
**“EFFECTIVENESS OF LITERATURE-BASED INSTRUCTION ON
SPEAKING PROFICIENCY AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS
AMONG SOUTH ASIAN L2 LEARNERS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW”**

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ABSTRACT

Incorporation of literature-based instruction (LBI) into second language (L2) instruction has become an increasingly popular option to both form-based and examination-based teaching methods, especially in the situations, when students lack oral communication and higher-order thinking skills. South Asian countries most of the learners are showing little proficiency in speaking English, as well as critical thinking skills, despite the long periods of exposure to English. This review of literature explores how much literature-based instruction can be used to improve speaking performance and critical thinking skills in South Asian L2 learners and which major themes can be identified based on the available empirical studies that have evaluated the importance of using this instructional method. The study is informed by two aims, which are synthesizing research evidence on the effect of LBI on these language outcomes and investigating the pedagogical conditions in which literature promotes or limits learning. Inductive systematic review design was used which was qualitative. Major academic databases were searched using predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria to retrieve peer-reviewed empirical studies that were published between 2015 and 2025. Thematic analysis was used to analyze eligible and selected studies to identify common patterns and explanatory knowledge. The results show that literature-based teaching has a positive impact on speaking as it provides communicative interaction based on the discussion, role-play, and interpretive tasks. It also facilitates the growth of critical thinking by fostering the analysis, critical evaluation and reflective interpretation of texts. It was found that there are four prevailing themes, namely: (1) enhancement of speaking through communicative interaction, (2) development of critical thinking through interpretive and

dialogic practices, (3) motivational and affective mediation of learning outcomes, and (4) pedagogical and contextual conditions shaping effectiveness. The review concludes that literature-based instruction could help tackle long-term issues in South Asian L2 teaching, such as poor oral skills and insufficient critical pedagogy when provided through interactive and learner-centred pedagogy. Such results highlight the educational importance of literature in the combination of linguistic and cognitive teaching tools in language learners.

KEYWORDS: Literature-Based Instruction, Speaking proficiency, Critical thinking skills, Second language learners.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

This has been a growing trend in second language (L2) teaching that has moved away from more traditional textbook teaching to teaching methods that previews real world use of languages, student activity and cognitive growth. Literature-based instruction (LBI) is one of such methods when literary works (short stories, poetry, novels, and drama) are taken as the core means of delivering language skills. In contrast to the traditional approaches that mainly involve the use of graded and controlled texts and explicit teaching of grammar, LBI has learners exposed to rich, contextualized, and meaningful language input that combines linguistic, cultural, and cognitive aspects of language learning (Mart, 2021). L2 classroom literature has been linked to motivation, more chances of communicative interaction, and the development of interpretative and critical thinking skills that goes beyond the element of basic linguistic competence.

Throughout history, the role of literature in language teaching has a history in communicative methods that focus on the use of real language tasks and learner autonomy. As a genre, literature provides complex grammar, diverse vocabulary, expressions, and culturally sensitive meaning and provides learners with an opportunity to use language in the ways it is applied in the real world (Mart, 2021). Furthermore, literature has the potential of evoking higher-level thinking, e.g., the ability to interpret, synthesize and evaluate- skills inherent in critical thinking and effective communicative competence.

Literature-Based Instruction (LBI) is one of the key concept in this study, if define it, LBI is the educational instruction based on the use of authentic literary texts as the medium of language learning instead of the decontextualized textbook passages. Students in LBI get to read, discuss, analyze, speak, and write various literary forms and rely on them as platforms

that reflect real-life use of language and expand the linguistic repertoires of students (Seghayer, 2003; Mart, 2021). LBI is therefore comprehensive in the process of integrating language skills, not just in a process of enhancing linguistic accuracy, but also in the process of interpreting and critical thinking.

Then Speaking proficiency is another key element here. It refers in L2 refers to the capacity of a learner to generate fluent and coherent as well as contextually relevant oral communication in the target language. It does not only entail grammatical correctness, but also discourse competence, pragmatic appropriateness, and interactional skills. Since oral communication is at the core of the real-life language, strategies that involve more talk time on the part of the learner and less affective filters are hypothesized to improve speaking performance.

When it comes to critical thinking skills, the popular meaning of critical thinking is the ability to decompose, analyze, synthesize, and construct arguments (Facione, 2011). Critical thinking in the L2 classroom is going to be an approach to language processing that does not just involve processing in a superficial manner, but involves an interpretation of the message, reasoning about concepts, challenging assumptions, and engaging with the message in a more deeply thought-provoking manner. The theorization of integrative pedagogies such as LBI is that they encourage this kind of cognitive engagement through stimulating learners to react to texts in the form of interpretive discussion, debate, and written responses.

1.2 The Educational Context in South Asia and Sri Lanka

In South Asia, English remains a global lingua franca which enables access to higher education, employment and transnational mobility. Nonetheless, even after years of teaching English language, a significant number of learners are still face-to-face with communicative competence particularly in speaking and critical thinking areas, which most traditional grammar-based and exam-oriented curricula seldom focus on (World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025). In Sri Lanka, students who learn English as a second language on a compulsory basis at all levels tend to have a high level of grammatical knowledge but a low level of communicative skills, especially when it comes to spontaneous speaking and critical inquiry of texts (Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022; World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025).

According to a recent study by the University of Ruhana, Sri Lanka, ESL lessons based on literature led to a positive effect on the active engagement and intrinsic motivation of the undergraduate level, creative thinking, and decreased anxiety, as well as speaking the English

language among students (Gunawardane et al., 2022). Equally, a study that has been conducted on ELT programmes in Sri Lanka shows that students find literature courses relevant to enhancing English language proficiency, which could be relevant pedagogically to the context of literature-based learning of languages (Ahmed, 2025). Nevertheless, such studies are still highly localized and qualitative in terms of their nature, and it is hard to make any generalized findings or systematic conclusions about the effectiveness of LBI in general on the important language outcomes.

1.3 Problem Statement and Research Gap

Although there is an increasing amount of research indicating that LBI can be used to facilitate better language results, the current body of research tends to be highly diverse in the study approach, context, and measurement. South Asian South Asian LBI is a topic that has received only a piecemeal scholarly attention, and no synthesis of the research has approached LBI as the instructional media to investigate the effects on speaking proficiency and critical thinking abilities of L2 speakers in a systematic manner.

Particularly, despite the likelihood of favorable effects of literature on engagement and communicative performance in the classroom in the individual studies, there is still no decisive body of research, which can critically assess the results of research in the framework of different contexts, methodologies, and groups of learners. Furthermore, although the teaching and learning of critical thinking has been studied in terms of writing (e.g., writing teaching in the EFL learning process; systematic reviews in recent years), relatively little is known regarding the effects of literature as an instructional resource on the speaking and critical thinking process in multilingual, exam-based contexts (as it is the case in many areas of South Asia).

Devoid of a strict synthesis of the available evidence, teachers and curriculum developers cannot get the full picture of the pedagogical worth of LBI and its ability to solve what have been long-standing issues in English language education, particularly in areas where speaking proficiency and critical thinking are of secondary importance in the mainstream instruction.

1.4 Research Problem

This systematic review aims to address the following overarching research problem:

To what extent does literature-based instruction enhance speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills among South Asian L2 learners, and what themes emerge from empirical research regarding its effectiveness?

By synthesizing research through thematic analysis, this review seeks to draw structured conclusions that can inform both *theories and practices* of language teaching in literature-rich pedagogies.

1.5 Research Objectives

To address this problem, the study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To systematically review and synthesize research evidence on the effectiveness of literature-based instruction in enhancing speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills among South Asian L2 learners.
2. To identify key themes and pedagogical implications that emerge from existing studies on LBI practices, facilitating insight into *why, how, and under what conditions* literature positively (or negatively) impacts these language outcomes using thematic analysis.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design and Approach

The research problem took a qualitative inductive research design by conducting a systematic review of literature to investigate the effectiveness of literature-based instruction (LBI) on the speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills of South Asian L2 learners. It was also deemed as the qualitative and inductive orientation as the study was to synthesize the existing empirical data and derive thematic findings based on previous research and not to test any predefined hypothesis (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Systematic reviews allow conducting evidence synthesis transparently, reproducibly, and exhaustively, which is achieved by using a set of procedures to identify, screen, and analyse the relevant studies (Snyder, 2019).

2.2 Search Strategy and Data Sources

The search was done systematically in key academic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, and JSTOR, and found peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers. Keywords used in search strings included: “literature-based instruction, English as a Second language, speaking skills, critical thinking, South Asia, Sri Lanka, EFL and language pedagogy. Refining results was done using Boolean operators (AND/OR) to ensure a complete retrieval.

Only the articles published between 2015 and 2025 were searched to ensure the inclusion of all the new trends in L2 pedagogy and their relevance to the current age (Kitchenham and Charters, 2007). The studies that were included in the review were published in English only since English is the target language that was investigated in the reviewed literature.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In order to be relevant and methodologically rigorous, the studies were chosen using the following inclusion criteria:

1. Empirical research involving literature-based teaching (e.g., the use of short stories, poems, novels or drama) in L2/EFL settings.
2. Research that aims to put in the spotlight speaking proficiency, critical thinking skills or both as learning outcomes.
3. A study carried out within a South Asian setting (i.e. Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal) or similar multilingual EFL.
4. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025.

Research papers were excluded when they:

1. when the literature sources had no exposure to speaking or critical thinking out of the two writing or reading skills.
2. if the reviewed the literature not as a pedagogical instrument but just as content knowledge,
3. if the literature source was too methodologically insufficient, or
4. were non-empirical reports or opinion pieces.

2.4 Study Selection Process

The first search on the database provided 312 articles. Following the elimination of duplicates (n = 68) 244 records were left to be screened on title and abstract. The 197 articles were excluded based on their relevance to the research objectives. All the other 47 articles were rated in terms of eligibility and 21 articles that fulfilled all the inclusion criteria were chosen to undergo final analysis. This screening procedure was based on principles described by the PRISMA system of systematic reviews that had to be transparent and replicable (Page et al., 2021).

2.5 Data Extraction and Analysis

The data that were found in each selected study were relevant and included:

- (a) Country and education background,
- (b) Characteristics of the participants,
- (c) Type of literary texts used,
- (d) Instructional practices used, and
- (e) Indicated the results of speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills.

Thematic analysis was the qualitative approach of extracting, analyzing and reporting patterns of data, which was used to analyse the extracted data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was selected as it provides the opportunity to flexibly but rigorously synthesize qualitative and mixed-method results that help to interpret the results in various educational settings (Nowell et al., 2017).

2.6 Justification for Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis was found to be appropriate in this review since it aids with identifying patterns in the heterogeneous studies and allows integration of the findings conceptually (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Since earlier research has operationalised speaking proficiency and critical thinking with various measures (e.g. fluency, interactional competence, inferencing ability, argumentation), thematic analysis allowed such various measures to be aggregated into analytical categories. Additionally, thematic synthesis is popular among systematic reviews of educational studies to extract explanatory insights out of the statistical aggregation (Thomas and Harden, 2008).

It was analyzed using the six-phase framework provided by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- (1) acquaintance with liquidated information,
- (2) generation of initial codes,
- (3) candidate themes identification,
- (4) revising and perfecting themes,
- (5) defining and naming of themes, and
- (6) Analysis of results into analytical stories. An inductive development of the themes was made based on the data and not predetermined but the synthesis showed patterns based on the reviewed studies.

2.7 Trustworthiness and Rigor

All steps of the selection and analysis were reported in every detail in order to make it credible and dependable. The coding and theme development were performed in cycles, the inter-study constant comparison was done to guarantee the consistency of analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The methodology rigor of the review was further enhanced by the explicit use of inclusion criteria and the use of transparent screening procedures (Snyder, 2019).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 RESULTS

The systematic review was a synthesis of information about 18 empirical studies (2015–2025) that were reviewed by peer-reviewers and focused on investigating the role of literature-based instruction (LBI) to improve speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills in L2 learners in South Asian contexts (Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal) and closely similar EFL settings. These two research objectives influenced the thematic analysis: (1) to assess the degree of the improvement of speaking and critical thinking with the help of LBI, and (2) to determine major themes and pedagogical conditions behind the occurrence of these effects and how. There were four general themes: (i) speaking proficiency gains through communicative engagement, (ii) development of critical thinking through interpretive and dialogic practices, (iii) motivational and affective mediation of outcomes, and (iv) contextual and pedagogical constraints shaping effectiveness.

1. Extent of Enhancement in Speaking Proficiency

One of the common themes within the studies reviewed concerned the fact that LBI has a positive influence on the oral communication skills of learners, specifically, in fluency, lexical range and willingness to talk. Studies, based on literature-based ESL materials, carried out in Sri Lanka indicated that there was a notable enhancement in the involvement of students in the oral activity, with the learners showing heightened self-confidence and decreased anxiety in discussions and role-plays (Gunawardane, Chandradasa & Senevirathne, 2022). Equally, in a survey-based research on the Sri Lankan undergraduates, it was discovered that having access to literary texts was perceived to be helpful in the development of expressive language and communicative competence, particularly when literature was approached in an interactive manner as opposed to a subject to be analysed through rote (Ahmed, 2025).

These results are supported by evidence in neighbouring South Asian contexts. In India, an action research study involving a short story and drama into EFL classrooms recorded quantifiable improvements in the articulation of spoken and interaction in the classroom of students who received instruction using texts alone (Kumar and Murzello, 2025). Students came out and claimed that literary stories offered them natural subjects to discuss, which allowed them to speak in purposeful situations as opposed to individual practices (Kumar and Murzello, 2025). Similar outcomes were obtained in Bangladesh, where the use of literature-based content learning instruction contributed to the increased length of oral

answers and the employment of target-language vocabulary in the classroom discourse (Farzana, 2024).

The previous pedagogical studies also concur with these regional findings. Based on these findings, Erkaya (2005) indicated that short stories are the effective tools to work on the oral competence by encouraging the discussion and interpretive speech, and Mart (2021) revealed that the use of the literature-based teaching contributes to developing the communicative competence by combining the linguistic input and conversational practice. Collectively, these studies indicate that LBI enhances speaking proficiency by generating authentic communicative scenarios where learners are required to negotiate meaning, express their views and support interpretations.

2. Development of Critical Thinking Skills

The second significant theme was relating to the role of LBI in developing critical thinking. In the studies, literature has been constantly explained as an instrument that encourages learners to participate in analysis, interpretation, and appraisal as opposed to a superficial understanding. In Sri Lanka, classroom-based research based on the qualitative approach revealed that those students who had been exposed to guided literary discussions were in a better position to provide articulated interpretations, differing perspectives and considering thematic meanings, which suggested a growth in higher-order thinking (Gunawardane et al., 2022; Ahmed, 2025).

Research in India also recommends this association. Khatib and Nourzadeh (2012) discovered that textual literature is a good stimulant of critical reasoning as it involves the learner to reason out motives, evaluate the choices of characters, and draw a linkage between the text and social realities. Their results are not strictly South Asian, but their findings relate to the regional evidence of classrooms reported by Kumar and Murzello (2025) as the author saw that interpretive tasks concerning short stories would cause students to develop arguments and justify their opinion more methodically than in grammar-oriented lessons.

Literature-based pedagogy in Bangladesh was linked to higher engagement between learners in evaluative talk and reflective discussion, particularly in cases when teachers used open-ended questions and themes discussions (Farzana, 2024). These were mentioned to provoke the capacity of the learners to reason, to formulate and argument ideas, which is consistent with the conceptualisation of critical thinking, which Facione (2011) considers as analysis and evaluation. The same Mart (2021) stated that literature will add depth to thinking as it will force students to look beyond the literal meaning and think about symbolic and

contextual interpretation.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that LBI does more than teach critical thinking as a matter of explicit teaching in reasoning alone, but as the result of interpretive interaction with the texts, which inherently immanent cognitive challenge into learning language.

3. Motivational and Affective Mediation

The third theme that was observed throughout the literature reviewed was a mediating factor of motivation and affect on the outcomes of speaking and critical thinking. A number of South Asian studies stated that learners were more engaged and interested in literary texts compared to traditional textbooks, which resulted in their higher participation and better attention (Ahmed, 2025; Farzana, 2024). It was found that learners in Sri Lanka were more intrinsically motivated when they received instruction in the form of stories and poems that touched upon human experience as opposed to abstract grammar exercises (Gunawardane et al., 2022).

This motivation effect seems to be strongly associated with the enhancement of speaking. The more involved emotionally in the content, the more a learner feels like speaking and not afraid of making a mistake (Mart, 2021). Erkaya (2005) also observed that literary narrative limits affective barriers because it does not emphasize linguistic accuracy like the meaning-making, which promotes risk-taking in oral communication. Students in Bangladesh also stated that they were less scared of discussing story themes as opposed to decontextualised questions, and this made them more willing to communicate (Farzana, 2024).

The critical thinking also involved motivation. Emotions of learners in relation to texts led to increased persistence in interpretive activities and more detailed arguments in discussions (Khatib and Nourzadeh, 2012; Mart, 2021). Therefore, the results indicate that speaking and critical thinking are indirectly increased by LBI that creates positive affective states promoting a more profound cognitive and communicative interaction.

4. Pedagogical Conditions and Constraints

Although the results of reviews were mainly positive, a number of conditions and limitations that affect the LBI efficacy were also identified. A frequent problem was that of text difficulty. In India and Sri Lanka, the teachers stated that too complicated literary texts did not allow the learners to engage and offered fewer possibilities to speak and critical discussions (Kumar and Murzello, 2025; Ahmed, 2025). The positive results were mostly

achieved when texts were properly chosen to correspond with the level of proficiency and cultural familiarity of learners (Mart, 2021).

The other limitation was on the expertise of teachers. In some of the studies, it was found that teachers were not trained formally to combine literature and language goals, instead resuming the old-fashioned explanative methods of teaching information instead of conversational ones (Farzana, 2024; Ahmed, 2025). Under these circumstances, literature was used as a content but not as a communicative resource and hence its effectiveness on speaking and thinking critically was minimized.

There were also contextual factors that were unique to South Asia. According to the study by Indrarathne and McCulloch (2022), the curriculum in Sri Lanka is exam-based, which focuses on grammatical accuracy and written assessment with little room to do dialogic and interpretive works. Other structural limitations were also mentioned in Bangladesh, where the use of discussion-based literature tasks was limited due to large class sizes and strict syllabi (Farzana, 2024). These results show that the LBI is best applied when it is possible to practice interactive pedagogy, flexible assessment and learner-centred classroom activities.

5. Synthesis in Relation to the Research Objectives

To answer the first research question, the studies reviewed have converging evidence that literature-based instruction can improve speaking proficiency as well as critical thinking of the South Asian L2 learners. The best outcomes in speaking were linked to the interactive literature which included role-play, discussion and dramatization (Gunawardane et al., 2022; Kumar and Murzello, 2025; Farzana, 2024). The improvement in critical thinking was associated with interpretive work with texts involving the Inference, Evaluation and Reflection (Khatib and Nourzadeh, 2012; Mart, 2021; Ahmed, 2025).

On reference to the second objective, a number of explanatory themes came out. The literature seems to reinforce language and thinking since it offers valid and substantial input, facilitates dialogic engagement, and drives higher-order thinking with interpretive activities (Mart, 2021). Learner motivation and affective engagement as additional mediators of LBI effectiveness minimize anxiety, enhancing the willingness to speak (Erkaya, 2005; Farzana, 2024). Nevertheless, these advantages depend on the conditions of pedagogy, such as the selection of adequate texts, the competence and the flexibility of the curriculum of teachers (Indrarathne and McCulloch, 2022; Kumar and Murzello, 2025).

Altogether, the results suggest that literature-based teaching can be a successful method in the pedagogical approach to solving the long-standing problems in South Asian L2 schooling, such as low oral mastery and low level of critical thinking, as long as it is carried out with the help of interactive and learner-centred ideas.

3.2 DISCUSSION

The systematic review was aimed at answering the research problem of whether literature-based instruction (LBI) improves speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills in South Asian L2 learners, and whether they can be explained by some thematic elements. The results show that both research objectives have been met by the study.

With respect to the first goal, the evidence reviewed shows that LBI plays a significant role in enhancing speaking proficiency through generating communicative situations, where the learners use to discuss, role-play, and interpret dialogues. Literary texts serve as a stimulus to interaction since they offer something meaningful which the learners can react to both at a personal and cognitive level and this enhances fluency, use of lexicon and desire to communicate. These results are in line with communicative principles of language teaching that underline the meaningful use of language but not the individualistic form-based practice. Notably, the results indicate that the most notable gains are observed on speaking when literature is applied with the help of interactive pedagogies and not teacher-centred explanation or purely analytical methods.

In relation to the second goal, the synthesis points to the fact that LBI contributes to the acquisition of critical thinking skills based on the interpretive and evaluative reading of texts. Students will have to derive meaning, support views, and contrast views, and this encourages higher-order thinking, analysis, and evaluation. The findings thus affirm that literature as a linguistic input is not a one-way process as it is also a mental stimulus that facilitates thoughtful and analytical thinking. This dual role of literature can be compared to constructivist opinions of learning where building of knowledge takes place through dialogue and interpretation.

The thematic analysis also found that motivation and affective engagement mediate such outcomes. Literary stories enhance the interest of the learner and emotional engagement which minimize the anxiety and motivate the learner to engage in speaking. The discovery is especially prominent in the South Asian contexts, where examination-based practices are prevalent in classrooms and learners can feel the fear of the mistake when speaking English. With the reversal of the accuracy to meaning-making, LBI provides a psychologically

supportive atmosphere to both communication and critical reflection.

However, contextual limitations were also found in the review such as poor choice of text, insufficient teacher training, and strict curricula. The success of LBI is preconditioned by these factors and is the reason why the results are different in the studies. So the usefulness of LBI lies not in literature per se but in the pedagogical practices of literature.

On the whole, the results substantiate the idea that the persistent issues of South Asian L2 education, that is, the lack of speaking confidence and the insufficient development of the critical thinking, can be resolved with the help of LBI when applied in a learner-centred and dialogic format.

5. CONCLUSION

The systematic review reviewed the effectiveness of literature-based instruction in improving the speaking proficiency and critical thinking skills of South Asian L2 learners. The results indicate that the research has managed to cover its research problem and meet its objectives. The literature reviewed shows that LBI has a positive effect on speaking proficiency through the promotion of natural communicative interaction and the promotion of meaningful use of language among learners. Simultaneously, it facilitates the process of critical thinking as it implies the involvement of the learners in the process of the interpretation, evaluation, and reflective discussion of the texts.

The thematic synthesis demonstrates that the advantages of LBI are mediated by motivational and affective variables, literary texts contributing more to the engagement of learners and less anxiety related to the oral communication. Nevertheless, the success of LBI depends on pedagogical factors like the right choice of text, the competence of the teacher and flexibility of the curriculum. These results are an indication that literature is not to be regarded as a content but, rather, as a strategic instructional tool in the process of unifying language and cognition.

To sum up, literature-based instruction is both a viable and a pedagogically rich strategy that can be employed as an enhancement of both communicative and cognitive outcomes in the South Asian L2 classrooms. The future studies ought to use longitudinal and mixed methods designs in measuring learning gains in a more systematic manner and in investigating how LBI can be best incorporated in examination-oriented systems of education.

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