

A Systematic Analysis of the Effect of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) Approach on Improving Critical Thinking Skills in Civics Education at the Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

The Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach is widely used in primary education to foster meaningful learning; however, studies specifically examining its impact on critical thinking skills within Pancasila and Civic Education (PPKn) remain limited. This study aims to analyze trends, characteristics, and empirical findings regarding the impact of CTL on the critical thinking skills of primary school students during the 2021–2026 period. The study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method based on PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Data were obtained from Google Scholar and Scopus using the Publish or Perish application and subsequently analyzed using a descriptive-qualitative approach via narrative synthesis. Out of 1,248 articles, 10 met the inclusion criteria. The results indicate that CTL has a positive impact on students' critical thinking skills, particularly in the areas of analysis, evaluation, argumentation, and decision-making. Implementing CTL through constructivism, inquiry, discussion, and reflection enhances active student engagement and connects learning to real-world contexts. The study confirms that CTL is effective not only in improving learning outcomes but also in developing higher-order thinking skills, thereby contributing to the strengthening of PPKn instruction based on 21st-century skills.

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Introduction

Primary education plays a crucial role in shaping students' cognitive abilities including critical thinking skills through instruction in Pancasila and Civic Education (PPKn) (Zakiah & Linda, 2021). At this level, PPKn holds a strategic position in instilling the character values, democratic attitudes, and critical thinking skills that students require as citizens. However, in practice, PPKn instruction faces various challenges, most notably students' limited critical thinking capabilities. This situation is characterized by students' difficulties

in analyzing issues, evaluating information, and expressing opinions in a logical and well-reasoned manner. Research indicates that primary school students are not yet accustomed to engaging in higher-order thinking activities such as analysis, evaluation, and drawing conclusions independently (Khasanah, Matsuri, & Karsono, 2026). Critical thinking skills are an essential competency that needs to be cultivated from an early age. In the context of primary education, this ability encompasses skills in analysis, evaluation, and rational decision-making regarding the various issues students encounter. Therefore, instruction in Civics Education (PPKn) should not merely focus on mastering subject matter but also on developing higher-order thinking skills relevant to students' real-life experiences. This aligns with research findings indicating that critical thinking skills can be enhanced through active, contextual, and student-centered learning (Nurmaniah et al., 2026).

Students' low critical thinking skills are also influenced by instructional practices that remain dominated by conventional, teacher-centered approaches. Civics education (PPKn) that emphasizes lectures and rote memorization tends to render students passive and limits their engagement in exploration and discussion activities. Consequently, students fail to develop the analytical and reflective abilities needed to comprehend the subject matter (Wulandari & Slameto, 2021; Sari, Sudana, & Teguh, 2022). This situation reveals a gap between the demands of 21st-century learning and the instructional practices still prevalent in elementary schools. Furthermore, the lack of critical thinking skills stems from insufficient practice in higher-order cognitive activities, such as expressing opinions, analyzing problems, and drawing independent conclusions. Uswatun Khasanah et al. (2026) emphasize that students are unaccustomed to presenting strong arguments and tend to provide superficial answers. Indeed, the evaluative aspect is virtually absent, as students are not used to assessing or responding to the opinions of others during the learning process. These findings are corroborated by other research indicating that teacher-centered instruction results in students lacking practice in analytical thinking (Novaliza et al., 2026). Thus, the low level of students' critical thinking skills in Civics education is influenced not only by individual factors but also by instructional approaches that fail to provide adequate opportunities for exploration, discussion, and contextual problem-solving.

One approach that can be employed to address this issue is Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). CTL is an instructional approach that links subject matter to the real-life contexts of students, thereby fostering active engagement in the learning process. Through components such as constructivism, inquiry, questioning, learning communities, reflection, and authentic assessment, CTL enables students to construct knowledge independently and meaningfully. Research indicates that the implementation of CTL can enhance students' critical thinking skills, particularly in the areas of analysis, evaluation, and problem-solving (Anjela, Astuti, & Rohman, 2024).

Nevertheless, most prior research has focused on the general effectiveness of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach regarding learning outcomes, while studies specifically analyzing its impact on critical thinking skills within Civics Education (PPKn) at the elementary school level remain limited. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research that systematically integrates these empirical findings using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. This indicates a research gap that warrants further investigation. Therefore, this study aims to systematically analyze the impact of the CTL approach on enhancing students' critical thinking skills in Civics Education at the elementary school level (SD/MI). This research is expected to strengthen the existing body of literature and provide a clearer justification for prioritizing the development of critical thinking skills in elementary-level Civics Education.

The Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach is an instructional strategy that emphasizes the connection between learning material and the students' real-life contexts.

According to Berns and Erickson (2020), contextual learning enables students to construct understanding through direct experience, making the knowledge gained more meaningful and easily applicable to daily life. In practice, CTL fosters active student engagement through inquiry, discussion, reflection, and problem-solving activities. Consequently, this approach holds significant potential for developing critical thinking skills, as students are directly involved in the processes of analyzing and evaluating information.

The CTL approach is grounded in constructivist principles, wherein students actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. Its implementation encompasses key components such as constructivism, questioning, inquiry, learning communities, modeling, reflection, and authentic assessment—aimed at fostering meaningful and relevant learning (Daulay et al., 2026). Through this approach, students go beyond rote memorization of concepts to connect knowledge with real-world situations, thereby enhancing engagement, conceptual understanding, and critical thinking skills. Research indicates that implementing CTL can improve learning outcomes, motivation, and student engagement by making learning more contextual and student-centered (Riza et al., 2024; Haziyah et al., 2024). Consequently, CTL is considered highly relevant to the demands of 21st-century education, which emphasizes higher-order thinking skills and the ability to adapt to real-world challenges. Previous research indicates that the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) model contributes to enhancing the critical thinking skills of elementary school students. These findings prompted a more comprehensive and systematic study to analyze the impact of CTL on critical thinking skills within Civics Education (PPKn) instruction at the elementary school level (SD/MI). This research is expected to offer theoretical contributions to the development of Civics Education instruction and serve as a foundation for designing teaching strategies that are more effective, contextual, and focused on fostering students' critical thinking skills.

Method

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant research findings concerning the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in Civics Education (PPKn) at the elementary school level (Inten Meutia, 2022). The SLR method was selected due to its ability to provide a comprehensive and unbiased summary of existing evidence through a structured and replicable procedure. In conducting this review, the study adheres to the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, which offer a standardized framework to enhance transparency, rigor, and completeness in reporting systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). The data source consists of secondary data obtained from scholarly articles indexed in Google Scholar and Scopus databases, utilizing the Publish or Perish application (Harzing, 2007). The data collection process was conducted through several systematic stages in accordance with the PRISMA flow framework. First, the identification stage involved searching for articles using predefined keywords such as “Contextual Teaching and Learning,” “critical thinking skills,” and “Civics Education” or “PPKn.” Second, the screening stage was carried out by removing duplicate records and excluding articles that were not relevant based on title and abstract review. Third, the eligibility stage involved a full-text assessment of the remaining articles using predetermined inclusion criteria. These criteria included: (1) studies focusing on the implementation of CTL in PPKn learning at the elementary school level (SD/MI), (2) studies that explicitly measure students’ critical thinking skills, and (3) articles published in peer-reviewed and indexed scholarly journals. Finally, the inclusion stage resulted in the selection of ten articles that met all criteria out of an initial pool of 1,248 identified studies. Data processing utilized a descriptive-qualitative technique involving a narrative synthesis

approach to identify patterns, trends, and commonalities in findings across the studies (Snyder, 2019). Subsequently, the researchers cataloged the articles in a table and conducted an in-depth review and analysis, focusing particularly on the research findings. Finally, conclusions were drawn by integrating the results of the narrative synthesis. The conclusions provide a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of CTL implementation in enhancing critical thinking skills among elementary school students in PPKn learning. This integrative approach ensures that the conclusions are grounded in evidence derived from multiple studies, thereby increasing the validity and robustness of the research findings.

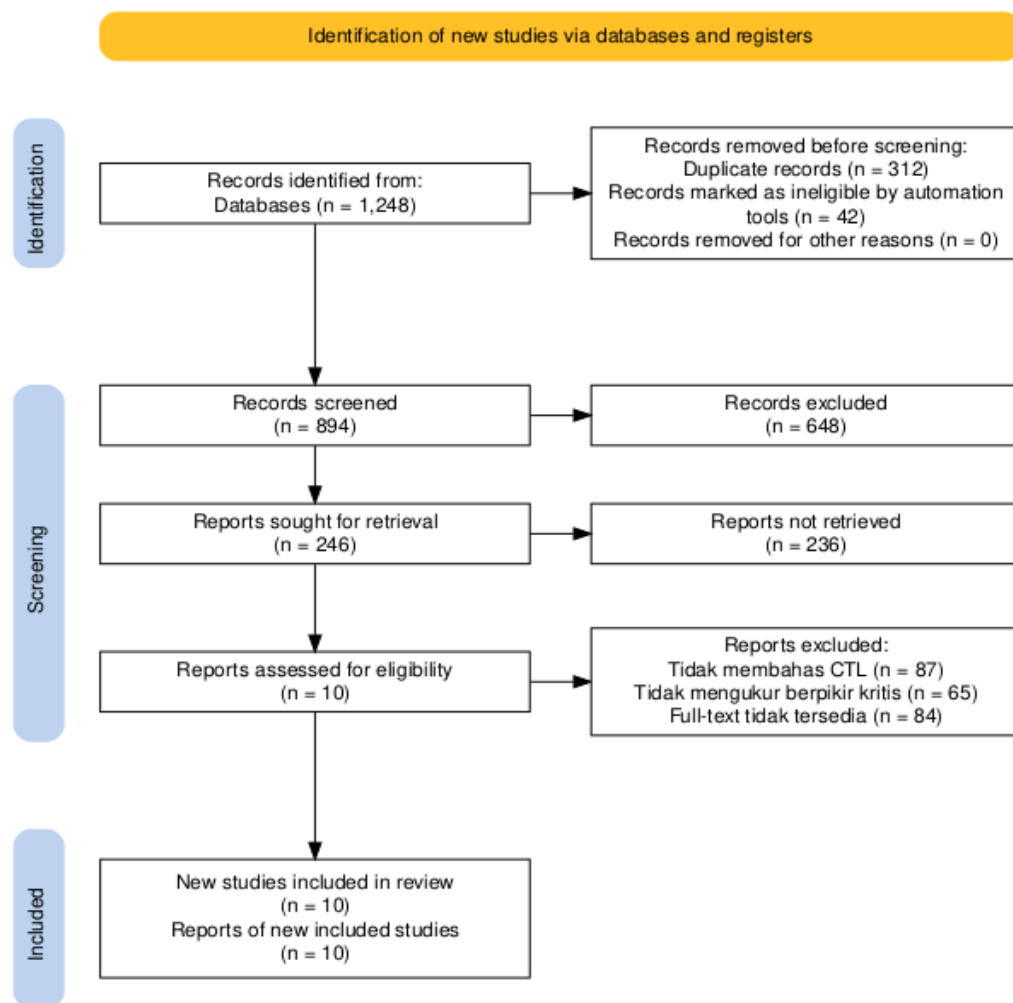


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

Results and Discussion

The Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) model is a holistic learning process designed to help students grasp the meaning of instructional material by linking it to their daily lives, thereby equipping them with the dynamic and flexible knowledge or skills needed to actively construct their own understanding. Students are given the opportunity

to employ higher-order thinking skills to discern the truth amidst the vast amount of information they receive, which in turn enhances their critical thinking abilities (Binti Yusup, 2022).

Table 1. Research Results on the Effect of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) Approach on Improving Critical Thinking Skills in Civics Education (PPKn) at the Elementary School (SD/MI) Level

Author and Year	Journal	Research result
(Dian Ekasari Sulnas et al., 2023)	<i>Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Dasar</i>	The research results indicate a significant improvement in the critical thinking skills of students taught using the CTL approach compared to those taught using conventional methods. This demonstrates that CTL is effective in enhancing students' abilities to analyze, evaluate, and draw logical conclusions regarding the problems presented.
(Sabrina Najwa Nabila et al.,2024)	<i>Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar</i>	Research findings indicate that the consistent implementation of CTL has a positive impact on enhancing students' critical thinking skills. This is evidenced by improvements in students' ability to understand concepts, connect information, and solve problems related to everyday life. CTL has also been shown to boost learning motivation and foster active student participation in the learning process.
(Minar Trisnawati Tobing et al., 2022)	<i>Jurnal Basicedu</i>	The research results indicate that the implementation of CTL has a significant impact on enhancing students' critical thinking skills, evidenced by their improved ability to identify problems, analyze information, and construct logical arguments. Furthermore, improvements were also observed in students' cognitive learning outcomes, demonstrating that CTL influences not only critical thinking but also their overall understanding of the subject matter.
(Femmy Nurzulaiti Z et al., 2024)	<i>Jurnal Ilmiah Sekolah Dasar</i>	The research results indicate that CTL has a significant positive effect on enhancing students' critical thinking skills, with an effect size ranging from moderate to high. This demonstrates the consistency of findings that CTL is effectively applied across various learning contexts.
(Mitha Restu Saputri et al., 2025)	<i>Journal of Innovation and Research in Primary Education</i>	The research results indicate that the group using CTL experienced a greater improvement in critical thinking skills compared to the control group, with a moderate level of improvement. This suggests that CTL is effective in enhancing student engagement as well as their ability to understand and analyze learning materials.

<i>Author and Year</i>	<i>Journal</i>	<i>Research result</i>
(Sulistiyowati et al., 2024)	<i>Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar</i>	The research results indicate that the implementation of CTL has a significant effect on improving students' critical thinking skills, as evidenced by a significance value of less than 0.05. These findings confirm that Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) enhances students' ability to analyze and evaluate learning materials.
(Hastri Mulyani et al., 2024)	<i>Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Pendidikan</i>	Research results indicate that a global citizenship-based Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach is capable of significantly improving students' conceptual understanding and critical thinking skills.
(Nurmaniah et al., 2026)	<i>Jurnal Ilmiah Profesi Pendidikan</i>	Research findings indicate that the implementation of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach is effective in enhancing the critical thinking skills of elementary school students. This improvement was observed incrementally across each cycle of the classroom action research conducted. Initially, prior to the intervention, the students' critical thinking proficiency stood at only 27.27%. Following the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in Cycle I, there was a significant increase to 72.72%. Subsequently, in Cycle II, the students' critical thinking skills improved further, reaching 90.90%. These results demonstrate that the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach fosters active student engagement and helps students connect learning material to real-life contexts, thereby positively impacting the development of critical thinking skills.
(Yetti Apriani et al., 2022)	<i>Jurnal Ilmiah Teknologi Pendidikan</i>	The research results indicate that the gradual implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) was able to enhance students' critical thinking skills across each cycle and led to a significant improvement in their overall academic achievement.
(Luh Putu Susilawati et al., 2025)	<i>Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengembangan Sains dan Humaniora</i>	Research findings indicate that the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) significantly enhances students' awareness of their rights and obligations as citizens, as evidenced by changes in attitudes, active participation in learning, and the ability to connect Civics concepts with real-life situations. Furthermore, this approach encourages students to think more critically when understanding social issues related to national life and the state.

An analysis of ten selected articles reveals a consistent pattern of findings regarding the effectiveness of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach in enhancing the critical thinking skills of elementary school students. Overall, the studies demonstrate that CTL has a positive and significant impact compared to conventional teaching methods. Research by Dian Ekasari Sulnas et al. (2023) and Sabrina Najwa Nabila et al. (2024) confirms that CTL improves students' abilities to analyze, evaluate, and connect concepts to real-life situations—key indicators of critical thinking. These findings are reinforced by Minar Trisnawati Tobing et al. (2022), who show that Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) not only boosts critical thinking skills but also leads to an overall improvement in students' cognitive learning outcomes.

Furthermore, Femmy Nurzulaiti Z et al. (2024) and Mitha Restu Saputri et al. (2025) revealed that the effectiveness of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) falls within the moderate-to-high range, demonstrating that this approach consistently yields positive impacts across various learning contexts. Research by Sulistyowati et al. (2024) and Hastri Mulyani et al. (2024) reinforces these findings by showing a statistically significant influence on the enhancement of students' critical thinking skills. Additionally, classroom action research conducted by Nurmaniah et al. (2026) and Yetti Apriani et al. (2022) indicates that improvements in critical thinking skills occur incrementally across learning cycles, suggesting that the sustained implementation of CTL can achieve optimal results.

Moreover, research by Luh Putu Susilawati et al. (2025) demonstrates that CTL not only enhances critical thinking skills but also fosters civic awareness among students by linking learning materials to real-life contexts. Overall, the synthesis of results indicates that CTL is effective in improving students' critical thinking skills through active engagement, contextual learning, and the development of analytical and problem-solving abilities. Consequently, by integrating these findings, a comprehensive picture emerges: the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) is a relevant and effective approach for enhancing the critical thinking skills of elementary school students.

Based on a synthesis of the ten articles analyzed, the effectiveness of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach in enhancing students' critical thinking skills is not only empirically proven within the context of Civics education in primary schools but also holds broader implications for improving the quality of education in general. Conceptually, CTL emphasizes the connection between learning material and real-life contexts, thereby encouraging students to actively construct knowledge through direct experience, reflection, and problem-solving. This aligns with the demands of 21st-century skills, which position critical thinking as a core competency that learners must possess.

In a broader context, these findings indicate that the CTL approach has the potential to be adapted not only for Civics education but also for various other fields of study, such as Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and Mathematics. This is because the flexible and contextual nature of CTL allows for interdisciplinary integration and ensures relevance across diverse learning situations. Furthermore, the enhancement of critical thinking skills resulting from the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) contributes to strengthening other competencies, such as problem-solving, decision-making, and social and civic literacy. Thus, Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) serves not merely as a teaching strategy but as a pedagogical approach that fosters the development of learners who are adaptive, reflective, and participatory.

Furthermore, analysis results indicate that the successful implementation of CTL is influenced by several factors, including teacher readiness in designing contextual learning, the availability of relevant learning resources, and active student engagement in the learning process. Variations in findings across studies such as differing levels of

effectiveness (ranging from moderate to high) suggest that CTL implementation requires adjustment to suit learner characteristics and the specific learning environment. Therefore, optimizing Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) implementation necessitates consideration of instructional design, evaluation strategies, and the support of a conducive learning environment.

Future research directions should focus on several strategic aspects. First, studies with more robust experimental designs and larger samples are needed to test the effectiveness of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) in a more generalizable manner. Second, future research could examine the integration of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) with other learning approaches or models such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, or digital technology-based learning to explore potential synergies in enhancing critical thinking skills. Third, it is important to explore Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) implementation at different educational levels, such as secondary and higher education, to determine the consistency of its effectiveness. Fourth, further research could adopt a longitudinal approach to observe the long-term impact of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) implementation on the development of students' critical thinking abilities. Thus, future research developments are expected to strengthen the empirical foundation and expand the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) across diverse educational contexts.

Conclusion

Based on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of ten relevant articles, it can be concluded that the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach significantly influences the improvement of students' critical thinking skills in Civics education at the elementary school level. This is consistently demonstrated by research findings showing enhanced student abilities to analyze, evaluate, and connect learning concepts to real-life contexts. Furthermore, the implementation of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) has been proven to boost active student engagement, learning motivation, and a deeper understanding of concepts. Thus, Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) can be considered an effective and relevant instructional approach for developing critical thinking skills among elementary school students, particularly in Civics education.

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