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Reader-Response Theory: Using Literary Works to Promote EFL Students' Critical Reading Skills

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Abstract

This study investigated the combination of literary works and reader-response theory as a form of literary criticism to promote EFL students' critical reading skills. Critical reading is essential for navigating a world filled with misinformation and propaganda. For this reason, it is essential to teach this skill to students at an early age. University students, including EFL learners, should be rigorously trained in critical reading to engage effectively with foreign texts. To this end, a qualitative study was conducted. Participants were tasked with reading five short stories and providing oral and written responses using the reader-response theory. 21 EFL students taking a reading course at a private university participated in the research. They were given five short stories in five sessions, read them, and responded to them based on the reader-response theory. Oral and written responses were collected and analyzed to identify the elements of critical reading skills present. The study also distributed an open-response questionnaire to determine the processes students followed during reading activities. Thus, both the products (e.g., presentations, written responses, discussions) and processes of reading were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that five noticeable elements of critical reading emerged: reflecting, analyzing, interpreting, commenting, and reasoning. In addition, the activities had other benefits: students became involved in vocabulary acquisition and engaged with authentic materials. The study suggests that, apart from enhancing comprehension, the reader-response theory and literary works can promote EFL students' critical reading skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A text that is already available in public is subject to criticism and becomes meaningful when people read it. Without readers, a text is meaningless, even useless, as it cannot convey its message. Each text has an objective, be it positive or negative. Therefore, readers should be critical when reading. Adopting a critical stance when reading can be beneficial (Leland et al., 2012), for instance, because it helps readers resist propaganda, comprehend content, unearth hidden meanings, judge the flow of ideas, learn how the author presents arguments, and get ideas for further writing, reading, or research activities.

Reading is a skill that is taught to students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). At the beginner level, where the students start to read in a foreign language with limited grammar and vocabulary understanding, critical reading approaches may not be fully implemented. It should be suitable to teach these students close reading, the stage that precedes critical reading (Hogan, 2017). However, as the student's level increases, the teacher should use more advanced strategies to encourage them to be critical when reading. This is surely not an easy task, since most EFL classes take place in non-Western contexts. Individuals in these cultures are not always familiar with Western ideas of 'critical thinking'. However, this should not stop teachers from teaching critical reading in the EFL context because it provides many benefits to students.

A significant issue in current EFL instruction is the lack of clarity in how to effectively integrate critical reading strategies with literary work that is culturally and contextually relevant to students. A foreign language cannot be separated from the culture and customs surrounding it. Learners cannot correctly position the language in the correct context, especially regarding social activities, if the teaching of language and culture is separated (Brown & Park, 2020). Work of fiction also belongs to culture, and they often tell the stories of people whose problems are specific to a certain culture. That is why literary works such as novels, short stories, and poetry have long been included in EFL, and many studies have been conducted on their usage.

The research problem addressed in this study is the lack of exploration on how the combination of literary works, specifically short stories, and reader-response theory can foster critical reading skills among EFL learners, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts. Reading literary work can become meaningful if a reader connects it with his/her life experiences (Lee & Patkin, 2016). One theory of literary criticism is the reader-response theory, which encourages readers to explore literary works in terms of personal connections (Moutray et al., 2001). This leads to the research question:

1. What are the elements of critical reading that emerge from combining short stories as literary products and the reader-response theory as one of the approaches in literary criticism, with a particular focus on EFL university students?

Despite its significance, there is a noticeable research gap regarding the specific integration of the reader-response theory with critical reading in the context of EFL, especially in non-Western educational settings. While the reader-response theory has been widely discussed in literary studies, its application in enhancing critical reading skills among EFL students, particularly those from non-Western backgrounds, remains underexplored. Furthermore, existing literature largely ignores the combination of short stories with the reader-response theory in EFL classrooms, particularly in terms of the practical, critical reading elements that emerge from this integration.

The novelty of this study lies in the contribution of combining literary short stories with reader-response theory to enhance critical reading skills in non-Western EFL contexts. It addresses a gap in the literature by exploring how this integration can provide more effective and culturally responsive reading strategies. Focusing on EFL university students, the research examines the intersection of literature, literary criticism, and language learning, providing innovative perspectives on pedagogical practices for teaching critical reading. Specifically, it

investigates whether applying reader-response theory to literary texts can support the development of essential critical reading skills.

The present study extends the work of previous research by focusing on a broader range of student engagement, including not only reflective writing and dialogue but also an in-depth analysis of how readers interact with the overall narrative structure of short stories. While prior studies have examined specific components such as creativity and autonomy, the present study aims to explore how the integration of reader-response theory with the structured analysis of literary elements (e.g., plot, character, and theme) can further enhance critical reading skills in the EFL context. This study builds on [Prasasti's \(2021\)](#) research but expands its scope by investigating how reading literary works through the lens of reader-response theory can enhance critical reading skills. It examines both the processes students engage in and the products they produce. As a result, the study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of this approach.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One teaching strategy that has proven to encourage criticality is exposing students to literary works, including short stories, novels, poems, and dramas. Some authors have shown the positive results of this strategy in EFL. Accordingly, this section reviews the use of literary works, the concept of reader-response theory and related studies, and the elements of critical reading, and connects them to the present research.

2.1 Literary Works in EFL

Several authors ([Adeani et al., 2020](#); [Al-Jarf, 2022](#); [Bloemert, et al., 2016](#); [Bloemert, et al., 2019](#); [Febriani, et al., 2022](#); [Hoff, 2019](#); [Jaafar & Hassoon, 2018](#); [Khan & Alasmari, 2018](#); [Y. H. Kim, 2018](#); [Luukka, 2019](#); [Rahman, 2019](#); [Sauro & Sundmark, 2016](#); [Stefanova, et al., 2017](#); [Suprayogi, 2021](#); [Viana & Zyngier, 2020](#); [Wong et al., 2017](#)) have shown the benefits of using literary works in the EFL context and encouraged teachers to use them. For instance, [Viana and Zyngier \(2020\)](#) state that using literature in the EFL classroom can stimulate autonomous learning, while [Khan and Alasmari \(2018\)](#) note benefits such as exposure to authentic materials, increased language skills, and expanded linguistic ability. In general, studies on literature in EFL contexts, inside and outside Indonesia, have investigated various aspects. They have explored such topics as cultural model adoption (e.g. [M. Ilyas & Afzal, 2021](#)), the selection and function of literary texts in EFL (e.g. [Luukka, 2019](#)), teacher and student perspectives (e.g. [Barzani, 2020](#); [Bloemert et al., 2019](#); [J. Kim, 2022](#); [Maretha et al., 2023](#); [Qassem, 2020](#); [Raees, 2018](#)), the role of literature as a pedagogical tool (e.g. [Arboleda-Arboleda & Castro-Garcés, 2019](#)), fiction and writing (e.g. [Seo & Kim, 2020](#)), novels and graphic novels (e.g. [Gultom et al., 2022](#); [Hakim et al., 2021](#); [Iles & Belmekki, 2021](#); [Mutiarani et al., 2021](#); [Wong et al., 2017](#)), poetry (e.g. [Dewi, 2018](#); [Mermelstein, 2022](#)), drama (e.g. [Angelianawati, 2019](#); [Sirisrimangkorn, 2018](#)), fictional films (e.g. [Liu, 2019](#)), martial arts fiction ([Wu, 2021](#)), short stories ([Bhatti et al., 2022](#); [Eklesia & Angelina, 2019](#); [Feeney & Gajaseni, 2020](#); [Nazara, 2019](#); [Pratiwi et al., 2020](#); [Prinsloo, 2018](#); [Rahmawati, 2020](#); [Sentürk & Kahraman, 2020](#); [Zainal et al., 2022](#)), and digital storytelling (e.g. [Arroba & Acosta, 2021](#)).

Studies investigating teachers' and students' perspectives on the use of literature in EFL ([Barzani, 2020](#); [Bloemert et al., 2019](#); [J. Kim, 2022](#); [Maretha et al., 2023](#); [Qassem, 2020](#); [Raees, 2018](#)) have shown positive results. For example, [Barzani \(2020\)](#) interviewed 10 students and 10 teachers in Iraq to determine their points of view on the use of literary works to enhance reading comprehension. The teacher participants of this study mentioned that literary works could be used to encourage reading comprehension, while the students responded positively and said that literary works also had other benefits. Similarly, students in [J. Kim's \(2022\)](#) study stated that literary works helped them respect different cultures, reflect critically, and develop language

skills. Concerning students' critical thinking, Qassem (2020) also mentioned that using literary works could improve students' thinking in addition to their language skills.

Some studies adopting novels, including graphic novels (book-length works of fiction or nonfiction that use sequential art and illustration, often combined with text, to tell a complete narrative in a visually engaging format), have also shown positive results and responses from students and teachers (Gultom et al., 2022; Hakim et al., 2021; Iles & Belmekki, 2021; Mutiarani et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2017). Gultom et al. (2022) used graphic novels (i.e., novels combining texts and illustrations) to promote speaking fluency. Through online classroom observations and surveys, their study found that their speaking fluency was enhanced when they verbalized their thoughts when conversing and reviewing the content of novels. Similarly, Wong et al. (2017) proved that the reading skills of 188 students improved after being exposed to graphic novels instead of text-only novels. The content of novels also enabled a teacher to foster EFL students' social awareness and interest in reading (Hakim et al., 2021) and encourage moral knowledge and literacy (Mutiarani et al., 2021). Since novels usually show a certain culture, they are often used to expose EFL students to the culture, as shown in a study conducted by Iles and Belmekki (2021), who introduced students to Black English vernacular using *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a novel about slavery written by Harriet Beecher Stowe. In addition to developing EFL students' skills in the target language, this approach could expand students' knowledge of the varieties of English spoken by a particular group of people.

Similarly, recent studies on the use of short stories in EFL have also shown positive results and the significant potential benefit of this form of literary work (Bhatti et al., 2022; Eklesia & Angelina, 2019; Feeney & Gajaseeni, 2020; Nazara, 2019; Pratiwi et al., 2020; Prinsloo, 2018; Rahmawati, 2020; Sentürk & Kahraman, 2020; Zainal et al., 2022). They have shown that short stories can be utilized to develop EFL students' vocabulary (Bhatti et al., 2022; Eklesia & Angelina, 2019; Nazara, 2019; Rahmawati, 2020), grammar (Sentürk & Kahraman, 2020), and intercultural communication (Feeney & Gajaseeni, 2020). The studies exploring short stories and vocabulary (Bhatti et al., 2022; Eklesia & Angelina, 2019; Nazara, 2019; Rahmawati, 2020) found that short stories encouraged EFL students to increase and develop their vocabulary knowledge, reinforced vocabulary acquisition, and helped them better guess the meaning of words.

These studies have shown the benefits of incorporating literary works in the EFL classroom. They revealed the effectiveness in enhancing language skills, cultural understanding, and critical thinking. Whether through novels, short stories, or graphic narratives, literature offers diverse entry points for engaging learners. These findings support the integration of literary texts as meaningful tools for language instruction in EFL contexts.

2.2 Reader-Response Theory

Reader-response theory is one school of thought in literary criticism, which is also known as reader-oriented criticism. It stems from the notion that the meaning of literary works comes from the interaction between a reader and a text. Since the interpretation of the text is the result of the reader's experiences, feelings, emotions, and perspectives, it is subjective. Subjectivity is one of the key points of the reader-response theory. In essence, it describes how a reader constructs their own meaning through interaction with a text (Davis & Womack, 2018).

Other key points of the reader-response theory are active engagement and multiple interpretations. Active engagement means that the reader actively constructs meaning by making connections between information in the text and themselves. Therefore, they are not a passive reader who simply accepts the meaning of the author of the text (Whiteley & Canning, 2017). The idea of multiple interpretations suggests that each reader has a unique interpretation as they bring their respective experiences, feelings, perspectives, and background knowledge with them to the text.

A fundamental concept in the reader-response theory is that of the 'implied reader', a theoretical figure who is assumed to interpret the text in a particular way (Kukkonen, 2014). This contrasts with the 'actual reader', who brings his/her personal experiences and perspectives to the interpretation. The theory posits that readers actively engage in the process of interpreting a text

by applying their knowledge to fill the gaps, creating a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader's cognitive process (Kukkonen, 2014). This dynamic process of negotiation enables the text's meaning to evolve beyond its original intent, resulting in a range of potential interpretations.

Furthermore, the reader-response theory views reading as both an emotional and an intellectual experience in which the reader's emotional responses play a key role in shaping his/her understanding of the text (Miall, 2011). This emotional engagement causes readers to question their own biases, assumptions, and reactions, thus encouraging deeper critical thinking and reflection. The theory also emphasizes the importance of personal context, as the reader's social, cultural, and historical background significantly influences his/her interpretation of the text.

In recent years, several studies using the reader-response theory in EFL have been conducted by researchers with various objectives (e.g., Boubekur, 2021; Kinasih, 2020; Pasaribu, 2020; Prasasti, 2021; Rahimpour, 2021). For instance, Boubekur (2021) found that the reader-response theory promoted students' creativity and thinking skills, especially elements such as evaluating, analyzing, and inferring, as well as making them aware of morals and different cultures. The idea that the reader-response theory can promote critical thinking skills was also supported by Kheladi (2020), who argued that it encouraged analysis and reflection. About reflection, Kinasih (2020) asked her participants to write reflections in response to selected poems and short stories, with the results showing students' self-confidence in expressing ideas. Another benefit was promoting EFL students' autonomy (Pasaribu, 2020). A study conducted by Prasasti (2021) showed that three activities related to the reader-response theory (i.e., dialoging, reflecting, emphasizing) encouraged critical thinking and reading among EFL students.

2.3 Critical Reading Elements

To identify the elements of critical reading, the present study considered recent research on critical reading in EFL (Din, 2020; H. P. Ilyas, 2023; Khamkhong, 2018; Suarcaya & Prasasti, 2017). These studies have highlighted the components of critical reading in EFL contexts. For example, Din (2020) shared the following critical reading elements: analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, assessing, reasoning, and distinguishing.

Suarcaya and Prasasti (2017) investigated EFL students' critical reading skills based on the critical literacy perspective. They analyzed 12 students' written and oral responses to reading texts with various themes, such as women's rights and arranged marriage, and found elements of critical reading: reflecting, arguing, and challenging. Similarly, Khamkhong (2018) conducted a study that aimed to improve EFL students' critical reading skills using the PISA reading literacy assessment framework. This included the following key elements: evaluating, integrating, interpreting, and reflecting.

A study by H. P. Ilyas (2023) investigated the extent to which EFL teachers' reading instruction featured critical reading activities. To this end, he reviewed four studies on integrating critical reading in EFL and two authors who discussed critical reading. He examined and synthesized critical thinking elements and items found in this material. The elements cover the following categories: commenting, comparing, concluding, contrasting, evaluating, guessing, identifying, inferring, outlining, previewing, questioning, reflecting, responding, and summarizing (listed in Table 1).

Table 1. Elements of critical reading.

No.	Categories
1.	Analyzing
2.	Arguing
3.	Assessing
4.	Challenging
5.	Commenting
6.	Comparing
7.	Concluding

Table 1 continued...

8.	Contrasting
9.	Distinguishing
10.	Evaluating
11.	Guessing
12.	Identifying
13.	Inferring
14.	Integrating
15.	Interpreting
16.	Outlining
17.	Previewing
18.	Questioning
19.	Reasoning
20.	Reflecting
21.	Responding
22.	Summarizing

Table 1 presents 22 categories that represent key elements of critical reading, as synthesized from previous studies and theoretical discussions by [H. P. Ilyas \(2023\)](#). These elements cover a wide range of cognitive and analytical skills essential for developing deeper engagement with texts. These elements provide a thorough basis for structuring and assessing critical reading tasks in EFL teaching.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted the principles of qualitative inquiry to deal with the data ([Çelik et al., 2020](#)). The goal was to unearth information related to students' expressions, thoughts, and experiences and subject it to qualitative analysis. The data obtained were in the form of written and spoken language. The content was analyzed to identify the elements of critical reading. Accordingly, the principles of qualitative content analysis were adopted.

3.2 Setting and Participants

This study was carried out with students in a reading course offered by the English Department of a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The reading course was selected because it was the only available course at the university that aligned with the objectives of this research, which focused on critical reading. Additionally, this course was suitable for the research as it provided the appropriate context for implementing the reader-responses theory. The students in this class also consented to participate after being informed that the research project was focused on critical reading.

Twenty-one students participated in this study, all of whom were in their second semester of study, with ages ranging from 18 to 21 years. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants ([Symon et al., 2012](#)) because they were enrolled in the reading course that directly aligned with the research focus. The participants were also all Senior High School graduates, so their level of English proficiency ranged from pre-to-post-intermediate, with a few students at pre-advanced level.

The sample included seven male participants and 14 female participants. The reading course comprised 14 meetings, with each meeting lasting 150 minutes. Toward the conclusion of the course, literary works in the form of short stories were introduced to the students, with one short story provided per meeting. Following each meeting, participants were required to respond to the short story using the reader-response theory. Before the initiation of these activities, the researchers explained the principles of the reader-response theory to the students and guided how to respond to the stories. The incorporation of the reader-response theory as a supplementary

activity was a key element of the course design, with five of the classroom meetings dedicated to the execution of reader-response activities. During these sessions, students read and responded to five short stories.

3.3 Data Source

This study selected data derived from five short stories by renowned literary figures (see Table 2). The selection of these narratives was motivated by their intellectually engaging and thought-provoking narratives. These stories also have the potential to stimulate readers' thinking skills, which is ideal for developing critical reading skills in EFL university students. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) reveals the presence of unconventional plots, surprising twists, humanistic themes, and rich moral values in the stories. These characteristics render the stories highly suitable for analysis through the framework of the reader-response theory. Additionally, the five short stories contain challenging vocabulary, which makes them appropriate for participants of this research who are still at an intermediate to pre-advanced level of English proficiency. The interaction of all these characteristics becomes a good basis for promoting critical thinking, and this is in line with the focus of the present research on identifying critical reading that emerges when integrating short stories and the reader-response theory.

Table 2. List of short stories

No.	Title	Author
1.	<i>The Happy Prince</i>	Oscar Wilde
2.	<i>The Canterville Ghost</i>	Oscar Wilde
3.	<i>The Last Leaf</i>	O. Henry
4.	<i>The Furnished Room</i>	O. Henry
5.	<i>Lamb to the Slaughter</i>	Roald Dahl

The first short story under consideration was *The Happy Prince*, a work by Oscar Wilde that was published in 1888. Wilde is recognized as an Anglo-Irish playwright, poet, novelist, and critic. The story conveys a profound moral lesson concerning the themes of kindness and sacrifice. The narrative revolves around a statue of a prince that is erected in a public square after the prince's death. The statue becomes an instrument of charity through the intervention of a swallow. The swallow, guided by the statue's wisdom, meticulously plucks the jewels and gold, subsequently bestowing them upon the needy and destitute. The Happy Prince is loaded with themes of compassion, social responsibility, and generosity. These themes provide an excellent literary vehicle for engaging readers in critical thinking, especially about human behavior and moral values. The metaphor and irony present in this piece of Wilde's writing encourage EFL students to reflect on the disparities between the haves and have-nots and the social dynamics that exist in this imbalance.

The second story, *The Canterville Ghost*, was also authored by Oscar Wilde and published in 1887. The narrative recounts the tale of a ghost that haunts a mansion in England. The mansion belongs to a family of Americans who have recently acquired it and relocated to England. The ghost, in its attempts to cause terror, is met with successive failures at the hands of the family. A distinguishing feature of Wilde's narrative is its incorporation of humor and satire, a departure from the conventional approach to ghost stories. This characteristic makes the story ideal for EFL students to analyze using the reader-response theory. The central story is the transformation of the ghost from a scary creature to a pitiful character, with the themes of redemption, forgiveness, and the clash between British tradition and American pragmatism. Wilde's incorporation of these elements provides a variety of ways for readers to think about personal growth, cultural differences, social values, and the impact of social values on individual behavior.

The third short story was entitled *The Last Leaf* and was authored by the American writer O. Henry. The story was first published in 1907. The narrative is characterized by themes of hope, sacrifice, and the human will to persevere. The narrative revolves around two young women, Sue and Johnsy, who reside in a modest apartment in New York. Johnsy is portrayed as a young woman grappling with pneumonia, a condition that has left her in a state of imminent mortality.

She is convinced that the last leaf to fall from a vine outside her window will signify her death. Recognizing her fear, an elderly artist named Behrman sacrifices his life by painting a leaf on a vine so that Johnsy will survive. The narrative conveys profound messages to its readers, emphasizing the significance of selfless deeds, human resilience, and the transformative power of art. These themes, which include self-sacrifice and the connection between life and art, make the text a suitable selection for critical reading activities.

The fourth short story, also authored by O. Henry and entitled *The Furnished Room*, was published in 1906 and explores loss, love, and the harsh realities of urban life. The narrative revolves around a male protagonist who rents a room in a boarding house in New York. The narrative unfolds with the revelation that the previous occupant of the room was a woman with whom the protagonist had been involved in a romantic relationship. The narrative takes an unexpected turn when it is revealed that the woman had a tragic past. This literary work is a compelling example of O. Henry's ability to explore the intricate dynamics of romantic relationships and the profound influence of destiny on one's personal life. By employing irony and layers of meaning, O. Henry invites readers to engage with the narrative. The narrative's depth and complexity, including themes of love, identity, and existential meaning, make it a suitable candidate for use in critical reading activities designed for EFL students.

The final short story under consideration was Roald Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter*, which was first published in 1953. In this narrative, Dahl, a British author, poet, and screenwriter, tells the story of Mary Maloney, who kills her husband. The narrative revolves around the unexpected outcome of Mary's actions, wherein she prepares and serves a frozen leg of lamb to the attending police officers who investigate her husband's demise. The motivation behind the act is the husband's intention to depart from the marriage. The narrative's premise is notably provocative, and its conclusion is unexpected, which makes it a suitable candidate for inclusion in a critical reading project. Beyond its provocative premise and unexpected conclusion, the narrative offers a lens into profound themes, including justice, crime, and deception, making it a valuable resource for critical reading projects that encourage students to engage with complex literary works. The incorporation of dark humor and an examination of gender roles prompt readers to engage in a critical analysis of societal expectations and the intricacies of human behavior, making it a suitable choice for reader-response analysis.

3.4 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The present study collected four types of data: written responses, oral presentations, focus group discussions, and open-response questionnaires. The overarching objective of this multifaceted approach was to gain an understanding of the elements of critical reading as EFL students responded to short stories using the reader-response theory. The rationale behind the utilization of these methodologies was to employ a multifaceted approach for data collection, ensuring the capture of both group interactions and individual reflections. The integration of these varied data collection techniques was undertaken to explore how students engage with literary texts through communal and personal lenses, thus allowing for deeper analysis.

The initial data collection was through written responses in which students wrote a one-page response to each of O. Henry's short stories. These responses manifested as personal reflections, encompassing the students' thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and emotional reactions, based on the principles of the reader-response theory. Before the administration of the survey, students were provided with a week to read each story and reflect on it. The responses were typed, single-spaced, using Times New Roman font size 11-12. The process occurred in two separate sessions, one for each of the two O. Henry short stories, *The Furnished Room* and *The Last Leaf*.

The second data collection method employed in this research was verbal presentation. In this method, students were tasked with presenting their responses to two literary works, *The Happy Prince* and *The Canterville Ghost*, both of which were written by Oscar Wilde. As with the written responses, the students received the stories a week in advance, enabling them to engage in thorough reading and reflection. For each session, students delivered a speech lasting 2-4 minutes, articulating their subjective emotions, experiences, and reflections concerning the

stories. The purpose of this activity was not only to collect students' responses but also to practice students' spoken English and encourage their confidence. The sessions were recorded, and the researchers took notes for subsequent analysis. The oral presentations were conducted in two meeting sessions, one for each of the two Wilde stories.

The last data collection method was a focus group discussion on Roald Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter*. In this session, the researchers assumed the role of a moderator, facilitating a discussion among students regarding their responses to the short story. The objective of this activity was to encourage an open dialogue in which students could express their thoughts and feelings about the plot, characters, and themes. Consistent with the preceding activities, the students were allotted a week to read and reflect on the short story, a period that was sufficient to allow time for reading and reflection. The focus group discussion was recorded, and detailed notes were taken. The activity was conducted within a single session.

Following the completion of these activities, the researchers administered an open-response questionnaire to the students. The objective of the questionnaire was to elicit students' reflections on all of the activities in which they had participated. The objective of the questionnaire was to capture students' reflections on the process of generating their responses, experiences with using the reader-response theory, challenges, or insights they encountered. To ensure that students could articulate their ideas fully, the researchers instructed them to complete the questionnaire in Indonesian, a language they all spoke. The completed questionnaires were submitted one week after distribution.

After the collection of all data, they were transcribed. A systematic analysis was conducted to identify the critical reading elements that emerged from the interactions between students and the texts. Because the data were qualitative, the researcher used thematic analysis, which followed [Braun and Clarke's \(2022\)](#) principles of analysis. The thematic analysis is particularly well-suited to this study because it allows for the identification of patterns and themes that emerge across different types of data: written responses, oral presentations, focus group discussions, and open-ended questionnaires. The researchers then proceeded to code the data, followed by grouping the codes into themes that reflected the critical reading elements that emerged from the students' engagement with the short stories and the reader-response theory.

In the course of the analysis, the researchers meticulously read and transcribed the responses. Subsequently, an open coding approach was employed, wherein significant pieces of text that reflected elements of critical reading, such as analysis, reflection, emotional responses, and personal connections to the stories, were marked. These codes were then grouped into broader themes related to critical thinking, such as evaluation, interpretation, and emotional engagement. The final step was developing themes, where the researchers refined and strengthened the themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the critical reading elements that emerged in this research.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After all of the processes and activities were considered and analyzed, the following elements of critical reading emerged most prominently.

4.1 Reflecting

Data from the presentation, written responses, discussions, and questionnaires showed that reflecting was the most noticeable process. All of the students' open-response questionnaires said they had to connect the stories with their own personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts, which made them think and reflect, as shown in the excerpt below (all excerpts have been revised for clarity):

- (1) Reading the short stories using reader-response theory made me reflect on my life experience. I had to think back and collect my memories to find similarities or differences between the content of the stories and my life. (Student #19)

Reflecting enables students to think deeply because they have to recall their previous experiences to identify causes, effects, and reasons for events. Following this process for short stories whose content is connected to personal experience is even harder. This is because students need to interpret the meaning personally and then identify which part of their life corresponds to the stories. Therefore, reading literary works using reader-response theory trains EFL students to engage in reflection and thus encourages them to read critically.

One of the EFL students who gave a presentation about Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* reflected on the story by connecting it to her own experience with the needy. She said that the story reminded her of her father's message that they had to be kind to everyone, especially people in need:

- (2) When I reflected on the short story titled *The Happy Prince* by Oscar Wilde, I remembered the statue of the happy prince who said to the Swallow, 'I am covered by fine gold...you take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to the poor'. This reminded me of my father teaching me to always be kindhearted and generous, especially to the needy. The happy prince is a very generous statue. (Student #13)

Other researchers investigating the use of literary works in EFL classes (Adeani et al., 2020; Dewi, 2018; Hoff, 2019; J. Kim, 2022) and the implementation of reader-response theory (Kheladi, 2020; Kinasih, 2020) have also proven that reflection emerged as one of the aspects of critical reading. In this study, which considered both literary works and reader-response theory, reflection was the most prominent critical reading element. Therefore, EFL teachers can explore activities that combine these two strategies.

In this study, reflection emerged as a pivotal component, with participants frequently associating the short stories with their personal experiences and emotions. This approach to critical reading is consistent with the findings of previous studies, such as that of Adeani et al. (2020), which demonstrated that engaging in reflective thinking enhances students' comprehension of literature. By establishing connections between the themes in the stories and their own lives, students developed a more personal understanding of the text, which encouraged further self-reflection.

Similarly, Khan and Alasmari (2018) accentuate the significance of reflection in EFL classrooms. They argue that literary texts provide an opportunity for students to develop both their language skills and their cultural awareness. In this research, the application of reader-response theory significantly promoted reflective thinking, as students engaged with the material not only through analysis but also through relating it to their personal experiences. This pedagogical approach not only fosters language acquisition but also nurtures emotional intelligence, which is a pivotal skill in our globally connected world. Although reflection played a significant role, it is important to consider the extent to which students were able to connect with the material. It is possible that some students engaged in more meaningful reflection, while others made more superficial connections.

4.2 Analyzing and Interpreting

Analyzing and interpreting were other noticeable elements of critical reading that emerged from the combination of literary works and reader-response theory in this study. Almost all of the students mentioned analyzing, followed by interpreting. This makes sense because they had to respond to the short stories, and they analyzed them to interpret their meaning.

Some students said they needed to analyze the short stories carefully. They described processes such as identifying the meaning of difficult words, noting the characters in the stories, making connections among characters, and searching for the characters' motivations or challenges. After these processes were complete, they were able to engage in interpretation, as shown in the following excerpts from open-response questionnaires:

- (3) ...as many difficult words. Firstly, I had to find the meaning of them in the dictionary. Then I reread the short stories. I wanted to connect the characters and what the characters desired and wanted. Sometimes I read them three times. (Student #7)
- (4) To understand the flow of the stories, I analyzed the difficult words after the first quick reading. [Then], I related sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph to understand the stories. (Student #18)

After analyzing the vocabulary and characters, students started interpreting the stories by finding messages and values, connecting the stories to their own experiences, and identifying similarities and differences between themselves and the characters.

- (5) After I understood the stories and knew the connections between all of the characters, I began to relate the content of the stories to the story of my own life. Finally, I gave my comments on the stories for the assignments. (Student #5)

Analyzing and interpreting are two elements that enable students to be critical when reading. When they understand a text thoroughly, students can interpret it intelligently. This is useful, for example, if they encounter propaganda in the future. In addition, this also helps students acquire components of language; they can expand their vocabulary and be exposed to authentic materials, which was also shown in a study by [Khan and Alasmari \(2018\)](#).

The analyzing and interpreting phases of critical reading were also found to be significant in this study. Participants engaged in the process of uncovering meanings, exploring characters' motivations, and comprehending the underlying themes present within the short stories. These findings align with [Barzani's \(2020\)](#) research, which demonstrated that literary texts, such as short stories, play a significant role in improving reading comprehension in EFL settings.

As students engaged with the stories, they demonstrated critical thinking by analyzing character relationships and narrative structure, skills that mirror how we interpret complex texts in real-life situations. The process of analyzing language and narrative not only helped them improve their language skills but also provided a deeper understanding of the social and cultural messages in the stories ([Boubekour, 2021](#)). Employing the principles of reader-response theory, students articulated a variety of interpretations, indicating a growing awareness of the multiple layers of meaning in the texts. Hence, the students showed that they could successfully analyze and interpret the texts. However, the depth and quality of their interpretations often depended on their critical thinking skills.

4.3 Commenting and Reasoning

Commenting and reasoning were also noticeable elements of critical reading in the activities that combined literary works and reader-response theory to promote critical reading skills. They were mostly found during presentations and written tasks. The students expressed various comments on the stories. Most of them also gave reasons for any comment they made since they were asked to do so.

As one of the basic principles of the reader-response theory is that the meaning of a text comes from the readers, the students were given the freedom to comment on any aspect of the stories they found interesting. One student, during the discussion about Roald Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter*, commented that the wife should not kill her husband even though he plans to leave her; she should be strong enough to face the future, even though it is hard. The reason the student gave was that a wicked action will eventually go back to the person who commits it and end in misery. He stated:

- (6) The relationship between husband and wife is not always smooth. Sometimes the husband wants to divorce his wife, or vice versa. If this happens, one should not kill the other, because it will make the problem worse. And remember, a bad deed always returns to the person who performs it. (Student #10)

Another student commented on O. Henry's *The Last Leaf* in a written response. He said that people have to regain their spirit even if they are suffering from a terminal illness. Others

should also support those suffering from sickness because a positive spirit leads to motivation, happiness, and positive thinking:

- (7) My comment is that if we have a terminal illness, we have to keep our spirits up to recover. Also, we should motivate and entertain people who are terminally ill, because spirit and motivation at least help people to be happy and positive. (Students #6)

Commenting and reasoning are elements of critical reading that should be included in the EFL classroom. They can help students express their thoughts and emotions, including such feelings as apprehension and hope. However, students must support their comments with reasons. EFL teachers should give them opportunities to do so. In modern society, people have different opinions and debates about various topics. People can get insights or ideas from different opinions. Eventually, this may lead to the creation of a more democratic society (Gainer, 2012; Shih, 2018). EFL teachers can play a pivotal role in this regard.

In this study, the roles of commenting and reasoning were found to be instrumental in fostering the development of critical reading skills among EFL students. In accordance with the tenets of reader-response theory, which advocate for the acceptance of multiple interpretations, students were encouraged to articulate their reflections and reasons behind them. This pedagogical approach finds consistency with Feeney and Gajaseeni's (2020) findings, which highlight the value of using literature to develop both intercultural communication and critical thinking skills. The ability to argue for one's views is a core part of critical literacy, as it encourages deeper interaction with the text and helps students take a more active role in discussions.

The findings of the study, as illustrated by the students' responses to such stories as *Lamb to the Slaughter* and *The Last Leaf*, show that engagement with literature can help develop critical thinking skills. While numerous students provided insightful responses, some responses were more limited in scope, likely influenced by individual or cultural backgrounds that shaped their interpretation of the stories. Boubekour (2021) has noted that reader-response theory can stimulate creative thinking and enhance student engagement. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the diverse ways in which students can interact with literary texts. While commenting is valuable, it is imperative to support one's views with strong academic reasoning and evidence from the text to build stronger analytical skills.

5. CONCLUSION

The combination of literary works and reader-response theory, when applied in the EFL classroom, can provide many benefits for students. Reading literary works can contribute to greater vocabulary acquisition, exposure to authentic material, and a broader knowledge of culture. Reader-response theory contributes to critical thinking and reading skills, as it allows the reader to explore texts and build meaning. This has been demonstrated in this study. The noticeable elements of critical reading that arose were reflecting, analyzing, interpreting, commenting, and reasoning. The elements are important for EFL students to have since they may be bombarded with false information and propaganda in the real world.

EFL teachers can play an important role in facilitating students' development of critical reading skills. There are two significant advantages to reading literary works using the reader-response theory. First, it facilitates their acquisition of the English language. Second, it enhances their critical thinking and reading skills. Other researchers can develop similar studies, but in different contexts. For example, the same study could be conducted at the secondary school level. The reason for this is that critical thinking must start early to ensure that students receive all of its beneficial effects, especially in non-Western contexts where critical thinking and reading are still not popular in education. Finally, it must be acknowledged that there is no perfect study and that other researchers may develop a wider scope by incorporating the reader-response theory with other literary works, such as novels and poetry, in multiple classrooms. The more studies that are conducted within various educational contexts and with a diverse range of subjects and scope, the

greater the insight that EFL practitioners can have, which, in turn, accelerates the acquisition of critical and linguistic skills by EFL students.

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