Erudita: Journal of English Language Teaching

Vol. 6, No. 1, 2026, 117–133
https://e-journal.uingusdur.ac.id/erudita
p-ISSN: 2809-2023; e-ISSN: 2809-2465

# Fostering tertiary EFL students' critical thinking through literary criticism: A students' perception study

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**ABSTRACT**

**Purpose** — This study investigates tertiary EFL students' perceptions of a modern literary criticism course and examines how engaging with critical theories influences their critical thinking dispositions.

**Design/methodology/approach** — This study adopted the mixed-method approach. The 47 participants of this study were students from the Literary Criticism of English study in a private university in Tangerang, Banten, Indonesia, consisting of 32 female students and 15 males.

**Findings** — The findings indicate that undergraduate students did not view the conceptual complexity of literary texts or their English proficiency as primary barriers to comprehension. They believe that digital reading fatigue and sustained deep reading posed the main challenges. Integrating multimodal materials, such as film adaptations alongside textual analysis, significantly enhanced textual engagement and comprehension. Crucially, students perceived that applying literary criticism to socially and personally relevant texts promoted higher-order thinking, self-reflection, and critical evaluation of life values.

**Originality/value** — This study offers empirical evidence on the pedagogical intersection between literary theory and critical thinking among Generation Z undergraduates in an Indonesian higher education context. This research also reveals the cognitive and multimodal learning preferences of modern digital natives, providing actionable insights for designing literature curricula that cultivate critical reasoning.

**ARTICLE INFO**

**Article history:**

Received: March 10, 2026
Revised: May 26, 2026
Accepted: May 27, 2026
Available online: May 31, 2026

**Keywords:**

Critical thinking; Literary criticism; Novel; Short story; Students' perception

**To cite this article:** Kinasih, P. R., & Sitorus, C. M. S. (2026). Fostering tertiary EFL students' critical thinking through literary criticism: A students' perception study. *Erudita: Journal of English Language Teaching, 6*(1), 117–133. https://doi.org/10.28918/erudita.v6i1.14670

**To link to this article:** https://e-journal.uingusdur.ac.id/erudita/article/view/14670

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## Introduction

Globally, cultivating critical thinking has long been recognized as a cornerstone of higher education (Bates et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025). Still, it is also becoming one of the most endangered. According to the American Philosophical Association, critical thinking is the purposeful, self-controllable judgment that leads to interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and

inference, along with an explanation of the conceptual, methodological, criteriological, evidential, or contextual factors that support that judgment (Golden, 2023). Yet, we must face the harsh reality that the Generation Z students we are teaching today grew up in a world where algorithms constantly encourage them to click, scroll, and swipe at a rapid pace, negatively affecting their concentration (Mancall-Bitel, 2019). Forbes reported that only 34% of the 5,700+ Millennial and Gen Z respondents said they think clearly, deeply, and productively for the majority of their thinking time, demonstrating the phenomenon of a significant "thinking gap" (Perna, 2022). Not surprisingly, over the past several years, researchers have seen a decline in people's ability to think deeply and reflectively (Yamashita et al., 2025; Zohar, 2023). Consequently, teachers have found it challenging to foster critical thinking.

Critical thinking abilities include the ability to solve problems or make decisions, analyze arguments, assess or evaluate, and draw conclusions using either deductive or inductive reasoning (Golden, 2023). Literary criticism is one of the learning methods that can be used to acquire this skill (Haixia, 2023). First, students who practice literary criticism are more conscious. Both students and teachers can transcend their limitations and broaden their intellectual horizons by trying various literary theories, which helps them recognize their prejudices and dispositions (Fletcher, 2022). Second, literary criticism can also be used to uncover the implicit beliefs and presumptions of others (North, 2017). The traditional concerns of literary criticism are stretched by modern theory, which examines how literature intersects with psychology, historical and social analysis, and issues of power, gender, race, and class. These explorations foster the development of critical thinking skills (Gillespie, 2024). In addition, students can become a voice for social change and work to build a more compassionate and inclusive world by having thoughtful discussions about how social issues are interconnected (Veliz & Farias, 2024).

Regarding this issue, research has been done to address the problem of teaching literary criticism today. First, some research has discussed the cognitive and linguistic barriers in student literary appreciation. Few opportunities are given to directly appreciate literary texts through reading and comprehending literary criticism published in various sources, and the teaching materials for literary criticism offered on campus primarily concentrate on theory (Erawan et al., 2024). Secondly, Soy et al. (2023) found that even though the majority of students have positive views of the literary text, many of them believe that learning challenges are caused by vocabulary and grammatical structures. Text difficulty, workload from other classes, and poor English language proficiency are the challenges faced by some learners. When teachers use the cultural model for literary analysis, students must go beyond the lexicon, grammar, pragmatics, and syntax. Even though the majority of students have nothing against studying literature, they are less likely to discuss the ideological, cultural, and historical aspects when they are still struggling with poor English language proficiency.

In addition, Febrianty and Hafiz (2023) studied the literary appreciation of the fifth-semester tertiary students in an Indonesian university. The results showed that the literary appreciation level of students is divided into different levels of achievement, namely the understanding level of literary works that have been achieved by all students and the enjoyment level of literary works achieved by almost all students. However, the understanding level and comprehension level have only been achieved by half of the students, as well as the implications level, which has been achieved only by a small number

of students. The respondents were influenced by factors of disturbed concentration, storylines that are considered complicated, and the inability to grasp the messages implied in literary works. In other words, the ability to interpret the meaning of literary works is influenced by the cognitive aspects of the respondents.

Another discussion that was shared was the issue of distractors. Autonomous or self-directed learning exists in literary criticism class because most learners are active and independent, as they can learn by themselves or with peers using a variety of learning resources (Soy et al., 2023). Also, Erawan et al. (2024) emphasized the value of digital literary criticism in adding color to the literary treasury instead of relying on physical books, despite fluctuations in the number of literary criticisms published online. However, even though a large number of students have good learning habits that can promote extensive reading of e-books or e-short stories, there are activities that they do not employ, such as having a specific learning schedule, task completion before class, and learning discussions between peers, which hinders understanding.

Overall, the earlier research mentioned above covered the topic of teaching literary criticism analysis to today's students as well as how cognitive difficulties and distractions affect their capacity to evaluate literary works. However, there has been little effort made to learn more about how literary criticism has helped students develop their critical thinking abilities. It is especially important in the context of higher education in Indonesia. The culture of memorization *(hafalan)* and passive information consumption—a conventional method where students are conditioned to search for a single "correct" answer decided by the instructor—has been a major part of the local curriculum (Mahayanti et al., 2025). It takes a whole different cognitive framework to go from reproducing basic summaries to carrying out active, free interpretive analysis. Students are suddenly required to deal with ambiguity, comprehend ideological power relations, and challenge various issues in texts in literary criticism classes. These are skills they may not have been prepared to use in secondary school (Mbato, 2019).

Therefore, by using a mixed-method approach that includes interviewing participants and using a questionnaire, this research aims to not only understand students' perspectives regarding the literary criticism class but also how this class has influenced their way of thinking. The researchers aim to answer the following questions:

1. What is the participants' perception of the literary criticism class?
2. Based on the participants' perception, to what extent has the literary criticism class shaped their critical thinking?

## Method

This study adopts the mixed-method approach. Dörnyei defines a mixed-method study as "the collection and the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study with some attempts to integrate the two approaches at one or more stages of the research process" (p.163). He also stated that the purposes of mixed methods are to gain a more comprehensive understanding, validate findings from different perspectives, and reach multiple audiences (Dörnyei, 2007). In other words, this method combines quantitative and qualitative designs. The writer adapted the questionnaire in this research from the one used

by Soy et al. (2023). The results of the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science). The purpose of using SPSS is practicality and efficiency.

The participants of this study are the students from the Literary Criticism of English study at Universitas Bunda Mulia. There are 47 students, consisting of 32 female students and 15 males. In the class, the students are assigned to read several literary texts such which are *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin, *Button Button* by Richard Matheson, *Girl* by Jamaica Kincaid, *Found Wanting* by Douglas Stuart, *A Cup of Tea* by Katherine Mansfield, and the novel entitled *Mean Girls*, a "novelization" of the 2004 movie, written by Micol Ostow. The literary texts in the questionnaire refer to the previously mentioned list of readings because it was given out following a ten-week literary course. It should be noted that when the participants are assigned to read the novel, the lecturers choose some chapters to be read and discussed in class. However, the participants are also allowed to watch Tina Fey's movie version of *Mean Girls.*

To strengthen the result of students' perception, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview, which was recorded using Zoom video recording. Bekele and Ago argued that the maximum and minimum number of interviews required for a single qualitative study are not set in stone. However, researchers must provide clear information about the proposed research participants, who these participants are to be interviewed, strategies for interviewing, and for how long (2022, p. 44). The researchers interviewed 6 students who are Indonesian students with ages ranging from 19 to 20 years old. Three participants are female, and three participants are male. They have the same educational level background, as they are all currently in the 4th semester of the English Department and are taking the Literary Criticism class. The interview was transcribed and then coded in relation to the questionnaire questions. The demographic data of the participants' details are presented in Table 1 (all names are pseudonyms):

**Table 1**

*Demographic Data of the Participants*

| Name | Gender | Age | Accumulative GPA |
|---|---|---|---|
| Oscar | Male | 19 | 3.85 |
| Mike | Male | 19 | 3.70 |
| Kilo | Male | 20 | 3.50 |
| Sierra | Female | 19 | 3.40 |
| Echo | Female | 19 | 3.86 |
| Alpha | Female | 19 | 3.80 |

## Findings and discussion

### *Participants' perception of the literary criticism class*

Both the descriptive and interview results are presented by the researchers in this section. The results of the students' perceptions of the level of difficulty and complexity of the chosen literary texts are shown below.

**Table 2**

*Results on Students' Perception of the Literary Texts' Difficulty*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Strongly disagree | 12 | 25.5 | 25.5 | 25.5 |
| | Disagree | 28 | 59.6 | 59.6 | 85.1 |
| | Agree | 6 | 12.8 | 12.8 | 97.9 |
| | Strongly agree | 1 | 2.1 | 2.1 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

According to Table 2, 59.6% of participants disagree that the chosen literary texts are challenging and complex, while 25.5% of participants strongly disagree. Therefore, even though 12.8% and 2.1% of participants agree that the chosen literary texts in Literary Criticism is difficult, most participants believe that the text is still fine and too complex. In addition, it is evident from the interview with one of the interviewees, Kilo, that while the literary texts are not difficult, he is not used to reading lengthy texts before taking literary criticism classes.

> "It is not that complicated, although sometimes it took a while to really digest the text due to its academic vocabulary. I guess I am just not accustomed to read long text. I need a while to read story for so many pages." (Kilo, Personal communication, November 24, 2025).

Based on the interview excerpt, Kilo shared that the literary texts in the class are not complicated. But before enrolling in the literary criticism course, he had never read a seven-page short story. Thus, the ability to read lengthy texts requires training. This finding is aligned with previous research proposed by Rahmatillah & Parlindungan (2023) about reading stamina, a term for someone's ability to keep reading in one sit, is believed to be affected by the reading formats. Reading stamina is considered a required skill for success in the 21st century. Stamina prevents "skimming fatigue," ensuring readers can extract credible, accurate, and reliable information.

**Table 3**

*Results on Students' Perception of the Literary Texts' Grammatical Structure*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Strongly disagree | 1 | 2.1 | 2.1 | 2.1 |
| | Disagree | 5 | 10.6 | 10.6 | 12.8 |
| | Agree | 32 | 68.1 | 68.1 | 80.9 |
| | Strongly agree | 9 | 19.1 | 19.1 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 3 outlines that 68.1% of participants agree and 19.1% strongly agree that the grammatical structure of the chosen literary works is comprehensible. Furthermore, 2.1% of participants strongly disagree, and 10.6% disagree that the grammatical structure of the literary texts is understandable.

**Table 4**

*Results on Students' Perception of the Length and Kind of Sentences in The Literary Texts*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Disagree | 5 | 10.6 | 10.6 | 10.6 |
| | Agree | 32 | 68.1 | 68.1 | 78.7 |
| | Strongly agree | 10 | 21.3 | 21.3 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 4 demonstrates that 21.3% of participants and 68.1% of participants agree that the length and type of sentences in the literary texts being studied are appropriate. The questionnaire's results are consistent with interviewee Mike's perception that it takes more work to understand the short story because of its old language.

> "For example, the short story "The Story of an Hour", the language used is not common and quite old. So, it is quite difficult to read and understand the story in the beginning. It is hard for me to understand, like it's too formal, but it's still okay. I just need time to read again and again." (Mike, Personal communication, November 24, 2025)

Based on the interview excerpt, the text's use of outdated English is the issue, not the sentences' length or complexity. Therefore, it takes time to carefully read a literary work and grasp its content to truly comprehend it. This finding is strengthened by the previous research, which stated that high-stakes secondary literature exams feature a dense concentration of historical words that are absent from modern spoken environments or popular teenage books, creating a structural "vocabulary barrier" (Korochkina & Rastle, 2024).

**Table 5**

*Results on Students' Perception of the Literary Texts' Length*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Strongly disagree | 2 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 4.3 |
| | Disagree | 7 | 14.9 | 14.9 | 19.1 |
| | Agree | 29 | 61.7 | 61.7 | 80.9 |
| | Strongly agree | 9 | 19.1 | 19.1 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The results in Table 5 then strengthen those in Table 3, with 61.3% of participants agreeing and 19.4% strongly agreeing that the length of the texts they learned in class is acceptable. It should be highlighted, nonetheless, that 14.9% of the participants disagree and 4.3% strongly disagree that the texts' length is acceptable. Additionally, according to Sierra's interview, one of the challenges of reading lengthy literary texts is the amount of time spent in front of a screen.

> "The only problem might just be coming from a personal problem, and that is when I have to stare at the screen for a long time to read the text, but since I have a lot of time to read it anyway, I can take it easy. So, all good for this concern." (Sierra, Personal communication, November 24, 2025).

The interview vignette depicts that one issue that arises from the extensive reading in literary criticism classes is the amount of time spent on the screen. Since today's students do not read printed texts, they must constantly read literary texts on their phones or tablets, which increases their screen time. This finding is linked to the previous research, which discussed that even though the tech-savvy generations—in this case, Gen Z—probably have positive views toward digital reading and would spend more time reading on a screen than in print (Rahmatillah & Parlindungan, 2023), digital reading is said to provide more distractions and frequently cause headaches and eyestrain. Apart from social media-related distractions, some students believed that embedded links in the texts could divert their attention from the original purpose of their reading (Hargreaves et al., 2022).

**Table 6**

*Results on Students' Perception of their English Level in Relation to the Literary Texts' Understanding*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Strongly disagree | 10 | 21.3 | 21.3 | 21.3 |
| | Disagree | 21 | 44.7 | 44.7 | 66.0 |
| | Agree | 11 | 23.4 | 23.4 | 89.4 |
| | Strongly agree | 5 | 10.6 | 10.6 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 6 outlines students' self-assessment regarding whether their English proficiency level impeded their comprehension of the selected literary texts. As illustrated in the data, a substantial majority of the participants expressed disagreement with this notion. Specifically, 44.7% disagreed and 21.3% strongly disagreed, culminating in a cumulative negative response of 66.0%. Conversely, only about one-third of the cohort perceived their linguistic competence as a barrier, with 23.4% agreeing and 10.6% strongly agreeing. These findings indicate that general English proficiency was not perceived as the primary obstacle to engaging with literary criticism by the majority of learners. Instead, it suggests that tertiary students feel sufficiently equipped linguistically to decode the target texts, shifting the pedagogical focus away from foundational language mechanics toward higher-order interpretive challenges, such as sustained deep reading and analytical conceptualization.

> "Reading stories here is not just read. We suppose to understand the layers, the problem behind it. I think the literary text is complicated because it has hidden meanings that require critical thinking and deeper understanding. Uhm… we know the story, we understand. No problem. But… uhm, like, *apa ya?* We have to think about the why. Like, for example, miss… we know that the character *kan* angry. Then, we have to think, why is he angry? What makes him explodes? If we just read, *ya*, we just see the character is angry, *ya udah.* I don't have to think further why-*nya itu lho*." (Echo, Personal communication, November 24, 2025).

The results displayed in Table 6 are strengthened by Echo's detailed opinion in the excerpt above. It has been shared above that the majority of participants disagree that the literary texts used in the class are difficult due to the participants' comprehension level. And, Echo reveals another issue, which is the need for a deeper comprehension of the text. Reading a text in a literary criticism class is different from just normal reading. One does not need to study deeper into the true reasons behind people's actions when reading texts for

recreational purposes. Therefore, the difficulty of the literary texts is not due to the participants' comprehension level.

**Table 7**

*Results on Students' Perception of How Interesting the Literary Texts Are*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Strongly disagree | 10 | 21.3 | 21.3 | 21.3 |
| | Disagree | 19 | 40.4 | 40.4 | 61.7 |
| | Agree | 11 | 23.4 | 23.4 | 85.1 |
| | Strongly agree | 7 | 14.9 | 14.9 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 7 highlights that the theme in the chosen literary text is interesting according to 61.7% of participants, with 25.5% strongly agreeing. However, 12.8% of participants do not think that the theme is interesting.

> "Actually Miss, when we read the [Button, Button] short story in class, I asked my group, would they do things like Norma? It was such a hard discussion, *heboh tuh miss*, because one of my group says maybe currently she will not push the button because she is fine at the moment. But, what if you are currently trapped in *pinjol* (Online loans)? Would you push the button to get $50,000, but someone you know would die? I mean, it's crazy but it happens right, Miss? Like in *Squid Games*? I think, people can do crazy things for money." (Alpha, Personal communication, November 24, 2025).

Informed in the interview excerpt, Alpha shared how interesting the group discussion in class was as they worked together on *Button Button* by Richard Matheson. According to Alpha's reflection in the aforementioned excerpt, reading Richard Matheson's *Button, Button* stimulates complex cognitive processing rather than just simple plot retention. The students move from passive reading to active textual reflexivity. They critically map the story's moral dilemma onto their own ethical frameworks. Furthermore, when the group contextualizes the narrative through the contemporary crises of *pinjol* (illegal online loans) and the systemic desperation shown in *Squid Game*, they are performing socio-political evaluation and structural analysis. This finding is aligned with the research from Sunengko et al. (2025), which explored how utilizing a critical lens in the classroom enables students to link deep textual analysis directly with "real-world concerns." Alpha and her group perform an ideological comprehension of the text instead of seeing Norma's decision as a self-centered act of greed. They understand how severe systemic financial entrapment blurs human nature, causing people to do "crazy things" to survive.

Thus, in response to the first research question, it can be summarized as follows: the participants generally disagree that the selected literary texts are difficult and complex. They also disagree that the literary texts used in class are difficult due to their limited English language proficiency. In addition, the participants agree that the grammatical structure of the selected literary works is comprehensible and that the length and types of sentences used in the texts are appropriate for their level. The researchers also point out that this outcome occurs because the participants were given short stories as literary texts. Even when the participants are assigned to read novels, the lecturer allows them to watch the movie adaptation. The researchers believed that by doing so, the students who are accustomed to the visual media and the language used in it can understand long literary texts.

Understandably, many teachers are worried that students who watch movies will not read the texts that have been assigned to them, as what has been argued by Perumal (2014). Yet, research by Azizi et al. (2023) shows that the movie helped students to understand the canonical texts better. The use of the movie version keeps the participants' reading interest in the selected chapters discussed in class.

In addition, the majority of participants read the chosen literary texts on tablets and phones, and the researchers observed that the interviewee brought up the subject of screen time. The problem of distraction on gadgets might also affect the students' perception of the work. In order to avoid this, the lecturer requested that the students read the short stories in class rather than just assign them as homework. Thus, even though Erawan et al. (2024) value digital literary criticism, this phenomenon must be noted by the lecturers and teachers of literary criticism.

### *Students' perceptions of how the literary criticism class shaped their critical thinking*

Another finding demonstrate the students' perceptions of the level of difficulty and complexity of the chosen literary texts. This deals with their perspectives on how the literary criticism EFL class foster their critical thinking. Emprical evidence is presented based on the results of descriptive and interviews in this section.

**Table 8**

*Results on Students' Perception of the Relation between the Literary Texts and the Background Knowledge*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Disagree | 8 | 17.0 | 17.0 | 17.0 |
| | Agree | 33 | 70.2 | 70.2 | 87.2 |
| | Strongly agree | 6 | 12.8 | 12.8 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

In addition to the previously mentioned findings, Table 8 reveals that 70.2% of participants agree, and 12.8% strongly agree, that the literary texts they learned are similar to or close to their background knowledge. These results leave 17% of the participants who disagree with the statement. The opinions of Alpha and Sierra, the interviewees, provide some insight into the questionnaire results shown in Table 8.

> "The most memorable lesson is when we discuss Mean Girls novel or movie. I can relate. Like, the influence of friends and who we spend time with is so strong. Then, Cady going through many changes that even her parents feel disappointed with her. You know, problem like this happen at school, at my school even in 2025. My friends talk about me behind my back, suddenly they don't hang out with me again for some reason. I cannot share things to my parents as well. So, it's like a flashback." (Alpha, Personal communication, November 24, 2025)

From the interview excerpt, Alpha shares that she has a similar background to Cady Heron, the main character in the novel *Mean Girls* by Micol Ostow. She explains that Cady Heron's issues are relatable to her because she has similar experiences. Alpha explains she finds it difficult to communicate with her parents, and her friends abandoned her without giving a reason. She can therefore identify with Cady's state of mind when the issue is discussed in class. This finding is aligned with the research from Ruing et al. (2025), which

highlights that "real-world connections" and "contextual awareness" are the advanced indicators of reading development. In addition, Halimah(2020) noted that students who comprehend the process of growing critical awareness are better able to draw the essential connections between their experiences, the information they have received from those experiences, and how to critically reflect on how they have used themselves in an action. In other words, Alpha's text-to-self connection is not small; it is a high-level cognitive integration of text and herself.

**Table 9**

*Results on Students' Perception of the Foreign Culture in the Literary Texts*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Disagree | 6 | 12.8 | 12.8 | 12.8 |
| | Agree | 36 | 76.6 | 76.6 | 89.4 |
| | Strongly agree | 5 | 10.6 | 10.6 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 9 presents the distribution of students' perceptions regarding the presence and role of foreign culture within the assigned literary texts. The quantitative data indicate an overwhelmingly affirmative consensus among the participants. A significant majority of 76.6% agreed that foreign cultural elements were prominent in the texts, with an additional 10.6% strongly agreeing, generating a cumulative agreement rate of 87.2%. In contrast, no respondents selected the "Strongly disagree" category, and only 12.8% expressed disagreement. This pronounced tendency demonstrates that the vast majority of learners were acutely aware of the cross-cultural dimensions embedded in their literary readings. From a pedagogical standpoint, this heightened cultural awareness suggests that the literary criticism course served as an effective conduit for intercultural exposure. Rather than encountering literature merely as linguistic input, students recognized these texts as culturally situated artifacts, which provides a rich conceptual foundation for developing critical cultural consciousness and interrogating diverse socio-historical worldviews.

> "Maybe the things that do not suit the culture is no-uniform school. So, compared to Mean Girls, the differences in clothes or fashion show their status at school. But in Indonesia, high schooler has to wear uniform to school, so it is a bit difficult to relate. Why clothes is so influential and has power at school from how the way you dress yourself. Or maybe because I am a guy? I mean, uhm, in campus… we are fine with T-shirts." (Oscar, Personal communication, November 24, 2025)

The interview data portray that Oscar's confusion as he recalled the *Mean Girls* discussion in class is evident in the excerpt above. In Indonesia, students must wear uniforms. So, it was hard for him to see how fashion becomes a statement. He is unable to comprehend the impact that our everyday choices in fashion and style have on a student's advantages and privileges at school. This finding is aligned with the research from Radzi & Aziz (2023), which stated that for ESL students at the secondary and tertiary levels, reading passages and short stories from textbooks can be challenging, particularly for learners with limited cultural literacy schemata. This is because the passages or short stories content does not fit into the learners' knowledge. Thus, proficiency in language and the ability to comprehend and interpret cultural elements incorporated into texts are prerequisites for reading comprehension (Muhria et al., 2025).

**Table 10**

*Results on Students' Perception of Conflicts in Literary Texts*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Disagree | 10 | 21.3 | 21.3 | 21.3 |
| | Agree | 32 | 68.1 | 68.1 | 89.4 |
| | Strongly agree | 5 | 10.6 | 10.6 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 10 depicts students' responses regarding their perception of conflicts depicted within the assigned literary texts. The survey results show a distinct positive skew, with a substantial majority affirming the prominence and relevance of these textual conflicts. More than two-thirds of the respondents (68.1%) indicated agreement, while 10.6% strongly agreed, resulting in a collective affirmative response of 78.7%. Notably, no participants chose the "Strongly disagree" option, and only 21.3% reported disagreement. These statistical distributions illustrate that the vast majority of students actively identified and engaged with the internal, interpersonal, or systemic conflicts embedded in the literary narratives. In the context of literary criticism, recognizing such narrative tensions is crucial; it demonstrates that learners did not read passively, but rather discerned underlying thematic struggles and power dynamics.

> "I think the short story Girl by Jamaica Kincaid is the most interesting one. It makes me think. The story reflects how there's so many "unspoken" or "invisible" rules for girls, that just beyond ridiculous, honestly, how relatable that is in real life. Like for me, Miss... I like gothic makeup, right? I use black eye shadow, pair it with glitter. But at the same time, I wear hijab. When I am in public places, some people stare at me, as if I must not highlight my eyes. My clothes are all modest. I don't do bad things. Then, the glitter could define my character?" (Sierra, Personal communication, November 24, 2025)

It is clear from the interview above why Sierra finds that the conflict in the literary texts resembles the conflict in life. Particularly, Jamaica Kincaid's short story Girl brings up the issue of the "unspoken" or "invisible" rules for girls. Sometimes she finds the rules absurd. Sierra also relates the problem to her encounter with a hijab-wearing woman. She says she applied glitter and makeup to her eyes. Even when she wears modest clothing and does nothing wrong, people still stare at her for her appearance. She questions how her entire identity could be defined by some glitter in her eyes. By doing so, Sierra demonstrates that engaging with literature serves as an active mechanism for self-reflexivity.

Di Martino (2023) stated that, first, self-reflexivity highlights how crucial it is to think about our reality. Lastly, self-reflexivity is a reflection on the effects of the oppressive and power structures in the context of female writers, as well as an evaluation of their perceptions. Sierra uses the "invisible rules" in the story to conduct a critical structural analysis of the gendered surveillance she encounters in her daily life. Not only that, when Sierra connects the oppressive, repetitive instructions in Kincaid's story, she is executing a complex social evaluation. She recognizes that the public "stares" are not merely random reactions, but are instead structural attempts to enforce rigid boundaries on female identity. Her question about whether small aesthetic choices like "glitter" can fully define her moral character is a deep example of inter-sectional criticism. From this, it is clear that Alpha and

Sierra's opinions indicate that the participants find the literary texts fascinating because the topics being discussed are relevant to them.

**Table 11**

*Results on Students' Perception of* the *Usefulness of Literary Texts for Living and Communicating*

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid percent | Cumulative percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | Disagree | 10 | 21.3 | 21.3 | 21.3 |
| | Agree | 28 | 59.6 | 59.6 | 80.9 |
| | Strongly agree | 9 | 19.1 | 19.1 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 47 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Table 11 proves that 19.1% of participants strongly agree and 59.6% of participants agree that the literary texts they have studied in class help them communicate or live in real life. It should be noted that 21,3% of participants disagree that literary texts are useful. Also, the elaboration from Alpha provided some insight into how the literary texts have helped her reflect.

> "It's not that we are going to discuss the short story with families, or friends when we hang out, Miss. But, you know, from The Story of an Hour, the woman to feel freedom at that time, still tied up by the social norms. She is happy when the husband is dead. I mean, what… I don't know about the situation back then, but today I can relate with women in toxic relationship, maybe. I feel pity to them, and I think, I am lucky not to be like her." (Alpha, Personal communication, November 24, 2025)

From the interview excerpt, Alpha mentioned that less likely that she will discuss the short stories with her friends or family when they meet together. But Alpha considers what kind of burden Louise Mallard might have to feel freed and happy when discovering her husband's passing. Alpha honestly confesses that she was clueless about the circumstances in the story; she now can be more empathetic with women who are trapped in toxic relationships. She felt lucky not to be trapped like Louise Mallard. A study from Meretoja (2021) stated that empathy is essentially relational and mediated by society, culture, and history. Our experiences and memories are always shaped by our socially, culturally, and historically constructed horizons. Therefore, other-oriented empathy cannot be entirely "selfless" in the sense that we must use our own life history and embodied memory to imagine the other's circumstances and point of view, a process mediated by cultural memorial forms. Thus, the fact that Alpha is able to be empathetic with women in a toxic relationship shows her ability to reflect socially, culturally, and historically.

> "I think I'll take the value from Mean Girls movie, I learn to not be scared by people's perception of me. We sometimes can be desperate to have someone's that is popular to like us and trying to hard not to be an outcast. It's also important being genuine than being fake just for people to accept us." (Echo, Personal communication, November 24, 2025)

The interview vignette demonstrates that Echo supports Alpha's viewpoint above by saying that she takes *Mean Girls*' value seriously and learns not to be afraid of what other people think of her. She points out that people may occasionally want to be liked and accepted by well-known individuals. But Echo also states that being genuine is more important than being fake to be accepted.

Therefore, to address the second research question, this study points out how students are provoked to think, reflect, and acquire life values by literary texts that are relevant to

them. These findings are strengthened by the research from Han et al. (2025) that when the lecturer adapts reading passages that align with individual learners' interests, it improves comprehension and engagement. To start with, they find the themes of the chosen literary texts interesting, consider the content similar to or closely related to their background knowledge, and agree that the foreign culture presented in the literary texts is understandable. Regarding this, the researchers want to highlight the importance of lecturers and teachers' sensitivity in selecting literary texts. Because the chosen short stories and novels that the participants read discussed everyday problems like romantic relationships, financial difficulties, greed, peer pressure at school, and social expectations for women, the students were able to connect the issues to their own lives. Therefore, it becomes essential for teachers to decide the type and content of the materials in class (Kinasih et al., 2023).

Further, the participants' answers showed connection with intersectionality; it is a theoretical framework that recognizes the complexity of individual identities and how factors such as gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and more interact with each other to shape individuals' lived experiences (MacDonald, 2023). Intersectionality enables us to understand how different forms of inequality (Lockwood-Moran, 2026) and discrimination are intertwined and how they can affect individuals simultaneously and in compounding ways (Lestari et al., 2025). For example, the short story *Girl* by Jamaica makes them think about the "unspoken" rules for girls; Matheson's *Button Button* makes them question humans' brutality and the danger of *pinjol (illegal online loans)*; Louise Mallard's stress brought up the issue of toxic relationship which suffocate women, and they even learned about the meaning of true self from *Mean Girls*. In addition, Alpha's association with Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* demonstrates how complex textual reflexivity and socio-analysis are triggered by literary criticism class. She develops ideological understanding when she moves from acknowledging her historical distance ("I don't know about the situation back then") to mapping Louise Mallard's domestic trapping onto modern-day "toxic relationships." She goes beyond a straightforward summary to explain the patriarchal "social norms" that regulate women's independence throughout history.

The discussion above is also aligned with the study from Gillespie (2024) which stated that as literature intersects with psychology, historical and social analysis, and issues of power, gender, race, and class, it fosters the development of critical thinking skills. And, from this, it can be seen how literary criticism can become a space for students to explore the possible multiple meanings of the literary works (Kinasih, 2020). Thus, as proposed in this research, a combination of reading and movie screening with a more direct learning activity, such as a lecture, post-discussions of the short stories, workshop, or writing activities, is effective at improving empathy and social cognition as discussed by Rezende & Shigaeff (2023).

In terms of practical usefulness, 59.6% of the participants agree, and a substantial number strongly agree that the literary texts studied in class are helpful for communication or daily life situations. However, it should be noted that 21.3% of the participants disagree that literary texts are useful, indicating that a smaller portion of learners do not perceive literary texts as beneficial for real-life purposes. This discussion is aligned with the statement from Nuri (as cited in Ayuretno & Kinasih, 2024) that literature can be a mirror for readers to understand what and how life is (Doecke, 2024).

## Conclusion

The present study highlights that most participants do not perceive the selected literary texts as excessively difficult or linguistically challenging. However, the participants' main challenges stem from prolonged digital reading, which may affect concentration and reading stamina, as well as the cognitive demands of literary criticism that require students to interpret underlying meanings. The study also demonstrates that literary criticism encourages students to connect literary themes with their personal experiences, social realities, and broader cultural issues. These processes indicate the development of critical thinking skills, including interpretation, analysis, reflection, and sociocultural evaluation. The findings further suggest that the careful selection of relevant literary texts, combined with supportive learning activities such as discussions, movie adaptations, and guided analysis, can enhance students' engagement and comprehension. Therefore, literary criticism should be viewed not merely as a means of studying literature but also as an effective pedagogical approach for fostering critical thinking, empathy, and social awareness among Generation Z learners in higher education.

This research suggests that students' engagement with literary texts may be influenced by their content schemata, particularly when the themes are closely related to their personal experiences and social realities. In addition, the findings indicate the potential value of exploring intersectionality in literary criticism classes, especially in relation to how students interpret issues of gender, power, and identity. Future studies could examine these aspects more systematically through qualitative interviews or comparative classroom designs.

## Declaration of the use of AI-assisted technologies

The authors declare that no AI-assisted technologies were used at any stage in the preparation of this article. The writers have also provided the AI Detector by ChatGPT Zero.

## Credit authorship contribution statement

Putri Rindu Kinasih: Writing – Paper writing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. Chesya Mapela Syalom Sitorus: Questionnaire distribution, Interview transcription, Paper editing.

## Funding statement

This work was carried out as part of a research grant program at Universitas Bunda Mulia, with support from the Department of Research and Community Service.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors affirm that neither their personal connections nor their financial interests could have an impact on the work discussed in this article.

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

Each participant in this study gave written informed consent, and participation was entirely voluntary.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge the research participants and colleagues who have been involved in this research.

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