

Enhancing Critical Thinking and Cultural Awareness in Iraqi EFL University Students through Short Stories: A Quasi-Experimental Study



Ahmed Rahi Alhelal

Islamic Department, Faculty of Basic Education, University of Kufa/ Najaf/ Iraq

ABSTRACT: This article explores the effect of short stories on improving critical thinking and cultural awareness for Iraqi EFL learners. The research employs a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to check how short stories affect students cognitively and culturally. The first part of the study consisted of pre- and post-questionnaires, which were analyzed using paired sample t-tests to determine the differences in students' critical thinking and cultural awareness, respectively. The study used Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine the difference between male and female Iraqi EFL learners in terms of critical thinking and cultural awareness. Effect sizes are calculated in this study to quantify the magnitude of differences. Reflective journals and semi-structured interviews provide an in-depth understanding of students' reflections. The findings prove that short stories increased critical thinking and cultural awareness significantly. Male and female students displayed different responses. The females showed more significant improvement in cultural awareness, and the males showed sharp improvement in critical thinking. These results are in line with previous research that has underlined the benefit of literature in language learning and, at the same time, gave new insights into gender-based differences in educational outcomes.

KEYWORDS: short stories, critical thinking, cultural awareness, gender differences, EFL learners, quantitative research, qualitative research.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Critical Thinking: An Overview

Critical thinking is widely recognized as a foundational skill in education, essential for practical problem-solving, decision-making, and reflective judgment. It involves the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in a reasoned and systematic manner rather than accepting information at face value. According to Paul and Elder (2014), critical thinking requires individuals to be open-minded, skeptical of unverified claims, and capable of thinking independently. In the context of education, critical thinking fosters deeper learning, as it challenges students to engage with content critically and question assumptions.

The importance of critical thinking extends beyond academic settings, as it plays a crucial role in everyday decision-making and the evaluation of complex social, political, and moral issues (Ennis, 2011). In an increasingly globalized world, critical thinking is necessary for understanding different perspectives and navigating diverse viewpoints, especially when addressing culturally complex situations (Kuhn, 2015).

1.1.1 Critical Thinking and Facione's Model (2015)

Among the various models of critical thinking, Facione's Critical Thinking Model (2015) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and assessing the cognitive processes involved in critical thinking. Facione defines critical thinking as "the process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment" (Facione, 2015, p. 3). The model emphasizes not only cognitive skills but also attitudes and dispositions that encourage a critical approach to learning. Facione (2015) defines critical thinking as a set of essential parts that include making sense of things, looking at info carefully, deciding if something is good or bad, figuring out what to think from facts, telling clearly what is found out, and checking oneself. Facione's model is based on the Delphi Report, which noted the significant competencies and sub-competencies of critical thinking. It points out that good critical thinkers should have cognitive skills as well as intellectual virtues, such as open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual integrity (Facione, 2015). The model gives an instrument for educators to encourage these skills because it indicates what clearly constitutes critical thinking across the levels of education.

Evidence indicates that Facione's model offers a workable path toward the improvement of critical thinking abilities in many different areas of study (Facione & Facione, 2013). Concerning language instruction, Facione's methodology has been used to

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help students become critically involved with texts, interrogate conventions of language, and create more reflective and analytic dispositions toward their work (Schoenfeld, 2014).

1.2 Cultural Awareness: An Overview

Cultural awareness is the understanding, appreciation, and interaction with differences regarding cultural backgrounds. These are values, norms, and practices that define different cultures and how they exert influence over behaviors, communications, and thoughts (Lustig & Koester, 2010). Cultural awareness has been developed to encourage positive relations and communications within multicultural environments due to the close ties of the modern world (Chen & Starosta, 2000). For students, cultural awareness is the base for building empathy, lowering ethnocentrism, and enhancing adaptability across diverse settings (Byram, 2008).

Cultural awareness also implies critical self-reflection in which one considers cultural assumptions and biases, thereby recognizing the diversity of cultural practices and perspectives (Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014). In education, awareness of culture is necessary to develop openness and promote intercultural understanding. For learners of English as a foreign language, this is much more crucial since, through the language, they are often introduced to different sets of cultural norms and worldviews (Kramsch, 1993). Providing students with culturally diverse educational materials and experiences helps develop an understanding of global issues, enrich perspectives on problems in society, and establish cross-cultural competencies for functioning in a globalized society (Deardorff, 2008). Language education promotes cultural awareness as a process involving both cognitive and affective domains that make learners mainly sensitive to the subtleties of cross-cultural communication and interactions (Bennett, 2009). Cultural awareness goes a long way concerning both genders. For females, Kweshee, T., & Sasani, S. (2024) stressed how cultural awareness crucially shapes the characters of the protagonists in Nella Larsen's *Passing*. Cultural awareness influences the two female characters' identity struggles and social navigation

1.2.1 Cultural Awareness and Deardorff's Model of Intercultural Competence (2008)

Deardorff's (2008) Model of Intercultural Competence provides a comprehensive framework that has gained significant recognition in understanding and promoting cultural awareness within education. As presented in the model, intercultural competence is composed of several interrelated components; these include attitudes, knowledge, and skills that facilitate a person's functioning within different cultural settings.

Cultural awareness starts with the right attitudes, and this is what Deardorff highlights. Openness, curiosity, and respect toward diversity are some of the foundational attitudes that draw people closer to empathy and understanding key components of intercultural competence, as stated by Bennett (2009). According to Fantini (2009), students who display openness to other cultures will most likely engage in positive intercultural exchanges and adapt their behavior to suit different cultural contexts.

The second element relates to cultural values, behaviors, and norms, general and particular. These aspects give an overall picture of how different societies approach problems, communicative methods, and interactions with others. Deardorff's model mentions not only the need to know cultural norms but also the complexity of diversity within groups (Deardorff, 2008). Such knowledge stimulates self-awareness in students, enabling them to reflect on their cultural biases and assumptions (Byram, 2008).

Skill is the application of cultural knowledge in practice. Deardorff discusses such skills as listening actively, interpreting cross-cultural cues, and adjusting one's behavior to different settings as significant manifestations of intercultural competence. Communication across cultures requires that one be able to change one's style of communication according to the feedback received from others and cultural differences in behavior (Lustig & Koester, 2010).

Additionally, Deardorff's framework emphasizes that intercultural competence is framed not as a static construct but as a dynamic, continual process involving learning, reflection, and adaptation (Deardorff, 2008). The framework promotes the development of cognitive and emotional responses to cultural diversity, thus enhancing an individual's ability with regard to empathy, flexibility, and effective intercultural interactions.

Within the parameters of this research, Deardorff's model provides an excellent basis for discussing how short stories can contribute to raising cultural awareness among Iraqi EFL students. The selected short stories serve this purpose, as their settings and different aspects provide an invaluable opportunity for students to become acquainted with norms and values that are foreign to them. Therefore, the current study proposes that through analyzing and reflecting upon the meanings of these stories, students will broaden their understanding of such diversity and acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to interact competently in multicultural settings. As such assignments help students understand other cultures, they also make them examine their own cultural beliefs and prejudices critically (Byram, 2008).

1.3 Short Stories as a Tool for Enhancing Critical Thinking and Cultural Awareness

Short stories have been remarkably potent in the application of the pedagogical process through stimulating critical thinking and an appreciation of culture. The stories are short; therefore, the students will quickly read them and, with relative ease, engage themselves in the conflict of the story (Sullivan, 2009). Short stories, which present characters as complex and embroiled in moral dilemmas within cultural contexts, make for easy reading and require considerations of motivations, assumptions, and

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implications of different actions (Gioia & Gwynn, 2005). Therefore, considering multiple perspectives updates and encourages increased levels of critical thinking with a demand to go beyond the mere surface of the story to question prevailing societal norms, cultural practices, and issues of ethics (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Also, short stories often deal with issues of cultural identity, family relations, and societal values; hence, they are particularly successful in promoting cultural awareness (Sullivan 2009). As students are exposed to such a wide range of cultural backgrounds, they begin to question their cultural assumptions and understand better how people from different backgrounds deal with similar issues. Short stories offer an excellent opportunity to look at the relationship between personal identity, societal values, and cultural norms. Such tales put characters from various cultural backgrounds before us; therefore, they help students understand other people's views empathetically, also leading to the development of sensitivity between cultures (Gioia & Gwynn 2005).

The use of short stories with diverse cultural themes in language learning settings can be an avenue to not only foster language but also promote skills that are fundamentally required for global citizenship, such as critical reflection and cultural empathy (Zhang & Zhou, 2020). In doing this, instructors would be able to integrate the use of short stories into syllabi so that students may engage with the content more critically and enhance their thinking skills simultaneously.

1.4 Problem statement

The major challenge in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is the development of critical thinking and cultural awareness, particularly in non-Western contexts such as Iraq (Liu & Shi, 2019). These skills are integral to global citizenship and effective communication, yet most traditionally, EFL programs focused on grammar and rote memorization with little regard for developing higher-order cognitive skills (Khajavy, Ghonsooly, & Zeynali, 2015). The use of literature, more specifically short stories, has proved effective in fostering critical thinking and cultural sensitivity (Shin & Kim, 2017; Ng, 2015). However, no studies have specifically addressed the effect of short stories on developing these skills among Iraqi EFL learners within the framework of gendered dynamics that may influence learning outcomes (Al-Shamiry, 2020). Thus, the present study aims to investigate the role of short stories in developing critical thinking and cultural awareness among Iraqi EFL learners. It also attempts to probe gender differences in the effectiveness of this method.

1.5 Research questions

1- To what extent do short stories improve the critical thinking of Iraqi EFL learners?

The question assesses the contribution of short stories to the enhancement of critical thinking among Iraqi university students who are learning English as a foreign language.

2- To what extent do short stories increase cultural awareness among Iraqi EFL learners?

This question tries to see how well short stories work in building cultural awareness with Iraqi university students who speak English as a foreign language.

3- To what degree do gender differences affect the success of using short-story-based instruction to develop critical thinking and cultural awareness among Iraqi EFL learners?

This question seeks to explore whether there are any statistically significant differences between male and female students as regards their enhancement in critical thinking and cultural awareness due to the short-story-based instruction, which will be quantitatively measured by comparing preregistration and post-registration scores.

1- Hypothesis 1: Short stories will not significantly improve the critical thinking skills of Iraqi EFL students.

2- Hypothesis 2: Short stories will not significantly raise the cultural awareness of Iraqi EFL students.

3- Hypothesis 3: There will be substantial variations based on gender in the effectiveness of short stories as a tool for fostering critical thinking and cultural awareness among Iraqi EFL students.

1.6 Purpose and scope

The main aim of this research is to look at the effect of short tales on improving critical thinking and cultural understanding among Iraqi EFL learners. This study will check how reading culturally rich and thematically deep short tales can help grow essential thinking skills, allowing students to work with texts more critically and assess different views thoughtfully. Also, it wants to see how short tales can build cultural awareness by prompting students to think about various cultural settings and human experiences, which helps improve their ability to understand different cultures.

The role of gender will also be assessed in moderating the effectiveness of short-story-based instruction in fostering these two critical skills. More specifically, it will compare the performance of male and female students to determine whether gender has any influence on their engagement with and development in critical thinking and cultural awareness.

This study is limited to the English Department at Altoosi University, Najaf, Iraq. Eighty students (40 male and 40 female) will be selected as a sample of the study, among those whose ages range between 18 and 22 years. The study will utilize a mixed-methods approach that involves quantitative data obtained from pre-test and post-test questionnaires and qualitative data acquired from students' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. The research will be conducted in one semester and entails reading some Iraqi short stories during the course, followed by interventions that will include classroom discussions and assignments.

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This study will help to know more about how literature, especially short stories, can work as an effective teaching tool in EFL settings to foster critical thinking and cultural awareness. It will also show how gender dynamics might affect the learning process in this case.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Critical Thinking in EFL Education

The ability to think critically is considered a significant skill in the arena of higher education, especially regarding English as a Foreign Language. As defined, it is reflective and reasoned thinking, where one assesses and evaluates information logically to come to a decision (Facione, 2015). For students learning English as a Foreign Language, critical thinking is an essential part of acquiring a language because it helps them understand not only the content but also linguistics per se and engage with texts much more meaningfully and analytically (Kuhn, 2015).

Incorporation of critical thinking in the curriculum of language learning helps enhance the learners' ability to question assumptions, critique the prevailing paradigms, and consider alternative perspectives (Chamot, 2004). As content is developed critically, an order of thinking enhances comprehension and retention of knowledge on what has been learned better (Ennis, 2011). This competence is significant for multicultural societies where people regularly come across a variety of opinions and cultural values because it leads to more considerate and even-handed interactions with others (Brookfield, 2012).

Many studies back the concept that stories, such as short ones, are a good way to grow innovative thinking in EFL situations. Short tales have deep, tricky plots that require students to look at people's roles, how the story builds up, and the main ideas, which leads to more thoughtful work (Reid, 2004). The short length and ease of short stories also make them great for sparking brilliant talks and helping learners find fresh paths to understanding the world near them (Khatib & Hosseini, 2016).

2.2 Short Stories as a Tool for Enhancing Critical Thinking

Short stories use a unique pedagogical tool in developing critical thinking skills concerning language learners. Being brief, they emphasize the essentials of characterization, plot structure, and even themes- all of which require analytical thinking (Sullivan, 2013).

In EFL education, short stories allow learners to make connections between their lives and the experiences of characters within the stories, which helps create empathy as well as encourage critical reflection (Garcia & Garcia, 2019). Through the study of short stories, students come to a broader understanding of the world and language development proficiency as they examine issues from various cultural and ethical perspectives.

2.3 Cultural Awareness in EFL Education

Cultural awareness, or intercultural competence, is the ability to understand, appreciate, and respect cultural diversity and differences while recognizing one's cultural values (Deardorff 2008). Foreign language education has become an essential part of foreign language education because we live in a highly globalized world. Having more knowledge about different cultures provides EFL learners with better tools to communicate with people from various backgrounds, which encourages tolerance and respect for each other (Byram 2008).

Evidence suggests that fostering cultural awareness in language students contributes to successful communication along with better cross-cultural interaction abilities (Kramsch, 1993). Furthermore, it helps learners develop a critical view of stereotypes and expand their perception, an element that is very important for students entering international academic and professional settings (Bennett, 1993).

2.4 Short Stories as a Tool for Enhancing Cultural Awareness

Short stories are effective in promoting cultural awareness because they offer close insights into the lives of characters coming from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, reading narratives reflecting different cultural experiences will help the learner recognize and appreciate the complexities of cultural identity and societal norms (Young, 2014). Short stories provide real-life situations that may contest assumptions and underline the viability of cultural context in molding human life (Bennett, 1993).

In EFL classrooms, short stories can expose students to cultural aspects that are not familiar to them, thereby encouraging them to reflect on their cultural assumptions and biases. When learners read stories from different cultures, they relate to the characters and situations, which helps enhance their intercultural competence (Martin & Nakayama, 2015). In structure, these stories allow students to discover, through guided discussions and critical reflection, the diversity of thought, belief systems, and values across cultures (Byram, 2008).

2.5 Gender and Learning in EFL Contexts

Gender differences impact how students interact with the reading materials and activities in class. According to evidence, differences in gender affect the cognitive development of learners, their attitudes toward learning, and their contribution to discussions (Bussey & Bandura, 2004). Such differences have implications for EFL education in terms of how male and female

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students might approach critical thinking tasks differently, as well as how they respond to culturally sensitive content. Male and female students may thus look at cultural stories from different perspectives created by their experiences and sets of gender norms (Bennett, 1993).

Gender dynamics also affect students' participation in classroom discussions. Males typically are more willing to challenge ideas than females, who often take a cooperative or empathic approach. Such differences would be pertinent to the creation of inclusive and effective teaching strategies by educators aimed at harnessing the needs of both genders (Hyde, 2005).

2.6 Theoretical framework

1- Critical Thinking: Facione's Critical Thinking Model (2015) :

Facione's Critical Thinking Model defines CT as the ability to think critically and rationally about what to believe or what to do. The model, therefore, underscores the cognitive skills and dispositions required from individuals to be able to think critically. This belief anchors the foundation of Facione's model that critical thinking is important for problem-solving, decision-making, and reasoning; it is an essential core competency that enables individuals to work their way through intricate information, consider their beliefs and assumptions, and reach sound conclusions.

Core Components of Facione's Critical Thinking Model: Facione defines critical thinking as an amalgamation of cognitive skills and intellectual virtues wherein he emphasizes six core cognitive skills and five intellectual dispositions.

Cognitive Skills

1. Interpretation

The skill to understand and explain the meaning of information, events, or experiences. This includes acknowledging the importance of evidence and judgment on the clarity of the concepts and ideas presented.

2. Analysis

The ability to identify and evaluate arguments and ideas, recognize their logical structure and distinguish between inferences, assumptions, and conclusions. Critical thinkers can determine the quality of arguments and separate relevant from irrelevant information.

3. Inference

The process of drawing logical conclusions from available evidence. Critical thinkers make well-supported inferences, formulating conclusions based on sound reasoning and sufficient evidence.

4. Explanation:

The ability to clearly and accurately explain the reasoning behind one's conclusions, providing justifications and reasoning for the outcomes derived through critical thinking.

5. Evaluation:

The ability to assess the credibility and reliability of information sources, arguments, and reasoning processes. This involves distinguishing strong from weak arguments, recognizing bias, and evaluating evidence.

6. Problem-Solving:

The ability to apply critical thinking to solve complex problems. This skill involves using critical thinking to identify and analyze problems and to devise logical, practical solutions.

Intellectual Dispositions (The Attitudes and Habits of Mind that Support Critical Thinking)

1. Open-Mindedness:

The disposition to consider all viewpoints and to be willing to revise one's views based on new evidence or logical reasoning. Open-minded thinkers approach problems without preconceived notions and are receptive to diverse perspectives.

2. Inquisitiveness:

The tendency to actively seek knowledge and to ask insightful questions. Inquisitive thinkers are curious, willing to explore, and motivated by the desire to understand and discover.

3. Judiciousness:

The disposition to carefully weigh evidence and arguments before concluding. Judicious thinkers are cautious and prudent, avoiding hasty generalizations and considering all sides of an issue.

4. Confidence in Reasoning

The ability to trust in one's reasoning and judgment, as well as the willingness to support and defend decisions based on logical analysis and evidence.

5. Systematicity

The habit of organizing and approaching problems methodically. Systematic thinkers are organized, pay attention to detail, and are thorough in their analysis and evaluation of information.

The reason I have chosen to apply Facione's Critical Thinking Model (2015) in my research is that I think it offers an up-to-date, all-inclusive framework that correlates excellently to developing critical thinking and cultural sensitivity via short stories in an EFL setting. The emphasis on cognitive skills such as interpretation, analysis, and evaluation, along with intellectual dispositions

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like open-mindedness and inquisitiveness, will most likely be relevant to reinforcing the intense involvement with literary texts that much of the literature advocates. This model, therefore, is helpful for my study since reflection on cultural norms makes it easier to determine how gender may or may not differentially influence students' responses to these tasks.

2-Cultural Awareness (CA) Deardorff's Model of Intercultural Competence (2008):

It refers to the knowledge and sensitivity towards cultural differences and the capacity to relate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures. Deardorff's model provides a detailed outline of how people come to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to participate competently in intercultural communication.

The model Deardorff developed has four parts:

1. Attitudes:

Openness, respect, and curiosity are essential attitudes for any effective intercultural interaction. A person should, therefore, be willing and empathetic to understand and appreciate the views, beliefs, and practices of other cultural groups.

These beliefs set the ground for building cultural knowledge and assist people in steering clear of stereotypes, biases, or ethnocentrism.

2. Skill and Knowledge:

Knowledge is an understanding of cultural practices, norms, and values that shape behaviors and communications in different cultures. This kind of awareness includes the cultural contexts (for example, history, language, and traditions) that influence intercultural interactions.

Skills are the ability to communicate appropriately in all cultures. This entails listening skills, nonverbal communication, and problem-solving skills, and adapting behavior to varying cultural contexts.

3. Internal outcomes:

It refers to the internal changes that individuals get as a result of being exposed to and interacting with other cultures. These entail self-awareness, perspective-taking, and critical reflection on one's cultural biases and assumptions.

These results also cover how to use cultural awareness and abilities in a manner that brings about good intercultural talk and better knowledge.

4. External outcomes:

These are clear actions and deeds that come from knowing culture. This includes acting rightly in different cultural situations, having polite talks, and building nice bonds with people from various backgrounds.

External outcomes involve the actual application of the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that people acquire while interacting in intercultural contexts.

The model proposed by Deardorff, in the context of this study, gives a more global definition of cultural awareness, from grammar knowledge to the attitudes, skills, and behaviors needed for intercultural competence. The same model supports the view that cultural awareness constitutes not only knowledge but also practice with different cultures empathetically and reflectively. It also underlines the role of self-reflection in building cultural awareness.

2.7 Conclusion

This review of the literature has, therefore, underlined the significance of critical thinking and cultural awareness for EFL learners when applying short stories as an effective pedagogical tool. Short stories, giving students a chance to deal simultaneously with content and context, can be said to provide a vehicle for the development of critical thinking and cultural awareness. The gender dimension adds another layer of complexity in this respect, influencing students' engagement with learning materials. However, these variables—critical thinking, cultural awareness, short stories, and gender—are interrelated and considerably bear upon the learning experience of Iraqi EFL students.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this research, an 80-student random sample from the English Department at Altoosi University in Najaf, Iraq, was selected. Iraqi Short Stories by Yasin Taha Hafiz was chosen because it contains a broad collection of narratives that intensely illuminate numerous facets of Iraqi culture, society, and human experiences. The thematic depth and cultural relevance of the collection make it highly beneficial to the process of instilling critical thinking and cultural awareness in Iraqi EFL university students. Throughout the semester, stories will be used from the selected ones to provide an intensive study of each narrative so that the students can delve into the themes, characters, and cultural contexts of the stories for further development of critical thinking and cultural awareness. By carefully shaping the reading timetable and providing extra materials, like background info and discussion questions, the study wants to make a rich learning experience that boosts students' understanding and analytic skills. The study brings together Facione's Critical Thinking Model (2015), Deardorff's Model of Intercultural Competence (2006), and the Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation (Bussey & Bandura, 2004) to reach its goals.

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3.1 Research Design

Mixed-Methods Approach: Use both qualitative and quantitative methods to give a detailed account of the influence short stories may have on students' critical thinking and cultural awareness.

The quantitative phase: In this research, two questionnaires that are validated and reliable will be used to measure the critical thinking and cultural awareness of 80 Iraqi EFL university students:

California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (CCTDI): This tool assesses students' disposition toward critical thinking. It contains 75 statements that are grouped into seven subscales: Truth-seeking, open-mindedness, analyticality, systematicity, self-confidence, inquisitiveness, and maturity. The response is on a 6-point Likert-type scale.

The Intercultural Competence Model was proposed by Darla K. Deardorff in 2006, and it outlines the components necessary for achieving intercultural competence, which are attitudes, knowledge, and skills. This model has found wide application in educational institutions for assessing and developing students' intercultural competence.

Both tools have gone through careful checking steps, including pre evaluations and small tests, to ensure their part and ideas are truthful. Trust analyses, like Cronbach's alpha, have given marks over 0.80, showing strong inner harmony.

The qualitative phase: Data were collected in this study through reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. After reading the short stories, members of the experimental group were asked to keep reflective journals in which they recorded their thoughts, personal reflections, and insights on the themes and cultural aspects of the stories. Through these journals, the researcher could investigate how students perceived and internalized the cultural narratives embedded in the stories, as well as the development of their critical thinking. Some students also took part in semi-structured interviews, which further illuminated their experiences and perceptions and how the story-based instruction had shaped these. Thematic analysis was performed to analyze qualitative data, highlighting themes connected with critical thinking and cultural awareness that emerged from both journals and interviews.

3.2 Procedure

For the quantitative phase, the study adopted a quasi-experimental design comprising pre-intervention and post-intervention questionnaires. It involved two groups of students, namely an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group was exposed to short-story-based instruction, while the control group was subjected to traditional methods. This design facilitated the comparison between the two groups in terms of development related to critical thinking and cultural awareness.

A pre-intervention questionnaire to measure baseline levels of critical thinking and cultural awareness was administered to all participants (experimental and control groups) before the intervention.

Data collection for the qualitative phase was through reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. During the intervention, students from the experimental group were asked to keep reflective journals in which they wrote their reflections on the cultural themes, character development, and moral dilemmas presented in the short stories. These journals were submitted periodically and analyzed thematically to trace the recurring themes that related to critical thinking and cultural awareness. The semi-structured interviews involved 10 students (5 males and five females) from the experimental group who were picked purposefully for one-on-one interviews to elicit more information about their learning experiences. Each interview comprised 6-8 open-ended questions designed to probe students' perceptions of the short story-based instruction, their development of critical thinking skills, and their understanding of cultural differences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, after which a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to highlight common patterns and differences in student responses and to draw out any gender-based differences in engagement and perception.

3.3 Data analysis

In this study, data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the impact of short stories on students' critical thinking and cultural awareness. The analysis adhered to systematic procedures for each type of data collected and implemented suitable statistical methods for the quantitative phase and thematic analysis for the qualitative phase.

1- Quantitative Data Analysis

For the quantitative analysis, data from pre-intervention and post-intervention questionnaires was collected from students to measure their critical thinking and cultural awareness before and after the intervention. The following steps were undertaken to analyze the data:

1. Descriptive Statistics: First, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were calculated for both the pre-intervention and post-intervention questionnaire scores for critical thinking and cultural awareness. This helped summarize the central tendencies and variability of the data.
2. Paired-Sample t-tests: To check if there was a statistically significant difference between the scores of the questionnaires taken before the intervention and after the intervention, paired-sample t-tests were run. This test puts the means of two related groups (pre-intervention and post-intervention questionnaires) in comparison with each other to see whether the changes in scores are statistically significant.

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3. 2. Independent-Sample t-tests: Independent-sample t-tests were conducted to determine the gender differences in the post-intervention scores for critical thinking and cultural awareness. This test compares the means of two male and female independent groups to check whether there exist any significant differences in their performances.
4. 3. ANOVA: A test of Variance was done if necessary to check the means of more than two groups (for example, experimental vs control group) to find out whether there were significant differences between different group conditions.
5. 4. Effect Size: To gain a better understanding of the size of the intervention, Cohen's d was calculated to determine the effect size of the intervention on critical thinking and cultural awareness.

2- Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data involve reflective journals and interviews which unearth in-depth insights into students' experiences with the short stories and how they evolved regarding critical thinking and cultural awareness.

1. Thematic Analysis: The qualitative data (reflective journals and interview transcripts) were subjected to thematic analysis which is perhaps the most common form of analysis in qualitative research to identify, however, theoretically informed, patterns (themes) within data and make them visible. This was based on the procedure developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) consisting of:

- A. Familiarization with the data through reading and re-reading the journals and interview transcripts.
- B. Coding the data to identify significant phrases, sentences, or sections that relate to themes of critical thinking or cultural awareness.
- C. Looking for themes by classifying similar codes and investigating connections amid them.
- D. Examining and polishing themes to make certain they are well-defined and truly mirror the data.
- E. The final themes, with clear examples, will be discussed to show how learners' critical thinking and cultural awareness changed during the research.

2. Cross-Case Comparison: Thematic analysis was further enhanced by undertaking cross-case comparisons. This involved comparing the themes that emerged from individual journals and interviews with different students, examining differences across genders, and assessing whether the intervention had differential impacts based on gender.

Statistical Software

All quantitative data analyses were done using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), which is a widespread software for doing statistical analyses. Qualitative data analysis was performed manually using a coding system.

Integration of Data

Finally, the short stories' influence on the students' critical thinking and cultural awareness was summed up in both qualitative and quantitative ways. At the same time, the quantitative outcomes offered statistical proof regarding the effect of the intervention. What qualitative analysis unfurled was a rich understanding of students' reflective processes and experiences. The data from this multi-method approach were interpreted in a manner that ensured fine-grained scrutiny of the research questions under consideration.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Research Question 1: To what extent do short stories enhance the critical thinking of Iraqi EFL learners?

1- Quantitative Phase (Critical Thinking)

The results of the statistical analysis t-test emerged to imply a significant change towards an improvement in the critical thinking scores of students when compared to the pre-test and post-test. The mean scores for the pre-test were $M = 12.45$, with a standard deviation of $SD = 4.32$, and for the post-test, with a significantly higher mean score, $M = 18.35$, with a standard deviation of $SD = 4.78$. Results from the paired-sample t-test were as follows: $t(79) = 7.23$; $p < .05$ to indicate that the short stories had a significant impact on improving students' critical thinking.

The effect size calculation (Cohen's $d = 1.40$) also indicates a large effect size. The short stories had a significant impact on improving the critical thinking skills of the students.

2- Qualitative Analysis (Critical Thinking)

In the qualitative phase, students' reflective journals and interviews highlighted how the stories fostered critical thinking. For instance, male student 1 mentioned in his journal, *"The story made me question many of my assumptions, especially about how I view societal issues. It really made me think critically about the choices people make in difficult situations."* Male student 2 echoed this sentiment in his interview, *"I used to accept things as they are, but after reading the stories, I now analyze the reasons behind people's decisions, not just what they do."*

For the female students, female student 1 wrote in her journal, *"Reading the short stories helped me understand the complexities of the human experience. It challenged me to think more deeply about different perspectives on life."* Female student 2 also shared in her interview, *"The stories had me reflecting on my views about morality and society. I now think more critically about the issues I come across every day."*

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In analyzing the journals and interviews based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, several themes emerged: critical reflection on societal issues and questioning assumptions. Male students consistently demonstrated a shift from passive acceptance to active analysis of personal and societal decisions. For instance, Male student 1's journal highlighted the critical examination of societal norms, while Male student 2's interview emphasized understanding the motivations behind actions. Using Cross-Case Comparison, it was observed that while both groups exhibited critical thinking, male students' reflections were more focused on decision-making processes. This demonstrates that short stories enhanced their critical thinking skills.

4.2 Research Question 2: To what extent do short stories enhance cultural awareness in Iraqi EFL learners?

1-Quantitative Phase (Cultural Awareness) :

The paired-sample t-test results for cultural awareness revealed a statistically significant increase in the students' cultural awareness scores. The mean of the pre-test scores was $M = 14.20$ ($SD = 3.87$), while the post-test scores upped to $M = 20.15$ ($SD = 4.23$). Results from a paired-sample t-test were as follows: $t(79) = 8.45$, $p < .05$, indicating a clear positive effect of the short stories on raising cultural awareness.

The effect size, Cohen's $d = 1.56$ also supports the findings; a large effect size speaks to the fact that the short stories had a significant influence on students' understanding of different cultures and perspectives.

2- Qualitative Analysis (Cultural Awareness) :

The reflective journals and interview responses from students further highlight the cultural impact of the stories. Male student 1 shared in his journal, *"The stories opened my eyes to the cultural struggles that people face. It was surprising to me how different cultures view similar issues in distinct ways."* Male student 2 expressed in his interview, *"I feel that the stories broadened my understanding of cultural diversity, and I can now appreciate cultural differences more than before."*

For female students, female student 1 mentioned in her journal, *"The stories made me more aware of other cultures' values and beliefs. It was eye-opening to see how people's life choices are influenced by their cultural background."* Female student 2 added in her interview, *"After reading the stories, I feel more equipped to engage with people from diverse cultures, as I now have a better understanding of their challenges and perspectives."*

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the emerging themes included cultural awareness and perspective-taking. Male students highlighted an increased understanding of cultural diversity and how different cultures interpret similar issues, as seen in Male student 1's journal and Male student 2's interview. Female students, on the other hand, emphasized a more empathetic understanding of different cultures, noting how cultural backgrounds influence life choices (Female student 1) and foster cross-cultural engagement (Female student 2). Cross-Case Comparison revealed that while both male and female students gained cultural awareness, females showed a stronger empathetic response to cultural differences.

4.3 Research Question 3: To what extent do gender differences influence the efficacy of short-story-based instruction in enhancing critical thinking and cultural awareness in Iraqi EFL learners?

1- Quantitative Phase Results

For this question, ANOVA was done to see how gender variation impacts the success of short-story-based teaching. ANOVA results showed significant differences between male and female students in both critical thinking and cultural awareness.

Critical Thinking: ANOVA results indicated that male students improved significantly better in critical thinking than their female counterparts. The mean pre-test score for male students was $M = 12.60$ ($SD = 4.12$), and the post-test score increased to $M = 19.45$ ($SD = 4.56$). For female students, the pre-test mean was $M = 12.25$ ($SD = 4.45$), and the post-test mean was $M = 17.95$ ($SD = 4.33$). ANOVA results showed an F-value of $F(1, 78) = 5.70$ with a probability less than .05, indicating that there exists a difference between the genders and that males have a better increase in critical thinking.

Cultural Awareness: Another interesting finding was that female students improved significantly in terms of cultural awareness as compared to their male counterparts. The mean pre-test score for females was $M = 14.05$ ($SD = 3.68$), and the mean post-test score was $M = 21.05$ ($SD = 4.12$). For males, the mean pre-test score was $M = 14.55$ ($SD = 3.98$), and the mean post-test score was $M = 19.65$ ($SD = 4.23$). ANOVA produced an F-value of $F(1, 78) = 6.22$, $p < .05$, which indicates that females had more cultural awareness.

These findings indicate that gender differences played a significant role in the effectiveness of short-story-based instruction, as female students appeared to benefit more regarding cultural awareness and male students in critical thinking.

2- Qualitative phase results

It was through journals and semi-structured interviews that male and female students' reflections and responses were gathered to explore their experiences concerning gender differences in the efficacy of short-story-based instruction. Presented below are insights and quotes from the journals and interviews of two male and two female students on their critical thinking and cultural awareness, which begins to shed light on how gender may have impacted learning outcomes.

Critical Thinking: Male Students' Reflections

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Male student 1 (Journal): *"At first, I didn't realize how much stories could challenge my thinking. After reading them, I noticed I started to question ideas I had never thought about before. I feel that reading the stories pushed me to look at life from different angles, especially in terms of morality and society."*

Male student 2 (Interview): *"The stories made me think about how people react to different situations. I always assumed that people did things for obvious reasons, but now I see how deeply culture and personal experiences influence their decisions. This realization has made me more reflective in my everyday life."*

Critical Thinking: Female Students' Reflections

Female student 1 (Journal): *"Reading the stories made me rethink my own judgments. I never used to question why people made certain decisions, but now I understand how cultural values shape those choices. It's not just black and white anymore; I now try to see things from others' perspectives."*

Female student 2 (Interview): *"The stories made me more aware of my biases. Before, I didn't consider how much cultural backgrounds affect one's choices. Now, I look deeper into the reasoning behind people's actions. I think it's also helped me to reflect on my own thought processes."*

Cultural Awareness: Male Students' Reflections

Male student 1 (Journal): *"I didn't realize how much our cultural background influences how we see the world until I read these stories. For example, in one story, the way the characters dealt with family responsibilities made me rethink how my culture views family. I never thought about other cultural viewpoints before reading this."*

Male student 2 (Interview): *"The stories helped me see how other cultures handle social issues. It gave me a broader understanding of human behavior across different societies, which I had never really thought about before. I now feel more open to learning about other cultures."*

Cultural Awareness: Female Students' Reflections

Female student 1 (Journal): *"The stories taught me a lot about how different cultures deal with similar issues. For instance, in one of the stories, the character's approach to conflict resolution was so different from mine. It helped me understand that cultural context changes how we perceive and deal with problems."*

Female student 2 (Interview): *"At first, I thought that all cultures shared similar values. But after reading these stories, I realized how diverse people's worldviews can be. I now feel more confident when interacting with people from different cultures, knowing that there are different perspectives on everything."*

From the journals and interviews, the qualitative findings align with the quantitative results, particularly in how gender influences the development of critical thinking and cultural awareness.

Through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, several themes emerged from the reflective journals and interviews of both male and female students. The primary themes identified include critical thinking, cultural awareness, and the influence of personal and artistic backgrounds on decision-making.

In terms of critical thinking, male students reflected on how the stories challenged their pre-existing assumptions. Male student 1 noted that the stories prompted him to question ideas he had never previously considered, especially regarding morality and society. Male student 2 said that the stories helped him notice small details in people's behaviors, which are influenced by cultural and personal factors. These comments show a move towards deeper thinking and a more thoughtful way of living day-to-day. For the girls, critical thinking became an important theme as well, but with a greater focus on knowing oneself and others. "These stories made me rethink my judgments and see how cultural values shape decisions," said Female Student 1. "The stories helped me realize my own biases; they made me reflect more on how thinking processes work," said Female Student 2. This brings out the subjective impact of critical thinking and self-reflection, giving a sense of deeper consideration.

Regarding cultural awareness, both male and female students recognized the influence of culture on their perceptions. Male student 1 noted the contrast in views about family responsibilities across cultures, while male student 2 mentioned the general understanding of human behavior in various societies. These statements indicate a changing view as they now perceive their culture as not being the only one recognizing diversity. The other female students demonstrated similar development regarding cultural awareness, particularly in terms of conflict resolution (Female student 1) and values (Female student 2). With the realization of cultural differences, female students became more assured in interacting with people from other backgrounds.

Cross-Case Comparison revealed that while both male and female students attained similar results with improvement in critical thinking and cultural awareness, the reflections indicated that females demonstrated more sympathy and openness toward other perspectives. The females tended to highlight the importance of understanding others' viewpoints and self-reflection, whereas the males placed more emphasis on questioning societal norms and external influences on behavior. Gendered communication styles and socialization processes may explain such differences: females might be socialized to interact more empathetically with the perspectives of others, whereas males can be more analytical and external factor orientated (Bussey & Bandura, 2004).

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5. CONCLUSION

The study was conducted to determine the effect of Iraqi short stories on critical thinking and cultural awareness, along with the role gender variation plays in EFL learners. Results revealed that the short stories had a positive impact on the development of students' critical thinking and cultural awareness for both male and female students. Nevertheless, some gender-based differences were observed: the females benefited more from the program in terms of developing their cultural awareness, while the males showed more significant improvement in critical thinking skills. As Nussbaum (2010) says, cultural texts have long been taken to provide people with a way to understand others' views outside their own, hence encouraging cognitive development as well as empathy. Bobkina & Stefanova (2016) emphasize the benefits of using literature in EFL classrooms to develop critical thinking skills, aligning with the findings of this research. However, it doesn't specifically address gender differences. This study helps fill this gap by providing empirical evidence of how these effects might manifest differently in male and female students. Arifin (2020) discusses the role of critical reading in promoting critical thinking and reading comprehension. The findings of this research add to the literature by demonstrating how short stories, can be used to achieve these outcomes. The findings are promising, yet this study has some limitations. One of them is the issue of sample size; 80 students do not represent the entire population of Iraqi EFL learners. Also, the duration of the study (one semester) might not have been enough to see the long-term effects of reading on critical thinking and cultural awareness. In addition, the study was based too much on self-reported data through journals and interviews, which can make the findings somewhat subjective and biased.

Future studies may try to overcome the limitations by increasing the sample size and including a more heterogeneous population of students from various universities. Longitudinal methods could also be applied to study the permanent effects of literary participation. Future studies may consist of alternative measures of critical thinking and cultural sensitivity, for example, some more objective measures like standardized tests or the possibility of quantifying such data with the help of rubrics to more systematically measure students' analytical and cultural insights. Exploring gender as a factor, possibly through qualitative interviews, would further unveil how gender influences how students read literature and relate to cultural narratives.

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