

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING IN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: *This paper explores how literary texts can be used to enhance critical thinking skills among learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Literature offers rich and varied content that challenges students to analyze, interpret, and evaluate ideas beyond surface meaning. Through exposure to diverse perspectives, complex themes, and ambiguous situations, students are encouraged to reflect deeply and think critically. The study outlines various pedagogical approaches to integrating literature into EFL classrooms and presents findings from a small-scale classroom-based research project.*

Keywords: *Literature, Critical Thinking, EFL Learners, Language Acquisition, Literary Analysis, Higher-order Thinking*

Introduction:

In the rapidly changing globalized world, language education is expected not only to develop communication skills but also to promote critical thinking. Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is no longer limited to grammar and vocabulary; it also involves fostering students' ability to think independently, evaluate information, and form logical judgments. Literature, with its multiple layers of meaning and cultural richness, offers an ideal platform for developing these higher-order thinking skills.

Literary texts require learners to go beyond literal comprehension, prompting them to interpret characters' motivations, identify themes, evaluate moral dilemmas, and make inferences. Such processes mirror critical thinking strategies and can be systematically developed through structured reading and discussion activities.

Furthermore, literature serves as a mirror of human experience, providing learners with opportunities to explore various cultural, social, and philosophical dimensions. Engaging with characters who face moral dilemmas or societal pressures helps students not only build empathy but also consider multiple viewpoints, thus enhancing their ability to assess and critique information. These are essential skills in the 21st century, where learners must navigate a vast amount of digital and often conflicting information.

Additionally, literature allows students to explore ambiguous language and complex sentence structures, prompting them to pause, analyze, and interpret meaning. This process

strengthens their cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills. The classroom thus becomes a space not just for learning English, but for cultivating open-minded, critically aware individuals

Methods:

This study used a qualitative research design involving:

Text Selection: Short stories and poems from both classic and contemporary literature were chosen based on theme, language level, and cultural relevance.

Lesson Implementation: Over a 4-week period, literature-based lessons were delivered to two groups of A2–B1 level EFL students, incorporating discussion, questioning, role-play, and written response activities.

Data Collection: Classroom observations, student journals, and post-lesson interviews were used to gather insights into learners' engagement and development of critical thinking.

Analysis: Thematic analysis was applied to assess evidence of critical thinking in students' verbal and written responses.

Results:

The findings show that:

Students demonstrated increased engagement when discussing moral or emotional dilemmas found in literary texts.

Learners gradually shifted from simply retelling plots to offering analytical interpretations and personal opinions.

Open-ended questions and group discussions fostered deeper thinking, as students built on each other's ideas.

Exposure to culturally diverse literature encouraged students to reflect on different values, beliefs, and social issues.

Journaling responses showed improvement in students' ability to evaluate, synthesize, and question content.

Discussion:

These results support the claim that literature can be a powerful tool for fostering critical thinking in EFL contexts. Unlike factual texts, literature allows multiple interpretations, which stimulates cognitive engagement and deeper reflection. However, the success of this approach depends on teacher guidance, appropriate text selection, and the integration of student-centered activities.

One of the challenges identified was the initial difficulty students faced when interpreting metaphorical or symbolic language. However, with scaffolding, students became more confident in expressing their ideas and questioning text meanings. Literature also promoted emotional engagement, which enhanced motivation and memory retention.

Conclusion:

The integration of literature into EFL classrooms not only enriches language learning but also cultivates critical thinking. When students interact with texts that present complex characters, conflicting viewpoints, and unresolved endings, they are compelled to think analytically and empathetically. For educators, this approach offers a meaningful way to develop both linguistic competence and cognitive skills in a balanced and engaging manner.

In conclusion, the use of literature in EFL classrooms offers more than linguistic enrichment; it becomes a catalyst for intellectual and personal growth. The literary experience teaches learners how to question, compare, and construct arguments — all vital components of critical thinking. When supported with appropriate instructional strategies such as guided questioning, peer discussion, and reflective writing, literature can transform the traditional language classroom into a dynamic arena for inquiry and analysis.

Educators are encouraged to select texts that are thematically rich and culturally relevant to students' lives while also offering cognitive challenges. As this study indicates, even students at lower proficiency levels can benefit from literature, provided they receive the necessary scaffolding. Ultimately, fostering critical thinking through literature is not only an academic aim but a step toward forming thoughtful, informed, and responsible global citizens.

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