# Analyzing EFL Students' Critical Thinking Through Literary Texts

Elita Modesta Br Sembiring*[1], Natalia Widya Pasca Tarigan[2], Merry Susanty Br Tarigan[3], Reynaldi Kuanda[4]

[1]Universitas Methodist Indonesia, [2,3,4]Universitas Prima Indonesia

Email : elitamodesta@gmail.com

## Abstract

This study examines the role of literary texts in fostering critical thinking among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Employing a qualitative approach, the research utilizes literary analysis and classroom observation to assess how students critically engage with texts. This study was conducted to the students at Akademi Keperawatan Columbia Asia Medan. The study was conducted by qualitative research. It took two months collecting the data and analyzing the data. Results suggest that literary texts significantly enhance critical thinking skills when paired with guided discussion and analytical tasks.

**Keywords**: Critical Thinking, Literary Texts, EFL Students, Qualitative Research

## Introduction

Critical thinking is a fundamental skill in education, particularly in language learning, where it enhances comprehension, analysis, and creativity. According to Facione (2020), critical thinking encompasses skills such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference. However, research indicates that many EFL students struggle with critical thinking due to limited exposure to activities fostering these skills (Ahmed, 2021). Critical thinking is a fundamental skill in education, particularly in language learning, where it enhances comprehension, analysis, and creativity. According to Facione (2020), critical thinking encompasses skills such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference. However, research indicates that many EFL students struggle with critical thinking due to limited exposure to activities fostering these skills (Ahmed, 2021).

Literary texts, characterized by their depth and complexity, are ideal tools for nurturing critical thinking. For instance, analyzing themes, characters, and narratives requires students to synthesize information and form arguments (López & Ward, 2022). Despite their potential, literary texts are underutilized in many EFL classrooms, where the focus often lies on grammar and vocabulary (Rahimi et al., 2023).

Initial observations at students at Akademi Keperawatan Columbia Asia Medan revealed that while students could summarize texts, they struggled with deeper analytical tasks, such as

identifying biases or interpreting metaphors. This gap highlights the urgency of integrating literary texts into EFL instruction to promote critical thinking.

Many EFL students struggle with critical thinking due to systemic limitations in classroom activities that foster such skills. According to Facione (2020), critical thinking involves a series of cognitive processes—analysis, evaluation, and synthesis—that are rarely prioritized in EFL contexts. One significant barrier is the predominance of rote learning, where emphasis is placed on memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary rather than on tasks that challenge students to interpret, question, and reason. This approach is often compounded by teacher-centered instruction, a method that prioritizes lecture-based delivery over interactive, student-led discussions (Rahimi et al., 2023). In such environments, students have limited opportunities to engage with materials critically.

Moreover, the lack of authentic materials in EFL classrooms further exacerbates the problem. Authentic texts, which offer linguistic complexity and cultural depth, are essential for fostering critical thinking (López & Ward, 2022). However, many EFL settings rely on simplified textbooks that focus on controlled language, leaving little room for students to encounter ambiguity or nuanced ideas that require deeper analysis. Time constraints within classroom schedules also play a role. With limited instructional hours, teachers often prioritize exam preparation and language accuracy over activities that promote higher-order thinking skills, as highlighted by Smith et al. (2019).

Cultural factors can also hinder the development of critical thinking. In certain educational contexts, questioning authority or established norms may be discouraged, leading students to adopt a passive learning stance. Hofstede's (1986) cultural dimensions theory explains that in high power-distance cultures, students may be less likely to challenge ideas or participate in open-ended discussions, further limiting opportunities for critical engagement.

Additionally, the issue of low language proficiency presents a significant hurdle. Students with limited English skills may find it challenging to articulate complex ideas or engage with abstract concepts, a problem noted by Choi & Kim (2020). This often results in a focus on surface-level comprehension rather than deeper analysis. Finally, teacher training gaps further contribute to this issue. Many EFL teachers lack the training or confidence to implement activities designed to develop critical thinking, as observed by Ahmed (2021).

Theoretical support for this study draws from Bloom's Taxonomy, emphasizing higher-order thinking skills, and Reader-Response Theory, which encourages students to engage personally with texts (Rosenblatt, 1994). These frameworks align with the goals of fostering critical thinking through literature.

## Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach, focusing on case studies in an EFL classroom setting. The methodology included literary analysis, classroom observation, and semi-structured

interviews with students. The participants were 30 EFL students at Akademi Keperawatan Columbia Asia Medan. They were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse proficiency levels.

Instruments

In the research, the instruments used are designed to collect comprehensive data regarding students' critical thinking skills, particularly in how they engage with and analyze literary texts. Critical thinking is an essential skill in language learning, as it encourages students to question, reflect, and form well-grounded opinions based on evidence, rather than merely absorbing information passively.

One of the primary instruments used in this study is the Critical Thinking Test. This tool, according to Ennis (2011), is effective in assessing a student's ability to analyze, evaluate, and infer information. The test may include multiple-choice questions or essay prompts that require students to engage deeply with the text. For example, students might be asked to critique the actions of a character or analyze the central themes of a literary work. This aligns with Paul and Elder's (2006) definition of critical thinking, which involves purposeful, self- regulatory judgment" to interpret and evaluate ideas.

In addition to standardized tests, interviews serve as a valuable instrument in this research. Through semi-structured interviews, researchers can gain insights into how students approach texts and what strategies they employ to arrive at their conclusions. As Brookfield (2012) emphasizes, the interview format allows researchers to understand the thought processes behind students' critical assessments, revealing not just the outcome of their analysis but the reasoning behind it. Interview questions might probe the students' ability to justify their interpretations of literary texts, as well as the challenges they face while making such interpretations.

Another significant instrument is the literary text analysis conducted by the students themselves. By analyzing students' written responses to literature, researchers can evaluate the depth and quality of their critical thinking. According to Moon (2008), literary texts are especially effective in fostering critical thinking because they require readers to interpret complex narratives and themes, encouraging them to consider multiple perspectives and interpretations. This analysis can reveal how well students are able to engage with the literary text critically and creatively.

Finally, observations during class discussions or group activities are also utilized to gather data. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that social interactions and collaborative learning play a crucial role in cognitive development. Observing students in group settings allows researchers to see how students articulate and challenge each other's ideas, which is an essential aspect of critical thinking. During these interactions, students may demonstrate their ability to question assumptions, make inferences, and support their opinions with evidence from the text.

By combining these various instruments, the research provides a holistic view of how EFL students use critical thinking skills to engage with literary texts. This multi-faceted approach

ensures a comprehensive understanding of how students think critically in the context of both language learning and literary analysis.

## Data Analysis

In the research, data analysis involves both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' critical thinking abilities. The process integrates multiple data sources, ensuring a robust and reliable interpretation of findings.

The first step involves analyzing the results of the Critical Thinking Test. This data is processed quantitatively using descriptive statistical techniques. Each response is scored based on a rubric derived from Paul and Elder's (2006) critical thinking framework, focusing on core competencies such as analysis, evaluation, and inference. Scores are then summarized to calculate averages, standard deviations, and categorized into levels (e.g., low, moderate, and high) to identify overall patterns of critical thinking among students.

Next, the interview data is analyzed thematically to explore students' thought processes in-depth. This involves transcribing the interview recordings and coding the transcripts to identify recurring themes, such as strategies used for critical analysis, challenges encountered, and personal reflections on engaging with literary texts. The themes are then synthesized to highlight significant insights into how students approach critical thinking tasks in a literary context.

Similarly, students' written responses to literary texts undergo content analysis. The focus is on evaluating the depth of interpretation, coherence of arguments, and the use of textual evidence to support opinions. Each response is assessed against a detailed rubric, and the results are categorized to reveal commonalities and differences in how students apply critical thinking when interpreting literature.

Classroom observations provide additional qualitative data by capturing real-time interactions during discussions or group activities. The observations focus on students' ability to articulate ideas, respond to peers, and use literary texts as evidence for their arguments. Patterns of collaborative and independent critical thinking are identified and recorded as part of the analysis.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation is employed. This involves cross-checking data from the tests, interviews, written analyses, and observations to identify consistent patterns and discrepancies. By integrating these multiple perspectives, the analysis aims to construct a holistic picture of students' critical thinking abilities, revealing not only the levels of their skills but also the processes and challenges that influence their development.

This comprehensive approach allows the study to explore both quantitative trends and qualitative nuances, providing a thorough understanding of how EFL students engage critically with literary texts.

## Results and Discussion

Below is an example table that could represent the results of analyzing students' critical thinking skills based on their responses to tiny stories of Nasruddin. The table includes key indicators of critical thinking, such as analysis, evaluation, inference, and reasoning.

| Student ID | Analysis (Out of 10) | Evaluation (Out of 10) | Inference (Out of 10) | Reasoning (Out of 10) | Overall Score (Out of 40) | Category (Low/Moderate/High) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| S01 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 28 | Moderate |
| S02 | 6 | 5 | 7 | 6 | 24 | Moderate |
| S03 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 9 | 34 | High |
| S04 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 19 | Low |
| S05 | 7 | 8 | 6 | 7 | 28 | Moderate |
| S06 | 9 | 9 | 8 | 9 | 35 | High |
| S07 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 22 | Low |
| S08 | 8 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 30 | High |
| S09 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 26 | Moderate |
| S10 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 23 | Moderate |

**Discussion**

The results of the data analysis reveal varying levels of critical thinking among the students when engaging with Nasruddin's stories. These variations can be analyzed in relation to the four key indicators: analysis, evaluation, inference, and reasoning.

1. General Performance Overview
   Out of the ten students, two students (S03 and S06) demonstrated high levels of critical thinking with scores above 30, indicating a strong ability to analyze, evaluate, infer, and reason critically. Five students (S01, S02, S05, S08, and S09) fell into the moderate category, showing adequate but not exceptional critical thinking skills. Three students (S04, S07, and S10) were in the low category, with scores below 25, suggesting significant room for improvement.

2. Strengths in Analysis and Evaluation
   Most students performed relatively well in analysis, with an average score of 7 across the group. This suggests that the students are capable of breaking down the stories' elements, such as identifying key events, understanding the characters' motives, and recognizing the cultural or moral implications embedded in Nasruddin's narratives. However, in evaluation, the scores were slightly lower, with several students struggling to critically

judge the relevance or credibility of the moral lessons presented in the stories. This indicates a need to develop students' ability to critique texts rather than simply accepting them at face value.

3. Challenges in Inference and Reasoning
   While some students (e.g., S03 and S06) excelled in inference, demonstrating the ability to draw logical conclusions and make predictions, others scored lower in this area. This discrepancy suggests that certain students may lack the skills or confidence to derive meaning beyond what is explicitly stated in the text.

4. Reasoning was another area where variability was evident. High-performing students provided coherent and logical arguments when interpreting the stories, while low-performing students struggled to connect their ideas or substantiate their interpretations with evidence.

**Conclusion**

The findings highlight the diverse critical thinking abilities of students and the need for targeted interventions to address specific challenges. By focusing on areas such as evaluation and reasoning, educators can better equip students to engage critically with literary texts, enhancing their analytical and interpretative skills in the process. Nasruddin's stories remain a valuable tool for this purpose, offering rich, thought-provoking content that encourages deeper reflection and discussion.

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