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EXPLORING A LECTURER'S READER-RESPONSE STRATEGY TO FOSTER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING

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Abstract: Critical thinking is a vital 21st-century skill, yet many Indonesian students struggle to develop higher-order thinking abilities. This study investigates the use of the reader-response strategy to stimulate university students' critical thinking, particularly in areas such as interpretation, analysis, and evaluation. The study aims to examine how the lecturer implements the strategy, identify the challenges faced, and explore students' perceptions of its effectiveness. A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were gathered through non-participant observation, a semi-structured interview with a lecturer, and a questionnaire distributed to 24 students enrolled in an Introduction to Literature course. Thematic analysis was used for the observation and interview data, while exploratory data analysis was applied to the questionnaire responses. The findings revealed that the lecturer implemented various reader-response activities, such as personal reflection, written responses, interpretive freedom, and classroom discussion—encouraged students to analyze textual meaning, justify interpretations, and consider multiple perspectives. These are core aspects of critical thinking. However, some students remained passive or reluctant to express opinions. The lecturer addressed this by using scaffolding strategies and small-group discussions. Most students stated the strategy improved their text comprehension, confidence in sharing ideas, and class participation. Based on the findings, the study concludes that the reader-response strategy effectively supports the development of critical thinking in EFL literature classrooms when combined with appropriate instructional support.

Keywords: *Critical thinking; EFL; literature teaching; reader response; student engagement*

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is widely recognized as one of the competencies for 21st-century learners. It involves the ability to reflect, analyse information, evaluate arguments, and make reasoned decisions. In the context of higher education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, fostering students' critical thinking is essential for academic success and real-world problem solving. However, several studies (Moeljono & Lintangsari, 2021; Nurhayati & Erviana, 2024; Susanti & Hernawati, 2022) have consistently found that Indonesian university students tend to demonstrate only moderate levels of critical thinking, highlighting the urgent need for more effective and engaging instructional methods.

One potential platform for stimulating critical thinking is through literature learning. Literary texts challenge readers to engage with complex plots, subtle language, and layered meanings that

extend beyond literal understanding. Among the various instructional strategies in literature education, the reader-response approach has shown considerable potential. Grounded in Rosenblatt (1978) theory, this approach emphasizes the dynamic transaction between reader and text. According to Rosenblatt's (1978) reader-response theory, meaning is shaped through the reader's emotions, imagination, and personal experiences. Rather than seeking fixed meanings, reader-response invites learners to explore texts subjectively, fostering a sense of interpretive freedom and reflective inquiry.

The effectiveness of the reader-response approach has been supported by various studies. Qamar (2016) and Hassan et al. (2023) found that this strategy enhances students' critical analysis and reflective thinking. Similarly, Iskhak et al. (2020) and Boubekeur (2021) further observed improvements in student autonomy, interpretive skill, and motivation when students were encouraged to connect texts with their personal experiences. Likewise, Suarez & Diva (2022) highlighted its role in helping students developing critical thinking competencies such as defining, classifying, and drawing conclusions. Despite these promising outcomes, prior research is limited in several ways. Many studies emphasize theoretical implications or rely on experimental designs without exploring the practical realities faced by instructors. Moreover, there is limited insight into students' perceptions of these strategies and the challenges that might hinder their effectiveness, such as a lack of confidence, unfamiliarity with open-ended tasks, or insufficient scaffolding from instructors.

To address these gaps, this study focuses on how lecturers implement reader-response strategies in real EFL classroom settings, particularly at the university level in Indonesia. Particularly, this study aims to investigate the implementation of the reader-response strategy in a university literature class, specifically exploring: (1) how a lecturer uses the strategy to stimulate students' critical thinking, (2) the challenges encountered during implementation, and (3) students' perceptions of its impact. By examining both teacher practices and student responses, this study hopes to contribute practical insights into literature pedagogy in EFL contexts.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate how a lecturer implements a reader-response strategy to stimulate university students' critical thinking, the challenges encountered during implementation, and students' perceptions of the strategy. The respondents were one literature lecturer and 24 second-semester students from an Introduction to Literature class at a private university in Ciamis, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using three instruments: non-participant observation through classroom video recordings, a semi-structured interview with the lecturer, and a closed-ended questionnaire distributed via Google Forms was used to gather students' perceptions. The questionnaire items were adapted from established critical-thinking and reader-response frameworks and reviewed for content validity by two experts in EFL pedagogy.

The observation focused on how the lecturer applied reader-response activities, while the interview explored teaching challenges and strategies. The questionnaire, using a 5-point Likert scale, measured students' perceptions of the strategy's impact. Observation and interview data were analyzed thematically following Clarke & Braun (2017) and Creswell (2023), while questionnaire data were analyzed using frequency and percentage through exploratory data analysis. All findings were triangulated to ensure validity and provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategy's implementation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined how the reader-response strategy was implemented in an EFL literature classroom and how it supported students' critical thinking. Drawing on Rosenblatt's (1978) theory, the approach emphasized personal engagement with texts, allowing students to interpret literature through emotional, cultural, and experiential lenses. The findings suggest that the strategy fostered

critical thinking by encouraging students to analyze, evaluate, and justify their interpretations. Activities such as reflective writing, open-ended discussions, and text-to-self connections helped promote higher-order thinking.

However, the strategy's effectiveness depended on classroom dynamics and instructional support. While some students embraced the freedom to interpret, others needed guidance due to prior reliance on teacher-centred methods. The lecturer addressed these challenges through scaffolding and trust-building techniques that gradually encouraged independent thinking. The discussion below is organized around the three research questions

How does the lecturer implement the reader-response approach to stimulate students' critical thinking in the classroom?

Classroom observation showed that the lecturer implemented various reader-response activities to actively engage students in literary analysis and develop their critical thinking. These included expressing personal opinions, writing reflections, discussing open-ended interpretations, and connecting literary texts to personal or cultural experiences. For instance, at the beginning of the lesson, students were asked, "*What is your response, your opinion to the poem?*" and many expressed their emotional reactions, such as one student stating, "*I like this poem because I think it really touches my feelings...*" This type of activity encouraged students to make value-based judgments and emotional evaluations of the text. The lecturer also assigned written reflections following group discussions, instructing, "*Then, everyone write your own responses.*" This practice pushed students to not only interpret texts but also justify their ideas in writing, promoting analytical and evaluative skills.

In practice, this meant the lecturer frequently invited students to evaluate poems based on their own emotional reactions, asked them to justify their interpretations using textual evidence, and facilitated group discussions where multiple perspectives were explored. For example, during lessons on poems such as "*A Red, Red Rose,*" students were encouraged to relate the imagery and emotional tone to their personal experiences or generational values, such as contrasting romantic ideals across cultures or eras. This was evident when the lecturer prompted, "*Maybe expressions or words like this don't fit the strawberry generation,*" leading students to critically compare past and present views on romance. These tasks not only required comprehension but also encouraged students to analyze, evaluate, and defend their views, indicating higher-order thinking of Bloom's taxonomy. The lecturer also encouraged the exploration of figurative language, for instance, asking "*Do you know the meaning of that sentence?*", which led students to interpret hyperbolic expressions in the poem and infer symbolic meaning.

The approach created a student-centered environment where students were free to share their interpretations and take an active role in learning. The lecturer guided this process by asking open-ended questions such as "*Why red, red rose?*" or "*Do you think the language is easy to understand?*" These types of prompts stimulated discussion and required students to reflect on multiple viewpoints. Group discussions further encouraged students to compare ideas, explore different meanings, and justify their views, skills that support both critical thinking and effective communication. In one task, students were even asked to "*Find two other poems that contrast with this one,*" challenging them to analyze themes and propose alternative perspectives. These structured yet open-ended tasks supported independent learning and made students more confident in expressing their opinions. As noted by Iskhak et al. (2020), such reader-response practices promote engagement, deeper understanding, and reflective thinking. Similarly, Woodruff & Griffin (2017) found that students developed stronger critical reading skills when given space to interpret texts personally and collaboratively.

The Reader-Response strategy used by the lecturer supports individual interpretation and emotional engagement with literary texts. This teaching method is consistent with Rosenblatt's (1978) Reader-Response Theory, which argues that meaning is created through the dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. In the observed Introduction to Literature classes, the

lecturer encouraged students to express their personal reactions to poems and other literary works. For instance, the lecturer stated, "*I'm not going to give you a bad grade because you don't like the poem. For me, the important thing is how you express your feelings*". Such statements fostered a classroom atmosphere where interpretive freedom was respected and students felt safe to articulate their thoughts. One student responded to a poem by saying, "*I like this poem because I think it really touches my feeling*", illustrating that the reader-response strategy effectively promoted emotional connection and engagement with the text.

This study aligns with previous findings while offering new insights specific to Indonesian university students. The observations align with Hassan et al. (2023), who found that the reader-response approach significantly enhanced critical thinking among EFL learners. However, this study adds a unique perspective by highlighting how students at an Indonesian university connected literary texts with their personal lives, cultural identities, and contemporary social issues. For example, in discussing the relevance of a poem to modern youth, students made connections to the "*strawberry generation*", a term often used to describe today's more emotionally expressive and fragile youth. These culturally grounded discussions not only helped students relate to the text more deeply but also encouraged them to evaluate themes from multiple viewpoints, which is a key element of critical thinking.

This study found that emotional responses, when scaffolded appropriately, can contribute meaningfully to students' critical thinking. This is in contrary to Suarez & Diva (2022), who reported no significant link between emotional engagement and critical thinking competence. In contrast, the findings of this study suggest that emotions can play a constructive role in developing higher-order thinking, provided they are accompanied by instructional support such as reflective writing, open-ended questions, and evidence-based discussions. For example, students were asked, "*Why red, red rose?*" prompting them to explore figurative meaning and symbolism. They were also encouraged to critique poems based on their own interpretations, as in the comment, "*This poem is too much, I don't like it,*" which the lecturer validated as part of the reader-response process. These classroom practices helped students develop skills in interpretation, justification, and self-reflection, indicating critical and independent thinking.

What challenges does the lecturer face when implementing the reader-response approach in the classroom?

The implementation of the reader-response strategy in the EFL literature classroom presented several challenges for the lecturer, particularly in promoting student autonomy, active engagement, and interpretive freedom. These findings are based on the semi-structured interview conducted with the lecturer and thematically analyzed to capture key issues in instructional practice.

The lecturer faced several challenges in implementing the reader-response strategy, particularly in encouraging student autonomy and active participation. Students were often hesitant to express their personal opinions and tended to rely on the lecturer's guidance, showing a preference for passive learning. These findings conflict with the Roen & Karolides (2005) theory that the reader-response sees the teacher not as the main authority on the text but as a facilitator who encourages discussion. For example, the lecturer noted that students frequently waited for instruction rather than offering independent interpretations, which limited their engagement and critical reflection.

To address these issues, the lecturer implemented several adaptive strategies to foster a more supportive and interactive learning environment. These included providing issues or topics before class sessions, which allowed students to reflect and prepare their responses in advance. During lessons, small-group discussions and written response tasks were used to encourage students to explore personal interpretations without fear of being judged. The lecturer also provided guiding questions and expression models to help scaffold students' responses and gradually increase their confidence. These strategies proved effective in promoting engagement and reflective thinking.

As students became more comfortable, they began to share their perspective more openly and support their interpretations with textual evidence, which is an important part of the critical thinking skills (Paul & Elder, 2014).

These findings demonstrate that while the reader-response strategy can be challenging to implement in EFL settings, it can still be effective when supported by thoughtful instructional design. The lecturer's experience shows that many students, especially in Indonesian university classrooms, are used to traditional, teacher-centered approaches. They tend to wait for instructions rather than explore their own ideas. This often makes it difficult for them to engage with the open, interpretive nature of the reader-response method. The lecturer explained that students were generally good at listening but less confident in speaking or giving their opinions, which limited their ability to respond freely and personally to literature.

In the interview, the lecturer noted that students were not used to being asked for their personal views and were sometimes unsure how to respond without fear of making mistakes. This situation supports Rahimipour (2021) study, which found that EFL students often hesitate to participate unless they feel safe and supported. Therefore, building trust and creating a classroom environment that supports freedom of expression was essential. To do this, the lecturer gave students issues or prompts before class, allowing them time to think and prepare. This step helped reduce anxiety and gave students more confidence to join the discussion.

Moreover, the step-by-step is important in helping students develop confidence when learning through the reader response strategy; as Kunjanman & Aziz (2021) suggested that teachers should provide gradual guidance to help students become more independent in their responses. In this case, the lecturer applied this idea by offering expression models and guiding questions to help students begin their responses. Small group discussions and personal writing tasks were also used to encourage participation in a less intimidating setting. These scaffolding techniques allowed students to move slowly from guided activities to more independent ones. Over time, students became more willing to share their opinions and support their interpretations with evidence from the text.

What are the students' perceptions of using the reader response strategy to stimulate their critical thinking?

The students generally expressed positive perceptions toward the implementation of the reader-response strategy, particularly regarding its ability to stimulate critical thinking. The complete data tabulation is presented below to provide a comprehensive view of students' perceptions.

Table 1. Data Tabulation of the Closed-ended Questionnaire

No	Students' perceptions	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
1	The reader response strategy encouraged me to analyze texts beyond surface-level understanding	0% (0)	0% (0)	54.2% (13)	33.3% (8)	12.5% (3)	100% (24)
2	I felt motivated to share my interpretations during reader response activities	0% (0)	8.3% (2)	25% (6)	45.8% (11)	20.8% (5)	100% (24)
3	I needed more guidance to use the strategy effectively	8.3% (2)	4.2% (1)	16.7% (4)	50% (12)	20.8% (5)	100% (24)
4	The strategy helped me structure and justify my arguments using textual evidence	0% (0)	4.2% (1)	33.3% (8)	54.2% (13)	8.3% (2)	100% (24)
5	Sharing my emotions and views with classmates improved my	0% (0)	8.3% (2)	29.2% (7)	33.3% (8)	29.2% (7)	100% (24)

ability to critique and refine
interpretations

6	The reader response strategy sparked my interest in reading literature	0% (0)	4.2% (1)	29.2% (7)	45.8% (11)	20.8% (5)	100% (24)
7	The strategy helped me evaluate different perspectives or interpretations of a text	0% (0)	0% (0)	33.3% (8)	50% (12)	16.7% (4)	100% (24)
8	The strategy increased my engagement with texts through personal reflection	0% (0)	4.2% (1)	29.2% (7)	50% (12)	16.7% (4)	100% (24)
9	Group discussions using this strategy were occasionally unproductive	8.3% (2)	20.8% (5)	41.7% (10)	25% (6)	4.2% (1)	100% (24)
10	This strategy allows me to connect texts to my own life experiences	4.2% (1)	4.2% (1)	16.7% (4)	50% (12)	25% (6)	100% (24)

The results show that a significant number of students perceived the strategy as supporting critical thinking. As shown in the data from statement 1, 8 students (33.3%) agreed, and 3 students (12.5%) strongly agreed that the reader response strategy encouraged them to analyze the texts beyond surface-level understanding. While a majority, 13 students (54.2%) selected “neutral,” this still indicates that nearly half of the respondents actively recognized the strategy’s impact on deepening their analytical engagement. This aligns with Paul & Elder (2014) definition of critical thinking, which emphasizes the ability to analyze, evaluate, and construct arguments supported by evidence. According to their framework, the act of interpreting literature, making personal connections, and justifying interpretations using textual evidence reflects higher-order thinking, precisely what students reported experiencing in this study.

The perception that the strategy helped students justify arguments is also evident in statement 4, where 13 students (54.2%) agreed and 2 students (8.3%) strongly agreed that the strategy allowed them to structure and support their ideas using textual evidence. This means that students were not only expressing personal opinions, but also learning how to give reasons and examples to support their thoughts. This is an important part of critical thinking, especially in academic settings where students are expected to explain their ideas clearly and logically. Similarly, in statement 7, 12 students (50%) agreed, and 4 students (16.7%) strongly agreed that it helped them consider different perspectives or interpretations. This shows that the strategy also helped students become more open-minded and reflective. According to Paul and Elder (2014), critical thinkers are able to consider different perspectives and compare them before making their own conclusions.

The findings also align with Hassan et al. (2023), who demonstrated through pre- and post-test that the reader response strategy enhances critical thinking among EFL learners. Their research demonstrated that students made clear progress in skills such as analysis, interpretation, and logical reasoning after engaging in reader-response activities. Although the current study did not use pre-post-test measures, the students’ strong agreement with statements related to textual analysis, argument justification, and evaluating different viewpoints suggests a similar improvement in cognitive engagement. Many students reported that the strategy helped them think more deeply about texts, express and support their opinions with evidence, and consider multiple interpretations. These responses reflect important aspects of critical thinking and indicate that the reader-response strategy played a meaningful role in developing students’ higher-order thinking skills.

Moreover, students perceived the strategy as personally engaging. As shown in statement 10, 12 students (50%) agreed, and 6 students (25%) strongly agreed that the strategy helped them

to connect texts to their own life experiences. This kind of connection shows that students were not only reading to understand the surface meaning of the text, but also relating it to their personal feelings, memories, and real-life situations. Similarly, in statement 8, 12 students (50%) agreed, and 4 students (16.7%) strongly agreed that it increased their engagement through personal reflection. This suggests that the strategy encouraged students to think more deeply about how the themes and messages in the text related to their own beliefs, values, or past experiences. These findings support Boubekeur (2021) conclusions, which emphasize that the reader response enhances personal connection, creativity, and critical engagement with texts.

In Statement 5, 8 students (33.3%) agreed and 7 students (29.2%) strongly agreed that sharing emotions and views with classmates improved their ability to critique and refine interpretations. This further supports the idea that collaborative, reflective dialogue strengthens students' analytical and interpretive skills. By expressing their own reactions and listening to their peers' perspectives, students were able to reflect more deeply on the texts and reconsider their initial interpretations. Such interaction encourages openness to multiple viewpoints and helps build a more nuanced understanding of literature.

However, some students noted challenges. In Statement 3, 12 students (50%) agreed and 5 (20.8%) strongly agreed that they needed more guidance to use the strategy effectively. This indicates that while the reader-response approach encourages independent thinking, it still requires proper scaffolding from the teacher, especially for students who may be unfamiliar with reflective or interpretive tasks. Additionally, in Statement 9, 6 students (25%) agreed and 1 (4.2%) strongly agreed that group discussions were occasionally unproductive. These responses point to the need for better facilitation and clearer structure during collaborative activities to ensure that discussions remain focused and inclusive.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation of the reader-response strategy in a university literature classroom and its effectiveness in stimulating students' critical thinking. The findings indicate that the strategy enabled students to make personal connections with the texts and develop critical thinking skills. Through activities such as written responses, class discussions, and reflective interpretation, students were encouraged to evaluate perspectives, justify their opinions with textual evidence, and develop higher-order thinking skills. These practices align with core dimensions of critical thinking such as analysis, evaluation, and interpretation. In addition, the lecturer's implementation demonstrated that with proper scaffolding, such as small-group discussions and guiding questions, students who were initially passive or hesitant became more engaged. Nevertheless, challenges such as students' unfamiliarity with open-ended interpretation and their reliance on the lecturer's instruction remain, indicating that reader-response strategies require sustained support and adaptation to learners' needs.

This research contributes to enrich the previous study by providing contextual evidence from an Indonesian EFL setting, showing that the reader-response strategy is both educationally effective and adaptable across cultural contexts. It advances the field by highlighting how literary instruction, when centred around students' perspectives, can bridge the gap between textual understanding and critical engagement. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to observe long-term development in students' critical thinking skills and explore how digital tools (e.g., blogs or e-journals) may support more inclusive and reflective response practices. Experimental studies could also examine comparative impacts of reader-response versus other interpretive approaches to literature on cognitive and affective learning outcomes.

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