

Enhancing Iraqi EFL University Students' Critical Reading Skills in Analyzing Literary Texts: A Discourse Analysis Study

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigated the impact of critical reading strategies (CRSs) instruction on 176 Iraqi EFL university students' literary analysis skills over one academic year. Participants were divided into an experimental group (E.G.) receiving explicit strategy modeling and a control group (C.G.) with traditional instruction. Quantitative data from multiple researcher-designed tests indicated statistically significant enhancements across strategies, with outlining/summarizing, questioning, comparing and contrasting, contextualizing, and evaluating being the most beneficial. The qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions in the pre-and post-tests, as well as interviews, further supported these advancements by highlighting improved evaluation of perspectives and the establishment of meaning. In addition, the E.G. showed significant improvement in using ideational metafunctions in comparison to the C.G. Nevertheless, these difficulties in implementing specific metafunctions on their own suggested a need for more practice. The results, supported by the enhancement in ideational metafunctions, ensure the important role of critical reading in enabling students to analyze texts in literature courses. The study suggests that even with challenges such as vocabulary deficiencies and the limitations of online learning (among many), providing specific reading strategies could help students critically assess literary texts, necessitating additional research to enhance implementation across various curricula.

Keywords: Critical Reading Strategies, Literary Text Analysis, Systemic Functional Grammar, Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

Although texts may seem straightforward at first glance, delving into their true significance requires a more thorough approach, emphasizing the importance of employing advanced reading strategies as highlighted by Wallace (2003) and Pearson (2014). These strategies help readers explore further into the content, promoting self-reflection, careful examination, and

develop their perspectives. (Talebi & Marzban, 2015). This study builds upon this tradition by exploring the integration of critical reading instruction into the Iraqi EFL university curriculum, with a special focus on its impact on students' ability to analyze literary texts effectively.

Critical reading involves making connections between the text and one's knowledge and beliefs. Rather, it goes beyond just acquiring information to reading purposefully and relating new ideas to prior knowledge (Erdoğan, 2019). Critical reading requires analytical, deductive, interpretative, and evaluative skills to assess the credibility and meaning of texts (Olga et al., 2020). Also, teaching critical reading is increasingly important in universities as students need to analyze and make sense of texts, not just decode words and answer comprehension questions (Al Roomy, 2022). However, most university students struggle with critical reading of complex texts (Rahmi, 2021). Therefore, developing critical reading abilities helps students overcome reading problems, recognize rhetorical techniques, and evaluate authors' perceptions (Gönen, 2022).

In Iraqi universities, the English curriculum aims to enhance language proficiency and literary analysis skills, yet a gap exists between these objectives and students' analytical capabilities (Jassim, 2019). To address this, the study integrates critical reading instruction using Suacillo et al.'s (2016) strategies, as independent variables, and Halliday's (1978) systemic functional grammar (SFG) model, as a base analytical approach. The amalgamation of these frameworks offers a comprehensive approach to analyzing the participants' responses which stand for the dependent variables of the study.

Significantly, the study aims to determine these strategies that can enhance Iraqi EFL university students' skills in analyzing literary texts and which strategies are most successful. It also seeks to examine the effect of these strategies that may contribute to the identification of the metafunctional categories. Besides, by interviewing the E.G., the study investigates the

potential obstacles encountered by the participants when applying CRSs to analyze literary texts. This incorporation of frameworks, offering a systemic approach to textual analysis, can plausibly strengthen the analytical skills to help Iraqi students achieve curriculum goals more effectively. Furthermore, the work in question is predicted to inform pedagogical practices and curriculum development by identifying effective instructional strategies and addressing obstacles in critical reading instruction, thus enhancing English language education in Iraqi universities context.

2. Research Questions

Building on the gaps referred to above, the current study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Does the instruction of critical reading strategies enhance Iraqi EFL university students' critical reading skills in analyzing literary texts, and which strategies are most effective?
2. How do students' utilization of critical reading strategies impact their analysis of texts within the framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar?
3. What are the common obstacles that students may encounter while utilizing critical reading strategies in analyzing literary materials?

3. Literature Review

Recognizing reading as a critical competency, awareness is given to the potential negative impact on students' academic achievement resulting from their struggles with this skill (Widharyanto & Binawan, 2020). Further, it is a complex task, and hence, critical reading has emerged as a comprehension model, particularly in education which aims to enhance students' analytical skills and depth of understanding (Li & Wan, 2022). Simango (2023) emphasizes that critical reading is not merely reading slowly and focusing on content, instead, it involves reflecting on the material, questioning its validity, and deducing its meaning. Therefore, good readers regularly engage with the text and know the processes they use to understand it. Teachers, in this respect, help improve reading comprehension through deliberate methods to grasp the

author's message and bias. So, these strategies are thought to help readers adjust their approach based on the text, task needs, and situation (Li et al., 2022).

Critical reading involves actively engaging with texts to comprehend, analyze, and evaluate them (Wallace, 1992). In addition, it requires assessing the author's arguments, evaluating evidence, and developing one's perspectives (Talebi & Marzban, 2015). Moreover, critical reading means discovering inconsistencies and ambiguities in texts to understand the author's viewpoint (Chan, 2020). Therefore, proficient critical readers can interpret the writer's intent creatively and effectively by frequently analyzing texts using higher-order thinking (Ratanaruumkarn et al, 2023). They can also adapt to complex reading situations based on the context and their understanding (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2018). Hence, developing critical reading skills in the classroom promotes deeper engagement with course materials and active learning (Barlow, 2015). On the other hand, literary analysis involves critically examining literary devices, narrative elements, language use, and the author's perspective to interpret meaning (Gebeyehu, 2019). Likewise, rhetorical analysis instruction helps students critically evaluate persuasive techniques (Rapanta & Macagno, 2020). Furthermore, reading strategies like inferring themes and examining characters can support critical analysis of texts, resulting in multiple perspectives for validity, reliability, and credibility (Arifin, 2020). This leads to a fundamental lifelong skill that helps students engage with complex information and continue growing (Falloon, 2020).

Yule (2014, p.140) probes that discourse is "language beyond the sentence", and discourse analysis is primarily concerned with "the study of language in texts and conversations", focusing on how users of a language are able to recognize grammatical and ungrammatical sentences in their interactions. To serve the purpose of integrating CRSs with discourse analysis (D.A), the latter was emphasized by Javorčíková et al (2021) to function as a

foundational analytical approach, highlighting the importance of analyzing texts within their real-world contexts. Nevertheless, D.A. to van Dijk (1997) is not merely understood as a form of a language, meaning of words, or mental processes; yet, it is a collection of intricate systems and hierarchies of relationships and social behaviors. He believes that the correlation between discourse and society is more complex than the simple assumption of discourse as an activity or interaction. On this ground, D.A. investigates the principles of actions, contexts, and power relations.

Importantly, employing D.A. in reading instruction can be significantly enhanced through the lens of SFG. This linguistic framework equips researchers with a structured approach to effectively integrate D.A. into the area of reading pedagogy (Mohammed, 2020). It enables the examination of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings constructed in texts, facilitating analysis of how ideas are represented and power relations encoded by grammar, as argued by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). Wallace earlier (2003) underlined this view since it could develop skills for critically analyzing meanings and social relations encoded in texts, an idea echoed also by Feng (2013). This contextual emphasis of SFG further provides insights into language-context relationships valuable for critical reading (Rogers et al., 2005). In the same vein, Ivanov (2009) evoked that by guiding students to explore topics, content links, and author-reader relations, teachers emphasize the interactive nature of reading. Moreover, understanding contextual factors beyond semantics, as emphasized by Bonyadi (2019), is necessary for analyzing texts critically and comprehending implied meanings and the author's intentions.

The exploration of critical reading skills within diverse contexts, drawing insights from Iraqi EFL students and beyond, represents a significant pace in addressing a notable gap in the existing literature. That is, by focusing on the impact of targeted instruction in CRSs, this study aligns with the broader aim

of enhancing students' literary text analysis abilities, with an emphasis on understanding the practical implications of these strategies across various educational settings.

This examination sheds light on the complex nature of SFG and its impact on literary analysis. Hence, exploring the layers of meaning in texts helps reveal how the linguistic choices can shape themes, character development, and narrative structure (Myhill et al., 2018). Also, by thoroughly examining SFG, educators and researchers may uncover novel opportunities for enhancing critical reading skills that enable students to tackle the complexities of language with more certainty and better understanding (Zhang, 2018).

4. Methodology

The current work employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach which consisted of two phases. Firstly, a quantitative phase was piloted to analyze pre- and post-tests data by using Mann-Whitney and Wilcoxon tests to assess the influence of instructing CRSs (the independent variables) on students' proficiency when analyzing literary texts (the dependent variables). Secondly, a qualitative phase involved thematic analysis of the open-ended sequential tests responses and interviews to investigate the participants' utilization of the strategies in question. This infusion of quantitative and qualitative results through deductive and inductive thematic analysis could pave the way to a comprehensive examination of the impact of the reading strategy. It also provided an objective understanding of the results as well as subjective perspectives from the participants (Kandel, 2020). Also, it offered valuable implications for educational practice and curriculum development in terms of improving students' literary analysis skills as indicated by Polikoff, et al (2018).

4.1 Participants

This research was carried out in the department of English language, college of Arts, University of Basra, Iraq. A total of 176 students from 240

who were all 2nd stage college students and aging between 19-28 years old, participated in the study. The participants included 98 females (i.e. 55.6%) and 78 males, forming 44.3%, were selected based on their English language proficiency level, assessed through the Oxford placement test (OPT). The researcher, who was also the course instructor, aligned the academic curriculum to assimilate seven CRSs in the reading course. All participants were Iraqi residents of Basra, with Arabic as their native language, and had been studying English for approximately 14 years. By using stratified sampling, the participants were divided based on their OPT results to ensure minimal variation in their English proficiency levels, and to enhance the validity of the study.

4.2 Instruments

The instruments of the study were developed and validated to address the research questions. These instruments included an OPT, a pre-test, sequential post-tests, and a guide for the interviews. The OPT was conducted to homogeneously group the participants into E.G. and C.G. which served the purpose of comparison.

Moreover, the pre-test, which addressed the seven reading strategies, was used to evaluate the participants' critical reading ability before the intervention. It was based on four hierarchical levels proposed by Huijie (2010): structural analysis, rhetorical analysis, social relevance, and holistic evaluation. The original framework was modified by the researcher and approved by the jury. This revision focused on content and construction, specifically the clarity of the test and the relevance of the items to ensure appropriateness for the participants' English level and the study objectives. As for the test's reliability, on the other hand, it was piloted to some students who did not participate in the experiment to ensure consistency. In addition, following the nature of the aforementioned test, sequential post-tests were conducted to determine the enhancement of the participants' critical reading abilities after the intervention. All of these tests provided quantitative and

qualitative data on the participants' performance in the analysis of literary texts.

By the end of the intervention, semi-structured interviews were conducted with informed consent to have a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives on the practical application of the strategies. This added valuable qualitative data for the analysis. The interview guide, which served as the primary instrument for the interviews, was developed specifically for this study to ensure consistency across all interviews. To verify its effectiveness, the guide was informed by both a review of relevant literature on CRSs and consultation with field experts. The guide included questions designed to explore various aspects of the participants' experiences. These aspects included their backgrounds, familiarity with critical reading before the course, the perceived effectiveness of the strategies, and the challenges encountered during their implementation. The processing of the interviews involved the decision on the format, the creation of the situational settings, the preparation of the guide, and the triangulation of the interviews. During the interviewing phase, the researcher maintained a conversational tone while following the guide. This allowed the participants to express their experiences with the intervention flexibly.

Before completion, the guide was piloted with a group of students to maintain clarity and relevance. This process affirmed that the interview guide was comprehensive, allowing for detailed qualitative perceptions to be collected, which contributed to a deeper understanding of how these strategies impacted the participants' analytical skills in literary texts.

4.3 Procedures

The study began with obtaining permissions from the department, denary administration offices, and students, followed by a pilot study to test the methodological procedures as a standard practice to ensure the effectiveness of the research methods before its implementation. The OPT, in the form of a questionnaire, was revised to be consistent with the cultural and educational

background of Iraqi learners. For example, the original reference to a Western cultural icon like the Empire State Building was replaced with a locally specific Iraq equivalent (e.g. Al-Malwaia minaret in Samarra) and as well certain lifestyle habits, such as having dinner at 6 p.m. (a time not widely experienced in Iraqi society), were adjusted to better reflect what one might expect from an Iraqi (or at least Middle Eastern) individual. These revisions were needed to retain not only the familiarity of the content with the students' backgrounds but also to limit cultural bias that could have influenced the findings of the study. Following that, the results were utilized to homogeneously divide them into an E.G. (74 individuals) and a C.G. (102 individuals).

Next, a pre-test was employed to evaluate the participants' critical reading skills before the intervention. The E.G. participants were subject to explicit instructions on the seven CRSs over two 15-week semesters in a separate class. The intervention to instruct these strategies involved different types of interactive activities and practical applications of the reading strategies. This included some students reading the same text and taking on different roles, such as summarizing, questioning, etc. during literature circles. Moreover, text annotation was used where students read between the lines for key concepts to define different literary elements and to stay connected to the presented materials. In addition, peer review sessions also took place where the participants provided feedback on each other analysis based on the CRSs taught.

This training required several instructional methods, such as modelling strategies, which called the researcher to demonstrate specific reading techniques on how to outline and summarize a text, or how to preview it, etc. In addition, guided practice, where the participants worked in small groups to apply the modelled strategies to a different text. Besides, feedback for participants on how they could use the CRSs to analyze literary texts effectively.

However, the C.G. received only traditional instructions that covered chapters in their course book to minimize any potential transfer effects. Following the intervention period, both the E.G. and the C.G. undertook the post-tests to see the effect of each strategy on the former group's analytical skills. This process enabled the researcher to examine the impact of the strategies before and after the intervention.

4.4 Data Analysis

The researcher collected the data using a series of researcher-designed tests: a pre-test to determine the participants' knowledge of critical reading skills by analyzing literary texts before the intervention. Then, seven posttests to track the participants' progress in critical reading throughout the intervention. These tests were specifically designed to evaluate critical reading skills, which are closely linked to critical thinking, such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information. Descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney and Wilcoxon were implemented to check differences within and between groups throughout the study and to see to what extent the application of each strategy for critical reading affected participants' skill enhancement.

For the qualitative component, a deductive thematic analysis was employed to assess pre-test and post-test data, aligning themes with predetermined categories based on the SFG. Yet, an inductive thematic analysis approach was applied to focus group interviews with the E.G. (6-7) participants were interviewed each time). Worthy to note is that the combination of deductive and inductive thematic analyses provided a comprehensive examination of both data i.e. quantitative and qualitative. It further offered insights into the effect of CRSs on students' skills and viewpoints. More importantly, to maintain the credibility of the findings from the thematic analysis, checks on inter-rater reliability were conducted by the researcher and three professors in the field who helped assess it by independently coding a subset of the data.

5.1.1 Investigating the Normal Distribution of Data

Test of Normality of the Data

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test								
		Previewing	Contextualizing	Questioning	Reflecting	Outlining and	Evaluating	Comparing and
N		176	176	176	17	176	17	176
					6		6	
Norm	M	2.5	2.78	3.2	2.1	4.13	2.4	3.2
al		7		4	2		9	2
Para	S	1.0	1.31	1.5	0.9	1.62	1.1	1.4
meter	D	8		7	9		90	7
s ^{a,b}								
Most	Ab	.22	.20	.21	.20	.13	.22	.16
Extre	sol							
me	ute							
Differ	Po	.17	.20	.21	.15	.10	.18	.14
ences	siti							
	ve							
	Ne	-	-.17	-.13	-	-.13	-	-.16
	gat	.22			.20		.22	
	ive							
Test Statistic		.22	.20	.21	.20	.13	.22	.16
Asymp. Sig.		.00	.00 ^c	.00 ^c	.00	.00 ^c	.00	.00 ^c
(2-tailed)		^c			^c		^c	

Table 1 shows that none of the samples are normally distributed, as indicated by the "Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)" column. The p-values, all reported as "0.00", indicate significant deviation from a normal distribution. Therefore, the Mann-Whitney and Wilcoxon, as non-parametric tests, were utilized to compare the two independent groups and within paired data, respectively.

5.1.2 Findings Related to Research Question One

To answer RQ.1, Mann-Whitney and Wilcoxon tests were used. Besides, the descriptive statistics of the seven strategies for both groups were computed. Then, a case summary report of the data was provided.

5.1.2.1 Analysis of the First Strategy (Previewing)

Table 2 presents the results of the Mann-Whitney test comparing the E.G. and C.G. mean scores and the Wilcoxon test analyzing the difference in mean scores for the same group across both tests.

Table 2.

Analysis of the First Strategy (Previewing)

Study of the difference "Previewing"				
		Mean	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Experimental)	Pre-test	2.36	-	0.21
	Post-test	2.53	1.26	
	difference	0.17		
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Control)	Pre-test	2.55	-	0.35
	Post-test	2.58	0.47	
	difference	0.03		
Pre-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	2.36	-	0.48
	Control	2.55	0.71	
	difference	0.19		

Post-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	2.53	-	0.71
	Control	2.58	0.37	
	difference	0.05		

Table 2 shows that the Mann-Whitney test comparing the mean scores of both groups revealed no statistically significant differences, as all p-values were greater than 0.05, with similar mean values. In addition, the Wilcoxon test comparing the same group's pre-and post-test scores showed no significant difference, indicating that the Previewing strategy did not impact the students' results.

5.1.2.2 Analysis of the Second Strategy (Contextualizing)

Table 3 below shows the results of the statistical tests comparing the mean scores of the E.G. and the C.G., as well as the pre-and post-test scores within each group, to observe the impact of Contextualizing strategy.

Table 3.
Analysis of the Second Strategy (Contextualizing)

Study of the difference "Contextualizing"		Mean	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Experimental)	Pre-test	2	-	0
	Post-test	2.95	3.87	
	difference	0.95		
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Control)	Pre-test	2.53	-	0.35
	Post-test	2.66	0.93	
	difference	0.13		
Pre-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	2	-	0
	Control	2.53	3.35	
	difference	0.53		

Post-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	2.95	-	0.18
	Control	2.66	1.32	
	difference	-0.29		

Table 3 shows no statistically significant differences in pre-and post-test scores for the C.G. ($p > 0.05$), while the E.G. had a significant difference ($p < 0.05$). Although the post-test comparison between groups showed no significant difference, the pre-test comparison revealed a significant difference, indicating the strategy was effective for the E.G.

5.1.2.3 Analysis of the Third Strategy (Questioning)

Table 4 presents the results of the Mann-Whitney test, comparing the mean scores of the E.G. and C.G., and the Wilcoxon test, examining the difference in mean scores within the same group across both tests.

Table 4.
Analysis of the Third Strategy (Questioning)

Study of the difference "Questioning"				
		Mean	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Experimental)	Pre-test	2.03	-	0
	Post-test	4.11	6.47	
	difference	2.08		
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Control)	Pre-test	2.46	-	0.24
	Post-test	2.61	1.18	
	difference	0.15		
Pre-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	2.03	-	0
	Control	2.46	3.19	
	difference	0.43		

Post-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	4.11	-	0
	Control	2.61	5.92	
	difference	-1.5		

The results indicate a statistically significant difference in pre-and post-test scores for both groups, with an increase in post-test mean scores and a p-value less than 0.05. The E.G. showed significant improvement, while no such difference was observed in the C.G., suggesting the strategy was effective.

5.1.2.4 Analysis of the Fourth Strategy (Reflecting)

Table 5 displays the results of the Mann-Whitney test, which studies the difference between the mean scores of the E.G. and C.G., and the Wilcoxon test, which examines the difference in mean scores within the same group across both tests.

Table 5.

Analysis of the Fourth Strategy (Reflecting)

Study of the difference “Reflecting”		Mean	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Experimental)	Pre-test	1.81	-	0.15
	Post-test	2.01	1.44	
	difference	0.2		
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Control)	Pre-test	2.18	-	0.83
	Post-test	2.2	0.22	
	difference	0.02		
Pre-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	1.81	-	0
	Control	2.18	3.05	
	difference	0.37		
Post-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	2.01	-	0.24
	Control	2.2	1.18	

Table 5 shows no statistically significant differences between the two groups ($p > 0.05$), with similar mean scores. Also, the tests comparing pre-and post-test scores within the same group showed no significant results ($p > 0.05$), suggesting the strategy did not affect the students' results.

5.1.2.5 Analysis of the Fifth Strategy (Outlining and Summarizing)

Table 6 below shows the Mann-Whitney test comparing mean scores between groups and the Wilcoxon test assessing mean score differences within the same group.

Table 6.

Analysis of the Fifth Strategy(Outlining and Summarizing)

Study of the difference "Outlining and Summarizing"		Mean	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Experimental)	Pre-test	3.15	-	0
	Post-test	5.26	6.91	
	difference	2.11		
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Control)	Pre-test	2.79	-	0.002
	Post-test	3.31	3.04	
	difference	0.52		
Pre-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	3.15	-2.2	0.03
	Control	2.79		
	difference	-0.36		
Post-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	5.26	-	0
	Control	2.79	7.98	
	difference	-2.47		

Table 6 shows statistically significant differences between the two groups with p-values less than 0.05, indicating significant differences in both pre-and post-tests. Additionally, significant results with p-values less than 0.05 in the within-group comparisons suggest that the strategy impacted the students' results.

5.1.2.6 Analysis of the Sixth Strategy (Evaluating)

Table 7 shows the Mann-Whitney test comparing mean scores between the E.G. and C.G., and the Wilcoxon test for mean score differences within the same group.

Table 7.

Analysis of the Sixth Strategy (Evaluating)

Study of the difference “Evaluating”				
		Mean	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Experimental)	Pre-test	1.47	-	0
	Post-test	2.69	5.26	
	difference	1.22		
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Control)	Pre-test	1.56	-	0
	Post-test	2.35	4.99	
	difference	0.79		
Pre-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	1.47	-0.4	0.69
	Control	1.56		
	difference	0.09		
Post-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	2.69	-	0.04
	Control	2.35	2.02	
	difference	-0.34		

Table 7 shows statistically significant differences in pre-and post-test scores for the same group ($p < 0.05$) and a significant difference between

groups in the post-test, suggesting a moderate impact of the strategy on mean scores.

5.1.2.7 Analysis of the Seventh Strategy (Comparing and Contrasting)

Table 8 presents the Mann-Whitney test results comparing mean scores between the E.G. and C.G., and the Wilcoxon test for mean score differences within the same group.

Table 8.

Analysis of the Seventh Strategy (Comparing and Contrasting)

Study of the difference “Comparing and Contrasting”				
		Mean	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Experimental)	Pre-test	2	-	0
	Post-test	3.97	6.86	
	difference	1.97		
Pre-test vs. Post-test (Control)	Pre-test	2.56	-	0.54
	Post-test	2.68	0.61	
	difference	0.12		
Pre-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	2	-	0
	Control	2.56	3.55	
	difference	0.56		
Post-test Comparison (Experimental vs. Control)	Experimental	3.97	-	0
	Control	2.68	5.51	
	difference	-1.29		

Table 8 shows statistically significant results for mean scores between groups in pre-and post-tests ($p < 0.05$), with increases in both groups. The E.G. showed significant improvement between pre-and post-tests, unlike the C.G., suggesting the strategy was effective.

5.1.2.8 Case Summary Report

Table 9.

Case Summary Report

Case Summaries								
Group		Previewing	Contextualizing	Questioning	Reflecting	Outlining and	Evaluating	Comparing and
1	N	74	74	74	74	74	74	74
	Mean	2.55	2.95	4.11	2.01	5.26	2.69	3.97
	SD	.90	1.58	1.80	.95	1.18	1.43	1.40
	Kurtosis	.42	7	2		3	3	4
	Std. Error of Kurtosis	.55	-.10	-.15	-.43	-.32	-.08	-.04
			.55	.55	.55	.55	.55	.55
2	N	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
	Mean	2.58	2.66	2.61	2.20	3.31	2.35	2.68
	SD	1.20	1.05	.98	1.02	1.40	.96	1.28
	Kurtosis	.19	8		5	0		3
	Std. Error of Kurtosis	.47	.20	.61	-.35	-.21	.07	-.44
		.47	.47	.47	.47	.47	.47	.47
Total	N	176	176	176	176	176	176	176
	Mean	2.57	2.78	3.24	2.12	4.13	2.49	3.22
	SD	1.08	1.31	1.57	.99	1.62	1.19	1.47
	Kurtosis	.42	8	1		5	0	8
	Std. Error of Kurtosis	.36	.46	1.23	-.38	-.428	.38	.08
		.36	.36	.36	.36	.36	.36	.36

Table 9 indicates that certain CRSs significantly contributed to developing students’ critical literary analysis skills. The outlining and summarizing strategy had the most substantial impact, with mean values ranging from 5.26 in the E.G. to 3.31 in the C.G., and an overall mean of 4.13. The questioning strategy also demonstrated a significant effect, with mean values spanning from 4.11 to 2.61. The comparing and contrasting strategy was also significant, with means ranging from 3.97 to 2.68. Contextualizing and evaluating strategies were useful but less effective, with means between 2.95 to 2.66 and from 2.69 to 2.35, respectively. Previewing and reflecting strategies showed less differentiation, with mean values ranging from 2.55 to 2.58 and 2.01 to 2.20, respectively.

It can be concluded that the explicit instruction of CRSs enhanced Iraqi EFL university students’ critical reading skills in analyzing literary texts. Most strategies showed positive effects on students’ analysis abilities based on pre-test and seven sequential post-test results. However, a few strategies had a less consistent impact, and others were found to have insignificant effects in the current work.

5.2 Qualitative Results

5.2.1 Findings Related to Research Question Two

To answer RQ.2, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted based on Halliday’s SFG framework. Responses from pre-test and post-test analyses were categorized into ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions.

Table 10 summarizes the results of the most prominent categories: ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions

Table 10.

Summary of the three Metafunctional Categories

Category	Pre-test: E.G.	Pre-test: C.G.	Post- test: E.G.	Post-test: C.G.
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1. Ideational				
Metafunctions				
-Participants Identification	50-60%	40-50%	75-85%	45-55%
-Process Identification	50-60%	40-50%	75-85%	45-55%
-Causal Attribution	50-60%	40-50%	75-85%	45-55%
-Circumstances Identification	50%	40%	60%	45%
2. Interpersonal				
Metafunctions				
-Person/Pronoun Usage	40-50%	30-40%	65-80%	45-60%
-Mood Selection	40-50%	30-40%	65-80%	45-60%
-Modality	40-50%	30-40%	65-80%	45-60%
3. Textual				
Metafunctions				
-Semantic Structure	45-55%	35-45%	70-85%	50-65%
-Textual Organization	45-55%	35-45%	70-85%	50-65%
-Theme Selection	45-55%	35-45%	70-85%	50-65%
-Cohesive Devices	45-55%	35-45%	70-85%	50-65%

Following strategy interventions, as shown in Table 10, the E.G. displayed significant advantages over the C.G. in post-test assessments related to ideational metafunctions analysis. More specifically, the E.G. excelled across almost all ideational metafunctional subcategories including, recognizing main participants, processes, and causation, with percentages ranging from 75% to 85%. They also demonstrated strengths in identifying circumstances, scoring 60% in this area. In contrast, in the pre-test, performance was much lower, with

the E.G. ranging from 50% to 60% across categories and the C.G. from 40% to 50%. Likewise, the data revealed a significant disparity in comprehension levels favoring the E.G. To detail, their percentages across each ideational metafunctional component improved dramatically, spanning 70% to 90%, from 45% to 55% on the pre-test.

As to the interpersonal metafunctions, the E.G. outperformed the C.G. in understanding the functions of personal pronouns, mood selection, and modality, with percentages ranging from 65% to 80%, compared to the C.G.'s percentages of 45% to 60%. In the pre-test, the E.G.'s percentages ranged from 40% to 50%, while the C.G.'s percentages ranged from 30% to 40%. For textual metafunctions, the obtained results from the sequential post-tests show that the E.G. were able to recognize semantic structure, textual organization, theme selection, and the use of cohesive devices over the C.G., with percentages ranging from 70% to 85%, compared to the C.G.'s percentages of 50% to 65%. However, in the pre-test, the E.G.'s percentages ranged from 45% to 55%, and the C.G.'s percentages ranged from 35% to 45%.

The data analysis conducted to address RQ.2 revealed significant insights into the utilization and growth of metafunctional categories among students, particularly in relation to critical reading and analytical skills enhancement. Notably, the ideational metafunctions emerged as the most prominent area of development, with a focus on identifying and describing participants and attributing causation. The comparing/contrasting, contextualizing, and previewing strategies successively facilitated this growth, resulting in considerable improvements in the participant identification and causation attribution compared to the C.G.

Moreover, the interpersonal metafunctions demonstrated progress, though less distinct than the ideational metafunctions, particularly in the use of personal pronouns, mood choices, and modality attributed to contextualizing and comparing and contrasting strategies. Importantly, although the textual

metafunctions ranked lowest in utilization, significant progress was still observed, especially with the comparing and contrasting strategy leading to improved identification of semantic structure and discourse type, and the textual organization. As to the rest of the strategies, they did not show significant results in enhancing the identified metafunctional categories when compared to the C.G.

5.2.2 Findings Related to Research Question Three

To answer RQ.3, a qualitative inductive thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted. The interviews held with the E.G. participants displayed the primary obstacles they faced in applying the CRSs. While many challenges emerged, the following themes represent the most predominant issues reported by the participants. These widely shared themes provide important understanding of the major difficulties students encountered. Further analysis of the themes uncovered related sub-themes, highlighting nuances within each broader obstacle.

Table 11 depicts the distribution of participants among different themes and sub-themes, along with the corresponding percentages. These themes and sub-themes are described in the following table with percentages next to each.

Table 11.
Qualitative Thematic Analysis of the Interviews

No.	Themes	Sub-themes	Number of Participants	%
1.	CRSs	Previewing	50	67.6
		Contextualizing	45	60.8
		Evaluating	46	62.1
		Writing and Summarizing	43	58.1

		Comparing and Contrasting	31	41.8
2.	Vocabulary Deficiency		46	62.1
3.	Hesitancy in Engage in Open Discussions		45	60.8
4.	Retention	Retaining Abilities	34	45.9
		Retaining Key Information	29	39.1
5.	Coherence	Coherence in Writing	33	44.5
		Transition of Ideas	32	43.2
6.	Online Learning	The Impact of Online Learning	30	40.5
		Interactive Dialogues	32	43.2
7.	Literary Analysis	Barriers to Literary Analysis	39	52.7
		The Ambiguous Nature of Literary Works	38	51.3
8.	Theory and Practice		48	64.8

The data presented in Table 11 highlights various key themes and sub-themes derived from participant responses. CRSs were emphasized, with a majority recognizing the importance of previewing text (67.6%), contextualizing information (60.8%), and critically evaluating content (62.1%). Besides, writing and summarizing (58.1%) and comparing and contrasting (41.8%) were noted as crucial for comprehension.

Vocabulary deficiency (62.1%) and hesitancy in open discussions (60.8%) emerged as significant concerns, impacting communication and collaborative learning. Retention of knowledge and skills (45.9% for abilities, 39.1% for key information) posed challenges. Coherence in writing (44.5%) and transition of

ideas (43.2%) were deemed essential for effective communication. The impact of online learning (40.5%) and interactive dialogues (43.2%) were also noted. Participants expressed concerns about literary analysis, citing barriers to interpretation (52.7%) and the ambiguous nature of literary works (51.3%). Integration of theory and practice (64.8%) was highlighted for skill development. These results highlight the necessity of all-encompassing strategies to improve learning, understanding, and active engagement in different educational areas.

This indicates that students faced multiple obstacles to employ CRSs, such as having difficulty with the application of specific reading strategies, vocabulary deficiencies, hesitancy in their discussions, retaining concepts, writing coherently, limitations of online platforms, interpreting literary works, and linking theoretical knowledge with practical application.

6. Discussions and Conclusions

The comprehensive analysis carried out in this study presents strong evidence for the role of CRSs in enhancing students' ability to analyze literary texts. Given that the E.G.'s improvements over the C.G. were quite substantial, and that the results were highly significant for multiple such strategies, it is clearly essential that the instruction of critical reading can be strategically incorporated into an English curriculum to help students analyze texts more effectively. The highly adept performance displayed by the E.G. on the post-tests further corroborates research from recent years that adds to the body of evidence supporting the use of explicit strategy instruction (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2018; McNamara et al., 2023).

Also, the quantitative data supports the embedment of CRSs into the literature studies curriculum. The strong and consistent improvements in close reading, accurate comprehension and ability to critically analyze literary texts mirror Shanahan et al.'s (2010) findings. The researcher concluded that college students' comprehension was found deeper and their retention was better when

elements of textual analysis were necessitated than when students read without considering such strategies. This finding also shows the value of the directed inclusion of particular reading strategies and the distance that such teaching can move students beyond traditional classroom methods.

Moreover, Mann-Whitney and Wilcoxon tests provided more insight on the effectiveness of specific reading strategies by students where outlining and summarizing; questioning; and comparing and contrasting were rated the most effective ones in the enhancements of critical reading skills among the study participants. In this set of findings, one of the most central implications is to pinpoint the most effective strategies in this context. They can help students make sense and make meaning of complex literary texts. Thus, they may enable students to analyze and use the information found within similar texts. However, it is essential to note that the effectiveness of these strategies is different, with previewing and reflecting being the least effective ones. This latter result contradicts the findings of Duke and Pearson (2009) who stressed the necessity of the implementation of previewing and reflecting as factors that affect the value of reading strategies. Much of this use of these two strategies has been driven by a lack of familiarity on the part of the study participants due to the limited exposure they received from their course books, which do not focus explicitly on critical reading strategies, such as previewing, and reflecting. This explains why they scored somewhat lower overall. Consequently, their limited experience caused them to appear less effective in this context.

Furthermore, outlining and summarizing strategy was found to have a distinguishable impact on students' analytical skills. Interestingly, the comprehension advances from such strategy seem to persist even without ongoing instructional support, as reported by Pressley (2002) and Suacillo et al. (2016). Besides, questioning strategy proved effective in promoting students' comprehension and higher-order thinking skills, and this effect

appears to be maintained over time. However, these conclusions contradict Davoudi and Sadeghi (2015) and Dös et al.'s (2016) view. They argued that the impact of the questioning strategy decreases over time since students often encounter complex areas and topics that require a deeper level of analysis. This discrepancy arises from the regular and structured practice effects. That is, students in this study were able to transmit to more complex materials due to consistent reinforcement that extended the utility of the questioning strategy. As a result, it was easier to assimilate into their learning process and prolonged the benefits of such approaches as the materials got more complicated.

In addition, comparing and contrasting strategy played an important role in supporting students' evaluation and abstraction of meaning, reinforced by previous studies like Meraz et al. (2019), and Nasheeda et al. (2019). However, they were found to be less effective in Femilia's (2018) results due to their different learning style and their prior knowledge. With respect to contextualizing strategy, it also showed effectiveness in developing the participants' analytical skills. This indicated that they were able to connect the conceptual elements found in the provided literary texts with their socio-cultural contexts, aligning with Karami's (2020) results.

Furthermore, the findings revealed an effect of the evaluating strategy on the participant's level of critical analysis. This advocates that they succeeded to synthesize information, and thus efficiently applied evaluative reasoning skills in their texts analysis, similar to Sellars et al. (2018), and Barth et al.'s (2022) studies. Yet, the very strategy was found less influential in the works conducted by Magnusson et al. (2019), and Olifant et al. (2020). This was due to the learners' low English proficiency level and their lack of engagement in reading classroom.

The results of previewing and reflecting strategies in literary analysis had some contradictory results. That is, despite some studies demonstrated their substantial benefits in enhancing comprehension and critical abilities (Al-

Mekhlafi, 2018; Valizadeh, 2021), others, including the present study, highlighted their unpredictable use and limited efficacy, particularly in synthesizing information and applying evaluative reasoning skills (Hong-Nam, 2014; Chutichaiwirath & Sitthitikul, 2017). These contrasting findings suggest that the effectiveness of previewing and reflecting strategies may depend on various factors, such as the complexity of the literary texts and the instructional approach employed.

Remarkably, the results revealed that the participants showed significant gains in their comprehension and analysis of the key contents within the provided literary texts compared to the C.G. These findings suggest that the intervention promoted a deeper engagement with the components of the three metafunctions with varying degrees of effectiveness. To detail, from the perspective of the ideational metafunctions, the findings illustrate a marked shift in the participants' focus from the linguistic features to the ideas expressed. This shift indicates an increased appreciation of the meaning expressed by the texts. Consequently, it enabled them to make fewer and less substantial inferences and analyses of the texts generally. In a similar context, Utami et al. (2021) and Ramadhani et al. (2023) found that participants are often engaged in cognitive processes when analyzing variant components in literary texts. They maintained that the learners' inclination to the ideational metafunctions are evidence of a sophisticated readership.

This highlights the dynamic role of these cognitive activities and performances in the most basic understanding and interpretation of the content. In contrast, studies by Oliveira (2015) and Wardani et al. (2019) found that the ideational metafunctions were less pronounced than the interpersonal and textual metafunctions in their analyses of literary texts. This inconsistency is due to the potentiality of the manifestation of the ideational metafunctions across academic contexts. It further suggests that the influence of students' linguistic choices on meaning construction through their textual encrypting of

ideas could affect their ability to comprehend and analyze literary texts. This, in turn, warrants that the dominance of the ideational function may be more context-dependent than previously conceived.

Moreover, the qualitative analysis revealed that the participants placed a lower emphasis on employing interpersonal metafunctions in their post-test responses, in contrast to the attention given to ideational metafunctions. In other words, the E.G. made some progress in properly including specific grammatical and contextual cues in their text interpretations. Nonetheless, they encountered difficulties in utilizing language to deliver social meanings, due to many factors. According to Hilton (2018), expressing subjective social meanings through writing is contingent on more than just the possession of normative grammatical knowledge. Instead, writers should be able to modulate mood and tone in the service of the semiotic dimensions that approximate the emotions they are depicting. This proposes that while the intervention might have contributed to the improvements in the interpersonal categories, it does not address the complicated aspects of multilayered social communication. However, as maintained by Utami et al. (2021), these aspects require further attention and investigation to be clearly understood.

In addition, post-test analyses indicated limited progression of the majority of the textual metafunctions required to construct a coherent discourse. Although participants demonstrated strong higher-order organizational skills, comprehension of cohesion was restricted. This likely advocates that students were not exposed to enough quality writing samples in the previous stages and thus were not able to employ cohesive devices in their responses. Moreover, they were preoccupied with advanced features at the expense of consolidating their foundational textual mastery. Furthermore, the critical reading instruction might have glossed over specific challenges stemmed from syntactic cohesion that could not be subsumed under investigating ties among ideas in general.

Yet, a study conducted by Maniati et al. (2020) revealed a greater emphasis, by their study samples, on the textual metafunctions over ideational and interpersonal ones in written discourse. This prominence of the textual metafunctions is derived from its role in enhancing communication clarity and coherence, as Sundram (2023) indicated. It also aligns with the educational priorities that emphasize effective writing as a communicative skill. In this context, Kakhramonovich (2020) who identified that teaching writing of all forms and for diverse purposes would contribute to helping students develop novice communication abilities. This would enable them to clearly convey their ideas and emotions through writing.

Furthermore, the findings of the interviews held with the E.G. revealed significant obstacles they encountered in acquiring fundamental academic abilities. For example, many of them suffered to employ previewing, contextualizing, evaluating, summarizing literary texts, contrasting and comparing when analyzing texts. Also, vocabulary deficiencies, coherence, and the lack of willingness to participate in conversations were additional issues that hindered their analytical skills. These results are consistent with studies conducted by Ahmad (2021) and Zerr et al., (2021). The participants justified these challenges due to the complexity of skills in question, the language barriers, and their lack of motivation.

Likewise, students met with difficulties expressing analytical criticisms clearly in writing and transitioning concepts effortlessly. It could be argued that the reliance on online learning platforms during the pandemic had negatively impacted learners' understanding and engagement (Rice, 2017; Li, 2022). Another obstacle is the identification of literary themes where students were able to recognize the need of CRSs but found it challenging to apply to understand and analyze texts, which hence impeded their substantive conversation and cohesive writing.

The study concludes that explicit critical reading strategy instruction significantly enhances students' literary analysis skills, with the E.G. showing substantial improvements in various areas such as outlining and summarizing, questioning texts, comparing literary components, and contextualizing and evaluating concepts. These findings support existing metacognitive and schema learning theories, emphasizing the importance of structured reading strategy training for better comprehension. However, challenges persist, particularly in previewing texts and reflecting on comprehension, indicating the need for continued teacher modeling and guided practice.

In addition, gaps were identified in coherent analysis and syntactic cohesion in writing, suggesting targeted interventions focusing on cohesive devices and quality writing samples. The study underscores the key role of instructors in fostering sophisticated analytical abilities over time and suggests addressing barriers such as dualistic perspectives to enhance textual analysis. While explicit strategy instruction offers benefits, it requires substantial guidance for proficiency advancement, with pedagogical implications applicable to EFL classrooms for enriched literary analysis instruction.

7. Limitations of the Study

Though deeply explored in its context and theoretical basis, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data comes with attendant difficulty of holding them together as a unit solid state. This means that, regardless of the design put in place to do research carefully, qualitative insights are still not generalizable like quantitative results. In addition, triangulating the data through mixed-methods approaches aims to address limitations in capturing the complexity of critical reading skills, yet the qualitative data from the interviews and the thematic analyses might not cover the breadth of the students' experiences.

There is also the point that the sample of 176 participants was modest, albeit closely stratified. In addition, the two semesters during which this study took place may limit how participants registered the full effect of CRSs. Accordingly, studies conducted over a longer term might yield deeper insights

into how these strategies affect students' abilities over time. Finally, the focus of the current study is on Iraqi EFL university students thus diminishing the applicability of results to a more general population.

8. Suggestions for Future Research

This study serves as an initial understanding of the explicit instruction in CRSs on student learning of literary analysis. Recommendations on the important paths for further investigations are presented. The first is having a longitudinal study that follows students throughout their undergraduate program. Second, it is important to expand the research scope to larger and more diverse student populations across other institutions and geographic areas to obtain a more comprehensive perspective of CRS effectiveness.

Third, designing and testing the effects of instructional resource packages that include both worked demonstrations and interactive technology tools will be an important focus for future research. One such approach is to perform a comparative analysis, which can then be used towards optimizing materials development (i.e., how these resources are utilized). Finally, experimental comparisons of the integration of strategic reading instruction within language studies should encompass educational institutions across different levels of language proficiency. Thereby, promoting inclusivity and adaptability in language learning.

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