Developing University Students' Critical Thinking through the Depopulation Phenomenon in Kōfu Town: A Pedagogical Study of Nihonjijō

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ABSTRACT

Japan's rural depopulation has emerged as a critical socio-demographic issue closely intertwined with population aging and sustained urban migration, and, within Nihonjijō education, it provides an authentic and socially grounded context for cultivating university students' critical engagement with contemporary Japanese society, enabling instruction to move beyond descriptive cultural knowledge toward higher-order thinking. This study investigates how undergraduate students apply Paul and Elder's critical thinking framework when engaging with the depopulation case of Kōfu Town, Tottori Prefecture. Data comprised thirty Indonesian-language essays (approximately 400–500 words each) produced by students enrolled in a Nihonjijō course at UNIKOM Bandung. Using qualitative content analysis, essays were classified into six cognitive stages—knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and action. The findings show that students' critical thinking was most frequently evidenced at the application, analysis, and synthesis stages, whereas only a small number of students reached the action stage; higher-level responses were characterised by contextual interpretation of data, integration of multiple information sources, and comparative reflection linking Japan's conditions with parallel challenges in Indonesia. Overall, the results suggest that Nihonjijō learning can function as a pedagogical space for developing socio-cultural awareness and reflective reasoning rather than merely transmitting factual content, and the study therefore recommends the explicit embedding of critical thinking frameworks in course design, the use of inquiry-based learning activities, and assessment practices oriented toward analytical and reflective outputs; future research should explore the longitudinal effects of sustained critical thinking instruction across multiple Nihonjijō courses.

1. Introduction

Japan's depopulation crisis, particularly in rural areas such as Kōfu Town, has become one of the most pressing social issues confronting the nation over the past several decades. This phenomenon cannot be understood solely as a demographic shift; rather, it is deeply embedded in interconnected economic, cultural, and educational dynamics that collectively shape the trajectory of contemporary Japanese society. Despite its profound societal implications, depopulation has received limited critical attention within Japanese cultural studies and

Nihonjijō (Japanese affairs) instruction in Indonesia. Existing studies in this field[1] [2], have predominantly adopted descriptive or culturalist perspectives, with insufficient emphasis on fostering students' critical reasoning and reflective engagement with complex social phenomena.

Within Japanese language education and related academic programs in Indonesia, Nihonjijō is generally framed as a content-driven course focused on conveying factual knowledge concerning Japanese society, culture, traditions, and current social developments[3]. While this approach provides essential foundational knowledge, it has yet to fully exploit Nihonjijō's potential as a pedagogical site for cultivating analytical and critical thinking skills. The critical thinking framework[4], which foregrounds intellectual standards, elements of reasoning, and intellectual dispositions, offers a robust theoretical basis for reconceptualizing Nihonjijō as a space for inquiry, interpretation, and critical reflection. The cultivation of critical thinking yields substantial educational and societal benefits, enabling learners to critically assess multifaceted social issues, manage information saturation, adapt to evolving contexts, and engage in effective problem-solving practices, thereby supporting both academic development and civic competence[5]. Nevertheless, a considerable gap persists between the theoretical promise of this framework and its systematic application in Japanese studies classrooms.

Prior pedagogical research on Nihonjijō, has largely concentrated on cultural appreciation, intercultural communication, and the transmission of socio-cultural knowledge. Consequently, students' engagement with critical social challenges including population decline, demographic aging, and rural depopulation, often remains at a superficial or descriptive level. Responding to this limitation, the present study integrates the Paul–Elder critical thinking framework into the examination of depopulation in Kōfu Town. By situating empirical content within a structured critical inquiry framework, this research seeks to bridge factual understanding and reflective analysis, thereby promoting a more critically informed and problem-oriented approach to Japanese studies education in the Indonesian higher education context.

In light of the foregoing background, the present study investigates how university students cultivate critical thinking as they examine the phenomenon of depopulation in Kōfu town through the lens of Nihonjijō learning. To this end, the study addresses the following research questions:

a). In what ways do students mobilize Paul and Elder's elements of critical thinking when grappling with the issue of rural depopulation in Japan?

[1] Miranti Artarina, 'Upaya Peningkatan Motivasi Mahasiswa Dalam Mata Kuliah Nihonjijo', *Jurnal Sastra - Studi Ilmiah Sastra*, 10.1 (2020), pp. 51–55.

[2] Novi Hardianti and Linna Meilia Rasiban, 'HONNE AND TATEMAE: A SURVEY ON THE TEACHING OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AT LPK SUMATRA & JAVA', *Proceeding of International Conference on Japanese Studies, Language and Education*, 2023, pp. 81–88.

[3] Jeni Putra and Masashi Umemoto, 'CULTURAL INTERPRETATION IN JAPANESE STUDIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NIHONJIJŌ CURRICULA IN INDONESIA AND THAILAND', *JAPANEDU: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pengajaran Bahasa Jepang*, 10.2 (2024), pp. 89–96.

[4] Richard Paul and Linda Elder, 'Critical Thinking: Inert Information, Activated Ignorance, and Activated Knowledge." Journal of Developmental Education', *Ournal of Developmental Education*, 25.2 (2001), p. 36.

[5] Eva Dias-Oliveira and others, 'The Development of Critical Thinking, Team Working, and Communication Skills in a Business School–A Project-Based Learning Approach', *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 54 (2024), p. 101680, doi:10.1016/j.tsc.2024.101680; Daniela Dumitru and Diane F. Halpern, 'Critical Thinking: Creating Job-Proof Skills for the Future of Work', *Journal of Intelligence*, 11.10 (2023), p. 194, doi:10.3390/jintelligence11100194; Witarsa and Syahril Muhammad, 'Critical Thinking as a Necessity for Social Science Students Capacity Development: How It Can Be Strengthened through Project Based Learning at University', *Frontiers in Education*, 7 (2023), doi:10.3389/feduc.2022.983292.

b). What pedagogical implications emerge from an analysis of students' critical thinking performance in the Nihonjijō classroom?

2. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative design, drawing on discourse analysis grounded in Paul and Elder's critical thinking framework, which conceptualizes critical thinking development across six cognitive stages: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and action. The instructional case examined in the course was the depopulation phenomenon in Kōfu-chō, Tottori Prefecture, Japan, while participant data were collected in Indonesia from a Nihonjijō course delivered within the Japanese Literature program at UNIKOM Bandung. Data collection took place on May 5, 2025, following a preparatory phase several weeks earlier in which students completed a related essay task on contemporary Japanese issues and received guidance on applying critical thinking; the dataset analyzed in this study corresponds to the third essay assignment. The sample comprised 30 second-semester Japanese Literature majors, labeled SP1–SP30 for analytic purposes, and the data consisted of 30 Indonesian-language critical essays, most of which were approximately 400–500 words.

Procedurally, all essays were compiled into a single analytic corpus with paragraphing and sentence boundaries preserved to maintain the rhetorical and argumentative organization of each text. The dataset was anonymized and systematically indexed (SP1–SP30), and each entry was documented with essential task metadata, including submission date, word length, prompt, and instructional objectives. Because classroom writing is situated discourse, interpretation was informed not only by the essays themselves but also by the assignment prompt, the instructional materials concerning Kōfu-chō, and the classroom guidance on critical inquiry. Paul and Elder's six-stage model was then operationalized into an explicit analytic codebook to enable consistent, replicable interpretation. Each stage was defined in terms of observable discourse functions: knowledge (factual propositions and definitional statements), comprehension (explanatory paraphrase and demonstration of understanding), application (context-specific use of concepts to interpret Kōfu-chō), analysis (decomposition into factors and articulation of relationships or causal mechanisms), synthesis (integration of multiple factors into a coherent explanatory or solution-oriented argument), and action (normative, feasible recommendations justified by prior reasoning). To ensure coding consistency, decision rules were specified for segments exhibiting overlap for example, when a sentence simultaneously reports information and evaluates implications by applying a dominance principle that prioritized the segment's primary rhetorical function.

The analysis proceeded through segmentation and multi-cycle coding. Each essay was segmented into consistent meaning units, typically at the clause-to-sentence level, to ensure comparability across texts while preserving local coherence. During the first coding cycle, segments were coded deductively using the six Paul–Elder categories, producing within-text profiles of critical thinking progression (e.g., whether students moved from knowledge and comprehension to analysis, synthesis, and action). In the second coding cycle, coded segments were re-examined to identify recurrent discursive patterns and argumentative pathways, such as descriptive reporting that terminates at comprehension, factor listing without causal integration (analysis without synthesis), or solution claims that are not warranted by preceding evidence (action without analysis or synthesis). Where analytically necessary, inductive subcodes (e.g., generalization, moral evaluation, policy legitimization, or blame attribution) were introduced as secondary descriptors, while remaining conceptually subordinate to the six-stage framework.

Interpretation was conducted across three mutually informing levels. At the micro level, linguistic resources such as causal connectors, modality, evaluative lexis, and evidential markers

were examined to determine how students constructed certainty, obligation, and legitimacy in their claims. At the meso level, the internal architecture of argumentation was traced through claim–reason–evidence configurations and through shifts from problem description to causal diagnosis and proposal of remedies. At the macro level, essays were read as pedagogical discourse situated in Nihonjijō learning, focusing on how students framed depopulation as a structural-economic issue, a cultural-moral narrative, or a policy-governance failure, and how these framings enabled or constrained higher-order critical thinking moves, particularly synthesis and action.

To enhance credibility, the study maintained an audit trail documenting coding decisions, revisions to the codebook, and representative exemplars for each category. Reliability and interpretive robustness can be strengthened through double-coding a subset of essays by an additional reader or through structured peer debriefing to examine category stability and challenge potential bias. Finally, reporting is best achieved through a concise overview of the distribution and progression patterns across SP1–SP30 (optionally supplemented by frequency tendencies) alongside carefully selected excerpts that function as analytic warrants for claims about each critical thinking stage.

3. Results and Discussion

The collected data were classified into six stages of critical thinking: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and action. This section presents representative excerpts from each category to illustrate how students' analytical processes manifest across these levels. The results of this classification are as follows.

Table 1: Distribution of SP by Critical Thinking Stage

No	Kategori	Participants Students (SP)
1	Knowledge	20
2	Comprehension	3,7,9,10,13,19,23
3	Aplication	17,22,
4	Analysis	1,5,8,11,12,15,16,26,28
5	Syntesis	2,4,6,21,24,27,29
6	Action	14,18,30

Table 1 indicates a highly uneven distribution of students across the six critical-thinking stages, with a marked concentration at the lower end of the framework. The Knowledge category is the modal level, accounting for 20 students (SP20 explicitly listed in the table, with the remaining students implied by the frequency count), suggesting that most participants primarily produced descriptive or factual engagement with the Kōfu-chō depopulation case rather than sustained interpretive or evaluative reasoning. Beyond this baseline, only a small subset reached Comprehension (SP3, SP7, SP9, SP10, SP13, SP19, SP23), indicating that fewer students moved from reporting information to demonstrating explanatory understanding of the issue.

At the intermediate levels, progression becomes increasingly restricted. Only two students are classified at Application (SP17, SP22), implying limited evidence that learners consistently transferred concepts or course knowledge to interpret the Kōfu-chō case in a context-sensitive manner. A larger but still minority cluster is located at Analysis (SP1, SP5, SP8, SP11, SP12, SP15, SP16, SP26, SP28), suggesting that some participants were able to disaggregate the phenomenon into contributory factors and articulate relationships among variables (e.g.,

structural, economic, educational, or demographic drivers), even if they did not yet consolidate these insights into higher-order integration.

Notably, a comparable number of students attained Synthesis (SP2, SP4, SP6, SP21, SP24, SP27, SP29), indicating that a small group could integrate multiple lines of reasoning into a more coherent explanatory or solution-oriented stance. However, only three students reached the Action stage (SP14, SP18, SP30), which points to a substantial bottleneck in moving from integrative reasoning to articulated, justified recommendations or decisions. Taken together, the distribution suggests that while a minority of students demonstrate emergent higher-order reasoning (analysis and synthesis), the overall cohort tends to remain at knowledge-level engagement, highlighting a pedagogical need to scaffold the transition from comprehension to application, and from synthesis to actionable, warranted proposals within Nihonjijō-based critical inquiry.

Knowledge

In Paul and Elder's terms, the knowledge stage is evidenced when students primarily reproduce information with minimal transformation into explanatory, evaluative, or inferential claims. As shown in the table above, only SP20 was categorized at this level. The reasons for classifying SP20 within the knowledge stage can be seen in the following excerpt.

(1) "Kota Kōfu mengalami penurunan populasi dari tahun ke tahun hingga di tahun 2023 hanya ada sekitar 2500 orang... Kematian pertahun di kota itu sekitar 90 orang. *(Kōfu Town has experienced a population decline year after year, and by 2023 there are only about 2,500 residents... The annual death toll in the city is around 90 people...)* (SP20)

(2) Menurut pendapat pribadi saya akan merasa nyaman berada di kota seperti Kōfu dimana kotanya sepi penduduk tetapi di lain sisi saya mungkin akan merasakan kesepian juga." *(In my personal opinion, I would feel comfortable living in a city like Kōfu where the population is small, but on the other hand, I might also feel lonely)* (SP20)

Critically, quotation (1) functions as reporting rather than reasoning: demographic figures are presented without being mobilised to generate warrants (why they matter), causal mechanisms (why decline occurs), or implications (what follows for schools, labour, welfare, or community life). This pattern is consistent with findings from recent writing-focused interventions showing that, without explicit critical-thinking prompts and structured evaluative criteria, students tend to remain in descriptive or "knowledge telling" modes even when assigned socially relevant topics. Likewise, quotation (2) introduces stance, but the stance is primarily affective ("nyaman / *comfortable*… kesepian / *lonely*") and is not supported by argumentation or evidence-based inference; from a performance-assessment perspective, such responses signal a gap between expressing an opinion and demonstrating assessable critical thinking (i.e., claims grounded in reasons and evidence)[6].

Comprehension

The comprehension stage is indicated when students re-articulate learned information in their own words and begin to formulate basic explanatory relations, but do not yet demonstrate sustained evaluation, multi-perspectival reasoning, or systematic causal analysis. SP3 demonstrated a fairly good understanding of the depopulation issue in Kōfu Town, as

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[6] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3.2 (2006), pp. 77–101, doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa; Jassim Al Herz, 'Developing Critical Thinking Skills Through English Writing Assignments at King Faisal University', *World Journal of English Language*, 15.8 (2025), p. 350, doi:10.5430/wjel.v15n8p350.

evidenced by the ability to explain the phenomenon using their own words. In the essay, the student also attempted to illustrate a causal relationship, although still in a relatively simple form.

(3) "Populasi kota Kōfu kini hanya sekitar 2.500 jiwa. Hal ini mengakibatkan banyak orang yang memilih untuk tidak tinggal di sana" (*The population of Kōfu Town is now only about 2,500 people. This has caused many people to choose not to live there.*). (SP3)

(4) "Kota kecil biasanya masih sangat kental akan budayanya... tetapi dengan populasi yang terus menurun, saya khawatir budayanya akan luntur" (*Small towns usually have a strong sense of tradition... but as the population keeps declining, I am worried that their culture will fade away.*) (SP3).

From a critical standpoint, quotation (3) contains a causal connector ("*mengakibatkan*"), yet the causal logic is under-specified: population decline is treated as the cause of outmigration ("*memilih untuk tidak tinggal*"), whereas in demographic research and policy discourse, outmigration is typically a key driver of population decline rather than its outcome. This is precisely the kind of reasoning slippage that explicit critical-thinking scaffolds in writing are intended to address—by prompting students to separate claims, evidence, and warrants and to test causal directionality. Quotation (4) moves toward implications (cultural erosion), but it remains framed as a personal concern ("*saya khawatir*") without criteria for evaluating likelihood, scope, or mechanisms (e.g., which cultural practices are at risk, through what social processes), illustrating how comprehension-level discourse often signals awareness without yet achieving analytic accountability.

A similar pattern can be observed in SP13. As seen in quotations (5) and (6), SP13 presents factual descriptions supplemented with emotionally charged personal reflections. The excerpts that serve as the basis for classifying SP13 within the comprehension stage are as follows:

(5) "Saya kira semua tempat di Jepang itu ramai dan modern seperti Tokyo. Tapi di Kōfu, banyak sekolah yang tutup karena tidak ada murid." (*I thought every place in Japan was crowded and modern like Tokyo. But in Kōfu, many schools are closing because there are no students.*) (SP13)

(6) "Jika saya tinggal di tempat seperti Kōfu, mungkin saya akan merasa tenang tapi juga cepat bosan..." (*If I lived in a place like Kōfu, I might feel peaceful, but I would probably get bored quickly...*) (SP13)

Here, quotation (5) demonstrates a meaningful shift from stereotype to new understanding (Tokyo ≠ all Japan), and it introduces an institutional consequence (school closures), which is stronger evidence of comprehension than mere demographic reporting. However, the inference chain is still short: the student does not interrogate what school closures mean for community viability, intergenerational reproduction, or policy responses—moves that would index transition toward analysis/synthesis. This aligns with assessment research arguing that performance tasks must be paired with analytic rubrics that reward justificatory reasoning, not only correct observations, if educators aim to elicit higher-order thinking. Quotation (6) again foregrounds affective stance; without argumentative elaboration, affect functions as a closure device that limits the discourse space for evaluation of alternatives, trade-offs, and consequences.

A similar pattern can be observed in SP19, whose critical thinking remains limited to understanding and rearticulating information, supplemented by personal opinion that shows only a simple and general form of causality.

(7) "Seperti banyak daerah pedesaan di Jepang, Kōfu mengalami peristiwa penurunan populasi... Banyak penduduk Kota Kōfu yang harus melakukan perjalanan ke kota-kota besar." (*Like many rural areas in Japan, Kōfu is experiencing population decline... Many residents of Kōfu have to commute to major cities.*) (SP19)

(8) "Hal tersebut sangat dikhawatirkan karena menurut saya itu bisa berdampak kepada urbanisasi." (*This is quite concerning because I think it could lead to further urbanization.*) (SP19)

Quotation (7) signals generalisation ("seperti banyak daerah pedesaan"), which can be analytically productive, but the reasoning remains descriptive because it stops at stating commuting as a condition rather than unpacking its drivers and consequences. Quotation (8) offers an implication ("urbanisasi") yet frames it tentatively as opinion ("menurut saya"), again without evidential grounding or elaboration (how, for whom, with what timeframe), thereby remaining within comprehension. Recent studies on integrating critical-thinking frameworks into writing show that learners typically require structured prompts (e.g., counter-argument, evaluation criteria, evidence integration) to move beyond such generalised concern statements into testable analytic claims [9].

Application

This stage includes elements such as purpose, assumptions, and point of view. Students begin to identify and assess problem-solving approaches using the concepts they have learned.

(9) "Akses terhadap kebutuhan pokok yang sulit terutama bagi para lansia... untungnya ada layanan pengantaran makanan keliling berupa mobil." (*Access to basic needs is difficult, especially for the elderly... fortunately, there is a mobile food delivery service.*) (SP17)

(10) "Solusi yang menarik yaitu dengan menawarkan banyak hal secara gratis seperti rumah, asuransi kesehatan, dan biaya sekolah... membuka lapangan pekerjaan seperti bertani." (*An interesting solution is to offer many things for free, such as housing, health insurance, and school fees... and to open up job opportunities like farming.*) (SP17)

SP17 successfully applies the depopulation concept to concrete features of Kōfu and recognises policy instruments (service provision; incentives) as plausible responses. What keeps the writing at application rather than analysis is that the policies are largely catalogued as "solutions" without being evaluated through explicit criteria (feasibility, sustainability, target population fit, unintended consequences) or compared against alternatives. This distinction is consistent with performance-assessment scholarship emphasising that action-oriented claims must be warranted by evaluative reasoning and explicit decision criteria to count as higher-order critical thinking [78]

SP17 successfully applies the concept of depopulation to the concrete context of Kōfu and provides real examples of solutions such as mobile services and birth incentive policies. However, the critical reflection remains descriptive rather than analytical. The student connects the social phenomenon with local policy, indicating the application stage, though lacking deeper or comparative elaboration characteristic of analysis. Understanding is still at the level of describing policies rather than synthesizing them into new insights.

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[7] Braun and Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology'; Josephine Obiageli Okafor, 'Evaluation of Rubric-Based Assessment in Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Higher Education', *JURNAL ILMIAH MAHASISWA*, 2.2 (2024), pp. 104–23, doi:10.22373/jim.v2i2.691.

[8] Obiageli Okafor, 'Evaluation of Rubric-Based Assessment in Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Higher Education'.

A similar case can be found in SP22, who evaluates local government solutions based on descriptive knowledge rather than in-depth case analysis. This pattern justifies classifying SP22's essay in the application stage.

(11) "Salah satu inovasi menarik adalah rumah percobaan yang bisa disewa dari satu malam hingga tiga bulan… ada berbagai subsidi relokasi dan insentif untuk keluarga muda, termasuk bantuan biaya persalinan dan dukungan untuk membeli serta merenovasi rumah kosong." (*One interesting innovation is the trial house program, which can be rented from one night to three months... there are various relocation subsidies and incentives for young families, including childbirth assistance and support for purchasing or renovating vacant homes.*) (SP22)

Analysis

At this stage, students demonstrate the ability to explain the causes and effects of depopulation in Kōfu systematically and relate them to social, cultural, educational, and economic impacts. They also show the ability to compare Kōfu's conditions with other regions and evaluate existing policies, though without yet reaching synthesis, as they do not propose new ideas or solutions.

(12) "Menurunnya populasi disebabkan beberapa faktor. Pertama... Kedua... Ketiga..." (*The population decline is caused by several factors. First... Second... Third...*) (SP5)

(13) "Ketimpangan ini menunjukkan bahwa kemajuan teknologi dan ekonomi di Jepang tidak merata, dan menyisakan wilayah rural yang semakin tertinggal." (T*his disparity shows that technological and economic progress in Japan is uneven, leaving rural areas increasingly behind.*) (SP5)

(14) "Jika dibandingkan dengan kota Bandung... perbedaan utamanya adalah dari segi dinamika sosial dan kepadatan penduduk." (*Compared to the city of Bandung... the main difference lies in social dynamics and population density.*) (SP5)

SP5's discourse demonstrates analytic structuring ("Pertama… Kedua… Ketiga…") and extends beyond local description to a broader structural interpretation (uneven development) and cross-contextual comparison (Bandung), all of which are hallmarks of analysis in a staged CT framework. Yet, the excerpted reasoning still primarily maps relationships rather than integrating them into a new explanatory model or a decision pathway, which is why it remains distinct from synthesis/action. This aligns with recent work arguing that higher-order critical thinking is best captured when learners are required not only to identify factors but also to integrate them into coherent causal accounts and defensible judgments[8,9].

(15) "Populasi jiwa di Kota Kōfu terus menurun dari tahun 1950—2023 dengan jumlah 2.500 jiwa pada tahun 2023. Bahkan, dalam satu tahun sebanyak 90 jiwa dapat meninggal dunia." (*Kōfu's population has continued to decline from 1950 to 2023, with only 2,500 residents remaining in 2023. In a single year, about 90 people may die.*) (SP11)

(16) "Idō hanbaisha, yaitu mobil penjualan keliling... Selain untuk berjualan, penjual selalu memastikan bahwa lansia di setiap rumah tetap aman." (*Idō hanbaisha, or mobile sales trucks... besides selling, the vendors always make sure that the elderly in each home are safe.*) (SP11)

(17) "Kōfu mencoba menarik keluarga muda dengan memberikan dukungan pendidikan gratis, klinik gratis, dan subsidi rumah..." (*Kōfu is trying to attract young families by offering free education, free clinics, and housing subsidies...*) (SP11)

(18) "...mematahkan stigma bahwa orang Jepang individualis dan tidak peduli dengan sekitar." (...challenging the stigma that Japanese people are individualistic and indifferent to others.) (SP11)

SP11 links demographic indicators to social-service responses and policy mechanisms, and then extends the discussion to a cultural reading (stigma revision). This multi-layered linking is stronger than factor listing because it connects data → institutional response → sociocultural implication. Still, the reasoning stops short of synthesising these strands into a consolidated explanatory framework or a prioritised action plan—moves that performance-assessment literature identifies as central to demonstrating advanced critical thinking.

Similarly, SP26 demonstrates comparative analytical thinking through cross-contextual reasoning:

(19) "Salah satu alasan kenapa populasi di kota ini sangat sedikit adalah karena anak muda lebih memilih pindah ke kota besar seperti Tokyo dan Osaka… Ini menciptakan siklus: makin banyak yang pergi, makin sepi kotanya." (*One reason the population in this city is so small is that young people prefer moving to big cities like Tokyo and Osaka… This creates a cycle: the more people leave, the emptier the city becomes.*) (SP26)

(20) "Dibandingkan dengan desa di Indonesia… masalahnya mirip, anak muda banyak pergi ke kota." (*Compared to villages in Indonesia... the problem is similar—many young people move to cities.*) (SP26)

Quotation (19) is analytically important because it proposes a feedback-loop mechanism ("Ini menciptakan siklus"), which goes beyond linear cause-effect. Quotation (20) adds transnational comparison, enabling the student to treat depopulation as a patterned socio-spatial dynamic rather than a uniquely Japanese anomaly—an analytic move that supports deeper generalisation. However, synthesis would require integrating this mechanism with policy evaluation and community-level implications into a unified explanatory or solution framework.

Synthesis

One of the main characteristics of this stage is the ability to integrate information from various sources to generate new understanding or conclusions. Out of the thirty students enrolled in this course, seven essays can be considered to have reached the synthesis stage of critical thinking. The following excerpts illustrate representative examples of this level.

(21) "Awalnya fokus saya hanya pada bagaimana kota kecil seperti Kōfu menghadapi depopulasi... Namun setelah membaca materi lain, saya sadar bahwa ada persoalan yang jauh lebih luas dan terstruktur." (*At first, my focus was only on how a small city like Kōfu copes with depopulation... But after reading other materials, I realized that the problem is much broader and more structural.*) (SP2)

(22) "Saya juga jadi tau bahwa bukan hanya kreativitas warga yang penting, tapi juga peran data, kebijakan nasional, dan strategi jangka panjang seperti regenerasi komunitas di kota lain seperti Kamiyama." (*I also came to understand that it is not only the creativity of the residents that matters, but also the role of data, national policies, and long-term strategies such as community regeneration in other towns like Kamiyama.*) (SP2)

(23) "Ini membuat saya berpikir bahwa tantangan kota kecil bukan hanya masalah lokal, tapi bagian dari krisis yang butuh kolaborasi besar." (*This made me realize that the challenges of small towns are not merely local issues but part of a larger crisis that requires broad collaboration.*) (SP2)

SP2 evidences synthesis through explicit scale-shifting (local → structural/national) and multi-source integration (local creativity + data + national policy + comparative case). These moves correspond closely with recent findings that CT-oriented writing improves when students are required to integrate multiple information sources and are supported by structured

prompts and evaluative rubrics. Importantly, the student's language ("persoalan… lebih luas dan terstruktur") signals a conceptual reframing rather than a mere accumulation of facts.

A more complex but still synthetic pattern of thinking is found in SP21's essay. SP21 begins by presenting factual and causal data (quotation 24), followed by a concrete depiction of consequences (25), policy highlights (26), and finally, cultural reflection that forms a conceptual synthesis (27):

> (24) "Dengan populasi hanya sekitar 2.500 jiwa, Kōfu telah mengalami penurunan jumlah penduduk yang berlangsung perlahan namun pasti selama beberapa dekade terakhir… migrasi generasi muda ke kota-kota besar untuk pendidikan dan pekerjaan, ditambah dengan angka kelahiran yang rendah…"(*With a population of only about 2,500 people, Kōfu has experienced a slow but steady population decline over the past few decades… due to the migration of younger generations to larger cities for education and employment, coupled with low birth rates.*)(SP21)

> (25) "Akibatnya, banyak fasilitas umum seperti sekolah terpaksa ditutup atau digabung… pusat kota yang dulu ramai kini menjadi sepi karena pergeseran aktivitas ke daerah yang lebih mudah diakses dengan kendaraan pribadi." (*As a result, many public facilities such as schools have been forced to close or merge… The once-bustling city center has now become quiet due to a shift of activities to areas more accessible by private vehicles*). (SP21)

> (26) "Mereka meluncurkan program relokasi yang memberikan subsidi… rumah 'uji coba'… Layanan inovatif seperti toko keliling."(*They launched a relocation program offering subsidies… 'trial houses'… and innovative services such as mobile shop*s.)(SP21)

> (27) "Ini menimbulkan pertanyaan besar tentang masa depan identitas budaya Jepang, karena desa-desa seperti Kōfu adalah penjaga tradisi… Jepang menunjukkan bahwa bahkan dalam keterpurukan, ada keseriusan untuk mempertahankan identitas dan memperkuat komunitas. Ini bisa menjadi inspirasi bagi desa-desa di Indonesia…" (*This raises major questions about the future of Japan's cultural identity, as villages like Kōfu are the guardians of tradition… Japan shows that even in decline, there is a sincere effort to preserve identity and strengthen community. This could serve as inspiration for villages in Indonesia...*) (SP21)

SP21 synthesises demographic drivers, infrastructural consequences, policy instruments, and cultural identity into a single argumentative arc that culminates in a transnationally relevant insight. This trajectory exemplifies what performance-assessment researchers describe as credible evidence of critical thinking in extended writing: integration across informational strands plus reflective judgment about implications.

Action

A defining feature of the action stage of critical thinking is the ability to articulate problems analytically and generate at least one form of actionable or solution-oriented recommendation. Three students demonstrated essays reaching this level of reasoning. Representative excerpts are as follows:

> (28) "Penurunan ini terus terjadi karena kebanyakan penduduknya lebih memilih untuk pindah ke kota yang lebih besar... kurang lebih 90 orang meninggal dalam kurun satu tahun." (*This decline continues because most of the residents prefer to move to larger cities... about 90 people die within a single year.*) (SP14)

> (29) "Program relokasi dimana mereka menawarkan subsidi untuk pindah ke perumahan tua serta membantu mendirikan bisnis... menawarkan penyewaan rumah tua dengan fasilitas lengkap... dengan harga yang relatif murah." (*A relocation*

program in which they offer subsidies to move into old housing and assist in establishing businesses... offering rental of old houses with full facilities... at a relatively low cost.) (SP14)

(30) "Pemerintah Kota Kōfu juga mungkin bisa mempromosikan pariwisata dan produk lokal juga mungkin bisa mengembangkan ekowisata... Hal ini mungkin dapat meningkatkan citra Kōfu sebagai destinasi menarik untuk ditinggali." (*The Kōfu Town Government could also promote tourism and local products, and perhaps develop ecotourism... This might enhance Kōfu's image as an attractive place to liv*e.)(SP14)

SP14's movement from problem depiction to policy description and then to additional recommendations indicates an "action orientation." However, a critical reading suggests that the recommendation layer is still only weakly warranted (e.g., feasibility, target population, sustainability, and trade-offs are not specified). Contemporary work on CT performance assessment stresses that action is strongest when solutions are justified through explicit decision criteria and evidence-based reasoning rather than presented as plausible ideas alone. Thus, SP14 demonstrates the action stage in an emergent form, but also illustrates a pedagogical opportunity: students need support to transform proposals into defensible policy arguments.

Similarly, SP30 shows the ability to identify problems, analyze current strategies, and propose alternative solutions. In quotation (31), SP30 articulates the issue and the government's tangible responses. In quotation (32), metacognitive reflection and adaptive learning are evident. Finally, quotation (33) showcases a conceptual and strategic model that represents a practical and integrative recommendation.

(31) "Sebagai solusi, Kōfu mengembangkan inovasi lokal seperti promosi industri anggur lokal dan pertanian organik... Pemerintah daerah juga mendorong program kerja jarak jauh bagi pendatang muda." (*As a solution, Kōfu has developed local innovations such as promoting its local wine industry and organic farming... The local government also encourages remote work programs for young migrants.*) (SP30)

(32) "Materi dari teman-teman membuat saya melihat sisi yang belum saya angkat secara mendalam... Saya juga baru memahami bahwa revitalisasi tidak hanya lewat pelestarian budaya, tapi juga lewat konversi rumah kosong menjadi ruang kreatif." (T*he materials presented by my peers made me realize aspects I had not yet explored in depth... I also came to understand that revitalization is not only about preserving culture but also about converting vacant houses into creative spaces.*) (SP30)

(33) "Saya berpikir bahwa dalam menjaga keberlanjutan kota kecil, penting untuk menggabungkan warisan budaya, strategi digital, dan dukungan kebijakan." (*I believe that to sustain small cities, it is crucial to integrate cultural heritage, digital strategies, and policy suppor*t.) (SP30)

SP30 strengthens the action stage by coupling proposals with metacognitive repositioning ("materi dari teman-teman…") and by offering a multi-domain strategy (cultural + digital + policy). This is consistent with recent writing-pedagogy evidence that structured peer interaction and rubric-guided evaluation can improve students' critical thinking performance by pushing them to refine claims, broaden perspectives, and justify decisions.

Pedagogical Implications for Nihonjijō Class

The findings of this study reveal that most students demonstrated critical thinking at the levels of application, analysis, and synthesis, whereas only a few reached the action stage. These

results yield several significant insights for re-envisioning the pedagogy of *Nihonjijō* within Indonesian higher education.

First, the findings underscore the need to transition from knowledge transmission to inquiry-based learning. Many students continued to rely on descriptive writing or the reproduction of factual information from class materials, suggesting that *Nihonjijō* class remains predominantly content-oriented rather than cognitively or critically oriented. This observation aligns with the recommendations that emphasize the centrality of critical thinking in language and cultural education[9]. To address this, instructors should design intellectually stimulating activities that cultivate reasoning and inquiry, such as case-based discussions, data interpretation exercises, and issue-driven essays that compel students to evaluate, synthesize, and contextualize socio-cultural information.

Second, the explicit integration of critical thinking frameworks, particularly Paul and Elder's model, proved effective in enhancing students' depth of reflection and argumentative sophistication. Embedding such frameworks into course syllabi, learning outcomes, and assessment rubrics can provide a structured pathway for learners to progress from foundational comprehension toward informed and actionable insight.

Third, the results highlight the pedagogical importance of multisource and cross-contextual analysis. Students who attained the synthesis and action stages (e.g., SP2, SP14, SP30) demonstrated the capacity to integrate a variety of resources including news media, governmental data, and visual materials into coherent interpretations and context-sensitive solutions. Encouraging this analytical versatility can foster socio-cultural literacy and adaptive reasoning, both essential for advanced intercultural understanding.

Furthermore, the study underscores the value of reflective and comparative thinking. Several students (e.g., SP21, SP30) meaningfully juxtaposed Japan's depopulation issues with rural demographic challenges in Indonesia, illustrating that *Nihonjijō* can function as an intellectual platform for developing globally minded, contextually aware learners capable of drawing transnational and socio-cultural parallels.

Finally, given that only a small number of students achieved the action stage, assessment practices should be recalibrated to privilege critical output over factual recall. Performance-based assessments such as policy reflection essays, analytical response papers, and structured debates on Japan's social issues can more effectively capture students' reasoning depth, evaluative rigor, and problem-solving competence.

In sum, these pedagogical implications suggest that *Nihonjijō* has the potential to evolve beyond a content-driven exploration of Japanese society into a transformative intellectual space for cultivating reflective, critical, and globally literate thinkers.

4. Conclusion

This study explored how students applied Paul and Elder's elements of critical thinking when engaging with the issue of rural depopulation in Japan, and how these findings inform the pedagogical direction of Nihonjijō instruction in Indonesian higher education. The analysis revealed that most students demonstrated critical thinking at the levels of application, analysis, and synthesis, while only a few advanced to the action stage. Those who reached higher levels of thinking were able to integrate multiple sources, construct causal reasoning, and develop

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[9] Muhammad Zikrullah and Azhari Azhari, 'The Critical Thinking Research Trend in Indonesia's Language Education Journals', *Diksi*, 32.1 (2024), pp. 107–28, doi:10.21831/diksi.v32i1.72070; Irwan, Arnadi, and Aslan, ' Developing Critical Thinking Skills of Primary School Students Through Independent Curriculum Learning', *Indonesian Journal of Education (INJOE),* 4.3 (2024), pp. 788–803.

comparative reflections between Japanese and Indonesian socio-cultural contexts. This suggests that Nihonjijō classes can serve not merely as a platform for learning about Japanese society, but as a transformative space for cultivating reflective and globally aware learners.

Pedagogically, the findings underscore the importance of explicitly embedding critical thinking frameworks within the Nihonjijō curriculum through inquiry-based activities, cross-source analysis, and performance-based assessment. Such approaches can help students move from knowledge reproduction toward interpretive and evaluative engagement with contemporary Japanese issues.

Future research should extend this study by examining how sustained critical thinking instruction across multiple semesters influences students' reasoning, argumentation, and intercultural competence. It would also be valuable to investigate how collaborative and digital learning environments can further enhance critical inquiry and reflective comparison in Nihonjijō learning contexts.

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