



Akademik Eğitim ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi (AJESS Journal)

EFL Learners' Perceptions of Critical Thinking Development through the Study of Rip Van Winkle

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Article History

Received : 25/04/2026 ; Accepted : 26/09/2026 ; Published : 11/10/2026

Abstract:

Critical thinking has gained paramount importance in education. Thus, educators have long been interested in achieving critical thinking skills as an outcome of the learning process. Literature has been regarded as an effective tool in EFL classes, for it improves EFL learners' language skills and communicative competencies. It is also supposed that it enhances learners' critical thinking skills. This study investigates how studying the short story of Rip Van Winkle (1819) by Washington Irving might develop learners' critical thinking. The purpose of this study is to explore how reading and analyzing the narrative elements and the characters' evolution within this short story can enhance analytical abilities in a classroom environment that is based on group discussion, through conducting a survey in which 40 learners were asked questions to evaluate their critical thinking proficiency after studying Rip Van Winkle. After collecting and analyzing their responses, the results revealed that studying this short story helped learners develop a number of cognitive skills, such as analyzing, questioning, evaluating different perspectives and interpretations, and judging based on evidence. These skills are evidence of enhanced critical thinking.

Keywords: critical thinking; short story analysis; Rip Van Winkle; EFL literature teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has always been a very important tool to teach English as a foreign language (EFL), for it provides an authentic language and exposes learners to rich cultural experiences. In addition to developing the learners' linguistic competencies, literature can also develop their cognitive skills and competencies. Among these skills, critical thinking has gained major value in modern teaching, and it has become a significant goal in the learning process. It encourages learners to analyze data, question hypotheses, interpret different meanings, and form reasoned conclusions. In literature classes, learners are urged to go beyond the surface understanding of the literary texts; instead, they are asked to engage in a deeper analysis of the characters, themes, and issues discussed in literary works through which learners can practice important cognitive skills like analysis, inference, and evaluation.

Short stories are considered effective in the EFL context due to their appropriate length and rich narrative framework. One extensively studied story is Rip Van Winkle by Washington Irving, which introduces themes of change, responsibility, and time passage. It makes the reader wonder about the protagonist's behavior and the social and historical changes. These parts of the story make it a useful resource to motivate learners to think critically about the text itself and its broader implications.

Therefore, investigating learners' perceptions of how studying Rip Van Winkle fosters their critical thinking skills can give a valuable understanding of teaching literature in the EFL context.

1.1. Research Problem

Despite the paramount importance of literature in developing critical thinking skills, some challenges limit its role and effective integration in EFL classrooms. Although literature is extensively used in teaching EFL, its aim to foster critical thinking skills is not always successfully fulfilled. In many settings, literature courses focus only

on understanding the story rather than encouraging analysis and reflection. One more challenge is determining if learners themselves realize the development of this skill during the study of literary works. Learners may discuss analytical questions about the text, but they don't clearly understand how these discussions are contributing to their cognitive abilities. Thus, investigating learners' perception is very important to understand if studying Rip Van Winkle by Washington Irving can be considered a meaningful experience to support the enhancement of their critical thinking competencies. Accordingly, this study aims to answer the following question:

- To what extent does studying Rip Van Winkle contribute to the development of EFL learners' critical thinking skills?

1.2. Research Objectives

This study endeavors to examine the role of the short story Rip Van Winkle by Washington Irving in developing learners' critical thinking skills. Specifically, this study aims to examine the learners' views and perceptions on how interacting with the story may inspire them to think, analyze, and question the themes and characters presented in the story.

1.3. Research Methodology

After studying Washington Irving's short story Rip Van Winkle, participants – learners who have studied and analyzed the story – were questioned in a survey about their perception of how studying Rip Van Winkle may have catalyzed the growth of their critical thinking skills. They were asked a few questions, and their responses were recorded and will be displayed in this paper in pie charts. The questions were designed to induce learners' viewpoints on the extent to which engaging with this short story contributes to their cognitive skills, including interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and reflective thinking, using various teaching methods such as reading, discussion, and engagement with the text. The responses of the participants will be presented later with a thorough description and analysis for a better understanding of the role of the short story on their critical thinking skills.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical Thinking in EFL Literature Education

Using literature as a tool in EFL classes is no longer just about developing linguistic competencies. Relevant theories and studies see it as an educational mediating artifact to enhance critical thinking.

Fielding, as cited in Iser (1974), in his book *The Implied Reader*, argued that reading literature is a cognitive activity.

As the text invites him to imagine for himself what would be the right reaction to the given situation, he is bound to make the necessary adjustments consciously, and this process must in turn make him conscious of himself, of his own conduct, and of the customs and prejudices that condition it. This new awareness, Fielding hopes, will make the reader suddenly see himself as he really is, and so the role that he is to play in uncovering the hidden reality of the text will lead ultimately to his uncovering and correcting the hidden reality of himself. (p. 36)

Literature is considered a pedagogical tool to foster cognitive processes through the analysis of different literary components, such as the narrative technique, characters' development, symbolism, and thematic exploration.

The most effective literary technique for developing critical thinking is the use of the narrative viewpoint and perspective. The manner in which the story is told impacts how learners analyze the text. When they are engaged with different narrators (first-person, second-person...), they are encouraged to consider multiple perspectives, which will urge them to question the reliability of each narrator. This will help them to foster deeper critical thinking by reflecting on the motives, preconceptions, and limitations of each narrator (Kramsch, 2021).

The evolution of characters' motives, ideologies, and actions offers chances for learners to develop their critical thinking in EFL classrooms. Through understanding the character's development, learners will need to deal with complex ethical and moral dilemmas, analyze different perspectives, evaluate opposing opinions, and draw inferences (Paran & Robinson, 2016). Learners will question different assumptions, understand the intricacy of human behavior, and learn to predict their reactions.

Symbolism and thematic exploration are also powerful literary techniques to enhance critical thinking. Symbols in literary texts require a deeper understanding and a careful reading to go beyond the surface meaning and discover the hidden messages in the text. Engaging with thematic analysis helps learners foster deductive reasoning as they try to find the links between the text and the wider social, cultural, and religious context (Khatib et al., 2011).

2.2. Teaching Short Stories as a Tool for Cognitive Development

In *The Philosophy of the Short Story*, Matthews (1901) defined the short story as a unique literary genre centered on a single character and a single event. Short stories are considered one of the best choices that can be used in the EFL classrooms, for they are predominant and contemporary, and are written by authors whose attitude and language are accessible, relatable, and clear so that the reader can enjoy them (River, 1981).

Short stories are an excellent way to sharpen learners' critical thinking. They correspond to the real world, where learners are challenged to analyze, evaluate, and create to make sense of the text. The stories are short, so learners will quickly engage with them (Morsy et al., 2021). Barroll and Wright (1969) described the short story as an experience that is full of details and deep feelings. These details enter the readers' minds and affect their way

of thinking to decode it. “A story is an experience, full of subtle perception and complex judgment and emotion. It reaches us through our consciousness but usually penetrates below the level of consciousness” (p. 4).

Moreover, Short stories are related to cultural understanding. This competence is a paramount part of critical thinking techniques. Rosenblatt (1968) said the reader’s reactions are the natural manifestation not only of the story but also of the cultural setting. She argued that stories assimilate the reader into their cultural pattern. “Just as the young child and the adolescent acquire images of behavior and ways of thinking and feeling from the actions and lives of the people around them, so they may assimilate such images from the experience offered by books” (p. 187). As learners are exposed to such a large variety of cultural patterns, they will question their own cultural assumptions and see how people from different backgrounds deal with the same problems.

In addition, short stories allow readers to relate their lives to the experiences of the characters in the story, which evokes empathy as well as critical reflection. Rosenblatt (1994) in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* stated that when reading, the reader not only imagines and builds pictures of the characters, events, and places that the story describes, he also uses his memories and past experiences to make sense of the story. So, he will be emotionally engaged with the story, and he will be invited to experience a profound emotional response with the characters, fostering a deep sense of both empathy and compassion. In this context, the reader will challenge his own assumptions and broaden his understanding of the shared human experience.

2.3. Cognitive Engagement through Rip Van Winkle

Rip Van Winkle is a short story written by the American author Washington Irving in 1819. It describes the Dutch ethnic life in New York during the British colonization, the American independence, and the post-independence era. Irving’s story depicts the life of a lazy Dutch-American villager who wanders into the mountains to escape his nagging wife. After drinking a magical drink with mysterious ingredients, he falls into a deep sleep for twenty years and wakes up to find that he has missed the American Revolution and that his entire world has changed.

Across philosophy, Rip Van Winkle functions as an example to explore how the human mind remains engaged with past thoughts and perceptions. The story encourages the readers to think in a deeper way to have different versions of reality through different times and places to understand Rip’s changing world. The story promotes thinking through the following steps.

First, learners interpret the themes of the story. Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) highlighted that themes of the story are not given, but are interpreted by the readers. In Rip Van Winkle, plenty of themes are stated in the story. Readers can evaluate the social and economic change during the emergence of the industrial civilization (Liu & Sun, 2018). Fetterley (1978) said that female readers of the story search for sympathetic images of themselves in the character of Damme Ven Winkles. Rip’s wife was viewed as a victim through a feminist lens. Another theme that may be inferred by the readers is self-identity and cultural-identity crisis; some readers will deduce that the character of Rip represents the Dutch ethnicity that lost their identity and culture (Baga, 2020).

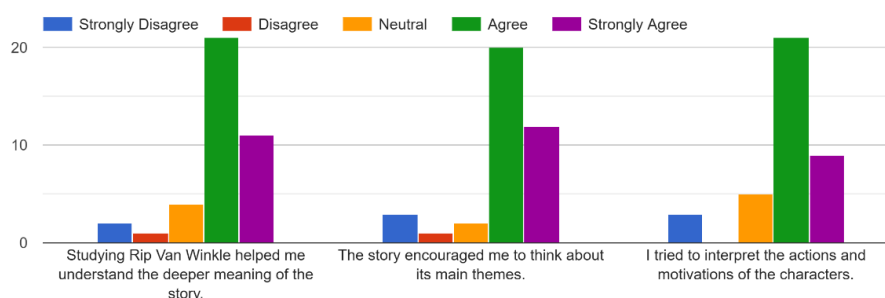
Moreover, learners analyze the characters’ behavior and transformation. Characters of the story responded to the personal, the social, and the historical changes in different ways. Before his deep sleep, readers can notice that Rip is kind, helpful, and gentle, but he is also lazy and irresponsible. He only escaped to avoid his annoying and nagging wife (Baga, 2020). After 20 years of sleep, which was considered a separation and transition, Rip was prepared for another role in society (Popescu, 2020). Rip only developed from being economically irresponsible to being politically irresponsible. That is why critical readers changed their view of his wife. They reframed her as a hard-working housewife, a caring mother, and a courageous woman for protesting against her husband’s carelessness (Baga, 2020). Looking closely at the characters’ motives, conflicts, and change is an effective way to develop genuine critical thinking and analysis.

Finally, learners evaluate the characters’ behaviors and decisions to form their personal judgments and interpretations. Readers process the story based on the analysis of the characters’ decisions, gender roles, marriage conflicts, and social change. Liu and Sun (2018) asserted that readers’ judgments move beyond the framework of the story to deepen their economic and political understanding of the historical period of the story. Rip can be seen as representing the whole group of Dutch American farmers. A figure like Brom Dutcher symbolizes disregarding traditions and identity, whereas Rip symbolizes a cultural preservationist (Liu & Sun, 2018). Therefore, readers will not judge Rip as a person, but they will interpret his decision as standing for broader cultural existence. As learners decode meanings through symbols and events, they are thinking critically.

3. Description and Analysis of the Questions of the Survey

Figure 1: Interpretation of the Story

1. the relationship between studying Rip Van Winkle and deep understanding and interpretation of the story.

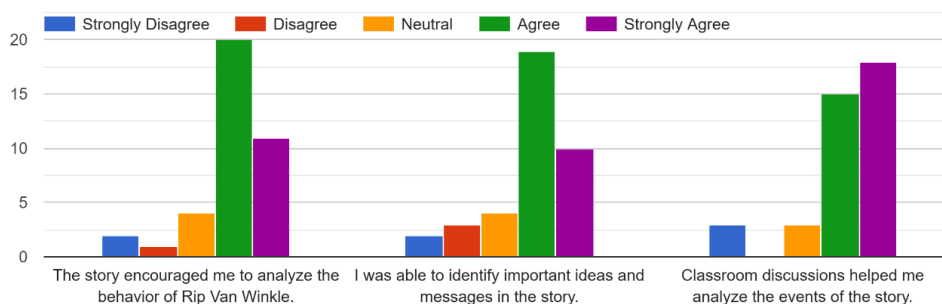


Source: Learners' Survey, Question 1

According to the data, learners appear to find a strong connection between studying Rip Van Winkle and their ability to understand and interpret the story. Specifically, over 20 respondents in each category agree that the study helped them build deeper meanings, while over 10 respondents per category strongly agree that reading this story encouraged them to think about its main themes and to interpret the actions and motivations of the characters. This trend proves the effectiveness of the story in developing analytical engagement and interpretative skills. The chart represents positive outcomes. It implies that learners understand the importance of looking beyond the surface level of the story and digging deeper into the characters' motivations and the discussed themes.

Figure 2: Analysis of the Narrative and Events

2. Studying "Rip Van Winkle" and Its Impact on Analyzing Narrative and Events

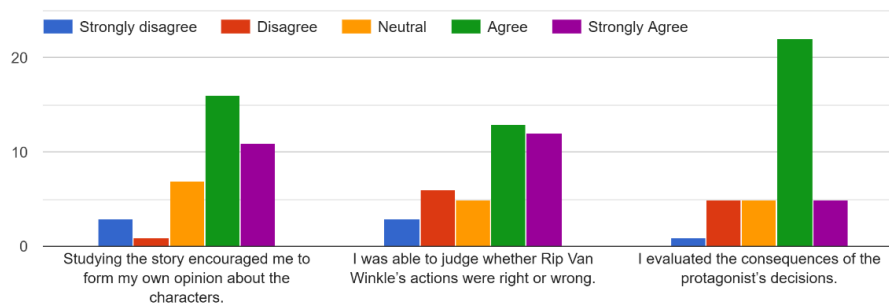


Source: Learners' Survey, Question 2

The above diagram shows that 20 learners agree that the story has encouraged them to analyze the behavior of Rip Van Winkle, and 11 learners strongly agree with that. In addition, 31 learners both agree and strongly agree that reading the story made them able to identify important ideas and messages in the story. Unlike the first two categories, the majority (18 learners) strongly agree that classroom discussions helped them analyze the events of the story. These results confirmed that the study and analysis of this story in the classroom improved learners' abilities to identify core messages and engage with them in collaborative literary analysis. This chart implies that learners displayed a positive engagement. They understand the value of both individual critical thinking and group discussion in analyzing the story.

Figure 3: Shaping Evaluations and Judgements

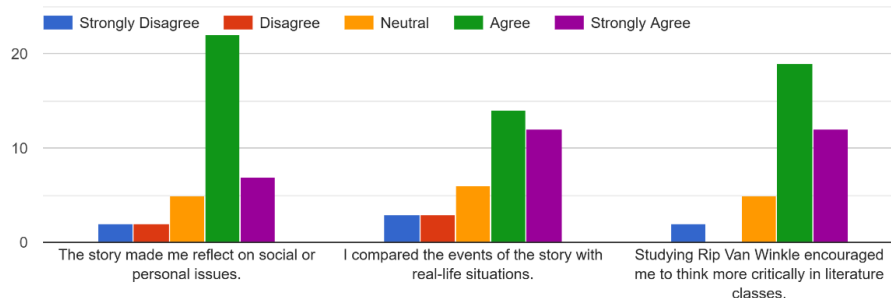
3. The Role of Studying "Rip Van Winkle" in Shaping Evaluations and Judgments

**Source:** Learners' Survey, Question 3

The chart illustrates the role of studying Rip Van Winkle in shaping evaluations and judgments, where 27 learners see that studying the story encouraged them to form their own opinion about the characters, and over 26 learners were able to judge whether Rip Van Winkle's actions were right or wrong. Finally, 27 learners could evaluate the consequences of the protagonist's decisions. These results show learners' increasing ability to assess characters' ethics and autonomy in literary judgment. The chart indicates that learners analyze and grasp the complexity of the protagonist's choices and the importance of forming evidence-based personal opinions and decisions.

Figure 4: Reflection and Critical Thinking

4. Studying "Rip Van Winkle" as a Means of Encouraging Reflection and Critical Thinking

**Source:** Learners' Survey, Question 4

According to this chart, learners appear to benefit from studying this story. 29 of them agree that this story made them reflect on social or personal issues, and 26 of the learners seem to compare the events of the story with their real-life situations. 31 of the learners see that studying Rip Van Winkle encouraged them to think more critically in literature classes. These results prove that the literary work serves as more than just an exercise. It bridges the gap between fiction and the real world. The study shows that learners understand the relevance of the story's themes to their own lives, and they learn how to think critically about their own perceptions and understanding in real life as well.

4. Discussion and Findings

The analysis of the learners' responses reveals that studying Rip Van Winkle has developed their analytical abilities and critical thinking skills through fostering different cognitive processes. Many students mentioned that this story made them think beyond the narrative, digging into hidden meaning and understanding deeper messages, which indicates the development of interpretive thinking, inferential skills, and engagement with implicit meaning.

A significant number of learners focused on the idea of analyzing the characters' behavior and trying to explain their actions. Learners had to question whether Rip is irresponsible or a victim, the justification of his actions, and the role of his wife and social environment to evaluate the characters' decisions, which develops learners' analytical skills, judgement, evaluation, and moral reasoning. Crucially, learners were not merely depicting the characters but critiquing them, which is the most important component of thinking critically.

Several students highlighted that the story can be seen from different angles and interpreted in different ways. Through their classroom discussions, learners notice different aspects of the story that they didn't pay attention to before. By discussing each other's perspectives, they learned to consider multiple opinions. In this stage, learners acquired cognitive flexibility by viewing events from the characters' perspective and comparing interpretations, moving toward independent thinking.

Based on the learners' responses, studying *Rip Van Winkle* helped them improve their textual analysis by exploring the themes discussed in the story through different narrative elements, such as Rip's long sleep, which symbolizes the political and social transformation of America, the mountains, which symbolize an escape from the change of time, and his wife, who represents the responsibilities that he wanted to escape. This indicates learners' development of evidence-based analysis and abstract thinking.

Learners seemed to develop many other skills related to critical thinking. Some responses show that they have developed a sort of contextual thinking by connecting the story to its historical context. Moreover, learners keep analyzing the consequences and causes of Rip's actions, which confirms their ability to reason logically. Through their responses, they related the story to their real-life issues (marriage and responsibility) and applied the acquired knowledge beyond the classroom, which means mastering reflective thinking.

The results of this study demonstrate that studying *Rip Van Winkle* contributed to the enhancement of critical thinking. Through this story, learners engaged in analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and reflection, which are considered the most important cognitive skills that are required to think critically.

The findings of this study do not just prove that the story of *Rip Van Winkle* fosters critical thinking, but also explains how this development occurs based on certain cognitive mechanisms that were predicted by previously existing theories. The learners' ability to discover hidden meanings highlights Iser's concept of (1974) implied reader. In addition, their questioning of Rip and his wife's behaviors and motives goes hand in hand with Paran and Robinson's (2016) emphasis on ethical analysis and with the feminist theory of Baga. The cognitive flexibility that they acquired through discussing this story in the classroom reflects Kramsch's (2021) narrative viewpoint theory and Rosenblatt's (1968) cultural self-questioning. Symbolic decoding matches with Khatib's (2011) deductive reasoning, and linking the story to their real-life situations confirms Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional reading and validates Wright's (1969) claim that the literary text reaches into the subconscious mind. Finally, this story cannot be considered as just a literary text. Based on these results, the story can be considered a pedagogical artifact that engages learners in analyzing, questioning, evaluating, and reflecting.

5. CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, learning objectives have moved beyond knowledge acquisition to delve into the human brain processes and how we think and process information and facts. Today, cognitive skills such as critical thinking have gained great attention, with it being put at the top of the hierarchy of educational and professional objectives. Teaching literature has been used as an effective tool to develop both linguistic competencies and critical thinking skills. The use of novels, poems, and short stories has shown a significant benefit in making readers and learners think and analyze. Teaching literature is about interpreting the literary text from different perspectives, thereby fostering critical thinking. This study was guided by the question: to what extent does studying *Rip Van Winkle* contribute to the development of EFL learners' critical thinking skills?

In light of the findings, the answer is that studying *Rip Van Winkle* highly contributes to the development of the learners' critical thinking. The findings show that the story developed their ability to interpret hidden meanings (Figure 1), analyze characters' behavior and identify core messages (Figure 2), form independent judgements and evaluate consequences (Figure 3), and reflect on social and personal issues while applying insights to real-life situations (Figure 4). Learners didn't just describe the narrative. They criticized it as well. They questioned the motives of the characters, analyzed different viewpoints through classroom discussions, decoded symbols, and connected the story to their own personal experiences. These results demonstrate that studying *Rip Van Winkle* engaged learners in deep cognitive processes, which are considered the core pillars of critical thinking. Thus, this story contributes greatly to the development of EFL learners' critical thinking.

Studying this story has been a good example of how literature develops critical thinking. Learners who studied this story have shown growth in different cognitive processes such as analyzing, evaluating, questioning, and judging. These processes constitute the essential scaffolding of deep critical thinking. Learners had different interpretations of this story. Each one of them viewed the story from their own perspectives and built upon it different understandings and different decisions; however, during the classroom discussion, each of them explained their viewpoints and interpretations, and they also questioned each other, which widened their views and sometimes even changed their perspectives. All of these steps that they had gone through while studying the story helped in developing their critical thinking.

Based on this study, teachers are encouraged to provide learners with short stories to encourage them to read and discuss what they read. They are invited to choose stories that trigger learners' curiosity and eagerness for understanding. In addition, they should choose the appropriate method for teaching the short story, such as Socratic circles or group discussions, because this encourages learners to share their perspectives with their peers and listen to others' perspectives, which will allow them to question, evaluate, and judge appropriately. These are crucial

steps to fostering critical thinking abilities. Using short stories like Rip Van Winkle is therefore a useful tool for teachers who wish to boost their learners' critical thinking abilities to survive in the 21st century.

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