

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides general information about the study, explaining its background, research questions, statements of the problem, purpose, significance, state of the art, and key terms.

1.1 Background of the Study

Developing students' critical thinking skills has become a major priority in contemporary education, particularly at the secondary school level, where learners are expected to engage with increasingly complex texts, ideas, and real-world issues. In the twenty-first century, students are required not only to understand information but also to analyse, interpret, evaluate, and justify their ideas in meaningful ways. These demands are especially relevant in English language learning, where reading is not simply a process of decoding words, but also a process of constructing meaning, making inferences, and responding critically to texts. As technology and visual media continue to shape the way students receive and process information, schools are increasingly challenged to adopt instructional approaches that can support both literacy development and higher-order thinking (Ahmadi, 2018).

This issue is particularly significant for ninth-grade students. Grade IX represents an important transition stage in which students are expected to move from basic comprehension toward more analytical and interpretive engagement with texts. However, many students at this level still struggle to go beyond surface understanding. They may be able to identify explicit information in a passage, but they often have trouble when required to infer implied meaning, evaluate ideas, or justify responses using evidence. In reading classrooms, this creates a gap between what students are expected to achieve and what they are actually able to do. As a result, there is a growing need for reading instruction that not only improves comprehension but also helps students develop critical thinking skills through structured, meaningful learning experiences.

One instructional approach that has strong potential to address this need is Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). Developed by Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen, VTS was originally designed to facilitate guided discussion around visual artworks in museum education (Yenawine, 2013). Through open-ended questions such as *What is going on in this picture?*, *What do you see that makes you say that?*, and *What more can we find?*, VTS encourages learners to observe, interpret meaning, support their ideas with evidence, and listen to alternative perspectives. Although first introduced in art education, VTS has increasingly been adapted to broader educational contexts because its core principles observation, interpretation, evidence-based reasoning, and dialogic interaction are highly relevant to literacy instruction. Studies have shown that VTS can support students' communication skills, interpretive thinking, and engagement with texts (Nolan, 2022, 2023; Yenawine, 2013, 2018).

The relevance of VTS to reading instruction lies in its ability to bridge visual interpretation and textual comprehension. In reading classrooms, students are often expected to infer meaning, interpret authorial intention, and justify their understanding using textual evidence. These are also central processes in VTS. For this reason, VTS can be adapted as a pre-reading or reading-support strategy that helps students activate background knowledge, construct meaning collaboratively, and engage more deeply with written materials. Cappello and Walker (2016) argue that visual texts can function as cognitive scaffolds that support inference-making and evidence-based explanation, while Nolan (2022) found that VTS-based instruction in English language classrooms improved students' paraphrasing, justification, and collaborative meaning-making. These findings suggest that VTS is not only a visual literacy strategy, but also a valuable pedagogical tool for strengthening reading comprehension and critical thinking.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), this need becomes even more pressing. EFL learners, especially those at the CEFR A2 level, often have limited vocabulary and linguistic resources for expressing abstract ideas. As a result, they may find it difficult to articulate interpretation, evaluation, or argumentation when reading English texts. Visual support can therefore play an

important role in reducing linguistic burden while still promoting higher-order thinking. Park (2012) found that visual prompts in EFL classrooms improved students' reading comprehension and oral expression, while Khamkhong (2018) emphasized that reading instruction should be designed in ways that support critical reading and analytical skills. Similarly, Syarkowi (2018) reported that inquiry-based reading assignments enhanced students' critical thinking, and Arifin (2020) found that students' ability to analyse and evaluate texts improved when they were encouraged to engage critically with reading tasks.

Despite the growing body of research supporting visual and critical-thinking-oriented approaches, reading instruction in many Indonesian EFL contexts still tends to focus on literal comprehension and low-level recall. Critical thinking is often stated as an educational goal, yet its implementation in classroom materials remains limited. Ilyas (2015) pointed out that many Indonesian ELT textbooks do not sufficiently promote higher order thinking skills such as inference, clarification, and argument evaluation. This suggests that there is still a need for reading materials that go beyond surface comprehension and intentionally integrate analytical and interpretive thinking. This need is also aligned with the goals of Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes student-centered learning, reasoning, and the development of critical thinking as part of twenty-first-century competencies (Jufriadi et al., 2022). In relation to this context, the present study focuses on St. Patricia School, where preliminary classroom observations indicated that reading instruction for ninth-grade students was still largely teacher-centered and focused mainly on literal understanding of texts. Although students were able to follow teacher explanations and answer basic comprehension questions, they showed difficulty in making inferences, evaluating ideas, and justifying their responses. This classroom reality demonstrates the need for reading materials that are not only appropriate to students' language level, but also capable of promoting deeper thinking and more active engagement.

Therefore, this study aims to develop reading materials for ninth-grade students at St. Patricia School by integrating Visual Thinking Strategies and critical thinking skills. The study is designed to produce a simple, structured, and context-

appropriate instructional module that can be used by both teachers and students in classroom practice. By combining visual discussion, guided reading activities, and critical-thinking tasks, the study seeks to support students in becoming more active readers who can interpret, analyse, and respond to texts in more thoughtful and evidence-based ways. In doing so, this research attempts to bridge the gap between curriculum expectations, previous research, and actual classroom implementation in secondary EFL reading instruction. Therefore, the appropriate development of VTS-based reading materials is expected to enhance students' critical thinking skills and improve their reading skills.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Based on the researcher's preliminary survey and classroom observations at St. Patricia School, reading instruction for ninth-grade students still tends to emphasize literal comprehension rather than higher-order thinking. Although many students are able to decode texts and identify explicit information, they often experience difficulty when asked to infer meaning, analyse ideas, evaluate content, or justify their responses using evidence. In other words, students may understand what a text says at the surface level, but they are not yet consistently supported in developing deeper critical engagement with reading materials. This issue is important because reading instruction at the secondary level should not only help students comprehend texts, but also encourage them to think critically about what they read. However, traditional reading instruction does not always provide sufficient opportunities for students to interpret authorial intention, make reasoned judgments, or discuss alternative viewpoints. As a result, reading activities may remain focused on recall and factual understanding rather than analysis and reflection.

The problem becomes more significant in the context of English as a Foreign Language learning, where students may face both linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties. Ahmad (2021) explains that reading problems may be related to vocabulary limitations, decoding difficulties, memory constraints, or attention-related issues. These factors can hinder students' ability to identify main ideas, infer

implied meaning, and connect information across a text. Consequently, students need more structured support that can help them engage with texts actively and meaningfully. At the same time, the context of St. Patricia School offers potential for pedagogical innovation. As a private school with relatively small class sizes and adequate instructional resources, the school provides a suitable environment for implementing more interactive and student-centered reading instruction. One approach that may address this need is Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), an image-based discussion protocol that encourages observation, interpretation, evidence-based reasoning, and collaborative dialogue. VTS has been discussed as a pedagogical approach that can foster higher-order thinking and student engagement across learning contexts. Even so, there is still limited research on how VTS can be systematically integrated into English reading materials, particularly for ninth-grade students in secondary EFL classrooms.

Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is not only the limited development of students' critical thinking in reading lessons, but also the lack of structured reading materials that intentionally integrate Visual Thinking Strategies and critical thinking skills. This gap is especially relevant for teachers who need practical, context-appropriate materials that can support students in moving beyond surface-level comprehension toward deeper interpretation, analysis, and reflection. For this reason, the present study seeks to develop and examine reading materials that integrate VTS and critical thinking skills for ninth-grade students at St. Patricia School

1.3 Research Questions

This research focused on developing

1. To what extent do the existing English reading materials for ninth-grade students at St. Patricia School incorporate Visual Thinking Strategies and Critical Thinking Skills?
2. How can English reading materials integrating Visual Thinking Strategies and Critical Thinking Skills be systematically designed and developed for ninth-grade students at St. Patricia School?
3. How do ninth-grade students at St. Patricia School experience and perceive the use of English reading materials integrating Visual Thinking Strategies and Critical Thinking Skills?
4. To what extent do the developed English reading materials integrating Visual Thinking Strategies and Critical Thinking Skills support the improvement of ninth-grade students at St. Patricia School critical thinking skills, reading comprehension, and classroom engagement?

1.4 Purpose of the Study

Based on the research questions above, those are in line with the purpose of the research which are stated as follows:

1. To identify and examine the extent to which existing ninth-grade English reading materials incorporate Visual Thinking Strategies and Critical Thinking Skills.
2. To create innovative English reading materials that specifically incorporate VTS and Critical Thinking Skills, ensuring appropriateness, clarity, and validity for the ninth grade.
3. To apply the newly developed VTS and Critical Thinking-infused reading materials in authentic ninth-grade classroom settings, exploring students' perceptions and engagement in a practical context.
4. To assess and evaluate the effectiveness of VTS and Critical Thinking-infused reading materials in enhancing students' critical thinking abilities, reading comprehension, and overall classroom engagement.

1.5 Scope of the Study

Ninth-grade students should be able to use English at an intermediate level, equivalent to the qualification level set by the CEFR. In the context of using CEFR-compliant qualifications in the real world and the specific educational needs that are the focus of this study, the grade 9 students who are the subjects of this study are at a basic proficiency level, which is equivalent to CEFR A2 (Beginner). At the A2 level, students can handle familiar and straightforward tasks, discuss basic personal and daily information, and understand simple written texts with pictures.

In this unique situation, the qualitative study looks at combining Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) and Critical Thinking Skills (CTS) specifically for ninth-grade students currently at the A2 level. The study is guided by the qualitative ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation). The first step is to carefully look at the English reading materials that are already out there and see if they are appropriate for A2-level students. This includes looking at how well these materials teach visual and critical thinking skills that are appropriate for this level of proficiency. The analysis shows specific problems and gaps that need to be fixed by making more useful teaching materials for this group of learners. The following steps in the study's design and development will focus on making new reading materials that are appropriate for the context and include VTS and CTS, while also considering the language skills and cognitive development level of ninth graders at the A2 level. This phase focuses on using simple language, easy-to-understand vocabulary, organised visual aids, clear instructions, and carefully planned critical thinking activities, all of which are very important for helping A2-level learners. During the implementation phase, these specially made materials will be used in real classrooms with ninth graders who have been identified as CEFR A2. The study will use qualitative methods like observations, interviews, student reflections, and teacher feedback to learn a lot about how students feel, understand, and engage with the material. This will give a human-centered view of how well the integrated approach works.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this research contributes to constructivist learning theory by examining the application of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) within secondary-level reading instruction. Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and language in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978), VTS positions dialogic discussion as a catalyst for higher-order thinking. By integrating an art-based discussion protocol into reading lessons, this study bridges visual literacy and textual literacy, two domains that are increasingly recognized as interdependent in contemporary literacy education. Prior research suggests that structured visual inquiry can strengthen students' abilities to make inferences, justify interpretations with evidence, and engage in reflective reasoning core components of critical reading comprehension (Yenawine, 2013; Serafini, 2017). Focusing on adolescent learners, this study addresses a notable gap in the VTS literature, which has predominantly concentrated on elementary education and museum contexts. Given that students at the ninth-grade level are entering the formal operational stage of cognitive development, where abstract and critical thinking become more prominent, this research offers timely theoretical insights into how dialogic, visually mediated approaches can support advanced literacy skills.

Practically, the findings of this study are expected to inform instructional practices by offering an alternative and innovative approach to teaching reading comprehension and critical thinking. If VTS is shown to effectively enhance students' engagement and analytical reasoning during reading lessons, English teachers and educators in other subject areas may adopt this strategy to facilitate richer classroom discussions and deeper textual interpretation. As a practical output, this study can serve as the foundation for developing a simple, adaptable instructional module or teaching guide that integrates VTS prompts with reading materials suitable for ninth-grade students. Such a module may assist teachers in implementing VTS systematically, even without prior experience in art-based pedagogy. This contribution is particularly relevant in private school settings, where curricular flexibility and an emphasis on college readiness often encourage

pedagogical innovation. Strengthening students' critical analysis skills at this stage can have a cumulative impact on their academic performance across disciplines, better preparing them for the demands of upper secondary education and higher education.

Methodologically, this study contributes to educational research by employing a qualitative approach to capture students' voices, reasoning processes, and classroom interactions during VTS-facilitated reading instruction. Through in-depth observations, discussion transcripts, and reflective responses, the research provides rich, contextualized evidence of how students experience and make meaning through VTS. Such qualitative insights complement existing quantitative findings on critical thinking and literacy outcomes, offering a more nuanced understanding of how and why VTS may be effective in classroom practice. By documenting the instructional process and student responses in an authentic school context, this study enriches the growing body of research on dialogic teaching, visual literacy, and interdisciplinary instructional strategies. Overall, this research contributes to both educational theory and practice by exploring the potential of Visual Thinking Strategies as a multidisciplinary approach to cultivating critical thinking through reading instruction among adolescent learners.

1.7 Key Terms

To avoid misinterpretation, the technical terms found throughout this study are defined below as follows:

1. Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS):

VTS is a teaching method that uses pictures, diagrams, and graphic organizers to help students observe, interpret, analyse, and express their thoughts. This helps them understand things better and think more critically.

2. English Reading Material:

Specifically designed and structured to include Visual Thinking Strategies and Critical Thinking Skills in a way that encourages students to interact with, think about, and make sense of what they read.

3. Critical Thinking Skills (CTS):

These mental processes include analysis, evaluation, reasoning, interpretation, and judgement. They help students think about information carefully, question assumptions, and come to logical conclusions.

4. Ninth Grade Students (A2 Level):

Students are typically predicted to be around 14 to 15 years old and in the ninth grade. In this study, they have an English language proficiency level equal to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) A2 (Elementary) level. This means they can understand and use basic language in familiar situations.

5. ADDIE Model (Qualitative):

A systematic instructional design framework comprising Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation phases, adapted qualitatively to develop, assess, and refine instructional materials and methods through descriptive, interpretive, and reflective processes.

1.8 State of the Art

Integrating Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to reading classes is part of a trend in many fields to teach people how to read and write as well as how to think critically about what they read. Yenawine and Housen (2013) made VTS to help people look at, understand, and think more deeply about works of art by having guided conversations about them. There have been a lot of studies that show VTS can be used in regular schools to teach language and reading (Cappello & Walker, 2016; Nolan, 2022, 2023). These changes show that VTS can help students improve their ability to speak, read, and draw conclusions from what they read. All of these things are important for being able to read and think critically.

In Indonesia, most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading lessons only teach students how to understand the surface of the text. They don't give them enough help to develop higher-order thinking skills (Ilyas, 2015; Nainggolan & Wirza, 2021). Some learning products do have parts that help with critical thinking,

but they are still not very broad or deep in their design. Researchers are looking into different ways to get people more interested and help them read better, like adding pictures or videos. Park (2012), Arifin (2020), and Syarkowi (2018) all showed that reading techniques that include critical thinking and open-ended exercises, like those in VTS, can make it much easier for students to understand and analyse what they read.

Paivio's Dual-Coding Theory (1990) and Vygotsky's social constructivism (1978) are two theories that support using both visual and verbal methods in teaching. Paivio believes that using both visual and verbal inputs together helps people remember things and understand them better. Vygotsky, on the other hand, stresses how important it is to talk to other people for cognitive growth. These frameworks show that VTS could help students learn better by using student-centered, discussion-based strategies. Even with these changes, a lot of writing is still about museums and early childhood education. There isn't a lot of research on secondary EFL courses for teens, especially in Southeast Asia. This thesis fills in that gap by using the ADDIE instructional approach to systematically make and test English reading materials that integrate VTS and critical thinking. The Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar framework from Indonesia (Jufriadi et al., 2022) builds on what has been learnt recently and includes material that is appropriate for ninth-grade students at the CEFR A2 level.