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Strengthening The Critical Thinking Skills Of 11th-Grade Students Through the Zep Quiz Platform When Studying News Articles

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the achievement of critical thinking skills of eleventh-grade students (class XI TKR 4) at SMK Bina Patria 1 Sukoharjo on news text material through Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) questions delivered on the Zep Quiz platform, and to identify the constraints encountered. The study used a descriptive qualitative method involving 34 students. Data were collected through active participant observation and a ten-item HOTS-based quiz and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model (data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing). Achievement on each indicator was categorized using a criterion set by the researchers (≥75% correct = high; 50–74% = moderate; <50% = low). The results show high achievement in evaluating news texts (85.3%) and drawing logical conclusions (75.7%), and moderate achievement in analyzing the accuracy of information (54.9%). The lowest results appeared on items requiring mastery of linguistic concepts (adverbs, 11.8%) and the understanding of implied information (41.2%). Observations suggest that the game-based format supported students' active engagement; however, because no comparison data were available, the effect of Zep Quiz on critical thinking cannot be concluded. Constraints included unstable internet connection and limited premium features. Zep Quiz has potential as a supporting medium for practicing critical thinking, provided that students' mastery of basic concepts is also strengthened.

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INTRODUCTION

Secondary education aims not only to develop academic skills, but also to foster strong character and integrity in students (Puspasari et al., 2025). The teaching of Indonesian at the Senior High School (SMA) and Vocational High School (SMK) levels, particularly in the 11th grade, requires mastery of advanced language skills, including the ability to read, analyze, and critically evaluate informational texts. Mastery of learning outcomes can be observed through student behavior, whether in the form of knowledge, thinking skills, or motor skills. (Suharni, 2017). Critical thinking is one of the key competencies for 21st-century students, as the overwhelming flow of information requires individuals to sort, analyze, and evaluate information objectively and logically. Critical thinking is understood as a logical, systematic, and reflective process of analyzing information, evaluating arguments, and formulating and defending data-based opinions (Data et al., 2025).

The development of critical thinking skills plays a key role in shaping students reflective and systematic ways of thinking (Safitri & Fajriyah, 2025), and serve as the foundation that students should have (Hayati & Setiawan, 2022). Students who think critically are able to process information objectively, analyze it, evaluate it, and draw conclusions based on their competencies (Hosniyeh, 2022).

Students with critical thinking skills can process information, evaluate it, and make the right decisions when addressing any problems they encounter (Imawati et al., 2025). In line with that view, Novandi et al., (2025) the study also revealed that critical thinking can help students evaluate learning content and defend their beliefs or arguments.

Students' critical thinking skills can be maximized by creating space for innovation in the learning process, which can boost their enthusiasm for learning (Rizkiah et al., 2025). One form of such innovation is instructional media. The use of media that focuses solely on textbooks and lectures is no longer entirely relevant in today's world. Media is essentially a tool for conveying messages from the sender to the receiver (Azriati et al., 2018) and help students understand the material taught by the teacher (Hafizh & Yefterson, 2019; Rahmadi et al., 2023). Creative and innovative teaching materials can boost student engagement, making learning less monotonous and more enjoyable (Indrawati et al., 2024; Mahayati et al., 2023; Masdar et al., 2024; Sugestiana & Soebagyo, 2022). Therefore, educators are encouraged to make use of modern technology in the learning process (Sibarani & Ngatmini, 2024). The selection of media cannot be done haphazardly; rather, it must take into account students' abilities, learning objectives, and the role of media as part of the instructional system (Abidin, 2016; Chotib, 2018).

Indonesian language instruction is geared toward achieving national educational goals, including fostering responsible citizens (Muryati et al., 2024). One manifestation of this is students' ability to analyze and process information thoroughly, rather than simply accepting information whose accuracy is unclear. Critical thinking is also one of the four 4C competencies (Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, Creativity) that are needed in the digital age and Society 5.0. Technological advancements make it easier for people to access information (Rindha & Hafrison, 2023), but it also creates opportunities for the spread of misinformation, especially on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. Therefore, learning to analyze news articles is important because it requires students to analyze the structure of news stories, evaluate the credibility of sources, distinguish facts from opinions, and identify misinformation.

Based on initial observations in Class XI TKR 4 at SMK Bina Patria 1 in Sukoharjo, many students still struggle to identify facts and opinions, distinguish between valid and invalid information, and draw logical conclusions from news articles. Students also tend to rely on ready-made information from search engines and artificial intelligence (AI). One factor believed to contribute to this is a lack of variety in learning media, as the learning process is still dominated

by lectures, handouts, or static presentations that are one-way and lack interactive stimulation.

One option for interactive media is Zep Quiz, a digital platform that allows teachers to create interactive quizzes in real time with engaging visuals, various game modes, and automatic grading (Istiqomah et al., 2025). Teachers can create multiple-choice, short-answer, and true-false questions, along with individual and group games, scoreboards, and lesson materials that accommodate various learning styles (Adinda et al., 2025; Fitriah et al., 2025; Widyaningrum et al., 2025). Zep Quiz aligns with the gamification approach, which involves incorporating game elements into learning, an approach that has been shown to increase student motivation because it makes them feel challenged and engaged (Dola et al., 2025).

A number of studies have examined the Zep Quiz. Widyaningrum et al., (2025) conducted a study on learning motivation in computer science classes at junior high schools and found that the majority of students experienced an increase in motivation. Husen & Wulandari, (2025) This study examined elementary school students' understanding of science concepts related to changes in the state of matter, and the paired-sample t-test showed a significance value of 0.000 (< 0.05), indicating that the medium had an effect. Adinda et al., (2025) this study examined the learning motivation of 9th-grade students using the TGT model with Zep Quiz, achieving a 72% success rate in the pre-cycle, 80% in Cycle I, and 87% in Cycle II; challenges included difficulty answering HOTS questions, a lack of rewards, and connectivity issues. Another study linked Zep Quiz to learning outcomes in economics at the elementary school level (Dola et al., 2025), understanding of biological concepts (Rahmawati & Ripai, 2025), and student career planning (Mulyawan et al., 2025). Mulyawan et al., (2025) It also mentions that Zep Quiz can help students think more critically.

A comparison of these studies reveals three key points. First, the variables examined primarily include motivation, learning outcomes, and conceptual understanding, while critical thinking is only mentioned as an additional benefit and has not been specifically measured using individual indicators. Second, the subjects and courses were predominantly elementary and junior high school students studying Indonesian language at vocational high schools (SMK), even though news texts are directly related to the ability to assess the truth and credibility of information. Reported challenges, such as difficulty answering HOTS questions (Adinda et al., 2025), It has also not been further examined based on question types or indicators.

Given these gaps, this study offers novelty in three aspects: context (vocational high school students in the Light Vehicle Technology program), content (news texts in Indonesian language instruction), and measurement focus (critical thinking skills broken down into three indicators through HOTS questions on Zep Quiz). Its specific contribution is to provide an overview of the indicators and question types that yield high or low achievement, as well as the challenges in using Zep Quiz, to serve as a reference for teachers in designing news text lessons that foster critical thinking. The objectives of this study are (1) to describe the critical thinking achievement of 11th-grade TKR 4 students across three indicators—analyzing the accuracy of information, evaluating news texts, and drawing logical conclusions—through HOTS questions on Zep Quiz; and (2) to identify challenges that arise during the use of Zep Quiz in news text instruction.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on providing an overview of students' achievements and responses during learning with Zep Quiz, which need to be presented descriptively rather than merely as numbers (Siyoto & Sodik, 2015; Sugiyono, 2019). The qualitative approach emphasizes subjective experiences and the interpretation of events in the field (Yusuf, 2017).

This study did not use a comparative design (pretest-posttest or control group). Therefore, this study describes student achievement and does not test the effectiveness or extent of improvement in critical thinking skills. The study was conducted at SMK Bina Patria 1 Sukoharjo during the 2025/2026 academic year with all 34 students in Class XI TKR 4 as the subjects. The research data consisted of students' answers to HOTS questions on Zep Quiz, their behavior and responses during news text lessons, and the challenges that arose during the use of Zep Quiz. Data sources included the students, the Indonesian language teacher, and observed learning events. The role of the Indonesian language teacher in this study was to serve as a resource person regarding the continuity of Indonesian language instruction, the use of teaching methods and media, and the challenges arising from the students themselves in relation to the research to be conducted.

Data were collected using two methods. First, active participatory observation, in which the researcher was directly involved in the learning process and recorded students' behaviors, responses, and challenges in field notes. Second, a quiz consisting of ten multiple-choice questions based on Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) at cognitive levels C4–C6 regarding a news text, which 34 students completed via Zep Quiz; the quiz had been validated by the supervising lecturer and the Indonesian language teacher. The questions were designed based on three indicators of critical thinking, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Operational indicators of critical thinking and question distribution

Indicators	Operational description	Question No.	Focus on the question
Analyzing the accuracy of information	Analyzing the content of a news article to identify facts and opinions, as well as violations of objectivity and linguistic conventions	5, 6, 9	Objectivity and fact versus opinion (5); violations of linguistic rules (6); number of adverbs (9)
Evaluating News Articles	Assessing the credibility and accuracy of news texts based on their social function, structure, and linguistic conventions	1, 3, 7	Definition based on social function (1); credibility of news citations (3); most comprehensive definition (7)
Drawing logical conclusions	Connecting facts and elements in a news article to draw new conclusions, including implied information	2, 4, 8, 10	Elements/structure of news texts (2); direct and indirect speech (4); missing elements in narratives (8); the function of the news lead (10)

The news text lesson was conducted over three sessions, each lasting ninety minutes. During the first and second sessions, the teacher presented material on the definition, structure, linguistic conventions, and characteristics of news texts. Next, students individually completed ten HOTS questions on Zep Quiz, with a time limit for each question. After the quiz, students reviewed their answer feedback and the leaderboard on the platform. Throughout the activity, the researcher recorded observations.

Data analysis adapted the Miles and Huberman model (Miles et al., 2014; Zulfirman, 2022) which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. In the reduction stage, quiz results and field notes were sorted and coded according to three indicators, and irrelevant data was set aside. In the

presentation stage, the data was presented in tables and descriptive narratives. In the conclusion-drawing stage, the findings were interpreted and verified by comparing them again with the raw data.

To determine skill improvement, for each question, the percentage of students who answered correctly was calculated (the number of students who answered correctly divided by 34). The percentage for each indicator was calculated based on the average achievement rate for that indicator. Achievement was categorized as high if ≥75%, moderate if 50–74%, and low if <50%.

Data validity refers to the four criteria identified by Lincoln and Guba (Luthfiyani & Murhayati, 2024), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through technical triangulation—that is, cross-referencing the results of the Zep Quiz with observational data—as well as through observations made during the news text learning process. Transferability was ensured by providing a detailed description of the research context in Class XI TKR 4 so that readers can assess possible applications in similar contexts.

Reliability is ensured through a transparent audit trail consisting of a summary of quiz results on the platform, field notes, and draft analyses. Confirmability is ensured by making sure that conclusions are based on

field data rather than the researchers' biases.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 34 11th-grade students in Class TKR 4 who answered ten HOTS questions via Zep Quiz on news text material. The students' performance is broken down according to three indicators of critical thinking in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Student performance by question (N = 34)

Indicators	Question No.	Focus of the question	Correct answer	%	Category
Analyzing the accuracy of information	5	Objectivity and fact versus opinion	30	88,2	High
	6	Violations of linguistic rules	22	64,7	Medium
	9	Number of adverbs	4	11,8	Low
Evaluating news articles	1	Definition based on social function	33	97,1	High
	3	Credibility of news quotes	25	73,5	Medium
	7	Most comprehensive definition	29	85,3	High
Drawing logical conclusions	2	Elements/structure of a news text	27	79,4	High
	4	Direct and indirect speech	28	82,4	High
	8	Elements missing from the narrative	14	41,2	Low
	10	Function of the news lead	34	100	High

Table 3. Summary of achievements by indicator

Indicators	Average achievement rate (%)	Category
Analyzing the accuracy of information	54,9	Medium
Evaluating news articles	85,3	High
Drawing logical conclusions	75,7	High

The highest score was recorded for the indicator assessing news texts (85.3%), followed by drawing logical conclusions (75.7%), and the lowest score was for analyzing the accuracy of information (54.9%). The variation in scores across the questions was quite wide, from 11.8% (question 9) to 100% (question 10). The following description discusses each indicator.

Strengthening Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Analyzing the Accuracy of Information

For this indicator, students were asked to analyze the content of a news article to identify facts, opinions, and violations of objectivity or linguistic conventions. The average achievement rate was 54.9% (moderate), but this figure masks sharp differences between questions. On question 5, 30 students (88.2%) were able to assess the objectivity of the news text and distinguish facts from opinions when comparing it to an editorial. These results are consistent with the view that (Hosniyeh, 2022) critical thinkers are able to view information objectively, free from subjective bias. However, the quiz data only show the final answers and do not reveal how students reasoned. Observation notes indicate that, before answering, students attempted to discuss the questions with their peers and ask the researcher questions; furthermore, while students answered more cautiously, they still proceeded in accordance with their calculations.

On question 6, 22 students (64.7%) were able to identify violations of linguistic rules, while the other 12 students were not. On question 9, only 4 students (11.8%) correctly counted the adverbs in the news excerpt. This question is discussed further in the section on low-scoring questions.

Strengthening Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Evaluating News Texts

For this indicator, the average achievement rate was 85.3% (high). On question 1, 33 students (97.1%) identified the correct definition of a news text based on its social function, and on question 7, 29 students (85.3%) selected the most comprehensive definition from five options. These two questions primarily assess accuracy of understanding; therefore, the high achievement rate must be interpreted with caution, as they reflect conceptual understanding rather than critical evaluation. The question that most directly tests critical evaluation is Question 3 regarding the credibility of news quotes. On this question, 25 students (73.5%) answered correctly, and 9 students did not.

Strengthening Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Drawing Logical Conclusions

The average achievement rate for this indicator was 75.7% (high). For questions 2 and 4, 27 students (79.4%) and 28 students (82.4%), respectively, answered correctly—specifically, the questions regarding the elements/structure of news texts and the conversion of direct speech to indirect speech. On question 10, all students (100%) answered correctly regarding the function of the news conclusion, demonstrating a good grasp of news text structure. In contrast, on question 8, only 14 students (41.2%) were able to draw conclusions about the missing news elements in the narrative, so more students answered incorrectly than correctly.

Analysis of Questions with Low Achievement Rates

Two low-scoring items—item 9 (11.8%) and item 8 (41.2%)—were analyzed separately because they affected the overall picture. Item 9 asked students to count adverbs, thus requiring knowledge of parts of speech. The low performance on this item is more likely to reflect a lack of strong mastery of linguistic concepts rather than weak critical reasoning. This is supported by the finding that, excluding Question 9, the average score for the "analyzing the accuracy of information" indicator was 76.5% (30 + 22 correct answers out of 68), which falls into the high category. Therefore, Question 9 should be reconsidered as a measure of critical thinking in future research.

Question 8 required students to identify missing elements of a news story within a narrative, thus requiring careful reading and understanding of the elements that make up a news story. Observation notes indicate that students tended to assume the questions were too easy, so many were misled because they did not read the questions carefully enough to understand what was being asked.

Students' errors were spread across different questions, although some also made mistakes on the same question. These errors appear to be related to a lack of careful reading and a weak foundation in the structure, characteristics, and linguistic features of news texts.

Challenges in Using Zep Quiz

Two technical challenges were encountered during the learning process. First, the internet connection at the school was inadequate, making it difficult for fifteen students to access Zep Quiz. Second, some of the platform's key features require paid premium access, limiting the teacher's ability to utilize features that could make learning more interactive. In addition to these technical challenges, pedagogical challenges were identified, such as a lack of careful reading and mastery of basic concepts related to news texts, as seen in questions 8 and 9.

The research findings indicate that students' critical thinking performance was uneven. High performance was observed on questions related to the structure and comprehension of news texts (questions 1, 7, and 10), while low performance was observed on questions requiring careful reading and mastery of linguistic concepts (questions 8 and 9). This pattern indicates that students' critical thinking skills depend on their mastery of basic concepts. This view is consistent with (Husen & Wulandari, 2025) that the effectiveness of educational Games are most effective when accompanied by a solid understanding of concepts, because without it, the game elements can distract students from the subject matter.

Regarding the role of Zep Quiz, this platform has features that have the potential to support critical thinking practice, namely immediate feedback when students answer incorrectly, leaderboards, visual avatars, virtual learning spaces, and time limits. Immediate feedback has the potential to help students correct conceptual errors and evaluate their thought processes. Exploring virtual learning spaces and leaderboards are thought to encourage students' active engagement and curiosity, as reported in other studies on motivation and learning engagement (Dola et al., 2025; Widyaningrum et al., 2025).

However, the relationship between gamification features and critical thinking outcomes in this study cannot yet be confirmed. This study lacks baseline data and a control group, and the quiz results show only the final answers. Therefore, student engagement and the potential benefits of the Zep Quiz feature should be viewed as hypotheses supported by observation, rather than as evidence of an effect. The view that the space for innovation in interactive media can foster a passion for learning and provide a safe space for students to test arguments (Novandi et al., 2025) and the claim that Zep Quiz can help students think more critically (Mulyawan et al., 2025) It can serve as a conceptual foundation, but it needs to be tested using a design that allows for comparison.

For teaching purposes, these findings suggest that teachers should (1) ensure students have a solid grasp of the basic concepts of news

texts, such as parts of speech and news elements, before the quiz is administered; (2) discussing the answers and reasoning after the quiz so that students practice critical thinking, rather than simply selecting answers; and (3) preparing alternatives in case of an unstable internet connection and taking into account the limitations of the platform's free features.

This study has several limitations: it was conducted in a single class with 34 students; it lacked pre-intervention data and a comparison group; it used ten questions in a single assessment; and some questions (e.g., question 9) tested conceptual knowledge rather than critical reasoning. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized. Future research is recommended to use a pretest-posttest design or a comparison group, a validated critical thinking instrument, and interviews to explore students' thought processes.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that 11th-grade students in Class TKR 4 at SMK Bina Patria 1 in Sukoharjo achieved varying levels of proficiency on three critical thinking indicators through HOTS questions on Zep Quiz. The highest achievement was in evaluating news texts (85.3%), followed by drawing logical conclusions (75.7%), and the lowest was in analyzing the accuracy of information (54.9%). Low performance was particularly evident in questions requiring mastery of linguistic concepts (adverbs, 11.8%) and understanding of implied information (41.2%), suggesting that students' analytical acuity depends on their mastery of basic concepts and careful reading.

Challenges identified included an unstable school internet connection and limitations on premium features within the platform. Based on these findings, Zep Quiz has the potential to serve as a tool to support critical thinking practice using news articles, provided that students have a solid grasp of the basic concepts and that adequate infrastructure is in place. Since this study did not use a control group, the effectiveness of Zep Quiz in improving critical thinking skills cannot yet be concluded and needs to be tested in future research.

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