Interpreting Literary Texts through Critical Reading
Within EFL Context

تفسير النصوص الادبية من خلال القراءة النقدية

ضمن سياق اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية

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Abstract Reading literature usually results in making critical judgments through its interpretation. In this case, it is necessary to provide an explanation and definition to 'critical reading', as well as, to explore the effectiveness of the different critical reading strategies in fostering EFL learners' literary texts interpreting. The idea is to introduce some critical reading techniques that would enable learners engage in wider reading of literary works, and help them achieve appropriate interpretation. Driven by the objective of explaining a cause -and - effect relationship, and based on a quasi-experimental design, in this paper, an investigation would be carried out to reveal the effectiveness of critical reading in enhancing EFL learners' literary text interpreting. Some practical activities are incorporated into reading comprehension course design to examine and test their efficacy through learners' performance.

Keywords::Text interpretation, Critical judgments, Critical reading, Literary texts.

الملخص :عادة ما تؤدي قراءة الأدب إلى إصدار أحكام نقدية ، مما يعني استغراق وقت في تفسيره. في هذا السياق تحاول هذه الدراسة شرح وتعريف القراءة النقدية والكشف عن مدى فعالية استراتيجيات القراءة النقدية المختلفة في تعزيز تفسير النصوص الأدبية لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. والغاية من وراء هذه الفكرة هو تقديم بعض تقنيات القراءة النقدية التي من شأنها تمكين المتعلمين من الانخراط في قراءة أوسع للأعمال الأدبية ومساعدتهم على تحقيق التفسير المناسب لها. بناءً على تصميم شبه تجريبي بهدف شرح وتقييم العلاقة بين السبب والنتيجة ، تتبنى هذه الدراسة بعض الاستراتيجيات والتقنيات التي من شانها مساعدة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على ترقية القراءة النقدية لديهم و بالتالي تعزيز تفسير النصوص الأدبية. وعليه تم دمج بعض النشاطات التطبيقية في تصميم دراسة فهم النصوص لاختبار فعالية مثل هذه النشاطات من خلال تقييم أداء المتعلمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تفسير النصوص الأحكام النقدية ،القراءة النقدية ، النصوص الأدبية ،ردود الافعال.

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Introduction

A significant proportion of EFL learners struggle with literary texts reading and interpreting. While processing literary works, learners attempt to find the meaning and explore the significance of texts by examining the main elements of the work and how they relate to one another. Yet, difficulties in understanding and interpreting literary works, such as, understanding the relationship between the writer/poet, period of the text, and theme(s) of the literary work, then finding out and interpreting figures of speech remain the main issues that trouble EFL learners when reading and analyzing literary texts. Of course, comprehending and interpreting a literary text involves firstly investigation of its linguistic components and secondly its cultural ones. Therefore, learners can never attain an ideal understanding of a literary work without opting for appropriate models and consistent strategies to reach the objective set beforehand, and which is, mostly, the appropriate interpretation of a literary text. Accordingly, literature can act as a very powerful agent to develop and foster learners' critical potentialities through engaging them to interact with literary texts not only linguistically and culturally but emotionally as well, and thus enabling them make successful interpretation. According to McRae (1991), a literary work that provides no reaction is counterproductive to learning. The subject matter, the setting, and the language of a literary text provide learners with a variety of real world scenarios to construct meanings of self and life progressively. Besides, comprehension and analytical activities assigned by teachers have to foster the learners' critical and evaluative faculties, rather than fill them with ready stereotyped ideas and values.

It is important to state that the principal objective is to explore the extent to which critical reading can help learners provide effective analysis and appropriate interpretation of literary texts. Additionally, both language and literary competences must lead to a personal and pleasurable reading of literary text. In this sense, the efficient way to reach this end is to make learners consider the text their own (Carter & Long, 1991). Thus, different interpretation would be possible to a single text and the teacher should accept them all providing learners only with hints and directions to stay within the text's general cultural and informational context (Benton, 1990). It is of paramount importance, in this regard, to motivate learners to participate in class discussion and to involve them in making personal judgments about texts.

1.Definition of Critical Reading

Critical reading is the process of reading texts with the purpose to attain full understanding. It is not simply a matter of skimming a text or reading for plot points; rather it involves a deeper examination of the text's structure, its implicit and explicit themes, the ideas and claims presented, among other characteristics, such as tone, mood, diction, etc. In other words, critical reading is a form of language analysis, involving close, careful and attentive reading that result in enhancing clarity and comprehension.
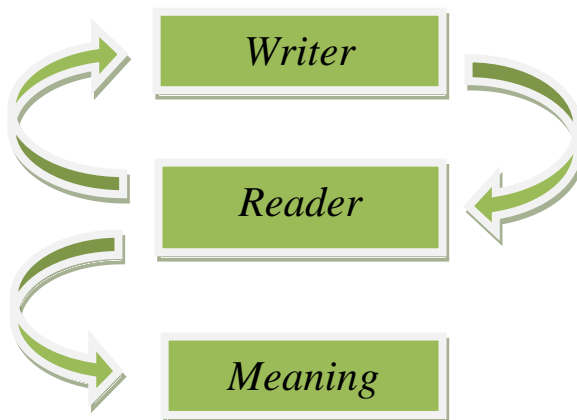
Writer – Reader Interaction

In academic contexts, critical reading involves a higher level of involvement from EFL learners. This means that they are expected to follow certain techniques and thought processes, raise questions about the author's attention, the text's structure and purpose, the meanings of individual words and phrases in addition to the context in which a text was written to attain full understanding and make appropriate judgments.

Robinson (1966) defines critical reading as:

> The judgment of the veracity, validity, of worth of the ideas read, based on sound criteria or standards developed through previous experience ... The judgment of each requires previous experience with the specific kinds of materials or knowledge of the general area, which is organized as criteria or standards against which the ideas are projected and evaluated.(Ibid,p.17)

According to Robinson, critical reading is evaluative reading which implies that there must be standards or criteria based upon the reader's previous knowledge and experience if he/she is to make a judgment. Within the same context, EFL learners need to use their previous knowledge, to observe, judge and carefully analyze any thought, idea or concept expressed by the author while critically reading in order to understand different viewpoints and make their own judgments.

As a process, the reader should reflect on:

- What the text says by taking notes and paraphrasing the key points.
- What the text describes through attentive and thoughtful reading to get the meaning.
- Interpretation of the text that implies analyzing the text and stating a meaning for the text as a whole.

In this context, critical reading is a complex thinking technique that involves questioning a text, rather than assuming everything it contains is factual, exercising careful judgment and evaluating the evidence to promote comprehension and achieve successful interpretation.

2. Critical Reading Strategies

For reading a text critically and moving from analysis to interpretation, Axelrod and Cooper, in an article entitled: "Reading Critically , Writing well: A Reader and Guide" (1999), suggest some basic strategies, which are the following:

✓ **Annotating**

It is the first step to begin with while reading critically a text. The reader, here, needs to underline important parts of the text, such as the thesis statement, topic sentences of body paragraphs and explanatory material, circle key elements, then write comments and questions about it.

✓ **Contextualizing**

While contextualizing a text, the reader is supposed to place it within its original historical or cultural context by considering its language and ideas, the

time and place in which the work was written, and then identify and examine how this context differs from his/ her own.

✓ **Reflecting**

During this phase, readers should try to explore the points in the text that challenge their beliefs, and then attempt to analyze their feelings about the most troubling challenges.

✓ **Paraphrasing**

Paraphrasing a text means putting or incorporating its ideas into one's own without changing any information. This can help the reader understand difficult or ambiguous passages.

✓ **Outlining**

As a preliminary stage to summarizing, outlining enables readers to identify the basic structure and the main ideas of the text. It involves listing main ideas and supporting evidence of a text to enhance clarity and promote understanding.

✓ **Summarizing**

After outlining, a reader is supposed to synthesize and recreate the meaning of the original material using his/her own words to foster understanding

✓ **Exploring the figurative language**

Exploring and identifying the figurative language, such as similes, metaphors and symbols can help readers better comprehend the writer's viewpoints and thoughts and thus get clarity and full understanding of the text.

✓ **Looking for patterns of oppositions**

Looking for and considering a writer's conflicting views about the issues that are communicated in a text can help readers understand what the writer wants them to believe, or the type of reaction he/she wants from them.

✓ **Evaluating the logic of an argument**

Evaluating and testing a writer's arguments presented in a text involves analyzing their appropriateness, believability and consistency.

✓ **Recognizing emotional manipulation**

While processing a text, a reader should be suspicious and try to identify all types of emotional appeals, such as loaded or slanted language, false flattery, etc. to ovoid subjectivity and make appropriate and accurate judgments.

✓ **Judging the writer's credibility**

Judging the writer's credibility through examining his/her knowledge of the subject, points of views, ideas and arguments can help the reader achieve successful and logic interpretation.

✓ **Analyzing the writing in other disciplines**

Within this phase, a reader is expected to compare and contrast related readings for exploring likeness and difference between texts to get better understanding.
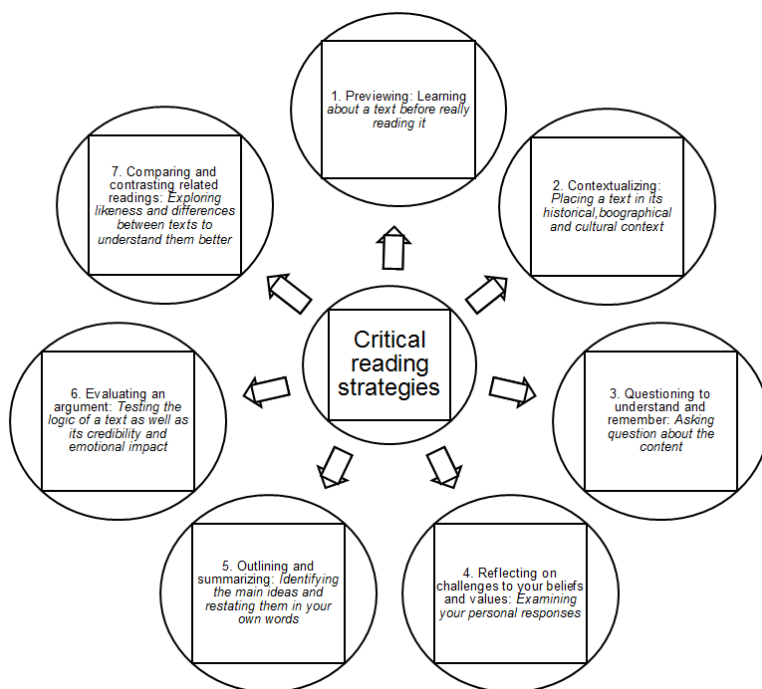


Critical Reading Strategies[1]

In brief, critical reading strategies stimulate learners to evaluate, predict, and organize ideas which support value judgment, draw inferences, and arrive at conclusion based on evidence.

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[1] Taken from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figure-1-Critical-reading-strategies_fig1_354932068

3. Critical Thinking and Bloom's Taxonomy

One of the renowned theory that has been viewed as representative of the educational perspective of critical thinking theory is Bloom's Taxonomy (Piaw, 2004, p.80). According to Bloom, there are six levels of critical thinking into which any cognitive learning experience might be categorized. These levels are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Yet, critical thinking is, likely, a part of level six which is evaluation. In fact this level "focuses on making an assessment or judgment based on an analysis of a statement or proposition" (Huitt,1998, p.2).

In the 1990s, some students led by Lorin Anderson have revised Bloom's taxonomy, and have suggested instead the following:
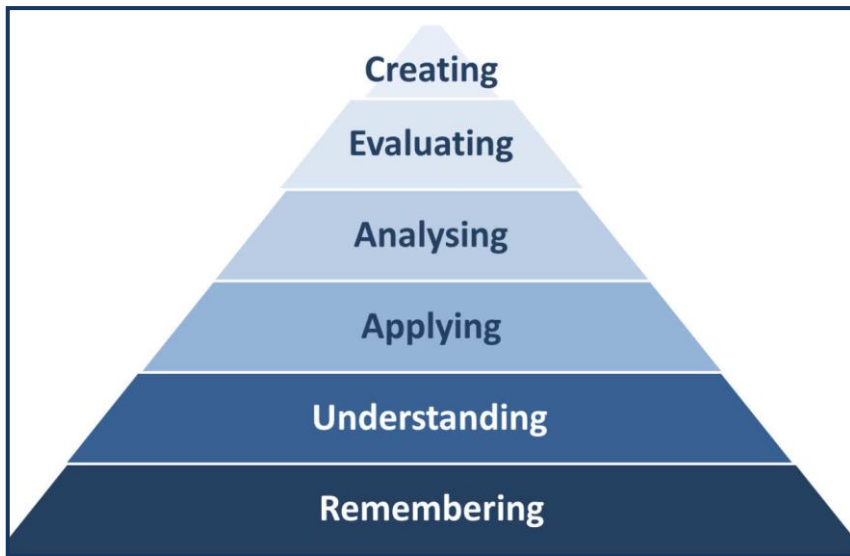
The New Version of Bloom's Taxonomy (2001)[2]

It would be necessary to provide definitions of the levels revised by Lorin Anderson

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[2] The Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Gulzar,2021)

Creating	Reorganizing and putting elements together to form a coherent new pattern or structure through designing, planning, constructing, inventing, devising, etc.
Evaluating	Hypothesizing and making judgments through checking and critiquing.
Analyzing	Breaking, organizing, structuring, outlining, and integrating different elements, determining how they relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose.
Applying	Using a procedure through executing, or implementing
Understanding	Constructing meaning through summarizing, inferring, interpreting, comparing and explaining.
Remembering	Retrieving, recognizing, listing, naming, identifying, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory.

Table (1) Definitions of Critical Thinking Levels [3]

The authors of the revised taxonomy infused the original taxonomy with additional complexity and nuance. While the original taxonomy suggests that learners should move from the simple recall or recognition of facts, as the lowest level, through increasingly more complex and abstract mental levels, to the highest order which is classified as evaluation, the revised one explains that learners may freely move up and down the chart. This freedom from moving systematically up the taxonomy gives much greater weight to teacher usage, and allows the categories to overlap one another. This revised Bloom's taxonomy proves to be a very useful tool that can be used in EFL classrooms to achieve better results.

In brief, Bloom's theory has been widely accepted and taught in thinking skill courses in all fields of education programs. Critical thinking pedagogy always refers to Bloom's theory, giving learners practice in some of the lower levels of critical thinking skills before moving them on to the more difficult tasks of the higher thinking processes (Piaw,2004,p.80).

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[3] The Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Gulzar, 2021)

4. Literary Text Interpreting

Regarding the specificities of literature and literary texts, tremendous opportunities and advantages can be traced in coping with the multidimensional aspects of the great body of literary texts. Being original, universal, suggestive, and ambiguous, literary texts will provide crucial chances to learners for discussion, interpretation and personal responses. These faculties will ultimately ensure students interaction with the text and with each other in a way which will enhance their language learning and personal cultural growth (Maley, 1989, p.23).Conversely, if these advantages are not properly handled, resistance and disgust to literary text may result on the part of learners. Teachers of literature, thus, have to opt for solid and consistent methods in teaching literature.

Reading literature generally results in making connections to writing, which involves spending time interpreting it. When interpreting literary texts, learners attempt to explore the significance of literature by examining the main elements of the text and how they relate to one another, determine the writer's views and thoughts, identify the text's hidden values, and theme(s) conveyed in the literary text, then finding out and interpreting linguistic features and figures of speech. Yet, interpreting a literary text critically involves learners' engagement in texts' discussion, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In other words, learners are supposed to question what they read, reflect on the writer's ideas and the text's evidence, assess and evaluate the arguments communicated so that they can decide whether the text's messages and the writer's thoughts and views are worthy of agreement. Within this context, Flynn (1989) states:

> When students actively struggle with interesting problems within a supportive environment, they are simultaneously challenged and encouraged to test out their ideas. Young readers develop into independent, critical readers as they learn to analyze, synthesize and evaluate knowledge by thinking their way through problems in a cooperative environment. (Ibid, p.668)

Literary texts actually being imaginative can provoke the learners' thought, reflection, associations, emotion, and various responses. The Teacher has to benefit from the multi-various richness of the literary text and focus his course on stimulating the learners' responses (Rumelhart, 1987). He/She should, however, provide them with necessary knowledge concerning moral issues, decisions, anticipation, expectation, and evaluation. This should ultimately be carried out

relying on the main objectives set to the course and the general framework (thematic context) of the text and its author. The teacher's role will be that of a mediator and initiator to help learners interact with the text more profoundly. In other words, the role of the teacher is limited to direction and assistance, encouraging interaction in order to achieve a well-planned goal.

Selected materials for reading should be of interest to learners so that they can interact with them and provide their personal judgments. Obeidat (1997) pinpoints that:

> As we teach Arab students English literature, we should also teach them how to read closely and critically, and supply them with proper analytical skills as we open the door to a deeper appreciation and understanding of literature, both as an object or ideological and cultural analysis, and as a linguistic activity of reading and writing about the other. (Ibid, p.34)

In this context, texts will only provide directions to learners activate their schemata to construct meaning assisted partly by the teacher and partly by linguistic and stylistic tools apparent in the text. Different interpretations would be possible to a single text and the teacher should accept them all providing learners only with hints and directions to enable them attain full understanding and appropriate interpretation. Of course, the teacher can use a variety of literary texts or assign research work to be conducted by learners and then presented in order to give them more chance to express themselves, and to vary and deepen their knowledge under study (Ghosen, 2002).On the whole, literature exposes learners to authentic materials which foster not only their natural acquisition of foreign languages but critical thinking potentialities as well.

5. Critical Reading and Literary Material

Reading literature is a complex process that requires EFL learners to recall, retrieve and reflect on their prior experiences or memories to construct meanings of the text. While doing so, they need to demonstrate the following abilities:
- ✓ To differentiate facts from opinions.
- ✓ To understand the literal or implied meanings and the narrator's tone.
- ✓ To locate details related to the issues discussed.

- ✓ To find out the causal relationship or the connections between the events or actions.
- ✓ To detect an inferential relationship from the details observed.
- ✓ To be perceptive of multiple viewpoints.
- ✓ To make moral reasoning and critical judgments.

In a sense, learners are exercising what the critical thinking experts termed 'explanation','analysis','synthesis', 'argumentation', 'interpretation', 'evaluation', 'problem-solving', 'inference', 'logical reasoning', and 'application' (Lazar, 1987; Halpern, 1998; Brunt, 2005; Facione, 2007). All these abilities, in sum, are critical thinking skills. In this context, literary works are regarded as efficient resources of authentic language, often rich in multiple layers of meaning, cultural and aesthetic values, offering more opportunities for discussions, expressing and sharing feelings and opinions, making evaluation and providing judgments in addition to more language practice and usage(Rosenblatt, 1995). Within the same view, Lazar (2000) asserts that "Literary texts are thus seen as a resource one among many different types of texts which provide stimulating language activities" (Ibid, p. 27).Lazar (1987) further argues 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" (Ibid, p.3).

Being exposed to a variety of literary genres, learners are supposed to extend their reading insights to a more advanced view about the reading between the lines and deep reading that implies critical reading. Actually, to engage a textual literary study and achieve full understanding and appropriate interpretations, learners are supposed to examine carefully and profoundly the writer's claims and arguments. This is certainly why, recent research studies assert that teaching learners to think critically, draw inferences, evaluate, and reach conclusions based on evidence while processing a text, is of paramount significance (Keyan, 1994; Facione, 1995; Halpern, 1998; Klaczynski, 2001; Day, 2003; Braun, 2004).Along with this, Facione and Gainen (1995) pinpoint that enhancing learners' critical thinking skills enables them "make purposeful judgments about what to believe and what to do" (Ibid, p.3). Halpern (1998) further claims that the critical thinking skills help learners "know to learn and how to think clearly" (Ibid, p.450). This reveals that the acquisition of critical reading methods and techniques allows learners reach their learning outcomes among which efficient understanding and interpreting a literary text could be mentioned.

Actually, if the learners were successful readers, they would probably uncover their limitations and weaknesses, and would certainly exert efforts to enhance change. It is worth to mention that, critical reading is more than just assisting learners in solving problems and developing critical thinking skills. Therefore, an effective literary work enables readers learn to change and be better through challenging a text.

6. Critical Reading Activities and Literary Texts

Developing learners' critical thinking potentialities, promoting their personal responses and enhancing their comprehension and interpretation of literary materials remain the most prominent goals of teaching literature in EFL classes. In this context, convenient activities are to be designed to engage learners in texts analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; varied from the easiest and most simple to the most difficult and complex, that is those that require more reflection and thought. The following table suggests some examples of the questions that could be asked about the story *The Unicorn in the Garden* (Adapted from James Thurber, **Fables of our Time**).

Level	Cognitive Verb	Questions	To what degree can a student...
Higher Order Thinking Skills	Creating	**Judge** whether the husband's reaction was good or bad. **Defend** your opinion.	create, develop, and formulate a new product or point of view?
More Abstract	Evaluating	What does the husband mean when he says: — " We'll see about that"? **Justify** your answer.	Evaluate and judge a stand or decision?
	Analyzing	**Compare** this story to reality. What events could not really happen?	distinguish and contrast different parts?
	Applying	**Demonstrate** whether the husband and wife are in love with each other or not.	use and interpret information in a new way?
More Concrete	Understanding	**Report** the expressions used by the wife, then **discuss** them.	explain concepts or ideas?
Lower Order Thinking Skills	Remembering	**List** the items or expressions used by the husband to awake his wife.	recall, remember information?

Table (2) Suggested Questions

Teachers are expected to plan appropriate instruction, and design effective assessment tasks and techniques to ensure full understanding of literary texts. For instance, while reading a text, learners could be asked to:

- ✓ Underline key words and ideas.
- ✓ Circle words or phrases they want to remember for discussion.
- ✓ mark important ideas.
- ✓ Use different color highlighters to mark an especially significant idea.
- ✓ Put a question mark near any unfamiliar word or expression to be looked up.
- ✓ Number the writer's key supporting points or arguments.
- ✓ Provide their own thoughts and comments about the text on the margin or on a separate sheet of paper.

Using the above prompts, the literary reading promotes learners' critical thinking. Further questions can be assigned to enable learners explore the depth of their thoughts and challenge themselves providing ideal text interpretation. Some of these questions could be stated as follows:

- ✓ What issue is the writer communicating in the text?
- ✓ What is the writer's thesis?
- ✓ What is the writer's purpose for writing?
- ✓ What is the writer's tone? Why does he/she write with this tone?
- ✓ What evidence or arguments does the writer use to support the text's thesis?
- ✓ What reaction does the writer want from the reader? Does he/she seem to assume readers will agree with his/her position?
- ✓ Does the writer consider all or reject opposing arguments?
- ✓ Does the writer use simple or complex vocabulary?
- ✓ Do you understand the writer's references and citations? If not, look them up.
- ✓ Do you share the writer's view points? Why or why not?
- ✓ What connections can you make between this text and others you have read?

Such questions would enable learners delve in meaning, deepen their understanding and provide personal judgments.

When the selected literary text is in the form of prose or short stories, Tung and Chang (2009) suggest some learning prompts as follows:

✓ Pick out at least five phrases or sentences which you think are especially important to the story and briefly describe why you chose each.

✓ Who is the most impressive or your favourite character in the story? What qualities does he/she exhibit in the story? How does he/she exhibit them? What qualities does he/she lack?

(Ibid, p. 317)

According to Tung and Chang, the use of these prompts can sustain learners' critical judgments and enhance their literary text interpreting.

In brief, a well combination of the course learning objectives and literature reading tasks or activities can promote EFL learners' critical thinking while processing literary material. The teacher is then expected to help learners interact with the text more profoundly through adequate reading techniques and activities to enable them provide successful interpretation.

Conclusion

In general, the present paper has attempted to cover a general overview of critical reading as a whole, then introduce some critical strategies in particular. Different critical strategies and techniques have been introduced to highlight their effectiveness in fostering EFL learners' personal responses, and awareness required to become critical readers. Promoting learners' critical reading skills is a fundamental objective in higher education and to achieve this aim, using literary material to encourage learners provides successful interpretation is highly feasible approach. For this sake, if possible, more time should be allocated for learners to respond to the questions marked and the activities designed by the teacher during the reading comprehension course. In this way, learners' critical reading abilities can be sustained and further exalted over a long-term process.

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