

Examining ESL Learners' Perceptions of How Short Stories and Poetry Enhance Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract

In this new context of English language teaching (ELT), the development of critical thinking ability among ESL students has become the most significant aspect at the higher-education level. This is a quantitative survey research study that investigates undergraduate ESL students' perceptions of the pedagogical role of short stories and poetry in their acquisition of critical thinking skills in the Pakistani context. Based on an approved 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire based on the validated instruments of the Transactional theory of Reading, and the revised bloom taxonomies by Rosenblatt (1978) and Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), 100 BS English students in the COMSATS University Islamabad, Vehari Campus, and other related public colleges were sampled based on convenience and purposive sampling. The current descriptive statistical measures- means, percentages, and standard deviations revealed high levels of agreement with five constructs, including exposure (M = 3.90), engagement (M = 4.07), critical thinking development (M = 4.06), application of skills (M = 3.98), and overall perceptions (M = 4.11) being consistently high. According to the respondents, literary texts contribute greatly to analysis, assessment, interpretation, logical thinking and application of critical thinking in real life. These results confirm the cognitive and linguistic benefits of including short stories and poetry in an ESL curriculum. The research has practical implications for ESL teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers who want to advance higher-order thinking through literature-based instruction. Future mixed-method research limitations and directions are discussed.

Keywords: ESL Learners, Short Stories, Poetry, Critical Thinking Skills, Learners' Perceptions, Literature in ESL

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Introduction

In modern ESL instruction, a growing trend is to focus on teaching not only language skills but also higher order thinking of learners. Critical thinking, which can be defined as the ability to analyze, interpret, evaluate and explain ideas, has increasingly taken a mainstream position of focus in higher education. In this pedagogical setting, literature has been commonly argued for as a rich source of material for language classrooms that involves students in authentic language use and interpretative meaning-making rather than fixed or predictable content (Hall, 2015; Paran, 2018).

Literature is vague, contains many layers of meaning, and is open to interpretation. Texts like these require learners to read beyond the literal level and make meaning through inference, reflection, and evaluation. Research conducted in ESL and EFL settings suggests that this form of interaction is closely associated to the progression of critical Thinking skills, as students are urged to discuss viewpoints, counteract assumptions, and back up their interpretations based on textual evidences (Shukri & Mukundan, 2015; Bóbkina & Stefanova, 2016).

In addition, literature teaching has also been pointed out to promote analytical discourse and reflective commentary in the language class-room. Moreover, when learners fulfill interpretative tasks, they have to share their opinion, commentary on various interpretations and build meaning together. They are those practices, which help learners to engage in profound thinking and add to the active learning atmosphere wherein the application of the language is highly connected to the process of thinking and judgment (Paran, 2018; Bloemert et al., 2019). Through this means literature is an input in language and mental engagement.

In spite of these pedagogical benefits, the role of literature in ESL teaching is not universal in education. In other contexts, language education favors practical competence and thus, may limit the possibility of long-term exposure to interpretive literature. Recent researches thus highlight the necessity to study the role of learning with literary materials and the contribution of such learning to the acquisition of critical thinking skills in ESL classrooms (Julia and Jeyanthi, 2024; Zondi, 2025).

The current study is aimed at analyzing the importance of short stories and poetry in ESL education and its connection with the development of critical thinking, in particular. The research will serve to add to the current debates on the cognitive worth of literary literature in language learning and its role in ESL education at the higher level of human education.

Literature Review

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking has been defined in various ways. Mostly, it can be regarded as purposeful thinking or reflective judgment. To think critically means to inspect ideas, assess them in light of prior knowledge, and form rational judgments about their value. Facione (1990) identified six core constituents of critical thinking: interpretation (understanding and clarifying meaning), analysis (examining arguments), inference (drawing logical conclusions), **evaluation**, explanation (articulating arguments), and self-regulation. These skills are vital in almost everything we do i.e. Studying, reading, writing academic assignments, or interrelating with people.

Ennis (2015) defined critical thinking as “reasonable and reflective thinking aimed at deciding what to believe or what to do.” It includes abilities such as exploring arguments, making interpretations through inductive or deductive reasoning, appraising information, and making sound decisions or solving problems. In a similar strain, Halpern (2012) termed critical

thinking as the collection of mental procedures, approaches, and cognitive representations that individuals depend on on to solve problems, make decisions, and procure new concepts. Henning (1993) emphasizes that culture and language are inseparable elements that should be cohesively integrated within the curriculum rather than treated as distinct subjects. Incorporating literary texts into language teaching enriches the learning experience by providing multifaceted benefits that extend beyond mere linguistic competence. These texts serve as channels for students to engage with diverse cultural contexts, thereby improving their cultural awareness and sensitivity. Through acquaintance to various literary traditions and narratives, learners develop a deeper understanding of social values, historical perspectives, and worldviews rooted within the target language community.

Moreover, the study of literary texts nurtures cognitive and creative skills that are crucial for academic growth. Engaging with complex themes, figurative language, and narrative structures challenges students to think critically and imaginatively. This process cultivates creative thinking abilities by encouraging learners to interpret, analyze, and synthesize information in comprehensible ways. As a result, literary texts act as powerful tools that simultaneously stimulate language acquisition, cultural competence, and higher-order thinking skills, making them vital components of an effective and rounded language curriculum.

Lipman (1991) describes "critical thinking as a healthy skepticism." According to Elder and Paul (1994), critical thinking involves the capacity of individuals to take control of their own thought processes and establish robust criteria and standards for evaluating and analyzing their thinking. Maiorana (1992) states that the aim of critical thinking is to foster understanding assess perspectives and address problems. These definitions share a fundamental similarity. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), educators have identified the critical thinking skills necessary for academic and professional success. Pally (2000:53) asserts that "students should achieve English language proficiency in areas such as cause and effect, description, categorization, and differentiation, particularly for comparison and contrast.

Mohan, (1986, p. 42) emphasizes that:

"The skills of skimming, scanning and the ability to use the rhetorical conventions of academic or professional disciplines. Cognitive psychology highlights the understanding of the principles of temporal sequence, cause and effect, judgment and choice. Critical pedagogy focuses on examining the deep meanings, personal implications and social consequences of any knowledge, theme, technique, text, or material...its internal structure and its connections to self and society".

Critical thinking includes the use of information, experience and world knowledge in ways which allow learners to seek choices, make interpretations, raise questions and solve problems, that shows understanding in a diversity of multifaceted ways. Shor, (1992:78) is of the view that the need for critical thinking in classroom does not mean that EFL learners want the aptitude to involve in critical thinking. In fact, EFL students generally come to the classrooms with a variety of critical thinking skills developed in their L1. Many students are ready to participate in the activities related to their L2.

Developing Critical Thinking

Critical thinking proficiency can be developed using a number of teaching models. As Collie and Slater, (1991:52) explain that each undergraduate should be able to think critically and make rational choices by obtaining, investigating, blending and evaluating knowledge. They

further claim that sub-competency that can be used in the process of evaluating and assessing critical thinking can be listed as follows:

1. Knowing what to observe and thoroughly making accurate observations.
2. Representing observations in a suitable form to show relationships.
3. Recognizing problems that need to be and can be solved
4. Using sequential and complete approaches to problem solving.
5. Examining information and ideas to make choices.

They further add that some of the models of teaching which easily fit into the critical thinking skill are concept execution, scientific inquiry, inquiry training, replication, role playing and advanced organizer.

The incorporation of literature into language learning is a broadly discussed topic. Its role and potential to cultivate higher-order thinking further than linguistic competence (Othman et al. 2015). The scholars, on the role of short stories and poetry, are of the view that poetry and short stories are genuine, rich, and non-trivial texts that enhance the learning experience linguistically, culturally, and cognitively (Hanauer, 2015). Studies have emphasized literature's contribution to Language **Competence as it** improves vocabulary, stimulates reading, motivates speaking and provides multiple ways of writing (Lao & Krashen, 2000). Tucker (2015) is of the view that literary texts provide socio-historical context and knowledge of the target language's values and traditions; hence the ESL learners have Cultural Awareness through literary genres. Vural (2013) favors short stories and novels as a source of Personal Development (Othman et al., 2015). **Literary discourse encourages** fostering motivation, engagement, and personal growth by allowing students to understand their own and others' experiences. According to Sanavi & Tarighat (2014) Critical thinking (CT) is constantly acknowledged as a central product of incorporating literature. It acts as a catalyst for moving learners beyond repetition memorization to investigative, evaluative, and explanatory procedures (Paul & Elder, 2008).

Short Stories and Critical Thinking (CT)

Research directing precisely on short stories shows a strong link between this genre and the growth of CT skills. Undergraduate students, particularly those in EFL/ESL programs, usually perceive short stories as a valued tool for cognitive boost: Boumediene Houda (2018; 2021) conducted Quasi-experimental studies with second-year EFL students. The findings validated that reading short stories suggestively enriched CT abilities, which involved interpretation, analysis, and evaluation. They coined **Positive Impact of short stories on CT of the students**.

Short stories, due to their appealing storylines and stimulating themes, prompt students to make judgments, blend information and evaluate situations. Ahmed et al. (2019) favors skills like analyzing, comparing, contrasting, explaining, and inferring fostered by the literature in the readers as all the activities align with higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Nathir & Zubaedah, 2023; Othman et al. (2015) confirm that short stories are supposed as highly operational for language teaching due to their adaptable length, relevant content about human experiences and use of daily language, which makes them more reachable than other genres like poetry. They studied the perception of the students through class room notes and observations.

Poetry and Critical Thinking

Ferrer (2020) narrated numerous studies indicating that EFL adult and university students have reacted constructively to poetry activities when they are task-based, leading to development in reading, speaking, and writing. Karami, (2022) is of the view that poetry

programs precisely intended to center on culture-specific information and organized tasks can advance students' critical habits and overall CT. Poetry needs deep examination to understand compressed imagery, words with connotative and literary devices of the figurative language. It essentially demands high-level explanation and critical thought (Othman et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework.

This study is theoretically grounded in a amalgamation of the **Transactional Theory of Reading** (Rosenblatt, 1978) and **Bloom's Revised Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives** (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). This combined frame is necessary for exploring the idiosyncratic **perception** of ESL undergraduate students concerning the role of literature in evolving higher-order thinking skills The **Transactional Theory of Reading** postulates that the meaning of a literary work arises not merely from the text itself, but from the self-motivated, mutual interaction or *transaction* between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). In the ESL context, this transaction is greatly mediated by the students' current linguistic, cultural, and empirical schema (Othman et al., 2015). Students may assume either an **aesthetic stance**, or an **effereent stance** that ponder on extracting facts and logical information. The students' perception of a text's value is thus formed by their capability to productively pilot this transactional space. For example, the semantic and cultural complexity often found in poetry may slow down the transaction that leads to a perception of difficulty while the storyline structure of short stories may assist a smoother transaction (Nathir & Zubaedah, 2023).

The Revised Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives by Bloom is also being applied in this frame to complement the transactional process in that they offer a structure hierarchy to define and quantify the cognitive outcomes of the literary engagement in the form of the hierarchical levels of Analysis, Evaluation and Creation Bloom Revised Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) is being utilized as the enclosure to the higher-order abilities of Analysis, Evaluation and Creation. Exploration of literature with the student goes beyond the simple understanding (Remembering and Understanding) to analyze because of dismantling literary elements such as plot, theme and metaphorical language to determine the relationship between them. It also leads to Evaluate by arriving at acceptable judgments of motives of character, the purpose of the writer, the relevance of the theme, and basing on textual suggestion and external standards. The combination of the two theories announces that the perception of the ESL undergraduates of the CT process can be verified by the fact that it entails the objective higher-order cognitive skills that are explained in Bloom Taxonomy. Thus, the effective use of poetry and short stories is based on the teaching strategies that promote active and critical exchange.

Research Questions

1. How does regular exposure to short stories and poetry in the classroom help ESL learners understand texts with multiple meanings?
2. How effective do ESL learners believe short stories and poetry are in developing their critical thinking skills?
3. How do ESL learners view the overall role of short stories and poetry in enhancing their critical thinking skills?

Methodology

The researcher has employed a **quantitative research design** with data collected via a structured; closed-response questionnaire measuring operating through Likert scale administered through Google Forms, and consequently investigated using statistical coding and the t-test. Undergraduate students enrolled in BS English at the public colleges and

COMSATS University Vehari Campus was the population. **Convenience sampling** was used to recruit participants. This practical non-probability method was required for accessing freely available and willing students within the participating institution's present courses who have read short stories and poetry in their first two semesters of BS English.

A predesigned questionnaire consist of 5 constructs was shared to the 100 students through Google Form. This platform guaranteed constant administration, computerized data collection and homogeneity in demonstration. The questionnaire utilized a **Likert scale** format and was divided into three main sections .Responses were measured using a **5-point Likert scale** (e.g., 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).Content weight age was established through a review of the questionnaire items by my instructor at COMSATS University Vehari Campus, experts in ESL education and literature instruction to confirm that the items sufficiently signified the theoretical constructs of Transactional Theory and Bloom's Taxonomy. A **pilot study** was conducted with a separate group of students (n=10) to validate the tool of data collection.

Data Collection

For the present research we collected data with a help of a structured questionnaire based on the five sections: Exposure to Short Stories and Poetry, Engagement with Short Stories and Poetry, Critical Thinking Development, Application of Critical Thinking Skills and Overall Perception.

Data Collection Process

The questionnaire was shared with the population of 100 undergraduate ESL learners enrolled in public colleges. The questionnaire was sent to the students via google form. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the participants who were presently taking English language or literature courses in which major contents from poetry and short stories were being taught in the regular classes.

Data Analysis

This chapter presents the quantitative analysis of data collected through a structured questionnaire from 100 undergraduate students. The structured questionnaire consisted of 20 items divided into five sections: Exposure of Short Stories and Poetry, Engagement with Short Stories and Poetry, Critical Thinking Development, Application of Critical Thinking Skills and Overall Perceptions.

The questionnaire was carefully written to evaluate how reading and comprehension of literary texts, specifically short stories and poetry, equips the students with critical thinking abilities, analytical reasoning, and contemplative conclusion. The questionnaire was authenticated by subject experts in English language education to make sure the content relevance and transparency before distribution.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 items rate 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Mean score, Percentages and Standard Deviation) to identify trends and patterns.

Table 4.1: Section-1: Exposure of Short Stories and Poetry

Item	Mean	% Agree	% Disagree	% Neutral	SD
Q1: I am regularly exposed to short stories and poetry in my ESL classes	3.75	74	9	17	0.833
Q2: Discussions on short stories and poetry are a common part of my classroom learning	3.92	80	4	16	0.813



Item	Mean	% Agree	% Disagree	% Neutral	SD
Q3: Short stories and poetry are integrated into our language learning activities to improve comprehension and analysis	4.04	82	3	15	0.764

Table 4.1 indicates that the descriptive statistics are in the section titled Exposure of Short Stories and Poetry. Presents ESL students with short stories and poetry in the classroom setting. The analysis will be based on three items, each investigating a particular dimension of the exposure to and incorporation of literary texts in language learning.

In the 1st item, I am regularly exposed to short stories and poetry in my ESL classes, the mean score was (3.75) that is a high level of agreement amongst the respondents. (74%) of students agreed and only (9) disagreed and (17) was neutral. The standard deviation (SD =.833) indicates that the responses were quite similar indicating that most of the most students had a common feeling concerning the frequent reading of short stories and poems.

The 2nd one, discussions on short stories and poetry are a common part of my classroom learning, had an almost greater mean score of (3.92). Agree percentage (80%) was very high and only (4) disagreed and (16) were not indifferent. Another similarity in the responses is the standard deviation (SD=.813). These results support the idea that not alone students are provided with the exposure to short stories and poetry, but they also engage in those discussions that stimulate the interpretation and analysis of literary texts.

The 2nd one (Discussions on short stories and poetry are a common part of my classroom learning) had a slightly higher mean score (3.92). The extent of consensus (80%) was quite high and only (4) disagreed and (16) were indifferent. Again the standard deviation (SD=.813) indicates a consistency of response pattern. These results indicate that students are not only selfless. reading of short stories and poetry, however, they are also actively involved in the discussions, which fosters the interpretation and analysis of literary texts.

The 3rd item, which is proclaimed as, Short stories and poetry are part of our language learning activities to enhance comprehension and analysis, was the highest mean score (4.04) and agreement percentage (82), low disagreement (3), and (15) neutral responses. The low standard deviation (SD=.764). The total outcomes of this part suggest that short stories and poetry are common and discussed among the undergraduate ESL learners, which is presumed to be conducive support to the development of analytical and critical thinking.

Table 4.2: Section-2: Engagement with Short Stories and Poetry

Item	Mean	% Agree	% Disagree	% Neutral	SD
Q4: Reading short stories and poetry helps me understand different perspectives and worldviews	4.17	92	2	6	0.667
Q5: I actively participate in class discussions about the meaning and interpretation of short stories and poetry	3.79	65	4	31	0.782
Q6: I feel motivated to analyze themes, characters, and ideas presented in short stories and poetry	4.26	93	0	7	0.579

The finding in Table 4.2 presents students' level of engagement with short stories and poetry. The 4th item, "Reading short stories and poetry helps me understand different perspectives and worldviews," received a high mean score (4.17) and high level of agreement (92%), only



(2%) disagreeing and (6%) remaining neutral. The low standard deviation ($SD=.667$) indicates consistent responses and that most students help similar opinion, which implies that literature helps them gaining a broader understanding.

For the 5th item, “I actively participate in class discussions about the meaning and interpretation of short stories and poetry,” the mean score was (3.79), with agreement at (65%), disagreement at 4%, and 31% of respondents remaining neutral with standard deviation ($SD=.579$). These results shows that not all students are equally active in discussions, there are those who contribute less actively.

The 6th item, “I feel motivated to analyze themes, characters, and ideas presented in short stories and poetry,” had the highest mean (4.26) with (93%) agreement, (0%) disagreement and (7%) neutral response with standard deviation ($SD=.579$) showing strong motivation among students to engage critically with literary texts.

The overall finding shows that students are highly engaged and motivated when they learn through short stories and poetry, which positively contributes to their critical and analytical thinking skills.

Table 4.3: Section-3: Critical Thinking Development

Item	Mean	% Agree	% Disagree	% Neutral	SD
Q7: Studying short stories and poetry has improved my ability to evaluate arguments and opinions	4.14	88	1	11	0.636
Q8: I am better at questioning assumptions after engaging with short stories and poetry	3.94	74	1	25	0.708
Q9: Short stories and poetry enhance my ability to think logically and draw conclusions from evidence	4.12	88	1	11	0.671
Q10: I can identify bias or hidden messages when analyzing short stories and poetry	3.99	80	7	13	0.859
Q11: I am more confident in justifying my opinions with logical reasoning after studying short stories and poetry	4.09	82	1	17	0.740

The findings in Table 4.3 present data on how learning short stories and poetry helps with the development of critical thinking among ESL learners. The 7th item, “Studying short stories and poetry has improved my ability to evaluate arguments and opinions,” with a high mean of (4.14) and (88%) agreement, only (1%) disagreement, and (11%) neutral responses. The low standard deviation ($SD=.636$) shows consistent views that literary study strengthens evaluative skills.

The 8th item, “I am better at questioning assumptions after engaging with short stories and poetry,” had a mean of (3.94), with (74%) agreement, (1%) disagreement, and (25%) neutral responses. The slightly higher neutral rate and standard deviation ($SD=.708$) demonstrates the majority of students identify an improvement in critical questioning, some remain unsure.

The 9th item, “Short stories and poetry enhance my ability to think logically and draw conclusions from evidence,” achieved a mean of (4.12), with (88%) agreeing, (1%) disagreeing, and (11%) neutral. The low standard deviation ($SD=.671$) shows that learners largely share the view that literature enhances logical reasoning.

For the 10th item, “I can identify bias or hidden messages when analyzing short stories and poetry,” the mean was (3.99), with (80%) agreement, (7%) disagreement, and (13%) neutral. The slightly higher standard deviation (SD=.859) shows more variation, possibly due to differing levels of analytical skill among students.

The 11th item, “I am more confident in justifying my opinions with logical reasoning after studying short stories and poetry,” showed a mean of (4.09), with (82%) agreement, (1%) disagreement, and (17%) neutral responses. The standard deviation (SD=.740) reflects general consistency.

The overall findings show that reading short stories and poetry improves students’ critical thinking abilities particularly their skills in evaluation, logical reasoning, and high argumentation. Though some students are neutral, the high mean scores and strong agreement rates demonstrate that literary study shows a valuable role in developing analytical and reflective thinking among ESL learners.

Table 4.4: Section-4: Application of Critical Thinking Skills

Item	Mean	% Agree	% Disagree	% Neutral	SD
Q12: The analytical skills I gain from short stories and poetry help me in other academic subjects	3.91	80	6	14	0.740
Q13: I can relate the ideas from short stories and poetry to real-life issues and problems	4.10	86	5	9	0.759
Q14: Short stories and poetry encourage me to see multiple solutions to a problem	4.00	81	5	14	0.765
Q15: I use critical thinking strategies learned from short stories and poetry in daily life situations	3.92	76	4	20	0.748

The finding in Table 4.4 shows that the descriptive statistics for the section titled Application of Critical Thinking Skills shows ESL students learning and applying capability of critically thinking skills within and out of the classroom environments. The analysis is based on four items, each items exploring different aspects of applying and integration of critical thinking skills in the understanding and evaluation of other Subjects.

The 12th item ‘The analytical skills I gain from short stories and poetry help me in other academic subjects’ the mean score was (3.91) which represents a high level of agreement among the respondents. (80%) of students agreed that their exposure to literary texts awakes the analytical skills that are helpful in their learning, while only (6%) did not agree and (14%) were neutral. The standard deviation (SD=.740) shows that the responses were relatively consistent, showing that the majority of most students shared the same opinion regarding their analytical skills development.

The 13th item ‘I can relate the ideas from short stories and poetry to real-life issues and problems.’ received the highest mean score of (4.10). The percentage of agreement (86%) was considerably strong, whereas only (5%) disagreed and (9 %) were neutral. The standard deviation (SD=.759) again reflects a consistent response pattern. These findings reveal that not only are students given exposure to short stories and poetry, but they are confident to avail this learning in the solution of the real life issues as well.

The 14th item, “Short stories and poetry encourage me to see multiple solutions to a problem”, scored the highest mean score (4.00) and agreement rate (81%), with low disagreement (5%)

and (14%) neutral responses. The low standard deviation (SD=.765).

The 15th item, “I use critical thinking strategies learned from short stories and poetry in daily life situations,” showed a mean of (3.92), with (76%) agreement, (4%) disagreement, and (20%) neutral responses. The standard deviation (SD=.748) shows similar but somewhat varied responses, indicating that while many students apply these skills beyond the classroom, some do so less frequently.

The overall results of this section indicate that undergraduate ESL learners are feasible with the content and analytical framework of the literary discourses of short story and poetry that invite the learners to see beneath the surface level meanings of the text.

Table 4.5: Section-5: Overall Perceptions

Item	Mean	% Agree	% Disagree	% Neutral	SD
Q16: Short stories and poetry play an important role in developing my critical thinking skills	4.05	85	1	14	0.626
Q17: Compared to other classroom activities, short stories and poetry help me think more critically	3.97	79	7	14	0.822
Q18: I believe that studying short stories and poetry is essential for developing higher-order thinking skills	4.08	83	4	13	0.761
Q19: My teachers encourage me to express original and critical ideas during lessons on short stories and poetry	4.18	91	4	5	0.702
Q20: Short stories and poetry are effective tools for improving both my language skills and my critical thinking	4.24	92	2	6	0.653

The data presented in Table 4.5 replicate the overall perceptions of ESL learners concerning the role of short stories and poetry in stimulating critical thinking skills. The 16th item ‘Short stories and poetry play an important role in developing my critical thinking skills’ got a mean score of (4.05) with (85%) of respondents agreeing that short stories and poetry play an important role in developing their critical thinking skills. This high level of agreement shows that the majority of learners know literary texts as active tools for improving analytical and insightful thought. The relatively low standard deviation (SD=0.626) suggests a little bit concerns of the ESL.

In the 17th item , ‘Compared to other classroom activities, short stories and poetry help me think more critically’ the mean score was (3.97) and (79%) of respondents agreed that suggest that most learners consider literature-based activities as more interesting for critical thinking than traditional classroom drills like grammatical practice exercises. Only 7% disagreed and 14% remained neutral. The standard deviation (SD= 0.822) shows a bit more variation in opinion, possibly reflecting differences in teaching methods or individual learning inclinations.

The 18th item “I believe that studying short stories and poetry is essential for developing higher-order thinking skills” with the highest mean value of (4.08), with (83%) agreement that indicates that students have strong intention to study short stories and poetry. They take it essential for developing higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation, analysis, and production of an opinion based on the evidences and meanings in the text. The standard

deviation ($SD=0.761$) reflects a general agreement of the respondents.

The 19th and 20th items got mean (4.18) and (4.24) that demonstrates ESL learners' positive and consistent perceptions about the role of short stories and poetry in improving their critical thinking. The high agreement percentages (91%–92%) confirm that short stories and poetry are a powerful instructive approach for developing cognitive skills and reflective thinking at the undergraduate level.

Findings and Conclusion

The current research examined perceptions of short story and poetry as a tool to develop the critical thinking skills in undergraduate ESL learners in COMSATS University Islamabad in Vehari Campus and other public colleges in Pakistan. The results of the quantitative survey of 100 BS English students based on a validated 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire showed a consistent positive perception among the five constructs of exposure ($M = 3.90$), engagement ($M = 4.07$), critical thinking development ($M = 4.06$), skills application ($M = 3.98$), and overall perceptions ($M = 4.11$). Respondents highly supported literature as an effective pedagogical resource that encourages analysis, assessment, rationale, perspective-taking, and relating the knowledge gained in texts to real-life problems. These findings are solid empirical evidence of the intentional mix of the short stories and poetry in the Pakistani ESL higher education curricula.

The results of the study are in line with its theoretical internalization. The Transactional Theory of Reading as explicated by Rosenblatt (1978, 1994) describes how meaningful processes of reader-text exchanges (especially by the aesthetic position) allow learners to co-construct layered meanings, negotiate cultural differences, and find an emotional connection to the literal work. In line with this, the Revised Bloom Taxonomy presented by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) takes into consideration the witnessed sequence of the lower-order comprehension through higher-order skills of analysing literary components, assessing arguments and biases, arguing his/her point with evidence, and devising more than one solution to the problem. The elevated agreement rates, particularly in thematic analysis motivation, argument appraisal, and dual advantages to language and cognition all attest to the fact that short stories (with narrative accessibility) and poetry (with linguistic density and figurative demands) jointly provide rich transactional spaces which activate and develop critical thinking.

The study has helped to fill the gaps in the existing body of knowledge in numerous aspects. First, it provides context-specific and localized knowledge based on under-studied expanding circle ESL context, whereby typical rote-learning instruction and exam-based teaching tend to restrict interpretive engagement. Second, the study addresses the gap between the rhetoric of policy-based advocacy of critical thinking (Higher Education Commission initiatives) and classroom realities due to its emphasis on the voices of learners from the perspective of systematic perceptual data. Third, the thorough descriptive analysis on multiple levels offers subtle evidence that goes beyond the general assertions about the benefits of literature and points to the positive (high motivation and perceived cognitive gains), as well as the negative (participation in discussions and direct transfer to real-life) aspects.

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of weaknesses that must be taken into consideration. The survey was based on self-reported perceptions, which, in spite of the presence of anonymity, can be prone to social desirability bias or overconfidence in the competence. The sample was selected by convenience and purposive sampling in one of the campuses in region and related colleges and this restricts the generalization of sample to other Pakistani universities or various populations.

The quantitative cross-sectional study represented a picture of perceptions at a point in time and not as they developed over time on the aspect of critical thinking skills. Also, the self-administered tool, despite being piloted and expert-validated, would be improved in terms of increased refinement and triangulation with objective tools like pre/post critical thinking tests or classroom observations.

Practice Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is possible to propose the following practical recommendations:

Curriculum Integration: BS English curricula must include short stories and poetry in a systematic way throughout various semesters with a progressive level of complexity and definite correlates to critical thinking outcomes.

Pedagogical Strategies: The teacher must embrace student based methods that encourage aesthetic transactional reading like reader-response journals, semi-structured discussions, think-pair-share, and creative extension activities. The idea of scaffolding participation should be given special consideration to reticent learners.

Teacher Professional Development: ESL teachers should be provided with professional training programs that will help them to teach the higher-order questioning skills, identification of bias, and real-life application activities according to the Revised Taxonomy of Bloom.

Material Development: Curriculum developers need to create contextualized collections of local short stories and poems that will appeal to Pakistani experiences and also introduce learners to the global outlook.

Assessment Practices: Go beyond the old methods of assessing with recital to incorporate interpretive tasks, reflective writing, and project based assessments which assess the development of critical thinking.

Future Research Gap

Future research might pursue mixed-method designs that will be used to triangulate perceptual data and carry out qualitative interviews, focus groups, or think-aloud protocols that can supplement the lived experience of transactional learning in learners. Longitudinal research on the growth of critical thinking skills during an academic year would be more insightful on growth patterns. The contextual variations may be identified in comparative studies among the various Pakistani provinces or in the public and private universities. Causal claims would be reinforced using experimental or quasi-experimental designs testing particular instructional interventions (e.g., poetry vs. short story tasks, digital literature platforms, etc.). Lastly, the research on the usefulness of digital storytelling, multimodal poetry, or AI-assisted literary analysis in improving critical thinking is also a promising direction in the changing ELT landscape.

To sum up, this research paper shows that short stories and poetry have a great potential as the effective instrument in developing critical thinking in Pakistani undergraduate ESL students. When carefully woven together and backed by theory-based pedagogy, these literary genres can not only make students more linguistically proficient, but also provide them with higher-order intellect needed to succeed in school, become an interculturally competent learner, and become a lifelong learner in a complex world of globalization. Listening to learners and responding to their perceptions, educators and policymakers will be able to make ESL classes lively places of intellectual investigation and self-development.

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