

**Literature as a Medium to Foster Critical Thinking:  
A Case Study of an Iranian EFL Classroom**

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**Abstract**

As far as teaching English as a foreign language is concerned, the role of literature as a medium to enhance language learning or to promote other cognitive and affective variables has been quite contentious. In order to shed more light on the use of literature in English Language Teaching (ELT), the study investigated the role of literature as a medium to foster critical thinking among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. A sample of 39 intermediate Iranian EFL students who were the students of two intact classes were recruited. They were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The experimental group (n=18) were required to read unabridged, authentic short stories written by literary figures whereas control group students were provided with abridged and simplified texts and short stories. A validated scale of critical thinking was administered as the pre/post-test before and after the treatment. The results of a one way ANCOVA revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test of critical thinking, suggesting that use of literary texts has been effective in enhancing the level of critical thinking among EFL students. The findings of the study have pedagogical implications for ELT theorizers and practitioners.

**Keywords:** Literature, Critical Thinking, EFL, Language Teaching, Short Story.

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## **1. Introduction**

The history of second language learning and teaching has witnessed a pendulum of interest (Alemi, 2011) in the role that literature teaching plays in second language learning. The early Grammar Translation Method deemed that the only worthwhile source of linguistic input and intellectual enrichment for learners was the study of the target language literature. Later, however, with the recognition of learners' need to develop communicative competence, it was realized that what learners particularly required was the ability to use language, not necessarily the means to analyze it (Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011; Widdowson, 1978). This view led to some lesser emphasis on literature as a teaching device, giving rise to the use of real or authentic linguistic data in a language classroom. This focus on authenticity led to such approaches as Conversation Analysis (CA) where real-life linguistic data, as used for performing communicative functions, are analyzed, and then later used as a resource for materials development. That is to say, there are indeed several scholars positing that using literature in a communicative language classroom can cause potholes for learners.

Savvidou (2004), McKay (1982) and Robson (1989), as cited in Khatib et al. (2011) have made similar arguments regarding the complexity of language in literary works, particularly syntax and lexis, suggesting that this complexity impedes learners' attentional resources to focus on meaning. McKay (1982), cited in Khatib et al. (2011), asserts that the disparity between the literary and academic genres makes it a cumbersome task for learners to benefit from literature as a learning device.

More recently, however, Duff and Maley (1990) have proposed that if its significance is carefully understood, literature can still be a great source of input in an EFL classroom context. Khatib et al. (2011), though partly acknowledging the criticisms raised against using literature in an EFL or ESL classroom, identified several advantages for it. With the deluge of emotional expressions and functional phrases, literary works such as novels, short stories, and dramas are at least situationally authentic (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Literature can enhance learners' motivation, providing the drive necessary for successful language learning. Also, delving into the target language literary works not only caters to intercultural awareness but also fosters the development of an understanding of the universally shared concepts around the world, such as love, hatred, and death (Khatib et al.,

2011). This deeper level of intercultural understanding could in turn promote one's EQ, a significant contributor to second language learning success (Arthur, 1968).

Most importantly for our purposes though, learners achieve higher intellectual and critical thinking abilities as they use literature in an EFL learning environment. The purpose of this study is then to empirically examine whether literature has a contributing role in the levels of critical thinking learners acquire following the use of literature as a learning device.

## **2. Literature Review**

McKay (1982), arguing for the proper selection of literary materials in ESL classrooms, observes several benefits for using literature in a language learning context. Literature does not solely promote language usage (Widdowson, 1978, cited in McKay, 1982), but it also provides a backdrop for authenticity, where situations in which language can be used as a communicative device are also exercised, hence it also promotes language use too. In addition, it is conducive to reading speed too, as it promotes learner's interaction with the text. Finally, working with target community literature in an ESL context can be beneficial to learners' and teachers' tolerability. Such arguments have instigated an array of research studies investigating the effect of literature on successful second language learning.

In an effort to examine the effect of literature integrated approach on promoting second language skills, Muthusamy, Marimuthu, Michael, Chazali, and Veeravagu (2010) conducted a study in a Malaysian university using a pre/post-test comparison group design. Each group underwent an eight week treatment, with the control group reading *Burden of Sin* by S. Karthigesu followed by traditional reading exercises and the experimental group working on the adapted Ibsen's *The I Model* text exploration and literary devices. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference between the scores of the experimental and control group, suggesting that integrating literature into an EFL curriculum results in improved performance of the learners' four language skills.

As for the presumed effect of literature teaching on motivation, Vural (2013) indicates that the authenticity of texts can have a significant effect on the overall results of students' final exams in Turkey. The experimental group was provided with unabridged and authentic texts while the control group was exposed to an abridged and simplified ones. The experimental group significantly outperformed

the control group with respect to the overall posttest proficiency scores. In the end, having administered an attitude survey assessing the level of motivation brought about by the use of authentic literary texts, Vural (2013) concludes that literature has a positive effect on reading and writing in that it caters to the level of interaction between the learner and the text. Similarly, M.-L. Chen (2012) observes the effect of children's literature and DVD films on EFL adult language learning using a quasi-experimental between groups design. The participants in the control group received instruction from the textbook while those in the experimental group were exposed to children's literature and DVD films. The results of the reading comprehension test followed by a questionnaire assessing the experimental group's perceptions about the use of literary texts showed that reading, viewing the film, and discussing a children's fantasy novel resulted in a significant increase in the experimental group's posttest scores.

Similarly, Lao and Krashen (2000) maintained that learners who participated in a literature class emphasizing reading for pleasure scored significantly higher than those in a traditional academic skills class, and when they were questioned whether they thought what they learned throughout the course would help them in the future, a significant majority of the literature group's answers were positive, while only 12% of the traditional skills class had this opinion about their class. Ho (2000) also advocates the use of children's literature in adult language classrooms, asserting that children's literature is intellectually stimulating and linguistically challenging, and thus works well with adult learners. In a similar vein, Wu (2001) maintains that using American children's novel can bring about significant positive changes of college students' English reading attitudes and English progress.

In a qualitative study, Y. Chen (2006) investigated the perceptions of EFL English learners about children's literature in a reading/writing course in Taiwan. After performing a set of interviews and examining the participants' reflective statements, Y. Chen (2006) observed that the recurring themes indicated the stories were good writing models, and the writing process was rewarding. García (2007, cited in Chen, 2012) used a similar design investigating the effect of integrating children's literature into a Spanish-as-a-foreign-language class at the university level. She maintained that students enjoyed reading, believed their Spanish improved and appreciated the presence of elements of Hispanic culture within the texts.

Calling for the use of folklores and fairy tales as content materials in language courses, Goh (1996) implemented a literature integrated program showing that using such works creates a context in which different language skills can be authentically practiced. The participants also manifested ability to analyze and go beyond their surface level interpreting them plausibly. Equally significant, Goh (1996) asserts that using literature, particularly folklores and fairy tales adds up to teachers' and students' engagement. A similar argument has been made by Khodabakhshi and Lagos (1993), stating that reading folklores and fairy tales to learners can bring about several beneficial outcomes in an EFL learning context: it can (a) increase learners' motivation, providing them with the required incentive to relate the characters to those of their own lives, (b) exposes learners with intercultural background knowledge, and (c) provides a context in which learners can hear correct pronunciation, work through more challenging vocabulary, and learn to make predictions.

Moving on to the relationship between one's critical thinking abilities and one's use of literature, a few research studies investigating the concept of critical thinking will first be reviewed. Critical thinking has been defined in numerous ways by different scholars in the field, but the core concept remains quite unchanged, referring to one's ability to gain control over one's thinking against one's own standards to arrive at the appropriate decision (Ennis, 1989; Lipman, 2003). Using a qualitative research methodology, Facione (1990) signifies the importance of cognitive skill of critical thinking, suggesting that experts from various fields agree on the crucial role of critical thinking in instruction and assessment.

As for the relationship between critical thinking and successful language learning, whether it be first or second language, the teacher is now viewed responsible to promote learners' critical thinking abilities due to several reasons: (a) learners with a critical thinking ability can take charge of their own thinking, functioning as autonomous learners, (b) as one component of critical thinking, those with higher critical thinking abilities are more likely to form a meaningful affinity between language and learning, and finally (c) As indicated by several studies, there is a high and significant relationship between critical thinking abilities and learners' achievement (Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011).

Liaw (2007) reports a study conducted with a content-based approach in which the effectiveness of promoting learners' critical thinking on language

proficiency is assessed. The study concludes with signifying the positive impact of integrating critical thinking into content-based instruction. Kusaka and Robertson (2006) maintain that integrating critical thinking instruction using challenging content and asking learners to share the results leads to higher motivation on the part of the learners. As for the role of technology in enhancing critical thinking, Burgess (2009) shows that using WebCT as a supplement tool in content-based instruction results in an increase in learners' engagement with the text, and heightens critical thinking skills. Similar arguments have been put forth by Ghosh (2002) and Khatib et al. (2011), saying that literature can bring about change in learners' attitudes toward language learning, and that the very nature of literature causes learners to reflect upon their own lives, and is ideal to critically look at.

Asserting that characters and their background can enhance critical inquiry, Daud and Husin (2004), using a pre/post-test comparative design, report a study in which they assess whether the use of literature and computer software aid helps the process of critical thinking skills development. The experimental group was exposed to literary texts with a concordancer while the control group was required to analyze the textbook manually. The result of the posttest revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the Cornell Critical Thinking Test. As for teachers and the way they view their tasks as related to the development of learners' critical thinking abilities, Choy and Cheah (2009) show that even though teachers believe that they are promoting learners' higher level cognitive skills, in effect, they do not indicate an understanding of the prerequisites of critical thinking development; they merely focus on conveying subject matter content.

Critical thinking abilities may also enhance teachers' success. Ghaemi and Taherian (2011) show that there is a significant relationship between teachers' level of critical thinking skills and learners' perception of their success, using Watson Glazer Critical Thinking Questionnaire to assess teachers' critical thinking abilities and another questionnaire to elicit learners' view of their teachers. Birjandi and Bagherkazemi (2010) restate the same argument, maintaining that there is a significant relationship between teachers' professional success (through the eyes of their students) and their level of critical thinking abilities. Interestingly, Roghanizadeh (2011) shows that teachers' critical thinking is also related to their extent of self-regulation.

Critical thinking is also related to learners' use of specific types of strategies. Using Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and a questionnaire of critical thinking, Nikoopour, AMINI, and Nasiri (2011) assert that there is a statistically significant relationship between cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategy use and the extent of one's critical thinking abilities. Critical thinking skills were found to be unrelated to memory, compensation, and affective strategies.

The opposite may also hold true; Davidson and Dunham (1996), calling for more empirical studies to assess the effectiveness of integrating critical thinking skills into EFL skills development curriculum, use a comparison between-groups design, in which the control group received a one year intensive content-based instruction while the treatment group received additional training in critical thinking. The experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group on the Ennis-Weir Critical Thinking Essay Test, suggesting that learners' critical thinking skills can further be developed if the corresponding instruction is integrated into traditional content-based teaching.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

In order to accomplish the purpose of the present study, a sample of 39 intermediate Iranian EFL students who were the students of two intact classes at a branch of Islamic Azad University in Iran were recruited. They were all the first-year college students studying English translation. The participants included both male and female students whose age varied from 18 to 22 with the average age of 19.21. They had already passed their first semester. During the conduction of the present study, the participants were taking a four-credit reading course II offered to the students of English majors at the bachelor's program. Since the students were not randomly selected, the design is considered as quasi-experimental.

To minimize the lack of random selection and to provide some control over the internal validity threats, the two groups were randomly assigned to experimental group (n=18) and control group (n=21) (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1990). The students of the experimental group were taught the authentic, unabridged literary short stories whereas the learners in the control group were taught the abridged, simplified short stories. After the assignment of the groups to either control or experimental, the Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered to the participants of the study. The purpose of the administration of

the PET was to ensure the homogeneity of the students in terms of general language proficiency prior to the conduction of the treatment. The result of an independent samples T-test for the mean score of the PET for both groups (Table 1) revealed that the two groups were not statistically different in terms of general language proficiency.

<b>Table 1. Independent Samples T-Test for the PET Scores</b>					
Group		Mean	Std. Deviation	t*	Sig
Experimental	30	49.33	5.50	0.429	0.67
Control	30	48.66	6.49		

### 3.2. Instruments

#### 3.2.1. Preliminary English Test (PET)

A retired version of PET exam (2004), as an internationally valid proficiency test, was utilized in this study as a measure of general language proficiency of the participants of this study. According to the PET Handbook (2004), the test is developed to assess the use of language in real life. PET is based on the communicative approach to learning English while considering the need for accuracy. As for content, the test requires understanding public notices and signs; reading and understanding of short written texts incorporating factual information; understanding of grammar as utilized to express language notions such as time, space, possession, etc. The reliability of the test as estimated against Kudar-Richardson Formula (KR-21) turned out to be 0.84.

#### 3.2.2. California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST)

This scale was developed from the study of the Delphi definition of critical thinking (Facione, 1990). This scale is considered to be a standard measure which has been used in a wide range of studies in the field of education (Fahim & Komijani, 2010; Grosser & Nel, 2013). The present scale is available in two forms of ‘A’ and ‘B’. In the current study, Form-B was employed because of its widespread use in other empirical studies. Moreover, this scale has been reported as a valid and reliable scale for measuring critical thinking in the Iranian context (GhorbanDordiNejad & Hey-darib, 2012). The original test is in English, but in



order to ensure more accurate responses by the participants, the researchers employed the translated version of Form-B, which has been validated by Khamli and Hossein Zadeh (2003). The scale consists of 34 multiple-choice items assessing five cognitive skills: Analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and interpretation based on some general background knowledge. The internal consistency of the scale as measured by Cronbach Alpha formula was 0.78 in the present study.

### **3.3. Procedure**

First, the PET was administered to the students of both groups. The purpose of administering the PET was to ensure the homogeneity of the students in terms of general language proficiency prior to the initiation of the treatment. As discussed above, the result of an independent samples T-test for the mean score of the PET for both groups revealed that the scores of the two groups were not statistically different. Then to determine the level of the critical thinking of the two groups, the critical thinking scale (CCTST) was administered to two groups as the pre-test of the study.

With the beginning of the treatment, besides the main coursebook, (*ACTIVE Skills for Reading 3*, 3rd edition by Anderson, Neil J. (2013)), the students of the two groups were provided with different short stories. The treatment lasted for one semester (16 weeks). Because it was a four-credit course, two ninety-minute sessions were held each week. One hour of each session was dedicated to teaching the main coursebook for both groups. However, thirty minutes of each session was allocated to short stories as the supplementary materials of the reading course. During the last thirty minutes of each session, the students of the control group were required to read some abridged and simplified stories chosen by the teacher from <http://eslyes.com/easyread/> website which provides about 500 short stories for Beginner-Intermediate levels.

Nevertheless, the students of the experimental group were required to read some authentic unabridged short stories belonging to native English-speaking authors. In other words, instead of abridged simplified short stories, the experimental group students were provided with authentic literary texts. The authentic short stories for the experimental group included: "To Build a Fire" by Jack London; "The Capital of the World" and "Old Man at the Bridge" by Ernest Hemingway; "The Robe Of Peace" and "The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry; "The Four Pigeons" by W.W. Jacobs; "The Cask of Amontillado" by Edgar Allan Poe; "A Cup of Tea" by Katherine Mansfield; "Eve's Diary" by Mark Twain "A Haunted House" by Virginia Woolf; "The Sisters" by James Joyce; "The Little Match Girl" by Hans Christian Andersen.

The decision about providing the experimental group students with short stories as the literary texts was made considering the fact that short stories are usually considered to be ideal ways of introducing students to the literature in the foreign language classroom (Vural, 2013). With regard to the reading comprehension activities employed for the both groups during the last thirty minutes of class time, who said what questions, what-comes-next questions, and true or false questions were used. Such questions and activities were mainly concerned with the characters, the plot, language, and the gist of the stories. Moreover, some students could tell a summary of the story voluntarily. It should be noted that the students of both classes were required to read the short stories or other supplementary materials in advance, and the thirty-minute class activities were mainly concerned with questions, answers, clarification, and comprehension check by students and the teacher. It should be also noted that the teacher provided the students of both groups with necessary background knowledge and language support prior to reading the short stories. The students were also allowed to look up the new words via their smart phones during the class sessions.

Finally, as the last stage of the treatment, the students of both groups were given critical thinking scale (CCTST) as the post-test of the study to check their progress in terms of critical thinking after the treatment and the results of the tests were compared to find the effects of the treatment.

#### **4. Data analysis**

In order to statistically investigate the effect of using literary texts on the critical thinking of the students, the mean scores of the control and experimental groups were compared and also one-way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to test possible differences between the two groups at the beginning and end of the study. This analysis was carried out to investigate whether there was any statistically significant difference between the performance of the control and experimental group on the pre-test and post-test of the study.

#### **5. Results**

In order to analyze the data, first the normality of distribution for the CCTST scores was investigated. To check the normality assumption, one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test was run on both pre-test and post-test scores of CCTST. In one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test, if the significance level is larger than .05, it indicates that the data are normally distributed. As it is revealed in Table 2., the results of one-sample K-S test showed that the CCTST scores were normally distributed.

		pre	post
N		39	39
Normal Parameters <sup>a</sup>	Mean	38.14 2	43.9744
	Std. Deviation	9.870 69	1.16444E1
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.170	.122
	Positive	.170	.122
	Negative	-.131	-.062
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.878	.761
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.382	.508

Then, in order to compare the two groups in terms of the level of critical thinking, a one way ANCOVA was run. According to Pallant (2007), ANCOVA can be employed when there is a pre-test/post-test design (e.g. comparing the impact of two different interventions, taking before and after measures for each group). The scores on the pre-test are considered as a covariate to 'control' for pre-existing differences between the groups.

Therefore, a one-way between-groups analysis of covariance was run to investigate the effectiveness of the intervention which was the use of literature on fostering the critical thinking of Iranian EFL students. The independent variable was employing literary texts, and the dependent variable was scores on CCTST administered after the intervention. Participants' scores on the pre-test of CCTST were considered as the covariate in this analysis.

Preliminary checks were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and reliable measurement of the covariate. After adjusting for pre-intervention scores, as the Table 3 indicates, there was significant difference between the control and the experimental groups on post-intervention scores on the CCTST ,  $F(1, 36) = 22.832, P = .000$ , partial eta squared = .46.

**Table 3.** ANCOVA results

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	4526.430 <sup>a</sup>	2	2173.215	91.758	.000	.841
Intercept	97.056	1	85.056	4.343	.036	.108
Pre	3543.233	1	3663.233	158.545	.000	.815
Group	581.312	1	627.312	22.832	.000	.460
Error	812.545	36	23.448			
Total	67271.000	39				
Corrected Total	4872.974	38				

## 6. Discussion

As an attempt to shed more light on the use of literature in second language learning, the present study investigated the role of literature as a medium to foster critical thinking among Iranian EFL students. The statistical results of a one way ANCOVA revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test of critical thinking, confirming that use of literary texts has been effective in fostering the level of critical thinking among language learners. This findings seem to be quite warranted and legitimate because the study of literature and literary texts cannot be complete without employing critical thinking competencies as learners need to have much analysis, inference, reflection, and evaluation in order to comprehend the literary texts. As Iser's (2000 cited in Shi, 2013) puts it:

...the function of literature is by no means entirely covered by its interaction with its readers and with its referential realities. Moreover, if a literary text does something to its readers, it simultaneously tells us something about them. Thus, literature turns into a divining rod, locating our dispositions, desires, and inclinations and eventually our overall makeup.

The findings of the present study support the claims of some researchers (e.g., Gajdusek & van Dommelen, 1993, Ghosn, 2002, Van, 2009) who considered literature as a good medium to enhance critical thinking among language learners.

Ghosn (2002) argued that literature can create and induce changes in the attitudes of the learners. Similarly, Langer (1997) maintained that literature provides the students with the opportunity to reflect on their lives, learning, and language. From this perspective, literature can open "horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore" (p. 607). Both traditional structurally-based texts and communicative syllabi may not be sufficient to meet different demands of foreign language learners. As confirmed by the findings of the present study, a syllabus which developed and built upon authentic, literary short stories may not only increase the learners' level of critical thinking but it also may foster language skills and competencies accompanied by a more heightened motivation to learn a foreign language.

The nature of literary texts require that the reader problematize the text and go beyond the given information. Moreover, to fully comprehend a literary text, the reader need to be reflective and analytic. Both problematizing and reflection have been reported as the strategies to foster critical thinking. Dewey (1933) maintained that if challenging tasks and issues are not 'problematic' in the classrooms, the learners will not be able to think critically. Likewise, Facoine (2000) asserted that critical thinking refers to, "judging in a reflective way what to do or what to believe". In the same vein, Kennedy et al., (1991) argued that with the reading of general textbooks does not guarantee the development of critical thinking skills among students because these books do not offer problematic and demanding questions or issues. Similarly, Facoine (2010) maintained that critical thinking assists leaners in understanding variety of expressions, situation, data, events, judgments and beliefs.

From pedagogical point of view, ELT methodologists and practitioners are recommended to incorporate literature in the language curriculums. Literature has the potentiality to foster critical thinking, provide comprehensible and authentic input necessary for the English language acquisition and develop the students' cognitive and linguistics abilities, since students are provided with the opportunity to build up new vocabularies as well as to expand their own understanding of words they already know (Ono, Day & Harsch, 2004). Although it was revealed that reading literary texts offer some advantages (i.e. fostering critical thinking in

the present study) for teaching foreign language, ELT practitioners should be careful about which literary works to be selected. Literary texts such as poems, short stories, novels, and plays seem to be more appropriate because they are replete with much imagination and creativity. However, short stories still seem to be the most proper texts to be used in EFL contexts. But since stories require particular background knowledge, it is the responsibility of teachers to provide the learners with enough schematic knowledge and scaffolding. In the newly emerged global world, language competencies, critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and emotional intelligence take precedence. Incorporation of literature as a motivating medium in EFL classes can be a promising venue within which various needs of L2 language learners can be addressed. However, EFL practitioners, methodologists, policy makers, material developers, and syllabus designers should select the most appropriate approach or combined approaches and design suitable activities and tasks to make use of literature as an effective medium in language classes.

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