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CRITICAL READING SKILLS THROUGH MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract: Critical reading is an essential component of advanced language competence because it requires readers not only to understand what a text says but also to examine how meaning is constructed, whose perspective is represented, what assumptions underlie the text, and how linguistic choices influence interpretation. Modern English literature provides particularly valuable material for the development of such skills because literary texts frequently combine complex language, multiple perspectives, ambiguity, symbolism, social issues, cultural references, and implicit meanings. This article examines the potential of modern English literature for developing critical reading skills in English-language and English-as-a-foreign-language contexts. The study is based on a qualitative synthesis of established research on literary reading, critical literacy, stylistics, critical thinking, and literature-based language education. Particular attention is given to reader response, contextual interpretation, linguistic analysis, evaluation of evidence, recognition of ideology and perspective, and comparative interpretation. Existing empirical evidence demonstrates that explicit instruction in critical thinking and critical reading can produce measurable educational effects. A meta-analysis of 117 studies involving 20,698 participants reported an overall mean effect size of 0.34 for instructional interventions targeting critical thinking, while a more recent university-level study involving 39 undergraduate students found that 94.87% of participants considered a two-stage critical reading model helpful. The analysis indicates that modern English literature is most effective for critical reading development when literary interpretation is combined with explicit questioning, contextualization, stylistic analysis, discussion, evidence-based argumentation, and reflection. The article concludes that literary education should move beyond the reproduction of predetermined interpretations and encourage students to become active, independent, and critically responsible readers.

Keywords: critical reading, modern English literature, critical literacy, literary analysis, EFL, reader response, stylistics, critical thinking, English language teaching, literature education.

Introduction

Reading in a foreign language is not limited to recognizing vocabulary, grammatical structures, and explicit information. At an advanced level, successful reading requires readers to identify relationships between ideas, infer unstated meanings, evaluate claims, recognize perspectives, examine linguistic choices, and connect textual information with broader social and cultural contexts. Critical reading therefore represents a complex form of reading in which comprehension is combined with interpretation and evaluation [1], [2].

The relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking has been extensively discussed in educational research. Kurland and other scholars have emphasized that reading involves reasoning rather than merely decoding written language. A theoretical review by Saadé, Morin and Thomas concludes that reading comprehension and critical thinking are strongly related and that prior knowledge, inference-making and reasoning contribute to the construction of meaning [3]. This relationship is particularly significant in literary reading because literary texts frequently require readers to interpret information that is indirect, ambiguous, symbolic or dependent on context.

Literature has traditionally occupied an important position in language education because it provides authentic and culturally meaningful language. Lazar argues that literary texts can be used for different pedagogical purposes, including language development, literary competence, personal involvement and cultural awareness [4, pp. 1–21]. Her discussion also emphasizes that there is no single universally correct method for teaching literature because different texts, learners and educational contexts require different approaches.

The educational potential of literature becomes particularly important when literary reading is connected with critical literacy. Bobkina and Stefanova argue that literature can provide opportunities for learners to explore, interpret and understand the world around them and propose reader-centred activities for developing critical thinking in the EFL classroom [5, pp. 677–696]. Their model emphasizes observation, interpretation and active evaluation rather than simple reproduction of a teacher's interpretation.

Modern English literature is especially appropriate for such work because contemporary literary texts frequently address identity, migration, gender, race, social inequality, cultural conflict, technology, political structures and changing social values. These themes allow students to examine not only the linguistic form of a text but also the relationship between language, society and power. Janks identifies domination, access, diversity and design as interconnected dimensions of critical literacy, emphasizing the relationship between language and power [6, pp. 175–186].

Consequently, the central objective of this article is to examine how modern English literature can contribute to the development of critical reading skills and to

identify pedagogical principles that can make literary reading more analytically productive in English-language education.

Methodology

The article employs a qualitative literature-review methodology. The research is based on published scholarly works concerning critical reading, critical thinking, critical literacy, stylistics, literature in language education, reader response and literary pedagogy. The sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and research reviews published by established academic publishers and journals.

The methodological approach consists of four stages. First, relevant theoretical literature concerning the nature of critical reading and critical thinking was examined. Second, research addressing the pedagogical use of literature in English-language education was analyzed. Third, studies specifically connecting literature and critical literacy were compared. Finally, empirical statistical findings from relevant educational studies were considered in order to distinguish theoretically proposed benefits from experimentally or quantitatively observed outcomes.

The literature-review approach is appropriate because the purpose of the article is not to report an original classroom experiment but to synthesize established evidence concerning the relationship between modern English literature and critical reading. Paran's evidence-based survey, for example, examined research on literature in instructed foreign-language learning and teaching and reported that learner responses to literature are associated with the approaches and tasks used in the classroom [7, pp. 465–496].

A particularly relevant empirical source is the study by Hà and Huertas-Abril. Their 2024 study developed and piloted a two-stage critical reading model with 39 undergraduate students. Thirty-seven students, or 94.87%, reported that the model supported their critical reading, while two students, or 5.13%, did not find it helpful. Among the reported benefits, 76.92% indicated that the model provided techniques for text comprehension and critical reading; 43.59% identified main-idea recognition as a useful outcome, 30.77% identified information organization, 15.38% identified structural analysis, and 28% identified connecting textual purpose with context and authorial intention [8].

The article also considers the meta-analytic evidence of Abrami et al., who examined 117 studies involving 20,698 participants and 161 effect sizes. The reported overall mean effect size was 0.341, with a 95% confidence interval from 0.31 to 0.37. The authors found substantial heterogeneity, with $I^2 = 90.95\%$, demonstrating that the effects of critical-thinking instruction varied considerably between studies and instructional approaches [9, pp. 1102–1134].

These findings are not interpreted as evidence that literature alone produces a particular improvement in critical reading. Rather, they support the more cautious conclusion that explicit pedagogical interventions designed to develop critical thinking and critical reading can be effective, while the selection of texts, instructional method, learner characteristics and assessment procedures remain important variables.

Results

The literature review identifies several interconnected dimensions through which modern English literature can contribute to critical reading development.

The first is **interpretive reading**. Literary texts frequently require readers to construct meanings rather than simply locate explicit answers. Hall describes literary reading as an important area of research within language education and distinguishes different dimensions of literary language, reading, culture and educational practice [10, pp. 83–122]. Literary interpretation consequently encourages students to consider why a writer has selected particular words, narrative structures, characters, images and viewpoints.

The second dimension is **linguistic and stylistic analysis**. Widdowson's work connects stylistics with the teaching of literature and argues that stylistic analysis can help learners relate literary language to their broader experience of language [11, pp. 1–126]. From a critical-reading perspective, this means that students can examine lexical selection, grammatical patterns, modality, repetition, metaphor, narrative voice, register and other linguistic features before forming an interpretation.

The third dimension is **contextual reading**. Readers do not approach texts without prior knowledge or cultural assumptions. Lazar's discussion of cross-cultural reading emphasizes that readers interpret literary texts through their own worldviews and cultural experiences [4, pp. 62–70]. Exposure to literature from different cultural backgrounds can therefore encourage learners to recognize the difference between their own assumptions and those embedded in the literary text.

The fourth dimension is **perspective recognition**. A literary narrative may privilege some characters while marginalizing others. Critical reading requires students to ask whose voice is dominant, whose experiences are absent, how characters are described, and whether the narrator can be considered reliable. Borsheim-Black, Macaluso and Petrone's Critical Literature Pedagogy specifically encourages students to examine canonical literature for ideological assumptions rather than treating canonical texts as automatically neutral or culturally unquestionable [12, pp. 123–133].

The fifth dimension is **evidence-based interpretation**. Critical reading should not become unrestricted personal opinion. Students need to distinguish between a subjective response and an interpretation supported by textual evidence. A useful literary-reading activity therefore requires students to formulate a claim, identify relevant textual evidence, explain the relationship between the evidence and the claim, and consider alternative interpretations.

The sixth dimension is **critical literacy**. Bacon's review of critical literacies in English-language teaching demonstrates that critical engagement with language is connected with questions of power, multilingualism and the social positioning of English learners [13, pp. 424–453]. Literary texts can therefore become sites for examining how language represents social groups and how particular viewpoints become normalized.

The seventh dimension is **culturally responsive interpretation**. Ervin argues that culturally sustaining approaches can be incorporated even when teachers are

required to use prescribed literary texts. Critical analysis can provide opportunities for students to examine canonical works from multiple cultural perspectives rather than replacing them with entirely different texts [14, pp. 321–329].

Finally, the literature indicates that critical reading requires explicit instruction. The evidence does not support the assumption that students automatically develop critical thinking merely because they read complex literary works. Abrami et al.'s meta-analysis explicitly indicates that improvements in critical-thinking skills should not be treated as an implicit consequence of instruction [9, pp. 1102–1134].

Analysis and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that modern English literature should not be understood simply as a source of vocabulary or grammatical examples. Its more significant contribution lies in the possibility of integrating linguistic, interpretive, cultural and critical dimensions of reading.

A productive critical-reading lesson can begin with **literal comprehension**, but it should not end there. Students may first identify the setting, characters, central conflict and key events. The next stage can involve analysis of language: What words are repeated? What metaphors are used? What grammatical forms indicate certainty or uncertainty? How does the narrator describe particular characters? These questions shift the learner from basic comprehension toward textual analysis.

The following stage should address **authorial purpose and perspective**. Hà and Huertas-Abril's two-stage model is particularly relevant here because it combines analysis of the author's purposes with subsequent evaluation and response [8]. Their findings indicate that students valued activities involving main ideas, organization, structure, context and authorial purpose. The fact that 94.87% of participants in their small undergraduate sample considered the model helpful provides empirical support for this type of structured approach, although the sample size means that the result should not be generalized to all learners or educational contexts.

A fourth stage can involve **alternative interpretation**. Students can be asked to produce two plausible interpretations of the same passage. They then compare the textual evidence supporting each interpretation. This technique develops intellectual flexibility because learners recognize that ambiguity does not necessarily mean that one interpretation is correct and all others are incorrect.

Modern English literature is particularly useful for this purpose because literary texts often contain ambiguity. A character may be simultaneously sympathetic and problematic; a narrator may provide incomplete information; an ending may remain unresolved. Such characteristics encourage students to distinguish between certainty, probability and interpretation.

Another important principle is **reading with and against the text**. Borsheim-Black et al. propose Critical Literature Pedagogy as a framework for combining critical literacy with canonical literature. Their approach encourages students to consider not only what a text says but also what it leaves unsaid and how dominant ideological assumptions may shape representation [12, pp. 123–133].

This principle can be applied to modern English literary works without turning literary lessons into purely ideological criticism. Students can examine questions such

as: Who speaks? Who is silent? Which social norms are presented as natural? What alternatives are excluded? What assumptions does the narrative require the reader to accept? These questions are compatible with traditional literary analysis because they remain connected to characterization, narration, diction, structure and theme.

At the same time, critical reading should avoid becoming exclusively suspicious reading. McKenzie and Jarvie warn about the limitations of resistant reading when critical literacy approaches encourage readers to treat texts primarily as objects to expose or distrust. They argue for making room for relational and affective responses in addition to critique [15, pp. 298–309].

This observation is important for modern literary education. A student may disagree with a character's actions but still need to understand the character. A reader may criticize an author's ideological assumptions while also recognizing literary complexity and aesthetic value. Critical reading therefore should combine skepticism with openness.

The role of **discussion** is also significant. Kramsch's analysis of literary texts in the language classroom highlights the importance of treating literary texts as discourse rather than as isolated linguistic objects [16, pp. 356–366]. Classroom discussion allows learners to compare interpretations, identify contradictions and revise initial conclusions. Such interaction is especially useful in foreign-language education because it integrates reading with speaking and argumentation.

The pedagogical process can therefore be organized around a sequence of questions:

- What does the text explicitly say?
- What does it imply?
- Which linguistic features support this interpretation?
- Who is presenting the information?
- What perspective does the narrator or speaker represent?
- What assumptions are visible in the text?
- Which perspectives are absent?
- What historical or cultural context is relevant?
- What alternative interpretations are possible?
- Which interpretation is best supported by textual evidence?

This sequence moves students from comprehension to analysis, evaluation and reflection.

The importance of explicit instruction is further supported by the meta-analysis conducted by Abrami et al. Their study found an overall effect size of 0.34 across 161 effects. Importantly, the type of intervention influenced outcomes: the reported effect size was 0.38 for general critical-thinking instruction, 0.54 for infusion approaches, 0.09 for immersion approaches and 0.94 for mixed approaches [9]. These findings suggest that simply immersing students in intellectually demanding material may be less effective than explicitly integrating critical-thinking instruction into subject learning. The considerable heterogeneity of the evidence, however, means that these values should not be interpreted as universal predictions for literature classrooms.

This distinction has direct implications for English literature instruction. A teacher should not simply assign a complex novel and expect critical reading to develop automatically. Instead, critical-reading objectives should be explicitly formulated and integrated into reading tasks, classroom discussion and assessment.

Assessment should also measure more than recall. Traditional questions such as “Who is the main character?” or “Where does the story take place?” can be useful for initial comprehension, but critical-reading assessment should additionally evaluate the student's ability to identify evidence, explain linguistic choices, recognize perspectives, compare interpretations and justify conclusions.

Modern English literature can consequently support a multi-dimensional model of critical reading consisting of five interconnected abilities: **comprehension, textual analysis, contextual interpretation, evaluation and reflective response**. These abilities are not independent. Comprehension provides the basis for analysis; analysis supports interpretation; interpretation enables evaluation; and reflection allows the reader to reconsider both the text and the reader's own assumptions.

The role of culture deserves particular attention in EFL contexts. Students may encounter references, social practices or historical assumptions unfamiliar to them. Lazar emphasizes that literary reading across cultures requires awareness that readers interpret texts through their own cultural experiences [4, pp. 62–70]. This suggests that teachers should neither assume that all learners share the same cultural background nor treat unfamiliar cultural elements as mere vocabulary problems. Instead, cultural difference itself can become an object of critical inquiry.

In this sense, modern English literature provides an important bridge between language education and broader literacy education. Students learn not only how English works as a linguistic system but also how English is used to construct identities, communicate values and represent social realities.

Conclusion

Modern English literature has substantial potential for the development of critical reading skills when it is taught through explicit, evidence-based and reader-centred approaches. Literary texts provide opportunities to examine language, narrative structure, perspective, ambiguity, ideology, culture and social representation. However, the presence of literary complexity alone does not guarantee the development of critical thinking. Research on critical-thinking instruction demonstrates that explicit pedagogical intervention is important, while empirical research on critical reading indicates that structured models can support students' comprehension, analysis and evaluation.

The most effective approach is therefore not to replace traditional literary study but to expand it. Close reading, stylistic analysis, contextual interpretation and reader response can be combined with questions about perspective, power, representation and evidence. Students should be encouraged to read both with and against a text, to appreciate literary complexity while also questioning assumptions embedded within it.

The available statistical evidence should be interpreted carefully. The 94.87% positive response reported by Hà and Huertas-Abril was obtained from a small sample

of 39 undergraduate students and therefore cannot be generalized to all learners. Similarly, Abrami et al.'s meta-analysis found a moderate overall effect but also very high heterogeneity. These limitations reinforce the importance of context-sensitive teaching and further empirical research.

For English-language education, the principal implication is clear: modern English literature should be treated not merely as a collection of texts to be understood but as a space in which learners can practice reasoning, interpretation, evaluation and reflection. When literary reading is connected with explicit critical-literacy strategies, students can develop the ability to approach complex texts independently and responsibly. Such competence is valuable not only for literary study but also for academic learning and participation in an information-rich society.

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STYLISTIC FUNCTIONS OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY DISCOURSE

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Abstract. The article investigates the stylistic functions of figurative language in contemporary literary discourse. It focuses on metaphor, simile, personification, epithet, and hyperbole as linguistic resources that organize imagery, evaluation, characterization, foregrounding, and reader response. Drawing on major approaches in literary stylistics, the study argues that figurative devices should not be treated as decorative additions to an otherwise neutral message. Their selection influences viewpoint, emotional intensity, textual cohesion, and the conceptual representation of fictional experience. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between linguistic form and interpretative effect, as well as to the role of context in determining the stylistic value of a figurative expression. The analysis demonstrates that figurative language is a central mechanism through which literary discourse creates aesthetic salience and guides readers toward particular interpretations.