusuma et al., 2023).

Table 1. Categories of Teacher and Student Activity Assessment

Percentage Level	Information
80% - 100%	Very good
60% - 79%	Good
40% - 59%	Enough
20% - 39%	Not enough
0% - 19%	Very less

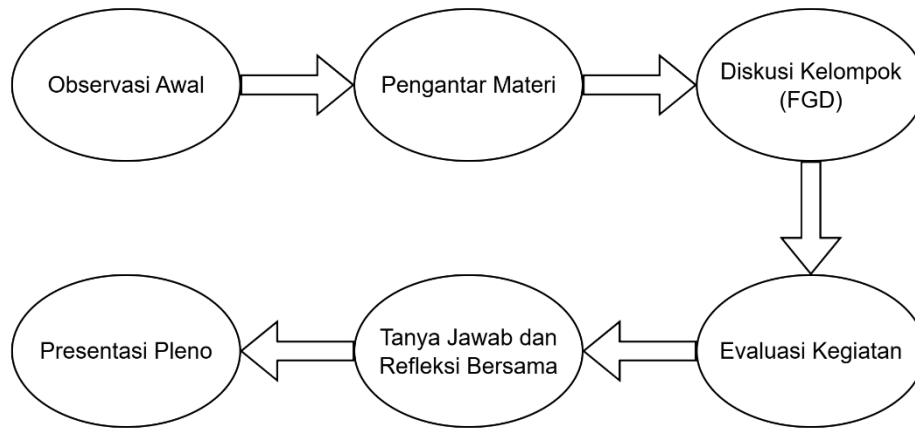


Figure 1. Activity steps

Table 2. Table of Partner Participation in Program Implementation

No	Activity Focus	Activity plan	Activity	Partner Participation
1	Introduction to the material and objectives of the activity	A brief explanation of the novel <i>The Alchemist</i> and the concept of moral reflection	Delivery of material (synopsis)	Providing classroom space
2	Group discussion with FGD	Group division, in-depth study of parts of the novel	Discussion and reflection in groups	Providing classroom space
3	Presentation of reflection results	The group presents the results of the discussion in the plenary session.	Presentation and clarification	Providing classroom space
4	Strengthening moral values and social relevance	Question and answer session and plenary discussion guided by a facilitator	Joint reflection	Providing classroom space
5	Evaluation of activities	Observation and assessment of student activities	Classification of results into qualitative categories	Providing classroom space

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The book review of "*The Alchemist*" was held with the participation of 36 students from grade XI.4 of SMA Negeri 10 Depok. The students were grouped into small teams to examine specific sections of the novel. Each team presented their discussions in a plenary session led by a mentor.

Based on observations and student reflection results, the following data was found:

Table 2. Data from the Results of the Book Review of The Alchemist

Observed Aspects	Key Findings	Percentage/Indicator	Qualitative Category
Student Activities	Students actively discuss, ask questions, and provide responses.	87.5% Active	Very good
Analysis	Students are able to describe the meaning of symbols and moral messages of novels with logical arguments.	71.2%	Good
Interpretation	Students can relate the values in the novel to personal experiences and social realities.	68.4%	Good
Evaluation	Students assess the relevance of the novel's moral message to real life.	74.6%	Good
Culture of Literacy & Reflection	Students felt the activity encouraged deeper reading and discussion.	81.3% admitted to being motivated	Very good

The book review of "*The Alchemist*" at SMA Negeri 10 Depok demonstrated highly satisfactory student engagement. In terms of activity, 87.5% of students actively participated in discussions, asking questions, and responding to their peers' ideas, with an attendance rate of 100%. According to Kusuma et al.'s (2023) classification, this achievement is considered very high.

In the critical thinking competency aspect, the analysis indicator achieved a score of 71.2%, indicating that the majority of students successfully explained the meaning of the symbols and moral teachings in the novel using logical reasoning. This score is considered high. Meanwhile, the interpretation indicator achieved a score of 68.4%, indicating that students' ability to connect the novel's values to personal experiences or social realities fell into the sufficient category.

The evaluation indicator then showed a score of 74.6%, categorizing it as high, as the majority of students were able to gauge the relevance of the novel's moral message to real life. Regarding literacy traditions and reflection, 81.3% of students reported that this activity motivated them to be more interested in reading literary works and to engage in in-depth discussions. This result qualifies as very high.

To strengthen the presentation of the results, the following is documentation of the book review activities of *The Alchemist* at SMA Negeri 10 Depok.



Figure 2. The facilitator guides the discussion forum.



Figure 2. The atmosphere of student group discussions during book review activities.

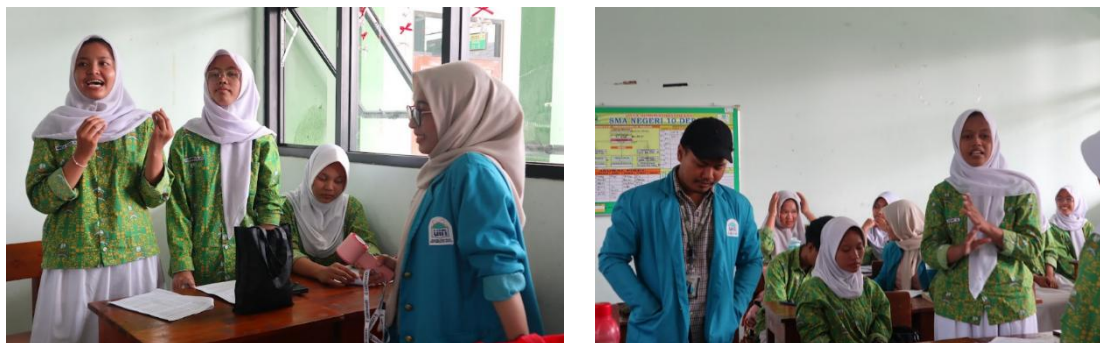


Figure 3. Exchange of ideas between groups.



Figure 4. Presentation of student reflection results in front of the class.

The results of this activity show that literary literacy through book reviews can be a strategic option for developing students' critical thinking skills. This finding aligns with the concept of *constructivist learning*. (Vygotsky, 1978) underscores the importance of social interaction in the process of knowledge formation. Group discussions provide opportunities for students to share perspectives, clarify understanding, and build rational arguments (Gokhale, 1995; Nguyen, 2018) . Advances in analysis, interpretation, and evaluation demonstrate that learning based on non-fiction or literary texts can encourage students to think beyond mere memorization. This is consistent with research (Sinaga et al., 2023) which confirms that literary literacy can foster reflective, critical attitudes, and social awareness in learners.

The Alchemist novel is a suitable resource because of its profound symbolism and philosophical value. Santiago's journey to discover *his personal legend* can be interpreted contextually by students. Thus, learning through book reviews not only sharpens cognitive aspects but also shapes character, moral sensitivity, and literacy traditions.

However, there were several obstacles in implementing the activity. First, the discussion duration was relatively limited, so some groups were unable to examine the entire novel in depth. Second, a small number of students (around 12.5%) still displayed a passive attitude and tended to accept the group's views without making meaningful contributions. This condition indicates the need for more intensive guidance to build students' confidence in expressing ideas (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005) . Overall, the results of the activity indicate that combining literary literacy with a group discussion model successfully improved the quality of 21st-century learning, particularly in developing students' critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills.

CONCLUSION

The book review of *The Alchemist* at SMA Negeri 10 Depok has proven effective in developing students' critical thinking skills through in-depth reading, group discussions, and reflective presentations. Students successfully improved their analytical, interpretation, and evaluation skills compared to their previous levels. Furthermore, this activity fostered a tradition of literacy and fostered critical, creative, and reflective dialogue. Therefore, literary literacy through book reviews can be utilized as a 21st-century learning strategy that focuses not solely on academic achievement but also on character development, collaboration skills, and social awareness.

However, the implementation of this activity still has several limitations. The relatively small number of students participating, as they can only take one class, prevents in-depth testing of this activity. The reading material used is limited to a single book summary, limiting students' scope for literacy exploration. The evaluation of the activity is also qualitative, so it cannot provide a measurable picture of the development of students' critical thinking skills.

Therefore, to ensure that this community service book review program provides optimal and effective benefits, it is recommended that the program be continued and developed into a sustainable literacy program that involves active student participation. Schools are expected to support this effort by providing a wider variety of literary reading materials, so that students have access to a broad and relevant selection of texts. Furthermore, similar activities can be enriched by inviting external speakers, such as authors, alumni, or literacy communities, to provide a more comprehensive perspective. Furthermore, students are expected to continue cultivating the habit of reading and engaging in critical discussion outside of formal activities so that the skills acquired can be consistently maintained and developed.

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