Bridging Faith and Critical Inquiry: Implementing Resource-Based Learning to Enhance Critical Thinking in Pesantren English Education

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Abstract

This study investigates the integration of Resource-Based Learning (RBL) in English education within an Islamic boarding school (pesantren) to enhance students' critical thinking while maintaining faith-based educational values. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research combined quantitative and qualitative data to capture both measurable learning outcomes and pedagogical dynamics. The participants were twenty-seven male santri of Ma'had Al-Jamiah UIN Salatiga who engaged in RBL-based English instruction over one semester. Quantitative data were obtained through pretest–posttest comparisons, while qualitative insights were drawn from interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. The results revealed a significant improvement in students' critical thinking performance (t = 12.68, p < .05; Cohen's d = 1.9), confirming the effectiveness of RBL in fostering analytical reasoning. Qualitative findings indicated that RBL promoted faith-based autonomy, reflective dialogue, and transformative engagement, allowing santri to connect inquiry with moral reflection. The integration of Islamic values into RBL created a learner-centered environment that harmonized intellectual growth with spiritual awareness. The study concludes that RBL is a viable and culturally responsive model for English education in pesantren, bridging the gap between faith and critical inquiry while encouraging teachers to adopt facilitative, resource-oriented pedagogies. Future research is encouraged to explore long-term and multi-institutional applications of RBL to strengthen its role in developing ethically grounded, globally competent learners.

Keywords: *Resource-Based Learning, critical thinking, Islamic education, English learning, pesantren*

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of education and communication has reshaped the competencies required of twenty-first-century learners. In this rapidly changing environment, the ability to think critically and communicate effectively in English has become an essential skill for engaging in academic, professional, and intercultural dialogue. For students in Indonesia's Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), this global demand presents a unique dual challenge: they must master global linguistic and cognitive competencies while maintaining their distinctive Islamic worldview and moral values. Historically, pesantren have focused on transmitting classical Islamic scholarship and cultivating spiritual discipline (tafaqquh fi al-dīn), positioning knowledge as both intellectual pursuit and spiritual devotion. Yet, the modern educational landscape requires santri—students of pesantren—to develop broader literacies, digital awareness, and analytical skills to thrive in increasingly globalized contexts (Arar, 2023).

Despite this evolving educational need, English language instruction in many pesantren remains dominated by traditional pedagogies. Several studies (Pelu et al., 2022; Istiqomah et al., 2023) note that classroom practices are still largely teacher-centered,

emphasizing grammar-translation and rote memorization rather than student engagement, inquiry, and reflection. This situation limits students' opportunities to develop communicative competence or higher-order thinking skills, as they tend to receive knowledge passively rather than actively construct meaning. Similar challenges have been reported in broader EFL classrooms across Indonesia, where the lack of learner autonomy and critical engagement has hindered the cultivation of analytical reasoning and problem-solving abilities (Abdullah, 2020; Akhdinirwanto et al, 2020). These findings underscore the urgency of developing pedagogical models that encourage both reflective inquiry and learner-centered engagement, particularly within faith-based education settings.

In recent decades, numerous approaches have been introduced to enhance critical thinking in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Alp & Bulunuz (2023) found that problem-based learning (PBL) effectively improved students' reasoning and analytical writing, while El-Yunusi & Sari (2023) demonstrated that inquiry-oriented learning significantly fostered cognitive flexibility and argumentation skills. Similarly, Siregar et al. (2021) and Rohmah & Ulya (2021) highlighted that structured reflection and contextualized tasks can nurture higher-order thinking across disciplines. However, these studies were largely conducted in secular or general educational environments, leaving a gap in understanding how such pedagogies could be contextualized within pesantren education, where the interplay of faith and intellect forms the core of the learning philosophy.

Parallel to these developments in EFL pedagogy, Islamic education scholars such as Bakar & Fuad (2023), Zamzam (2016) and Indriyani et al (2022) emphasize the need for integrative education—a model that unites spiritual formation, intellectual reasoning, and moral consciousness. They argue that faith-based learning should not isolate itself from critical inquiry, but rather guide learners to pursue knowledge in an ethical and reflective manner. Yet, despite these philosophical advances, empirical studies that operationalize integrative learning models in pesantren—particularly in English language instruction—remain scarce. Most existing studies on tafaqquh fi al-dīn, or Islamic pedagogy, focus on theological content rather than the development of global competencies, such as critical thinking, creativity, and communication.

Within this context, Resource-Based Learning (RBL) offers a promising bridge between traditional Islamic education and contemporary pedagogical reform. RBL is a learner-centered model that encourages students to construct knowledge by engaging with diverse sources—texts, digital media, experts, and peer collaboration—rather than relying solely on teachers as information providers (Unsurni, 2009; Suryadi, 2020). By promoting autonomy, reflection, and inquiry, RBL aligns with both constructivist learning theory (Kolb & Schocker, 2021; Nunan, 2015) and the Islamic concept of al-'ilm (knowledge) as a continuous process of seeking truth through reflection (tafakkur) and reasoning ('aql). Studies in higher education contexts have shown that RBL improves student engagement, critical awareness, and the ability to connect theory with practice (Unsworth, 2014; Karim et al., 2022; Mojumder, 2021), yet little empirical evidence exists on its integration within Islamic learning institutions or its capacity to harmonize faith and analytical reasoning.

This gap reveals an important opportunity for pedagogical innovation. While previous research has established the cognitive benefits of learner-centered and inquiry-based approaches, few studies have explored how these methods can be adapted to preserve the moral and spiritual dimensions of Islamic education. The intersection of RBL and Islamic pedagogy thus remains an underexamined domain—particularly in developing countries where religious institutions are beginning to modernize their curricula. Addressing this gap can contribute not only to improving EFL pedagogy in pesantren but also to broader discussions on integrating faith and critical literacy in multilingual education.

Therefore, the present study investigates how Resource-Based Learning can serve as a pedagogical bridge between faith-based education and critical inquiry. Conducted at Ma'had Al-Jamiah UIN Salatiga, the study explores the design, implementation, and outcomes of an RBL model integrated with Islamic values in English instruction. Specifically, it examines the model's effectiveness in enhancing santri's critical thinking skills and captures the perceptions of teachers and students regarding its practicality within the pesantren learning culture. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, this research aims to demonstrate that RBL can cultivate independent, reflective, and ethically grounded learners—santri who are prepared to engage intellectually with both local wisdom and global knowledge.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how Resource-Based Learning (RBL) could enhance critical thinking among *santri* within an Islamic boarding school context. The decision to adopt a mixed-methods approach stemmed from the need to not only measure the cognitive outcomes of RBL quantitatively but also to capture the nuanced experiences, perceptions, and pedagogical dynamics qualitatively. Quantitative data provided statistical evidence of improvement in students' critical thinking abilities, whereas qualitative insights illuminated how RBL interacted with the spiritual and cultural environment of the *pesantren*. The combination of these two strands ensured methodological triangulation, enhanced validity, and offered a holistic perspective on the integration of faith and inquiry in English language learning.

The research took place at *Ma'had Al-Jamiah* UIN Salatiga, a university-based *pesantren* that integrates Islamic and academic education. This institution was chosen because it represents a modern form of *pesantren* that aims to balance religious formation with the development of global competencies, including English proficiency. The participants were twenty-seven male *santri* aged between nineteen and twenty-two years who were enrolled in the English communication program. Their educational backgrounds were relatively homogenous, with all students having prior exposure to formal English instruction but limited experience with inquiry-based or resource-driven learning. The context of *Ma'had Al-Jamiah* provided a fertile ground for the implementation of RBL since the institution already encouraged the integration of academic innovation within a religious framework.

The study unfolded over one academic semester. The first stage involved a preliminary investigation to identify instructional problems, assess students' initial critical thinking skills, and map the resources available for learning. Observations and informal interviews with instructors revealed that English learning activities were primarily teacher-centered, emphasizing translation and grammar exercises. These findings guided the design of an RBL-based instructional model that incorporated Islamic themes such as ethics, social responsibility, and faith-based reasoning into English materials. The development of the model followed the research-and-development spirit of educational innovation, combining theoretical grounding with contextual adaptation. Expert validation was conducted by two scholars—one specializing in English education and the other in Islamic pedagogy—to ensure that the instructional content aligned with both linguistic objectives and religious values.

After the model was validated, it was implemented in the target classroom. The RBL model required students to explore multiple resources, including printed texts, digital materials, and religious articles in both Indonesian and English. Learning activities were organized around inquiry tasks in which students analyzed authentic materials, discussed moral issues, and presented arguments in English supported by textual evidence. The instructor acted as a facilitator, guiding resource selection, moderating discussions, and linking linguistic features to reflective thinking processes. Throughout the semester, the researcher maintained continuous observation to monitor classroom dynamics, the interaction between the teacher and learners, and the level of student engagement with the resources provided.

Quantitative data were collected through a pretest–posttest design to evaluate the effectiveness of the RBL model in improving critical thinking. The test instrument, adapted from Ennis's (2018) framework of critical thinking, consisted of short analytical questions, scenario-based reasoning, and argument evaluation tasks designed for EFL learners. Students completed the pretest before the intervention and the posttest after the final session of the RBL program. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed through a pilot test, which yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Statistical analysis was performed using a paired-sample t-test to determine whether the observed differences between the pretest and posttest means were statistically significant. The analysis also included the calculation of the effect size to evaluate the magnitude of the improvement.

To complement the quantitative findings, qualitative data were obtained through multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observations. Six English instructors and ten *santri* were purposively selected to provide in-depth perspectives on the implementation of RBL. The interviews explored participants' experiences with resource exploration, group collaboration, and reflective dialogue, as well as their perceptions of how RBL related to Islamic learning values such as *amanah* (responsibility) and *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). FGDs were conducted at the end of the semester to stimulate collective reflection on the learning process and the perceived transformation in thinking habits. Observation data were recorded systematically

using descriptive field notes focusing on indicators of critical engagement, such as questioning, analysis, and synthesis during classroom interaction.

Qualitative data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves concurrent processes of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Transcripts of interviews and FGDs were coded inductively to identify emerging patterns and themes, which were then organized into broader analytical categories. The triangulation of data sources—tests, interviews, and observations—ensured that interpretations were grounded in multiple forms of evidence. To maintain credibility, the researcher employed member checking by returning preliminary findings to participants for verification and refinement. Peer debriefing with two fellow researchers in English education also helped to ensure interpretive reliability and reduce potential bias in analysis.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants after a clear explanation of the research objectives and procedures. The confidentiality of students' identities was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of UIN Salatiga and conducted in accordance with institutional policies on educational research involving human participants.

Overall, the methodological framework of this study was designed to capture both the measurable outcomes and the lived experiences of integrating RBL within a *pesantren* learning environment. The quantitative analysis provided empirical validation of RBL's effectiveness in enhancing critical thinking, while the qualitative exploration illuminated the processes through which faith, inquiry, and language learning intersected. By combining both strands within a unified design, the study sought not only to evaluate the pedagogical value of RBL but also to offer a deeper understanding of how learner-centered education can coexist harmoniously with Islamic educational philosophy in Indonesia's rapidly evolving linguistic landscape.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Enhancing Critical Thinking through Resource-Based Learning

The application of the Resource-Based Learning (RBL) model at *Ma'had Al-Jamiah* UIN Salatiga produced significant improvements in the critical thinking abilities of *santri*. Statistical analysis confirmed that after the implementation of the RBL model, students demonstrated stronger reasoning, analytical, and evaluative skills in processing English learning materials. Before the intervention, the mean score on the critical thinking test was 47.5, reflecting limited proficiency in drawing inferences, identifying assumptions, and constructing evidence-based conclusions. Following the RBL-based instruction, the mean score increased to 80.5, with both the median and mode at 80.0, indicating consistent progress across participants. The paired-sample *t*-test yielded a *t* value of 12.68 at a significance level of $p < .05$, confirming that the difference between pretest and posttest results was statistically significant. The effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.9$) further indicated a large magnitude of change, suggesting that the RBL model had a robust impact on the development of higher-order cognitive engagement among learners.

This improvement substantiates the assumption that RBL, when appropriately contextualized, can serve as an effective strategy for promoting critical thinking in English language learning. The results resonate with previous studies by Alp & Bulunuz (2023) and El-Yunusi & Sari (2023), which demonstrated that problem-based and inquiry-based learning approaches enhance analytical and reflective capacities in Indonesian EFL settings. However, the present study expands on these findings by embedding the model within a *pesantren* context and infusing it with Islamic perspectives. The moral and spiritual dimensions of learning appeared to heighten students' motivation and sense of purpose, leading to deeper engagement with content and resources. Students reported that learning through materials related to Islamic ethics, social harmony, and leadership made English lessons more meaningful and personally relevant. This contextual integration not only facilitated cognitive growth but also reinforced learners' moral reasoning, reflecting the pedagogical potential of harmonizing global competencies with local spiritual values.

The RBL framework encouraged *santri* to construct knowledge through inquiry and reflection rather than passive reception. It required students to engage with multiple resources—texts, videos, articles, and digital materials—analyzing information, forming arguments, and articulating perspectives. Such practices fostered what Ennis (2018) calls "reasonable and reflective thinking focused on decision-making." In this way, English learning became more than a linguistic exercise; it evolved into a medium for intellectual discovery. By positioning the learner as an active participant, RBL created the conditions for self-regulated learning and analytical independence. Within the context of *pesantren* education, this approach complemented the Islamic ideal of *ijtihad*—the exercise of reasoned effort to derive understanding. Thus, the results not only confirm the cognitive effectiveness of RBL but also demonstrate its philosophical compatibility with Islamic pedagogy.

Faith, Reflection, and Transformative Learning

Beyond statistical improvement, the integration of Resource-Based Learning led to profound pedagogical and cultural transformations in how students and teachers perceived the learning process. Thematic analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions revealed that the RBL environment cultivated three interrelated dimensions of transformation: faith-based autonomy, reflective dialogue, and contextual engagement. Together, these aspects demonstrate how RBL can foster critical thinking while upholding the moral and spiritual ethos of Islamic education.

The first dimension, faith-based autonomy, emerged as *santri* gradually developed confidence in exploring learning materials independently. Initially, students were accustomed to highly structured lessons in which the teacher served as the sole source of knowledge. The shift to RBL required them to identify resources, analyze content, and synthesize insights from diverse perspectives, both religious and academic. Many students reported that working with materials aligned to Islamic values, such as ethics or compassion, gave them a sense of ownership and moral accountability in their learning. This newfound autonomy mirrors constructivist learning principles (Nunan, 2015), where learners build knowledge through active engagement and reflection, while also echoing the

Islamic principle of *amanah* (responsibility) in the pursuit of *'ilm* (knowledge). In this sense, autonomy did not signify independence from guidance but rather responsible self-direction informed by faith.

The second dimension, reflective dialogue, was visible in the way RBL transformed classroom interaction from teacher-centered explanation to collaborative exploration. Observations revealed that students were increasingly questioning ideas, proposing interpretations, and connecting English expressions with moral concepts. For instance, when discussing global issues such as environmental care or social justice, students connected English vocabulary like "stewardship" or "equity" to the Qur'anic concepts of *khalifah* (human stewardship) and *'adl* (justice). These interpretive acts demonstrate how RBL fosters intellectual reflection anchored in ethical reasoning. Teachers noted that students became more articulate in expressing complex ideas, shifting from memorized phrases to authentic discourse that intertwined critical thought with Islamic worldview. This dialogic engagement exemplifies the balance between *'aql* (reason) and *iman* (faith), reinforcing the argument that inquiry, when guided by spiritual consciousness, deepens understanding rather than undermines belief.

The third dimension, transformative engagement, occurred as students encountered real-world issues through authentic and multimodal resources. Learning activities included analyzing news reports, social media posts, and short films addressing cross-cultural communication, leadership, and empathy. By evaluating these materials through both linguistic and ethical lenses, students developed a broader awareness of how language shapes values and worldviews. Teachers observed that RBL stimulated empathy, tolerance, and humility—virtues central to Islamic education. The process also nurtured an appreciation of diversity and the ability to negotiate meaning between religious and global perspectives. These findings align with Bakar & Fuad's (20s3) concept of *pendidikan Islam integratif*, in which education unites intellectual rigor with moral sensibility. Within this framework, RBL became not merely a method of learning English but a platform for nurturing the holistic development of *insan kamil*—the ideal human who is both rational and righteous.

The transformation extended to teachers, who gradually redefined their roles from authoritative lecturers to facilitators of learning. Initially hesitant to relinquish traditional control, teachers eventually recognized that guiding students' resource exploration and inquiry fostered deeper engagement and responsibility. This pedagogical shift parallels Harmer's (2007) notion of teachers as facilitators who scaffold learner independence and reflective participation. In Islamic terms, this reflects the principle of *hikmah* (wisdom), where teaching is an act of guiding others toward understanding through patience and dialogue. By adopting this facilitative stance, teachers not only enhanced classroom interaction but also modeled humility and openness—qualities highly esteemed in Islamic educational ethics.

The findings demonstrate that RBL's integration into the *pesantren* setting bridges the often-perceived divide between faith and intellectual inquiry. Students reported that they viewed learning as a form of *ibadah* (worship) when it involved curiosity, analysis, and

reflection—echoing the Qur'anic injunction to seek knowledge through contemplation (*tafakkur*) and reasoning (*ta'aqqul*). Moreover, the critical habits developed during RBL sessions extended beyond English classes, as students applied analytical reasoning to interpret religious texts and community issues. This cross-disciplinary transfer illustrates how RBL can shape a holistic intellectual disposition grounded in both critical and spiritual dimensions. It suggests that integrative pedagogy does not weaken faith but rather strengthens it by enabling learners to approach the world with discernment, empathy, and ethical awareness.

After all, the results affirm that Resource-Based Learning is a transformative pedagogical model capable of cultivating both cognitive and moral development within Islamic education. The significant improvement in students' critical thinking performance validates its academic impact, while the experiential and reflective dimensions highlight its alignment with the Islamic educational ethos. RBL demonstrates that learner-centered innovation can coexist harmoniously with the spiritual traditions of *pesantren*, contributing to the emergence of a new paradigm of English education that bridges local identity, ethical responsibility, and global literacy.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how Resource-Based Learning (RBL) could enhance the critical thinking skills of *santri* within an Islamic boarding school context while maintaining the faith-based identity and pedagogical ethos of *pesantren* education. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the research demonstrated that RBL not only improves measurable aspects of analytical reasoning but also reshapes the culture of learning into one that values inquiry, dialogue, and reflection as acts of intellectual devotion. The mixed-methods findings revealed a significant improvement in students' critical thinking performance, supported by qualitative evidence that learning through contextual and faith-integrated resources encouraged autonomy, moral awareness, and active engagement. These outcomes confirm that RBL can bridge the long-perceived divide between faith and reason, enabling *santri* to develop both linguistic proficiency and reflective judgment.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature that seeks to harmonize modern pedagogical frameworks with Islamic educational philosophy. It extends previous findings on learner-centered approaches such as problem-based and inquiry-based learning by showing that RBL can be successfully adapted to religious education settings. The model's emphasis on independent exploration, collaborative meaning-making, and the use of diverse learning resources resonates with the Islamic principles of *ijtihad* (intellectual effort), *amanah* (responsible inquiry), and *hikmah* (wisdom through guidance). As such, RBL provides a viable model for integrative education in which faith serves not as a constraint to critical thinking but as its ethical foundation. This study thus reinforces the notion that Islamic pedagogy and critical literacy can coexist synergistically within English education, contributing to the development of reflective, globally aware, and ethically grounded learners.

Pedagogically, the findings underscore the importance of shifting from teacher-centered instruction to facilitative and inquiry-based approaches in *pesantren* English classrooms. Teachers play a crucial role in curating diverse learning resources, guiding discussion, and fostering environments where students can connect linguistic learning with spiritual reflection. The RBL model equips teachers with a framework for encouraging learner autonomy without diminishing religious values, promoting both academic excellence and moral formation. It also illustrates the potential for *pesantren* institutions to become incubators of educational innovation by integrating global teaching methodologies with local cultural wisdom. For language educators and curriculum developers, the study provides empirical and conceptual evidence that resource-based, faith-sensitive instruction can cultivate critical thinking, motivation, and intercultural competence among learners.

While the study produced meaningful insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a single institution with a relatively small sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the study's focus on one semester of implementation limits its ability to assess long-term cognitive and attitudinal changes. Future research could therefore expand the scope to include multiple *pesantren* across different regions, investigate the longitudinal impact of RBL on both language proficiency and moral reasoning, and explore how digital or blended RBL environments might further enrich faith-based learning. Comparative studies involving secular and religious institutions could also illuminate how cultural context mediates the relationship between autonomy, reflection, and critical inquiry.

In conclusion, Resource-Based Learning has proven to be both an effective and culturally congruent pedagogical model for enhancing critical thinking within Islamic education. By encouraging exploration, dialogue, and reflection grounded in faith, RBL embodies the essence of *tafaqquh fi al-dīn*—the pursuit of understanding as a spiritual and intellectual journey. The findings affirm that *pesantren* can embrace learner-centered innovation without losing their religious distinctiveness, transforming the study of English into a means of cultivating moral intellect and global competence. Through models such as RBL, Islamic education in Indonesia can continue to evolve as a dynamic force that unites the heart and the mind in the lifelong pursuit of knowledge.

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