

Is there a relationship between critical thinking and critical reading of literary texts: A case study at Arak University (Iran)

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ABSTRACT

Examining the theme, plot, and characters of a literary work is a common practice for students of literature so that they can criticize literature. Unlike a non-critical reading which provides readers only with facts, a critical reading also entails depicting how a book or a source illustrates the subject matter. Through various reading procedures including interpretation, inference and examining ideologies embedded in texts, readers can develop critical thinking. This paper aims at examining whether or not there is a relationship between critical thinking and critical reading of literary texts in higher education. To meet the mentioned aim, 121 EFL learners from Arak University were invited to participate in this study. After administrating English proficiency test, total numbers of students were 98 male and female. Data analysis was done through employing ANOVA and T-test.

Keywords: Higher education; Critical thinking; Critical reading; Literature; Literary texts

1. INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking checks the reading process, presumptions are created and discarded and viewpoints originated. Students must be aware that they have to communicate with the text in a purposeful way. It is helpful to consider a literary text as an actor that uses various craft to coax them into its own viewpoints. In the initial phases, students can be told to what pay attention. As students are not expected to initially understand what to seek for, they need to be guided. In the next steps, students can be instructed to associate what questions to the how questions. Critical thinking would help students of literature discern that literary criticism is not a disorganized and unsystematic activity but entails a meaningful and orderly mental process. Heightening a critical ability of mind means heightening student's awareness of mental processes, which would permit them to ruminate and rethink their own views.

In other words, they would learn to take responsibility for their thoughts and make a habit of thinking and scrutinizing their impetuous and routine ways of reflecting and acting. Not solely from the aesthetic perspective but from the unavoidable political viewpoint, critical thinking in literature also raises an acute awareness of the application of language. Students

discern that language is not an expressionless phenomenon elaborating some already existing reality but terms put layers of meanings together making and originating their own reality. The presumption behind this reasoning is that language is a reflective and ponderous selection of specific word models which attempt to influence the readers in a definite way. In case, this model is undiscovered, language would not uncover itself as an active and vital force (Meihami, et al., 2013, 2014).

1. 1. Critical thinking: definition and assessment

According to Sullivan (2012), it was in the nursing literature in the early 1980s that critical thinking was first debated but it was not until 1990 that the American Philosophical Association's Delphi Research Project presented a conceptual interpretation of critical thinking. The American Philosophical Association (1990) presents the most quoted definition of critical thinking. In their view, critical thinking "is the purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference as well as explanation of the evidential conceptual, methodological, criteriological or contextual considerations upon which that judgment was based. Critical thinking is essential as a tool of inquiry. Critical thinking is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon" (American Philosophical Association 1990, p. 3). Theoreticians agree that critical thinking is a process that involves higher-level thinking and reasoning abilities (Simpson & Courtney, 2002). It is a controlled and meaningful thinking that utilizes strategies to get the results you need (Alfaro-LeFevre, 2009).

Although most teachers presumably concur that critical thinking is a significant cognitive skill that schools attempt to foster in students, there seems to be a lack of concurrence considering an obvious and functional interpretation of critical thinking (Halpern, 2001; Moseley et al. 2005). Critical thinking has been regarded together with creative thinking as associated secondary ideas within the broader level class of constructive thinking that is construed by Moseley et al. (2005) as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy. One of the major differences within critical thinking is the differences between dispositions and skills. They are of the opinion that dispositions are connected to precondition features such as determination and broad-mindedness that mirrors tendency to apply critical thinking skills.

According to a review of 25 prior definitions, Griggs et al. (1998) provide a concise definition of critical thinking skills as "... a process of evaluating evidence for certain claims, determining whether presented conclusions logically follow from the evidence, and considering alternative explanations. Critical thinkers exhibit open-mindedness; tolerance of ambiguity; and a skeptical, questioning attitude." (p. 256). In accordance with this view, several well-liked definitions of critical thinking (e.g., Ennis, 1985; Watson & Glaser, 1980) include the coming five prevalent factors: recognizing principal matters and presumptions, making true inferences from information, deducing conclusions from information provided, construing whether conclusions are affirmed, and assessing evidence or authority. The many methods to examine critical thinking skills are parallel to the many methods to teaching them. Spicer and Hanks (1995) reported on standardized critical thinking tests available as well as several performance assessment methods that can be utilized as consequence measures within different issues. Standardized tests can provide fruitful data that is diagnostic and may help to guide instruction. However, since critical thinking is not a general competence but rather a complicated set of general and specific factors, different measures of critical thinking should be utilized whenever possible.

Renaud and Murray (2008) confirmed that the definitions and interpretations of critical thinking are various just like the methods utilized in its assessment. One matter regarding which

type of items most logically assess critical thinking is whether or not the items show an emotional element. For example, a question on the power of government would be surmised to elicit a tougher emotional component than a question on mathematics. Dressel and Mayhew (1954) were among the first to propose that critical thinking test items should entail some extent of emotion. Consequentially, Watson and Glaser (1980) quote various studies proving that issues eliciting strong views or prejudices can influence one's competence to think critically. While an emotional element may help to analyze one's critical thinking skill under stricter conditions, it might be hard to integrate an emotional element into a critical thinking measure within specific non-controversial subject areas such as geography or chemistry.

According to Watson and Glaser (1980), Facione (1990a) and Simpson and Courtney (2002), as experts and theorists of critical thinking, critical thinking includes analysis, evaluation, and inference. Furthermore, Bitner and Tobin (1998) used interpretation, explanation, and self-regulation as central to critical thinking. Despite the fact that the four theorists have proposed greatly different definitions for critical but they have views in common. An outcome of this difference is a lack of consensus, which has contributed to the confusion, misunderstanding and misuse of critical thinking.

1. 2. Importance of critical thinking in education

Dewey (1933) asserted that the main goal of education is learning to think. As part of that education, learners need to promote and learn to fruitfully apply critical thinking skills to their educational studies, to the complicated problems that they will face in their professions, and to the critical choices they will be forced to make as a result of the information explosion and other rapid technological changes. Ennis (1985) proposed a widely accepted definition of CT as "reasonable, reflective thinking that is concentrated on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 46). Unfortunately, CT skills do not come naturally to individuals; rather, these skills have to be actively cultivated. Critical thinking is a preferable pedagogical result, so to promote and practice critical thinking, teachers need to re-examine course content and curricular strategies used to promote such skills. The selection of creative education as a teaching and learning approach can stimulate the use of process oriented teaching methods and "transformational and situational teaching and learning approaches" (Banning, 2006, p. 100).

Since people encounter a lot of significant decisions affecting themselves and society in general, critical thinking skill has become more significant. As the extent of information and decisions proliferates, we may be at risk of having the responses, but not apprehending what they mean (Renaud & Murray, 2008). Critical thinking is regarded vital for democratic citizenship. Teaching critical thinking is aimed at developing people who are fair-minded, unbiased and bound to clarity. The ever-changing and increasingly convoluted state of knowledge promotion is insisting on higher-order thinking skills in students of all disciplines. In almost all academic branches, critical thinking has been followed as a pedagogical target (Mangena & Chabeli, 2005).

Glen (1995) believed that critical thinking is considered as an essential part of pedagogy, a characteristic of an instructed person. The downfall is, one cannot teach critical thinking if one is not a critical thinker oneself. For most of teachers, easing critical thinking is difficult because they did not have their own critical and reflective thinking promoted when they were learners. Presumably, teachers have been textbook-bound and concentrated on conveyance of content.

According to Dressel and Mayhew (1954), there are four supplementary justifications for why critical thinking is significant. First, critical thinking is advantageous as it nurtures other significant goals of attending college such as promotion of ethical and virtuous values, the

conveyance of knowledge, and the readiness of individuals for adult life. Second, critical thinking skills provide a purpose for attaining knowledge or else attained knowledge simply becomes a jumble of facts. In other words, the promotion of critical thinking does not disparage the significance of acquiring knowledge, but rather fosters the acquisition of knowledge more meaningfully. Third, critical thinking skill is appropriate for most activities and problems we encounter. Lastly, since critical thinking skill is a long-established skill, subject matter knowledge may be soon forgotten.

1. 3. Obstacles to critical thinking

Mangena and Chabelli (2005) declared that students did not have a good foundational basis for critical thinking due to a lack of cultural obstacles and socialization to critical thinking. Another barrier is students' lack of motivation and resistance to active learning. Among barriers to faculty for critical thinking, the lack of faculty knowledge of various analytical thinking patterns, lack of time for preparation, and didactic-oriented teaching can be noted (Profetto-McGrath, 2003). As culture supplies the basis for language learning and apprehension, it plays a significant role because reasoning is empowered through language and culture (Chabelli, 2001). Culture can either promote or prevent the thinking process, since different groups react differently to group interaction.

Cumming (1994) noted that, promotionally and socially, a person's access to oral and literate styles of discourse varies within a culture among individuals. Chabelli (2001) suggests that the teacher needs to recognize and realize the various cultural backgrounds of learners in order to ease co-operative learning and critical thinking. They need to establish an atmosphere helpful to group interaction that will nurture group tolerance through, freedom of choice, honor, confidence, broad-mindedness and empathy. It is, thus, significant to stimulate learners to scrutinize their own cultural background to be shared before examining the background of others. Racial discrimination has a negative impact on the self-confidence and thinking patterns of ethnic groups. The teacher should help students to promote a positive attitude about their ethnic heritage. The culture sensitive teacher stimulates peer tutoring, comparing and contrasting each other's attitudes. The educator should designate projects and activities that allow learners to discuss culture-specific knowledge and skills. The learners must be involved in activities that examine culture differences in values, perceptions, belief and the learners' progress is monitored in order to detect budding culture-related problems.

1. 4. Teaching Critical Thinking

Beyer (1988) asserts that, the subject in teaching thinking involve skills that form thinking, of knowledge associated with these operations, and dispositions that manage and develop thinking. Teachers should realize the different characteristics of these facets of thinking in some detail. The teacher should know the subject taught and the associated fields, as comprehensively as possible, to be able to ease these dimensions of thinking. The educator should know the conceptual, strategic, epistemological, philosophical and pedagogical complications of critical thinking. They should understand the facets of critical thinking by reading research articles and taking part in seminars, workshops and conferences on critical thinking, and familiarize colleagues and students with these competencies. Obtaining more content and learning more about learning and thinking help the inhabitants constantly develop their knowledge base in a school that is the home of the mind. The educators constantly attempt to establish reflective learning, craftsmanship, meta-cognition and rigor into the curriculum and education (Costa, 1991). In support of this view, Webster (1997) emphasized that educators

should move their courses and subjects away from the standards of the educational model into a conception of education as a continuous and disciplined cultivation of the mind. It can, thus, be concluded that it is essential for educators to continuously ponder upon their teaching practice and engage in renewing their domain-specific and personal knowledge and skills in order to become permanent learners.

Costa and Lowery (1989) contended that classroom time should be dedicated to teaching thinking skills directly if learning is to become a reality in education. Teaching the process of thinking should become the consequence of all pedagogical disciplines. The classroom should prepare an attentive atmosphere for teaching and learning thinking skills. Seating arrangement should ease group dialectic and dialogic interaction (Paul, 1993). In a friendly and well-disposed environment, learners feel free to take risk, ponder, think up, invent and analyze phenomena, events and issues (Beyer, 1988). To ease critical thinking, students should be given thought-promoting learning tasks to prompt their inquiry mind, which is an essential disposition for critical thinking. According to Bevis (1993), caring, critical thinking and praxis must be instructed in a reality context and must be instructed in ways that permit learners to allot ideas and feelings with each other around real issues.

Ford and Profetto-McGarth (1994) declared that the common relationship between teacher and student must change from superior-to-subordinate to an equal one which underlines working with the student. This will develop a peer relationship by which the educator and learner experience a reliable partnership in teaching-learning with greater emphasis on student-centered approach to learning. The educator should stimulate dialogue and dialect in the classroom which are strategies to encourage conversation and interaction between the educator and student. Peters (2000) is of the view that the constructivistic teacher works as a middle agent between the curriculum and the student to bring the two together in a way that is meaningful to the learner. According to Paul (1993), the teacher, should elucidate mental worthiness of critical thinking, which are autonomy of mind, mental curiosity, bravery, modesty, empathy, unity, diligence, faith in reason and fair-mindedness. If the educators elaborate critical thinking, students are committed to learn by role modeling.

1. 5. What is literature?

In general, literature means an inventive or creative writing that encompasses identified aesthetic value. It involves three main genres including prose, poetry and drama, and is recognized by perfection of style and expression and also by overall or durable interest. According to Moody (1981), literature basically aims at giving enjoyment and amusing those who freely experience it. Moreover, the greatest enjoyment and gratification elicited from literature occurs where it directs our attention to our real life situations, vicissitudes, emotions and relationships. El-Helou (2010) declared that literature leads students to discern and enjoy cultures and principles dissimilar from their own. Since students can get access to a variety of views, ideals, values, and historical structures of reference that make up the memory of a people via contrasting different literary texts, it can be concluded that literature and culture have an inextricable relationship. A successful literature class is one in which students are able to practice critical thinking strategies in analyzing a literary text. By using cognitive strategies in an organized process when examining literary works, learners learn to prove their analyses via well-grounded arguments and become cognizant of the reasoning process itself.

1. 6. Benefits of literature-based classes

Students can appreciate a foreign culture in different periods through literature. This appreciation permits students to tolerate cultural and racial differences and thus would offer an uninfluenced world view in criticizing a text. According to Khuankaew (2010), integrating literature into classes can develop critical thinking. In addition, literary reading nurture students' appreciation of English culture, and if students had an opportunity to relate their lives to the literature, it might stimulate them to take part more actively in class discussion. Literature also gives students the opportunity to willingly take part in their learning (Langer, 1991). If students were motivated to associate their life experience with the literature, they would highly be stimulated to take part in the learning process because it entails a part of their real lives.

Enabling readers of literary texts to create an internal meaning is the peculiar benefit of literature, and this is the way we make sense of things (Gajdusek, 1988). Furthermore, reading literary texts demands a search for meaning and it provides students with an effective tool in language learning--that is the ability to make a sense of a discourse (Spack, 1985). When reading literary texts, students can respond to text critically (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000). This ends in an aesthetic reading and also leads them to point-driven reading (Hall, 2005). Students thereupon become diligent and meaning making learners.

Zoreda and Vivaldo-Lima (2008) are of the opinion that literature modules would be a principal method for integrating U.S. and British cultural features while reinforcing English reading competence. To corroborate the use of literature in the language classroom, they also give some other reasons: a) It helps students cope with contradictory views. b) It helps language instructors nurture their own cultural, linguistic and deciphering abilities. c) It integrates diversity into the language classroom. According to Gajdusek (1988), there are some other benefits: a) It can be used as a training stimulus for competition. b) It helps make meaningful referential questions. c) For content-based classes, it can be considered as an effective means of making up content. d) It reinforces both the instruction of convoluted sentence grammar and the development of dramatic vocabulary. e) It promotes speaking.

1. 7. Critical thinking and critical reading of literary texts

Considering that reading literary texts and critical thinking are interrelated, it is believed that reading literary texts can develop critical thinking. Hall (2005) insisted that the method of reading Literary texts differs from reading other text types, and it helps develop critical thinking. He further declared that the process of reading literary texts is slower than others as readers are more attentive and more reflective. Langer (2000) emphasized that the readers of literary texts are often trying to understand something beyond the text, and they tend to speculate on potential future developments. Students, then, can promote the critical and analytic thinking that is required in their writing from reading literature.

As exposition in literary texts is not directly expresses, researchers agree that in reading literary texts, readers learn to make an inference. The process of reading literary texts is regarded as a 'bottom up' process, and it encourages thoughtful and critical thinking (Hall, 2005). It will be possible to have more than one meaning. Therefore, literature is a tough means for reflective analysis. Alvermann and Phelps (1998) claimed that their students found reading literature helped them to think and analyze the recent social issues as literature provides numerous viewpoints. Therefore, reading literature results in the examining of numerous viewpoints and sensitivity to others' visions. Thus, they discover differences, dissimilarities, and variances of interpretation, and they must determine what the correct information is.

Since reading literature examines feelings, relationships, desires and feedbacks, Langer (1991; 1992) also suggested that the term 'horizon of possibility'. Therefore, readers occasionally need to ruminate over the situations and occasionally they need to re-contemplate their own analyses. Langer (1992) added that enhancing the reader's understanding is greatly dependent upon an infinite "horizon of possibilities". As the readers examine different views and associate them with the "growing whole", they simplify views; the whole describes the components and the components also elucidate the whole. (p. 4)

Since reading literature activates readers' prior knowledge and incorporates novel information with existing knowledge, Hall (2005) stated that literature reading helps develop critical thinking. As he noted, fruitful reading comprehension needs dynamic taking up of 'gaps' by the reader. (p. 99)

For the following reasons, reading of literary texts is prominently appropriate for the fundamental characteristics of critical thinking. First, the intellectual process of reading literature needs critical thinking techniques and skills. Reading literature is a convoluted process which requires readers to recollect, retrieve and ponder over their previous experiences and recollection to create meanings and messages of the texts. The readers need to simultaneously manifest the following abilities when they are doing so; To distinguish facts from views; to grasp the explicit or implicit meanings and the story-teller's tone; to detect details germane to the discussed matters; to perceive the unplanned relationship or the links between affairs or deeds; to discern an inferential link from the details seen; to be astute of different viewpoints; to make ethical analysis and unbiased-grounded judgments; and most of all, to use what they have learned for other fields or the real world (Tung & Chang, 2009).

In fact, readers are practicing what the critical thinking (CT) theoreticians called "explanation," "analysis," "synthesis," "argumentation," "interpretation," "evaluation," "problem-solving," "inference" "logical reasoning," and "application" (Brunt, 2005; Facione, 1998). In brief, all these capacities are considered as critical thinking skills. For this reason, Lazere (1987) insisted that literature is the single pedagogical exercise that can involve the full domain of intellectual characteristics currently regarded to embrace critical thinking. Second, "the setting and the language and the subject matter, of a literary work provide readers with a variety of real-world scenarios to construct meanings of self and life incrementally" (Tung & Chang, 2009, p. 292). A literary work is an echo of life and a world rebuilt. By ruminating over its theme, plot, motifs and the relationships between characters, readers are faced with various viewpoints and are forced to reflect and ponder over their own views and deeds.

Students are involved in problem-solving tasks of literary texts via resolving conflicts. Ghosn (2002) is of the opinion that children's stories abound with noticeable conflicts for readers to sympathize with, and that authorizes them to empathize with characters encountering difficult conflicts in precarious situations. The educator will surely authorize the readers to imagine the real world much better after scrutinizing different parts of a literary work including the themes, allegories, symbols, motifs, characterizations and points of view. This will lead students to find their own answers and develop their skills and perception that are required while encountering conflicts themselves. Because application is one of the skills of critical thinking, the application of literary concepts to the real life is of great importance. Literature leads the readers to comprehend the literary notions and apply them to their real life situation. Since every story has a variety of themes, readers can be acquainted with these perceptive themes that can be applied to the real world situations. According to Bettelheim (1986), learners will be able to better understand their inner feelings and personality dimensions through literature and thus commiserate with the characters in the literary works and then they can apply the emotions and sympathy to the real-world situations. Furthermore, Ladousse

(2001) added that reading a literary work arouses and elevates the reader's emotional intelligence (EQ), and this makes literature specifically appropriate to the language classroom where the components of EQ involving self-awareness, stimulus, sympathy, and social skills all play significant roles in effective language learning.

2. METHODOLOGY

2. 1. Research hypothesis

Regarding above discussions the following hypothesis is formulated by researchers: H: Critical reading of literary texts has significant effect on critical thinking of EFL learners.

2. 2. Participant

The initial sample of this study consisted of 121 EFL students with the age range of 19 to 25. They consisted of male and female students who studied English language in Arak University. By means of a background questionnaire some information about subjects were elicited.

2. 3. Materials

The different materials which were used in this paper include:

a) Background questionnaire: It was utilized to elicit some information as: the subjects' full name, their age, name of their university and the language/languages they use.

b) Language Proficiency Test (Nelson 400B): This test was composed of multiple choice cloze passages, which consist of 30 questions in grammar and vocabulary and 20 questions for reading comprehension, totally it contained 50 questions.

c) The Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (WGCTA2) (pretest): It was used to determine the proficiency level of the subjects in reading comprehension ability. This test was consisted of two separate texts with 6 questions in each one.

d) Supplementary materials (short story and poem) for experimental group: The short stories were selected based on students' proficiency level in English language and their interest.

e) Supplementary materials (Total English book) for control group: Some texts of Total English book were selected for teaching to students. Again the level of difficulty was matched with students' level of proficiency and their interest. Readability of both texts in experimental and control group was measured by the readability program SMOG.

f) The Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (WGCTA2) (posttest): After teaching some materials for 3 weeks, again (WGCTA2) test was administered for two groups.

2.4. Procedures

The following procedures were adopted in order to meet the objective of this study. *Phase 1:* The Background questionnaire was given to the subjects to fill them out. Some information such as their name, age, gender and level of English proficiency were asked by

this questionnaire. *Phase 2:* The Nelson test was given to 121 male and female students who all advanced students regarding their English proficiency. After the administration of proficiency test, two groups of High and Low language proficiency levels were identified, that is, those whose scores were 1SD below the mean were taken as Low and those whose scores were 1SD above the mean as High level, making 98 students in total. The time allowed as determined at the pilot study was 45 minutes. *Phase 3:* The Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal was administered among the subjects to be completed in 50 minutes as determined at the pilot study in order to have an assessment of their English reading comprehension ability. *Phase 4:* In the fourth phase, the learners were divided into the experimental group and control group, consisting of 49 participants in each group. Participants in both groups attended reading comprehension class three days of a week for 21 days at university class. In fact, both groups received the same instruction but their texts were different. First of all background knowledge about topic activated by researchers and then students read the texts in both groups. In this time students talked about topic and told their idea as prediction and guessed the end of text by contextual clues. The researchers encouraged students to elicit the main idea and on the other hand, students should find the main question of text, purpose of its author and some other information. In this part, they told their idea about the author that he/she could transfer his/her meaning clearly by regarding details. In last part students should write any things about the text in summary and create same text in control group and story in experimental group. When the 21 days of instruction finished, the posttests were administered.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Independent sample 'T' test and repeated measure ANOVA were employed to compare the mean scores of data. Statistical representation of the analyzed data is given in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Table 1. The result of (WGCTA2) (pretest) for both control and experimental groups.

group	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Measurement	P value
Experimental	49	22/70	7/19	1/038	0/244
Control	49	24/12	7/08	1/001	

Regarding the statistical analysis of data, there is no significant difference between control and experimental groups in the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal test because ($p > 0/05$). This result indicated in Figure 1.

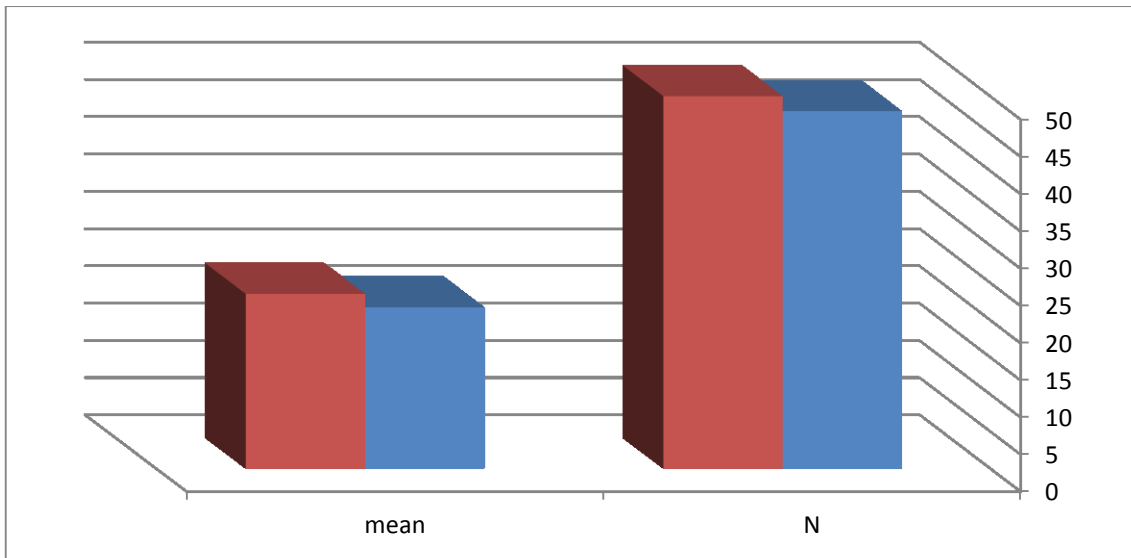


Figure 1. The result of (WGCTA2) as a pretest for both control and experimental groups.

■ Experimental
 ■ Control

Regarding obtained means in this study, there is significant difference between experimental and control group in post test because ($p < 0/05$). So as indicated in above table, experimental group who were exposed to teaching reading in literary text were better than control group.

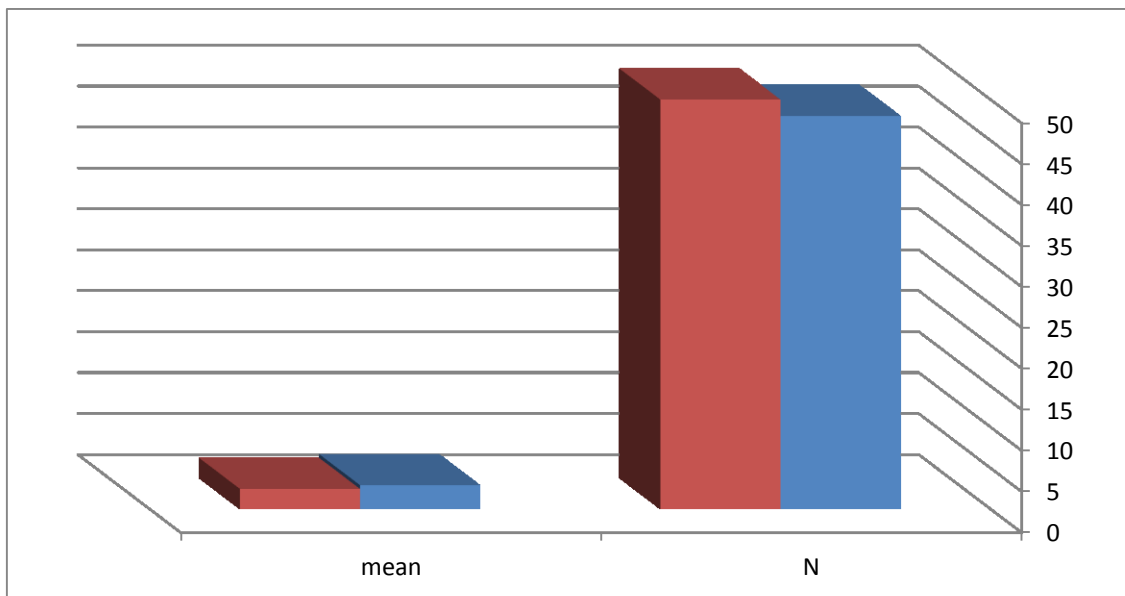


Figure 2. The result of (WGCTA2) as a posttest for both control and experimental groups.

■ Experimental
 ■ Control

Table 2. The result of (WGCTA2) as a posttest for both control and experimental groups.

group	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Measurement	P value
Experimental	49	2/91	0/963	0/139	0/027
Control	49	2/46	0/973	0/137	

According to obtained data in Table 1 and 2, the research hypothesis (Critical reading of literary texts has significant effect on critical thinking of EFL learners) was accepted.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Since the main aim of education is learning to think, students of all academic fields need to enhance their ability to think critically and learn to apply critical thinking skills to their pedagogical tasks. This paper focused its attention mainly on the interrelationships between critical thinking and critical reading of literary texts and how can critical thinking be promoted through critical reading of literary texts in higher education. After administering pre and post test, the results indicated that teaching through literary texts has positive effects on developing critical thinking of EFL learners of Arak University. In brief, data analysis through utilization of ANOVA and T-test indicated the following results: 1- All subjects had equal performance in WGCTA2 as a pretest. 2- Experimental group who were exposed to teaching by using literary text could get better result than control group who were learned reading in non-literary text.

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