

THE PROBLEM OF DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH READING FICTION IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: Critical thinking is a crucial skill for academic success and personal growth, and reading fiction in English has been widely promoted as a tool to enhance it. However, the development of critical thinking through fiction reading poses challenges related to students' linguistic proficiency, engagement, and the pedagogical approaches used. This paper examines the difficulties faced by learners in cultivating critical thinking skills via reading English fiction. It discusses the cognitive and linguistic barriers, the role of educators, and effective strategies to foster analytical skills through literary texts. By analyzing theoretical perspectives and empirical studies, the paper aims to offer practical solutions to optimize the use of fiction reading as a means to develop critical thinking in English language learners.

Keywords: critical thinking, reading fiction, English language learning, cognitive skills, pedagogical strategies, literary analysis

Critical thinking—the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information—is a vital competence in academic and real-world contexts. It enables learners to approach problems creatively and make informed decisions. The development of critical thinking skills is an essential objective in education, especially in foreign language learning. Reading fiction in English has been considered an effective approach to promoting critical thinking, as literary texts often contain complex characters, themes, and moral dilemmas that encourage readers to interpret, question, and evaluate.

Despite its potential, developing critical thinking through reading fiction in English presents various challenges. For many learners, especially those who are not native speakers, linguistic difficulties can hinder deep comprehension and limit their ability to engage critically with texts. The complexity of literary language, unfamiliar cultural references, and idiomatic expressions can cause cognitive overload, reducing the focus on analysis. Additionally, students' motivation and interest in fiction reading vary, impacting their willingness to engage critically.

Furthermore, pedagogical methods may not always support the development of critical thinking effectively. Traditional approaches that emphasize comprehension and recall rather than analysis fail to nurture higher-order thinking skills. The role of the teacher is critical in guiding students to question, infer, and reflect rather than passively consume the text. This paper explores the problem of fostering critical thinking through reading fiction in English by examining linguistic and cognitive barriers, teaching practices, and learner attitudes. It also reviews strategies proven to encourage analytical engagement, such as guided discussions, thematic questions, and reflective writing. Understanding these issues is essential for designing curricula and instructional methods that truly enhance critical thinking through literary reading.[2]

One significant obstacle in using fiction to develop critical thinking is the linguistic challenge. Literary texts often include complex sentence structures, archaic vocabulary, idioms, and figurative language that non-native learners find difficult. This can lead to surface-level reading focused on understanding basic content rather than deeper analysis. Cognitive overload occurs when learners devote too much effort to decoding language, leaving fewer resources for critical evaluation. Cultural references embedded in fiction may also create barriers. Without background knowledge, students might miss subtleties or contextual meanings that are crucial for critical interpretation. For example, reading Shakespeare or Dickens without an understanding of Elizabethan or Victorian society can result in superficial comprehension.[3]

Engagement is another key factor influencing critical thinking development. Learners who find fiction relevant and interesting are more likely to invest cognitive effort into analysis. However, some students may view fiction reading as tedious or irrelevant, especially if the texts are imposed or culturally distant. Lack of intrinsic motivation leads to passive reading, which impedes critical reflection. Effective teaching strategies are vital in overcoming these challenges. Instead of focusing solely on comprehension, teachers should incorporate higher-order questioning that encourages learners to infer meaning, identify themes, and evaluate characters' actions. For instance, asking "Why do you think the character made that choice?" or "What could this symbol represent?" promotes analytical thinking.[4] Discussion-based activities and group work can also foster critical engagement by exposing learners to multiple perspectives. This collaborative reflection deepens understanding and encourages questioning. Using reflective writing tasks, such as journals or essays, allows learners to articulate their interpretations and analyze their thinking processes, reinforcing critical skills.

Teachers can support learners by pre-teaching difficult vocabulary and cultural background, using scaffolding techniques to reduce linguistic load. Selecting accessible fiction that still challenges students analytically helps maintain motivation. Digital tools and multimedia adaptations can also enhance engagement, making literary themes more relatable.

The development of critical thinking through reading fiction in English presents multifaceted challenges, primarily due to linguistic complexity, cultural gaps, and learner motivation. Non-native English speakers often struggle with the language demands of literary texts, which can inhibit deeper cognitive processing required for analysis. Without adequate background knowledge and interest, students may engage in superficial reading that limits critical thinking growth. Nevertheless, these problems are not insurmountable. Pedagogical approaches emphasizing active learning, such as guided questioning, discussion, and reflective writing, have proven effective in promoting critical engagement. The role of educators is central: by scaffolding language difficulty, contextualizing cultural content, and selecting suitable texts, teachers can create an environment conducive to critical thinking development.

Moreover, fostering intrinsic motivation by connecting fiction reading to students' experiences and interests encourages deeper investment in analytical tasks. Incorporating multimedia and interactive elements can make literature more accessible and appealing. Ultimately, developing critical thinking through fiction reading requires a balanced integration of linguistic support, engaging pedagogy, and relevant material selection. When implemented thoughtfully, reading fiction becomes a powerful tool not only for language acquisition but also for cultivating essential cognitive skills.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies measuring the impact of specific instructional strategies on critical thinking outcomes in diverse learner populations. Meanwhile, educators are encouraged to innovate and adapt their methods to meet learners' needs, ensuring that fiction reading serves as an effective pathway toward critical thinking in English language education

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