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The Role of Case-Based Learning in Developing Students' Critical Thinking of Chinese Language Study Program

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which Case-Based Learning (CBL) plays a role in developing critical thinking skills of students of the Chinese Language Education Study Program. Critical thinking skills are seen as one of the main competencies in 21st-century higher education, especially in foreign language learning which requires students not only to master linguistic aspects, but also to understand the socio-cultural context. This study used a quasi-experimental design with a non-equivalent control group pattern involving 40 students in the odd semester of 2024/2025, consisting of 20 experimental group students taught with CBL and 20 control group students taught by conventional methods in the form of lectures and practice questions. The research instrument is in the form of a critical thinking essay test based on the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) indicator, which is validated by experts and tested for reliability. Pretest and posttest results data were analyzed using normalized gain (N-gain) scores to assess learning effectiveness. The results showed that the experimental group obtained an average *N-gain* of 0.763 (high category) with a range of 0.54–1.00, while the control group only achieved an average *N-gain* of 0.45 (medium category) with a range of 0.23–0.80. These differences in achievement confirm that CBL is more effective than conventional methods in improving students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and interpret. Thus, it can be concluded that the application of CBL makes a significant contribution to the development of students' critical thinking skills, as it encourages them to connect theory with practice through authentic case analysis. These findings recommend that CBL be systematically integrated into the Chinese language learning curriculum to produce graduates who are critical, reflective and adaptive in the face of global challenges.

Keywords: Case-Based Learning, Chinese Language Education, Critical thinking

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INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking skills are one of the key competencies that cannot be ignored in 21st century higher education. Global changes marked by the rapid flow of information, the development of digital technology, and the increase in cross-cultural interaction require students to not only master factual knowledge, but also to be able to analyze, evaluate, and interpret information objectively. In this context, critical thinking serves as a foundation for the development of students' intellectual capacity as well as an indicator of their readiness to face the dynamics of the world of work and global society. Research shows that critical thinking skills are closely correlated with higher academic achievement as well as more complex problem-solving abilities (Bagirzada Vuqar, 2025). Students who are used to critical thinking are able to formulate arguments logically, identify information biases, and formulate innovative solutions to real problems (Negoescu, 2023). This shows that critical thinking skills are not just additional skills, but core competencies that underpin learning success in various fields of science, including science, humanities, and foreign languages (Kuzmenko et al., 2024). Therefore, the integration of critical thinking skills in the higher education curriculum is an urgent need so that students can be better prepared to face global challenges.

In addition to having a significant contribution to academic success, critical thinking skills are also an indicator of students' readiness to enter an increasingly competitive world of work. Graduates who are able to think critically are more adaptive in dealing with change, have the ability to make data-driven decisions, and are more effective in collaborating with multicultural teams. In the context of globalization, multinational companies to international organizations place *critical thinking* as one of the main competencies that determine individual competitiveness. Therefore, higher education in different parts of the world is starting to emphasize teaching strategies that can cultivate these skills systematically (Jamiai & Karfa, 2022). In learning foreign languages, especially Chinese, critical thinking skills are becoming increasingly important because students are required to understand not only linguistic aspects, but also the cultural and social context behind them (Revutska, 2023). Without critical thinking skills, students are at risk of being trapped in memorization-based mechanical learning that lacks contextual meaning. In contrast, students who think critically are better able to interpret implicit meanings, compare differences in perceptions across cultures, and formulate more relevant communication responses. Thus, the mastery of critical thinking in learning Chinese is not only relevant for the development of linguistic competence, but also absolutely necessary to equip students to face increasingly complex global interactions (Zhumagaliyeva, 2024).

Chinese is one of the languages with a high level of complexity that demands special learning strategies. In terms of phonology, the tone system that Mandarin has creates a significant challenge for foreign students, because mistakes in intonation can drastically change the meaning of words. This is different from Indonesian or English which is relatively free of tone, so students often have difficulty distinguishing or imitating the right intonation. Challenges also arise in the syntactic aspect, where the structure of Chinese sentences is not always parallel to the patterns of other languages, so students need analytical skills to understand grammatical constructions in depth. In addition, the *logographic hanzi* writing system adds a level of difficulty because it demands the mastery of thousands of characters, in contrast to the simpler phonetic alphabet. These linguistic barriers have been shown to affect learning motivation and reduce students' confidence when facing real communication exams (Fedro & Istiona, 2021). Research also shows that students who learn Mandarin tend to rely more on mechanical memorization in learning vocabulary and grammar than on the use of metacognitive or analytical strategies, reducing the effectiveness of long-term learning (Ai Min et al., 2022). Therefore, Chinese teaching in universities needs to be designed with an approach that not only emphasizes structural mastery, but also integrates critical thinking skills so that students are able to interpret the language in a broader and relevant context.

In addition to linguistic barriers, the challenges of learning Chinese also include complex cognitive and cultural dimensions. Many students are stuck in a pattern of memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules that emphasize mere reproduction without leaving room for critical analysis or contextual understanding. As a result, they have difficulty when it comes to connecting language with the reality of communication that is full of cultural and social nuances. For example, the use of certain idioms (*chengyu*) or cultural expressions often cannot be translated literally, but rather requires a critical understanding of the history, values, and norms of Chinese society (Huang & Byram, 2025; Jin & Liu, 2023; Tian & Lau, 2023). This makes Chinese learning not enough to focus only on linguistic aspects, but must also be directed at the development of critical literacy and intercultural awareness. The latest study even emphasizes that the integration of translanguaging approaches and critical literacy can help students to be more flexible in interpreting messages and improve higher-level thinking skills (Jamiai & Karfa, 2022; Vuqar, 2025). Furthermore, psychological challenges such as language anxiety and low self-confidence were also found to exacerbate students' difficulties in learning Chinese (Xiang et al., 2025a). As such, it is important for Chinese language study programs to not only teach linguistic aspects separately, but also to provide learning experiences that emphasize analysis, evaluation, and critical reflection on the use of language in a socio-cultural context. This is in line with the direction of higher education which requires students to be active, reflective, and adaptive learners in facing the diversity of global communication.

Case-Based Learning (CBL) is one of the innovative learning strategies that emphasizes the active involvement of students in understanding and solving real problems. This method is believed to be able to answer the challenges of learning foreign languages, including Chinese, because it provides an authentic context that brings theory closer to practice. Within the framework of CBL, students are not only required to master declarative knowledge, but also to relate the material to real-world situations through case analysis. Research shows that CBL has proven to be effective in improving students' critical thinking skills, especially in the aspects of analysis, evaluation, and problem-solving (Silitubun et al., 2025). In the context of language learning, the application of CBL helps students develop academic and practical communication skills because they are trained to discuss complex issues, identify relevant arguments, and express opinions rationally (Agustina & Ro'isatin, 2024). In line with that, meta-analysis research in nursing education in China shows that CBL significantly improves students' critical thinking disposition, especially when combined with problem-based learning (PBL) (Xiang et al., 2025b). This indicates that CBL is able to be an effective cross-disciplinary learning approach to build students' critical thinking competencies.

In addition to encouraging analytical skills, CBL also has a great contribution in shaping student learning independence and collaboration. Students are required to actively seek information, evaluate data, and develop alternative solutions through group discussions, so that the learning process is no longer one-way but dialogical and reflective (Lavi & Marti, 2023). Another study conducted in English debate courses also showed that the application of case-based methods effectively improved students' critical thinking skills by training them to formulate logical arguments and respond to issues from various perspectives (Firdaus, 2025). In Chinese language learning, similar conditions can be adapted by raising contextual cases such as business communication, diplomacy, or cross-cultural interactions that require students to understand language as well as inherent social meaning. The findings of experimental research in secondary schools in Zhengzhou also confirm that case-based teaching methods in Chinese language learning significantly improve students' critical thinking scores and learning satisfaction (Gou et al., 2025). Thus, it can be concluded that CBL is not only relevant as an innovative method in higher education, but also able to bridge the gap between language proficiency, critical skills, and readiness to face global challenges.

Recent research shows that Case-Based Learning (CBL) makes a significant contribution to improving students' critical thinking skills in various fields of study. In the context of medical and nursing education, meta-analysis proves that the application of CBL is able to significantly improve students' critical thinking disposition, analytical skills, and problem-solving skills compared to conventional methods (Xiang et al., 2025a). Similar applications in the field of engineering also show positive results, where the CBL pedagogical framework is effective in encouraging students to develop creativity as well as think critically in solving complex problems (Lavi & Marti, 2023). On the other hand, in the realm of science education in Indonesia, experimental research shows that students who are involved in case-based learning experience a significant increase in indicators of interpretation, evaluation, and critical thinking inference (Amelia et al., 2024a). The three studies affirm that CBL is not just an alternative method, but a pedagogical strategy that is relevant to the needs of 21st century learning.

Although empirical evidence on the effectiveness of CBL is found in the disciplines of medicine, nursing, and science, research related to the application of CBL in language learning is still relatively limited. Recent studies in the field of foreign language teaching show that the CBL model integrated with critical thinking skills is able to improve reading comprehension, vocabulary mastery, and reading strategies of EFL students (Agustina & Ro'isatin, 2024). Other research in the context of English debate has found that case-based methods help students express arguments more critically by utilizing collaborative and reflective discussion frameworks (Firdaus, 2025). Furthermore, the application of case study methods to foreign language teaching in the master's program of engineering has also succeeded in improving students' analytical skills and ability to identify relevant information to produce creative solutions (Nykyporets, 2023). These results provide strong indications that CBL may play a strategic role in language learning, although its specific application to Chinese is still rarely researched.

The limitations of research in the context of Chinese language learning open up significant space for new studies to bridge these gaps. Several studies examining project-based methods in Chinese teaching have shown that innovative strategies can improve students' linguistic skills as well as cultural understanding (D et al., 2023). However, the main focus of the research was on project-based learning, not case-based. Meanwhile, experiments on high school students in China show that case-based teaching methods are effective in improving critical thinking skills in Chinese subjects (Gou et al., 2025). The gap between positive results from other fields and the lack of specific research on Chinese language study programs in universities makes this research relevant and urgent. Thus, an important question that needs to be answered is the extent to which CBL can develop the critical thinking skills of students of the Chinese language study program, given the linguistic complexity and cultural nuances that come with it.

In the context of learning Chinese, CBL has great potential to support students to develop critical thinking skills. Through case studies drawn from cross-cultural communication situations, students can hone their sensitivity to implicit meanings, differences in cultural values, and the right way of conveying messages. Case application in learning can be authentic texts, news articles, or conversation simulations in a professional context (Amelia et al., 2024b; Kosgi & Badry, n.d.). Thus, students not only learn language as a linguistic system, but also as a tool for critical thinking and interaction in a global society.

Based on this background, this research is focused on answering the main question: to what extent does CBL play a role in developing critical thinking skills of Chinese language study program students? This question is important because although the effectiveness of CBL in various fields has been proven, its application in the context of Chinese language learning still needs to be explored further. This research is expected to be able to make a theoretical contribution to the development of innovative learning models, as well as a practical contribution for lecturers and students in optimizing the teaching and learning process.

METHOD

This study uses a quasi-experimental design with *a non-equivalent control group design pattern*. This design was chosen because the research subjects came from a class that had already been formed, so the researcher could not do full randomization. In this design, there are two groups, namely the experimental group that gets learning with the Case-Based Learning (CBL) approach and the control group that gets learning with conventional methods (lectures and practice questions).

Both groups were given a pre-test to measure critical thinking skills before treatment, then given a post-test after treatment to find out if there was a difference in the improvement of critical thinking skills.

The research population is all students of the Chinese Language Study Program at Makassar State University in the Odd semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The research sample was taken by purposive sampling technique, namely two regular classes in the third semester which have the same number of students. The experimental group consisted of 20 students. The control group consisted of 20 students.

The research instrument is in the form of a critical thinking test in the form of essay questions that are prepared with reference to the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) indicators, namely: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, self-regulation. The instrument was validated by language education experts and tested on students outside the research sample to test its reliability.

The data of pre-test and post-test results were then analysed using inferential statistics. The calculation of the N-gain score was used to see the effectiveness of CBL-based learning compared to conventional methods.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The data of pretest and posttest results for the experimental group are presented in table 1 below.

Table 1. Data of Pretest and Posttest of Experimental Group

RESPONDENT	PRETEST	POSTTEST	GAIN SCORE	IDEAL – PRETEST SCORE	NGAIN SCORE	NGAIN PERSEN (%)
1	65	90	25	35	0,71	71
2	55	90	35	45	0,78	78
3	40	85	45	60	0,75	75
4	65	95	30	35	0,86	86
5	70	95	25	30	0,83	83
6	75	100	25	25	1	100
7	55	85	30	45	0,67	67
8	50	80	30	50	0,6	60
9	55	100	45	45	1	100
10	45	80	35	55	0,64	64
11	35	75	40	65	0,62	62
12	35	70	35	65	0,54	54
13	15	75	60	85	0,71	71
14	60	90	30	40	0,75	75
15	60	90	30	40	0,75	75
16	65	95	30	35	0,86	86
17	35	80	45	65	0,69	69
18	55	90	35	45	0,78	78
19	45	90	45	55	0,82	82
20	50	95	45	50	0,9	90

The total mean score obtained is the average value of the Ngain Score, namely: 0.763. The minimum Ngain Score value is 0.54 while the maximum Ngain Score is 1. As a basis for decision-making on the effectiveness of a method, indicators are used as in the following table 2.

Tabel 2. N-Gain Score Distribution Category

N-Gain Score	Category
$g > 0,7$	High
$0,3 \leq g \leq 0,7$	Medium
$g \leq 0,3$	Low

Source: Melzer, I. (2003)

Thus, it can be seen that the use of case-based learning has a fairly high influence in improving the critical thinking skills of Chinese Language Education Study Program students because it has an N-gain value greater than 0.7, which is 0.763.

Table 2. Data of Pretest and Posttest of Control Group

Respondent	Pretest	Posttest	Gain Score	Ideal – Pretest Score	Ngain Score	Ngain Persen (%)
1	60	80	20	40	0.50	50
2	50	75	25	50	0.50	50
3	45	65	20	55	0.36	36
4	65	85	20	35	0.57	57
5	70	90	20	30	0.67	67
6	75	95	20	25	0.80	80
7	55	75	20	45	0.44	44
8	50	70	20	50	0.40	40
9	55	80	25	45	0.56	56

10	45	65	20	55	0.36	36
11	35	55	20	65	0.31	31
12	35	50	15	65	0.23	23
13	15	40	25	85	0.29	29
14	60	80	20	40	0.50	50
15	60	80	20	40	0.50	50
16	65	85	20	35	0.57	57
17	35	55	20	65	0.31	31
18	55	75	20	45	0.44	44
19	45	65	20	55	0.36	36
20	50	70	20	50	0.40	40

In table 2, it can be seen that the total mean score for the control class is the average value of the Ngain Score, which is: 0.45. The minimum Ngain Score is 0.23 while the maximum Ngain Score is 0.80. Thus, it can be interpreted that the use of conventional methods has a moderate influence on improving students' critical thinking skills.

The results of this study show that the case-based learning (CBL) method is significantly more effective in improving students' critical thinking skills compared to conventional methods. The experimental group scored a mean *N-gain* of 0.763 (high category), while the control group only reached 0.45 (medium category). These findings are in line with a meta-analysis by Tsekhmister (2023), which concludes that CBL improves academic performance and case analysis skills more effectively than traditional learning.

Furthermore, research by Silitubun et al., (2025) emphasized that CBL consistently strengthens students' critical thinking skills in various fields of study. They explain that case-based learning allows students to explore complex real-life problems, thus encouraging more in-depth analysis and evaluation skills. In this context, students not only receive passive knowledge, but also learn to relate it to real-life cases relevant to their field. This makes learning more meaningful and has a long-term impact on critical thinking skills. Therefore, the results of this study are in line with the literature that affirms CBL as an effective strategy to foster critical thinking in the higher education environment.

In the realm of international education, Yang et al. (2024) shows that the implementation of CBL combined with the flipped classroom model can produce a more significant impact. They found that students who studied with a combination of these two methods showed a marked improvement in critical thinking skills, learning motivation, as well as participation in class discussions. The flipped classroom model allows students to learn the material independently in advance, so that face-to-face time can be focused on more interactive case discussions. This improves the dynamics of the classroom and provides a wider opportunity for students to develop critical arguments. Thus, the application of CBL enriched with flipped classrooms has proven to be able to create a more active, collaborative, and meaningful learning experience.

In addition, a meta-analysis of the application of CBL in psychological learning also provides empirical support for the effectiveness of this method (Wu et al., 2023). The study showed that students who participated in case-based learning not only obtained better academic scores, but also experienced an increase in engagement and collaboration with peers. Students' active involvement in case discussions encourages them to develop a deeper understanding as well as hone academic communication skills. Furthermore, this interactive learning environment contributes to the creation of a more participatory classroom atmosphere and supports the development of collective critical thinking. In other words, CBL not only improves individual cognitive outcomes, but also strengthens the social dimension in the teaching and learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that the application of Case-Based Learning (CBL) plays a significant role in developing critical thinking skills of students of the Chinese Language Education study program. This is evidenced by the acquisition of an average *N-gain* value in the experimental group of 0.763 which is in the high category, much higher than the control group which only obtained an average of 0.45 with the medium category. These differences

in achievement show that students who follow learning with the CBL approach are better able to relate theory to real practice, analyze complex problems, and formulate logical and argumentative solutions. In other words, CBL has been proven to encourage students to not only understand the material conceptually, but also to develop critical thinking skills that are applicable in academic and professional contexts.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of CBL in improving the critical thinking skills of students of the Chinese Language Education study program indicates that this method can be a relevant pedagogical alternative to support the learning needs of the 21st century. CBL not only improves academic achievement, but also strengthens higher order thinking skills that are essential for aspiring educators and language practitioners. Therefore, the implementation of CBL is recommended to continue to be developed in the learning curriculum, both through integration with other models such as flipped classrooms and by utilizing digital technology to enrich the learning experience. Thus, this study emphasizes that CBL plays an important role in preparing students to be more critical, adaptive, and ready to face challenges in the era of education globalization.

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