



# Enhancing Critical Thinking Through the Integration of Self-Directed Learning in Sustainable Education in Madrasah

Izzatul Munawwaroh<sup>1✉</sup>, Dinda Febrianti Putri<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Universitas Nurul Jadid, East Java, Indonesia

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## ✉ Correspondence

2352600009@unuja.ac.id

## Abstract:

This research focuses on improving critical thinking skills through integrating independent learning in the context of continuing education in madrasah. This research explores the effectiveness of a self-directed learning approach in supporting the development of students' critical thinking skills and understanding its impact on sustainable educational practices. This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach, where data is collected through in-depth interviews with teachers and students, observation of the learning process, and analysis of curriculum documents. Research findings show that integrating independent learning significantly improves students' critical thinking abilities, developing the ability to plan, evaluate, and reflect on their learning independently. Students who engage in independent learning improve analytical skills and creativity in dealing with problems and are better prepared to apply continuing education principles in everyday contexts. The implications of this research emphasize the importance of implementing independent learning in the madrasah curriculum to develop the critical thinking skills needed in continuing education and the challenges that need to be considered in adapting this method to the needs and learning styles of diverse students.

## INTRODUCTION

Developing critical thinking is more than just the result of a continuous educational process. Still, it is also the result of the integration of independent learning, which encourages individuals to take control of their learning process (Deak et al., 2022; Qurtubi & Hudi, 2022; Sanjani, 2024; Solihat et al., 2023). This is because independent learning enables students to actively seek, evaluate, and integrate information independently, strengthening their critical thinking abilities (Nasution et al., 2024). A study by (Hidayat et al., 2023) shows that students actively involved in independent learning have better analytical and problem-solving skills than students who rely only on traditional teaching methods. Thus, learning that focuses on student independence in the context of continuing education effectively improves critical thinking skills, which shows a positive correlation between this approach and increased analytical and problem-

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solving skills in students.

Research on improving critical thinking skills through integrating self-directed learning in continuing education has become a significant focus in recent years. Research on this topic is attracting attention because the independent learning approach effectively empowers students to develop critical thinking skills in facing global challenges. As revealed by various studies (Faiz et al., 2023; Harputra, 2023), the application of independent learning among students significantly increases students' critical thinking abilities. (Sholeh et al., 2024) Self-regulation strategies integrated into continuing education curricula can effectively improve students' critical thinking skills, which ultimately contribute to increasing essential thinking abilities in completing complex tasks. (Sodik et al., 2023) Reflective practice in continuing education is crucial in developing students' critical thinking abilities. Through structured reflection, students can evaluate their learning experiences in depth, identify strengths and weaknesses in their approach, and devise strategies for improvement.

This research seeks to complement the shortcomings identified in previous studies, where the main focus was on specific independent learning elements. However, there has yet to be much research that has deeply explored how the integration of independent learning can significantly improve critical thinking skills in the context of continuing education (Sutrisno et al., 2023). Therefore, this research aims to explore and identify effective ways of integrating self-directed learning approaches involving self-regulation, independent inquiry, reflective thinking, and problem-solving to optimize sustainable education outcomes (Fauzi et al., 2023; Islamiah & Maulidiah, 2024; Yuliani, 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in the exploration efforts to optimize independent learning and significantly improve critical thinking skills (Istianah et al., 2023). This research is based on constructivism theory, which emphasizes the importance of learning experiences guided by students, and critical thinking theory, which prioritizes analysis, evaluation, and reflection as the core of the learning process. The theoretical basis used includes 1) Self-Regulation Theory, which explains how self-regulation can influence students' ability to manage learning effectively; 2) Inquiry-Based Learning, which emphasizes the importance of independent investigation and exploration in the learning process; 3) Reflective Practice, which focuses on reflective thinking as the key to developing deeper and critical understanding (Latifah et al., 2024).

This research examines and analyzes how integrating independent learning can improve critical thinking skills in continuing education (Amelia, 2023; Dewi et al., 2021). Optimizing independent learning is essential because it allows students to be more proactive in the learning process, develop sharper critical thinking skills, and achieve more optimal learning outcomes (Taher et al., 2023). In this way, students will be better able to identify and solve problems independently, ultimately improving the quality of education and the relevance of learning in facing the challenges of the modern world.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative descriptive research with a case study type focuses on improving critical thinking through integrating independent learning in continuing education. Data was obtained through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and literature study. The primary data sources come from interviews

with teachers, students, and practitioners in continuing education. Direct observations were carried out in educational institutions that apply independent learning. The research location is located on MI Ihyauddiniyah Kecik, Kec. Besuk, Kab. Probolinggo, East Java. Secondary data was obtained from academic documents, previous research reports, and literature relevant to this research topic. Data collection techniques involve interviews, observation, and documentation.

To outline the research focus on improving critical thinking through integrating self-directed learning in continuing education, researchers identified and collected data from various sources that understand the application and impact of this approach. The data in this research is categorized into two main parts: First, data about the implementation of independent learning, which includes various aspects such as student self-regulation, independent investigation, reflective thinking, and problem-solving abilities. Researchers examined how these approaches are applied in sustainable education settings and how they influence students' critical thinking abilities. This data also includes observations about interactions between educators and students in the learning process and evaluations of the effectiveness of various independent learning strategies. Second, data on factors that influence the success of independent learning integration, such as institutional readiness to support this method, availability of educational resources, support from educators, and student adaptation to a more independent learning approach. This data analysis aims to understand the challenges and opportunities in implementing independent learning to improve students' critical thinking skills and its impact on achieving sustainable education goals.

In this research, data analysis was carried out in three stages, namely 1) Data Reduction (Milles & Huberman, 2014) in (Adlini et al., 2022). Data is categorized, directed, clarified, and organized at this stage, and irrelevant data is removed. This process helps simplify and focus the data obtained to make it easier to analyze; 2) Data Presentation. The reduced data is then presented in various forms, such as matrices, graphs, charts, and networks. This presentation aims to visualize the data to facilitate further understanding and analysis and 3) Draw conclusions. Based on the data that has been presented, the researcher makes conclusions. This process involves interpreting data and generating new ideas or understanding that did not exist before, contributing to the knowledge or theory being researched. The research results will provide in-depth insight into the role of independent learning in improving critical thinking skills in continuing education.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Various strategies have been implemented to improve critical thinking skills by integrating independent learning into continuing education. In educational institutions, programs supporting independent learning have been conceived and implemented, including training for students and educators focused on developing self-regulation and problem-solving skills. In addition, institutional policies have been designed to encourage a more independent learning culture, such as providing more comprehensive access to learning resources and involving students in determining learning goals. Through these strategies and policies, students' critical thinking abilities will increase

significantly and be better prepared to face challenges in continuing education and professional life.

### **Development of Metacognitive Awareness**

Self-directed learning is an important finding that can encourage students to develop metacognitive awareness, namely the ability to be aware of and control their thinking processes. This includes the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their approach to solving problems, which is the essence of critical thinking. As stated by Muzammil, a student initially had difficulty understanding the concept of calculus. After implementing self-directed learning, he started noting his steps each time he tried to solve a problem. He then reflects on each step to see which were effective and which were not. Ultimately, he found a way of studying that best suited his learning style and, more importantly, began to plan his approach before starting each assignment. These changes indicated a significant increase in his metacognitive awareness.

The results of the interviews above reveal that self-directed learning significantly helps students develop metacognitive awareness, enabling them to be more aware and reflective in the learning process. With this strategy, students can assess and adjust their learning methods, as seen in a student who successfully overcomes difficulties in calculus by organizing and planning his learning approach. This metacognitive awareness is critical because it improves understanding of the material and prepares students to face future educational challenges more independently and adaptively.

Independent learning has been proven to be effective in increasing students' metacognitive awareness, allowing them to be more reflective and adaptive in the learning process (Amelia, 2023; Istianah et al., 2023; Utami, 2024). By integrating this approach, students can evaluate and refine their learning strategies and improve their understanding of the material in depth (Munawwaroh, 2024). Concrete examples show that students who encounter difficulties in certain concepts can better overcome those challenges through planning and personal evaluation (Cuprianto & Firmansyah, 2023; Zamroni et al., 2020). This increased metacognitive awareness is valuable because it helps students become more independent and responsive to changes in the educational environment and prepares them to face future challenges with more vital skills.

### **Increasing Independence in Learning**

With greater independence in managing learning goals, time, and resources, students can be more proactive in seeking knowledge and solutions. This encourages them to receive information passively and question, analyze, and evaluate it critically. As the Abdurrahman states, "encourages students not only to rely on teachers in the learning process, but also to utilize various learning resources, be it books, the internet, or discussions with peers." The goal is for students to be able to find solutions and understand the material independently. Ramli said, "Integrating self-directed learning-based learning strategies in the curriculum. With this approach, students are challenged to complete independently. We also implement an independent study schedule, where students are free to choose the material they want to study outside of formal lesson hours. The teacher acts as a facilitator who provides guidance when needed.

The informant's statement above shows that the primary approach to promoting student independence in madrasah can reduce students' dependence on teachers by encouraging various learning resources, including books, the Internet, and peer interaction. This approach aims for students to find solutions and understand the material independently. Apart from that, there is scheduling of independent study time, which gives students the freedom to choose the material they want to study outside of formal lesson hours. In this framework, the teacher is a facilitator who provides support according to student needs. This approach aims to develop independent learning skills in students, which are essential to prepare them to face various challenges in the future.

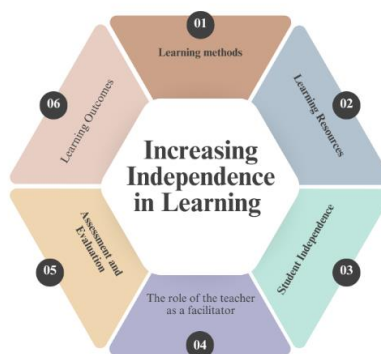


Figure 1, Increasing Independence in Learning in Madrasah

The Figure 1, increasing independence in learning in madrasah can be measured by developing critical thinking skills, which encourage students to complete tasks independently and creatively (Latifah et al., 2024). Using various learning resources, including books, the Internet, and peer interaction, strengthen students' independence in exploring material outside the formal curriculum (Cynthia & Sihotang, 2023). The teacher's role as an effective facilitator, supported by adequate professional training, contributes to student initiative and responsibility (Hasanah, Munawwaroh, Qushwa, et al., 2024). Student independence evaluations, including assessments of their selection of materials and ability to learn independently, show positive impacts on academic achievement and 21st-century skills, such as problem-solving and critical thinking (Deliati, Asbi, 2024). With this approach, madrasah seek to equip students with essential skills to face future challenges independently.

### Integration of Cognitive and Affective Aspects

The integration of cognitive and affective aspects in education is crucial for fostering a holistic learning experience that addresses both intellectual and emotional development. Cognitive aspects involve the processes of thinking, understanding, and reasoning, which are essential for acquiring knowledge and developing critical thinking skills. On the other hand, affective aspects encompass emotions, attitudes, and values that influence students' motivation, engagement, and overall well-being. By integrating these two dimensions, educators can create a more balanced and supportive learning environment where students not only excel academically but also develop the emotional intelligence needed to navigate social interactions and personal challenges. This

integration enhances students' ability to apply their knowledge in real-life situations, promotes empathy, and supports the development of a positive learning culture.

Independent learning allows students to integrate cognitive aspects (such as analysis and reasoning) with affective aspects (such as motivation and self-confidence). This interaction is important in critical thinking because it ensures that students not only think logically, but are also motivated to question assumptions and pursue deeper understanding (Kareena Nugis & Ayu Sanggarwati, 2024). The following research data shows the integration of cognitive and affective aspects in Madrasas,

**Table 1. Interview Result Data Integration of cognitive and affective aspects**

Interview results data	Code	Informant
"The integration of cognitive and affective aspects is important to create a comprehensive and deep learning experience."	Affective Cognitive	Muzammil
"We developed a curriculum that not only focuses on academic knowledge but also on students' emotional development."	Emotional Curriculum	Hayyi
"Classroom activities are designed to connect knowledge with positive values and attitudes, so that students are not only intelligent but also wise."	Emotional Knowledge Activities	Abdurrahman
"Assessment includes both cognitive and affective aspects, providing feedback that supports students' personal and academic development."	Holistic Assessment	Prayetno
"It is important to ensure that students feel motivated and emotionally engaged in the learning process so that they can better internalize knowledge."	Emotional Motivation	Robiah

The table 1, Integration of cognitive and affective aspects in education, focuses on creating a comprehensive and in-depth learning experience, emphasizing critical thinking skills in independent learning (Sholeh et al., 2024) (Amelia, 2023). This approach involves developing a curriculum that prioritizes not only academic knowledge but also the emotional aspects of students, aiming to form individuals who are not only intelligent but also wise (Ramadani & Firdaus, 2024). Class activities are designed to connect knowledge with positive values and attitudes, strengthen the internalization of lesson material, and encourage students to think critically independently (Shodiq, 2023) (Fauzi et al., 2023). Assessment is carried out holistically, including feedback that supports students' personal and academic development (Munir et al., 2024). Students' motivation and emotional involvement in the learning process are essential, as they contribute to a deeper understanding and application of knowledge and develop basic critical thinking skills.

### Continuous Reflection

The reflection process, self-directed learning, helps students develop critical thinking skills by continuously assessing and improving their approach to a particular problem or lesson. This reflection strengthens understanding and encourages more sustainable and holistic learning. As stated by Muzammil, "Implement reflection sessions at the end of each project or assignment to help students evaluate the process and results of their work." another perspective, from Hayyi, "The process of continuous reflection integrates critical thinking skills into students' learning routines so that they can develop these abilities continuously.

In the informant's statement above, it can be understood that the reflection process, part of independent learning, plays a vital role in developing critical thinking skills by enabling students to continuously evaluate and refine their approach to specific problems or learning materials. This reflection deepens students' understanding and encourages more sustainable and comprehensive learning. By implementing reflection sessions at the end of projects or assignments, students can analyze the processes and results of their work. In contrast, integrating reflection into continuous learning routines supports the development of holistic critical thinking skills. This approach allows students to develop critical thinking skills in a sustainable and in-depth way.

Continuous reflection is integral to developing critical thinking skills in independent learning in madrasas. This process allows students to regularly evaluate and improve their critical thinking skills (Faturrohman et al., 2022). At the end of each project or assignment, a reflection session is implemented to help students assess the process and results of their work (Hasanah, Munawwaroh, Azizah, et al., 2024). The feedback provided during these sessions is critical to identifying strengths and areas for improvement in students' critical thinking skills (Efendi & Sholeh, 2023; Islamiah & Maulidiah, 2024; Kurdi et al., 2023; Zuhdi et al., 2024). The continuous reflection process also integrates vital thinking skills into students' learning routines, supporting consistently developing these abilities (Istianah et al., 2023; Ridlo & Yanti, 2023). Additionally, students are encouraged to compile reflective journals that record their development and understanding of critical thinking skills, strengthening their independent learning process.

## CONCLUSION

This research highlights the significant impact of integrating independent learning into continuing education in madrasas on enhancing students' critical thinking skills. The key findings demonstrate that continuous reflection enables students to evaluate and refine their learning approaches, leading to a deeper understanding and fostering the development of critical thinking. This aligns with independent learning theory, which underscores the importance of reflection in the learning process, and holistic learning theory, which advocates for an integrated approach to education. The implications of these findings suggest that madrasas can effectively employ continuous reflection strategies to strengthen students' critical thinking abilities, improve the overall quality of learning, and support sustained academic success within the context of ongoing education.

Despite these promising results, the research has certain limitations that warrant consideration. The focus on self-directed learning within the madrasa context may limit the applicability of the findings to other educational settings or different types of institutions. Additionally, the study may not have fully accounted for the impact of external factors, such as the rapid evolution of educational technology or the varying dynamics of different educational environments. Methodological constraints, including the use of a case study approach or qualitative data, might also influence the interpretation of the results. These limitations highlight the necessity for further research that explores a broader range of educational contexts and considers external factors that could affect the effectiveness of integrating self-directed learning in developing critical thinking skills.

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