

Original Paper

Cultivating Critical Thinking through Literature Circle Activities:

A Case Study in the Chinese EFL Classroom

Zhaoyu Yang¹

¹ Xianda College of Economics and Humanities Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

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Abstract

This study aims to address the growing need for critical thinking in the information age, and the documented challenges of fostering critical thinking among Chinese EFL learners who are often constrained by linguistic limitations and a cultural reluctance to challenge authority. Based on a single-case implementation of an adapted literature circle activities model with intermediate English majors at a private Chinese college, and using James Joyce's "Araby" as the focal text, the researcher intends to determine whether, and through what mechanisms, critical thinking can be developed in this context. Data were collected through classroom video recordings, student work samples, teacher reflective journals, and pre- and post-lesson interviews. The findings indicate marked improvement in five dimensions of critical thinking which are active participation, reasoned discussion, curiosity and confidence, multiple perspectives, and empathetic engagement, and this improvement is attributed to three interacting factors: the intrinsic properties of the literary text, the streamlined four-task circle design, and the teacher's scaffolding role. Therefore, the case study suggests that adapted literature circle activities can effectively bridge language teaching and intellectual growth to cultivate in students a disposition toward questioning that begins with textual interpretation and extends to self-reflection.

Keywords

critical thinking development, literature circle activities, literary reading, "Araby", case study

1. Introduction

1.1 The Significance of Critical Thinking

We are now living in the twenty-first century, a time of breakneck technological change, and we're bombarded from every direction with content, whether it comes from social media feeds, entertainment apps, public WeChat accounts, or search engine results. Yet a great deal of that material is patchy in

quality and quite often simply untrustworthy. Tetlock (1994) long ago pointed out that humans, by nature, tend to be irrational, short-sighted, destructive, ethnocentric, emotional, and all too easy to mislead. Because of our ingrained cognitive biases, we routinely sign on to opinions without ever really scrutinizing them (Cui, 2019). In today's online world, where clickbait runs rampant, commercial interests are overbearing, traffic-chasing is obsessive, and personal voices are amplified without any filter, people frequently get swept along by what others say, which results in the fact that more likely they walk straight into the traps of hoaxes, financial scams, and cyberbullying. Even more worrying, when exposed to distorted and subversive narratives, some individuals begin to lose their sense judgement to distinguish right from wrong. On top of that, a society made up of mostly unexamined lives can cumulatively give rise to a world lacking in fairness and reason, one that is riddled with peril (Elder, 2007). Thus, to steer clear of these dangers, we need a level-headed way of carefully sorting through, interpreting, and weighing the enormous flow of information, so we can pick out what is genuinely worthwhile. Hence, what we desperately require is critical thinking, the ability to tell when someone is feeding us nonsense, and the determination to keep questioning and re-examining our very existence.

1.2 Challenges in Teaching Critical Thinking

The biggest hurdle that instructors face when trying to teach critical thinking comes straight from the learners themselves. In the case of Chinese students, the sociocultural context looms large as a primary barrier; it tends to suppress the emotional and attitudinal prerequisites for critical thought. For instance, the willingness to speak up is suppressed, given that doing so might be seen as questioning the teacher's standing. (Zhang, 2019). Yet some researchers trace the supposedly weak critical performance of Chinese learners back to their limited domain knowledge and language skills (Huang, 2014; Lun et al., 2010), which in turn hamper their capacity to pinpoint issues, frame queries, engage in reasoning, and arrive at sound judgments. More recent meta-analyses have only strengthened that line of argument, which reinforces the finding that across Asian tertiary EFL settings, linguistic competence and the capacity for critical thinking tend to be deeply interwoven (Soe & Eto, 2022).

But learner-side obstacles are not the whole story; the pedagogical practices that prevail in many classrooms also weigh heavily against the development of critical thinking since instruction tends to specifically concentrate on explaining grammar and vocabulary, and on having students drill skills straight out of the textbook, leaving little room for anything else. Most class activities revolve around imitation, rote memorization, and recitation, rather than pushing students to analyze, infer, or evaluate. The teaching model, by and large, is teacher-fronted, which means students get few chances to voice their own ideas or to exercise their mental faculties. What's more, even when teachers ask questions which ought to spark thinking, the questions tend to be closed or have only one correct answer while open-ended questions that could genuinely kindle critical reflection are few and far between.

1.3 Literary Reading as an Approach to Cultivating Critical Thinking

Within the foreign language teaching environment, the growth of critical thinking, language command,

and humanistic literacy tends to feed into each other, and literature sits right at the heart of this process, offering a whole range of moral, cultural, aesthetic, and affective pluses that are indispensable for humanistic development (Meretoja et al., 2015). Research has also shown that literary works can jump-start cognitive growth by firing up the imagination, sensitivity, creativity, and mental flexibility (Babae & Yahya, 2014). This becomes apparent in two ways: the suggestive quality of literary language, which packs dense meaning into few words and gets people talking, and the open-ended nature of their themes, leaving room for multiple readings and spirited critical exchange. Some texts even come with a built-in critical edge, nudging readers toward deep questioning.

Yet when it comes to teaching literary reading in English in China, things are far from smooth, for students often lack the language proficiency needed, which dampens their enthusiasm. Moreover, the fragmented, speed-driven reading habits bred by information overload make matters worse, because without careful scaffolding, students find it hard to sustain focused, immersive engagement with a text, let alone develop a lasting reading habit. Teachers, therefore, have to step in and help students see what literary reading can really offer. They must avoid mechanical teaching approaches and instead, facilitate lively, thoughtful discussions that are both rewarding and enjoyable.

All in all, using literary instruction as a vehicle for fostering critical thinking serves a three-pronged aim: firstly, to build up language skills and humanistic literacy side by side with critical thinking; secondly, to test out whether and how well undergraduate EFL classrooms can make use of literary reading to nurture critical thinking; and thirdly, to sharpen both teachers' and students' awareness of literary reading, deepen their literary sensitivity, and give teachers a theoretical and practical grounding that enables them to teach more effectively, ultimately raising students' literary level (Ma, Ismail, & Saharuddin, 2023).

1.4 Scholarly Contributions

What distinguishes this study from earlier literature-circle research is not any single novelty but a convergence of contextual and procedural choices. That meant targeting intermediate English majors at a private Chinese college, a group rarely examined, and trimming the canonical roles to three (Summarizer, Connector, Discussion Leader) while embedding the five fictional elements, dropping those that would have added cognitive load without critical payoff. Methodologically, we triangulated video, teacher journals, student work, and interviews, capturing both process and product in a way questionnaires could not. Moreover, the researcher broke critical thinking down into active participation, reasoned discussion, curiosity and confidence, multiple perspectives, and empathetic engagement five observable dimensions, and illustrated each with authentic student discourse. Last but not the least, special attention was given to the teacher's moment-by-moment scaffolding, to show how linguistic prompts and open questioning helped students navigate language limitations and cultural reserve. Together, these features make the study a locally grounded intervention instead of a recycled template.

2. Teaching the Short Story “Araby” through Literature Circle Activities

At its core, the literature circle activities model blends self-directed and collaborative learning which encourages small groups of students to read a shared text and then come together at regular intervals to talk it over (Daniels, 2002). The whole point is to spur reading, trigger personal reflection, promote connections with one’s own experience, and open up space for sharing, all of which, thus in turn, foster not only a firmer grasp of the material but also a genuine taste for reading and the formation of a regular reading habit (Luo & Li, 2016).

2.1 Text Selection and Treatment

The chosen text is “Araby” from James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (Joyce, 2014). The narrative recounts a Dublin boy’s disillusionment with his first love. The first-person protagonist, living on a “blind” street, secretly adores Mangan’s sister, idealizing her without direct interaction. When she speaks to him, asking whether he would go to the Araby bazaar, he promises to bring her a gift. However, his obsessive anticipation is thwarted by his uncle’s delayed return. Arriving late to the bazaar, he finds it nearly closed and dimly lit, and in a sudden epiphany he recognizes himself as “a creature driven and derided by vanity,” his fantasy shattered.

The story employs a retrospective first-person voice, yet the language surpasses the boy’s actual expressive capacity, creating a dual perspective that blends youthful sensitivity with adult retrospection. This is a quintessential Joycean “epiphany” narrative: the early accumulation of sensory details and emotional intensity gives way to a stark reversal, wherein the imagined “oriental” splendor collapses into mundane darkness. Symbolism pervades the story such as the “blind” street, the interplay of light and shadow, the chalice imagery, rain, with decaying domestic details all coalescing to evoke Dublin’s spiritual paralysis to mirror the boy’s inner turmoil. Joyce’s rhythmic prose, alternating long and short sentences, mimics the boy’s accelerating heartbeat, and the diction moves between colloquial plainness and poetic elevation.

Thematically, the story illuminates the universal adolescent ordeal of collision between idealism and reality, blindness and awakening. The boy’s romantic projection onto Mangan’s sister and the bazaar is entirely self-generated, and its collapse exposes the hollowness of his illusions. Moreover, the narrative depicts a paralysis of agency considering that the boy is constrained by a deadened environment, a repressive household, and the negligent uncle. Joyce, however, does not merely chronicle failure; instead, he endows the boy with a painful yet liberating self-awareness, which marks the establishment of subjective identity.

Regarding its narrative tension which is the gap between the child’s perception and the adult narrator’s retrospective judgment, “Araby” proves eminently suitable for literature circle activities, as naturally it invites rereading and inquiry. The dense network of symbols such as blindness, light versus dark, the chalice, rain, and the abandoned room, offers rich ambiguity and provides ample scope for diverse interpretations and collective meaning-making. The central themes ideal versus reality, paralysis versus agency, and the transition from blindness to epiphany resonate profoundly with undergraduate students

who find difficulty in navigating their own transitional anxieties. The open-ended, epiphanic conclusion of the novel further encourages critical questioning and sustained inquiry without recourse to predetermined answers. Thus, using “Araby” in literature-circle lesson enables students to engage authentically with the text through questioning, sharing, and reflection, thus to foster an appreciation of reading as a process of self-dialogue and meaning construction, and ultimately to nurture a lifelong reading habit.

2.2 Main Teaching Activities and Instructional Procedure

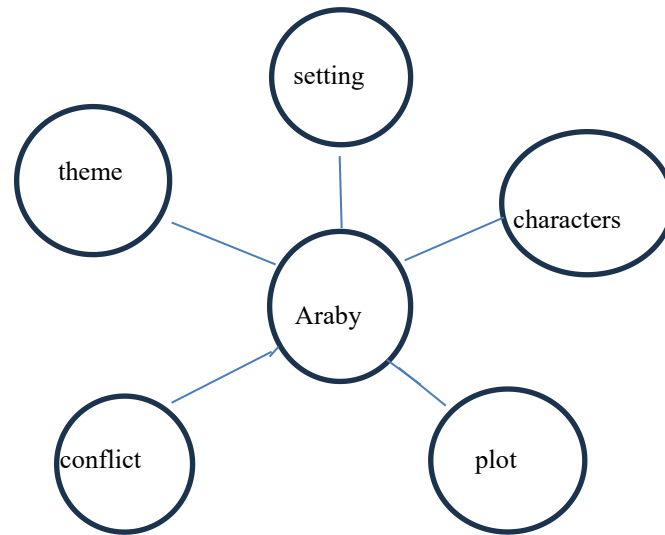
The course “Selected Readings in Modern Literature from English-Speaking Countries” targeted first-semester junior English majors at Xianda College of Economics and Humanities, Shanghai International Studies University. Half of those students had passed the TEM-4 (Test for English Majors Band 4) the previous term, which reflects an intermediate level with marked individual differences. While most possess foundational vocabulary and grammatical competence, their sustained engagement with authentic literary texts remains limited. Reading fluency, interpretive skills, and oral articulation in extended discussion are areas of their relative weakness. With little fiction-reading experience and no prior exposure to literature circle activities, students presented a challenge that led the instructor to substantially adapt the model: (three roles were retained) Summarizer, Connector, and Discussion Leader, and the five core fictional elements (setting, character, plot, conflict, theme) were integrated. The other roles (e.g., Word Master, Passage Person, Cultural Collector) were dropped because exploring writing techniques and cultural elements was not an objective. The adapted circle thus comprised the following four activities which are Story Summary, Character Analysis, Real-Life Connection, and Free Q&A. It is precisely the linguistic gap that makes literary reading pedagogically valuable since well-chosen literary works offer rich, contextualized language input that textbooks cannot provide, and the circle format creates low-anxiety opportunities for meaning-focused interaction. Through collaborative inquiry into stories like “Araby”, students are encouraged to develop both their language proficiency and their capacity for critical reflection, a dual outcome essential to their growth as English majors.

The story’s dense symbolism, imagery, restrained plot, and subtle psychology defy instant grasp, so one week before class, students received the electronic text of “Araby” and spent time on autonomous reading. Carrying personal responses into the circle, students could relate the story to their own disillusionments and epiphanies, collide perspectives, and move from “comprehending the story” to “penetrating life”, turning the circle into a site of collaborative inquiry and meaning-making.

In class, first, to help students grasp the central theme of “paralysis” and the metaphorical critique, the teacher introduced the work’s background in order to help students understand not just personal disillusionment but the paralysis of Irish society under British colonial rule and the Catholic Church. Then, a reading worksheet (Fig. 1) with clear instructions for the four activities outlined in Table 1 was distributed to help students understand their roles and responsibilities.

“Araby”

Task 1. Summarize the story and fill in the mind gap (Individual work).



Task 2. Choose one character and describe him/her with one complete sentence (Individual work).

The narrator/ The narrator's uncle/ Mangan's sister is

Task 3: Discuss the following questions with your partner (Pair work).

1. Have you projected romantic ideals onto classmates or activities like the boy did?
2. Have you ever been driven by any sense of vanity which disturbed your academic study and normal life?
3. If you were the narrator, what would you do after that trip to Araby?

Task 4. Raise a question about the story (group work).

Figure 1. Reading Worksheet

Subsequently, students are divided into five groups of five to six members and, following the teacher's guidance and demonstration, complete each activity presented in Fig.1. First, they fill in a mind map, share it within their groups, and then the teacher invites a few students to present to the whole class. Next, students write a one-sentence characterization in their own words and share it in groups. After that, they articulate their romantic ideals and sense of vanity and discuss them in groups. Soon afterwards, the whole class engages in an open discussion: "If I were the protagonist, what would I do upon returning from the Araby bazaar to reality?" Finally, each group raises one question and invites another group to respond. Throughout these activities, the teacher should rigorously manage time, structure discussions, and strive to involve as many different students as possible in speaking and interacting, enabling them to share and contribute valuable ideas. Before the class concludes, the

teacher uses the remaining few minutes to synthesize students' ideas, offer comments and feedback, or provide supplementary instruction as needed.

Table 1. Post-reading Discussion Session

Activities	Time	Step 1	Step 2
1 Story Summary	15 min	Individual Activity: Recall the reading and complete a mind map using keywords.	Group Activity: Share within the group. Whole-class Activity: Invite several students to orally summarize the story based on their mind maps.
2 Character Analysis	20 min	Individual Activity: Select a character, analyze their traits, and describe them in one complete sentence.	Group Activity: Share within the group, then select or revise to produce the best sentence. Whole-class Activity: Groups present and explain their sentence to the class.
3 Personal Connection	15 min	Partner Activity: First, identify and articulate your own romantic ideals and sense of vanity; then discuss what you would do if you were the protagonist after the journey.	Whole-class Activity: Students share their personal views and explain their reasoning to the class.
4 Open Q&A	20 min	Group Activity: Formulate one question related to the story.	Whole-class Activity: The questioning group invites another group to respond, and the invited group provides their answer.

2.3 Discussion of the Lesson Case

This section examines how the lesson case fosters students' critical thinking development. It first outlines the research questions and procedure, analyzes the effects on students' critical thinking, and then discusses the contributing factors.

2.3.1 Research Questions

To investigate the role of literature instruction in developing critical thinking, this section addresses the following questions concerning the "Araby" literature-circle lesson:

- (1) How do students' critical thinking skills develop?

- a. Have students' critical thinking skills improved?
- b. If so, in what aspects are these improvements manifested?
- (2) What factors influence the development of students' critical thinking?
 - a. What role does the short story "Araby" play in this development?
 - b. What role do literature circle activities play?
 - c. What role does the teacher play?

2.3.2 Research Method

During the implementation of the "Araby" literature-circle lesson, the author of this study collected the following data (see Table 2): student and teacher interviews, teacher reflective journals, video recordings of regular lessons and the case lesson, and student work. This multi-source qualitative approach is consistent with the case-study methodology adopted in similar EFL literature circle activities research (Julianah, Febriani, & Said, 2022). The combination of process and product data enabled a nuanced account of student critical thinking development.

Table 2. Data Collection Phases

instructional phases	Data sources
pre-instruction	regular class video recordings, teacher interviews, student interviews
during-instruction	lesson video recordings, student work
post-instruction	teacher reflective journals, teacher interviews, student interviews

Prior to the delivery of the focal lesson, the author of this paper conducted separate interviews with the teacher and the students. The teacher interview addressed the rationale for integrating the literary work "Araby" into English instruction, the role it played in the classroom, the instructional model adopted, and the teacher's perceptions of the challenges inherent in teaching literary reading. At the same time, the teacher was asked to provide a video recording of a routine reading lesson. Next, the author of this paper observed and documented the entire process of literature circle activities lesson in real time to collect and transcribe the students' oral and written production from all activities. After the lesson, the teacher was asked to submit a reflective journal focused on the teaching process, and the author of this paper interviewed the teacher and a sample of students regarding the perceived effectiveness of the lesson and its most memorable classroom moments.

2.3.3 Analysis of Results: Students' Critical Thinking Development

Analysis of the data reveals that in classrooms where literature circle activities were used to foster critical thinking, students' capacity for active thinking developed and their critical thinking skills improved markedly. This improvement was evident in the following areas: active participation, reasoned discussion, curiosity and confidence, multiple perspectives, and empathetic engagement (Matmool & Kaowiwattanakul, 2023).

(1) Active Participation

Engagement and involvement are essential to critical thinking. An interest in the topic and a willingness to participate, that is, the disposition to think, are prerequisites for critical inquiry. Comparing students' performance in regular lessons and in the literature-circle lesson on "Araby", the author of this paper has found that participation was substantially higher in the literature-circle lesson while in regular classes, students mostly kept silent, and when they did speak, they gave only brief yes/no answers or repeated phrases from the text, without offering their own views. In the literature-circle lesson, however, during tasks like story summarization, character analysis, personal connections, and open-ended questions, students actively thought and eagerly contributed in both small-group and whole-class discussions.

The most notable change was the high level of student participation. They were willing to discuss and proved able to engage meaningfully. Although these English majors were normally reserved, hampered by limited oral proficiency and shyness, the literature circle activities allowed them to become deeply engaged in reading the novel and in class discussion. They made their best effort to think and to offer what they believed to be the best possible answers (from Teacher interview).

What moved me most today was my students. They looked at me with sincere eyes, and their dedication and effort in every task were palpable even to the visiting teachers (from teacher's reflective journal).

The teacher herself also noted that despite many students' average speaking skills and introverted personalities, they were fully involved in the reading and discussion phases of the literature-circle lesson, in an effort to find the right words and the most fitting answers to share with their group and the class.

(2) Reasoned Discussion

Since rationality lies at the heart of critical thinking, thinking grounded in evidence and facts is required to achieve fair discussion through logical reasoning and clear, coherent exposition. For instance, when discussing the protagonist boy, his uncle, and Mangan's sister, students drew reasonable inferences from textual evidence and personal experience to reach their conclusions, thereby providing accurate descriptions of the characters' appearance, behavior, and personality.

Table 3. Data Collected From Classroom Video

characters	Characters Description	Evidence
		I think the boy is romantic because he dreams about the girl every day.
	romantic/ idealistic	He believes her name has magic power over him but he does not see the real world clearly.

the narrator	naïve	We can notice that he only lives in his own beautiful dream. He only looks at the girl from far away and never talks to her, and does not think about real problems like money or time. He thinks the bazaar is a magical place, but it is just a dark and empty market. He is too young to understand the hard truth behind the bazaar. The boy is frustrated because he really wants to go to Araby. But his uncle delays him and he gets there too late. The stalls are closing and the lights are dark. He cannot find a nice gift. His dream becomes nothing.
	frustrated	For me, the boy feels frustrated because he waits all day for the bazaar. His uncle is slow and does not care about his plan. At the market, he sees that everything is shutting down. He has very little money. He is sad and angry at the end.
	disillusioned (at the end)	Because in the end, he knows he is a creature driven by vanity. He loses all his hope and sees the truth clearly. He feels disillusioned because the bazaar is dark and empty. He understands that his love was just an illusion and his eyes burn with pain.
	late /forgetful/ uncaring	I think the uncle is not a good adult for he comes home very late and forgets to give the boy money for the bazaar. He hardly cares about the boy's feelings.
	irresponsible / distant/ selfish	He does not care about the boy's feelings. The uncle does not remember the boy's plan. What's more he does not ask why the boy wants to go there. He only thinks about his own business.
the narrator's uncle	kind but distant	
Mangan's	ordinary/ not quite special	Mangan's sister is a nice girl. She is pretty with her hair and dress. But she does not really know the boy's feelings. She is like a dream for him. She comes out to call her brother for tea, which is so common in our

sister	_____	daily life.
		The boy makes her into something bigger than she is. Nothing
romantic symbol		magical on her.
		She seems unattainable. She hasn't promised anything to the boy
		throughout the novel.
		She makes the boy dream of love and adventure.

(3) Curiosity and Confidence

Curiosity and confidence, as key affective traits of critical thinking, enable students to pose questions, seek answers, and confidently challenge authority. Unlike traditional classrooms where students passively answered teacher questions, the “Araby” literature - circle lesson allowed them to raise their own puzzles and co-construct answers through interaction. After discussion, groups posed such questions as:

- 1) Why do we create romantic illusions even when reality is dull?
- 2) Does the boy really love the girl, or just the idea of being in love?
- 3) What does the uncle's late arrival tell us about how adults ignore kids' feelings?
- 4) Why does the boy's dream break so suddenly at the bazaar?
- 5) Is the boy's final anger a sign of growing up or losing innocence?
- 6) How would the story change if the boy actually bought a gift? (Student Comments)

A close analysis reveals that these questions transcend surface plot. Questions 1 and 2 reflect a universal psychological tendency to romanticize reality and confuse love with illusion, exercising abstract induction and self-reflection. Questions 3 and 4 focused on social relations and narrative structure, demonstrate character understanding and causal awareness of plot twists, fostering causal reasoning and social criticism. Questions 5 and 6 which address the duality of growth and counterfactual narratives, exhibit dialectical thinking and higher-order creativity. Approaching the story from multiple dimensions such as plot, character, and metaphor, these questions successfully prompt students to construct meaning actively, hence embodying the core of literary critical thinking: from curiosity to deep, critical dialogue.

(4) Multiple Perspectives

Openness and diversity are vital to critical thinking which requires remaining receptive to new information and viewpoints based on one's knowledge and beliefs through multiple lenses, in order to obtain deeper understanding. What was striking about this lesson was how much interpretive variety came out of students simply reading, thinking, and talking things over. For instance, when asked, “If you were the narrator, what would you do after that trip to Araby?”, students gave individualized answers that were varied in stance and clearly layered:

S1: If I were the narrator, I would go home silently and never mention Araby again. I'd accept that my

dream was foolish, but I'd stop watching Mangan's sister. Instead, I'd focus on my studies and forget the vanity that made me suffer.

S2: If I were the narrator, I would still keep her image in my heart, but I will try to talk to her honestly next time. I'd save my own money and go to another bazaar alone, not for her, but to prove I can turn my feelings into real action, not empty wishes.

S3: I feel like writing down everything I felt that night in a diary. By recording my anger and shame, I will begin to understand how my own blindness and pride caused my pain. Then I will read it again to remind myself to see clearly.

S4: I would return the money to my uncle and tell him I wasted it. Then I will try to join a sports club or read more books. I'd stop daydreaming about love and start building a real life, because reality is harsh, but it teaches us better than fantasies.

Admittedly, the varied responses from students formed a comprehensive spectrum of critical thinking, which sequentially demonstrate typical stances including realism, romanticism, reflective thinking, and pragmatism. This outcome reflects the effectiveness of the literature circle activities where students no longer passively accepted textual conclusions but actively transformed the epiphany of "Araby" into personalized action choices. Responses varied widely, with each student taking a different tack. Student One opted for "silence and withdrawal", setting vanity aside to refocus on studies, a choice shaped by rationality and restraint after reading. The second student, however, governed by idealistic resilience, clung to the romantic impulse but resolved to transform it into concrete action, saving money for a future bazaar visit, from which we can see that Student Two attempted to turn fantasy into his concrete practice. The third turned inward, using a diary to dissect his shame which underscores the depth of a reflective personality, while the fourth took the most pragmatic route: he returned the money and immersed himself in sports and reading, in order to show that lived experience offers harsher but truer lessons than fantasy.

It's quite understood that these four responses, without hierarchy, together point to the core of critical thinking: students have moved beyond the simplistic judgment of "whether the narrator is pitiful", instead proposing reasoned follow-up choices based on their own experience and preferences. This reveals that they not only grasped Joyce's "epiphany" but also transformed it into an opportunity for self-construction, building a critical bridge between literary reading and lived reality. Diversity itself proves that students broke free from the shackles of standard answers and learned to position themselves carefully among multiple possibilities which are the ultimate goal of critical teaching---reading to think, thinking to educate.

(5) Capacity for Empathy

Empathy, an essential affective trait for critical thinkers, guides students toward justice rather than any selfish or dark purposes. In this lesson, students showed marked perspective-taking and emotional resonance. This was not superficial "I understand him," but empathy as the starting point for critical inquiry into the narrator's spiritual plight. Student 1's "silence and forgetting" stemmed from empathy

with the adolescent's shame, responding to vanity with restraint. Student 2's "keep feelings but change actions" empathized with love's preciousness, sublimating vague impulse into autonomous practice. Student 3's journal writing as self-dissection revealed deep empathy for the narrator's inner turmoil, attempting to reconstruct cognition linguistically by reliving that night's tremor. Student 4's returning the money and engaging in real life empathized with social oppression crushing personal illusions, responding pragmatically to literature's harsh truth. Though divergent, these four responses all began by entering the narrator's soul, to feel his blindness, longing, and disillusionment. Empathy did not trap the students in sentimentality but catalyzed rational examination. Only by standing in the narrator's shoes could they assess what "I" might do in his place. Therefore, this transformation from "understanding him" to "reflecting on the self" makes empathy the true engine of critical thinking, elevating literary reading from textual analysis to a spiritual exercise in self-knowledge and moral judgment.

3. Discussion: Factors Contributing to Critical Thinking Development

(1) The Reading Text

The reading text provides the topic and material for critical thinking activities. As noted earlier, "Araby" was selected because its narrative tension and thematic depth naturally align with the goals of critical thinking instruction. Joyce's use of first-person narration, in which a mature narrator recalls his childhood, creates a tension between adolescent perception and adult reflection. This dual consciousness compels students to reread the text, discern the narrator's emotions and judgments, and thus activate critical interpretation. Through tasks such as story summarization, character analysis, and making personal connections, students must formulate reasonable interpretations grounded in textual evidence while revising their existing assumptions through exposure to diverse perspectives. Ultimately, the story's epiphanic structure invites them to reflect on the universal conflict between ideal and reality, enabling a shift from textual comprehension to self-construction through collaborative inquiry.

(2) The Literature Circle Activities

The literature circle activities adopted in this lesson provided a framework for critical thinking. The four roles (story summarizer, character analyst, life connector, and free questioner) guided the process and direction of critical inquiry. To think critically, students first gathered and comprehended basic information by themselves, which highlights the importance of textual understanding through the summarizing task. Next, they learned to synthesize information, formulate and support arguments, characterizing figures in concise descriptions and articulating their views through oral explanation. Critical thinking also requires hypothetical decision-making within specific contexts, and the life connection task prompted students to examine their own choices accordingly. Finally, seeing the fact that critical thinking values questioning and problem-finding, the free-questioning segment invited inquiry-based exploration. As the teacher noted, the activity structure created space for deep thinking and autonomous expression.

The activity was designed not to find a definitive answer but to give students space for deeper thinking and to cultivate multi-perspective examination of issues. Through this process, their understanding of the story's conflicts and themes naturally surfaced, and their thinking and expressive abilities developed organically. (from teacher's reflective journal).

(3) The Teacher's Role

Besides reading materials and instructional activities, the teacher's role is crucial to cultivating students' critical thinking. In the lesson, the teacher contributed positively by establishing an open atmosphere, encouraging multiple perspectives and guiding reasoned discussion. Additionally, providing language support, offering alternative viewpoints, and prompting student reflection were also helpful to promote students' critical thinking: at the beginning of the class, the teacher endeavored to create an open and diverse classroom climate. For example, she refrained from imposing her own interpretations, actively invited students with differing views to speak, and guided them to recognize the value of reasonable pluralistic perspectives. Since literary appreciation is subjective, teachers should encourage thinking rather than require memorization of standard answers.

At the same time, students' ability to articulate and justify their views clearly was inseparable from the teacher's effective guidance. In many segments, the teacher used slides and oral instructions to emphasize "be prepared to present and explain your ideas", and after students expressed their views, she followed up by asking for reasons. In interviews, students confirmed that this approach helped develop the logical expression of their ideas.

The teacher prompted us to attend to wording, state a point first, and then give evidence, which made our reasoning more logical. (Student interview)

Last but not the least, the teacher offered timely assistance when needed—sometimes linguistic, sometimes conceptual, all in service of deepening students' discussion and understanding. Her guidance and support thus played a vital role in cultivating students' affective dispositions and thinking skills, while also preventing their reasoning from being constrained by limited language proficiency.

4. Conclusion

This case study set out to examine whether literature circle activities adapted for intermediate EFL learners could genuinely nurture critical thinking, and if so, through what mechanisms. The evidence from the "Araby" lesson suggests a clear affirmative answer.

The most tangible outcome was the shift in student participation. In regular lessons, these same students had remained largely silent, offering only fragmented responses when pressed. In the circle, however, they spoke at length, justified their readings with textual details, and, more strikingly, generated their own questions which moved beyond plot summary into matters of motive, symbolism, and personal relevance. The six questions they formulated reveal a level of intellectual curiosity that traditional recitation-driven classrooms rarely elicit. Equally telling was the range of responses to the hypothetical "what would you do" prompt: students did not converge on a single moral but instead

articulated four distinct stances: realist, romantic, reflective, and pragmatic; each grounded in their own life experience and each defended with reasoned justification. This diversity, the author of this paper would argue, is not a sign of indeterminacy but of genuine critical engagement.

Three factors made this possible. The text itself, with its dual perspective and epiphanic structure, rewarded rereading and invited multiple interpretations without yielding to any single reading. The activity design, stripped down to four core tasks, gave students a clear cognitive pathway while leaving ample room for idiosyncratic response. And the teacher, crucially, refrained from adjudicating correct answers; instead, she modelled how to ask for evidence, how to entertain counterarguments, and how to connect literary moments to lived dilemmas. Her role was less to instruct than to scaffold, and that scaffolding proved decisive for students whose linguistic reach often exceeded their grasp.

Of course, this was a single lesson with a small cohort, and the gains observed may not persist without sustained exposure. Nor can we assume that every literary text or every group of students would respond similarly. But the case does suggest that literature circle activities, when thoughtfully adapted, can bridge the gap between language teaching and intellectual formation, a gap that has long troubled Chinese EFL pedagogy. The real value of the exercise lies not in teaching students to read “Araby” correctly, but in teaching them to read themselves more honestly. That, we believe, is what critical thinking ultimately means in a literature classroom: not a set of transferable skills, but a disposition toward questioning that begins with the text and ends with the self. Whether that disposition will outlast the semester is another question; but that it emerged at all in a single class session is reason enough to take the approach seriously.

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