



## Transformative Power of Literary Criticism in Second Language English Acquisition to Enhance Learning Outcomes and Critical Engagement

Dr. Halimi Housseyn, University Center of Tipaza, Algeria.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6529-8874>

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### Abstract

*This article examines the impact of literary criticism on learning English as a Second Language, or ESL. It posits that the impacts of teaching ESL through literary criticism extend beyond the acquisition of simple language competencies. It facilitates the learner's ability to think critically and understand varied cultural paradigms to strengthen their bond with the English language. It attempts to address the rationale for this by deeply summarising the research pertaining to literature in ESL and critical thinking in language learning, and proposes functional pedagogical approaches to the ESL classroom, integrating literary criticism. It attempts to outline the possible outcomes and the challenges this construct poses in realising the potential of literary criticism to help shape ESL learners into balanced, thoughtful and culturally responsive citizens. Hence, this article focuses on literary criticism as a tool in ESL classes to enrich the learner's experience and foster English language proficiency.*

**Keywords:** Literary Criticism, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Critical Thinking, Literature in Language Teaching, Pedagogical Strategies, Learner Engagement.

### 1. Introduction

Learning English as a Second Language (ESL) involves learning grammar and vocabulary and it is a complex process. It entails a more comprehensive approach that incorporates the acquisition of communicative competence, cultural sensitivity and the necessary higher-order thinking that is crucial to function in a globalised society (Byram, 1997). ESL teaching has relied upon a foundation of direct language instruction, communicative practice and skills-oriented activities (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). There is a question of whether these frameworks are useful, but it is equally the case that more subtle and intellectually richer educational materials and activities are sometimes overlooked, especially when it comes to fostering more advanced language and thinking skills. By interpreting and evaluating literary texts reminds us that literary criticism is a powerful tool in the ESL classroom (Eagleton, 1983). This article aims to build a notion that employ literary criticism in the classroom to teach ESL can yield greater results than traditional approaches. Literary criticism encourages learners to move beyond the mere understanding of a text by grappling with a text's complexity and decoding its various meanings and examining its cultural and historical significance (Selden et al., 2005). These aspects of teaching and learning processes promote an appreciation of the English Language and foster critical analysis and thinking. This article attempts to demonstrate that incorporating literary criticism into ESL teaching can change the paradigm of ESL teaching and learning. ESL students who are guided with literary criticism will improve their English skills. This assumes a solid theoretical grasp of the approach and acts as an exploration of the literature in the proposed disciplines and may help in the practical classroom methodologies in pedagogy.

## **2. Second Language Acquisition Theories and Meaningful Engagement**

The recent studies in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) highlight the value of purposeful participation and real communication in learning a language (Mitchell et al., 2019). For instance, Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) states that language learners advance owing to the influence of comprehensible input and that learners achieve new levels of proficiency in a meaningful context when exposed to language. Krashen's view is similarly aligned with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky regards the learning of a new language as social and interactive. Also, Vygotsky emphasises the use of collaborative activities and interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). These SLA theories prompt a change in EMP pedagogy so that it moves away from memorisation theory and grammar drills towards opportunities for learners to use the language in interactive and purposeful ways (Ellis, 2015). Literature is a source of comprehensible input and meaningful interaction because it embodies the rich complexity of various cultural perspectives and emotional resonance (Kramsch, 1993). In addition, Paran says that the authentic linguistic diversity of genre, style and context of a literary text offers learners the opportunity to gain exposure to learn rich vocabulary, complex grammatical structures and various discourse patterns when compared to simplified pedagogical materials (Paran, 2008).

## **3. Literature in ESL Education**

Duff & Maley (1990) say that the use of literature in ESL instruction is not new. Literature has been used to improve reading comprehension skills, vocabulary development, and to offer cultural insights (Hismanoglu, 2005). But the potential of literature surpasses these practical applications. Many recent studies support a more comprehensive and transformative approach to literature in ESL. It highlights the ability to develop emotional literacy and critical thinking while learning (Tomlinson, 2013). Carter and Long (1991) say that by directing students to the imaginative and adaptable use of language, they can understand that literature can foster language awareness among them. Lazar (1993) emphasises how literature helps the learners to improve their interpretive abilities by allowing them to deal with ambiguity and various interpretations from their own viewpoints. Collie and Slater (1987) highlight that reading of literary works can promote emotional intelligence, empathy and a deep sense of cultural awareness with the target language.

## **4. Critical Thinking and Language Learning**

The ability to analyse data, assess arguments and make well-reasoned decisions is known as critical thinking. Critical thinking is becoming more widely acknowledged as a critical competency for students in the twenty-first century (Facione, 1990). Scriven & Paul (1987) point out that critical thinking is not only a useful cognitive ability but also a crucial part of communicative competence in the context of ESL instruction. The students who are better able to comprehend implicit meanings, negotiate challenging communication situations and have fruitful cross-cultural conversations have good critical thinking ability (Lun et al., 2010). Studies have indicated that critical thinking and language acquisition work in concert (Chamot, 1995). According to Clarke (2006), critical thinking abilities improve language proficiency by encouraging more efficient language learning techniques and deeper processing of linguistic input. According to Davidson and Dunham (1997), second language acquisition improves critical thinking ability, questioning their preconceptions and can promote clear expression of their ideas. Thus, the teaching strategies that combine language acquisition with critical thinking skills are more successful in developing English language acquisition among the students.

### **5. Role of Critical Thinking in ESL**

An interesting framework that encourages critical thinking in ESL classes can lead the learner towards success in the learning process. Literary criticism emphasises interpretation, analysis and evaluation (Abrams, 1999). Learners must go beyond textual comprehension and should take various viewpoints to develop their interpretations in order to engage with literary criticism (Culler, 1997). This method motivates the students to become active, thoughtful and analytical readers and thinkers. Moreover, the students are introduced to an array of critical perspectives and theoretical frameworks through the utilisation of literary critical approaches such as formalism, feminism, post-colonialism and psychoanalysis (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004). The views of the students are broadened and their notions are questioned in the application process. They are encouraged to think about different types of interpretations of the literary texts. They can understand different critical approaches in the learning process (Habib, 2011). Therefore, ESL students who study literary criticism could develop critical thinking skills and apply them to other academic fields and real-world situations. It will give them a conducive learning process to achieve success in their future career opportunities.

### **6. Pedagogical Strategies to Integrate Literary Criticism in ESL**

A flexible approach is needed to integrate literary criticism into ESL pedagogy by taking into account the learning objectives, cultural backgrounds, and proficiency levels of the students in the learning process (McKay, 2001). The use of criticism offers useful pedagogical techniques to implement literary criticism in various ESL contexts. The effective integration of literary criticism in ESL depends on the selection of suitable literary texts at the right times (Isernhagen, 2007). The texts should be linguistically accessible to the learners. Although it seems difficult, the texts should be reasonable to students at their level of proficiency by offering chances for language development (Hill, 1986). The students who have lower proficiency levels can benefit from using simplified or adapted literary texts by progressively moving on to authentic texts as their skills advance in the learning process (Paran, 2003). The pedagogy should be culturally relevant and engaging. According to Hall (2005), texts should attract the interest of the students and help them to achieve deep connections with relevance and engaging while learning. By choosing texts from a variety of cultural backgrounds can test learners' ethnocentric viewpoints and foster intercultural understanding at the time of analysis (Norton, 2000). According to Wellek and Warren (1956), the texts should have literary merit and critical potential by providing the chance of in-depth interpretation and analysis. To create such a situation, poetry, short stories, and select excerpts from plays or novels can serve as good starting points because of the easy nature of the texts for critical analysis (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002).

### **7. Introducing Basic Concepts of Literary Criticism**

The fundamental ideas of literary criticism must be presented to students in an understandable and straightforward way (Moon, 2005). Such basic concepts can be learnt by giving brief definitions to important terms and ideas. They could include literary genres, theme, character, symbolism, imagery and point of view (Cottrell, 2017). The examples such as graphics and visual aids can improve the understanding ability of the learners. Teachers should show students how to interpret literary texts through a variety of critical lenses to model critical analysis (Fisher, 2011). The methods such as reading exercises, teacher-led discussions, and think-aloud procedures, can all be useful tactics. As students' proficiency and critical thinking abilities advance, they can be introduced to literary criticism concepts in



a stepwise manner, beginning with fundamentals and working their way up to more intricate theoretical frameworks (Paul & Elder, 2008).

### **8. Engaging Critical Activities**

Fostering critical thinking and deeper understanding requires involving students in dynamic and interactive critical activities (Zohar & Dori, 2003). The tasks requiring students to analyse particular elements of literary texts, such as character development, thematic patterns, symbolic representations, or stylistic devices, are known as textual analysis tasks (Day & Park, 2005). You can use tasks like text annotation, close reading, and gathering textual evidence. Facilitating classroom discussions and debates that encourage students to share their interpretations of literary texts, support their positions with textual evidence, and interact with a range of perspectives is known as "interpretive discussion and debate facilitation" (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012). In the process, fishbowl debates, socratic seminars and small group discussions can all be useful to motivate students to use response papers, multimedia presentations, dramatic productions or artistic interpretations to convey their critical interpretations of the chosen text (Gardner, 1993). Deeper engagement with literary texts and personalised expression are made possible by these activities. The creation of longer-term research assignments that demand that students study particular authors, literary works, or critical theories (Thomas, 2000). These projects may entail cooperative group work, online resource exploration, and library research.

### **9. Technology to Enhance Critical Engagement**

In the ESL classroom, technology can be successfully incorporated to improve students' critical engagement with literary texts (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). Then, Chun (2011) discusses the application of online tools to support group text analysis and annotation. By the aid of these resources, students can annotate textual evidence, leave their comments and share their interpretations instantly with their peer group. The digital storytelling platforms and multimedia creation tools allow students to create and share their critical interpretations in a dynamic way. The creation of online platforms and virtual discussion forums promotes critical engagement in classroom discussions. So, giving access to the academic databases, critical essays and online literary resources aids the students in their research and critical thinking.

### **10. Benefits of Literary Criticism in ESL Learning**

By helping the students acquire language skills, the incorporation of literary criticism into ESL instruction provides several advantages in the learning process. The reading of literary texts broadens the vocabulary skills of the students by introducing them to complex and nuanced language (Hill, 1986). The grammatical awareness of the students and accuracy are improved when they analyse complex sentence structures and different grammatical patterns in the provided literary texts (Carter & Long, 1991). Students' comprehension of diverse discourse patterns and rhetorical techniques is enhanced by exposure to a variety of literary genres and styles, which raises their general discourse competency (Paran, 2008). By requiring students to deconstruct intricate texts, pinpoint essential components, and examine textual details, literary criticism naturally fosters analytical abilities (Culler, 1997). Students' ability to create logical interpretations and engage with ambiguity and multiple interpretations in literary texts improves their interpretive skills (Lazar, 1993). Students' evaluative thinking and capacity to judge the persuasiveness of arguments are improved when they examine various critical viewpoints and develop their own critical judgments (Facione, 1990). Through navigating textual complexities and resolving interpretive conundrums in

literary criticism, students develop their problem-solving abilities and capacity for methodical problem-solving (Zohar & Dori, 2003).

### **11. Cultural Understanding and Intercultural Competence**

The reading of literary works helps the students to gain a clear understanding of different cultures, historical periods and social situations (Kramsch, 1993). Byram (1997) says that interacting with characters of the stories from various cultural backgrounds promotes empathy and intercultural sympathy. The reading of works by different authors and dissimilar viewpoints helps the students to develop an awareness of cultural diversity and ethnocentric assumptions (Norton, 2000). According to McKay (2001), literary texts provide appealing content that can attract the curiosity of the students and encourage motivation among the students. By examining the universal themes and human experiences in the literary work can foster intimate bonds and raise the emotional interest of the students (Collie & Slater, 1987). The students may understand the intellectual views of literary criticism, and it could be rewarding and stimulating for them, leading to a sense of achievement and intellectual development in the course of learning (Eagleton, 1983). The students can express their individuality and interrelate the literary texts in a meaningful way when they are given the chance to react critically (Gardner, 1993).

### **12. Challenges and Considerations**

Though there are many advantages in the incorporation of literary criticism, it is important to be aware of some possible drawbacks and issues during the learning process. Sometimes, literary texts can present linguistic challenges. It may be particularly for the students who have less advanced language skills (Paran, 2003). To guarantee accessibility to such students, careful text selection is very important. The modern techniques such as scaffolding and language support are essential to improve them. The students who perform critical analysis need advanced cognitive abilities that some students may find difficult in the beginning process (Moon, 2005). The difficulty can be reduced with a gradual development of providing clear teaching methods, critical techniques and group-led exercises.

### **13. Text Selection, Teacher Training and Assessment**

To stop misunderstanding in text selection, it is important to choose texts that are appropriate for the learning process (Hall, 2005). The teachers should be aware of the cultural backgrounds of their students. To avoid such conventional or marginalised representation, it is significant to choose a literary texts that reflect universal voices (Norton, 2000). To incorporate literary criticism into ESL pedagogy, the teachers must receive proper training and preparation (Isernhagen, 2007). Professional development activities can be encouraged. The teachers can provide support to the students by organising workshops, providing study materials and collaborative activities. The teachers must be flexible in their pedagogical approaches by modifying their lessons to accommodate the various needs and learning preferences of the students (McKay, 2001). To evaluate the engagement among students, authentic assessment techniques must be used in place of conventional language tests. It will improve the talent acquisition ability of the students (Tomlinson, 2013). The critical thinking abilities and application of literary criticism concepts of the learners can be assessed through the portfolio assessments, project-based assessments and performance-based tasks given to them. To improve the growth and encourage the self-reflection of the students, it is essential to regularly provide feedback on their critical analysis and interpretive abilities during the learning process (Clarke, 2006). All of these steps can improve the text selection, pedagogical training and assessment quality in the process of teaching and learning English.





## 14. Conclusion

The use of literary criticism in ESL instruction has been argued and substantiated in this article. It is noted that literary criticism provides an effective pedagogical tool for promoting critical thinking and a deeper engagement with the English language learning skills that are beyond the usual language skills acquisition. So, teachers can develop students with the potential of critical thinking who are culturally aware and equipped to use English actively in the learning scenario by incorporating literary criticism into ESL instruction. Even though there are certain obstacles in learner proficiency, cultural feeling, teacher research and assessment, these can be overcome with careful pedagogical planning, well-chosen teaching and learning texts, teacher professional development goals and ingenious assessment techniques. Ultimately, literary criticism is a useful method for second language acquisition because it gives advantages and surpasses the disadvantages. Hence, future studies should look into the use of successful pedagogical approaches to incorporate literary criticism into various ESL contexts. They should also aim to examine the long-term effects of this method on the linguistic, cognitive and developmental aspects of students. Nevertheless, the potential use of literary criticism has a transformative potential in ESL instruction and can advance towards a comprehensive approach to language acquisition. It also enables the students to speak fluently in English and makes them capable of critical thinking.

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