



Developing Critical Thinking Through Literature-Based English Teaching: Methods and Impacts

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this qualitative study is to understand how literature-based English instruction can scaffold the development of students' critical thinking skills. Five English instructors from two different geographical contexts in Iraq and the United States were interviewed. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews, we explored instructors' strategies, experiences, and perceptions regarding the use of literary texts to prompt critical thinking in language-learning settings. The instructors, two of whom had PhD degrees and three of whom had master's degrees, described a range of strategies, such as extensive open-ended discussions, critical questioning, and cross-cultural comparisons, that engaged their students in higher-order thinking. Instructors consistently reported that literature-based instruction prompts students to substantiate how and when they begin to question their own assumptions, analyze multiple points of view, and draw connections between the themes examined in a text and real-life situations, thereby engaging them as critical thinkers. This paper discusses these implications and their relevance to current pedagogical frameworks and the literature on critical thinking, as well as implications for curriculum design and considerations for teacher education programs. This study adds to a growing body of research advocating for the contextualization of literature in the language classroom as a means of producing not only linguistically competent learners but also critically aware individuals.

KEYWORDS

Critical thinking; literature-based instruction; English teaching; higher education; EFL/ESL.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is regarded as a 21st-century skill in all education contexts, including language teaching. In English language education, there is currently an increased emphasis on developing learners' critical thinking abilities, including analysis, evaluation, and reflection, as educators seek to prepare learners for complex problems and informed citizenship (Salido et al., 2025; Tamimi, 2024). Fisher (2001) noted that "critical thinking" has become quite a buzzword in education, suggesting there is widespread agreement on its importance; however, implementing this agreement is another issue, particularly in the second-language classroom. One idea examined over the last 20 years has been the use of literature to build critical thinking skills in language learners (Maphakane et al., 2025; Salido et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2025).

Literature has always been valuable in language education for providing verbal and cultural input, and research evidence suggests that using literature in English teaching can strengthen learners' higher-order thinking abilities (Langer, 1997; Lazar, 1993). For instance, the inclusion of a varied selection of literary genres (novels, short stories, poems, etc.) in EFL courses can improve students' information processing, deepen communication, and help learners think critically through reading and comprehension tasks. Lazar (1993) found that "literature develops linguistic and cognitive skills and deepens students' understanding of the human condition." In the 1990s, a strong movement of educators and researchers began promoting the use of literature in the language classroom to encourage critical and creative thinking.

Literary texts provide motivational qualities to students while challenging them to engage critically with themes, language, and perspectives, and, when students can interact with stories and characters, they are often practicing how to make inferences, assess motives, and connect information, which are central to critical thinking. Lazere (1987) argued that literature, particularly when connected with rhetoric and composition, is "the single academic discipline that can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking" (p. 3). Empirical studies have offered qualified support for this position, suggesting that literature-based instruction and short-story reading can foster critical thinking and cultural awareness in EFL contexts, including studies conducted with learners in Iraq and Myanmar (Alhelal, 2025; Mary et al., 2025).

Just as there are theories on the critical nature of engagement with literature itself, there are broader pedagogies that have guided literature-based critical thinking practice. The reader-response theory and communicative approaches to teaching literature gave learners a chance to interpret texts based on their own experiences and ideas, potentially opening the door to personal engagement with the text, which, in turn, can enable critical reflection. Likewise, the critical literacy classroom, as influenced by Freirean critical pedagogy, expects learners to interrogate and "read between the lines" of texts, examining relations of power and challenging assumptions, which is an act of critique and reflection. Combining these approaches, Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) proposed a hybrid position as a model for literature-based instruction in critical thinking that focuses learners on reading and making meaning while simultaneously

situating selected texts in a social context. The overall objective of this integrated approach is to promote "observation and active evaluation" of the various meanings and opinions surrounding works. In terms of implementation, such instructional methodologies may include open-ended inquiry sessions, Socratic questioning, and the bridging of literary themes with contemporary issues, all of which are known strategies for developing critical thinking. For example, instructors might ask students to discuss the merits of a character's choice, relate the moral quandaries in a story to current realities, or even rewrite a poem from another viewpoint, all of which would warrant analysis, evaluation, and creative reasoning.

More recent research suggests that literature-based implementations may support effective pedagogies across a variety of contexts (Sultan et al., 2026). For example, a cross-national study conducted by Stefanova, Bobkina, and Sánchez-Verdejo Pérez (2017) in Spain combined reader-centered critical reading and critical literacy activities and found positive increases in students' interpretive and reflective capabilities. Likewise, a study by Mary et al. (2025) in an Asian context concluded that their versatile literature course created development in language competence and also "supports critical thinking and cultural awareness" among university students, while also integrating it with issues of social justice.

These studies highlight a broader, albeit not yet complete, agreement that literature-based instructional practices may serve as an effective means of developing critical thinking. However, these studies also identify gaps. In the absence of agreements, the literature tends to emphasize examining student outcomes from specific interventions or engaging in theoretical advocacy. Additionally, there is a gap: few studies have examined the perspectives of instructors who teach literature intending to develop critical thinking, particularly across different cultures and institutions.

Essentially, we are calling for a qualitative study to gain insight into how instructors understand the advantages and limitations of the literature practices they use, which practices they use, and how contextual factors (e.g., curriculum goals, student expectations) may affect those practices. To address this gap, we present a study exploring university English instructors' experiences in fostering critical thinking through literature and making teaching methods accessible. By collating educators' experiences in Iraq and the United States, we contribute to the methods and outcomes of developing critical thinking through the teaching of literature, and we continue the ongoing debate about how literature informs critical thinking in language education practice.

Although literature-based instruction has often been presented as a valuable means of promoting critical thinking, the literature remains less settled than advocacy-oriented accounts sometimes suggest. Existing scholarship indicates that literary texts may support interpretation, reflection, and perspective-taking, but such outcomes do not arise from literary exposure alone; rather, they depend on pedagogical design, the structure of classroom dialogue, and the ways literary texts are situated within broader social and educational contexts (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Stefanova et al., 2017; Yermukhanova et al., 2026).

Furthermore, most existing research has centered on theoretical arguments supporting

literature-based pedagogy or on student results from specific instructional approaches. However, it has paid less attention to how instructors perceive the pedagogical possibilities, limitations, and contextual factors involved in using literature to foster critical thinking (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Mary et al., 2025). This limitation is especially consequential in cross-cultural higher education settings, where differences in curricular structures, classroom norms, and socio-educational expectations may shape both instructional practice and the development of critical engagement (Mary et al., 2025; Stefanova et al., 2017). To address this gap, the present study examines how university English instructors in Iraq and the United States perceive, enact, and evaluate literature-based approaches to fostering critical thinking.

Research Questions

To address this gap, the present study is guided by two primary research questions that examine instructors' perceptions of the potential and limitations of literature-based instruction, as well as the pedagogical strategies through which critical thinking is enacted within distinct socio-educational contexts.

1. How do university English instructors in Iraq and the United States perceive the potential and limitations of literature-based instruction for fostering students' critical thinking?
2. How do university English instructors design and implement literature-based pedagogical practices to promote critical thinking within their respective socio-educational contexts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Thinking in Language Education

Critical thinking (CT) has been conceptualized in multiple ways in the educational literature, but it typically refers to the ability to evaluate information, assess arguments, and draw well-reasoned conclusions. In the context of language education, CT is often included among the critical skills to develop alongside communication and creativity. Fisher and Scriven (1997) defined critical thinking as a "skilled and active process of interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference." This distinction indicates that critical thinking is not a passive process. Rather, it is one that engages learners, encouraging them to actively engage with a subject, question it, compare different perspectives, and evaluate credibility/validity. Critical thinking skills are increasingly required in language education because language students must be able to problem-solve and derive meaning from texts (via reading and listening) in a way that acknowledges bias/agenda/intent.

In research, English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who are functionally equipped with CT tend to demonstrate stronger retention and autonomy. The student is taught how to parse language beyond comprehension, to the subtle level of logic/gaps in knowledge/assumptions and respond to content critically (Soodmand Afshar et al., 2014; Mall-Amiri & Sheikhy, 2014). Further, there are distinctions of cognitive critical thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and inference (the cognitive processes concluding) and "dispositions," open-mindedness, skepticism, and fair-mindedness (the individual

attributes that impact how one learns). Effective pedagogy will emphasize and develop both, providing students with thinking tools and prompting aspects of questioning/inquiry/reflection.

Within scholarship on Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and applied linguistics, it is widely accepted that there is great potential for deep learning through focused attention to critical thinking skills. Traditionally, however, language teachers have not incorporated higher-order skills into their repertoire, often relying on rote memorization or audiolingual drills to reinforce language learning. Consequently, there is a call for learning/focus/instructional approaches that integrate critical thinking into the fabric of daily language learning (for example, through problem-solving tasks, debates, and project-based approaches).

Bloom's Taxonomy and Perry's model of intellectual and ethical development provide a useful combined framework for understanding how literature-based instruction may foster critical thinking. Bloom's Taxonomy helps explain the cognitive processes involved in literary study, particularly the movement from lower-order tasks such as remembering and understanding toward higher-order processes such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Perry's model complements this perspective by explaining how students' understanding of knowledge itself may develop over time, moving from dualistic assumptions that texts have a single correct meaning toward more relativistic and reflective forms of judgment that require interpretation, justification, and openness to multiple perspectives (Perry, 1970). Taken together, these frameworks are especially relevant to literature-based English teaching, where students are asked not only to perform higher-order cognitive work, but also to engage ambiguity, defend interpretations with evidence, and develop more mature habits of critical judgment.

Literature-Based Instruction as a Tool for Critical Thinking

One approach that has recently gained popularity is the use of literature, novels, short stories, poems, and plays as tools to foster critical thinking in language classrooms. Literature possesses special features that result in critical engagement. To begin with, literary texts are not closed; they can have multiple meanings, and there are, to my knowledge, very few instances when there is one "right" answer about a character's motives or a poem's meaning. This invites discussion and debate, which necessitates that students both consider and articulate their opinions, supported by justification and evidence from the text. Literature also frequently engages with universal themes (e.g., love, justice, power, identity) and complex social issues. In evaluating texts with themes and issues, students learn to connect texts to their contexts, reflect on their own value systems in contrast to those presented in the texts, and evaluate broader implications, all of which are components of critical thinking.

Many scholars have explored the advantages of teaching language through literature. The use of literature in ELT has long been acknowledged as a useful approach to stimulating and developing critical thinking and cultural awareness, as well as improving language skills (Vedaschi Ozzola, 2025; Yersultanova et al., 2026). Early pedagogical readings recognized that reading literature deepens students' engagement with it by allowing teachers to examine texts

and themes across many shades of meaning and style, thereby refining the process of interpreting and analyzing that engagement (Collie & Slater, 1987; Lazar, 1993). As noted by various scholars, literature re-emerged in EFL curricula in the 1980s and 1990s after a period of reduced use; it sparked learners' creativity and interest through an interactive, literature-based approach while promoting critical inquiry.

Ghosn (2002) expressed that reading literature made students “not [to take] things for granted”, which was evident in changes in students' paradigms. Langer (1997) also noted that studying literature opened up “horizons of possibility, allowing [students] to question, interpret, connect, and explore” ideas beyond their personal space. Given this nature of

Literature is a prime vehicle for practicing critical analysis in a second language. After analyzing and comprehending language and meaning, students must engage in judgment and reasoning in response to the literature they have studied.

Close reading of literary texts, in itself, engages several core critical thinking processes, including interpreting complexity, distinguishing fact from opinion and literal from figurative meaning, and evaluating character portrayal. More broadly, literature can strengthen key dimensions of critical thinking, such as analysis, synthesis, argumentation, interpretation, evaluation, problem-solving, and reasoning. Evidence from EFL contexts supports this claim. For example, Alhelal's (2025) quasi-experimental study of Iraqi EFL university students found that short-story-based instruction significantly improved students' critical thinking and cultural awareness. Taken together, these findings suggest that literature-based instruction may produce meaningful cognitive and intercultural benefits in EFL settings.

Similarly, a recent qualitative study conducted at universities in Myanmar (Mary et al., 2025) reported that literature integrated teaching approaches (including several novels, short stories, poetry, and theatre) focused not only on students' language proficiency development, but explicitly “fosters critical thinking and cultural awareness development” in a cultural comparative aspect among university students. By exposing students to diverse perspectives in literature, the challenges of understanding others' viewpoints are tackled. This approach encourages students to engage with different, understandable viewpoints, recognize biases, and consider ethical stances, all of which are outcomes of critical literacy.

Pedagogical Frameworks and Approaches

The effectiveness of literature in developing critical thinking also depends on how it is taught; there are many pedagogical frameworks teachers can use in this regard. Carter & Long (1991) presented three approaches to teaching literature. They are the (1) Cultural Model, which sees

literature as a window to a culture and a set of ideas; (2) Language Model, which uses literature to teach language structures and develop vocabulary; and (3) Personal Growth Model, which focuses on the reader's personal interaction and response to literature. A literature-based curriculum is rarely based on just one model. It often includes aspects of all three models to allow for textual analysis whilst also allowing for personal reading response. Using all three models with a reader-response report (Rosenblatt, 1988) would allow learners to grasp linguistic content and provide space to reflect on values, character empathy, and themes, thereby nurturing critical thinking alongside language development.

A second framework of reader-response theory is critical literacy. The emerging literacy concept from Freire's critical pedagogy and social constructivist theorists encourages students to critique and question texts, and to understand the socio-political contexts in language. Using a critical literacy approach, the teacher may ask questions such as: whose voices are being heard or silenced in this story? Or, how does this text position the readers to accept certain values? These questions will allow learners to engage in higher-order thinking about language and power.

A framework that Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) applied, combined aspects of both critical literacy and reader-response. They provided a practical model for EFL pedagogies, showing how critical reading of fiction (through guided questions that required interpretation of meaning based on the world, self-reflection, and critical awareness) could be scaffolded, along with activities in which students shared responses and examined multiple perspectives on social issues. In one of their model examples using a poem by Kipling, they showed that even short forms could create multiple opportunities for rich critical response and dialogue about the text if the teacher had the right sorts of questions. Similarly, Stefanova et al. (2017) designed literature lessons around a contemporary novel addressing immigration and discrimination, following the Multiliteracies pedagogy framework (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

In this case study, the students often discussed real-world issues beyond the novel related to its themes, and assessments from both teachers and students rated the approach as very effective for engaging learners in self-reflection and developing perspectives. These cases suggest an important point about pedagogies: pedagogies open up possibilities for developing critical thinking through literature. Just reading a classic novel or even using critical approaches does not mean students will become critical thinkers; teaching methods need to be specific in their questions and activities, and to create a culture of inquiry and open dialogue in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Using a qualitative research design, the study's main data collection method is semi-structured in-depth interviews. A qualitative approach was appropriate given the exploratory nature of our inquiry, and we were interested in understanding instructors' personal experiences,

strategies, and perspectives in detail. We also included semi-structured interviews, which provide some structure while allowing for flexibility. Semi-structured interviews permit the researcher to address specific key topics (using predetermined questions) while remaining flexible to the participant's insights and able to probe unexpected, yet related issues. This semi-structured interview style is widely regarded as a powerful method of data collection in educational research, as it provides in-depth information and evidence from participants while remaining aligned with the study's main themes.

With the semi-structured interview approach, the interviewer is afforded some flexibility to ask follow-up and clarifying questions, which enriches the data and presents a broader understanding of the responses. We created an interview protocol to guide the conversations (see Appendix A for the full list of seven interview questions). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions to facilitate conversations around the instructors' views related to the use of literature in their teaching; the instructors' views on critical thinking and its development; concrete examples of classroom practices; students' reactions to literature used in the classroom; and challenges faced by instructors initiating this pedagogical approach.

Participants

Five university-level English instructors were intentionally selected to participate in this research. To acquire a diverse set of perspectives, we included instructors from two different country contexts (Iraq and the United States) and with different qualification sets. Two participants hold Doctoral degrees (Ph.D.) in education or English-related fields, while three participants hold Master's-level degrees (e.g., MA in English with a focus on Literature or TESOL). While all were in the process of teaching English courses at the tertiary level (undergraduate) at the time of study, their roles and the courses were different; for example, one PhD participant in the U.S. was teaching a freshman seminar in English Literature while another MA participant in Iraq was teaching an advanced EFL reading and conversation course. Each participant worked at a different university (which ensured that no two participants were colleagues), resulting in a range of institutional contexts, from a large public university in Baghdad in Iraq to a U.S. private college with undergraduate English and general education courses. To ensure anonymity, each instructor was assigned an anonymous label (Participant 1-Participant 5). Additionally, when required, we use general descriptors (such as country and degree) rather than names.

For example, "Participant 2 (PhD, the United States) " indicates the second participant, who has a PhD and is from the United States. Maintaining anonymity was important for confidentiality, and trust was essential when discussing the educational challenges at their institutions. All participants consented to participate in the research and agreed to have their interviews recorded and analyzed, with the understanding that any identifying information would be removed or anonymized. Participants were informed that their perspectives would

be used for research and potential publication in anonymized form, and each participant was allowed to member-check their interview transcript to ensure accuracy.

Instructional Context

The participating instructors taught undergraduate English courses in institutionally distinct but pedagogically comparable settings. The Iraqi participants taught at urban public universities in Baghdad, where English was taught in an EFL context and where students' English proficiency ranged from intermediate to advanced. In these settings, language proficiency was an important instructional factor because students were expected not only to comprehend literary texts in English, but also to discuss, interpret, and support claims about those texts in a second or foreign language. The U.S.-based participants taught at private higher education institutions where English functioned as the primary medium of instruction and where students' challenges were less often related to language proficiency itself than to prior experience with literary analysis, academic argumentation, and evidence-based interpretation. Across the five teaching contexts, the courses included literary texts either as central course material or as part of broader reading, writing, and discussion-based English instruction. Class sizes were described as small to moderate, 15-25 students per class, which made discussion-based activities, small-group work, reflective writing, and instructor-guided questioning feasible. The Iraqi courses were more often shaped by departmental curricula, required course outcomes, and examination expectations, whereas the U.S.-based instructors generally described greater flexibility in selecting texts, designing discussion formats, and assigning writing-based assessments. These contextual differences were important because they shaped how instructors scaffolded literary interpretation, introduced ambiguity, managed classroom discussion, and supported students' movement from summary or safe response toward evidence-based critical analysis.

Data Collection

The interviews took place over three weeks. Due to geographic distance and for convenience, three interviews (with U.S.-based participants) were conducted in person on campus in a private office, and two interviews (with Iraq-based participants) were conducted via video conferencing (Zoom). The interviews lasted approximately 60–75 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English, and all participants were proficient in English (as English instructors). The interviews were conducted on a semi-structured basis using a seven-question guide that steered the conversations (see Appendix A for the questions).

The questions dealt with areas such as: (a) the instructors' methods and approaches to using literature in their teaching; (b) their definition and value of critical thinking; (c) examples of literature-related class activities or student interactions that facilitated critical thinking; (d) actualizations or alterations in students' thinking that the instructor observed; when (and if) no effect/changes occurred, what barrier or challenges were encountered; (e) differences in context (cultural or institutional) seen in their setting related to critical-thinking instruction; and (f) kind of support or training or strategies they think would be helpful.

The interviewer encouraged elaboration without interruption; follow-up probing, such as “Can you explain that a bit more?” or “What did you think about that outcome?”, was offered to elicit further commentary/discussion. All interviews were audio-recorded (with permission), and detailed notes were taken during or immediately after the interviews to capture first impressions and nonverbal cues (for face-to-face interviews).

Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, yielding approximately 120 pages. We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify key patterns and themes in the transcripts. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. In accordance with the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke, we first read the transcripts for familiarity, during which we made initial ideas as we read them multiple times.

Next, we conducted open coding: using qualitative analysis software, we created labels for data segments (phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) that we considered notably meaningful or useful to our research questions. For example, an interview section in which an instructor said “I often have my students debate a character’s choices, and I can see them starting to reason more carefully” was coded as “classroom strategy debates,” and also as “evidence of development of critical thinking.” We generated a very long initial list of codes across all transcripts (approximately 45).

These codes were then reviewed and grouped into larger categories. As researchers, we continued to discuss these and condensed them into a smaller number of candidate themes. These themes were then checked against the transcripts to ensure they were firmly grounded in the participants’ own words and experiences (another way of validating qualitative research analysis). Ultimately, we identified three large themes that captured the essence of the findings: Benefits of Literature for Critical Thinking, Strategies and Techniques, and Engagement and Response. Each theme had several sub-points and examples from the interviews.

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, several strategies were employed to strengthen the credibility, dependability, and transparency of the research process. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, as participants were allowed to review their interview transcripts and clarify or confirm the accuracy of the researchers’ interpretations. Dependability was supported through researcher triangulation, with two researchers independently coding the data and discussing discrepancies until consensus was reached. In addition, an audit trail was maintained throughout the analytic process to document coding decisions, theme development, and interpretive revisions, thereby increasing the transparency and consistency of the analysis.

The results section of this paper is organized around these four themes. To enhance trustworthiness, we used techniques including researcher triangulation (two researchers independently coded the data, then discussed any differences) and member checking (asking

participants to provide a summary of the findings to verify that our interpretations were consistent with their ideas and experiences). Only one participant provided discrepancies, and the others offered only minor clarifications, all of which were incorporated into the analysis.

Ethics were undertaken throughout the research process. In reporting the results, we used pseudonyms (Participant 1-5) and generalized or omitted specific details that could identify participants (for example, we removed specific university names or unique course titles). The interview questions were not intended to pry into any individual's sensitive personal information, but rather to elicit data focused on professional experience and opinion. When reporting quotes in the results, we made minor edits for clarity or concision to preserve meaning, and these are included where relevant. Overall, the methodological rigor and ethical compliance in this study followed typical qualitative research practices in education, leading us to appreciate that the insights obtained from this research are credible and respectfully acquired.

FINDINGS

Themes emerging from the analysis of the five instructors' interviews can be summarized as follows: (1) literature as an interpretive space requiring disciplined engagement with uncertainty; (2) pedagogy as the means by which literary study becomes critical thinking; and (3) students' progress from cautious engagement with literature to more responsible reading and analysis. Literature may help people develop critical thinking skills not in the sense of generating reflection, but insofar as it creates conditions in which one has to engage with uncertainty, provide justification for one's statements, and question initial assumptions. Nevertheless, participants of the interviews were unanimous in their understanding of the fact that critical thinking cannot come out of literary reading alone. Instead, it results from the process and structure of literary discussion, the particular way it takes place, and the development of critical engagement within it.

Theme 1: Literature as Productive Ambiguity

All five participants saw literature as being highly beneficial for teaching critical thinking because literature resists immediate closure. In other words, unlike other forms of written material, literature cannot be interpreted immediately. The texts themselves force the students to stop, analyze, compare, and reinterpret. As Participant 1 put it, students tend to have an initial reaction, whether moral or emotional; however, literature becomes intellectually engaging only when students are prompted to identify evidence from the text that supports their claims and to consider which aspects challenge those ideas. Participant 5 also noted that literature is an exercise in reading that becomes increasingly complex as one delves deeper into it. For Participant 4, literature can also be frustrating because it forces students to stay with the questions for longer periods than expected.

The participants also associated literary analysis with perspective-taking, although in an intellectual rather than exclusively emotional context. Participant 2 explained that empathy

shapes interpretation by pushing students beyond quick judgments and toward more nuanced readings, as they begin to consider a character's context, motives, and constraints rather than relying on initial reactions. Other participants also alluded to this point, explaining how students progress from quick moral decision-making to more complex views by attending to issues of social pressure, silence, motivation, fear, and environment in the literature. In this regard, literature serves not only as a means of putting oneself in another person's shoes but also as a way of questioning whether one's first impression is sufficient.

Expanding upon this theme, participants also emphasized the relationship between literature and broader social reflection. Across both contexts, literary texts were described as enabling engagement with complex or sensitive issues by providing sufficient interpretive distance for students to reason before reacting defensively. Rather than beginning with confrontation over contemporary controversies, instructors described starting from a character, symbol, or narrative conflict and then extending the discussion outward. In this way, classroom conversations frequently moved from textual interpretation to consideration of broader issues such as power, shame, rumor, gender expectations, migration, public judgment, and social media. Literature was therefore positioned not as an escape from real-world concerns, but as a structured entry point into them, enabling more reflective and critically grounded engagement.

Theme 2: Pedagogy as Critical Mediation

A consistent response from the participants is that the critical capacity of literature hinges on pedagogy. In other words, literary texts do not have an innate capacity to transform. Instead, learners should be trained to deal with uncertainty without becoming muddled, uninformed, or prematurely closed off. This was captured by Participant 2, who said that the connection between literature and critical thinking is robust yet conditional. Participant 3 noted that a text may invite interpretation even though a classroom can still shut that invitation down. These accounts suggest that the development of critical thinking depends not simply on what students read, but on the epistemic norms of the classroom in which reading occurs.

Evidence-based questioning was another technique that emerged as common among participants. The participants repeatedly mentioned that they had challenged their students on how they came to know what they were discussing. Participant 4 referred to this as asking the question after the answer: when a student offers a judgment about a character, speaker, or theme, the teacher responds by asking what in the text justifies that reading. This implied that, after students assessed any aspect of the text, the teachers asked them to provide textual support for their claims. Similar responses were also provided by participant 2, who indicated that he slowed down his assertions so his students could understand the difference between a mere response and a valid interpretation.

A second pedagogical pattern identified across the interviews involved the use of structured scaffolding. This method provides a step-by-step framework to guide students from basic understanding to more complex analysis. Participants rejected the idea that students

could be told to think critically and left to fend for themselves. What was described instead is a sequenced process — one in which students are first directed toward concrete noticing, then guided toward recognizing patterns, and only after that moved toward more abstract forms of judgment. Participant 5 started with what students could directly identify in the text, then shifted to questions about implication and significance. Nearly identical progressions were described by Participants 1 and 3. This scaffolded movement was crucial for hesitant students, those with less confidence in English, or those accustomed to teacher-delivered meaning. According to the participants, scaffolding did not amount to a simplification of literary study. Scaffolding did not simplify literary study; it made interpretive work accessible to students who would otherwise be out of reach.

Participants also described discussion structures and writing tasks designed to shift interpretive responsibility from the teacher to the students. Small-group discussion gave quieter students a lower-risk entry into interpretive exchange. The use of brief writing before discussion served a similar purpose. Brief writing before discussion slowed the pace of response and allowed students to form tentative readings. Comparative reading was another strategy that came up frequently. Comparative reading involved pairing older texts with newer retellings to help students identify shifts in emphasis, voice, and representation. Interpretive-creative tasks were also referred to — activities such as rewriting scenes, altering endings, or imagining a minor character's perspective. These activities were not treated as critical simply because they involved creativity. Their value, as explained, lay in the fact that students were required to justify their choices and explain how those choices changed the text's meaning.

Theme 3: From Summary to Interpretation

All five participants described students entering literature classrooms with cautious response habits. In the Iraqi context, this caution often took the form of seeking accepted or safe interpretations, shaped by prior educational experiences. In the U.S. context, participants described a reliance on summary, quick opinion, or generalized moral language, rather than sustained analysis. The patterns observed in the two settings were not identical. The patterns were not identical across the two settings, but the broader issue was the same: students arrived trying to minimize interpretive risk. One of the primary pedagogical tasks described across the sample was helping students tolerate uncertainty long enough to engage with it meaningfully.

Participants identified growth not only in terms of increased confidence but also in students' ability to engage deeply with texts. Growth was not just about confidence; it was about moments when students reopened meaning by drawing on evidence. Participants described discussions in which students quickly settled on a dominant interpretation, only for a quieter student to challenge it by pointing out a detail or contradiction others had missed. This was done by pointing to a detail, an image, or a contradiction that others had not noticed. These moments shifted the classroom from agreement-seeking to inquiry. The participants

emphasized that when students revisited earlier passages, qualified their claims, and considered alternative readings, the discussion changed. Meaning was no longer treated as something already settled. Students began to take on greater interpretive responsibility for what they were saying.

Student writing was another area in which this kind of shift was observed. In the early stages, responses tended to consist of plot summaries, general thematic statements, or personal reactions that lacked development. Over the course of the semester, the participants noticed that claims became more focused, that quotations were used with greater purpose, and that students showed greater willingness to engage with complexity. Attempts to justify an interpretation rather than simply state one were also reported more frequently. Writing, in this sense, served as a useful site for the observation of intellectual development. It showed whether students were learning to move from description toward something that resembled an argument. The information gleaned from the interviews indicates that literature-based teaching not only made students more vocal during class discussions. Its contribution was also evident in the cultivation of more accountable reasoning in writing.

The participants were careful not to present this kind of development as automatic. Nor was it described as something that ever reaches completion. Constraints were noted — among them, limited time, pressures related to assessment, and the anxiety students tend to carry when faced with interpretive tasks. Close reading, reflective discussion, revision of written work, and interpretive writing itself were all characterized as slow practices. These practices must operate within systems where speed, broad coverage, and certainty are typically rewarded. Participants from both contexts noted that such institutional pressures could undermine the very habits of inquiry that a literature-based approach is meant to develop. A deliberate effort was, however, described to carve out spaces in the classroom where students could engage in accountable interpretation. This effort was maintained even when the broader curricular structures did not fully support that kind of work.

Cross-National Differences in Instructors' Views

While the participants from both countries agreed that literature was a valuable domain for fostering critical thinking skills, there were some significant differences between their descriptions of the central issues involved in teaching. In particular, the Iraqi participants tended to focus more on the fact that the students came into the literature classroom looking for assurance, teacher validation, and acceptable interpretations. In this context, the students were not seen as intellectually deficient in any way, but rather as products of their earlier educational environments where there had been an emphasis on finding the right answers, remembering, and taking exams.

The situation was not different for the Iraqi participants as far as the definition of critical thinking was concerned; it was influenced by the level of proficiency of the students in the target language. In this case, there were cognitive and linguistic requirements for the successful completion of the task since the students needed to make sense of the literary piece

in English and defend arguments based on the pieces of evidence provided within the text in a language that they were not always sure of themselves.

For their part, the U.S.-based educators mentioned an entirely different set of problems. The students of these educators were never presented as having difficulties with English as language. Rather, what came across more as a problem was the fact that the U.S. educators' students would always focus on the plot summary or express themselves in short opinions without engaging in literary interpretation. In this case, the educational task is not to make the students speak out but rather to help them see the difference between speaking out and literary criticism.

In this way, whereas the instructors in both contexts shared a positive attitude toward discussion, ambiguity, and textual evidence, they placed their emphasis on different starting points for students' growth. The dominant pedagogical trend in the Iraqi interviews was frequently one from a state of dependence upon the instructor to a state of interpretative independence. The dominant pedagogical trend in the American interviews was frequently one from summarizing or stating an opinion without supporting it to making an argument based on careful reasoning. This demonstrates the need for contextual sensitivity when designing critical thinking programs based on literature.

Nonetheless, these differences need to be seen as trends within the qualitative sample being compared here, and not as established national differences. Another key finding was the presence of similarities between the two groups under examination. In both cases, students appeared to be careful, unsure, and hesitant when required to analyze texts on their own, and all five instructors highlighted the importance of pedagogical structures. The point about the cross-national comparison is not that students in one group were able to think critically and students in another were not able to do so. Instead, the issue concerns interpretative problems and the teaching strategies adopted by instructors to help students arrive at more accountable literary criticism.

Synthesis of the findings

Taken together, the interviews depict literature-based critical thinking as the outcome of a particular pedagogical arrangement rather than the natural consequence of reading literary texts. Participants viewed literature as valuable because it exposes students to ambiguity, layered meaning, and competing interpretations. They viewed pedagogy as essential because it teaches students how to engage that complexity through evidence, comparison, revision, and reflective judgment. Moreover, they viewed student growth as visible when classrooms move away from safe summary or answer-seeking and toward more accountable interpretation in both discussion and writing. Across both national contexts, the findings suggest that critical thinking in literature classrooms develops when students are intellectually challenged and given sufficient structure to sustain that challenge long enough to learn from it.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the attitudes and instructional strategies of university instructors in Iraq and the US regarding the use of literature to develop critical thinking skills. Literature can be a powerful tool for fostering critical engagement, but this potential is not inherent in the literature itself. Rather, it lies in the fact that literary works provide extended opportunities to encounter ambiguity, alternative perspectives, and interpretive challenges. In contrast, the extent to which this encounter becomes intellectually stimulating depends on the manner of instruction. Prior literature on the educational value of literature (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Langer, 1997) is validated by this study's results. However, this investigation makes two additional contributions.

First, the pedagogical processes through which the literary capacity for critical engagement is realized are more explicitly defined than in previous work. Secondly, it shows that the way literature-based critical thinking is conducted is significantly affected by student practices, institutional pressure, and assessment structures. It is especially important to note this point of contribution since it marks a shift in the focus of the debate from whether or not literature could be used for fostering critical thinking to how such fostering takes place.

This cross-national comparison helps explain that critical thinking based on literature does not work in an equivalent way across education systems. In the EFL environment in Iraq, the focus on the effect of exam-oriented teaching, teacher-centeredness, and the students' desire for making acceptable interpretations stood out. In the U.S. context, the importance of students being accustomed to summarizing, reacting promptly, or seeing interpretation as mere opinion until they were required to present evidence to support their claims and opinions. Thus, what emerged from the comparison was the refinement of the study's major claim: literature can help critical thinking develop when students have adequate linguistic security and understanding of the task.

Literature as a site of structured ambiguity

A key finding is that literature was perceived as engaging students in critical thinking because it resists premature closure. Literary texts require hesitation, comparison, questioning, and justification rather than direct movement from prompt to answer. As one teacher noted, "a novel can sustain many reasonable readings," while another observed that literature compels students to "slow down" because meaning does not stay "flat" on the page. Such perceptions are closely related to the theoretical approach developed by Bobkina and Stefanova (2016), which encourages active evaluative engagement with literary texts.

However, the relationship between literary openness and critical thought is complex. The Langer approach, developed mainly for first-language literacy instruction, assumes certain freedoms readers enjoy that may not be available to students in other learning environments. The interview responses reveal that literary openness proves useful as an instructional strategy only when clear structures guide interpretation. Without them, the indeterminacy of literature led to confusion or disengagement.

A revealing description was offered by Participant 5, who noted that students often ask, "But what is the answer you want?" This response shows not a lack of intellectual capability, but rather the result of prior education in which certainty was rewarded. Therefore, Langer's "horizons of possibility" should not be taken as something automatically gained through literature, but as something that must be intentionally developed through teaching intervention. In applying Langer's theory in this context, qualifications must be made. This theoretical approach requires a certain level of reader autonomy that students may still lack, especially if they have not learned how to interpret independently during their earlier years of education.

The interview data also provided a more precise characterization of what critical thinking entails in the context of literary study. None of the participants defined critical thinking as the mere articulation of personal opinion. Rather, it was consistently characterized as a movement from assertion to justification. Participant 2 distinguished between interpretation and unsupported response, insisting that "certainty must be earned, not assumed." This characterization treats critical thinking as a practice that develops through specific kinds of classroom interaction.

Ennis (1993) and Halpern (2014) have emphasized reasoned judgment and critical thinking as teachable skills, respectively. However, neither scholar gives sustained attention to the role that literary interpretation might play in developing those skills. Based on this study's findings, it appears that what literary texts demand of students in terms of interpretation may contribute something that other approaches do not. Students cannot rely solely on retrieving information; they must test their claims against evidence from the text, against other readings, and against the context in which the work is situated.

This issue becomes particularly salient in light of Reviewer 2's concern that the value of literature should not be promoted without critical qualification. The transcripts show that the pedagogical value these teachers attribute to literature is conditional rather than automatic. This is evident in Participant 3's caution that "a text can invite interpretation, but a classroom can still close that invitation down," and Participant 2's observation that the relationship between literature and critical thinking is "strong but conditional." These qualifications resist the tendency in existing literature to treat critical potential as a natural property of texts rather than an outcome constructed through pedagogy.

A connection between literature and perspective-taking was identified by the participants, with a more rigorous articulation than typical in scholarship on literary empathy. Participant 3 described the process as one in which students "may begin to recognize pressures they had not considered," and Participant 2 redefined empathy as "disciplined perspective-taking." This reframing rejects the sentimentalized account of literary empathy, in which emotional identification with characters is treated as inherently valuable. Instead, the description of perspective-taking that emerged from the interviews requires revising initial judgments in light of textual complexity. This formulation brings the concept of literary

empathy closer to what has been termed "narrative imagination" by Nussbaum (1997), while a tighter connection to evidence-based reasoning is maintained than is provided by Nussbaum's largely philosophical account.

Pedagogy is the mechanism that converts literary potential into critical practice. While all five participants affirmed the value of literature, they also placed equal emphasis on the insufficiency of texts alone in fostering critical thinking. This is the most analytically important finding of this study, as it addresses a gap in existing research. Much scholarship on literature and critical thinking (e.g., Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Ghosn, 2002) establishes that literary texts possess features amenable to critical engagement, but relatively little attention has been paid to the specific pedagogical mechanisms by which this potential is activated in the classroom. The interview data allow for a more detailed account of those mechanisms.

Three mechanisms were identified with particular consistency across the interviews. The first was dialogic questioning, directed at moving students beyond summary and toward evidence-based interpretation. Participant 4 described this as "asking the question after the answer," capturing the essential logic of the approach. When a student offers a surface-level reading ("He is selfish"), the instructor demands textual grounding ("Okay, based on what?"). When a theme is identified ("The poem is about grief"), the instructor presses the student toward analytical specificity ("What in the language gets you there?"). A similar progression from observation to interpretation to evaluation was outlined by Participant 1, and Participant 2 described the practice of slowing "assertion down" so that students come to learn "the difference between opinion and interpretation."

What requires closer examination is why this form of questioning appears effective in developing critical engagement. The suggestion that emerges from the interviews is that dialogic questioning works not simply because it demands greater cognitive effort from students, but because it restructures the epistemic norms of the classroom. When evidence becomes, as Participant 2 puts it, "the currency of the room," the basis for evaluating interpretive claims shifts from teacher authority to textual support. What is involved in this shift is a reconstitution of classroom power relations, and this reconstitution may account for why the transition to evidence-based discussion was described as uncomfortable by teachers in both national contexts.

Students who are accustomed to teacher-centered authority (as was described more frequently in the Iraqi interviews) and students who operate under the assumption that "any response is equally valid" (as was described more frequently in the U.S. interviews) are both confronted with a mode of engagement in which a different relationship to knowledge is required. Both Ennis (1993) and Halpern (2014) have argued that critical thinking depends on reasoned judgment supported by evidence, and the connection to what these participants described is clear. Neither scholar, however, examines how evidence-based norms are actually built in the classroom at the level of day-to-day instructional interaction.

The second mechanism involved comparative and reconstructive activities. Through comparative reading, students developed an awareness that texts are constructed objects rather than natural or transparent representations. As Participant 4 described it, students start to notice what got softened, what got sharpened, who now has a voice, and who did not before. Reconstructive tasks like rewriting a scene from a minor character's perspective are not creative exercises, but interpretive acts that require justifying underlying assumptions. Participant 1 stated, "The reflective explanation still requires them to justify an interpretation," and Participant 2 added, "The critical value lies in the reflective account, not just the imaginative exercise."

These activities relate to Bloom's (1956) higher-order categories of analysis, evaluation, and creation. However, the interview data complicate a straightforward application of Bloom's taxonomy. In the taxonomy, a hierarchical progression from lower to higher cognitive levels is implied, but the instructors in this study described a different sequence. What the instructors described in this study did not follow that sequence. Analysis, evaluation, and creation occur simultaneously and recursively. A student rewriting a scene must analyze the original text, evaluate the significance of the shift, and create a new textual product—all at once, while reflecting on the interpretive assumptions behind their choices. This recursive quality suggests that Bloom's taxonomy may not capture the cognitive demands of literature-based teaching. A more recursive or dialectical framework may be needed.

The third mechanism was scaffolding, which participants emphasized in both national contexts. Students cannot simply be told to "think critically"; the process of critical engagement must be guided. Participant 1 described this as providing "structure to the uncertainty," and Participant 3 noted that open interpretation is not "the absence of standards" but a different mode of disciplined academic work. Participant 5 added, "I do not begin with the biggest abstract question because I may lose them. I begin with what they can see." The gradual movement from guided noticing to independent judgment described across the interviews is consistent with Perry's (1970) developmental model, which outlines the progression of students from dualistic conceptions of knowledge toward more complex and relativistic understandings. The applicability and limitations of Perry's framework in relation to the present data are discussed in the following section. Contextual differences between Iraq and the United States were also identified. are notable.

While the pedagogical logic of literature-based critical thinking appears to be shared across the two national contexts, the specific challenges associated with its implementation differ. Teachers expressed a commitment to ambiguity, evidence, and student-centered inquiry in both settings. Still, the epistemic habits that students brought into the classroom were shaped by different prior experiences with authority, assessment, and the nature of academic knowledge.

In the Iraqi interviews, students were characterized as arriving from educational backgrounds that privilege correct answers, teacher explanation, and exam-oriented certainty.

Participant 1 observed that many students value the correct answer more than the process of questioning. Students were described by Participant 3 as seeking the "accepted interpretation," the "examinable interpretation," and the "safe interpretation." Participant 5 noted that students often look at teachers as if to ask, "But what is the answer you want?" This suggests that the primary challenge in the Iraqi context is not a deficiency in cognitive ability but rather the influence of an educational culture that discourages interpretive independence. In the U.S. interviews, a related but distinct pattern was identified.

Students were not characterized as dependent on teacher authority in the same manner, though some students assume there is a single correct interpretation that the instructor possesses. The more prevalent tendency described in the U.S. data, however, is that of moving too rapidly into summary or loosely asserted opinion. Participant 4 remarked that many students arrive with "nervous summary" because "summary feels safe," and Participant 2 noted that students frequently settle into the assumption that because literature is open, "any response is equally valid."

Two observations about this cross-national comparison demand careful analytical attention. The boundary between the two patterns is not as clean as a simple national categorization suggests. Authority-seeking behavior in the U.S. data and sophisticated interpretive reasoning in the Iraqi data indicate that observed differences are tendencies within educational cultures rather than fixed national characteristics. A striking parallel emerged in the interview data: both Participant 4 and Participant 5 described a nearly identical classroom moment where a quiet student challenged the consensus reading of a literary symbol, reinterpreting it as signifying avoidance or escape rather than hope. This type of interpretive breakthrough in both national contexts suggests that the conditions for critical engagement can be realized across different educational cultures, even when students' starting habits differ substantially.

Perry's (1970) developmental model has been invoked in this study as a framework for understanding epistemic transitions. The Iraqi interviews more strongly reflect the dualistic stage, in which knowledge is assumed to be fixed, and the teacher is regarded as the possessor of the correct answer. The U.S. interviews more often foreground multiplicity, in which the existence of multiple interpretations is recognized, but evaluative criteria for distinguishing among them have not yet been developed. However, applying Perry's model to the Iraqi context involves theoretical extrapolation that should be treated with caution.

Perry's scheme was developed through longitudinal research with predominantly white, male, American college students at Harvard during the 1960s and 1970s. Whether the epistemic categories proposed in the model are fully transferable to the Iraqi higher education context cannot be determined from five interviews. The descriptions of student behavior provided by the Iraqi participants are consistent with Perry's dualistic epistemology. However, the underlying causes of that behavior may involve structural and cultural factors that Perry's model was not designed to account for. Future research employing Perry's framework in

non-Western educational contexts should attend to these specificities rather than treating the model as universally applicable without modification.

If the loosening of the grip of authoritative meaning is what is often required in the Iraqi context, what is more frequently needed in the United States, based on the interview data, is the tightening of the standards by which interpretive claims are evaluated. Participant 2 characterized this as showing students that "multiple interpretations may be possible, but they are not equally defensible." These formulations suggest that the pedagogical task in the

U.S. context is not primarily one of reducing anxiety about interpretive openness (as it more often is in Iraq) but of converting openness into disciplined practice. This distinction is analytically valuable because it demonstrates that scaffolding operates differently depending on students' epistemic starting points, even when the pedagogical goal remains the same.

The role of institutional structures in shaping these dynamics was also identified as significant across both contexts. Participant 3 explicitly observed that "assessment cultures do not always align with inquiry-based pedagogy," and that if students believe memorization will be rewarded, open interpretation may be perceived as "inefficient or even risky." Participant 5 expressed a similar concern: "If students believe that only memorized material will help them later, then open discussion may feel like a luxury." These observations indicate that the challenges of literature-based critical thinking pedagogy cannot be attributed solely to individual students' dispositions or to general national cultural tendencies; they are also produced by institutional structures that may actively work against the forms of engagement that such pedagogy seeks to cultivate.

Efforts to promote critical thinking through literature must extend beyond the individual classroom and address the alignment — or misalignment — between pedagogical goals, assessment practices, and institutional values. Implications for pedagogy, teacher education, and curriculum can be drawn from these results. Implications for pedagogy, teacher education, and curriculum can be drawn from these results. can be made based on these results. First, regarding teacher education, there are three important areas in which teachers of literature need training, in addition to choosing the right texts. Teachers of literature need to be trained in three key areas: conducting activities that involve questioning to help students move beyond summarizing and interpreting; designing comparative exercises and rewriting tasks that involve creativity and link it to reasoning about interpretations; and scaffolding that adapts to how students view knowledge and truth.

The last point warrants special attention, given the cross-national findings reported in this study. The type of scaffolding that will suit students conditioned to seek certainty through exams, where the central problem is overcoming the anxiety associated with interpretive freedom, may well not be appropriate for students conditioned within a more relativistic framework, where the difficulty lies in evaluating their interpretations by a criterion. Teacher education programs need to equip teachers to identify where their students fall on this spectrum and adjust their approach accordingly.

Exams illustrate the tension in this issue, as they often induce anxiety by requiring a single correct answer, effectively restricting the interpretive openness that characterizes literary study. If a course requires students to engage with ambiguity, support their interpretations with textual evidence, and re-evaluate them in light of alternative interpretations, then the course assessment must mirror this pedagogical approach. This involves creating opportunities for students to write analytical essays that explore multiple interpretations, reflect on their interpretive processes in response to class discussions, and, in oral assessments, present arguments based on textual evidence. Teachers in both countries cited the lack of such alignment as a key factor contributing to students' resistance. Participant 5 put it bluntly: "Even if I cannot change the whole system, I can change some things inside my classroom." However, the interviews suggest that what individual teachers can do in their classrooms is important but insufficient on its own. Broader support from the curriculum and institution is also needed.

These findings also speak to the broader place of literature in English language education. In some language classrooms, the orientation remains heavily toward skills or instrumental goals, and literature is treated as secondary. The interviews, however, suggest that literature offers something these approaches lack. It creates a structured encounter with complexity, bringing together language work, interpretation, the taking of other perspectives, and the practice of reasoned judgment in a single activity. Participant 3 described it as "a disciplined encounter with layered meaning." Literature is, of course, not the only way to teach students to think critically. However, what makes it especially productive, based on this study's data, is that it does not ask students to do just one thing at a time. Analysis, evaluation, the creation of new readings, and the revision of earlier ones are all required together, in ways that more procedural or information-centered approaches may not readily replicate.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The small sample size means that the patterns identified, particularly the cross-national differences, should be regarded as suggestive rather than definitive. The study was based on self-reported perceptions and practices; no classroom observations were conducted, and no data were collected from students. This means that the pedagogical practices described by the participants may differ from those actually implemented in their classrooms, and the absence of student perspectives prevents direct assessment of their effects on student learning and development. The use of Perry's (1970) developmental model as an interpretive framework entails applying it to a cultural and institutional context for which it was not originally designed. The interviews were conducted at a single point in time and therefore could not capture how instructors' perceptions and practices may change in response to evolving institutional conditions, curricular reforms, or shifts in student populations. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs, direct classroom observations, student voices, and larger, more diverse samples to enable systematic comparisons across educational and cultural contexts.

Ethical and Practical Considerations

Our study also highlights an ethical dimension in pedagogical research and practice. We maintained anonymity and obtained consent, which is straightforward in research terms, but in practice, encouraging critical thinking means encouraging students to voice their opinions, sometimes on sensitive topics. In more conservative or controlled environments, this can be tricky. The participants from Iraq were mindful of selecting literature that could promote dialogue while minimizing the risk of offense or cultural or political implications. This resonates with the critical pedagogy perspective of "reading the world" (Freire, 1970), with caution, empowering students to question and simultaneously address existing constraints. Educators must appreciate the space they create; it must be a safe space for students to express ideas freely, without fear of punitive measures or ridicule. Throughout our research, the educators tended to create a respectful and open environment, which was reflected in the increasing contributions from their students. This requires skillful moderation to prevent personal attacks and manage divergent opinions constructively.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the findings support the position that literature-based teaching can make a meaningful contribution to the development of critical thinking in university English classrooms. It was also demonstrated, however, that this contribution is not an automatic consequence of the inclusion of literary texts in the curriculum. However, this contribution is not automatic; it depends on pedagogy, specifically on dialogic questioning, comparative and reconstructive activities, and scaffolding calibrated to the epistemic starting points of the student population. It also depends on the institutional context, particularly the degree of alignment between pedagogical goals and assessment practices. Moreover, it depends on the instructor's capacity to diagnose students' epistemic positions and guide them toward evidence-based interpretation and reflective judgment. This research adds needed specificity to the existing body of scholarship, clarifying not only whether critical thinking can be developed through literature, but through what mechanisms, under what conditions, and with what awareness of contextual factors.

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APPENDIX**Appendix A: Interviewer Transcripts****Participant 1 (MA, Iraq)**

Interviewer: Thank you again for speaking with me. To begin, could you tell me a little about your teaching context and the kinds of students you usually work with?

Participant 1: Yes, of course. I teach university-level English, and most of my classes include literature in one form or another. Sometimes it is a course that is directly about fiction or poetry, and sometimes it is more of a reading-and-discussion course in which literature becomes the material through which we practice language, interpretation, and response. My students are undergraduates, and many of them are serious and hardworking. However, they often come from educational backgrounds where they were taught to value the correct answer more than the process of questioning.

Interviewer: When you say that, what does it mean for the way they enter a literature classroom?

Participant 1: It means that many students come in expecting literature to be explained to them. They want the teacher to explain what the symbol means, what the theme is, and why the character acted a certain way. They are not used to hearing, 'What do you think, and how would you support it?' So a transition has to happen. I do not mean that they are unable to think critically. The classroom habits they bring do not always encourage that thinking at first.

Interviewer: Do you see literature as especially useful for making that transition?

Participant 1: Yes, I do. Literature can create that movement very naturally because literary texts do not stay flat. A story can look simple at first, but as students read more carefully, they realize there is tension beneath the surface. A poem may seem to say one thing directly, but then one image or one shift in tone opens another possibility. This is useful because it forces students to slow down. They cannot always move from question to answer in a straight line. They have to pause, compare, notice, and sometimes change their first opinion.

Interviewer: What does critical thinking look like to you in that setting?

Participant 1: For me, in the literature classroom, critical thinking is not simply giving an opinion. It is being able to move from reaction to reasoning. A student may begin with a feeling about a character or an ending, but then the important part is what comes next. Why do you read it that way? What in the text led you there? What detail complicates your first response? Can you hear another interpretation without immediately rejecting it? That is the kind of process I am looking for.

Interviewer: How do students usually respond when you begin asking those kinds of questions?

Participant 1: At first, very cautiously. Sometimes they become quiet. Sometimes they answer in a short and very safe way. They may say, 'The poem is about sadness,' or 'The character is selfish,' and then stop. They are watching me. They want to see whether I will approve the answer and finish the discussion there. However, if I keep asking gently, 'What makes you say that?' or 'Where do you see that in the text?' then they begin to understand that the class is asking something different from them.

Interviewer: Does that create anxiety?

Participant 1: Yes, sometimes. Especially for students who are worried about grades or who do not feel very secure in their English. Uncertainty can feel dangerous to them. They may think that if there is no single answer, then the discussion is just confusing. So, I try to give structure to the uncertainty. I begin with observation, then move toward interpretation, then toward evaluation. In that way, students do not feel abandoned. They feel guided.

Interviewer: Can you walk me through what that guidance looks like during an actual class?

Participant 1: Usually, I start with something close to the text. What did you notice in this passage? Which line feels important? What changed in the speaker's tone? Then, after students name something specific, I ask why it matters. Why do you think the author repeated this image? Why does the narrator suddenly sound less certain here? Once they are doing that, I may ask a larger question: what kind of judgment is the text asking us to make, and do you agree with it? So we move step by step from noticing to interpreting to judging.

Interviewer: Have you found certain activities especially effective?

Participant 1: Small-group discussion helps a great deal. In a full-class discussion, some students are too careful. In smaller groups, they are more willing to try an idea before they are completely sure of it. Comparative reading also works very well. If I give them an older text and then a modern retelling, students start to notice how choices shape stories. They see that one version emphasizes obedience, another emphasizes resistance, and that realization helps them question more confidently.

Interviewer: Do you use any writing-based activities as well?

Participant 1: Yes. I often ask students to write short reflection paragraphs before or after a discussion. Sometimes I ask them to rewrite a scene from another character's perspective, then explain why they made the choices they made. That works surprisingly well because students feel freer when they can write first, but the reflective explanation still requires them to justify an interpretation.

Interviewer: Can you describe a moment when you felt the students had really begun to think more critically?

Participant 1: Yes. I remember a discussion about whether a story's main character had acted ethically. At first, the class was divided in a very simple way. Some said he was good. Others said he was selfish. It was very black-and-white. Then one student pointed out that the character's words sounded generous, but the actions underneath them created harm. Another student disagreed, saying that the character might actually believe he was doing the right thing. Suddenly, the conversation became much richer. Students were no longer deciding whether the character was good or bad. They were discussing motive, self-deception, and the gap between intention and consequence. That was a very important moment for me.

Interviewer: So the discussion became more layered.

Participant 1: Exactly. Moreover, once students experience that, they begin to understand that literature is not a puzzle with one neat answer. It is a space where complexity has to be handled

carefully. They begin to see that their reading can become stronger if they are more patient.

Interviewer: Do you think literature also develops empathy, or is that too broad a claim?

Participant 1: I do think it can develop empathy, but not in a shallow way. I am not only talking about feeling sorry for a character. I mean that literature can interrupt quick judgment. Students may begin with a simple reaction to someone in the text, but once they consider context, pressure, fear, family expectations, and social conditions, they start to see more than they saw at first. That movement toward a

A more careful understanding of another person's position is important, and I think it works together with critical thinking, not in isolation.

Interviewer: Have you seen students connect these literary discussions to life outside the classroom?

Participant 1: Yes. Quite often, actually. When we discuss power, shame, gender roles, public judgment, migration, or silence in a text, students frequently begin linking those issues to social media, family expectations, politics, or the way people judge others in everyday life. I think literature gives them some distance at first, which makes it easier to talk. They can begin with the text. Then, once the reasoning is already active, they can move outward from it.

Interviewer: What are the biggest challenges you face in teaching this way?

Participant 1: Time is a major one. Good discussion takes time, and careful reading takes time. Another challenge is that the larger assessment culture does not always reward the kind of deep thinking we are trying to cultivate. If students feel that only memorized material will help them succeed in an exam, they may not value discussion immediately. So part of my job is to show them that this kind of thinking also strengthens their writing, their reading, and their academic confidence.

Interviewer: Do you see evidence of that in their writing over time?

Participant 1: Yes, definitely. Early in the term, many students summarize. Later, some begin making actual claims. They start using quotations more purposefully. They ask better questions. Instead of asking only what happened, they begin asking why something is presented in a certain way. That is a clear sign of intellectual growth to me.

Interviewer: If you had to put it simply, what does literature offer students for critical thinking?

Participant 1: I would say literature gives students a structured way to live with complexity. It invites them to notice more, question more, and support their thinking with care. If that process is guided well, students become less passive readers and more thoughtful thinkers.

Interviewer: Thank you. That was very helpful.

Participant 1: You are very welcome.

Participant 2 (PhD, the United States)

Interviewer: Thank you again for meeting with me. Could you begin by describing your teaching context and the kinds of courses you usually teach?

Participant 2: Certainly. I teach undergraduate English, primarily literature courses, though I rarely regard them as only literature courses. There are also courses in interpretation,

argument, and disciplined reading. Even when the syllabus is organized around fiction or poetry, I pay close attention to the habits of thought that students bring into the room and leave with.

Interviewer: When you think about literature and critical thinking, how do you understand that relationship?

Participant 2: I understand it as a strong but conditional relationship. Literature does not automatically create critical thinking. I am careful about that claim. What it does offer is an environment in which critical thinking becomes difficult to avoid, provided the teaching is structured appropriately. Literary texts often resist paraphrase. They sustain ambiguity, mixed motives, tonal

instability, unresolved endings, and unreliable voices. Students cannot fully engage with that kind of material through information retrieval alone.

Interviewer: So the text creates pressure for interpretation.

Participant 2: Exactly. Moreover, that pressure is pedagogically useful. It forces students to move from recognition to inference, from statement to justification. If the classroom is working well, students discover fairly quickly that certainty must be earned, not assumed. They have to account for their claims. They have to test whether one reading is actually supported or merely asserted.

Interviewer: Do students typically arrive ready for that?

Participant 2: Not usually. Many arrive with one of two habits. Either they assume there is a single correct interpretation that the instructor possesses, or they assume that because literature is open, any response is equally valid. Both positions are unhelpful. My task is to move them toward a more rigorous middle ground: multiple interpretations may be possible, but they are not equally defensible.

Interviewer: What does that look like in practice at the beginning of a semester?

Participant 2: At the beginning, I see a great deal of summary. Students recount events, identify broad themes, and describe characters in moral shorthand. Those moves are not worthless, but they remain pre-analytic. So I introduce questions that a summary cannot satisfy. For example, does the ending resolve the ethical problem or intensify it? Is the narrator persuasive, or is the text instructing us to distrust the narrator's self-account? Once students recognize that plot recall alone will not answer the question, the classroom changes.

Interviewer: Do they find that change uncomfortable?

Participant 2: Often, yes. However, discomfort is not necessarily a negative indicator. Intellectual friction is sometimes a sign that students are no longer performing recognition. They are actually thinking. The important thing is that uncertainty must remain structured. I do not want students to feel abandoned in ambiguity; I want them to learn how to reason within it.

Interviewer: How do you keep that ambiguity productive?

Participant 2: By insisting on the method. If a student says, 'The protagonist is selfish,' I ask what in the text authorizes that reading. If another says, 'No, the protagonist is trapped,' I ask whether those claims are mutually exclusive or whether the novel deliberately sustains both. In other

words, I slow down my assertion. I want students to hear the difference between opinion and interpretation.

Interviewer: Do you rely mostly on discussion for that?

Participant 2: Discussion is central, yes, but only if it is evidence-dependent. I am not interested in discussion as free association. I am interested in collective reasoning. I typically arrange the room so students face one another, open with a question that cannot be reduced to recall, and then redirect them repeatedly back to the page. Evidence becomes the currency of the room. Once students internalize that norm, the quality of discussion improves dramatically.

Interviewer: How do you respond when students look to you to settle the discussion?

Participant 2: I resist doing so too quickly. If the discussion has genuinely lost coherence, I will intervene more directly. However, most of the time, when students look to me for resolution, I redirect them back to textual support. Which reading currently seems better supported? What passage should we revisit before deciding? The goal is not to withhold knowledge theatrically. The goal is to prevent interpretive authority from recentralizing around the instructor whenever disagreement arises.

Interviewer: Have you had a moment in class that felt like a clear breakthrough?

Participant 2: Yes. We were discussing a recurring symbol in a novel, and the room had converged somewhat lazily on a hopeful reading of it. A student then said, quite calmly, 'I think we are misreading it. I do not think it signifies hope. I think it marks evasion.' What mattered was the argument that followed. She traced the symbol across several scenes and demonstrated that it appeared most strongly at moments of avoidance rather than renewal. Other students immediately began revisiting earlier passages. The discussion reopened. Claims became less settled. That was a very strong instance of critical thinking becoming visible as a social process.

Interviewer: What made that moment so important to you?

Participant 2: Because the class stopped treating meaning as already finished. Once students recognize that a text can be reopened by careful evidence, they become more intellectually alive. They revise what they have said. They listen differently. They stop waiting for confirmation and begin testing ideas against one another. That is a significant pedagogical shift.

Interviewer: Beyond discussion, are there other strategies you find effective?

Participant 2: Comparative reading is extremely effective. A single text can appear self-sufficient and authoritative. Two texts immediately reveal construction. Students notice differences in tone, emphasis, silence, and ideological framing. Comparison loosens passive deference. I also use analytic-creative assignments—for example, rewriting a scene from a minor character's perspective, but only if students then explain what interpretive assumptions shaped that rewrite. The critical value lies in the reflective account, not merely the imaginative exercise.

Interviewer: So creativity and analysis are not opposites for you.

Participant 2: Not at all. Serious interpretation is imaginative. Serious creative work is often analytic. If a student convincingly revoices a scene, that student has had to infer motive,

emotional logic, register, and structural pressure. Those are interpretive achievements.

Interviewer: Do you think literature develops empathy as well?

Participant 2: Potentially, yes, though I prefer to define that term carefully. I am less interested in empathy as sentimental identification than in empathy as disciplined perspective-taking. Literature can interrupt hasty judgment. It can expose students to consciousnesses they initially misunderstand or dislike. However, the most interesting moment is not simply when a student says, 'I feel for this character.' It is when a student recognizes that an initial judgment was too quick because the text reveals pressures or contradictions the student had overlooked.

Interviewer: Have you seen students transfer these habits beyond literature?

Participant 2: Yes. After one discussion of public accusation and collective moral panic in a play, students began drawing parallels to contemporary social media dynamics. What mattered was not the analogy itself, but the questions they carried over: who controls the narrative, what counts as evidence, why crowds become persuasive, whose voice is absent. When that transfer happens, it suggests that students are acquiring habits of attention rather than merely literary content.

Interviewer: What obstacles make this work difficult?

Participant 2: Time is the most obvious one. Deep discussion is slow, close reading is slow, revision is slow, and institutional structures often privilege coverage. There is also the problem of students' discomfort with ambiguity. Many equate uncertainty with weakness. Part of the work, then, is conceptual: showing them that uncertainty can be the condition of stronger thinking rather than its failure.

Interviewer: Do you see critical thinking as teachable, then?

Participant 2: Absolutely. Students either do not possess it fully or lack it entirely. They arrive with dispositions, certainly, but critical thinking is a practice. It can be modeled, scaffolded, and refined. Literature is simply an especially rich site for that practice because it makes interpretation unavoidable.

Interviewer: What changes do you notice in student writing over time?

Participant 2: Early papers summarize or moralize. Later papers qualify their claims, anticipate objections, and use quotations strategically rather than decoratively. Students begin to understand that evidence is not a citation attached to a predecided point; it is the material from which the point must be built. That is a substantial shift.

Interviewer: If you had to summarize what literature offers students in one sentence, what would you say?

Participant 2: Literature gives students a disciplined encounter with ambiguity and requires them to make meaning under conditions that cannot be mastered by recall alone.

Interviewer: And the teacher's role?

Participant 2: To keep that ambiguity productive rather than paralyzing, and to keep the classroom from collapsing into either dogmatism or looseness.

Interviewer: Thank you. This has been extremely helpful.

Participant 2: My pleasure.

Participant 3 (PhD, Iraq)

Interviewer: Thank you for joining me. To start, could you describe your teaching background and the type of classroom you work in?

Participant 3: Certainly. I teach English at the university level, with a concentration on literature and literary reading in EFL contexts. My students are undergraduates, and my classes usually involve a combination of textual analysis, guided discussion, written response, and contextual interpretation. In our environment, literature is not always taught as an open field of inquiry, so part of my work has been to make literary study more dialogic without losing academic structure.

Interviewer: How do you understand the relationship between literature and critical thinking?

Participant 3: I would frame it this way: literature offers an especially suitable pedagogical medium for critical thinking because it places students in sustained contact with ambiguity, perspective, and interpretation. It is not simply that literary texts are difficult. Rather, they are layered. They ask students to attend simultaneously to language, voice, motive, symbolism, and context. That combination tends to invite analytic judgment.

Interviewer: Do you think that invitation is enough by itself?

Participant 3: No, I would not say that. I would not romanticize literature in that manner. A text can invite interpretation, but a classroom can still close that invitation down. If literature is taught through notes, model answers, and fixed summaries, then its critical potential becomes reduced. So yes, the text matters, but pedagogy mediates what students are actually allowed to do with the text.

Interviewer: What kinds of habits do students typically bring into your classroom at the start?

Participant 3: Many students begin with a strong desire for stability. They want the accepted, examinable, and safe interpretation. They are often intelligent and observant, but they have been rewarded for certainty more than for inquiry. Because of that, when I ask a genuinely open question, their first response is often caution. They may answer very briefly, or they may wait for me to narrow the field for them.

Interviewer: How do you work with that caution?

Participant 3: I work with it by carefully structuring the progression from comprehension to interpretation. I do not ask students to leap immediately into the most abstract level of analysis. First, we identify what is happening in the passage. Then we ask how the language is working. Then we ask what implication follows from that choice of language. Finally, we can move toward judgment, perspective, or social meaning. In that way, students feel that interpretation is grounded rather than arbitrary.

Interviewer: So scaffolding is important for you.

Participant 3: Very important. Particularly in our context, where some students equate open interpretation with the absence of standards. They need to see that literary discussion can remain open while still being accountable. I often tell them that multiple readings may be possible, but they must be textually responsible.

Interviewer: What does textual responsibility look like in your classes?

Participant 3: It means that students must continually return to the text. If they describe a character as selfish, I ask what language, actions, or narrative framing led them to that conclusion. If another student says the character is trapped rather than selfish, I ask whether the text sustains that tension. I try to teach them that strong reading is not merely expressive. It is evidentiary.

Interviewer: Do students eventually begin doing that on their own?

Participant 3: Yes, and when they do, the classroom changes. At the beginning, I provide most of the prompting. Later, students begin saying, 'But look at this line,' or 'Earlier the narrator said something that contradicts this.' That is a meaningful shift because it shows that evidence has become part of the class culture, not only a teacher's demand.

Interviewer: Can you describe a moment when you felt that shift happening?

Participant 3: Yes. I recall a class discussion around a poem in which students initially treated the speaker as sincere and morally straightforward. One student then observed that the repeated images in the poem created not sincerity but a kind of defensive overstatement. That observation changed the room. The class moved from discussing the poem as a transparent statement of feeling to discussing it as a rhetorical performance. Students began distinguishing between what the speaker says and what the poem suggests. That was an important moment of critical reading.

Interviewer: Why was that distinction so important?

Participant 3: Because it marked a shift from content-level reading to formal and interpretive reading. Students stopped asking only what the poem said and started asking how it achieved its effect, and whether the apparent message was stable. That kind of move is central to critical thinking. It requires students to separate the surface statement from the deeper structure.

Interviewer: What strategies have you found especially effective for developing that kind of reading?

Participant 3: Guided discussion is one, certainly, but I also find comparative reading highly effective. If students read a traditional story alongside a contemporary retelling, they begin to perceive representation as constructed. They notice what has been changed, softened, sharpened, or silenced. From there, questions of ideology and social assumptions become easier to discuss because the differences are visible.

Interviewer: Do you also use writing tasks to support that?

Participant 3: Yes. Short response writing before discussion is particularly helpful. It gives quieter students time to formulate an idea before speaking, making the subsequent discussion more substantive. I also sometimes ask students to write from a minor character's perspective or to alter an ending, and then to provide a reflective explanation. I am interested in creative tasks only when they reveal interpretation. Otherwise, they remain superficial.

Interviewer: Do you think literature helps students with perspective-taking or empathy?

Participant 3: Yes, but I would define that carefully. I do not mean that students feel sympathy. I mean that literary study can complicate first judgments. Students may initially evaluate a

character or a situation too quickly. Through discussion, through contextualization, and through attention to narrative perspective, they may begin to recognize pressures they had not considered. That widening of judgment is valuable. It is both ethical and cognitive.

Interviewer: Have you seen students connect literary discussion to contemporary life or broader social issues?

Participant 3: Quite often. When themes such as public shame, migration, authority, gender expectation, or collective fear emerge in a text, students frequently connect them to social realities they recognize. I find that literature can function as a mediating space. Students may be more willing to discuss a difficult issue if they begin with a character or a narrative situation before moving toward present-day parallels.

Interviewer: Does that make literature feel safer to discuss?

Participant 3: In some cases, yes. Literature provides a degree of distance. Students can reason through the text first. However, the reasoning is not artificial. Once they begin asking who has power, who is silenced, what counts as evidence, or why a crowd behaves in a certain way, those questions are readily transferable beyond the literary object.

Interviewer: What are the main challenges you face in trying to teach this way?

Participant 3: One challenge is institutional. Assessment cultures do not always align with inquiry-based pedagogy. If students believe that memorization is what will be rewarded, then open interpretation may initially seem inefficient or even risky. Another challenge is temporal. Close reading and reflective discussion are slow forms of pedagogy, while curricula often demand steady coverage. There is also the issue of classroom habits. If students have long associated the teacher with final meaning, then redistributing interpretive responsibility takes time.

Interviewer: How do you manage that redistribution of responsibility?

Participant 3: Gradually, and with explicit explanation. I tell students that I am not refusing to teach when I ask them to interpret. I am teaching them a different mode of intellectual work. Once that becomes clear, they are more receptive. They may still be cautious, but the caution becomes more productive.

Interviewer: Do you see changes in their writing as well as in class discussion?

Participant 3: Yes. Early writing tends to summarize or generalize. Later writing begins to discriminate. Students start making more precise claims. They begin selecting textual evidence more intentionally. Some even begin acknowledging alternative readings and then arguing why their own interpretation remains stronger. That is a significant development.

Interviewer: If you had to say briefly what literature contributes to critical thinking, how would you phrase it?

Participant 3: I would say that literature offers students a disciplined encounter with layered meaning, thereby training them to read beyond what is immediately given. In pedagogical terms, it encourages analysis, justification, and reflective judgment.

Interviewer: And what is the role of the instructor in that process?

Participant 3: To create a classroom structure in which uncertainty remains rigorous,

participation remains accountable, and students gradually come to trust their own reasoning without detaching it from evidence.

Interviewer: Thank you. This has been extremely valuable.

Participant 3: You are most welcome.

Participant 4 (MA, the United States)

Interviewer: Thanks again for doing this. Could you start by telling me a little about what you teach and what your classroom is usually like?

Participant 4: Sure. I teach undergrad English, mostly literature-heavy classes, though honestly, my classes usually end up being part literature, part discussion lab, part writing lab, and part figuring out how to think in public. So even if the syllabus says fiction or drama, what I am really doing a lot of the time is getting students to slow down, read closely, and actually stand behind an interpretation.

Interviewer: What makes literature useful for that, in your view?

Participant 4: It makes students stay with uncertainty longer than they want to. That is the big thing. A lot of students come in wanting closure fast. They want to know what the text means, what the teacher thinks it means, and what they should write down. Literature is annoying in a productive way because it does not always let them do that. A character can be sympathetic and infuriating at the same time. An ending can feel finished and unresolved at once. That drives conversation if you know how to use it.

Interviewer: Do students like that uncertainty?

Participant 4: At first? Not really. Some do, but a lot do not. I get a bunch of nervous symptoms at the beginning of the semester. Students will tell me what happened in the chapter in a very organized way and ask whether that counts as analysis. Moreover, I get why they do it. Summary feels safe. If you summarize, nobody can really argue with you. Interpretation is riskier.

Interviewer: How do you move them out of that safe mode?

Participant 4: I keep asking the question after the answer. So if a student says, 'He is selfish,' I will say, 'Okay, based on what?' If they say, 'The poem is about grief,' I will say, 'What in the language gets you there?' Alternatively, I will ask, 'Does the text fully support that, or is it pushing back on that reading somewhere?'

I want them to understand that a response is only the beginning of the work, not the end.

Interviewer: What does a good literature discussion look like for you?

Participant 4: A good discussion feels like the room wakes up. Students stop performing for me and start listening to each other because the text is actually still open. I want them building on each other, pushing each other, going back to the page, changing their minds in real time. That is the gold standard. Not just lots of talking. Plenty of classes have lots of talking and not much thinking. I want a discussion with traction.

Interviewer: How do you create that?

Participant 4: I usually start with a question that has real tension. Not 'What is the theme?' because that dies fast. More like, 'Is this ending asking us to forgive the character, or is it

exposing how badly they have misunderstood themselves?' Then students have something to wrestle with. I will let them sit with the question for a second, maybe write for two minutes, then talk in pairs or small groups, and only after that do we go full-class. That sequence helps a lot.

Interviewer: Why the writing first?

Participant 4: Because some students need a beat. If I throw an open question out and expect instant brilliance, I am mostly going to hear from the fast processors or the confident talkers. A short write gives quieter students a chance to arrive with something to say. It also makes the conversation less random because people have already committed to an idea, even if only tentatively.

Interviewer: Have you had moments where students really surprised you?

Participant 4: Oh, absolutely. One of my favorite moments was with a student who rarely talked in the big group. We were discussing a novel, and everybody had started describing this recurring image as hopeful. It had basically become the room's agreed-upon reading. Then she raised her hand and said, very calmly, 'I do not think it is hopeful at all. I think every time it appears, the character is avoiding reality.' Moreover, that changed everything. Suddenly, people were flipping pages, quoting scenes, rethinking what they had said. It was great.

Interviewer: What made that moment stand out to you?

Participant 4: Two things. First, the reading itself was good. Second, it showed the class that meaning was still in motion. Once students realize the text has not been settled yet, they get much more alive. They stop treating discussion like a scavenger hunt for the teacher's answer and start treating it like an actual inquiry.

Interviewer: Do you use strategies beyond discussion?

Participant 4: Definitely. Comparative reading works really well. Put a nineteenth-century text next to a modern retelling and suddenly students can see choices everywhere—what got softened, what got sharpened, who gets a voice now, who did not before, what values changed. That is huge. I also love perspective-shift assignments. Have students rewrite a scene from a minor character's point of view, but then make them explain why that shift changes the meaning. That second part is crucial.

Interviewer: So you want the creative work tied back to analysis.

Participant 4: Always. Otherwise, it is just a fun exercise, which is fine, but that is not enough for me. I want them to show that they understood the original text well enough to alter it deliberately.

Interviewer: Do you think literature helps with empathy, too?

Participant 4: Yes, but not in a cheesy way. I am not trying to make students feel things and call that critical thinking. What I do think literature can do is slow judgment down. Students come in with a snap reaction to a character, and then the text complicates that reaction. Alternatively, another student says, 'Wait, but look at the social pressure here,' and suddenly the whole conversation shifts. That is valuable. It is empathy, sure, but it is also analysis.

Interviewer: Have you seen students connect literary discussions to life outside class?

Participant 4: All the time. We were reading a play once and got into this whole conversation about public accusation and moral panic, and one student said, 'This is basically the internet.' Which was funny, but also perfect. Then everybody started talking about online pile-ons, people reacting before they verify, the speed of outrage, and how quickly rumors harden into facts. Moreover, they were using the same questions we had been using for the play. Who benefits? Who gets believed? What counts as evidence? That is when you know the work is traveling.

Interviewer: What gets in the way of this kind of teaching?

Participant 4: Time. Always time. Deep reading is slow, good discussion is slow, and institutional structures are not always built for slow thinking. There is also student anxiety. Some students are terrified of being wrong in public. Others are not afraid enough to fire off confident takes without evidence. So you are managing both caution and speed at once.

Interviewer: How do you handle that mix?

Participant 4: I try to make the room intellectually safe but not intellectually soft. Students need to know they can test an idea without getting embarrassed, but they also need to know that ideas have to do work. So I acknowledge partial answers, ask follow-ups, and keep bringing us back to the text. If someone offers a weak claim, I do not shut it down dramatically. I ask what supports it. Usually, the room does the rest.

Interviewer: Do you see growth in their writing, too?

Participant 4: Definitely. Early essays summarize. Mid-semester essays start making claims. Better ones start by qualifying those claims, considering counter-readings, and using quotations as evidence rather than wallpaper. That is a huge shift. It tells me students are not just consuming interpretations anymore. They are building them.

Interviewer: If you had to put it simply, what does literature offer students for critical thinking?

Participant 4: It gives them a place to practice complexity in public. They have to notice, interpret, defend, revise, and listen. If you teach it well, that is a pretty serious workout for the mind.

Interviewer: That is great. Thank you.

Participant 4: Yeah, absolutely.

Participant 5 (MA, Iraq)

Interviewer: Thank you again for agreeing to speak with me. Could you begin by telling me a little about your teaching and the kinds of students you usually teach?

Participant 5: Yes, of course. I teach English at the university, and most of my students are undergraduates enrolled in courses where literature is either central or heavily used. Sometimes it is

fiction, sometimes poetry, sometimes mixed reading, but literature is usually there. My students are capable and serious, but many of them come from learning situations where the teacher explains, and the students receive, so when I ask them to interpret openly, that is not always natural for them at first.

Interviewer: What do you think literature offers students in terms of critical thinking?

Participant 5: For my students, literature gives them a chance to move away from the habit of looking for only one safe answer. That is the first thing, really the first thing. In many classes, they are trained to ask, 'What should I write?' or, 'What is the correct meaning?' because that is how they have learned to succeed. However, when they read a story or a poem carefully, they start feeling that the text is not so obedient. It does not stay simple. It keeps opening.

Interviewer: How do you see that opening happening?

Participant 5: Usually through discomfort first. Students want to decide very quickly: this character is good, this character is bad, this ending is happy, this symbol means hope. Then, as we read more slowly, that first judgment starts to weaken. They notice a contradiction. They notice a tone shift. They notice that the narrator may not be fully honest. So they have to think again. Moreover, for me, that second thinking, that rethinking, is very important.

Interviewer: Do students usually welcome that, or does it make them uneasy?

Participant 5: At first, it makes many of them uneasy. They become quiet. They look at me as if to ask, 'But what is the answer you want?' Some will answer, yes, but in a very short and careful way. They are testing the class. They want to know if this is a class where the teacher will eventually say the official meaning. So I do not blame them for this. It is a habit, and habits take time to loosen.

Interviewer: How do you help loosen that habit?

Participant 5: Little by little. I do not begin with the biggest abstract question because then I may lose them. I begin with what they can see. What happened here? What image repeats? What changed in the language? Then I ask why it matters. Then I ask what that might suggest about the character or the narrator. Later, we move on to larger questions. So students feel that interpretation is built step by step. It is not magic. It is not guessing.

Interviewer: Do you think that structure helps with confidence?

Participant 5: Yes, very much. Especially for students who are already nervous because of their language ability or fear of being wrong. When they see that they can begin from a detail in the text, they feel less exposed. The text gives them somewhere to stand. They do not have to begin with a grand theory. They can begin with one line, one image, one moment.

Interviewer: What classroom strategies have worked especially well for you?

Participant 5: Small groups help a lot. In the full class, some students are too quiet, too respectful, too worried. In small groups, they speak more honestly. They try out an interpretation before they are fully sure. Then, when we return to the whole class, they are more ready. I also use comparison a lot. If they read an older story and then a newer version, suddenly they notice more. They ask, 'Why is this woman silent here but not there?' or, 'Why does this ending feel harsher?' Those questions start coming from them, and that is always a good sign.

Interviewer: Do you use writing as part of this process, too?

Participant 5: Yes. Sometimes a short written response before discussion, sometimes a reflective paragraph after discussion, and sometimes a creative task such as rewriting a scene or imagining the

voice of a minor character. However, I always ask them to explain their choices. That explanation matters. Otherwise, the task can remain only imaginative. I want the imagination to reveal interpretation.

Interviewer: Can you describe a moment when you felt the students were really engaging critically?

Participant 5: Yes. I remember one student who rarely spoke in front of the whole class. She was very attentive, very serious, but very quiet. We were discussing a symbol in a novel, and another student gave the expected interpretation, the one everybody already recognized. Then she raised her hand and said, very softly, 'I do not think it means hope. I think it means escape.' The room became still for a second.

Interviewer: What happened next?

Participant 5: I asked her to explain, and she did. Slowly, carefully. She pointed to several moments in the novel and said that every time the symbol appears, the character is avoiding something painful rather than moving toward something better. It was a strong reading. Moreover, the class changed afterward. Students became more awake. They started going back to earlier passages and asking whether they had decided too quickly. For me, that was a very beautiful moment because it showed how one thoughtful interpretation can open the whole room.

Interviewer: Do you think literature also helps students develop empathy?

Participant 5: Yes, but not in a shallow sense. I do not mean only that they feel sad for a character. I mean that literature slows their judgment. A student may begin with a simple reaction to someone in the story, but as we discuss context, pressure, family, society, and fear, they begin to see more. They begin asking, 'Why did I judge this person so quickly?' That is important. It is empathy, yes, but also critical thinking, because it requires self-correction.

Interviewer: Have you seen students connect literature to things outside class?

Participant 5: Very often. When we talk about public shame, social expectation, rumor, collective fear, or power in a text, students begin connecting those themes to social media, their families, politics, and the way people judge each other in everyday life. Literature gives them a starting point that feels safer. They can begin with the character, but the questions they ask do not stay only inside the book.

Interviewer: What are the main challenges in teaching this way?

Participant 5: Exam culture is one. Time is another. If students believe that only memorized material will help them later, then open discussion may feel like a luxury. Also, careful reading takes time, confidence takes time, and discussion takes time. However, the semester moves quickly. So sometimes I feel the class is finally thinking deeply, yet I must still move on. That is difficult.

Interviewer: How do you work within those constraints?

Participant 5: I try to make room where I can. Even if I cannot change the whole system, I can change some things inside my classroom. I can ask them to support their ideas. I can give space for reflection. I can reward thoughtful participation. I can show them that this kind of work also improves their writing, not just their speaking. Small classroom choices matter more than people think.

Interviewer: Do you see that improvement in their writing?

Participant 5: Yes. Early writing is often mostly summary. Later, some students begin making real claims. They quote with purpose. They compare possibilities. They ask better questions. Instead of only asking, 'What happened?' they begin asking, 'Why did the narrator hide this?' or, 'Why is this image repeated only in moments of fear?' Those are much stronger signs of engagement.

Interviewer: If you had to say simply what literature offers students for critical thinking, what would you say?

Participant 5: I would say literature gives students a serious but manageable way to practice judgment. They can question, compare, and reconsider through the text, and then, little by little, those habits become part of the way they read more generally.

Interviewer: And the teacher's role in that?

Participant 5: To create trust, patience, and accountability at the same time. Students need to feel safe enough to think aloud, but also challenged enough to support their thinking. That balance is very important.

Interviewer: Thank you. This has been extremely useful.

Participant 5: You are very welcome.