

From Cognitive Skill To Intellectual Disposition: An Affective Internalization Model Of Critical Thinking In Arabic Language Learning Among Madrasah Aliyah Students

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Abstract

This study addresses a critical gap in language education, where critical thinking is often treated as a situational cognitive skill rather than a sustained intellectual disposition. It examines how affective internalization shapes the development of critical thinking in Arabic language learning. A qualitative case study was conducted over eight weeks, involving sixteen classroom observations, semi-structured interviews (2 teachers and 12 students), and document analysis, with data analyzed thematically based on Krathwohl's affective domain. The findings show that critical thinking develops through five stages: receiving, responding, valuing, organization, and characterization, mediated by affective engagement in classroom practices. Most students remained at transitional stages (receiving–responding: 55%), while fewer reached dispositional levels (organization–characterization: 25%). Dialogic interaction, text interpretation, and reflective reasoning facilitate the shift from externally guided responses to internally regulated thinking. This study demonstrates that critical thinking develops through affective internalization rather than cognitive training alone and proposes an integrative model linking affective and cognitive processes. However, this study is limited to a single institutional context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

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Introduction

Critical thinking has become a central competence in contemporary language education and is widely recognized as a core component of 21st-century skills (Van Laar et al., 2020). In language learning contexts, it enables learners not only to comprehend linguistic forms but also to interpret, evaluate, and construct meaning reflectively (Ennis, 2011; Facione, 1990; Halpern, 2013). However, in many educational settings, critical thinking remains largely treated as a situational cognitive skill, emerging only in response to specific tasks rather than developing into a sustained intellectual disposition (Willingham, 2007; Baehr, 2013; Davies, 2015). From a cognitive perspective, thinking is not a natural or automatically sustained process; it is often triggered by specific conditions and tends to diminish without continuous engagement (Willingham, 2007).

This condition raises a critical issue: cognitive training alone is insufficient to sustain critical thinking over time. While instructional strategies such as dialogic interaction and reflective learning have been shown to enhance reasoning and engagement (Ilham Nurfikri et al., 2025; Lai, n.d.; Liang & Fung, 2021; Mercer & Howe, 2012; Towson et al., 2017; Xie & Lin, 2025), these approaches do not necessarily ensure that critical thinking becomes an internally regulated and stable disposition. From a cognitive perspective, metacognition plays a crucial role in enabling learners to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their thinking processes (Kuhn & Dean, Jr., 2004). However, metacognitive regulation alone does not guarantee that critical thinking will be sustained as an internalized intellectual disposition. From an assessment perspective, critical thinking is often measured in ways that capture cognitive performance while neglecting dispositional characteristics, reinforcing its treatment as a situational skill rather than a sustained intellectual orientation (Ku, 2009).

From a theoretical perspective, the affective domain provides a relevant framework for understanding this process. Bloom's affective taxonomy, refined by Krathwohl, explains that value internalization develops progressively through five stages: receiving, responding, valuing, organization, and characterization (Bloom et al., 1964). In addition, insights from educational neuroscience highlight the integration of emotion and cognition in shaping learning processes (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). This progression is further supported by the four-phase model of interest development, which explains how learners' engagement evolves from situational interest to well-developed individual interest through gradual internalization (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). These perspectives suggest that the transformation of critical thinking into a stable disposition depends on affective engagement that internalizes the value of thinking itself, shifting learners from externally driven participation to intrinsically regulated reasoning (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Previous research on critical thinking in language education has predominantly focused on cognitive skills and instructional strategies, with limited attention to how critical thinking develops as a sustained intellectual disposition. Recent work on critical disciplinary literacy highlights the importance of integrating criticality with disciplinary learning in ways that are socially and culturally responsive (Dobbs et al., 2024). However, these approaches still offer limited explanation of how critical thinking becomes internally sustained as an intellectual disposition. Moreover, existing studies tend to treat cognitive and affective dimensions separately, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these dimensions interact dynamically in shaping students' thinking, particularly in the context of Arabic language learning.

This study addresses this gap by proposing an affective internalization model that integrates Bloom's affective domain with the development of critical thinking dispositions in Arabic language learning. Unlike prior studies that emphasize skill acquisition, this research highlights the role of affective engagement as a mediating mechanism that transforms cognitive activity into a stable intellectual disposition. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how affective internalization contributes to the development of students' critical thinking and to formulate a pedagogical model that integrates affective and cognitive dimensions in Arabic language learning.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how affective internalization contributes to the development of students' critical thinking in Arabic language learning (Yin, 2018). The study was conducted at a public Islamic senior high school in Bengkulu, Indonesia, over a period of approximately three months. Participants consisted of two Arabic language teachers and twenty

eleventh-grade students who were purposively selected based on their active participation in classroom activities involving text interpretation and dialogic discussion. From this group, ten students were selected for in-depth interviews using maximum variation sampling, representing diverse levels of participation, academic performance, and observed critical engagement during classroom interactions. This approach ensured the inclusion of varied perspectives on the development of critical thinking.

Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted across 12 instructional sessions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer and used structured observation guidelines to record instructional practices, student participation, interaction patterns, and indicators of critical thinking. Data were documented through detailed field notes and supported by audio recordings to ensure accuracy and completeness. In-depth interviews were conducted with both teachers and the selected students ($n = 10$) using a semi-structured protocol. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews explored participants' learning experiences, their perceptions of classroom activities, and how they engaged in critical thinking during Arabic language learning.

Document analysis included lesson plans, instructional materials (Arabic texts used in class), students' written assignments, and reflective learning responses. These documents were examined to identify how learning tasks and student outputs reflected the integration of affective engagement and cognitive processes.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following the procedures of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2013). The analysis was guided by Bloom's affective domain framework, which includes five stages: receiving, responding, valuing, organization, and characterization. All data were coded iteratively, allowing themes to emerge while being aligned with the theoretical framework. Cross-data comparison was used to identify consistent patterns in students' critical thinking development. Coding consistency was ensured through repeated data review and discussion among researchers.

Coding Procedure and Analytical Framework

To ensure analytical rigor, the coding process was conducted through a structured framework that integrates Krathwohl's (1964) affective domain with indicators of critical thinking disposition. The analysis followed three stages (Creswell & Poth, 2016): open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the first stage (open coding), all observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents were examined to identify meaningful units related to students' engagement in learning activities. These units were coded based on observable behaviors such as attention, participation, argumentation, evaluation, and reflection.

In the second stage (axial coding), the initial codes were grouped according to the five stages of the affective domain: receiving, responding, valuing, organization, and characterization. At this stage, each code was also linked to indicators of critical thinking disposition, such as interpretation, justification, evaluation, openness to multiple perspectives, and consistency in reasoning. In the final stage (selective coding), patterns were identified to explain how affective engagement contributes to the development of critical thinking as a stable disposition. This process enabled the integration of cognitive and affective dimensions into a coherent analytical framework. The coding framework used in this study is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Coding Matrix Linking Affective Stages and Critical Thinking Disposition

Affective Stage	Behavioral Indicators	Critical Thinking Indicators
Receiving	Paying attention to texts and teacher explanations; responding to direct prompts	Information recognition; basic comprehension
Responding	Asking questions; participating in discussions; reacting to peers’ ideas	Initial interpretation; clarification of meaning
Valuing	Expressing opinions; defending arguments; showing interest in reasoning	Justification; reasoning; argument support
Organization	Structuring arguments; comparing multiple perspectives; evaluating interpretations	Evaluation; synthesis; logical structuring
Characterization	Demonstrating independent reasoning; maintaining consistent analytical stance; openness to different perspectives	Reflective judgment; intellectual consistency; autonomous thinking

In addition, students’ written responses were assessed using a simple rubric focusing on argument clarity, justification, and reflective depth, which further confirmed that higher-order critical thinking was limited to a smaller group of students.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study employed data triangulation (observations, interviews, and documents) and method triangulation. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to verify accuracy, and peer debriefing was carried out to enhance analytical rigor. These procedures align with the criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 20).

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that students’ critical thinking in Arabic language learning develops through a gradual process aligned with the five stages of the affective domain: receiving, responding, valuing, organization, and characterization. This progression reflects the dynamic interaction between affective engagement and cognitive processes. To provide a clearer empirical representation, the distribution of students’ dominant engagement across stages was identified based on observation and triangulated data. The dominant stage for each student was determined based on the most frequently observed indicators across observation sessions and triangulated with interview and document data.

Table 1. Distribution of Students’ Critical Thinking Development Across Affective Stages

Affective Stage	Number of Students (Dominant)	Percentage	Key Indicators Observed
Receiving	5	25%	Passive attention, responding to teacher prompts
Responding	6	30%	Asking questions, participating in discussion
Valuing	4	20%	Expressing and defending opinions
Organization	3	15%	Structuring arguments, evaluating interpretations
Characterization	2	10%	Independent reasoning, consistent critical stance

These results indicate that while students frequently engage in classroom interaction, deeper forms of critical thinking remain limited to a smaller proportion of learners. The percentages presented in the table are approximate and derived from qualitative categorization to provide descriptive clarity. The analysis shows that interpretative discussion participation occurred in approximately 70% of classroom interactions. Reflective reasoning indicators, such as justification and evaluation, appeared in around 45% of student responses. However, independent argument construction was observed in less than 20% of cases, primarily at more advanced stages. These findings suggest that while engagement in critical thinking activities is relatively frequent, the internalization into stable dispositions remains uneven across students.

Receiving: Initial Awareness and External Regulation

At the receiving stage, students demonstrated initial awareness of learning activities requiring attention to texts and teacher explanations. Their engagement was primarily receptive, characterized by listening and responding to direct prompts. From a theoretical perspective, this stage corresponds to the awareness level in Bloom–Krathwohl’s (1964) affective taxonomy, where learners begin to recognize the importance of a stimulus but have not yet internalized it. Cognitively, students operated at the level of information identification, with minimal interpretative effort. This finding confirms that early exposure to interpretative tasks alone does not automatically lead to critical thinking but functions as a necessary foundation for further development.

Responding: Emerging Engagement Through Dialogue

At the responding stage, students began to actively participate in classroom interactions. They asked questions, responded to peers, and engaged in dialogic exchanges. This stage aligns with the concept of dialogic learning, where knowledge is constructed through interaction and negotiation of meaning. The findings show that dialogic practices facilitated students’ transition from passive reception to active engagement. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that dialogic learning enhances both student engagement and critical thinking in language classrooms (Rahmawati, 2022). However, most responses remained within guided reasoning, indicating that students still relied on teacher scaffolding. For example, during classroom discussion, one student questioned the interpretation of a text by stating, “Why does the author use this expression instead of a simpler one?” This indicates an emerging ability to engage in interpretative reasoning rather than merely accepting information. Such responses reflect the transition from passive reception toward active engagement in meaning-making. This supports the argument that dialogic interaction is necessary but not sufficient without deeper affective commitment.

Valuing: Internal Commitment to Thinking Practices

At the valuing stage, a significant shift occurred in students’ orientation. Students began to appreciate the importance of reasoning, as evidenced by their willingness to defend arguments and engage more deeply with texts. This stage reflects the emergence of value commitment in the affective domain. Students’ engagement was no longer purely externally driven but began to reflect internal motivation. From the perspective of critical thinking disposition, this stage marks the transition from skill use to valued practice, where thinking becomes meaningful rather than merely task-driven.

Organization: Structured and Self-Regulated Thinking

At the organization stage, students demonstrated more structured reasoning. They were able to connect ideas, evaluate interpretations, and construct coherent arguments. This reflects the integration of values into a more stable system, as described in Bloom–Krathwohl’s taxonomy. Cognitively, students exhibited evaluation and synthesis, while affectively, they showed self-regulated

engagement. Importantly, this stage indicates that critical thinking is no longer episodic but begins to function as an organized cognitive-affective system.

Characterization: Critical Thinking as Intellectual Disposition

At the characterization stage, critical thinking became a relatively stable disposition. Students demonstrated independent reasoning, openness to multiple perspectives, and consistency in their analytical approach. This stage represents the highest level of affective internalization, where values are fully integrated into one's character. In this context, critical thinking evolves into an intellectual disposition rather than a situational skill. This finding aligns with theories of intellectual character, which emphasize that sustained critical thinking depends on internalized values rather than external instruction.

Integrative Discussion: Affective Internalization as a Mediating Mechanism

The findings of this study extend previous research by demonstrating that the development of critical thinking is not solely a cognitive process but is mediated by affective internalization. This finding is consistent with recent research emphasizing that the integration of critical thinking in language learning requires not only instructional strategies but also sustained learner engagement (Li, 2022). First, in line with Bloom–Krathwohl's framework, each stage of affective development corresponds to increasing levels of cognitive complexity. However, this study shows that affective engagement is not merely parallel to cognition but actively drives its progression.

Second, consistent with dialogic learning theory, interaction plays a crucial role in facilitating engagement. However, this study reveals that dialogic interaction becomes effective only when accompanied by affective commitment. Dialogic practices function as a mechanism that externalizes students' thinking and exposes them to diverse perspectives. Through interaction, students are required to articulate, defend, and revise their ideas, which strengthens both cognitive processing and affective engagement. This process gradually shifts students from passive reception toward active meaning-making and internal commitment to reasoning.

Third, in relation to critical thinking disposition theory, the findings confirm that repeated engagement in thinking activities is insufficient unless it is supported by value internalization. Without this process, critical thinking remains situational and unstable. The transition between affective stages appears to be influenced by the degree of sustained engagement in dialogic and interpretative practices. Students who frequently participated in open-ended discussions and were encouraged to justify their responses showed a higher likelihood of progressing from responding to valuing and organization stages. In contrast, students who remained primarily exposed to teacher-directed instruction tended to stay at lower stages, indicating that the depth of interaction and opportunity for reflection play a critical role in facilitating affective internalization.

Therefore, this study proposes that the affective domain functions as a mediating mechanism that transforms cognitive activity into stable intellectual disposition. This explains why some students remain at the level of participation, while others develop sustained critical thinking.

The model of affective internalization identified in this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

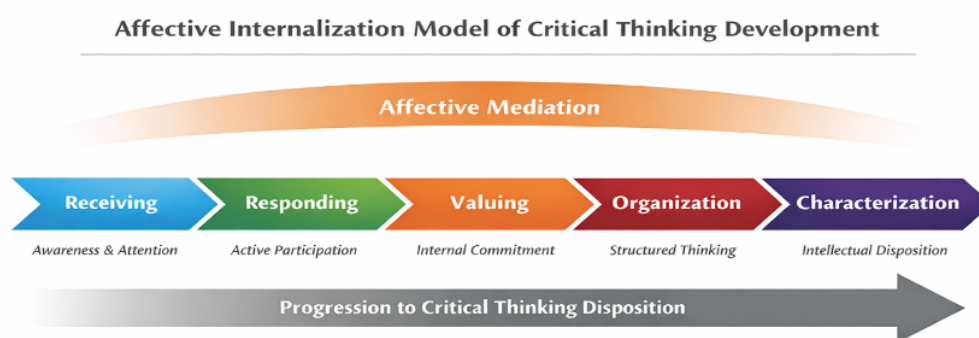


Figure 1. Affective Internalization Model of Critical Thinking Development

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The figure illustrates the progression of students' critical thinking from initial awareness (receiving) to stable intellectual disposition (characterization), mediated by affective engagement across learning stages.

Comparative Discussion with Previous Studies

The findings of this study both confirm and extend existing research on critical thinking in language education. Previous studies have consistently emphasized the role of instructional strategies such as dialogic learning and reflective activities in enhancing students' critical thinking skills (Lai, n.d.; Mercer & Howe, 2012). Recent research further highlights that fostering critical thinking in language classrooms requires integrating cognitive and affective dimensions rather than focusing solely on skills training (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Liang & Fung, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

However, unlike previous studies that primarily conceptualize critical thinking as a cognitive skill, this study demonstrates that such skills do not automatically develop into stable dispositions. While earlier research highlights improvement in performance during specific tasks, the present findings reveal that students' critical thinking often remains situational and externally regulated unless supported by affective internalization. This highlights a key difference: whereas prior studies focus on how to train thinking, this study explains how thinking becomes a sustained intellectual orientation.

Furthermore, prior research tends to treat cognitive and affective dimensions as separate constructs, whereas this study shows that both dimensions interact dynamically throughout the learning process. The progression across affective stages—from receiving to characterization—illustrates how affective engagement functions as a driving force in transforming cognitive activity into stable thinking dispositions. Therefore, the contribution of this study lies in three main aspects: conceptual contribution, by integrating affective and cognitive dimensions into a unified framework; empirical contribution, by demonstrating how critical thinking develops progressively across affective stages; and pedagogical contribution, by proposing a model to guide the design of language instruction aimed at fostering sustainable critical thinking dispositions.

These findings imply that Arabic language instruction should move beyond structural and grammar-focused approaches toward dialogic and interpretative pedagogies that actively engage students in reasoning processes. Teachers need to design learning environments that not only stimulate cognitive engagement but also support affective commitment, enabling students to internalize the value of critical thinking as part of their intellectual character.

This study shifts the paradigm from viewing critical thinking as a trainable cognitive skill to understanding it as an internally constructed and affectively sustained intellectual disposition.

Conclusions

This study yields three main conclusions. First, the findings demonstrate that students' critical thinking in Arabic language learning develops through a gradual process of affective internalization, progressing from receiving to characterization. This process reflects a transformation from externally guided participation to internally regulated reasoning, where critical thinking becomes a stable intellectual disposition. Second, this study contributes a conceptual model of affective internalization that integrates Bloom's affective domain with the development of critical thinking dispositions. The model explains how affective engagement functions as a mediating mechanism that transforms cognitive activity into sustained intellectual character.

Third, the findings imply that Arabic language instruction should move beyond structural and grammar-oriented approaches toward dialogic and interpretative pedagogies that foster both cognitive engagement and affective commitment. Such approaches are essential for enabling students to internalize the value of critical thinking as part of their learning process. However, this study is limited to a specific institutional context. Therefore, the proposed model requires further validation across broader educational settings to examine its applicability and generalizability.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All authors have agreed to the content of this manuscript and have no financial, personal, or institutional interests that could have influenced the outcomes of this study.

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