At Turots: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam
Vol. 7, No. 2, Desember 2025, pp.1395-1403
Print ISSN : 2656-7555 || Online ISSN : 2747-089X
http://journal.stitmadani.ac.id/index.php/JPI/index

Improving students' critical thinking skills through the problem based learning (PBL) model in islamic religious education at smpit permata

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Received: 03-09-2025 *Revised: 24-11-2025* *Accepted: 13-12-2025*

KEYWORDS

Problem Based Learning;
Critical Thinking ;
Islamic Religious Education;

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the Problem Based Learning (PBL) learning model in improving critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects at SMPIT Permata in Probolinggo City. The method applied is quantitative, namely designed using a quasi-experimental design. The subjects consisted of 33 seventh-grade students divided into an experimental class (21 students) and a control class (12 students). The instruments were tests (pretest and posttest), interview guidelines, and documentation of learning outcomes. The results of the analysis showed a significant increase in the average posttest score of the experimental class was 90.05 (very high category) which increased to 28.43 points (46.1%) compared to the pretest. The control class showed an average increase of 19.5 points (31.7%) with a posttest score of 81.08 (high category). Qualitative data supported the findings through increased active participation, analytical skills, and contextual relevance during learning. The application of the PBL model has been proven effective in developing critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education learning at the junior high school level.

Introduction

The rapid development of globalization demands that the education system produce students with critical and analytical thinking skills as provisions for facing the dynamics of modern life (Diah Anggraini Syahputri 2024). Quality education needs to equip students with high-level thinking skills to be ready to face the increasingly complex challenges of the times (Hendrayadi, Syafrudin, and Rehani 2023). A crucial aspect in education is the development of critical thinking, especially in Islamic Religious Education (Fikri and Munfarida 2023). This is in line with the direction of 21st century educational transformation which is needed to strengthen reflective reasoning capacity, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability through contextual, collaborative learning strategies that are oriented towards active student participation (Yuliana 2022).

The education system in Indonesia, especially Islamic Religious Education, is provided at every level of education, from elementary school to university (Rahmawati et al. 2024). At the Junior High School (SMP) level, Islamic Education has a strategic role in guiding students who are experiencing the transition from childhood to adolescence (Mohammad Khoirul Abidin 2023). The development phase is an important point in the formation of students' character and mindset, so the learning approach used needs to be able to support the growth of cognitive and affective aspects in a balanced manner (Nurfadhilah, Rehani 2024). As a result, it requires a learning method that can focus on reasoning power in understanding religious values, so that

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students are able to think critically and not just receive the material passively (Dea Ayunda1, Dhea Puspita Lutfiah Malaya Alfa 2024).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a fundamental role in achieving high morality through the formation of students' character, of course a deep understanding of Religious Education which plays a major component in building a harmonious and civilized society (Diah Anggraini Syahputri 2024). The aim of developing critical thinking in Islamic Religious Education lessons is to train students to develop rational, analytical and reflective thinking skills regarding Islamic teachings (Mirza Dwi Permana 2024). In addition, strengthening critical thinking also encourages students to be more critical of the religious understanding that has been accepted, and to be able to assess and criticize contemporary issues from an Islamic perspective objectively and responsibly.

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education learning still encounters many obstacles in developing critical thinking skills (Uzmal Himmah 2023). Students often just passively receive information without conducting an in-depth analysis of the concepts being studied (Salma Hijriah 2024). Low critical thinking skills can hinder students' ability to understand, evaluate, and relate daily life through Islamic perspectives in solving problems (Rohman, Bakhruddin, and Najamudin 2023). The study emphasized that the application of conventional methods which is still prominent is one of the main factors that causes students' weak critical thinking skills (Rohman et al. 2023).

Interviews and observations by researchers indicate that the teaching methods implemented in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in several junior high schools in Probolinggo tend to be monotonous and lack active learning. This often results in students feeling less focused and less fully engaged in their learning. The lack of variety in teaching methods and opportunities for active participation hinder the development of students' analytical thinking.

The Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model was introduced as an innovative approach to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) education to maximize students' critical thinking skills. The PBL model is oriented towards solving real-life problems, enabling students to actively participate in exploring information, discussing issues, and finding solutions (Mirawati 2025). Various subjects have shown the effectiveness of improving critical thinking using the PBL model (Mayasari, Arifudin, and Juliawati 2022). By implementing the PBL model, it is hoped that students will not only gain comprehensive insight into Islamic Religious Education, but will also be competent in developing superior competencies in critical thinking.

Researchers believe that the application of the PBL learning model in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has the potential to deepen students' critical thinking potential. The PBL model provides space to encourage students to actively participate in the learning process through the act of identifying, analyzing, and solving contextual problems related to religious values. Active involvement not only encourages theoretical conceptual understanding but also allows students to connect the material presented to real-world conditions that can produce a deeper, more applicable, and meaningful understanding. The study was conducted to examine the effectiveness of the PBL model in improving students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects in junior high schools. The results of the study are expected to make a significant contribution to the development of more innovative and effective learning strategies in the field of Islamic Religious Education, as well as serve as a reference for educators in applying educational models in the modern era that are more adaptive to student interests.

Research Methods

This study adopted a quantitative approach through an experimental method by testing the effectiveness of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in improving students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMPIT Permata Kota Probolinggo. The study was conducted for three months, from January to March 2025. The research subjects involved 33 seventh-grade students of SMPIT Permata Kota Probolinggo who were divided into two groups, namely the experimental group of 21 students who received learning with the PBL model and the control group of 12 students who applied conventional methods in learning.

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This study used three main instruments designed to obtain valid and comprehensive data: test questions, interview guides, and documentation of student work. The first instrument was administered to students before and after the implementation of the learning model in the experimental class to measure their critical thinking. The test questions consisted of a pretest of 5 questions given to identify students' initial abilities, and a posttest of 10 multiple-choice questions and 5 descriptive questions. The tests were distributed to the experimental and control classes, with the questions designed based on critical thinking indicators. The test material focused on the chapter "The Universe as a Sign of Allah SWT's Power." The second instrument aimed to gather information about students' experiences in participating in the PBL-based learning process. A structured interview guide was conducted with several students from the experimental class to determine their level of involvement in identifying and solving problems. Data from the interviews were used to support the test results and as a reflection on the effectiveness of the PBL model implementation. The third instrument was documentation, which included students' worksheets, both handwritten and analyzed. Documentation was used to observe the achievement of critical thinking skill indicators based on students' work, as shown in Table 2.1

Table 2.1 Critical Thinking Indicators

No.	Critical Thinking Indicators	Description of Student Abilities	Coding	Relation to Islamic Education Material
1.	Identifying the problem	Able to identify problems related to natural imbalances or creation	S1	Identifying natural phenomena such as global warming as the impact of a lack of awareness of God's creation
2.	Analyzing information	Able to sort and interpret information from various sources related to the universe	S2	Analyzing the verses of the Qur'an regarding the creation of nature and scientific information about the solar system
3.	Evaluating arguments	Able to assess the accuracy, logic, and truth of certain arguments or opinions	S3	Evaluate scientists' views on the origins of the universe and compare them with the revelations of the Qur'an.
4.	Drawing logical conclusions	Able to formulate appropriate conclusions based on evidence and analysis conducted	S4	Conclude that the order of the universe shows the power and greatness of Allah
5.	Proposing solutions or alternative solutions	Able to provide solutions to problems related to the preservation of God's creation	S5	Proposing concrete actions to protect the environment as a form of devotion and gratitude for God's creation

Source: Adapted from ((Mariskhantari, Karma, and Nisa 2022)

The research procedure involved several main stages, starting with preparation, including the development and validation of instruments, and coordination with the school. The researcher then administered a pretest to measure students' initial critical thinking skills in both classes. First, the experimental class received instruction using the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model, while the control class followed conventional learning. After the lesson, students were given a posttest to understand their critical thinking skills in the chapter "The Universe as a Sign of Allah SWT's Power." The researcher collected qualitative data through interviews and documented student work to support the analysis. The final stage involved

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comprehensive quantitative data analysis and the preparation of a research report for the development of Islamic Religious Education learning.

Data analysis used a mixed methods approach by applying triangulation techniques to increase the validity and reliability of the findings. Quantitative data were obtained through the results of critical thinking tests that were reviewed by comparing pretest and posttest scores between the experimental and control classes in obtaining the effectiveness of PBL implementation. Meanwhile, qualitative data were obtained through analysis of interview data and documentation. Data triangulation was carried out on three main sources, namely data from students' test questions, interview transcripts based on the prepared guidelines, and documentation of questions about learning related to critical thinking indicators. Based on the triangulation chart in 2.1, the researcher sought to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' cognitive involvement in the learning process through PBL which contributes to forming critical thinking skills contextually.

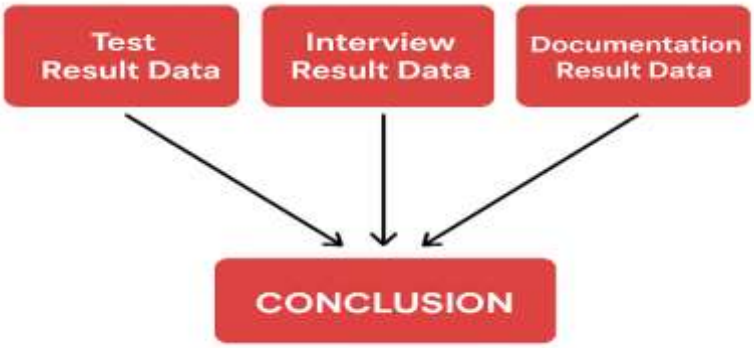

Figure 2.1 Data Triangulation Chart
Source: Adapted from (Mariskhantari et al. 2022)

Table 3.1 Critical Thinking Score Range Categories

Score Range	Category	Description
90–10	Very High	Able to relate natural phenomena to the verses of the Koran and explain God's power logically.
80–89	Tall	Can explain the relationship between God's creation and His majesty in a coherent and precise manner
70–79	Enough	Understanding that nature shows God's power, but not yet able to explain it in depth.
60–69	Low	Recognizing the connection between nature and God, but not being precise in conveying the arguments or reasoning.
< 60	Very Low	Unable to think critically about nature as evidence of the power of Allah SWT, tending to passively receive information.

Source: Adapted from (Okafor 2024)

Results and Discussion

The results of the research entitled "improving students' critical thinking through the PBL model in Islamic Religious Education subjects at SMPIT" can be known based on the analysis of pretest and posttest data given before and after the application of the model. The pretest and posttest data are shown in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2. Skill measurements were carried out to determine the effectiveness of the PBL model in fostering critical thinking, especially in understanding religious concepts and relating them to real-life contextual problems that can reveal that the universe is evidence of the power of Allah SWT. The findings obtained were then further analyzed to evaluate the impact of the application of the PBL model on the learning process and outcomes.

Table 4.1 Results of the Pretest and Posttest of Critical Thinking Skills in the Control Class

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No	Student Name	Pretest Score	Posttest Score
1.	AI	68	78
2.	AK	65	82
3.	AS	60	80
4.	AH	62	86
5.	BM	60	80
6.	FR	62	80
7.	KI	60	83
8.	NH	62	78
9.	NK	64	85
10.	SF	62	81
11.	CF	60	76
12.	NQ	64	84
Total:		739	973
Average value		61,58	81,08

Based on the research results in the table above, the pretest and posttest data show an average pretest score of 61.58, which is in the "Low" category. The average posttest score increased to 81.08, which is included in the "High" category. This improvement is indicated by the development of student abilities after the conventional learning process. Most students were in the "Low" category during the pretest. However, after the learning process took place, there was a significant increase, where 75% of students (9 out of 12 students) managed to reach the "High" category with a posttest score in the range of 80–89. This finding shows that even without intervention, innovative methods can improve student learning outcomes, so that learning activities can still contribute and have a positive impact.

Table 4.2 Results of the Pretest and Posttest of Critical Thinking Skills of the Experimental Class

No	Student Name	Pretest Score	Posttest Score
1.	AA	65	90
2.	AR	65	94
3.	AG	68	95
4.	DA	62	80
5.	FH	65	96
6.	FA	65	90
7.	IA	62	88
8.	KL	60	95
9.	MR	62	96
10.	MP	68	92
11.	MZ	60	90
12.	MY	65	95
13.	MA	68	92
14.	MT	65	88
15.	NP	62	94
16.	RA	62	92
17.	SA	68	94
18.	SS	60	92
19.	SB	65	90
20.	ND	65	88
21.	AM	60	90
Total:		1294	1.891
Average value		61,62	90,05

 ISSN 2747-089X

Based on the results above, the experimental class obtained findings that showed a rapid increase in students' critical thinking after the implementation of the PBL model. The average pretest score was 61.62 which is in the "Low" category. While the average posttest score increased to 90.05 which is included in the "Very High" category. All students experienced an increase in scores with 15 students (71.4%) reaching the "Very High" category and 6 students (28.6%) in the "High" category. No students were in the "Enough", "Low", or "Very Low" categories in the posttest results. The findings indicate the effectiveness of the application of the PBL model in Islamic Religious Education in developing students' critical thinking which is in line with the mastery of the demands of 21st-century education in emphasizing higher-orderthinking skills.

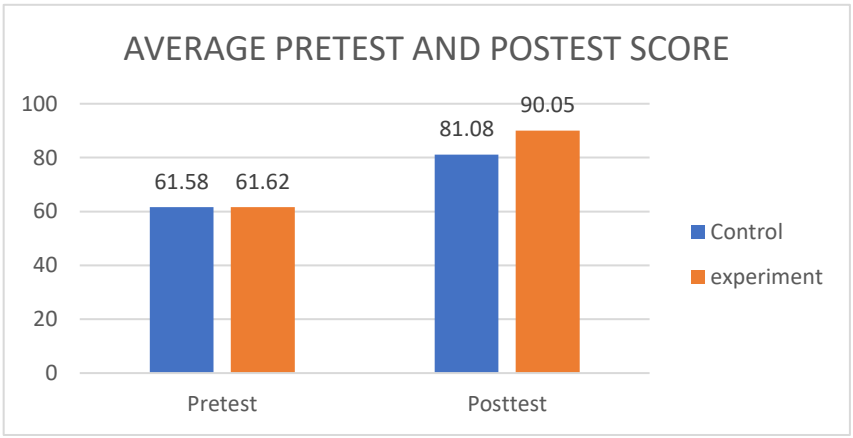

Figure 3.1 Bar Chart of Average Pretest and Posttest Scores

The comparison of the results of the experimental and control classes in Figure 3.1 shows that the experimental class using the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model experienced a significant increase in students' critical thinking potential. The control class's average pretest score was 61.58, increasing to 81.08 on the posttest, representing an increase of 19.5 points, or approximately 31.7%. Meanwhile, the experimental class using the PBL model experienced an increase from a pretest score of 61.62 to 90.05 on the posttest, representing an increase of 28.43 points, or approximately 46.1%. This comparison reveals that while both classes experienced an increase, the experimental class experienced a significantly higher increase. The above results demonstrate an effective increase in critical thinking skills with the application of the PBL model compared to the application of the conventional model in the control class.

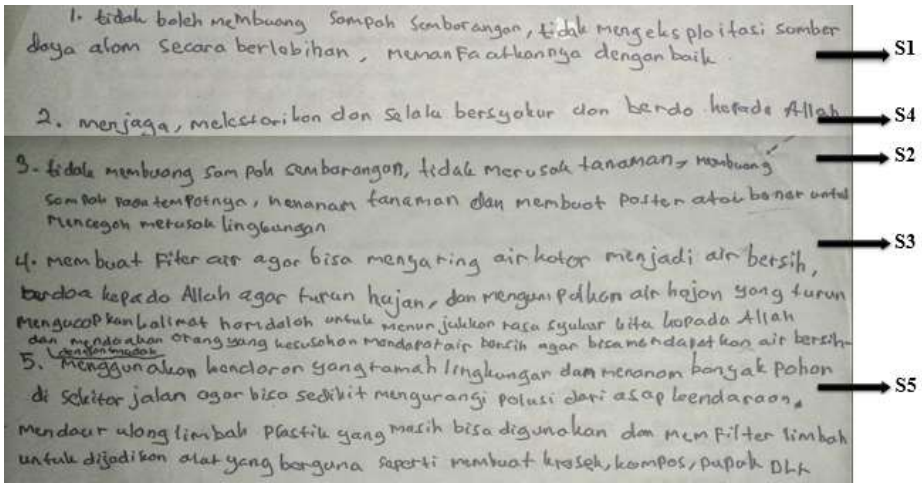

Figure 3.1 Data on the Results of Student Work Documentation in the Experimental Class

Based on Figure 3.1, the work results of one of the students with the highest achievement in the experimental class during the post-test show the effectiveness of the application of the PBL model in improving critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects.

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This is indicated by the student fulfilling 5 indicators of critical thinking, namely being able to identify environmental problems (S1), such as environmental damage due to a lack of concern for God's creation. The student also demonstrated the ability to analyze information (S2), evaluate arguments logically (S3), and draw conclusions that reflect the values of faith (S4). This ability is demonstrated by proposing concrete solutions (S5) as a form of gratitude and responsibility for the mandate to maintain environmental sustainability. The findings obtained results that strengthen the effective PBL model to shape students' critical thinking by integrating spiritual values in the theme "The Universe as a Sign of God's Power."

As part of the qualitative data collection, the researcher conducted an interview with one of the Law Faculty students who demonstrated high learning outcomes in the experimental class.

Researcher: "*How do you feel after participating in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning using the PBL model*?"

FH Students: "*After participating in the learning, I feel able to solve and find solutions related to nature, such as the problems presented yesterday, such as flooding and littering. So, when we were given problems in class, we had to think hard about how to solve them, and our focus improved. My friends and I also enjoyed asking questions and felt happy when we found solutions*."

The interview revealed that the PBL model motivated students to develop critical thinking skills in solving problems relevant to real life. Students demonstrated improved focus, analytical skills, and active engagement in discussions.

Table 4.3 Data Triangulation

Test Result Data	Based on the test results in the experimental class, the average pretest score was 61.62, which increased to 90.05 in the posttest. This represents a difference of 28.43 points, or 46.15%. Seventy-one-fourths of the students fell into the "Very High" category, while 28.6% fell into the "High" category.
Interview Result Data	Students felt more focused, engaged, and motivated during the learning process. They demonstrated deeper thinking skills, high engagement in group discussions, and the ability to solve problems relevant to real-life contexts.
Documentation Result Data	Documentation demonstrates that students are able to identify problems, analyze information, evaluate arguments, draw logical conclusions, and propose concrete solutions. Written evidence reflects the contextual integration of cognitive aspects and religious values.

Table 4.3 shows the results of data including tests, interviews, and documentation showing the effectiveness and collaboration of the PBL model in an effort to improve students' critical thinking in Islamic Religious Education lessons. The average student score increased from 61.62 in the pretest to 90.05 in the posttest, with 71.4% of students in the "Very High" category. The interview results concluded that PBL encourages active student involvement, increases focus, and facilitates in-depth thinking and collaborative problem-solving skills. Meanwhile, documentation shows that students are able to integrate critical thinking processes such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis with religious values in real-life contexts, confirming that PBL supports the strengthening of cognitive and affective aspects in an integrated manner.

Research conducted by Durrotun Nafisah (2024) at SMP Negeri 2 Rogojampi strengthens the findings in the study by revealing that the implementation of the PBL model for Islamic Religious Education is significantly able to develop students' critical thinking skills. Through a learning process that focuses on solving contextual problems, students are trained to identify problems, analyze information, evaluate arguments, and formulate solutions logically and systematically (Durrotun Nafisah 2024). The results of the study are in line with those carried out at SMPIT Permata Probolinggo on the application of the PBL model which has been proven

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to be efficient and effective in improving students' critical thinking potential abilities in experimental class VII, especially in understanding and linking natural phenomena as evidence of the power of Allah SWT. PAI adjusts the context of the educational level, teaching materials, and learning approaches which further strengthens that PBL is an applicable and relevant strategy in realizing high-level thinking skills at the junior high school level.

Conclusion

Research reveals that the implementation of the PBL model can significantly improve students' critical thinking skills in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMPIT Permata Kota Probolinggo. The results of the quantitative analysis showed a jump in post-test scores to the "Very High" category in the experimental class, while qualitative data from interviews and documentation showed active involvement in the learning process that led to contextual problem solving. The PBL model allows students to identify problems, analyze information, evaluate arguments, and formulate applicable solutions based on Islamic values. The implementation has been proven to increase cognitive capacity and instill spiritual awareness that can be implemented in real life. Thus, the PBL model is worthy of being implemented in Islamic Religious Education learning as a transformative pedagogical approach, to shape a generation that thinks critically, ethically, and adapts to the dynamics of the 21st century.

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