

## *The Effect of Literary and Non-literary Texts on EFL Students' Critical Reading*

Sirikarn Hiwanupong, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand  
Supaporn Yimwilai, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand

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### **Abstract**

Critical reading skills are important for all students around the world. Teaching these skills enables students to be critical readers and also helps them to survive in the real world. However, it was found that many EFL students lack critical reading skills. The objective of this study was to enhance EFL students' critical reading skills. It focused on comparing between literary and non-literary texts in developing critical reading. The participants consisted of seventy eleventh-grade EFL students. They were divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group. Literary texts were used to teach the experimental group, whereas non-literary texts were used to teach the control group. The research instruments used in this study included: a critical reading test, lesson plans, questionnaires on students' attitudes towards using literary and non-literary texts, and a semi-structured interview. Mean scores, standard deviations, and t-test analyses were used to analyze the data. The results revealed that both literary and non-literary texts had a positive effect on students' critical reading skills. That is, students' critical reading skills in both the experimental and control groups after the experiment were significantly higher than before the experiment. However, the scores of students in the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the control group. In addition, the result from the questionnaires showed that the students' attitudes in the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the control group. This study pointed out that literary texts can be a good tool to enhance critical reading.

Keywords: Critical Reading, Literary Texts, Non-literary Texts

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## **Introduction**

Critical reading is an important skill for students around the world. This skill enables students to evaluate what they have read in their lives. Students using English as a Foreign Language (EFL) confront many kinds of text (e.g., editorials, advertisements, propaganda bulletins, opinion columns, and political statements) in their daily life. These texts endeavor to influence students' thinking and behavior (Pardede, 2011). Mastering critical reading in the EFL classroom is an important skill for preparing students to become critical readers in their lives.

However, EFL students tend to lack critical reading skills. According to Kadir et al. (2014), because students cannot use critical reading skills when reading a text, they do not know the way to utilize the contextual clues or read between the lines in order to find a deeper meaning in a text. Nasrollahi et al. (2015) showed that students in an EFL classroom in Iran lacked critical reading skills because the school curriculum does not focus on teaching critical reading and thinking to Iranian students. Furthermore, lacking critical reading skills is an important problem for Thai students. As demonstrated by Chareonwongk (as cited in Khuankaew, 2010), young people in Thai society tend to lack critical reading skills, meaning that they are not able to evaluate information they have read.

Using literary texts in an EFL classroom is a debate. Some scholars disagree with using literary texts. McKay (1982) mentioned three reasons why literary texts should not be used in an EFL classroom. The first reason for not using literary texts is that the complexity of structure presented in literary texts. Second, literary texts reflect a particular cultural perspective which can be quite difficult to understand for students. Finally, studying literary texts cannot assist students to succeed in academic and occupational goals.

On the other hand, some scholars argued that there are many benefits in applying literary texts in an EFL classroom. Firstly, literary texts provide language models such as sentence structure, standard story structure, and new vocabulary to students (Roe and Ross, 2015). Secondly, literary texts can help students to activate imagination and develop their emotion (Babae and Yahya, 2014). Thirdly, students can gain new perceptions of other cultures and societies through literary texts (Babae and Yahya, 2014). Lastly, literary texts can be taught to promote students' critical reading and thinking skills in the EFL classroom (Kohzadi et al., 2014). Selection of reading materials is very important for teaching the skills of critical reading in an EFL classroom (Mokhtari, 2014). Teachers should carefully select reading materials which can benefit EFL students in enhancing their critical reading skills. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of literary texts in developing EFL students' critical reading skills.

## **Literature Review**

### **Critical Reading**

Critical reading can be defined by researchers and educators in many ways. For example, Huijie (2010) defines critical reading as “a high-level reading process which entails the ability to read with analysis and judgment” (p. 40). Schnell (1987) stated that critical reading is an ability which relies on past experiences, the criteria for evaluation, and the drawing of conclusions. Halim (2011) claimed that critical reading is a process of interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating of reading texts. Furthermore, Pardede (2011) identified critical reading as “an active and purposeful process of comprehending, questioning, and evaluating printed material and in order to react intelligently to the writer’s ideas” (p. 2). Therefore, it critical reading can be understood as a high-level reading process which requires readers to comprehend, evaluate, analyze, interpret, and question what they have read.

Teaching method is a key to enhance students’ critical reading skills. According to Wallace (1992), to teach critical reading in EFL classrooms, the activities should be divided into three stages: pre-reading stage, while-reading stage, and post-reading stage.

The pre-reading stage aims to encourage students to form their own questions, statements, and hypotheses from texts which they will read. This stage enables students to think about texts rather than to answer the given questions that control the way of reading a text. Students can be asked to make their own statements for supporting or refusing what a text is talking about before reading. Also, the pre-reading stage can encourage students to make hypotheses for predicting a text. The example of activities included anticipation guides, pictorial context, pre-reading questioning, and previewing.

The while-reading stage offers students to have alternative ways for reading a text. Teachers should prepare many kinds of while-reading activities which can help students to understand writers’ ideas and notions. The ideas and notions of writers are presented in the different time and culture for students because both of them do not live at the same time. Therefore, the activities in the while-reading stage should help students to aware of time and culture perspectives in a text. Teachers can place a text in its historical, biographical, and cultural context. The activities in the while-reading stage consisted of annotating, analyzing, and double-entry journal.

In the post-reading stage, teachers help students to think critically. For example, teachers can assign two texts which have the same topic to students, and then ask them to find the difference of features between both texts. Comparing and contrasting related texts enables students to explore similarities and differences and effectively help students to understand the way of authors’ writing. The critical reading activities used in this stage were summarizing, reflecting, and scales.

## Literary Texts

There have been many different definitions of what literary texts are, and theorists have defined literary texts in different ways. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005), literary texts are defined as “pieces of writing that are valued as works of art, especially novels, plays, and poems” (p. 863). Nurrohmah (2015) stated that literary texts are texts from works of literature such as poetry, short stories, plays or dramas. In contrast, Newmark (2004) identified literary texts as those that are written to present the world of imagination and the mind to readers. Furthermore, Lombardi (as cited in Elhabiri, 2014) claimed that literary texts are written works which present thoughts and ideas through creative thinking. Therefore, the term of literary texts can be used to refer to works of art which present the world of the mind and the world of imagination to readers in a creative manner. The primary function of literary texts is usually aesthetic, but they may also contain political messages or beliefs.

The genres or types of literary texts can be categorized in many ways. The major genre classifications of literary texts can be divided into three groups: poetry, prose, and drama (Kohzadi et al., 2014; and Hirschberg, 2009). Poetry is a form of literary text which is written using verse, rhythmic patterns and lines. Prose is a form of spoken or written language which comprises both fiction (e.g. myths and legends, fables, parables, and short stories) and nonfiction (e.g., essays, biographies, and autobiographies). Drama is the text of plays or anything meant to be performed using dialogue or a monologue. Drama includes tragedies, comedies, and tragic comedies. Therefore, literary texts can be divided into many kinds of written works, namely short stories, novels, poetry, plays and dramas. The literary texts genres were shown in Figure 1.

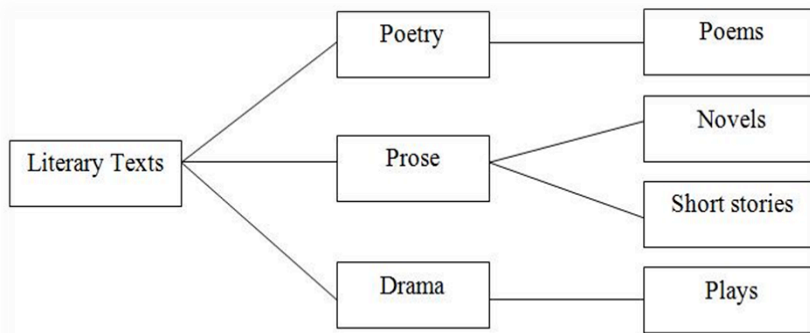


Figure 1: Literary Genres

Many scholars have described the characteristics of literary texts. For example, Elhabiri (2014) noted that authors utilize some artistic devices—rhyme, meter, and certain forms of sound and repetition—in literary texts. According to Kohzadi et al. (2014), literary texts present aesthetic value through inventive or creative writing. This aesthetic value can help readers enjoy reading literary texts. Newmark (2004) claimed that the gist of literary texts enables readers to enter the world of imagination and can help readers enjoy what they have read. Furthermore, literary texts can be written by using words in the form of allegory for teaching moral truths to readers, and they can be written for readers

to read in their mind, to enjoy, to read the texts sensibly and repeatedly, and to gain more appreciation of texts through repeated readings.

### **Non-Literary Texts**

There are many researchers who have defined the term “non-literary texts” in many different ways. According to Gibbova (as cited in Elhabiri, 2014), non-literary texts are different types of texts which are used to present events and issues, and to explain, analyze, argue, and persuade readers to understand what they read. Newmark (2004) claims that non-literary texts are written to present the world of events and facts and the world of reality for readers. Nurrohmah et al. (2015) stated that non-literary texts are facts, information, and reality, and which simple language. Therefore, non-literary texts can be said to refer to texts which present facts, truth, events, information, and issues to readers who have read the texts.

Many scholars have attempted to classify the genre of non-literary texts. Nurrohmah et al. (2015) described non-literary texts as documents, articles, scientific texts, issues, etc. Mahdi and Ibraheem (2013) explain that non-literary texts are “a wide range of texts from administrative, legal and other official documents, via economic and business texts, scientific, technical [and] up to publicist texts” (p. 282-283). Thus, non-literary texts include things such as articles, news reports, scientific texts, biographies and autobiographies, film reviews, instruction manuals, and so on.

The characteristics of non-literary texts have been identified by many researchers. Newmark (2004) described non-literary texts as focusing on the world of facts for readers. He says that these texts are written using ordinary language to present information, generally in the third person. He also claims that the sounds of non-literary texts are often read rapidly, and the language is easy to understand. Khosravishakib (2012) also observed non-literary texts are written using ordinary language, or language that is easy to understand. Ordinary language, as it appears in non-literary texts, helps readers to conceive of the subject matter rapidly. From this point, we can say that reading non-literary texts is different from reading literary texts because “literary texts [transform] and [intensify] ordinary language, [and deviate] systematically from everyday speech” (Khosravishakib, 2012, p. 11). According to Mahdi and Ibraheem (2013), non-literary texts are written using accuracy and reason, and these texts are often written for skimming or scanning. Non-literary texts can also present more or less of an argumentative progression to readers as well.

Non-literary texts are very beneficial reading materials for EFL students. For example, Mokhtari (2014) claimed that there are no cultural differences in the non-literary texts. For reading non-literary texts, students do not need to interpret what they have read regarding cultural differences because the aim of non-literary texts focuses on facts, truth, events, information, and issues. Students can understand non-literary texts clearly if they are compared to literary texts which require students to interpret differences of culture. Mokhtari (2014) claimed that using non-literary texts also enables students to acquire vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. For instance, students can acquire the

knowledge about grammar and vocabulary from non-literary texts easily because the grammar and vocabulary are precise to facilitate comprehension of texts. Students can get some ideas from a text directly, and then they do not interpret the meaning what they have read.

Literary texts can be employed for promoting students' critical reading skills. Mahdi and Ibraheem (2013) state that "non-literary texts are based on precision [and] reason and can be characterized by more or less logical argumentative progression" (p. 24). From this point, students can develop their critical reading skills through non-literary texts because these texts encourage them to think logically. Logical thinking enables students to be critical readers in life and to help them to be better readers and thinkers in tertiary education level. Furthermore, reading non-literary texts can help students evaluate authors' biases. This means that students have to use critical reading skills for making judgments regarding what they have read.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To investigate the effect of literary texts on developing EFL students' critical reading.
2. To investigate the effect of non-literary texts on developing EFL students' critical reading.
3. To compare the effect of literary and non-literary texts on developing EFL students' critical reading.
4. To study EFL students' attitudes towards teaching critical reading by using literary and non-literary texts.

### **Methodology**

This study was a pretest-posttest experimental research design investigating the effect of literary and non-literary texts on EFL students' critical reading. This study combined quantitative and qualitative data collection. The quantitative data consisted of students' pretest and posttest scores from critical reading test and scores obtained from questionnaires. The qualitative data included an open-ended part of the questionnaires and the semi-structured interview.

The participants of the study were 11<sup>th</sup> – grade students of Science-Math Program in the first semester of the academic year 2016. They were selected via convenience sampling. Although the participants were chosen by using the convenience sampling, they were randomly divided into 2 groups: the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group was taught by using literary texts, whereas the control group was taught by using non-literary texts. Before the experiment, to measure whether the students in both groups had the same level of critical reading skills, students in both groups were asked to do the pretest. Mean scores, standard deviations, and the t-test analysis were used to analyze the data from the pretest.

Two sets of lesson plans were developed to teach critical reading skills. One set was used to teach critical reading skills by using literary, another set taught critical reading skills

by using non-literary texts. The method of teaching of both sets of lesson plans was the same; the method of teaching was adapted from a framework of Wallace (1992). This teaching method was divided into three stages: pre reading stage, while-reading stage, and post-reading stage. The teaching critical reading process of both group were shown in Figure 2.

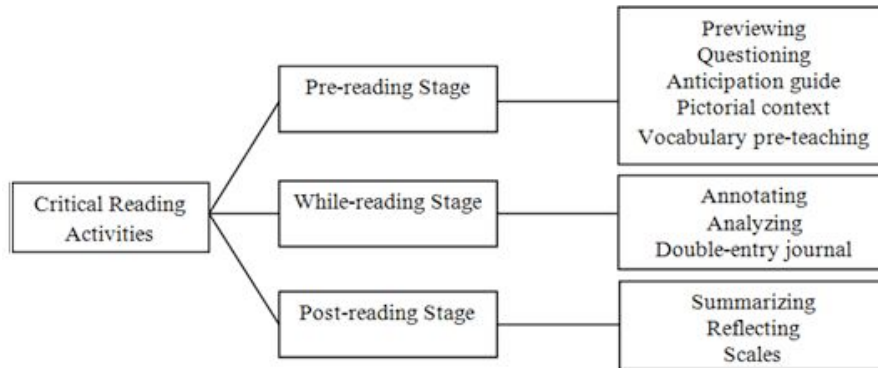


Figure 2: The Design of the Study

A critical reading test was developed for pretest and posttest to measure students' critical reading skills in the experimental and control groups. The test was divided into two parts: multiple choices questions, and open-ended questions. The multiple choices part consisted of 20 questions (20 scores). The test was designed to test four main elements of critical reading skills: distinguishing facts from opinions, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and recognizing an author's purpose. The purpose of the open-ended questions part was designed to ask students for sharing their opinions regarding the passages they had read. The test was consisted of 2 questions (10 scores).

Questionnaires on students' attitudes towards using literary and non-literary texts were prepared for students in the experimental and control groups. They included 15 items, both positive and negative statements, and were divided into three parts: opinions, feelings, and inclination to action.

A semi-structured interview was employed to investigate students' attitudes in the experimental and control groups and to assure the accurate results from the questionnaires. Five open-ended questions were prepared by the researcher. After the experiment, the researcher asked students to volunteer to be interviewed.

Three specialists in teaching English reviewed the instruments, which included lesson plans, a critical reading test, and questionnaires on students' attitudes towards using literary and non-literary texts, in order to determine their validity. To determine the reliability, all research instruments were tested with 20 students who were not the participants in this study. The instruments were analyzed using the reliability coefficient Cronbach's alpha. The reliability of the critical reading test and the questionnaires on students' attitudes towards using literary and non-literary texts was 0.78 and 0.89 respectively. Since Cronbach's alpha value was higher than 0.7, the research instruments

of this study were strong enough to evaluate students' critical reading skills and attitudes towards using literary and non-literary texts.

In the first week of the first semester of 2016 academic year, the students were asked to participate in the study. In the second week, the students were asked to do the pretest. Soon after the pretest, the students were taught critical reading skills. Each session continues for 100 minutes. Students in the experimental group were taught using literary texts while students in the control group were taught using non-literary texts. After teaching eight sessions, the students in both groups were asked to do the posttest. In week ten, students in the experimental group and in the control group were asked to answer questionnaires. In addition, the researcher asked students in both groups to volunteer in the interview. The interview was conducted after students' completing the questionnaires.

The data from the pretest and posttest were analyzed by mean scores, standard deviations, and using the t-test analysis. Independent t-test analysis was used to determine whether there were any differences between the critical reading skills of students in the experimental group and that of the control group. The data from the questionnaires were scored as follows: for the positive statements, Strongly Agree =5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1; for the negative statements, to measure the level of students' attitudes in the same way as the positive statements, the scores were reversed-- Strongly agree = 1, Agree = 2, Neutral = 3 Disagree = 4, Strongly Disagree = 5. The data from the interview were analyzed by content analysis.

## Conclusion

### Findings

The mean scores of critical reading skills test of both groups are presented in Figure3.

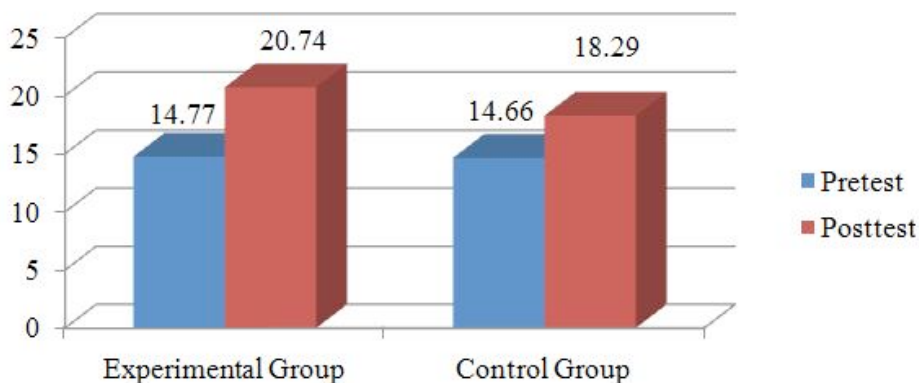


Figure 3: The Mean Scores of Critical Reading Skills Test of Both Groups

As shown in Figure 3, before the experiment the mean score of the experimental group was 14.77, and the mean score of the control group was 14.66. After the experiment, the



mean score of the experimental group was 20.74, and the mean score of the control group was 18.29.

Table 1. Comparison of the pretest mean scores to the posttest mean scores

<b>Group</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Experimental	After the Experiment	35	20.74	4.252	7.371*	.000
	Before the Experiment	35	14.77	4.088		
Control	After the Experiment	35	18.29	3.168	7.107*	.000
	Before the Experiment	35	14.66	4.158		

\*Significance at the 0.05 level ( $p < 0.05$ )

The results showed that the posttest mean scores of students in both group were significantly different from the pretest mean scores at .05 level. In the experimental group, the pretest mean score was 14.77, and the posttest mean score was 20.74. This means that after the experiment, the critical reading skills were significantly higher than before the experiment. In the control group, the pretest mean score was 14.66, and the posttest mean score was 18.29. This means that after the experiment, the critical reading skills were significantly higher than before the experiment. It can be interpreted that students in both groups developed their critical reading skills after the instruction.

To compare the critical reading score after instruction of the experimental group to that of the control group, an independent t-test analysis was used. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of the critical reading skills scores of the experimental group to those of the control group

<b>Time</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Before the experiment	Experimental	35	14.77	4.088	.119	.906
	Control	35	14.66	4.252		
After the experiment	Experimental	35	20.74	4.158	2.966*	.005
	Control	35	18.29	3.168		

\*Significance at the 0.05 level ( $p < 0.05$ )

Table 2 reveals that before the experiment, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean score of students in the experimental group ( $M = 14.77$ ) and that of the control group ( $M = 14.66$ ). This suggests that before the experiment, students in the experimental group had critical reading skills at the same level as students in the control group. It also revealed the effectiveness of using literary texts in developing critical reading skills. That is, the critical reading skills scores of the students in the experimental group were significantly different from those of the control group at 0.05 level. The

mean score of the students in the experimental group was 20.74, and that of the control group was 18.29. This can be concluded that the scores of the students in the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the control group.

In order to study students' attitudes towards using literary and non-literary texts to enhance critical reading skills of the experimental and control groups, the data were collected and merged from the questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of attitudes of students in the experimental group to those of the control group

<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Experiment	35	4.14	.462	7.371*	.000
Control	35	3.55	.602		

\*Significance at the 0.05 level ( $p < 0.05$ )

Table 3 revealed the students' attitudes towards using literary and non-literary texts to enhance critical reading skills. That is, the attitudes of the students in the experimental group were significantly different from those of the control group at 0.05 level. The mean score of the students in the experimental group was 4.14, and that of the control group was 3.55. This can be concluded that the attitudes of the students in the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the control group.

In addition, the results from a semi-structured interview supported the results from the questionnaires. All ten interviewed students (100%) in the experimental group said that using literary texts could help them to think critically and to improve their critical reading skills. For example, one student said that when he read literary texts, these texts encouraged him to think more logically because the characteristics of literary texts enabled him to be more attentive and more reflective about what he read. Thus, reading literary texts helped him to be a critical reader.

Students in the experimental group also thought that they could apply what they learned from literary texts to their daily lives. For instance, one student found that he could utilize a moral displayed in literary texts to his daily life. Another student responded that she liked reading a literary text named "The Wisdom of Solomon" because this story was very famous, and it also taught her many good morals which she could apply to her real life situation. She also added that literary texts enhanced her to express ideas with reasons more logically.

All interviewees responded that learning through literary texts in a classroom was interesting. They liked and enjoyed reading literary texts; for example, one student

stated, “I like reading literary texts because the themes and plots of these texts are very gripping.” He also added, “The literature components – plot, character, setting, point of view, and theme – could motivate his attention during reading.” Another student said that reading literary texts made she feel relaxed and enjoyable, especially reading a poem named “The Daffodils” by William Wordsworth. She could imagine the beauty of a flower named “daffodils”, and she felt very comfortable with the rhyme of the poem.

Although students in the control group can develop their critical reading skills through reading non-literary texts, they thought that reading non-literary texts was boring. For instance, five students (50%) commented that they did not enjoy reading non-literary texts because the texts assigned to read in a classroom were not fun and interesting. They cannot think beyond the text or think outside the box. Another student responded that she was stressed when she read non-literary texts in a classroom because these texts focused on facts, truth, events, and information. Thus, learning through non-literary texts made her feel bored and wasted her time.

### **Discussion and Implications**

In this study, it is clear that the students who participated in this study developed their critical reading skills after participating in teaching critical reading by using literary and non-literary texts. The finding revealed that both texts enabled students to develop their critical reading skills. However, the results of this study clearly proved that the critical reading skills of the students in the experimental group were significantly higher than that of the control group. It revealed that there was a statistical difference between the mean score of the students in the experimental group and that of the control group. This suggests that using literary texts had a positive impact on the critical reading skills of students in the experimental group. In addition, students in the experimental group had highly positive attitudes towards using literary texts to enhance critical reading skills.

These results can be explained by the fact that using literary texts in an EFL classroom had a positive impact on students’ critical reading skills. Reading literary texts help students to read more critically and these texts also encourage them to think more logically. Additionally, literary texts require readers to read and understand something beyond the subject matter presented in the text. In line with Kohzadi et al (2014), using literary texts in an EFL classroom, students can develop critical reading skills because the characteristics in literary texts help them to be more attentive and more reflective about what they have read.

In addition, the findings of this study showed that the students’ attitudes towards using literary texts were significantly higher than using non-literary texts. Students in the experimental group enjoyed reading literary texts in an EFL classroom. They also felt relaxed and comfortable while reading literary texts. That is, the elements of literary texts can engage the motivation of students’ attention; for instance, the plots and characters displayed in literary texts are very gripping to grab attention from readers. This study is in agreement with many studies. For example, Vural (2013) claimed that using literary texts in a classroom present the motivational effects to students. The

literary texts can be utilized as a positive stimulation for enhancing students' motivation. Similarly, Newmark (2004) pointed out that the gist of literary texts enables readers to enter the world of imagination and can help them enjoy what they have read. In addition, literary texts present aesthetic value through inventive or creative writing. This aesthetic value can also help readers enjoy reading literary texts.

However, this study also found some concerns regarding using literary texts in an EFL classroom. As the semi-structured interview results revealed, students stated that literary texts assigned to read in a classroom were too difficult for them. The vocabulary presented in literary texts was too complicated to comprehend. This finding correlated with that of Khuankaew (2010), in which it was found that short stories selected were complicated stories to understand for students in the pilot study. Besides, there were some cultural differences showed in literary texts. Based on Tasneen (2010), the difficulty of using literary texts in a classroom is the culture. This means that students need to interpret what they have read regarding cultural differences. Consequently, to select a material for teaching EFL students' critical reading skills is very important for teachers.

This study has significant implications to point out that literary texts can be a good tool in an EFL classroom. Firstly, literary texts can be used as an alternative instructional material for educators and instructors to enhance students' critical reading skills. Secondly, material developers should integrate literary texts into reading textbooks. The literary texts presented in textbooks can be used to enhance students' motivation. Therefore, this study confirmed the potential in utilizing literary texts in an EFL classroom. It also proposes an alternative way for teaching critical reading skills to EFL students.

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