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*Feature Article*

## **The Effects of Using Literature on EFL Students' Critical Thinking: Fostering Critical Thinking Skills in Foreign Language Learning**

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### **Abstract**

The use of literature in education can help students develop their critical thinking skills by encouraging close reading and analysis, promoting interpretation and evaluation, providing diverse perspectives, and developing communication skills. However, little research has been done to explore the benefit of using literature in English language teaching in Japan for the purpose of fostering students' critical thinking. In response to this, the present study investigated the effects of using literature to foster students' critical thinking skills in an EFL classroom with 35 non-English major students at a Japanese university. The participants were enrolled in an English reading class which incorporated literary texts as the reading materials. For 15 weeks, they participated in classroom activities centered around the reading of a different short story during each class. The results of pretest and posttest questionnaires indicate that using literature in English reading classes had a positive impact on students' overall critical thinking skills. The results also suggest that the ability to make inferences was the most developed critical thinking skill among the abilities gained by the students in the study. Additionally, students reported that they enjoyed participating in group discussions and had fun reading and analyzing literature in the classroom. The findings of the study suggest that using literature in English language teaching in Japan can be beneficial for fostering students' critical thinking skills.

**Key words:** critical thinking skills, reading, literature

Although developing critical thinking skills has been seen as a primary goal in higher education for decades (MEXT, 2008, 2018), opportunities to acquire these skills are limited and Japanese undergraduate students tend to possess inadequate critical thinking skills (e.g., Tanaka & Yutaka, 2016). The causes for such problems are largely due to Japan's social character, reinforced by its current educational system. Japanese students in general are accustomed to a collectivist society where individual thoughts and opinions are often not appreciated when compared with the reception of the same within a western society (Winfield, Mizuno & Beaudoin, 2000; Laskar, 2007; McDaniel & Katsumata, 2012; Kawabata & Barling, 2020).

English language teaching (ELT) in Japan focuses mostly on skill practice and grammatical understanding. Moreover, most textbooks employed at the secondary education level tend to focus excessively on basic reading comprehension skills and were not originally intended as a means of fostering critical thinking (Mineshima & Chino, 2013; Tanaka & Yutaka, 2016; Baker, 2018; Jones, 2019).

As a result, Japanese students seem to have very limited critical thinking skills by the time they reach university. According to Sugimura (2015), individuals who lack critical reading skills may struggle to identify issues in a text, form their own perspectives on it, or express their opinions coherently. Rather than engaging actively with the material and generating original insights,



they may adopt a passive approach of seeking a singular “correct” interpretation.

Thus, altering students’ learning habits and mindset by developing critical thinking skills and nurturing attitudes towards critical thinking is of great importance. Developing the ability to think critically and independently in a structured manner is a critical issue in higher education, representing the final frontier in preparing students for success in their academic and professional lives (Tanaka & Yutaka, 2016).

One means by which these skills could be fostered is through the application of literature in the EFL classroom (e.g., Nance, 2010). Literature has long been considered important in cultivating critical thinking and is effectively used in the EFL / ESL classroom (e.g., Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021; Ouhiba, 2022), including countries in Asia where English is widely used in education, such as Singapore (Ministry of Education: Singapore, 2013). With these examples in mind, incorporating literature into the Japanese university EFL classroom could present a possible solution to the aforementioned problems.

However, there is little research on the application of literature in Japanese ELT for the purpose of fostering students’ critical thinking skills. Therefore, it remains unclear to what extent reading literature can develop the critical thinking skills of Japanese EFL students. For this reason, this study aims to explore the extent to which a group of students’ critical thinking can be influenced by using literature in a Japanese EFL classroom.

### Literature review

While various definitions of critical thinking have been proposed, Fisher (2011), in his oft-cited book, *Critical Thinking*, defines it as “skilled and active *interpretation* and *evaluation* of observations and communications, information and argumentation” (emphasis added, p.11). This definition is particularly relevant for this study as it focuses on the ability to interpret and evaluate (e.g., written texts) as a fundamental trait of critical thinking, an ability that is intrinsic to reading a literary text (Widdowson, 1983). Thus, the use of literary texts in the EFL classroom could make a significant contribution to developing critical thinking.

Lazere (1987) claimed that “literature 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). Being

engaged in reading literature is a complex process that requires readers to reflect on their own thinking to make sense of a text (Tung & Chang, 2009). Readers of literature need to develop competencies to assist with

hidden or implied meanings, separate facts from opinions, examine characteristics of the narrative from multiple points of view, reconstruct images from details and apply what they have learned to other aspects of their daily life (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016, p. 680).

This is reflected in McRae’s (1996) idea of the components of literary competence, which include the ability “to make connections and cross-references, to quote and summarise constructively, to balance arguments and reach conclusions, to take subjective standpoints and relate them to objective criteria, and to contextualise” (p. 37).

In brief, all these components are regarded as critical thinking skills, and readers of literature are practicing what critical thinking theoreticians called “interpretation”, “analysis”, “inference”, “evaluation”, and “explanation” (Laskar, 2007; Fisher, 2011). On the basis of these insights, reading literary texts and critical thinking are closely interrelated. Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that literature serves as material for “training of critical thinking” (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000, p. 567) in the EFL classroom.

Previous studies have investigated the effectiveness of using literature to develop students’ critical thinking skills in EFL settings. Tung and Chang (2009) investigated the efficacy of developing critical thinking through literature in the EFL context with 12 non-English major students at a university in Taiwan. The results of a pretest and posttest Chinese version of California Critical Thinking Skills Test to measure critical thinking skills, a standardized test showed that the use of literature improved overall critical thinking, particularly those in analysis of a literary text. Among all student-directed activities, the survey results showed that the participants found that guided in-class discussion was the most effective method in developing critical thinking.

Sugimura (2015) explored the use of literary texts (short stories) as a means to develop critical thinking skills in the EFL setting in Japan with 15 non-English major volunteer Japanese university students in a group he named the ‘book club’. The survey results demonstrated that reading literary texts promoted the

students' critical thinking skills in terms of being able to form opinions based on the evidence in literary texts through group discussion as an intervention.

Despite the findings from the previous studies demonstrating the effectiveness of the use of literature in the EFL classroom, there remain some issues to be addressed. Tung and Chang (2009) demonstrated that the use of literature improved university EFL students' critical thinking. However, further research is needed to confirm the validity of their findings in the Japanese EFL context.

Sugimura (2015) also reported that the use of literature with Japanese university EFL students is effective. However, the participants in her study were students who voluntarily gathered in the 'book club', so it remains unclear whether the effects could be applicable to students who enrolled in a required course. In addition to the first point, both Tung and Chang (2009) and Sugimura (2015) showed that employing discussion is a very effective way of developing students' critical thinking. However, more research is needed to explore potential applications of the proposed method by the previous research in a different context.

## The Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to explore the effects of using literature to help develop Japanese EFL students' critical thinking in an English reading class based on group discussion. The research questions (RQs) are as follows:

RQ1: Does the use of literature in the English reading class help students develop critical thinking?

RQ2: Which critical thinking ability is best developed by reading literature?

RQ3: What do students think about the literature component English reading class?

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants of the present study were 35 first-year Japanese EFL students in a private university in Japan. They were all non-English majors enrolled in a general English reading class, one of the required courses for first-year students. It was a mixed class of law, economics, and business administration majors. The English reading class was divided into three levels for first-year students: basic, intermediate, and advanced, based on the university's independent grading system. The participants were at the intermediate level. The present study was conducted over four months from the

beginning of April to the end of July in 2021, and all the classes were taught by the researcher.

### *Materials*

The textbook used in the present study was *Donald J. Sobol: Solve the Mystery 3 and Improve Your English Skills*, (Yoshimura et al, 2019). It is a collection of fifteen complete short mystery stories. Each story includes a vocabulary exercise, true or false questions, and comprehension quizzes. All stories are original works of detective fiction, not abridged for EFL / ESL learners, and are about 200-300 words long. Readers attempt to solve the mysteries with the clues and evidence in the stories. The participants were expected to read one story per class.

### *Content of the lesson*

The lessons undertook the following stages: warmup, pre-reading activity, while reading, post reading activity, and group discussion. As a warmup, the teacher explained the cultural background and verbal expressions specific to the context of the story. Before reading the story, students were engaged in completing a vocabulary exercise as a pre-reading activity. Next, they individually read a story, and then engaged in the reading comprehension activities by scanning for information to answer the true or false questions and quizzes set as a post-reading activity. For group discussion, students were divided into groups of three to four and were expected to solve the mystery together. As they discussed the story, they exchanged their viewpoints. Subsequently, individual students from each group summarized their own opinions on their respective worksheets based on the results of their discussion. Finally, the representative of the groups presented the group's view to the entire class in turn.

Additionally, the students were asked to write a short paragraph in English about their views on solving the mystery, using the worksheet that contained relevant vocabulary, discussion questions, and prompts as a guide. This paragraph task was assigned to students after every lesson. Both the writing assignment and worksheet were collected in the next lesson. The teacher checked and returned both during the following lesson, then shared a model paragraph, gave feedback to the participants, and provided analysis on the content of the story.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Pretest and posttest questionnaires were used for data collection to investigate whether the use of literature in an English reading class had any impact on students' critical thinking. In the pretest, the directions were: "Looking back on the English reading classes you took in high school, how well do you think you developed the following abilities? Please circle the one that best applies." Whereas in the posttest, the direction was: "Looking back on the English reading classes you have taken, how well do you think you have developed the following abilities? Please circle the one that best applies. \*Do not include English reading classes taken before high school." The questionnaire statements were categorized into five sections: (1) Interpretation, (2) Analysis, (3) Evaluation, (4) Inference, and (5) Explanation. The questionnaires consisted of a five-point Likert scale as follows: 5-*strongly agree*, 4-*agree*, 3-*neither agree or disagree*, 2-*disagree*, and 1-*strongly disagree*. The following are the translations of the original Japanese form.

#### (1) Interpretation

Q1: I was able to develop the ability to decide the intended meaning of something.

#### (2) Analysis

Q2: I was able to develop the ability to examine in detail, to develop my opinion.

#### (3) Evaluation

Q3: I was able to develop the ability to judge the quality, importance, amount, or value of something.

#### (4) Inference

Q4: I was able to reach an opinion from available information or facts.

#### (5) Explanation

Q5: I was able to make something clear by describing or giving information about it.

Included in the questionnaire, open-ended survey questions were presented in a free comment column in order to examine students' views as to the use of literature for the English reading class. The open-ended survey questions for the pretest and posttest are as follows: "What did you think of your high school English reading class? (Pretest questionnaire)", and "What did you think of this English reading class? (Posttest questionnaire)".

The survey procedures of the pretest and posttest questionnaires are as follows. In Week 1, the pretest

questionnaire was administered, and all the participants were asked to complete the questionnaire. From Week 2 to Week 14, the participants received the lessons once a week for thirteen consecutive weeks. In Week 15, the posttest questionnaire was administered to all the participants in class. Consent to use the survey results for research purposes was obtained from the participants. The responses to both the pretest and posttest five-point Likert scale questionnaires were analyzed, and descriptive data was processed by SPSS. Additionally, the responses to the open-ended survey questions were examined and summarized by the researcher.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *The pretest and posttest questionnaires*

*RQ1: Does the use of literature in the English reading class help students develop critical thinking?*

Table 1 (see next page) shows the results of pretest and posttest questionnaires: the number of participants of the four groups (n), mean scores (Mean), standard deviation (SDs), and difference in points between the pretest and the posttest (Gains) for the five questions asked.

The results of the pretest and posttest questionnaires show that the mean scores for all five questions were found to be higher than those of the results of the pretest as follows: In the results of the question about students' ability of interpretation (Q1), the pretest mean score was 3.00, and that of the posttest was 4.00. Compared to the pretest, the posttest mean score increased by 1.00 point. In the results of the question about the ability of analysis (Q2), the pretest mean score was 3.28, and that of the posttest was 4.42. Thus, the mean score increased by 1.14 points. In the results of the question about the ability of evaluation (Q3), the pretest mean score was 3.28, and that of the posttest was 4.31. Accordingly, the mean score increased by 1.03 points. In the results of the question about the ability of inference (Q4), the pretest mean score was 3.25, and that of the posttest was 4.50. Consequently, the mean score increased by 1.25 points. In the results of the question about the ability of explanation (Q5), the pretest mean score was 3.31, and that of the posttest was 4.39. When compared to the pretest, there was an increase in the point by 1.08.

Table 1  
*Results of Pre-test and Post-test Questionnaires*

	Pretest (n=35)		Posttest (n=35)		Gains
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Q1. Interpretation	3.00	1.07	4.00	0.83	+1
Q2. Analysis	3.28	1.06	4.42	0.73	+1.14
Q3. Evaluation	3.28	1.00	4.31	0.82	+1.03
Q4. Inference	3.25	1.11	4.50	0.61	+1.25
Q5. Explanation	3.31	1.01	4.39	0.69	+1.08

Note: 5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-neither agree or disagree, 2-disagree, and 1-strongly disagree.

Regarding research question 1 (RQ1), as reflected in the overall mean scores, the results seem to indicate that the use of literature in the English reading class contributed to the development of these Japanese university EFL students' critical thinking. The findings of the present study seem to confirm Lazere (1987), who claimed that the process of reading literature involves the abilities necessary for critical thinking. Moreover, the results of the present study seem to suggest that the assertion by Tung and Chang (2009) and Sugimura (2015) that the use of literature fosters students' critical thinking skills is applicable to the Japanese EFL classroom environment. Hence, the findings of the present study seem to suggest that literature serves as material for "training of critical thinking" (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000, p. 567) not only in EFL classes overseas but also EFL classes in Japan.

*RQ2: Which critical thinking ability is best developed by reading literature?*

As shown in Table 1, the findings revealed that the question for the ability of inference (Q4) had the highest mean score of 4.50 and the question for the ability of analysis (Q2) had the second highest mean score of 4.42, followed by the question about the ability of explanation (Q5), with that of 4.39. This was followed by the question about the ability of evaluation (Q3) (4.31). The question about the ability of interpretation (Q1) had the lowest score in the posttest (4.00).

Although the overall mean scores improved, the ability to infer was found to be the most developed among the skills. It is assumed that this is mainly due to the characteristics of literary texts. As Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) claim, the readers of literature are likely to be put in a position where they must decode "hidden or implied meanings" and "reconstruct images from details" (p. 680). This is to say, unlike expository texts

such as *New Horizon English Course*, literary texts are written in a way that requires the readers to "read between the lines", which means here to infer. In literary texts, messages are not explicitly written, so the readers of literature must use their imagination to the fullest in order to reach and express an opinion of their interpretation and evaluation of the texts (Fisher, 2011; Widdowson, 1983) and to also 'contextualize' the text (McRae, 1996, p. 37), which is specific to fully understanding literary texts.

*Open-ended survey questions*

*Responses to the pretest questionnaire*

According to the results of the open-ended survey question in the pretest inquiring about students' perception of their high school English reading class, most participants reported that they had received grammar and translation type lessons. These mostly comprised of basic reading comprehension exercises, in which students translate reading passages in the text into Japanese and answer questions about the contents, followed by teacher explanations. Findings also showed that most of them perceived the English reading texts as materials for entrance examinations, so they never read the text with the purpose of engaging deeply with the content. In summary, their reading experiences in high school English classes were teacher-centered and did not involve meaningful interaction with the text or peers beyond achieving extrinsic goals.

*Responses to the posttest questionnaire*

*RQ3: How do students feel about the literature component English reading class?*

According to the results of the open-ended survey question in the posttest inquiring about students' perception of the English reading classes they had taken

in the present study, most participants reported that, unlike simply answering reading comprehension questions, they were able to think logically and consider things from various angles, based on limited information. Moreover, most of them reported that through group discussions, they were able to reflect on their own ideas based on the opinions of others and think things through in depth. They also reported that this learning experience was different from a *juken*-type of reading class (a preparation class for the entrance examination) where they are expected to find the one correct answer for a test purpose. Hence, findings of the present study may seem to confirm the benefit of the applications of group discussion for literature-oriented lessons as put forth by Tung and Chang (2009) and Sugimura (2015). Additionally, most students reported that it was their first time to read mysteries in English and that doing so in the English reading class was enjoyable.

In summary, in contrast to the students' high school English reading class, the reading experiences of the students in the present study were most likely more student-centered and interactive. Regarding RQ3, the findings seem to indicate that the use of literature in the Japanese EFL class had a positive impact on the participants' critical thinking.

### Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the effects of using literature on Japanese students' critical thinking skills in an EFL classroom in a Japanese university. Regarding the first research question about whether the use of literature helps students develop critical thinking, the findings obtained from the study suggest that the use of literary reading materials was effective within the study group, as indicated by the overall mean scores for critical thinking improving in the posttest questionnaire as compared to those of the pretest questionnaire. Thus, it seems that the application of the study of literature maybe effective to foster students' critical thinking in the Japanese EFL classroom in this case, and possibly more widely. With regard to the second research question inquiring about which critical thinking ability is best developed by reading literature, the findings of the present study show that the most developed ability reported by the students in the study was inference. It seems that reading literature could provide students with opportunities to be engaged in the process of analyzing a text beyond its literal meaning, and to interpret the underlying messages or subtext. As for the third research question asking about the perception of a literature

component in an English class, it was found that the use of English-language short mysteries provided a critical reading activity in which learners thought deeply about the content and interpreted it logically and thoughtfully. Furthermore, the findings show that through group discussions, literature was able to provide a proactive learning experience in which the participants were able to think for themselves rather than passively search for a set answer.

However, there are some points to be addressed for a further study. A limitation of this study is that while the study group was sizable, it was not huge, which means that the findings of this study may not be generalizable to all populations. In addition, although the sources used in this study provide valuable insights into the topic of critical thinking and literature in the EFL classroom, more recent references would help to ensure that the findings are up-to-date and reflective of current research in the field. As the field of EFL education continues to evolve, it is important to consider the most recent studies and publications in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Therefore, future studies could benefit from including a wider range of recent references to ensure the most current and relevant information is being used. It should also be noted that the present study has not investigated the acquisition of learners' critical thinking by measuring their abilities. Thus, more research is needed to assess the effectiveness of developing of critical thinking using literature by using standardized tests. Moreover, it should also be noted that the present study has not investigated the effects of using literature against a control group. Hence, more research is needed to compare the effects with the control group in its design using non-literary texts. Further examination is needed to clarify these issues with more recent studies in a different learning environment in Japan.

### Author Biography

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