

<https://doi.org/10.63636/rciid.v5i1.60>

La literatura fantástica como base para el pensamiento crítico en el aprendizaje del inglés

Fantastic Literature as a Training Ground for Critical Thinking in English Learning

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Artículo recibido: 10 marzo 2026-Aceptado para publicación: 23 abril 2026

Conflictos de intereses: Ninguno que declarar

RESUMEN

El presente artículo analiza el potencial de la literatura fantástica como herramienta pedagógica para el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico en estudiantes universitarios que aprenden inglés como lengua extranjera. El objetivo del estudio es explorar cómo la lectura y el análisis de textos pertenecientes al género fantástico fomentan procesos de interpretación, cuestionamiento de supuestos y tolerancia a la ambigüedad en estudiantes de un curso universitario. La investigación se desarrolló en el contexto del curso *Fantastic Literature*, donde los estudiantes trabajaron con relatos caracterizados por la presencia de eventos ambiguos, elementos sobrenaturales y narradores potencialmente poco fiables. Metodológicamente, el estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo con apoyo de indicadores cuantitativos mediante un cuestionario compuesto por preguntas abiertas y escalas tipo Likert orientadas a identificar percepciones sobre pensamiento crítico e interpretación textual. Los resultados sugieren que la literatura fantástica promueve una lectura más activa y analítica, en la que los estudiantes deben evaluar evidencias narrativas, considerar múltiples interpretaciones y cuestionar explicaciones aparentemente evidentes. Asimismo, los participantes indicaron que el contacto con este tipo de textos fortaleció su capacidad para identificar significados simbólicos, analizar perspectivas diversas y tolerar la incertidumbre interpretativa. En conclusión, la literatura fantástica puede constituirse como un espacio formativo significativo para el desarrollo de habilidades críticas dentro del aprendizaje del idioma inglés.

Palabras clave: literatura fantástica, pensamiento crítico, lectura crítica, enseñanza del inglés, interpretación literaria

ABSTRACT

This article examines the potential of fantastic literature as a pedagogical tool for the development of critical thinking among university students learning English as a foreign language. The objective of the study is to explore how reading and analyzing texts from the fantastic genre encourages interpretative processes, questioning of assumptions, and tolerance for ambiguity in students enrolled in a university course. The research was conducted in the context of the course *Fantastic Literature*, where students engaged with short stories characterized by ambiguous events, supernatural elements, and potentially unreliable narrators. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach supported by quantitative indicators through a questionnaire composed of open-ended questions and Likert-scale items designed to explore students' perceptions of critical thinking and textual interpretation. The results suggest that fantastic literature promotes a more active and analytical reading process in which students evaluate narrative evidence, consider multiple interpretations, and challenge apparently obvious explanations. Participants also reported improvements in their ability to identify symbolic meanings, analyze different perspectives, and tolerate interpretative uncertainty. The study concludes that fantastic literature can function as a meaningful pedagogical space for fostering critical thinking skills within English language learning contexts.

Keywords: fantastic literature, critical thinking, critical reading, English language learning, literary interpretation

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Conflictos de Interés: Ninguna que declarar

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INTRODUCCION

The development of critical thinking skills has become a central objective in contemporary higher education. Universities increasingly emphasize the importance of helping students analyze information, evaluate evidence, and interpret complex ideas to prepare them for academic and professional contexts. In language learning environments, these skills are closely connected to reading comprehension and interpretative abilities, particularly when students engage with texts that require analysis and reflection. Literature has long been recognized as a valuable tool for promoting analytical reading and reflective learning in language education. Literary texts expose students to complex narratives, symbolic elements, and multiple perspectives, which can encourage deeper engagement with textual meaning. In language learning contexts, literature-based instruction can help learners develop interpretative skills while simultaneously strengthening linguistic competence (Gillian Lazar, 2021).

The development of critical thinking is also an essential objective in higher education. Critical thinking involves the ability to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and consider alternative interpretations before reaching conclusions (Peter A. Facione, 2020). When students engage with literary texts that contain ambiguity or symbolic meaning, they are required to interpret textual clues and reflect on possible meanings, which can stimulate these analytical processes. In higher education contexts, instructional approaches that emphasize analytical reading have been shown to improve students' ability to interpret complex texts and develop independent interpretations.

Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, literature has increasingly been recognized as a valuable resource for promoting deeper cognitive engagement. Literary texts expose learners to complex narratives, multiple perspectives, and symbolic meanings that require readers to actively construct interpretations rather than simply extracting factual information. According to Zakaria et al. (2025), literature-based instruction can support the development of critical thinking by encouraging students to analyze textual details, question assumptions, and reflect on the meaning of events presented in a narrative.

Furthermore, literary analysis encourages students to engage in discussion, interpretation, and reflection while reading. When students analyze characters, narrative events, and symbolic elements, they are required to evaluate information and consider different perspectives. Hillis et al. (2024) note that literature-based activities can promote creativity and critical thinking by encouraging learners to explore multiple interpretations and justify their ideas through textual evidence.

Despite the growing recognition of literature as a pedagogical tool in language education, the use of specific literary genres to foster critical thinking has received less attention in classroom-based research. Genres characterized by ambiguity and interpretative complexity may offer particularly valuable opportunities for developing analytical reading skills. When students encounter narratives that require interpretation and reflection, they must evaluate textual evidence and consider multiple possible meanings.

For this reason, the present study explores how students enrolled in a university course titled *Fantastic Literature* perceived the role of fantastic narratives in the development of their critical thinking abilities. The participants were thirteen students enrolled in the course, of whom eight completed the questionnaire used for this study. Through the analysis of both quantitative responses and qualitative reflections, this research examines how engaging with fantastic literature influenced students' interpretative processes and their approach to reading in English. Fantastic literature offers a particularly interesting framework for this type of interpretative reading.

According to Tzvetan Todorov (2017), the fantastic emerges when readers hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of events within a narrative. This ambiguity encourages readers to analyze narrative evidence and consider multiple interpretations of the story. Similarly, Rosemary Jackson (2019) argues that fantastic narratives challenge conventional perceptions of reality by presenting events that blur the boundaries between the possible and the impossible. As a result, readers are required to interpret symbolic elements and question the reliability of narrative events.

METODOLOGY

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach with complementary quantitative indicators to explore how fantastic literature contributes to the development of critical thinking among students learning English as a foreign language. The research used a questionnaire consisting of both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to collect students' perceptions about their reading experiences. Questionnaires are commonly used in language education research because they allow researchers to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from participants in a structured way (Zoltán Dörnyei, 2022).

Research design

The study can be classified as descriptive research, as its purpose was to explore and describe students' perceptions regarding their interpretative processes and the role of fantastic literature in the development of analytical reading skills. The design of the study was observational and cross-sectional, since the data were collected at a specific moment during the course without manipulating variables.

Context of the study

The research was conducted in a university-level English course titled *Fantastic Literature*. The course focused on the analysis of short stories belonging to the fantastic genre, characterized by elements such as ambiguity, supernatural events, symbolic meanings, and potentially unreliable narrators. Through reading and discussion activities, students were encouraged to analyze narrative clues, question assumptions, and interpret different possible meanings within the texts.

Participants

The participants were students enrolled in the course *Fantastic Literature* at the university level. The class consisted of thirteen students in total, and eight students voluntarily completed the questionnaire used for this research. Therefore, the analysis presented in this study is based on the responses of these

eight participants. The sample can be considered a convenience sample, as the participants were selected from the group of students attending the course in which the pedagogical activities took place.

Data collection techniques

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed to explore students' perceptions of the relationship between fantastic literature and critical thinking. The questionnaire included two types of questions.

First, it included open-ended questions that invited students to reflect on their reading experiences, the interpretative strategies they used when encountering ambiguous or supernatural events, and the ways in which their interpretation processes changed after engaging with fantastic literature. Second, the questionnaire included Likert-scale items ranging from 1 to 5, where students evaluated statements related to critical reading practices. These statements explored aspects such as questioning assumptions, tolerance for ambiguity, identification of symbolic meanings, interpretation of multiple perspectives, and confidence in challenging ideas during academic discussions.

Data analysis

The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed through a qualitative thematic analysis, identifying recurring ideas and patterns in the students' reflections about reading and interpretation. The Likert-scale responses were analyzed descriptively in order to observe general tendencies in students' perceptions of how fantastic literature influenced their critical thinking and interpretative abilities.

Ethical considerations

Participation in the questionnaire was voluntary, and students' responses were analyzed anonymously to protect their identities. The information collected was used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

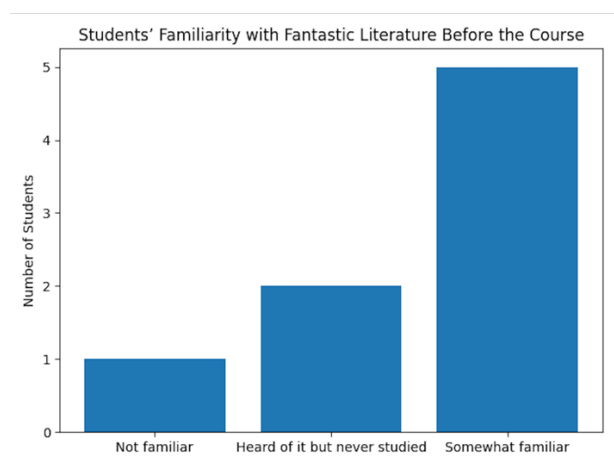
The results of the questionnaire provide insight into how students perceived the role of fantastic literature in the development of their interpretative processes and critical thinking skills while reading in English. The analysis combines descriptive observations from Likert-scale responses with qualitative reflections obtained through open-ended questions. The findings are discussed in relation to theoretical perspectives on fantastic literature and critical thinking.

Familiarity with fantastic literature

The first section of the questionnaire explored students' previous familiarity with the fantastic genre. The results show that most participants had limited exposure to fantastic literature prior to taking the course. As illustrated in Figure 1, five students reported being somewhat familiar with the genre, while two participants indicated that they had heard of it but had never studied it formally. Only one participant stated that they were not familiar with fantastic literature before taking the course.

Figure 1

Students' familiarity with fantastic literature before the course



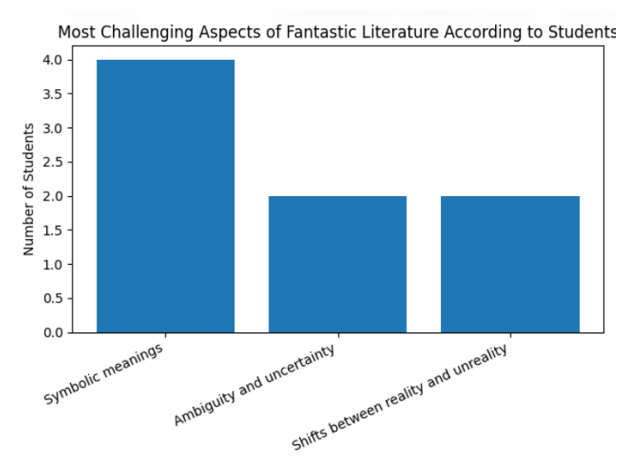
These results suggest that the course represented a new academic experience for many participants. The high levels of agreement among participants suggest that fantastic literature encouraged students to analyze narrative events and consider multiple interpretations. These processes are closely related to critical thinking, which involves evaluating information and examining alternative explanations before reaching conclusions (Richard Paul & Linda Elder, 2020).

Challenges when reading fantastic literature

Students were also asked to identify the aspect of fantastic literature that they found most challenging. As shown in Figure 2, most students identified symbolic meanings as the most difficult element to interpret. Other responses indicated that ambiguity and uncertainty and shifts between reality and unreality were also challenging aspects of the genre.

Figure 2

Most challenging aspects of fantastic literature according to students



These findings suggest that fantastic literature requires readers to engage in interpretative analysis rather than relying on literal comprehension. Students' responses also indicate that literary texts can stimulate interpretative reading practices. Previous research has shown that literature-based instruction can

encourage students to explore symbolic meanings and develop deeper engagement with textual analysis (Janice Bland, 2022).

The open-ended responses support this observation. For example, one student explained: “I had to read the same paragraph many times to understand the message.” This comment indicates that the reading process became more analytical and reflective. Another participant stated: “When something did not make sense, I started questioning how it could be possible.” Such responses suggest that the genre encouraged students to question narrative information and search for deeper meaning within the text.

Ambiguity and interpretative reasoning

A defining feature of fantastic literature is the reader’s hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations. According to Todorov (1975), the fantastic emerges when the reader experiences uncertainty regarding whether an event should be interpreted as supernatural or rational.

Students’ responses illustrate this interpretative process. One participant described a moment from *The Haunting of Hill House*: “Eleanor heard knocking on the walls at night, but her roommate did not hear anything. That made me question if the sounds were real or if they were caused by Eleanor’s psychological state.” This reflection demonstrates how students analyze narrative evidence and consider multiple explanations before forming an interpretation. Similarly, another participant described a scene from *Neverwhere* in which an angel character appears to manipulate events in the story:

“Even though the story suggested the angel was evil, I still questioned if the character could be right in some way.” This comment illustrates how readers combine narrative information with prior knowledge and personal interpretation when analyzing ambiguous characters. These responses support the idea that fantastic literature encourages readers to evaluate multiple possibilities rather than accepting a single explanation.

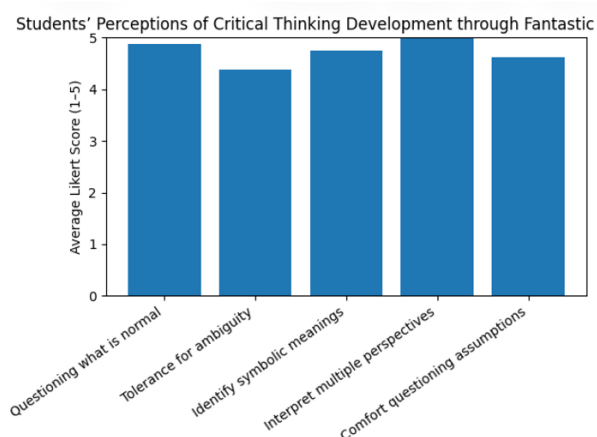
Perceived development of critical thinking

The Likert-scale items explored students’ perceptions regarding the development of critical thinking skills while reading fantastic literature. The responses show a consistently high level of agreement with statements related to analytical reading and interpretative flexibility.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the highest average score corresponds to the statement related to interpreting multiple perspectives, which obtained the highest mean value among participants. Other highly rated items include questioning what is considered normal or logical, identifying symbolic meanings, and feeling comfortable challenging assumptions.

Figure 3

Students' perceptions of critical thinking development through fantastic literature



These results suggest that students perceive fantastic literature as a valuable tool for strengthening critical reading practices. Critical thinking involves analyzing information, evaluating evidence, and considering alternative explanations before reaching a conclusion. The characteristics of fantastic narratives appear to promote these processes by encouraging readers to interpret ambiguous events and evaluate narrative perspectives.

Changes in interpretation processes

Students also reported changes in the way they approached literary texts after engaging with fantastic literature. Several participants indicated that they had previously searched for a single correct interpretation of a story, but that their reading approach became more flexible after the course.

One participant explained: "Before, I never analyzed the situations and characters, but now I analyze everything, including the setting and the details." Another student noted: "Instead of looking for a single meaning, I now consider different possibilities." These reflections indicate that fantastic literature encouraged students to adopt a more analytical and interpretative approach to reading, which aligns with educational perspectives that associate literary analysis with the development of higher-order cognitive skills (Bloom, 1956).

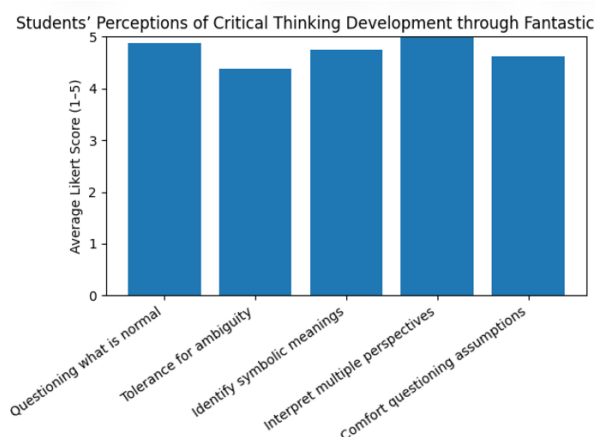
Transferability of analytical skills

Finally, students were asked whether the interpretative abilities developed through fantastic literature could be applied to other academic disciplines. All participants agreed that the skills practiced while analyzing fantastic narratives could be useful in fields such as science, philosophy, and social studies. According to the participants, fantastic literature encourages readers to question assumptions, analyze different perspectives, and evaluate multiple explanations. These abilities correspond closely to key components of critical thinking (Fisher, 2011). Overall, the results suggest that fantastic literature can function as an effective pedagogical tool for promoting analytical reading and critical thinking in the context of English language learning.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the highest average score corresponds to the statement related to interpreting multiple perspectives, which obtained the maximum average score among participants. Other highly rated items include questioning what is considered normal or logical, identifying symbolic meanings, and feeling comfortable questioning assumptions during academic discussions.

Figure 4

Students' perceptions of critical thinking development through fantastic literature



These results suggest that students perceive fantastic literature as a valuable tool for strengthening critical reading skills. The genre appears to encourage readers to evaluate narrative evidence, analyze symbolic meanings, and consider alternative explanations for the events described in the text.

Changes in interpretation processes

Students also reported significant changes in the way they approach literary texts after engaging with fantastic literature. Several participants explained that they previously searched for a single correct interpretation of a story, whereas after the course they became more open to considering multiple possible meanings.

Some students also reported paying greater attention to narrative details such as tone, atmosphere, and symbolic elements. Others mentioned that they now question the reliability of narrators and characters more frequently, recognizing that narrative perspectives may influence how events are presented in the story. These reflections indicate that fantastic literature can encourage a more analytical and reflective reading process, which is closely related to the development of critical thinking skills.

Transferability of analytical skills

Finally, students were asked whether the interpretative abilities developed through fantastic literature could be applied to other academic disciplines. All participants indicated that they believed the skills practiced while analyzing fantastic narratives could be useful in fields such as science, philosophy, and social studies.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to analyze the role of fantastic literature as a pedagogical tool for the development of critical thinking in students learning English as a foreign language. Based on the analysis

of students' responses, the findings suggest that the use of fantastic narratives in the classroom can encourage a more active and reflective reading process in which learners engage in interpretation, questioning, and evaluation of textual information.

One of the most significant conclusions of the study is that the characteristic ambiguity of fantastic literature promotes analytical reading practices. The hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations forces readers to evaluate narrative evidence, question assumptions, and consider multiple interpretations of the events presented in the text. This interpretative process encourages students to move beyond surface-level comprehension and engage in deeper analysis of narrative elements such as symbolism, narrative perspective, and contextual clues.

Another important finding is that students perceive fantastic literature as a genre that stimulates intellectual curiosity and interpretative flexibility. Participants reported that reading these stories helped them tolerate uncertainty, recognize symbolic meanings, and analyze events from different perspectives. These skills are closely related to the development of critical thinking, as they require readers to examine information carefully and avoid accepting interpretations without reflection.

Furthermore, the results indicate that the analytical skills developed through the reading of fantastic literature may extend beyond the literature classroom. Students expressed the belief that the interpretative strategies practiced during the course could also be applied in other academic fields, particularly in disciplines that require the evaluation of complex ideas, multiple explanations, and diverse perspectives.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the potential of fantastic literature as a valuable resource in English language teaching. By exposing students to narratives that challenge conventional notions of reality, educators can create learning environments that promote inquiry, interpretation, and discussion. In this sense, fantastic literature can function not only as a tool for language development but also as a means of strengthening higher-order cognitive skills.

Finally, although the study provides valuable insights into students' perceptions of fantastic literature and critical thinking, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The research was conducted with a relatively small number of participants within a single course context. Future research could expand this line of inquiry by including larger samples, different educational contexts, or comparative studies involving other literary genres.

In conclusion, fantastic literature offers a productive framework for encouraging critical reading practices and analytical thinking in English language learning. By engaging with narratives characterized by ambiguity, symbolism, and interpretative uncertainty, students are invited to question assumptions, explore multiple perspectives, and develop deeper interpretative skills that are relevant both within and beyond the academic context.

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