

## DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH LITERATURE IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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### **Abstract**

This article explores how literature can be utilized to foster critical thinking skills in the English classroom. The topic is important because English lessons today are expected to build more than grammar and vocabulary. Learners are also expected to analyze ideas, compare viewpoints, justify opinions, and draw clear conclusions. The article focuses on the teaching value of literary texts, especially short stories and other classroom-friendly texts, as tools for reflection, discussion, and deeper reading. The article examines how literature-based tasks can facilitate interpretation, evaluation, classroom discussions, and independent thinking. A qualitative and descriptive approach is used. Existing books and research articles are reviewed, and several short extracts from literary works are discussed through a simple structure: extract, simple analysis, and discussion. Comparative reading, source analysis, and method-based interpretation are also used in the study. The reviewed studies show that literature can improve reading, discussion, and critical response when tasks are designed clearly and when students are guided with purposeful questions. Recent studies also show that literature-based teaching can strengthen reading skills, classroom participation, and critical thinking in EFL contexts. The article argues that literature can become an effective and practical tool for the English classroom when text selection, task design, and teacher support are carefully planned.

### **Introduction**

English is no longer taught only as a school subject. English is used in higher education, online communication, academic reading, international work, and cultural exchange. Because of this, an English lesson is expected to develop not only language knowledge but also thinking skills. A learner may know many words and grammar rules, but real understanding is still weak if ideas cannot be questioned, compared, or explained. For that reason, critical thinking has become one of the important aims of modern language education.

This need can also be seen in the uploaded BMI work on this theme. That work treats literature as a useful classroom tool because literary texts give learners rich language, meaningful situations, and space for reflection. It also connects the topic with independent thinking, analysis, comparison, evaluation, and logical reasoning in English language education.

Critical thinking is usually connected with analysis, interpretation, evaluation, inference, and reasoned judgment. In language education, these skills are needed when students read a text closely, notice hidden meaning, compare characters, discuss moral choice, and defend a point of view. Such work cannot grow well in a lesson based only on mechanical repetition. It needs texts that have depth and questions that do not end with one short answer.

Literature offers this kind of space. A literary text usually presents conflict, motive, feeling, voice, and point of view. A story can show more than one truth at the same time. A poem can hide meaning under simple words. A short scene can raise a moral problem without giving a direct solution. Because of this, literature can move students from basic understanding to deeper thought. Language is practiced, but thought is also trained.

This article, therefore, studies the role of literature in developing critical thinking skills in the English classroom. The article looks at what researchers have already found, what methods were used in earlier studies, and how short literary extracts can open discussion, interpretation, and reflective judgment in class.

### **Literature Review**

The link between critical thinking and education has been discussed by many scholars. Bloom's taxonomy placed analysis, evaluation, and creation at the higher levels of thinking. Facione later described critical thinking as purposeful and self-regulated judgment. These works are helpful because they show why a language class should not stop at comprehension only. Learners should also be guided toward judgment, interpretation, and justified opinion.

The teaching value of literature has also been discussed for many years. Collie and Slater argued that literature gives authentic material, cultural value, language enrichment, and personal involvement. Carter and Long showed that literature can be used not only as content to admire, but also as language material and as a source of personal response. Lazar also explained that literary texts support both language growth and cognitive development. These earlier works remain useful because they give the basic pedagogical reasons for including literature in language lessons.

A more direct connection between literature and critical thinking was discussed by Bobkina and Stefanova. In their study on literature and critical literacy pedagogy in the EFL classroom, literature was presented as a means of encouraging observation, active evaluation, and response to different meanings and viewpoints. The authors

proposed activities around literary reading and showed that a literary text can move students toward interpretation, self-reflection, critical awareness, reasoning, and problem-solving. This study is helpful because it shows how literature can be turned into a classroom method for thought-building.

Another useful study was carried out by Sukanya Kaowiwattanakul in 2021. The study examined whether literature activities improved EFL students' reading skills and critical thinking skills in a university literature course. Lesson plans, a reading test, reflective writing, and interviews were used. The study found that reading skills and critical thinking skills improved significantly after the literature-based activities, and students also showed positive attitudes toward the approach.

Nawel Meriem Ouhiba also focused directly on this theme in a 2022 study from Algeria. That research used semi-structured interviews and classroom observation to explore how literature can enhance learners' critical thinking abilities. The findings showed positive student feedback toward critical thinking approaches used in literature lessons. The study also reported that teachers were aware of the value of critical thinking when teaching literature and recommended the use of higher-order thinking strategies.

Recent research has kept moving in the same direction. A 2024 review by Hossain described literature-based language learning as a growing approach that can enhance linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, and critical thinking, but the review also pointed out important challenges, such as text selection, student motivation, and language difficulty. A 2024 experimental study by Bekteshi found that work with poems, songs, short stories, novels, and movie reviews encouraged debate, critical thinking, creativity, independent learning, and collaboration.

A 2025 descriptive study by Tamirat Taye examined literary texts in Grade 12 English classrooms in Ethiopia. The findings showed that students recognized the benefits of literary texts for language skills, critical thinking, and cultural awareness, but they also reported vocabulary problems, comprehension difficulty, and challenges in choosing texts that matched student interests. A broader 2025 systematic review on critical thinking in EFL higher education also showed that critical thinking does not develop automatically. It needs clear goals, guided classroom practice, and methods that move students beyond passive reading.

Taken together, earlier and recent studies lead to one clear conclusion. Literature has strong potential in the English classroom, but this potential is realized only when texts are selected carefully and when students are asked to interpret, evaluate, and discuss meaning instead of simply retelling content.

### **Methodology**

This article is based on a qualitative and descriptive method. The main purpose is to explain how literature can support critical thinking in the English classroom and

to show how this idea is supported by existing research. For that reason, the study reviews relevant books and research studies, compares their findings, and discusses their value for the present topic.

Several methods are used together. First, source analysis is used. Scholarly books and journal articles on critical thinking, literature teaching, and EFL methodology are examined in order to identify common ideas and useful classroom directions. Second, comparison is used. The article compares older theoretical sources with recent empirical studies in order to see what has stayed stable and what new evidence has appeared. Third, descriptive interpretation is used. Important ideas from the selected sources are explained in simple language and linked to classroom practice.

The analysis and discussion section also uses close reading of short literary extracts. This step is included because the topic is not only theoretical. The article also needs to show how a literary text can actually open a path to critical thinking in classroom work. For that reason, selected extracts from well-known literary texts are presented. Each extract is followed by a simple analysis and a short discussion. This structure helps show how interpretation, evaluation, moral judgment, and text-based reasoning can grow from small but meaningful passages.

The choice of extracts follows practical classroom logic. Short texts or short passages are more suitable for the English classroom because they can be read, discussed, and revisited within limited lesson time. The selected passages were taken from literary works that raise clear human questions such as sacrifice, truth, kindness, deception, and social judgment.

The article also follows the methodological direction stated in the uploaded BMI work. That work lists analysis, comparison, generalization, pedagogical observation, and methodological analysis as key methods for studying the topic. The present article follows the same general path, but it is shaped into an article form and supported with recently published research.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The main idea of this section is simple. Literature supports critical thinking when a text gives room for more than one possible reading and when the teacher asks students to move from “what happened” to “why it happened” and “how it should be judged.” The following extracts are used to show this process clearly.

#### Extract 1

Source: O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi”

Extract: “Of all who give gifts these two were the wisest.”<sup>1</sup>

#### Simple analysis:

This line comes at the end of the story. On the surface, the line looks simple and

<sup>1</sup> O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi,” *The Four Million* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906).

warm. The actions of Jim and Della seem unwise because both gifts became useless in practical terms. At the same time, the action seems wise because love, sacrifice, and intention became more important than material value.

Discussion:

This line is useful for critical thinking because it invites disagreement in a natural way. One student may say the couple acted foolishly. Another student may say the couple acted nobly. Such discussion pushes students to justify opinion with reasons from the text. A classroom can also move to wider questions: What is real value? Is sacrifice always wise? Can love make a poor decision meaningful?

Extract 2

Source: Oscar Wilde, "The Happy Prince"

Extract: "I am covered with fine gold, but my heart is made of lead."<sup>2</sup>

Simple analysis:

This line gives a clear contrast between outer appearance and inner truth. The statue looks rich and beautiful. At the same time, the line reveals depth, feeling, and moral weight. Gold suggests surface beauty, while the heart suggests humanity and compassion.

Discussion:

This extract can be used to develop critical thinking because it encourages students to read symbolically, not only literally. A teacher can ask: Why is the heart made of lead? What does the line say about society and human worth? From here, students can move toward larger ideas about wealth, empathy, public image, and hidden suffering. The text teaches students to look under the visible surface.

Extract 3

Source: Saki, "The Open Window"

Extract: "Romance at short notice was her speciality."<sup>3</sup>

Simple analysis:

This sentence changes the whole way a reader understands the story. Until this point, the young girl's story may sound believable. This line reveals that the dramatic tale was invented quickly. The reader is forced to go back and rethink the earlier scene.

Discussion:

This extract is excellent for critical thinking because it teaches students not to trust every narrative voice too quickly. A class can discuss reliability, manipulation, and the difference between appearance and truth. Questions can be asked such as: Why did the girl invent the story? Why did the visitor believe it so easily? Such questions help students practice evidence-based reading and revision of first impressions.

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Wilde, "The Happy Prince," *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (London: David Nutt, 1888).

<sup>3</sup> Saki, "The Open Window," *Beasts and Super-Beasts* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1914).

## Extract 4

Source: O. Henry, "After Twenty Years"

Extract: "It was the hand of the man from the West."<sup>4</sup>

## Simple analysis:

This line reveals the hidden truth of the meeting. Before this moment, the scene appears to show friendship and loyalty. Then the reader understands that the expected friend is also the officer who arranged the arrest.

## Discussion:

This extract is useful because it raises a moral and social question without giving one easy answer. Was the officer right to choose duty over friendship? Was the action cold, or was it just? Students can be asked to defend one side, then explain the opposite side. Such activity develops comparison and reasoned argument.

These extracts show a common pattern. A literary text becomes useful for critical thinking when it contains tension, irony, contrast, or moral uncertainty. In such cases, students must do more than understand vocabulary. Students must compare meanings, test ideas, and defend interpretations. This process becomes even stronger when the teacher uses open questions instead of short factual questions.

Research reviewed earlier supports this classroom use. Studies by Bobkina and Stefanova, Kaowiwattanakul, Ouhiba, and Taye all suggest that literature-based work can support interpretation, reflection, discussion, and critical response when tasks are designed clearly.

From a teaching point of view, some practical strategies can be drawn from both the extracts and the research. Pre-reading can be used to activate a theme, but it should not remove all uncertainty from the text. While-reading questions should ask for motive, tone, contrast, and hidden meaning, not only for facts. Post-reading tasks should move into judgment, comparison, debate, or short reflective writing. In such tasks, literature stops being a decorative part of the lesson and becomes a tool for thought.

Overall, the analysis shows that literature can support critical thinking in a natural way. Stories and poems place students in front of choice, conflict, uncertainty, and interpretation. These are the exact conditions in which critical thinking begins to grow.

### Conclusion

This article examined the role of literature in developing critical thinking skills in the English classroom. The reviewed sources and the simple textual analyses lead to one strong conclusion: literature can do much more than provide reading practice. Literature can help students interpret meaning, compare viewpoints, evaluate behavior,

<sup>4</sup> O. Henry, "After Twenty Years," *The Four Million* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906).

and defend opinions with evidence. In this way, language learning and thinking development can be joined in one classroom process.

The literature review showed that both older and recent researchers support the value of literary texts in language education. Earlier scholars explained the basic pedagogical value of literature, while newer studies provided classroom evidence from EFL settings. Research from 2021, 2022, 2024, and 2025 showed that literature-based activities can improve reading, encourage debate, increase student engagement, and support critical thinking when tasks are designed clearly and when teachers guide discussion with purpose.

The analysis and discussion section also showed that even short literary extracts can open serious classroom thought. A single line from a story may raise questions about wisdom, sacrifice, truth, kindness, deception, loyalty, or moral duty. When students are asked to explain and judge these ideas, critical thinking is practiced in a concrete and understandable way. This is one of the main practical results of the article.

The novelty of the article lies in the combination of recent research, classical methodological literature, and short extract-based classroom analysis. The article does not treat literature only as theory, and it does not treat critical thinking only as a general slogan. Instead, the article connects research findings with real text discussion and shows how literature can work inside an ordinary English lesson.

The conclusion is clear. Literature should be used in the English classroom not only for reading pleasure or language enrichment, but also for the growth of thoughtful, active, and independent learners. When text choice is suitable and classroom tasks are well planned, literature becomes one of the most practical ways to develop critical thinking in EFL education.

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