

Enhancing students' critical thinking through literary analysis: a systematic review

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Highlights

Enhancing students' critical thinking through literary understanding: a reader-response theory approach.

ABSTRACT: This paper reviews empirical studies examining the relationship between literary comprehension and students' critical thinking skills. The studies included in this systematic review were published between 2013 until 2025, comprising a total of twenty articles. The review focuses on how activities involving textual interpretation, analysis, and evaluation contribute to the development of students' critical thinking abilities. As a comprehensive synthesis of previous research, this study highlights both the advantages and challenges of implementing literary comprehension strategies in educational contexts. The findings reveal several key advantages, including the promotion of interpretive reasoning, deeper engagement with texts, and the development of analytical thinking skills. However, the review also identifies several difficulties, such as students' limited background knowledge, varying levels of reading proficiency, and the challenges teachers face in facilitating effective literary discussions. These findings provide insights for both researchers and practitioners seeking to integrate literary texts as a pedagogical tool for fostering critical literacies.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Literary Understanding, Reader Response, Systematic Review.

Introduction

Critical thinking, i.e., the ability to analyse, evaluate, synthesize, and judge information well-founded, has increasingly become an essential objective of education in the twenty-first century (Paul & Eder, 2008). Meanwhile, literary understanding remains a core component of humanities education. Literary understanding involves interpreting the meaning of texts and characters read or studied, considering themes, and appreciating aesthetic elements (Bloom & Krathwohl, 2001). The relation between these two domains is also not consistently highlighted either in curricular structures or pedagogic interventions (Nussbaum, 2010).

By design, literary texts require readers to engage in interpretive work. Readers must deal with ambiguity, derive meaning from complex language and symbolic elements, and justify their interpretations by drawing on textual evidence (Iser, 1978). This interpretive engagement relies on essential cognitive processes shared with critical thinking, including analysis, inference, evaluation, and

reasoning (Gadamer, 1960). Growing empirical evidence indicates that structured literary learning activities can deliberately cultivate students' critical thinking (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Literary understanding, therefore, functions as a significant cognitive process that prompts deep interpretation, inference-making, and evaluative reasoning, placing it in a strong position to reinforce the critical thinking skills expected in contemporary education. Critical thinking, defined as purposeful, self-regulated judgment involving analysis, evaluation, and inference (Facione, 1990), remains a key learning outcome across educational systems worldwide. Yet, conventional methods often fall short of nurturing these advanced cognitive skills in literature classrooms. This systematic review synthesizes empirical findings on how literary understanding activities foster critical thinking and addresses an important gap in understanding the mechanisms by which literature instruction contributes to measurable cognitive development.

The theoretical foundation linking literary understanding with critical thinking is grounded in reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978). This theory conceives of reading as a transactional act in which students construct meaning from their experiences, prior knowledge, and textual cues, thereby forming what Fish (1980) describes as interpretive communities. This cognitive constructivist foundation aligns with three well-established models of literature teaching: the Cultural Model, which emphasizes contextual and historical analysis; the Language Model, which highlights linguistic and structural examination; and the Personal Growth Model, which encourages emotional engagement and reflective thinking (Carter & Long, 1991). Modern developments also draw on hermeneutic phenomenology (Gadamer, 1975), in which cycles of interpretation strengthen evaluative reasoning, as well as on poststructuralist perspectives that question fixed meanings, paralleling the critical thinking emphasis on multiple viewpoints and evidence-based argumentation.

Critical thinking has been conceptualized through several theoretical frameworks. In Bloom's taxonomy, later revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), analysis, evaluation, and creation occupy the highest cognitive levels. In the study of literature, these skills appear in close reading, interpretive analysis, and the formulation of arguments supported by textual evidence (Langer, 1990). Reader response theory, as initially proposed by Rosenblatt (1978), also asserts that meaning is produced through the interaction between reader and text, which relies on active cognitive engagement. This view aligns with constructivist epistemologies that propose learners build knowledge by interpreting and personally connecting with texts (Powel, 2009).

Hermeneutic philosophy, particularly the work of Gadamer (1960), further maintains that understanding literary texts necessarily involves a critical examination of assumptions, contexts, and potential meanings (Gadamer, 1975). Within this interpretive process, literary texts often contain elements of indeterminacy, a concept highlighted by Iser, where certain meanings remain implicit or incomplete and therefore require readers to actively construct interpretation. Such indeterminacy encourages readers to generate inferences by connecting textual cues with prior knowledge and contextual understanding. Additionally, phenomenological perspectives rooted in the ideas of Husserl and Merleau Ponty emphasize the role of aesthetic experience and embodied engagement in cultivating reflective thought (Merleau Ponty, 1962). The insights gathered from these theoretical foundations provide essential groundwork for future investigations in this field. Several recent studies have begun to substantiate this relationship empirically. Hassan et al. (2023) showed that students who used the Reader-Response Approach performed better in critical thinking compared to those in conventional classes. Widayanti et al. (2025) also discovered that structured reader-response methods enhanced interpretive engagement and promoted more analytical reading practices. Yang et al. (2025) also found

that reading modules which include reflective and group activities consistently helped improve critical thinking in higher education.

Even though there is a lot of evidence supporting this, most studies look at reader-response teaching in one classroom or a particular culture, which makes it harder to apply their results to other situations. There has also been very little systematic work aimed at bringing together evidence from different types of research to find common trends, ongoing problems, and the exact ways in which understanding literature leads to real improvements in critical thinking skills. The current study investigates these gaps by synthesizing fifteen empirical and theoretical studies published between 2013 and 2025, providing an integrated perspective on how literary understanding activities promote critical thinking in diverse educational contexts. With this in mind, the paper aims to explore how understanding literature helps students develop their critical thinking skills. It will focus on the methods, processes, and situations that influence this connection.

Method

To achieve the aims of this systematic literature review, 20 relevant studies were deliberately selected from various academic sources for further examination. Following the procedure proposed by Khan et al. (2003), the systematic review process generally involves five main stages.

The first stage is formulating the research questions. At this point, the researcher must clearly understand the issues under investigation and formulate precise, direct, and unambiguous research questions. The second stage involves identifying and gathering relevant studies within the selected research area. This requires a comprehensive search effort to ensure that the review includes research from diverse sources. In this study, the researcher primarily relied on peer-reviewed databases, including the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and Google Scholar, and focused on studies published between 2013 and 2025. The selection of appropriate articles was guided by keywords such as “reader response theory,” “reader response approach,” and related terms. When a suitable article was found, the researcher also used the “related articles” function to discover additional relevant papers. The third stage requires evaluating the quality of the identified studies to ensure they meet predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) the study focuses on literary comprehension, literary analysis, or reader-response approaches in educational contexts, (2) the study explicitly examines the development of critical thinking or higher-order thinking skills, (3) the study involves students or teacher trainees as participants, (4) the article is published in a peer-reviewed journal, and (5) the publication falls within the time frame of 2013–2025. Conversely, studies were excluded if they (1) did not address the relationship between literary engagement and critical thinking, (2) were theoretical papers without empirical data, (3) focused solely on language skills without literary analysis, or (4) were conference abstracts, book reviews, or non-peer-reviewed publications. These criteria help determine whether each article is appropriate for answering the research questions. The fourth stage is summarizing the evidence, which in this review was carried out using a structured table to present the key information clearly. Finally, the fifth stage involves interpreting the findings by comparing and synthesizing the collected data. Once the evidence is compiled, it is organized into tables to facilitate the drawing of conclusions and the addressing of the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

A total of fifteen articles published between 2013 and 2025 were selected in alignment with the review question. Each study examines the application of reader-response theory to literature instruction. The findings from these articles have been organized and displayed in the table below.

Table 1

Findings from studies related to the reader's response theory in teaching literature

Author & Year	Research Design	Key Findings (Narrative Sub-Points)
Zainal, Termizi, Wan Yahya & Mohd Deni (2013)	Mixed-method: Descriptive analysis of journal responses and a survey via a Likert-scale questionnaire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literary journals were effective in eliciting a variety of literary responses from students, ranging from low-level inferences (fundamental retelling) to higher-order thinking (interpreting and evaluating authors' methods and vision). • Students reported high personal engagement with the texts through their responses. • Students held a positive perception of using journals, noting that the method helped them actively negotiate meaning and practice responding. • The use of journals provided a platform that increased student participation and helped them move toward a critical appreciation of the text.
Pasaribu & Iswandari (2019)	Qualitative Case Study: Analysis of classroom observations, online archives, and students' reflections.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The collaborative reader-response method effectively enhanced students' critical thinking abilities. • Learners demonstrated engagement in higher-order cognitive processes, including understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. • Providing students with distinct roles within the group such as word wizard, inspector, and navigator prompted them to interpret texts from multiple viewpoints and collaboratively construct meaning. • This approach enabled students to relate the texts to their own experiences, examine authors' intentions, and build stronger motivation to read.
Abdulridha & Latiff (2020)	Quasi-Experimental: One-group Pre-test and Post-test design using the Cornell Class-Reasoning Test.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Reader-Response approach demonstrates a strong and positive impact on the teaching of literary texts, particularly in strengthening and advancing students' critical thinking abilities. • After engaging in Reader-Response activities, participants showed a notable increase in their critical thinking performance. • The instructional techniques applied included making predictions, drawing on background knowledge, conducting both

		<p>whole-class and small-group discussions, and participating in role-play tasks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study concluded that teaching literature without incorporating Reader-Response methods leads to minimal engagement and a much slower growth in students' critical thinking development.
Ramadhana, Al Arief, Elyani & Mu'in (2022)	Quantitative Descriptive Approach: Observation sheets and questionnaires based on critical thinking indicators.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The application of literary analysis activities proved effective in stimulating students' critical thinking abilities. • Based on classroom reflections, students achieved a high proportion of the indicators associated with critical thinking skills. • Engaging in literary analysis encouraged students to reach higher-order thinking levels, particularly the “Creating” stage, which culminated in the production of an analytical essay. • Students developed critical thinking through various approaches practiced in the literary analysis class, including mimetic, expressive, objective, and pragmatic methods
Huda & Brown (2022)	Mixed Method Research (MMR): Questionnaire Survey, Focus Group Discussion, Elicitation Tasks, and Classroom Observation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrating literary texts rooted in local culture encouraged students to participate more actively in constructing meaning than when using conventional instructional materials. • The subsequent learning tasks successfully pushed students to apply their Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). • Texts that reflected students’ cultural backgrounds, combined with the follow-up activities, were considered effective in fostering faster development of critical thinking. • Carefully designed follow-up activities enabled students to recall information analytically, examine ideas, apply concepts, make evaluative judgments, and generate new ways of thinking.
Suarez & Diva (2022)	Experimental Study: Pre-test and Post-test design with one group exposed to the Reader Response Strategy (RRS).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Reader-Response Strategy resulted in noticeable progress in three of the four critical thinking competencies, specifically defining, classifying, and making conclusions.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• However, the competency related to identifying relationships did not show a meaningful increase.• Because RRS centers on the reader's perspective and incorporates schema activation, collaborative discussions, and assigned roles, it supported students in thinking critically through the application of core RRS skills.• The study also revealed that there was no meaningful correlation between students' critical thinking abilities and their affective learning domain.
Hassan, Al Bajalani & Ismail (2023)	Quasi-Experimental: Pre-test, Treatment (RRA vs. Traditional), and Post-test design with control and experimental groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The use of the Reader-Response Approach (RRA) in teaching demonstrated a strong connection to the enhancement of critical thinking skills among university students.• Students in the experimental group who were taught using the RRA showed significantly greater improvement in critical thinking compared to those in the control group who learned through conventional methods.• Employing the RRA in teaching short stories led to a substantial increase in students' critical thinking performance.• Literature as a whole, and short stories in particular, can effectively cultivate EFL learners' critical thinking abilities when applied appropriately through the RRA.
Ahmed & Alshamari (2024)	Qualitative Case-Based Research adopting Constructivist Learning Theory (CLT).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The incorporation of literary texts supports not only the improvement of reading comprehension but also strengthens critical thinking, cultural understanding, and emotional involvement.• Woolf's experimental narrative style prompts students to examine multiple perspectives and the complexities of human life, making her work particularly effective for fostering critical reading abilities.• Teaching strategies that work well include providing contextual information, exploring major themes, annotating the text, engaging in literary circles, and writing reflective journals.• The novel's intricate themes and richly developed characters push students to think

		critically and conduct more in-depth interpretive analysis
Yang, Sulaiman & Yacob (2025)	Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the PRISMA framework.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading modules that incorporated structured, technology-supported strategies showed a beneficial effect on students' critical thinking development. • Effective module designs combined reflective exercises, collaborative learning tasks, and formative feedback that aligned with critical thinking goals. • Critical thinking is viewed as intentional, reflective, and evidence-based reasoning that involves skills such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. • Student-related aspects like language proficiency, motivation, and self-regulatory ability, along with institutional conditions, played an important role in shaping the results
Fajriyah Afifah (2025)	& Sequential Mixed-Methods Approach (Pre-test, Post-test, Questionnaire, and Structured Interviews).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The incorporation of an LMS led to a noticeable improvement in reading comprehension among non-EFL students. • Students showed stronger analytical reasoning and evaluative abilities in critical thinking, although difficulties persisted when attempting to apply higher-order thinking to more complex texts. • The LMS supported the development of analytical, evaluative, interpretive, and argumentative competencies effectively. • Some challenges remained, particularly students' difficulties in synthesizing information from multiple sources and transferring LMS-acquired knowledge to new or unfamiliar historical contexts
Widayanti, Mujiyanto, Rukmini & Pratama (2025)	Qualitative Case Study: Interviews, observations, and artifact analysis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of structured reading strategies within the Reader Response Approach (RRA) enhanced students' understanding of literary texts and strengthened their critical engagement with them. • The organized instructional sequence, which included previewing, questioning, annotating, outlining, summarizing, reviewing, and reflecting, helped students interact with texts more deeply and cultivate independent reading habits.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The RRA promoted analytical reflection and encouraged multiple interpretations shaped by students' individual experiences.• Textual meaning is collaboratively formed through the reader's personal background, emotional reactions, and contextual insights, rather than being predetermined or singular
Ilyas, El Khuluqo & Tarmini (2025)	Qualitative Study: Collection and thematic analysis of oral/written responses, discussions, and open-response questionnaires.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The integration of literary texts with reader-response theory greatly enhanced EFL learners' critical reading abilities.• Five key components of critical reading were identified, namely reflecting, analyzing, interpreting, commenting, and reasoning.• Reflection emerged as the strongest element, as it allowed students to engage in deeper thinking by connecting the narratives to their own experiences, emotions, and perspectives.• The approach also supported vocabulary development and encouraged students to interact more meaningfully with authentic reading materials.
Kunjanman & Aziz (2021)	Systematic Literature Review (SLR) examining 14 studies (2013-2020) on Reader-Response Theory.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reader-Response Theory is firmly grounded in the cognitive-constructivist perspective of learning, emphasizing the essential role of the reader in generating meaning from a text.• Some of the key benefits of this theory include encouraging personal interpretation, nurturing reflective thinking and creativity, increasing students' motivation to study literature, and supporting autonomous learning as well as advanced reasoning skills.• RRT facilitates students' development into engaged, thoughtful, and critically aware readers.• Teachers can enhance the learning process by prompting students to express their emotions, thoughts, viewpoints, and interpretations through writing.• Identified challenges include the use of culturally distant or less relatable texts and insufficient teacher knowledge, which can result in ineffective lesson delivery.

Wan Mohd Nasir, Halim & Arsad (2024)	Quasi-Experimental: Non-equivalent control group pre-test and post-test design.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Digital Storytelling Science Creative (DSSC) module showed considerably better results than traditional instructional methods in developing students' divergent thinking abilities.• Divergent thinking, which includes fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration, serves as a core component of creative thinking skills.• The DSSC module did not produce a notable impact on students' associative or visual thinking abilities.• The gains in divergent thinking indicate the effectiveness of encouraging students to generate ideas through multiple approaches and establish meaningful connections between concepts.
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Qamar (2016)	Review of Literature (Focusing on Critical Thinking, English Literature, and Reader Response Theory).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Critical thinking plays a vital role in literature learning because it clarifies vague ideas and encourages learners to make their beliefs, perceptions, and judgments explicit.• Literature is well suited to cultivate the mental abilities needed for critical thinking, since engaging with literary texts naturally promotes analysis, inference, and evaluative reasoning.• Reader Response Theory (RRT) is indispensable in literature instruction and in the application of critical thinking, as it relies heavily on reflection and the activation of prior knowledge.• When critical thinking is paired with RRT, learners are enabled to question, interpret, make connections, and investigate the broader "horizon of possibility" offered by a text.
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Bist & Kandel (2024)	Participatory Action Research (PAR): Classroom observations, reflective journals, and focus group discussions with 54 university students from two state universities in Nepal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The RRA gave students greater freedom to discuss literary texts and connect them to their personal beliefs and values, fostering autonomous meaning-making.• Students demonstrated increased confidence in expressing personal interpretations without relying solely on teacher-provided readings.• The approach encouraged collaborative dialogue in which students learned to negotiate interpretations and respect differing viewpoints.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The study concluded that RRA effectively shifts the locus of meaning from the teacher to the learner, which is fundamental to developing independent critical engagement with texts.
Rahimi & Babaei (2023)	Quantitative Descriptive: Questionnaire survey administered to 30 EFL university students to measure their attitudes toward RRA implementation in literature classes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students demonstrated a broadly positive attitude toward the implementation of the Reader-Response Approach in their literature classes.• Critical questioning activities were rated as the most effective component of RRA in stimulating students' critical thinking compared to other activities.• Students reported that RRA encouraged them to move beyond surface-level reading toward deeper personal engagement with literary texts.• The findings suggest that students' positive attitudes toward RRA are a significant factor in its effectiveness as a tool for developing critical thinking.
Liu & Puteh (2025)	Systematic Literature Review (SLR): Synthesis of 11 empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024 focusing on critical thinking in EFL reading instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The review identified five major challenges faced by teachers in integrating critical thinking skills into EFL reading instruction, including limited instructional time and insufficient teacher training.• Effective pedagogical strategies for developing CT in EFL reading included questioning techniques, collaborative tasks, and scaffolded reading activities.• The findings highlighted that CT development in reading requires a combination of explicit instruction and contextually meaningful tasks rather than either approach alone.• Student-related factors such as language proficiency, motivation, and prior exposure to critical thinking instruction significantly shaped learning outcomes.
Wei (2025)	Experimental Study: Pre-test and post-test design with 116 EFL university students in China divided into three groups: online reading circles, offline reading circles, and traditional reading instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Both online and offline reading circle groups showed significantly greater improvements in critical thinking compared to the traditional instruction control group.• Online reading circles were particularly effective in fostering evaluative reasoning and interpretive depth, as the digital format

Wei & Li (2024)	Systematic Literature Review (SLR): Review of studies on ICT-supported critical thinking development in EFL teaching from 2015 to 2024.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">encouraged more sustained and reflective written responses.• The collaborative nature of reading circles, regardless of modality, prompted students to justify their interpretations, consider alternative viewpoints, and engage in evidence-based discussion.• The study suggests that structured peer interaction around literary texts is a key driver of critical thinking development, whether conducted in physical or digital settings. <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ICT tools that were communicative, informative, and constructive in design proved most effective in enhancing core critical thinking skills including analysis, evaluation, and inference.• Technology-enhanced learning environments supported collaborative meaning-making and reflective engagement, both of which are closely aligned with reader-response principles.• The integration of digital platforms into literary instruction created opportunities for students to engage with multiple perspectives and produce evidence-based arguments in ways that traditional classrooms often cannot facilitate.• The review concluded that the effectiveness of ICT in developing critical thinking is contingent on intentional pedagogical design rather than the mere presence of technology in the classroom.
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Based on Table 1, the studies collectively illustrate a consistent pattern showing that reader response oriented approaches play a significant role in fostering students' critical thinking when engaging with literary texts. Across different research designs, ranging from qualitative case studies and mixed-method inquiries to quasi-experimental and systematic reviews, the findings indicate that students move beyond surface level comprehension toward deeper analytical and evaluative engagement. Activities such as reflective journaling, collaborative discussion, role assignment, and guided interpretation repeatedly appear as effective strategies for prompting students to justify interpretations, draw inferences, and connect textual meaning with personal and cultural experiences. Rather than treating meaning as fixed, these studies emphasize interpretation as a dynamic process shaped by interaction between the reader, the text, and the learning context.

In addition, the table highlights how contextual factors, such as culturally relevant texts, structured reading stages, and technology supported learning environments, strengthen

the impact of reader response practices on higher order thinking. While most studies report clear improvements in analysis, evaluation, and reasoning, some also note challenges, particularly in transferring critical thinking skills to unfamiliar or more complex texts. Nevertheless, the overall evidence suggests that when literary instruction is designed to actively involve students as meaning makers, it creates meaningful opportunities for sustained critical engagement. The findings summarized in Table 1 demonstrate that reader response-based pedagogy offers a flexible and empirically supported framework for developing critical thinking through literary understanding.

Discussion

The researchers highlight the overall patterns, strengths, and implications of the studies reviewed, particularly regarding the effectiveness of the Reader-Response Approach (RRA) and its variants in fostering students' critical thinking skills, interpretive engagement, and meaningful interaction with literary texts. Across the studies, several converging themes become evident.

In other contexts, students were highly engaged with literature through Reader-Response techniques. Early work, for example, Zainal et al. (2013), identified a positive response among students when literary journals prompted responses ranging from simple retellings to higher-order evaluations and heightened their personal interactions with the text. This active meaning-negotiation pattern was also evident in Pasaribu and Iswandari (2019), in which a teacher's voice in the case study facilitated students' examination of texts from multiple perspectives, including their own lives. These authors also concluded to this effect, like Ilyas et al. (2025), that found that reflection was the most prominent critical reading process, with RRT leading to a deep personal involvement and self-connection naturally

Regarding the development of critical thinking, the literature overwhelmingly supports the positive impact of Reader Response oriented pedagogies. Abudlridha and Latiff (2020) demonstrated significant improvement in critical reasoning following the implementation of prediction, prior knowledge activation, and group discussion activities. Likewise, Ramadhana et al. (2022) reported that literary analysis elicited higher-order thinking, particularly when students produced analytical papers during the "Creating" stage. Experimental results reported by Hassan et al. (2023) further indicated that students exposed to RRA significantly outperformed those taught through traditional methods, reinforcing the strong pedagogical link between RRA and the development of critical thinking.

Considering the development of critical thinking, the literature is robust regarding the benefits of participating in Reader-Response-oriented pedagogies. Abudlridha & Latiff (2020) also showed that using the prediction led to significant enhancements in critical thinking pre-test and post-test, prior knowledge activation, and group discussion. Likewise, Ramadhana et al. (2022) found that generative student responses (students having to create something new resulted in students' higher-order thinking being activated by literary analysis. Writing about EFL Bible literature addressed EFL writing skills. Experimental results reported by Hassan et al. (2023) further indicated that students exposed to RRA significantly outperformed those taught through traditional methods, reinforcing the strong pedagogical link between RRA and the development of critical thinking.

Studies focusing on cultural or contextual relevance further illustrated the effectiveness of RRA. Huda and Brown (2022) found that local-culture-based literary texts made students more active meaning-makers, enabling them to perform analytical and evaluative tasks with greater confidence. Ahmed and Alshamari (2024) similarly showed that contextual background, annotation, thematic exploration, and reflective journals fostered both comprehension and critical engagement with complex narratives. The emphasis on personal context was also central to Widayanti et al. (2025), who reported

that structured reading steps supported students in co-constructing meaning through emotional, experiential, and interpretive processes.

Technology-enhanced and modular approaches appear to complement Reader-Response pedagogy effectively. Yang et al. (2025) highlighted that well-structured reading modules that integrate reflective tasks, collaboration, and formative feedback consistently improve students' critical thinking skills. Likewise, Fajriyah and Afifah (2025) found that LMS integration strengthened analytical and evaluative reasoning, although some students still struggled to apply higher-order skills in unfamiliar contexts. This pattern aligns with Suarez and Diva (2022), whose experimental study showed improvement in three out of four critical thinking competencies, indicating that the RRS benefits learners but may require additional scaffolding in specific cognitive domains. On the other hand, the identification of relationships between ideas competency did not make good progress. The possible reason for this relates to the pedagogical approach of Reader-Response. The focus of RRS on the reader's perspective, along with schema activation, collaborative discussion and assigned interpretive roles, serves to help develop students' interpretive and evaluative thinking ability compared to systematically analysing relationships. Previous research has also noted that students' critical thinking ability does not always correlate with how they emotionally engage in literary learning experiences. Therefore, while students may be making emotional interpretations of texts and responding actively, they will struggle to identify complex relationships between concepts, themes, or text elements. Thus, from a practitioner's perspective, Reader-Response activities may require additional scaffolding, such as directed analytical questions or concept mapping tasks, in order to help develop relational reasoning skills.

Theoretical discussions also emphasize the foundational role of Reader-Response Theory in cultivating students' cognitive and interpretive abilities. Kunjanman and Aziz (2021) stressed that RRT encourages reflective thinking, personal expression, creativity, and higher-level reasoning traits essential to critical literary engagement. These ideas align with Qamar (2016), who described literature as a natural medium for fostering analysis, inference, and evaluation, thus making RRT indispensable for critical reading and meaning exploration.

While critical thinking is the primary focus of most studies, some research examines related cognitive domains such as creative thinking. Wan Mohd Nasir et al. (2024) showed that the DSSC module significantly strengthened students' divergent thinking skills, particularly fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. Although not explicitly RRA-based, these findings complement the broader argument that interpretive, student-centred pedagogies can enhance a wide range of cognitive outcomes.

Across the reviewed literature, several elements consistently contribute to students' improvement: activating schema, assigning roles, collaborative discussions, reflective journals, contextualized texts, and structured reading strategies. These practices collectively support key critical thinking processes, interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, reasoning, and self-regulation highlighted by Yang et al. (2025). The convergence of evidence suggests that RRA, when implemented effectively, transforms the literary classroom into an active space of inquiry where students negotiate, question, and co-construct meanings rather than passively receive information. To synthesize these findings, Fig. 1 presents a thematic diagram illustrating the three interrelated mechanisms through which Reader-Response activities foster the development of critical thinking skills.

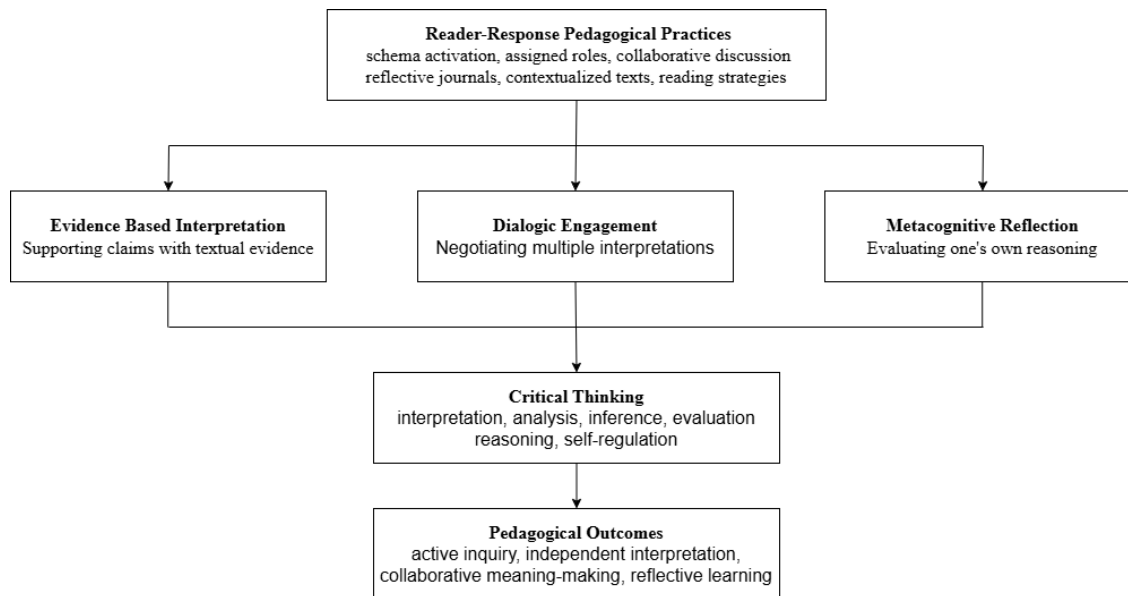


Fig. 1 Reader-Response Activities Foster The Development of Critical Thinking Skills

Conclusion

Drawing on twenty theoretical and empirical studies, the findings indicate that the Reader-Response Approach (RRA) is an effective method for fostering critical thinking, interpretive skills, and personal meaning-making in literature classrooms. Across diverse research designs, the evidence consistently shows that active student engagement promotes higher-order thinking. Through RRA, students connect texts with their experiences, emotions, and perspectives, making reading a reflective and interactive process. Strategies such as collaborative activities, reflective journals, guided reading, contextual learning, and thematic analysis enhance students' abilities to analyze, evaluate, and interpret literary works. Quasi-experimental studies further demonstrate that students taught through RRA achieve higher cognitive and critical-thinking outcomes than those in traditional teacher-centered classrooms. The integration of culturally relevant texts and technology-supported learning environments also increases engagement and cognitive development. Overall, the findings confirm that RRA provides a strong pedagogical foundation for developing critical, reflective, and autonomous readers. Future research should explore its long-term impact, digital integration, and effectiveness across broader populations and literary genres.

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