

The Role of Fiction in Developing Critical Thinking Skills in ESL/EFL Learners

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Abstract

In today's world, critical thinking is a vital skill for ESL/EFL learners, helping them move beyond memorization to analyze ideas, evaluate arguments, and engage with diverse perspectives. However, balancing language learning with the development of higher-order thinking skills can be challenging. This study explores how fiction can serve as a powerful tool to enhance critical thinking among first-year ESL/EFL students at Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. Over ten weeks, one group of students engaged in fiction-based learning activities, while another followed a traditional curriculum. The results showed that students exposed to literature developed

stronger analytical and interpretative skills, demonstrated greater engagement in discussions, and became more open to multiple viewpoints. Reflections and classroom observations reinforced these findings, revealing deeper reasoning and intellectual curiosity among students. This study highlights the untapped potential of fiction in ESL/EFL classrooms and advocates for its integration to foster both language proficiency and critical thinking.

Keywords: Fiction, Critical thinking, ESL/EFL learning, Language education, Higher-order skills

1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced, information-rich world, critical thinking has become a crucial skill for navigating academic challenges and solving real-world problems. For ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, developing the ability to think critically is especially important, as it empowers them to engage more

deeply with texts, ideas, and diverse perspectives—far beyond simple memorization or basic comprehension. However, encouraging critical thinking in language learning can be difficult, as learners must simultaneously improve their language skills while also engaging in higher-level cognitive activities such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis.

Among the various tools available to enhance critical thinking in language learning, fiction often remains underused, despite its considerable potential. Literary works, with their intricate narratives, multifaceted characters, and provocative themes, provide an excellent opportunity for students to delve into deeper analytical thinking. Unlike typical language-learning materials, fiction challenges learners to question assumptions, interpret nuanced meanings, and consider the motivations of both characters and authors. By engaging with fictional stories, students not only enhance their comprehension skills but also learn to recognize biases, appreciate multiple

viewpoints, and connect literary themes to real-life issues.

Fiction also provides a valuable space for learners to develop inferential reasoning and argumentation skills. When reading novels, short stories, or plays, students often need to read between the lines, predict potential outcomes, and support their interpretations with evidence from the text. These tasks mirror the cognitive processes involved in critical thinking—assessing evidence, drawing conclusions, and articulating thoughts clearly. Additionally, discussing literature in the classroom fosters a collaborative learning environment, where students can exchange ideas, challenge different perspectives, and refine their own views through discussion.

Moreover, fiction plays a significant role in promoting empathy and cultural understanding. By immersing themselves in diverse social and historical contexts through literature, learners can gain insight into experiences and worldviews that differ from their own. This ability to step into someone else's

shoes and consider the world through various lenses is a key component of critical thinking, as it requires individuals to evaluate issues from multiple perspectives rather than being limited by personal biases or assumptions.

Despite these benefits, fiction is often overlooked in ESL/EFL curricula in favor of more traditional language-learning resources such as textbooks and functional reading passages. While these materials are essential for building basic language skills, they may not challenge students to engage in more profound intellectual inquiry. As such, there is a growing need for teaching methods that leverage the power of fiction to enhance both language proficiency and critical thinking abilities.

This paper examines the role of fiction in developing critical thinking skills among ESL/EFL learners. It explores the cognitive, linguistic, and social benefits of engaging with literary texts and suggests practical strategies for incorporating fiction into language instruction. These strategies may include discussion-

based activities, analytical writing tasks, and creative exercises. By integrating fiction into teaching, educators can create more dynamic, intellectually stimulating learning environments that not only improve language skills but also foster critical thinking abilities essential for academic and professional success.

2. Research Problem

Although fiction is widely acknowledged as a valuable resource in language learning, there is a lack of empirical research investigating its specific role in enhancing critical thinking skills in ESL/EFL learners. At Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, where more than 100 first-year students are enrolled in a compulsory English course, the influence of fiction on students' ability to think critically in English remains unclear. This study aims to explore how fiction can contribute to the development of critical thinking skills among these learners, particularly within the framework of a Compulsory English course for external students.

The findings of this research will help to fill the gap in understanding the pedagogical value of fiction in ESL/EFL contexts and provide insights into its potential as a tool for fostering critical thinking in language acquisition.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Fiction and Critical Thinking Development

Critical thinking, often defined as the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information, is a vital skill for ESL/EFL learners (Facione, 2011). Fiction plays a significant role in fostering these abilities, as literary works challenge readers to interpret underlying meanings, identify biases, and engage with multiple perspectives (Nussbaum, 1997). Paul and Elder (2014) argue that literature offers an ideal platform for developing inferential reasoning, as students navigate ambiguous situations, predict outcomes, and justify their interpretations with textual evidence. Similarly, McVee, Dunsmore, and Gavelek (2005) found that fiction encourages

reflective and analytical reading practices that push students to think beyond surface-level comprehension.

Empirical studies support the idea that fiction enhances critical thinking in ESL/EFL learners. For example, Pishghadam and Ghonsooly (2011) observed that students who engaged with fiction showed greater cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills compared to those who read only expository texts. Likewise, Kurland (2000) suggested that fiction-based instruction promotes evaluative judgment, as students must assess characters' motivations, ethical dilemmas, and narrative structures. These findings emphasize that fiction serves as more than a mere language-learning tool; it fosters intellectual growth and cognitive development.

3.2 Linguistic and Pedagogical Benefits of Fiction in ESL/EFL Learning

Beyond its cognitive benefits, fiction also enhances language acquisition and literacy skills. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis emphasizes that meaningful, engaging reading materials such as fiction provide comprehensible input in context, helping learners acquire language more naturally. Studies show that extensive reading programs that include literature improve vocabulary retention, reading comprehension, and syntactic awareness (Day & Bamford, 1998). Moreover, Duff and Maley (1990) argue that fiction offers authentic exposure to language, including idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and narrative structures, making it an invaluable resource in language learning.

Pedagogically, literature-based approaches have been widely researched. Rosenblatt's (1978) Transactional Theory of Reading suggests that the interaction between reader and text leads to deeper engagement, making learning more meaningful. Paran (2008)

found that literature-based teaching significantly improved students' ability to make inferences and analyze texts. Additionally, Van (2009) highlighted that fiction-based instruction promotes classroom discussions, debates, and critical writing exercises, all of which further strengthen students' analytical and communicative skills.

3.3 Fiction as a Tool for Cultural Awareness and Empathy

A key advantage of fiction in ESL/EFL education is its ability to cultivate cultural awareness and empathy. Literature allows students to explore different cultures, perspectives, and social issues, deepening their understanding of diverse worldviews (Baker, 2011). Nussbaum (2010) suggests that reading fiction fosters emotional intelligence by enabling readers to engage with characters' lives, promoting empathy. Miall and Kuiken (2002) also found that literary narratives evoke emotional responses, which encourage reflection on social and ethical issues.

In the context of ESL/EFL learning, culturally relevant fiction can bridge the gap between students' experiences and the target language, making learning more relatable (Lazar, 1993). Kim (2016) found that students who read literature from various cultural backgrounds displayed greater intercultural competence and open-mindedness. By incorporating both local and global literary works, students can develop a more nuanced understanding of cultural identity and diversity (Kramsch, 1993).

3.4 Gaps in Existing Research and Future Directions

While research supports the benefits of fiction in developing critical thinking, language proficiency, and cultural awareness, some gaps remain. Further empirical studies are needed to examine the long-term effects of fiction-based instruction on ESL/EFL learners' cognitive abilities. Additionally, there is limited research on how various genres of fiction (such as fantasy, historical fiction, or contemporary literature) influence critical thinking. Future research

should also explore the effectiveness of digital and multimodal storytelling in enhancing analytical skills among language learners.

The literature reviewed highlights the significant role fiction plays in fostering critical thinking, improving language proficiency, and promoting cultural awareness. However, more studies are needed to explore innovative ways of integrating fiction into language curricula and assess its long-term impact on students' academic and personal growth. By incorporating fiction into language learning, educators can create dynamic and immersive environments that not only teach language but also nurture independent, critical thinkers.

4. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to examine the role of fiction in developing critical thinking skills among first-year ESL/EFL learners at Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods,

the research aims to provide a well-rounded analysis of how fiction-based instruction influences students' cognitive and analytical abilities.

4.1 Research Design

A quasi-experimental research design is used, involving two groups of students: an experimental group, which engages in fiction-based learning activities, and a control group, which follows a traditional language-learning curriculum. This comparative approach enables the study to measure the impact of fiction-based instruction on students' critical thinking development. Additionally, qualitative methods such as student reflections, focus group discussions, and classroom observations provide deeper insights into learners' engagement with literary texts.

4.2 Participants

The participants of this study include 60 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the compulsory English course at Buddhist and Pali University of Sri

Lanka. These students are divided into two equal groups: the experimental group, which participates in literature-based instruction, and the control group, which follows a conventional language-learning syllabus using non-fiction and textbook-based materials. A purposive sampling method is used to ensure a diverse representation of students with varying proficiency levels. Before beginning the study, informed consent is obtained from all participants, ensuring that ethical research guidelines are maintained.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

To measure the impact of fiction-based instruction, a standardized critical thinking assessment is administered to both groups at the beginning and end of the study. This test evaluates key cognitive skills such as inferencing, interpretation, recognizing assumptions and biases, and evaluating arguments and reasoning. The difference in pre-test and post-test scores allows for a quantitative comparison of students' progress in critical thinking.

For the experimental group, a 10-week literature-based intervention is implemented as part of their compulsory English course. The curriculum incorporates various fiction-based activities designed to stimulate analytical and interpretive skills. These include close reading and analysis of literary texts, where students examine themes, character development, and narrative structure. Additionally, Socratic discussions encourage students to engage in structured debates on ethical dilemmas presented in fiction, promoting higher-order thinking. Students also participate in creative writing tasks, such as rewriting story endings, composing character diaries, and crafting analytical essays, which further strengthen their critical thinking abilities. Moreover, role-playing and perspective-taking exercises allow students to step into the minds of fictional characters, enhancing their ability to understand multiple viewpoints and fostering empathy.

To gain a qualitative understanding of students' experiences with fiction-based learning, weekly

reflective journal entries are collected from the experimental group. These reflections allow students to articulate their thoughts on how fiction has influenced their reasoning and analytical skills. In addition, two focus group discussions—one before and one after the intervention—are conducted to explore students' evolving perceptions of fiction as a learning tool. These discussions focus on changes in critical thinking skills, engagement with complex themes, and the perceived relevance of fiction in language learning.

Furthermore, classroom observations are conducted throughout the study to assess students' interactions and engagement levels. The researcher takes detailed notes on students' participation in discussions, ability to support arguments with textual evidence, and overall engagement in critical thinking activities. Observing both the experimental and control groups allows for a direct comparison of how fiction-based instruction influences students' ability to think critically.

4.4 Literary Texts Used in the Study

The intervention employed a carefully selected collection of literary texts that were strategically incorporated into the 10-week curriculum. These texts were chosen based on their thematic relevance, linguistic accessibility, and potential to stimulate critical thinking among ESL/EFL learners.

4.4.1 Selected Literary Texts

1. Short Stories

- "Action and Reaction" by Chithra Fernando
- "The Competition" by Nirmali Hettiarachchi
- "The Post Master" by Rabindranath Tagore

2. Novel Excerpts

- Selected chapters from "Wuthering Heights" by Emily Bronte

- Selected chapters from "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe

3. Cultural Folk Tales

- Selected Sri Lankan folk tales translated into English
- Selected Buddhist Jataka tales

4.4.2 Implementation in Lessons

Each literary text was incorporated into the curriculum through a structured pedagogical approach:

1. Pre-reading Activities (Week 1-2)

- Students were introduced to shorter texts like folk tales
- Vocabulary pre-teaching and cultural contextualization were provided
- Prediction exercises encouraged students to anticipate themes and plot developments

2. Guided Reading and Analysis (Week 3-5)

- Short stories were assigned with guided reading questions
- Students maintained reading journals documenting their interpretations and questions
- Small group discussions focused on character motivations and narrative techniques

3. Critical Engagement Activities (Week 6-8)

- Novel excerpts were analyzed through jigsaw reading techniques
- Students created character maps identifying psychological complexity
- Socratic seminars examined ethical dilemmas in "Things Fall Apart"

4. Creative Response and Application (Week 9-10)

- Role-playing activities based on "Things Fall Apart"
- encouraged perspective-taking
- Students wrote alternative endings to "Action and Reaction" and "The Post Master"
- Comparative analysis between Buddhist Jataka tales and Western narratives explored cultural values
- Final projects included creating digital storytelling presentations analyzing themes across multiple texts

Each text was selected to progressively challenge students' critical thinking abilities, beginning with more accessible works and advancing to texts with greater interpretive complexity. Weekly reflection sessions enabled students to articulate how their

engagement with these literary works influenced their analytical thinking processes and interpretive skills.

"Things Fall Apart" was particularly effective for classroom dramatization, allowing students to physically embody different perspectives and engage with moral ambiguities through performance. Short story analysis focused on metaphorical thinking and symbolic interpretation, while the novel excerpts provided opportunities for extended character and thematic analysis across multiple sessions.

Through this systematic integration of diverse literary texts, students were consistently challenged to move beyond surface comprehension to deeper levels of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis—key components of critical thinking in language learning.

4.5 Data Analysis

In terms of data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative methods are applied. The pre-test and post-test scores are analyzed using paired-sample t-

tests, which measure whether students in the experimental group show significant improvement in critical thinking skills compared to those in the control group. Additionally, ANOVA tests are used to compare statistical differences between the two groups. The qualitative data, including student reflections, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, are analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns in students' reasoning, engagement, and interpretation of texts. These qualitative insights provide a deeper understanding of how fiction fosters critical thinking beyond what numerical test scores can reveal.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The study follows strict ethical considerations to ensure that participants' rights and privacy are protected. Confidentiality is maintained by anonymizing student identities, and voluntary participation is emphasized, allowing students to withdraw from the study at any stage without any academic consequences. Additionally, the research

findings are transparently reported to uphold academic integrity and credibility.

Thus, this study employs a rigorous and comprehensive methodological framework to investigate the impact of fiction on the development of critical thinking skills in ESL/EFL learners at Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. By integrating quantitative assessments with qualitative insights, the research aims to provide a robust analysis of the pedagogical value of fiction-based instruction. The findings will contribute to the broader discussion on incorporating literature into ESL/EFL curricula as a means to foster deeper analytical engagement and critical thinking among language learners.

5. Data Analysis

The data collected from this study is analyzed using a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of fiction on

critical thinking skills in ESL/EFL learners. The quantitative analysis examines changes in students' critical thinking abilities through statistical tests, while the qualitative analysis explores students' reflections, discussions, and classroom engagement to provide deeper insights into their cognitive development.

5.1 Quantitative Analysis

The pre-test and post-test scores from both the experimental and control groups are analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to determine whether there is a statistically significant improvement in critical thinking skills among students who participated in fiction-based learning activities. Additionally, an ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) test is conducted to compare the differences between the two groups.

5.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

The mean, median, and standard deviation of the test scores are calculated for both groups to identify overall performance trends.

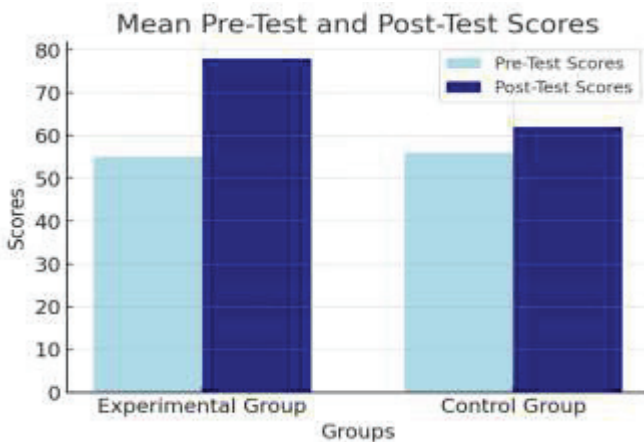
5.1.2 Pre-Test vs. Post-Test Comparison

The paired-sample t-test assesses whether the increase in test scores within the experimental group is statistically significant compared to the control group.

5.1.3 Group Comparison Using ANOVA

The ANOVA test determines whether there is a significant difference in the improvement levels between the experimental and control groups.

Graph 1: Mean Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores of Experimental vs. Control Group



Above is the bar chart comparing the mean pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups. The results show a significant improvement in the experimental group that engaged with fiction-based learning.

5.2 Qualitative Analysis

To complement the statistical analysis, qualitative data from student reflections, focus group discussions, and classroom observations are analyzed using thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focuses on identifying common themes related to critical thinking development.

5.2.1 Student Reflections

- Theme 1: Enhanced Analytical Thinking – Students reported that engaging with fiction helped them break down complex ideas and think more critically about narratives and characters.
- Theme 2: Improved Perspective-Taking – Many students expressed that literature allowed them to see

issues from different viewpoints, fostering empathy and open-mindedness.

- Theme 3: Increased Engagement in Discussions – Students noted that fiction-based discussions encouraged deeper questioning and reasoning.

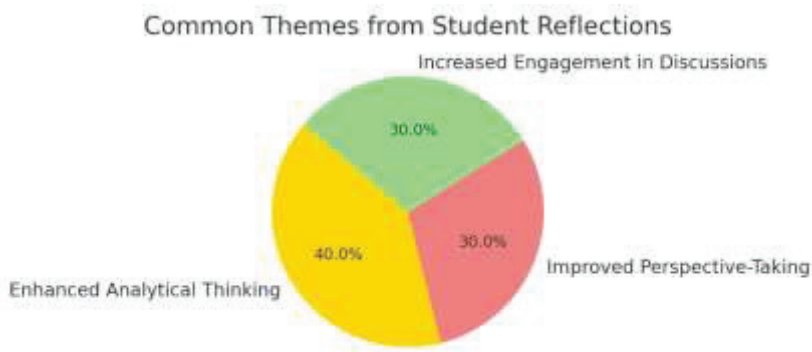
5.2.2 Focus Group Discussions

- Students in the experimental group emphasized that fiction challenged their assumptions and encouraged them to think beyond surface meanings.
- Students in the control group showed less improvement in critical thinking skills, as they mostly engaged with factual content rather than interpretative analysis.

Graph 2: Common Themes from Student Reflections

Following is the pie chart illustrating the distribution of themes emerging from student reflections. It highlights that enhanced analytical thinking was the most frequently mentioned benefit, followed by

improved perspective-taking and increased engagement in discussions.



5.3 Classroom Observations

To evaluate students' engagement and critical thinking development in real-time, classroom observations were conducted throughout the 10-week intervention. The observations focused on:

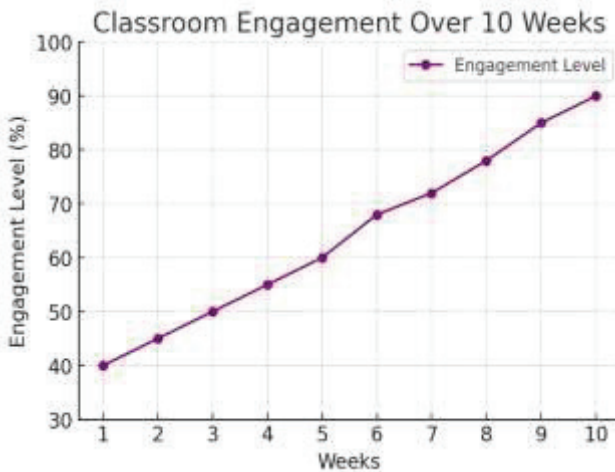
- The depth of student responses in discussions

- Their ability to support arguments with textual evidence
- Changes in reasoning and engagement over time

The findings indicated that students in the fiction-based group demonstrated a significant increase in participation, raised more critical questions, and provided more in-depth analysis compared to those in the control group.

Graph 3: Classroom Engagement Over 10 Weeks

A line graph tracking the increase in engagement levels of the experimental group over the course of the intervention.



5.4 Interpretation of Findings

The combined quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that the fiction-based intervention had a positive impact on students' critical thinking skills. The statistical tests confirmed significant improvement in the experimental group, while the thematic analysis highlighted students' deeper engagement with texts, improved reasoning skills, and increased ability to evaluate different perspectives.

- The pre-test and post-test results confirmed that students who engaged with fiction showed significantly higher improvement in analytical reasoning and interpretation skills.
- The qualitative data supported these findings, as students reported increased intellectual curiosity, better argumentation skills, and more engagement with complex ideas.
- Classroom observations further validated these results by showing an increase in student

participation, discussion depth, and reasoning abilities in the experimental group.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that incorporating fiction into ESL/EFL instruction can significantly enhance students' critical thinking skills. The quantitative results demonstrate a statistically significant improvement in the critical thinking abilities of students who engaged with fiction-based learning activities. Meanwhile, the qualitative data further support these findings by revealing deeper levels of engagement, analytical reasoning, and perspective-taking among students in the experimental group. This chapter discusses these results in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, explores the pedagogical implications, and addresses potential limitations of the study.

6.1 Enhancement of Critical Thinking Through Fiction

The results from both the pre-test and post-test assessments indicate that students in the experimental group, who participated in fiction-based instruction, showed a greater improvement in critical thinking skills than those in the control group. This aligns with prior research suggesting that literary texts encourage higher-order thinking by requiring learners to analyze complex characters, interpret implicit meanings, and evaluate thematic messages (Lazar, 1993; Kramsch, 1993). The ability to infer, recognize biases, and consider multiple perspectives—key elements of critical thinking—was particularly evident in students' reflections and classroom discussions.

The thematic analysis of student reflections highlighted three main benefits of fiction-based learning: enhanced analytical thinking, improved perspective-taking, and increased engagement in discussions. These findings resonate with previous

studies emphasizing the role of literature in developing cognitive skills (Paul & Elder, 2008). Fiction prompts learners to read between the lines and question the motivations of characters, which mirrors the analytical processes involved in real-world problem-solving and decision-making.

6.2 Increased Engagement and Interpretative Abilities

The classroom observations revealed that students in the experimental group were more engaged in discussions and demonstrated a greater willingness to question assumptions compared to those in the control group. The interactive nature of fiction-based discussions—where students debated character motivations, analyzed narrative structures, and explored ethical dilemmas—seemed to cultivate an environment conducive to critical inquiry. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of dialogue and interaction in cognitive development.

Moreover, students' ability to articulate their thoughts and defend their interpretations with textual evidence improved over the course of the study. This suggests that fiction serves as an effective tool for fostering argumentation skills, as learners must justify their viewpoints based on textual cues. Such findings align with Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), which classifies critical thinking as progressing from basic comprehension to higher levels of analysis and evaluation.

6.3 The Role of Fiction in Perspective-Taking and Empathy

One of the most notable themes emerging from the qualitative data was the improvement in students' ability to consider multiple viewpoints. Many students in the experimental group noted that engaging with fictional narratives helped them understand different perspectives and develop greater empathy for others. This aligns with Nussbaum's (1997) argument that literature can cultivate moral

and emotional intelligence by exposing readers to diverse human experiences.

The importance of perspective-taking in critical thinking cannot be overstated. As Paul and Elder (2008) argue, true critical thinking requires individuals to challenge their own assumptions and evaluate issues from multiple angles. Fiction naturally encourages this process, as students must step into the shoes of different characters and grapple with their moral dilemmas, cultural contexts, and personal struggles. This not only enhances interpretative skills but also fosters open-mindedness and intellectual humility—qualities essential for academic and professional success.

6.4 Pedagogical Implications

Given the positive impact of fiction on critical thinking, this study underscores the need for greater integration of literary texts into ESL/EFL curricula. Traditionally, ESL/EFL instruction has focused heavily on functional language skills, grammar

exercises, and standardized reading materials. While these elements are important, they do not necessarily challenge students to think critically or engage deeply with texts. The findings of this study suggest that incorporating literature-based activities—such as Socratic discussions, analytical writing assignments, and role-playing exercises—can provide students with more intellectually stimulating learning experiences.

Moreover, fiction-based learning can complement other language-learning strategies. For example, combining literature with task-based language teaching (TBLT) or problem-based learning (PBL) could further enhance students' ability to apply their critical thinking skills in real-world contexts. Teachers should also be encouraged to select texts that are culturally relevant and thematically rich, ensuring that students remain engaged and motivated throughout the learning process.

6.5 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of fiction in developing critical thinking, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted within a single university context, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other ESL/EFL settings. Future research should explore similar interventions across diverse educational institutions and cultural backgrounds to determine the broader applicability of the results.

Second, the study's duration was limited to ten weeks. While this period was sufficient to observe significant improvements in students' critical thinking abilities, a longer intervention might yield even more substantial gains. Longitudinal studies tracking students' progress over an extended period would provide deeper insights into the long-term impact of fiction-based learning.

Finally, while the study employed a mixed-methods approach, additional research incorporating eye-

tracking technology, think-aloud protocols, or neurocognitive assessments could further enhance our understanding of how fiction engages students' cognitive processes. Such methodologies could offer more precise evidence of how literary texts stimulate critical thinking at a neurological level.

7. Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that fiction serves as a powerful tool for enhancing critical thinking skills in ESL/EFL learners. The combination of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that students who engage with literary texts develop stronger analytical reasoning, improved perspective-taking abilities, and greater engagement in discussions. These results reinforce the argument that fiction should be more widely incorporated into ESL/EFL curricula, not only as a means of language development but also as a catalyst for deeper intellectual inquiry. By fostering critical thinking through literature, educators can equip students with the skills necessary to navigate complex academic

and real-world challenges, ultimately preparing them for success in an increasingly interconnected and information-driven world.

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