

INTEGRATING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH TEACHERS' QUESTIONING STRATEGIES IN THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM FOR EFL STUDENTS OF ISLAMIC SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: November 2025 Revised: January 2026 Accepted: March 2026 Published: July 2026	<i>Critical thinking (CT) is determined as one of Indonesian senior high school's graduate profiles in Merdeka Curriculum, and this policy suggests teachers to nurture students' critical thinking, which focuses on students' ability of analysing, evaluating and creating narrative and exposition texts. This qualitative study investigates on how the Pre-Service EFL Teachers' (PSETs) inserted CT in their questioning strategies to teach narrative and exposition texts for the eleven graders of Islamic senior high school (Madrasah Aliyah) in Ponorogo. This qualitative case study captured PSETs' questioning strategies implemented during their internship. Four PSETs were observed and interviewed to gather data about types of questioning strategies they implemented. The findings revealed that six types of questioning strategies have been implemented, namely structuring, directing, pitching, rhetorical, probing, and pausing. Then, the researchers identified six questioning strategy types and determined that four types of questioning strategies, such as directing, rhetorical, probing, and pausing effectively engaged students in higher-order cognitive processes aligned with critical thinking integration in learning activities such as, analyzing, evaluating, and creating narrative and exposition texts. In the process of creating narrative and exposition texts, the students hesitated to write their own and need scaffolding learning. The students always ensure their paragraph to PSETs. Hence, PSETs have to assist them optimally. In addition, the study also documents implementation challenges faced by pre-service teachers and proposes practical solutions.</i>
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INTRODUCTION

Merdeka Curriculum gives teachers more flexibility in designing lessons that fit the characteristics and needs of student (Aulia, 2021). This curriculum also allows greater freedom to customize the learning plan (Hanum & Dalimunte, 2025). In addition, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes some competencies such as creativity, critical thinking, and social skills to prepare a generation for future challenges (Rozandy, et al., 2021). Since Indonesia adopted the Merdeka Curriculum, students should embody one of its characteristics. It refers to critical thinking, which students are expected to develop, as it is helpful for their future. In the ELT context, critical thinking skills had a positive effect on students' academic success and future endeavours (Agustina et al., 2022)

The process of learning how to think critically in the classroom can begin by integrating critical thinking into learning activities. The proofs are that students deal issues in the inside and outside school, students can decide proper decision and can be responsible for every single issue, the students can have open-minded, create something new as innovations, and enhance self-confidence, the last is to learn individually (Mardatillah & Prayudha, 2024). In practice, students and teachers make sense of content by making critical arguments where those skills are taught and demonstrating those abilities by students (Bartelds et al., 2020). Moreover, critical thinking is essential across disciplines, leading to better learning outcomes and professional success (Golden, 2023). Accordingly, there is no way to think critically without knowledge, which includes information and facts from general knowledge, having knowledge based on content and wisdom from experiences in life and workplace (Zhang et al., 2020).

In this case, the students need guidance to master critical thinking. Pre-service EFL teachers are the best choice for helping students think critically. The reason is that pre-service EFL teachers bring experience and fresh understanding to contribute to critical thinking in learning process. It means pre-service EFL teachers have a concept of critical thinking that is useful for the students. Pre-service teachers benefit from targeted training in critical thinking pedagogy and active learning strategies such as problem-based learning, which enhance their capacity to engage students in critical reflection and reasoning. This preparation bridges theory and practice, empowering them to implement critical thinking effectively (Harahap & Fithriani, 2024).

To successfully integrate critical thinking in the classroom, pre-service EFL teachers must have strong comprehension and effective strategies. The way to integrate critical thinking is to utilize questioning strategies. The strategies of questioning are among the most commonly used in ELT and can stimulate students' critical thinking (Salwa et al., 2023). As teachers cultivate critical thinking in their classrooms, questioning strategies remain the most commonly used (Hermansyah et al., 2024). This strategy can be implemented to the whole process of teaching and learning. As stated by Bata & Zamzani (2020), when used in class, the questioning strategy will allow students to contribute in learning and will also encourage critical thinking. Research conducted by Shanmugavelu, et al. (2020) entitled *Questioning Technique and Teachers' Role in the Classroom* showed that a proper questioning technique is essential to teaching and learning. Then, the result explained some of the ways teachers can get students to pay attention in class. This includes using a voice that is loud enough and friendly enough. Pause to think about the content and distribution of questions. This is important for making students more motivated and for encouraging them to think in a positive, critical, and creative way. It can also improve the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Questioning is an effective way to stimulate thinking. Thus, the teacher asks students to improve their thinking skills as part of the learning process (Nuryanti et al., 2024). Therefore, questions in the learning process require students to provide responses in the form of knowledge or things resulting from their thinking.

In this case, some studies state the type of questioning strategies, which effective foster critical thinking. Probing and pausing strategies are effective for HOT development. Hermansyah et al. (2025) identifies probing and reflective questions as significantly contributing to enhancing students' analytical, evaluative, and synthetic abilities. Sulaiman (2021) documents that lecturers use pausing strategy and probing and prompting strategies to guide and direct students to find complete answers. However, the sources provide limited explicit evidence for "directing" and "rhetorical" questions as HOT-fostering strategies. Sulaiman (2021) mentions rhetorical questions as a strategy used by lecturers but does not specifically link them to HOT development. Directing questions are not prominently featured in the HOT literature reviewed. Overall, probing and pausing have stronger empirical support for fostering HOT than the other two strategies mentioned.

The concept of critical thinking, particularly within the context of education, is derived from Bloom's taxonomy. Developed by Anderson and Krathwohl in 2001, this framework has

been revised since then. As a revision to the original framework, they added a two-dimensional framework, which focuses on knowledge and cognitive processes. As part of the knowledge category are remembering, comprehension, which is called understanding, and synthesis, which is called create, which ranks high in the hierarchy. The revised Bloom's taxonomy can be summarized as follows: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create (Anderson et al., 2001). These verb form foster deep language processing, matching Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on higher cognition like Profile of Pancasila Students' critical reasoning (Budiastuti, 2025). In the classroom, the students need comprehensive interaction to integrate critical thinking in the learning activities. It refers to teachers' questioning that known as the Socratic questioning theory. It employs iterative "why/how" prompts to challenge assumptions, directly mapping to Bloom's higher domains by prompting clarification, evidence-seeking, and perspective-taking. Unlike rote queries, it mirrors manuscript directing or rhetorical strategies, correcting misconceptions and extending EFL responses (e.g., narrative analysis).

Studies show Socratic methods boost EFL debate and comprehension, integrating with Bloom for analytical growth (Ibarra & Cardenas, 2022). These theories connect with constructivist approaches, particularly focused on stages of the cognitive development and how children actively build their knowledge through interaction with the environment. It focused on cognitive of the students which is from Jean Piaget's theory that included constructivist approaches. In this case, pre-service EFL teachers are as the educator that would help the students during integrating critical thinking through teachers' questioning that foster the students in developing their cognitive. Thus, the students become active students in learning. A study found that they used a range of effective questioning, including translation, repetition, pausing, probing, and rephrasing, to enhance students' engagement and comprehension (Masduki, 2022). However, probing and rephrasing adjustments are used to pose practical questions and encourage pupils to think critically. Although teacher's questioning has been introduced in many studies, integrating critical thinking and implemented it based on Merdeka Curriculum remain limited.

Numerous studies have integrated critical thinking into the Merdeka Curriculum in EFL classrooms. Still, relatively few have integrated critical thinking through teachers' questioning in the Merdeka Curriculum. Aeni and Ariyani (2025) conducted the study to explore the techniques of English teachers' questioning impacted the cognitive growth and engagement of the students. Based on the results, the variety of questions encouraged students to think creatively by allowing them to offer numerous responses, whereas probing questions forced them to think and elaborate more clearly. Thus, the study's results have integrated critical thinking through questioning, divergent thinking, and probing. Then, it also represented the Merdeka Curriculum. The students applied Profile of Pancasila Students dimensions, including independence, global diversity, critical reasoning, and creativity. Another research analyzed the teachers' questioning strategies in the English lesson plan (Nuryanti et al., 2024). The result revealed that teachers can facilitate learning, promote to think critically, and confirm that students gain a deeper comprehend of the material. However, there have been a few grammatical errors when teachers use it to ask students questions. Fortunately, there are prompting questions that help deepen students' understanding, motivate them to solve the problem, encourage their critical thinking, and create new ideas.

In addition, there is evidence that questioning strategies foster critical thinking in Merdeka Curriculum. The evidence is sparse and indirect. Faradella, et al. (2024) identified open-ended questioning as one strategy used by Merdeka Curriculum teachers to promote HOTS, but this finding emerged from a study of only 13 teachers (2 observed) and was presented alongside project-based learning without detailed analysis of questioning's specific role. In sum, the literature lacks empirical studies specifically investigating how questioning types (probing, open-ended, wait-time, etc.) operationally foster critical thinking skills as defined by Merdeka Curriculum principles.

Research on integrating critical thinking in the EFL classroom based on the Merdeka Curriculum is growing. However, little attention has been given to integrating critical thinking through teachers' questioning in the Merdeka Curriculum for Madrasah Aliyah students. This research makes a novel contribution by examining an entirely unexplored intersection: pre-service EFL teacher questioning which focuses on students' ability of analysing, evaluating and creating narrative and exposition texts, Merdeka Curriculum implementation, and critical thinking development. Thus, this study wanted to explore how pre-service EFL teachers integrate critical thinking through teachers' questioning strategies in line with the Merdeka Curriculum. By demonstrating teachers' questioning strategies, this study advances ELT discussions on critical thinking integration through questioning strategies which used constructivist approaches to nurture students' critical thinking, which focuses on students' ability of analysing, evaluating and creating narrative and exposition texts each others in EFL classrooms and operationalizes Merdeka Curriculum goals, offering scalable lesson frameworks for Indonesian educators. Additionally, the study also provided insight into the challenges facing pre-service EFL teachers in integrating critical thinking through teachers' questioning and the solutions they offer.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

A qualitative approach enhances the methodology by providing rich, contextual insights into complex teacher experiences that quantitative methods cannot capture. This directly aligns with the study's exploratory goals on pre-service EFL teachers' integration of critical thinking via questioning in the Merdeka Curriculum. The qualitative design was selected (Creswell, 2017) to deeply comprehend pre-service EFL teachers' experiences in integrating critical thinking through questioning strategies under the Merdeka Curriculum, allowing in-depth exploration of "how" teachers implement questioning strategies and overcome obstacles. It prioritizes participants' voices through interviews and observations, revealing nuanced data on HOTS development that statistics might overlook.

Research Participants

The study was conducted in an Islamic Senior High School, also known as Madrasah Aliyah, in Ponorogo, East Java, where the Merdeka Curriculum existed in the eleventh grade for English lesson. The school was intentionally selected for its preparedness to incorporate critical thinking in the genre text. This context enabled the research to document genuine interactions between pre-service EFL teachers and students in a genuine classroom environment. Students who consistently engaged with the genre text were selected because their classrooms used Merdeka Curriculum. This method guaranteed that students could provide valuable feedback on the teachers' questioning that were delivered by pre-service EFL teachers in language classrooms.

The pre-service EFL teachers as participants were selected using convenience sampling, which includes volunteers or recruits who are readily available (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Among four pre-service EFL teachers, the selected participant demonstrated a willingness to participate and met all eligibility criteria. Then, they are from the undergraduate English Language Education Department and from 7th semester, joining the teaching practicum at Madrasah Aliyah. The pre-service EFL teachers were fully informed of the study's objectives and assured of privacy and confidentiality. In this study, classroom observations and interviews were used to collect data on the integration of critical thinking through pre-service EFL teachers' questioning strategies in the Merdeka Curriculum.

Instruments

A combination of classroom observations and interviews was used in this study. Classroom Observations were conducted to collect direct data on the implementation of integrating critical thinking through teachers' questioning strategies in the Merdeka Curriculum. As part of the teaching practicum program, pre-service EFL teachers taught the lesson three times. Further

investigation was conducted by conducting semi-structured interviews with four pre-service EFL teachers to elucidate the challenges associated with integrating critical thinking through teachers' questioning. Interviews were conducted after classroom observations. These lectures utilize structured inquiries. The interview explores pre-service EFL teachers' perspectives on understanding critical thinking, teachers' questioning as strategies to integrate critical thinking into the Merdeka Curriculum, the challenges they encountered, and the solutions. The duration of interview was for 20 minutes each. During the interview, Bahasa Indonesia was used to obtain precise answers and reduce misunderstandings. The voice recorder documented the complete interrogation process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is carried out by following the steps established by Miles and Huberman (2011), including data reduction, presentation, and conclusions. Data reduction is the first step in selecting, simplifying, summarizing, and transforming field notes into usable data. After the research data is collected, it can be organized to avoid clutter, making it easier to find and interpret the information. In the data presentation stage, the researcher presented their data as documentation of information compiled by them, in a way that makes it easy to understand and fully express all the data. As a final step, the conclusion provides an overview and summary of the data reduction results, followed by a brief presentation.

The researchers conducted triangulation to ensure data validity and avoid subjectivity (Rofiah & Bungin, 2021). Triangulation is a strategy that involves the validation of data using multiple data sources, investigators, and data collection methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, cited in Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The technique is subdivided into three parts, firstly is data triangulation. The term "multi-source" in this context refers to the utilization of multiple data sources, which can be conceptualized as the aggregation of data at different times, locations, and from various individuals. This multifaceted approach encompasses the collection of data on the same phenomenon in multiple sites and the aggregation of data from different types or levels of people. The second method is known as investigator triangulation. The present section pertains to the utilization of two additional researchers for the purpose of coding, analysis, and interpretation. The last is method triangulation. This component necessitates the utilization of diverse methodologies for data collection. The present study utilizes a methodological approach that employs triangulation of the research design, incorporating a variety of data sources, including documents, interviews, and observations.

In data analysis, the data from the lesson plans, encompassing assignments and activities, were systematically categorized into potential themes. As the research framework, revised Bloom's taxonomy by Anderson et al. (2001) was used to analyze the lesson plans of pre-service EFL teachers. Moreover, field notes were taken during classroom observation in order to identify research-relevant tasks and activities. For the researchers' convenience, classes were recorded to aid in re-examination of the learning processes. Aside from interview data, the researchers also examined pre-service EFL teachers' views on critical thinking integration.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Integrating Critical Thinking Through Teachers' Questioning in Merdeka Curriculum

Based on classroom observations, all pre-service EFL teachers used an approach recommended among several EFL teaching approaches. That was the Genre-Based Approach. This approach served become a guideline for integrating critical thinking through teachers' questioning strategies. Accordingly, genre-based approach used in English classroom which this approach focus on text-based approach that could be in diverse modes, such as oral, written, visual, audio or multimodal, as follows, Building Knowledge of the Field (BKoF), Modeling of the Text (MoT), Joint Construction of the Text (JCoT), and Independent Construction of the

Text (ICoT) (BSKAP, 2022). Using the Genre-Based Approach, pre-service EFL teachers appeared to sequence their integration of critical thinking through teachers' questioning in the Merdeka Curriculum. It is a line that enhances learners' higher-order thinking, also known as critical thinking (Dogan et al., 2023). The participants used 6 teachers' questioning strategies, such as structuring, pitching, directing, rhetorical, probing, and pausing. For each strategy, there is a definition, an example, and a discussion.

Structuring

Structuring a questioning strategy is important to integrate critical thinking. This is because it encourages students to move beyond simple and stimulates their critical engagement with concepts. The purpose is to review the series of questions and explain the implications based on previous lessons or adequacy statements, which is a tactic question.

Table 1
Structuring Questioning Strategy of The first PSET in EFL Classrooms

Teachers' questions	Students' responses
Have you reembered your previous lesson?	Yes, miss
Nice. What is that?	Narrative text
What is a narrative text?	It is a text
Yups. What text?	A text tells past

A pre-service EFL teacher uses a structured questioning strategy at the beginning of the lesson. The purpose is to assess students' memory of the previous lesson.

Table 2
Structuring Questioning Strategy of The Second PSET in EFL Classrooms

Teachers' questions	Students' responses
What lesson did you learn last week?	About narrative text, miss
Then, when do you use this tense?	It is past events
If it is past events, what tenses does it use?	Simple past
Could you make an example?	Once upon a time

From the excerpt above, the pre-service EFL teacher also tries to review the previous lesson by starting with recalling the prior lesson and they can identify which lesson it is. The data indicate that a pre-service EFL teacher uses different strategies to help students recall the lesson. Those questions prove that the students can remember critically. In sum, structuring questioning strategy is the starting point to integrate critical thinking in the lesson. Students will think critically to recall their previous knowledge. Structuring questioning serves as the critical foundation for integrating critical thinking in EFL lessons, grounded in Bloom's revised taxonomy like remember that activate prior knowledge for critical thinking progression, elevated by Socratic questioning prompts drive analysis, and empowered through Piaget's constructivism that turns recall into active schema-building. Pre-service EFL teachers, by employing engaging strategies within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, transform passive students into critical thinkers aligned with Profile of Pancasila Students' reasoning competencies, ensuring comprehensive cognitive growth from prior knowledge activation to innovative language production (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Ibarra & Cardenas, 2022). For instance, students engage in classroom discussions to foster a positive atmosphere. Wandasari et al. (2023) stated that the classroom atmosphere should be more engaging to increase students' interest in the material presented by the teacher. In this initial stage, it helps students respond to those questions precisely by recalling prior knowledge. Linh and Thanh (2022) argue that structuring questioning strategies can integrate critical thinking by elevating students' thinking from lower-order to higher-order skills.

Pitching

Questioning during pitching is crucial for actively engaging students and fostering their critical thinking by posing questions at a level and pace that both interest and challenge them. The goals are to select the appropriate question type, recall-narrow, recall-broad, thought-narrow, or thought-broad and to create a responsive, learner-centred environment that gradually fosters deeper understanding and critical engagement with content in the EFL classroom. By asking about the structure of the text, the students are naturally active in answering the question. It elicits a response that references student-centred learning and demonstrates students' interest in the classroom discussion.

Table 3
Pitching Questioning Strategy of The Third PSET in EFL Classrooms

Teachers' questions	Students' responses
The chief of the class? How do you categorize the kind of a narrative text?	Fable, legend, myth, and fairy tale
Nice. What are the differences between a fable, a legend, a myth, and a fairy tale	Fable tells about animals like cats and dogs, and legends sometimes the origin of a place, such as the story of Toba Lake Myth (kejadian masa lalu yang dikaitkan dengan dewa atau cerita mistis) the past event associated with gods or mystical stories, I think Timun Mas A fairy tale is a fantasy story with unreal characters, like Cinderella

Pre-service EFL teacher asks students about the kind of narrative text and the differences between them. It proves that students have a good understanding. The questions also stimulate their critical thinking. It is because every single kind of narrative text supports the definition and example. In the pitching questioning, the students deeper understanding regarding the lesson. Based on the classroom observations above, pre-service EFL teachers ask appropriate questions to assess active participation in classroom discussions, students' engagement, and understanding of prior knowledge. It shows that appropriately chosen questions can encourage students to be active, interact, and listen to one another's contributions which this strategy enhances students' critical thinking. This is consistent with Bloom's revised taxonomy (mid-levels like understand and apply scaffold critical thinking), enhanced through Socratic questioning which open-ended prompts foster evidence-based dialogue and participation, and rooted in Piaget's constructivism through peer interactions builds active knowledge. Classroom observations confirm pre-service EFL teachers' appropriate questions assess engagement without repetition, promoting interaction and critical thinking per Merdeka Curriculum goals (Darong & Niman, 2021).

Directing

To avoid errors in a student's response, mispronunciations, or poor intonation, a teacher may approach the same question to return it to the same student for more help.

Table 4
Directing Questioning Strategy of The Fourth PSET in EFL Classrooms

Teachers' questions	Students' responses
Alright, from the narrative text, in your opinion, which one of the narratives texts is the easiest to tell a story?	Fable
How do you answer the question correctly?	I think fable, sir
Could you give an example of the story?	It's about a rabbit and a turtle. There was a rabbit and a turtle. They did run a

Teachers' questions	Students' responses
	competition. The rabbit was confident of winning this competition. They started the competition. The rabbit had the idea of sleeping for a while and running when the turtle was almost there. Rabbit thought that the turtle could not be the winner. Unfortunately, the rabbit slept well and did not realize that turtle had arrived in the finish place.
Give applause, everyone. Are you sure the second sentence is true? There was a rabbit and a turtle	Oh were
The full answer?	There were a rabbit and a turtle

The pre-service EFL teacher asks a question, and a student confidently answers it, though in a short answer. The pre-service EFL teacher asked the correct one. The student can fix it. The student continued to tell the story of the rabbit and the turtle. In the previous answer, the student is careful to tell the story in complete sentences, but she is wrong to place it in the second sentence. Fortunately, she realizes it and changes to the best answer. In this strategy, pre-service EFL teachers aim to understand students' abilities within a specific context. Starting in the first answer, the pre-service EFL teacher is aware of errors in a student's response. The pre-service EFL teacher's action is to make sure the answer by asking the student once. Although the student made a mistake, she still corrected it after getting revision from pre-service EFL teachers. The strategy shows that critical thinking is present because the student could modify the answer, so she solved the problem without any clues from the teacher.

Rhetorical

Asking questions related to new material, which this question was delivered at the beginning of learning activities after recalling or reviewing the previous lesson. This strategy is called brainstorming. The pre-service EFL teacher will move to the following material by asking students about a past story, focusing on students' arguments and perspectives. The students follow the process in learning activities.

Table 5
Rhetorical Questioning Strategy of The Second PSET in EFL Classrooms

Teachers' questions	Students' responses
Before coming to the new material, have you ever written or spoken to your friends about something and they do it?	I have ever told my friends to stop drinking coffee and switch to mineral water, and they do it.
That is point ! So what is our new lesson?	Delivering a suggestion
Something like that, but we also give some arguments to support our statement and other components. It refers to Hortatory Exposition.	

Pre-service EFL teacher tries to present new material by building on experience. This questioning strategy helps students develop their critical thinking skills. The student can easily guess the lesson topic from their responses, even though the answers are not precise. Additionally, the student can analyze which best experience fits the teachers' questioning. In this case, pre-service EFL teachers build knowledge to present new material. The concept of building knowledge here, asks students regarding the update news that will refer to the new lesson. Thus, rhetorical questioning enables pre-service EFL teachers to build knowledge for new material by aligning with Bloom's revised taxonomy, activating analyze and create stage to integrate critical thinking through current events, embodying Socratic questioning which rhetorical prompts spark brainstorming and assumption-revealing dialogue.

Probing

Engaging students in a discussion about their answer and assessing their understanding. Through this strategy, students deepen their understanding of the material by reflecting more deeply and clarifying their thinking.

Table 6
Probing Questioning Strategy of The Third PSET in EFL Classrooms

Teachers' questions	Students' responses
Have you ever listened to a story?	Yes miss
Here is the audio of an animal story, along with some pictures. Could you guess what we will do?	Describing the story Retell the story using these pictures
Not really. You and your group will listen to the audio, then look at the picture and write the story on a piece of paper, just like the audio, and add a moral value. Are there any questions to the task?	(Running)
Now, the first group presents, right?	One day, a big lion was sleeping. A little mouse ran over his paw. The lion woke up and roared. Then, they ask, "Who is there?" because a mouse is afraid of being eaten by a lion. The lion laughed and let a mouse go. On a different day, a lion was in a net. Then, scream "help". A little mouse heard him and ran to bite a net. Finally, a lion was free. They become a good friend. The moral value is that the kindness you share around will come around to you.

This section shows that pre-service EFL teachers attempt to develop a depth of understanding of the story through group discussion during the listening section. The result is that students can listen to the story once and think critically about the moral values it presents. The process of probing the questioning strategy above indicates that the pre-service EFL teacher asks students to engage in deeper thinking because the topic is from our environment and is happening now. Pre-service EFL teacher also wants to know how far the students criticize the news or their environment. This helps students expand their thinking to become more critical.

Referring the probing questioning strategy, examine the students' focus. Further, pre-service EFL teachers truly prepare students to integrate critical thinking through questioning and tasks. Probing questioning sharpens students' focus and integrates critical thinking by aligning with Bloom's revised taxonomy, targeting the blooms taxonomy operational verb, particularly in critical thinking integration through scenarios and group presentations, employing Socratic questioning that WH-probes elicit deeper evidence and clarification (Esther, 2012), and leveraging Piaget's constructivism show assimilation of stories into schemas via group critique drives active summary construction. Pre-service EFL teachers' strategic preparation ensures readiness for knowledge-building, evidencing robust critical thinking integration within Merdeka Curriculum activities.

Pausing

Taking the time to consider students' responses carefully can encourage deeper analysis and lead to more meaningful, productive class discussions.

Table 7
Pausing Questioning Strategy of The First PSET in EFL Classrooms

Teachers' questions	Students' responses
Do you get the point of analytical exposition?	Yes, miss

Teachers' questions	Students' responses
What is that?	The text that contains an arguments to persuade the reader
Good..I have sentences for three sentences for a thesis statement. Can you continue writing the argument untill the reiteration on the whiteboard, right now?	(Silence)
In today's digital era, social media has become the primary source of information for many people. While it offers fast access to news, it also contributes to the spread of fake news. Fake news on social media can create confusion, fear,, and even harm society.	
What is the first argument?	(Silence)
Alright, I will give 5 minutes to arranges three arguments that support the thesis statement and the reiteration	

Pre-service EFL teacher asks the students about the material that they have learnt. This is a way to analyze the students' knowledge and skills. In this case, the students should think critically to fill in the answers, arguments 1, 2, and 3, and the reiteration based on the clues in the thesis statement. The pre-service EFL teacher uses familiar topics to connect their thinking and knowledge, including fake news on social media. The pre-service teacher is the facilitator after explaining the lesson. It means that a pre-service teacher only asks questions, and students' responses serve as the topic for the next task. The students must think it through and use it to create an outline before writing a hortatory text. The last is pausing questioning strategy. By using a pausing strategy, pre-service EFL teachers create a gap to prompt students to think critically. Pausing questioning fosters deep critical thinking by aligning with Bloom's revised taxonomy, transitioning from understand to create which it is useful to integrate critical thinking through reflective gaps, embodying Socratic questioning which strategic pauses after prompts cultivate evidence-based argument construction, and leveraging Piaget's constructivism that clues into schemas during reflection drives active text creation.

The challenges of integrating critical thinking through teachers' questioning

The interview data showed that integrating critical thinking through teachers' questioning in the Merdeka Curriculum posed several challenges for the participants. The challenges include students' responses, students' lack of self-confidence, students' proficiency, and time constraints. Pre-service EFL teachers attempt to identify when students are wondering how to respond to their questions. The students' wondering is reflected in their responses, their lack of self-confidence, and their proficiency. All of those issues have been faced by pre-service EFL teachers in integrating critical thinking through teachers' questioning in the Merdeka Curriculum.

Excerpt 1

So, the challenges when applying teachers' questioning are students' responses. Sometimes they do not understand why it happened, so they just sit in their chair and listen to us. (P4)

Excerpt 2

Some students are less confident about answering my questions. (P3)

Many students remain silent during questioning by pre-service EFL teachers due to shyness, fear of errors, and hesitation in articulating ideas, opting instead for passive participation. Student silence from shyness and fear blocks Bloom's revised taxonomy progression, failing to activate remember or understand for HOTS scaffolding, disrupts Socratic questioning dialogue in eliminating assumption-challenging feedback loops (Hong et al., 2021), and halts Piaget's constructivism, preventing schema through social interaction. This passivity hinders critical thinking development and self-confidence growth (Adharini & Herman, 2020) underscoring pre-service EFL teachers' need for proficiency-matched questions within

Merdeka Curriculum to foster active participation and Profile of Pancasila Students competencies.

The following challenge is the students' proficiency. The first pre-service EFL teachers stated that the students had a clear idea and expressed it in Bahasa. Meanwhile, when pre-service EFL teachers asked in English, the students were silent.

Excerpt 3

Some students do not use English to express their ideas. They can deliver the idea clearly in Bahasa, but if I ask them in English, they can not answer. (P1)

Lower L2 proficiency restricts students' ability to process complex questions, analyze texts, or formulate reasoned responses, leading to reluctance in participating during teacher questioning. Then, lower L2 proficiency fundamentally restricts critical thinking by blocking Bloom's revised taxonomy, limiting understanding, apply access to HOTS like analyze and evaluate, disrupting Socratic questioning, halting Piaget's constructivism schema through linguistic barriers. This reduces student willingness to engage, as L2 limitations create cognitive overload that stalls Merdeka Curriculum's Profile of Pancasila Students competencies.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that pre-service EFL teachers integrated critical thinking into English learning through six questioning strategies: structuring, pitching, directing, rhetorical, probing, and pausing. These strategies were implemented within the Genre-Based Approach, particularly in teaching narrative, analytical exposition, and hortatory exposition texts under the Merdeka Curriculum framework. This finding confirms that questioning remains a central pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms because it enables teachers to guide students from recalling prior knowledge to producing more complex responses. The result is consistent with Shanmugavelu et al. (2020), who emphasized that effective questioning can attract students' attention, stimulate motivation, and promote positive, critical, and creative thinking. Similarly, Salwa et al. (2023) and Hermansyah et al. (2024) argued that questioning strategies are among the most frequently used techniques to stimulate critical thinking in English language teaching.

The use of structuring questions shows that critical thinking does not necessarily begin with complex or high-level questions. In this study, pre-service EFL teachers used structuring questions to activate students' prior knowledge before moving to more demanding tasks. Students were asked to recall previous lessons, identify narrative text features, and explain grammatical elements such as the use of past tense. This finding supports Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised Bloom's taxonomy, in which remembering and understanding serve as foundational cognitive processes before students can analyze, evaluate, or create. It also confirms Linh and Thanh's (2022) argument that well-structured questions can gradually elevate students' thinking from lower-order to higher-order levels. In this sense, structuring questions function as cognitive scaffolding rather than simple memory checks. They prepare students to engage more confidently with genre analysis and text construction.

The findings also reveal that pitching questions helped teachers adjust the level and direction of questioning to match students' readiness. Through pitching questions, students were encouraged to explain the structure of narrative texts, distinguish between fables, legends, myths, and fairy tales, and provide examples from familiar stories. This extends Darong and Niman's (2021) view that teacher questions can serve as assessment for learning, because teachers can identify students' understanding while simultaneously encouraging participation. Pitching questions also reflect learner-centered pedagogy because they allow teachers to select questions that are neither too easy nor too difficult. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, this strategy is particularly relevant because it supports differentiated learning and encourages students to participate according to their cognitive and linguistic readiness.

Among the six strategies, directing, rhetorical, probing, and pausing were found to be more directly associated with higher-order cognitive processes such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Directing questions enabled students to revise their answers, correct language errors, and improve the accuracy of their responses. For example, when a student made a grammatical mistake while retelling a fable, the pre-service teacher redirected the question, allowing the student to self-correct and reconstruct the sentence. This finding confirms Brookfield and Preskill's (2005) view that classroom discussion can help learners clarify, examine, and refine their thinking. It also supports Salmon and Barrera's (2021) claim that intentional questioning promotes deeper thinking and learning. The important point is that directing questions did not merely correct linguistic form; they created opportunities for students to evaluate their own language production.

Rhetorical questioning was also found to support critical thinking by connecting learning materials with students' personal experiences and current social issues. In the observed classrooms, rhetorical questions were used to introduce exposition texts through topics such as news, social media, arguments, and suggestions. This finding extends Tofade et al.'s (2013) explanation that questions can be used as teaching tools to stimulate reflection and reveal assumptions. In this study, rhetorical questions encouraged students to think about why they believed certain information and how arguments should be supported by credible evidence. This is closely related to critical literacy in EFL learning, particularly in the digital era, where students must evaluate information before accepting it as true. Thus, rhetorical questioning helped transform classroom interaction from topic introduction into a process of reasoning and argument formation.

Probing questions produced one of the strongest links to critical thinking. The findings show that probing questions encouraged students to elaborate, clarify, summarize, and connect information with moral values or environmental issues. For instance, students listened to a story, reconstructed it, and identified its moral message. In another lesson, they discussed global warming and took notes from a video to prepare for exposition writing. This finding strongly confirms Hermansyah et al. (2025), who found that probing and reflective questions contribute to students' analytical, evaluative, and synthetic abilities. It is also consistent with Masduki (2022), who reported that probing and rephrasing questions encourage students to think critically in reading comprehension. The present study extends these findings by showing that probing is useful not only in reading activities but also in listening, speaking, and writing tasks within genre-based instruction.

Pausing questions also played a significant role in promoting critical thinking. The findings indicate that students often remained silent when asked to construct arguments or outlines, but the teachers' decision to provide wait time allowed them to think more carefully before responding. This finding is aligned with Sulaiman (2021), who documented that pausing strategies help guide students toward more complete answers. It also supports Darong (2022), who argued that teacher questioning techniques influence the quality of classroom interaction. In this study, silence was not always a sign of failure; it sometimes indicated that students needed time to process the question, organize ideas, and formulate language. Therefore, pausing can be interpreted as a reflective space that supports the transition from comprehension to text creation.

However, the findings also reveal several challenges in integrating critical thinking through questioning, including limited student responses, lack of confidence, low English proficiency, and time constraints. Students' silence was often caused by shyness, fear of making mistakes, and hesitation in expressing ideas. This confirms Hong et al. (2021), who found that self-confidence is closely related to students' critical attitude and ability. The issue of language proficiency also supports Manalo and Sheppard's (2016) argument that language can affect critical thinking performance. Students may have ideas in Bahasa Indonesia but

struggle to express them in English. In addition, limited classroom time restricted opportunities for deeper questioning, extended practice, and complete genre-based cycles. These challenges suggest that critical thinking in EFL classrooms requires not only good questions but also linguistic support, emotional safety, and sufficient instructional time.

This study confirms previous research showing that questioning strategies can enhance students' engagement and critical thinking. At the same time, it extends the literature by showing how pre-service EFL teachers operationalize questioning strategies within the Merdeka Curriculum and the Genre-Based Approach in a Madrasah Aliyah context. The findings imply that teacher education programs should train pre-service teachers to design sequenced, purposeful, and proficiency-sensitive questions. Questioning should not be treated as spontaneous classroom talk only, but as a planned pedagogical strategy that supports students' movement from remembering and understanding toward analyzing, evaluating, and creating. In this way, questioning strategies can become a practical bridge between English proficiency development and the cultivation of critical reasoning expected in the Merdeka Curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that integrating critical thinking significantly can be succeed in EFL classroom through teachers' questioning that enhanced student engagement, critical thinking, and comprehension in narrative and exposition text, while remaining aligned with the pedagogical values of Merdeka Curriculum. Open-ended questions characterize targeted questioning that can integrate critical thinking in the learning activities are directing, rhetorical, probing, and pausing. This framework embodies Socratic questioning principles across strategies and rooted in Piaget's constructivist approaches, these strategies create cognitive domain, students assimilate prior schemas and accommodate through peer or group interactions. Despite barriers like silence (low confidence), L2 proficiency limits, and time constraints, which block high-order thinking skills progression and the solutions such as varied collaborative tasks, personalized approaches, and balanced low or high-level questioning overcome these, ensuring autonomous learning. Research findings support these theoretical contributions, showing enhanced classroom discourse when pre-service teachers address challenges through student-centred Merdeka Belajar practices.

Future research should analyze real-world performance tasks (portfolios, oral defenses, community projects) using diverse participants to validate this integrated Bloom, Socratic, Piaget framework for EFL critical thinking through teachers' questioning strategies under Merdeka Curriculum. Teacher professional development can adopt integrating critical thinking through questioning strategies in daily lessons, starting with structuring questions to build prior knowledge schemas of Piaget's constructivism, overcoming passivity. Besides, curriculum development should increase explicit critical thinking scaffolds into Merdeka Curriculum EFL materials, embedding questioning strategies like structuring and probing prompts directly into lesson modules for narrative and expository texts.

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INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. All participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study before agreeing to take part. They were also assured that their identities would remain confidential and that all information provided would be used solely for research purposes. Participants were informed of their right

to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they were otherwise entitled. By continuing their participation, the participants provided informed consent under the conditions described in this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data utilized in this study cannot be made publicly available due to privacy concerns and ethical obligations to protect participant confidentiality. This restriction ensures compliance with ethical research standards and applicable data protection regulations. However, researchers or interested parties who require access to the dataset for validation or further analysis may submit a reasonable request to the corresponding author. Each request will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Data sharing will only be considered after approval from the appropriate institutional ethics review board to ensure that the proposed use aligns with ethical guidelines and participant consent terms.

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