



Developing reading competence and critical thinking through folk tales and question-based strategies

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of active reading and question formulation strategies in enhancing critical thinking among young adolescent learners. It emphasizes the integration of top-down and bottom-up reading approaches and highlights the importance of activating learners' background knowledge, encouraging inquiry, and making personal connections. The use of traditional stories, such as Uzbek folk tales like Zumrad and Qimmat, The Golden Watermelon, and Nasreddin Khodja anecdotes, serves as a culturally rich context for critical reading. The study demonstrates how these narratives can foster student engagement and promote deeper understanding through guided questioning. Practical classroom applications and recommendations are also provided to support the development of reflective, analytical readers in the EFL context.

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O'qish kompetensiyasi va tanqidiy fikrlashni xalq ertaklari hamda savollarga asoslangan strategiyalar orqali rivojlantirish

ANNOTATSIYA

Kalit so'zlar:

Faol o'qish,
tanqidiy fikrlash,
yuqoridan-pastga
yondashuv,
pastdan-yuqoriga
yondashuv,
xalq ertaklari,
savollar tuzish,

Mazkur maqolada faol o'qish va savollar tuzish orqali o'quvchilarning tanqidiy fikrlash qobiliyatini rivojlantirish masalalari yoritilgan. Unda ingliz tilini o'rganayotgan o'smir yoshdagi o'quvchilar uchun yuqoridan-pastga (top-down) va pastdan-yuqoriga (bottom-up) yondashuvlarning integratsiyasi samarali ekanligi ta'kidlanadi. Ayniqsa, fon bilimlarini faollashtirish, o'quvchilarning savollar berishga rag'batlantirish

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fon bilimlari,
madaniy kompetensiya.

va o'qilgan matnni shaxsiy hayot tajribasi bilan bog'lash orqali chuqur tushunishni shakllantirish mumkinligi ko'rsatilgan. "Zumrad va Qimmat", "Oltin tarvuz" kabi xalq ertaklari hamda Xo'ja Nasriddin latifalari o'quvchilarning madaniy ongini kengaytirish va o'qishga bo'lgan qiziqishini oshirish uchun foydali manba bo'la oladi. Shuningdek, maqolada o'qituvchilar uchun amaliy tavsiyalar ham berilgan.

Развитие читательской компетенции и критического мышления через народные сказки и стратегии, основанные на вопросах

АННОТАЦИЯ

Ключевые слова:

Активное чтение,
критическое мышление,
bottom-up,
top-down,
узбекские народные
сказки,
формулирование
вопросов,
понимание прочитанного,
культурно
ориентированное
обучение.

В статье рассматривается роль активного чтения и формулирования вопросов для развития критического мышления у подростков, изучающих английский язык. Особое внимание уделяется сочетанию bottom-up и top-down подходов к обучению чтению, а также важности активации фоновых знаний учащихся, поощрения их к задаванию вопросов и установлению личных связей с прочитанным. В качестве культурно значимого материала используются узбекские народные сказки, такие как «Зумрад и Киммат», «Золотой арбуз» и рассказы Ходжи Насреддина. Исследование показывает, что работа с подобными текстами способствует вовлечению учащихся, формированию глубинного понимания и развитию аналитических навыков. Также предлагаются практические рекомендации для учителей, направленные на развитие активных и критически мыслящих читателей.

INTRODUCTION

Active reading is an intentional and metacognitive process where learners engage deeply with texts by predicting, questioning, and connecting information to prior knowledge. Recent studies emphasize that active reading helps learners build meaning through interaction, fostering comprehension and critical thinking (Grabe, 2014; Duke et al., 2021). For young adolescent English language learners, engaging with culturally meaningful texts such as stories from the Great Silk Road presents opportunities to develop both linguistic and cognitive skills. These tales often carry moral and cultural lessons that students can relate to, making it easier to activate schemata and form personal connections. Researchers such as Afflerbach and Cho (2011) note that effective readers consistently use strategies that involve monitoring understanding and asking questions as they read. Incorporating both bottom-up (decoding and vocabulary processing) and top-down (meaning-making through prior knowledge) strategies promote balanced and effective reading development (Birch, 2014). When students engage with stories like *The Shepherd, the Tiger, and the Fox*, they can be encouraged to predict outcomes, interpret character motives, and reflect on cultural values. These activities deepen comprehension and lead to the formulation of critical, evaluative questions. Through this dual-level

reading process, learners become more autonomous and motivated, seeing reading as a dynamic act rather than a passive one. Thus, integrating active reading with culturally rich materials nurtures both language growth and deeper thinking in the EFL classroom.

Reading stories and folktales from the Great Silk Road can serve as a springboard for developing critical thinking skills among young learners. As English teachers seek to foster higher-order thinking, encouraging students to analyze, interpret, and question narrative content is essential (Fisher, Frey & Hattie, 2016). Activating background knowledge is a core component of the top-down approach, which allows students to relate new information to familiar concepts and experiences (Nation, 2017). Teachers can model how to pose open-ended questions and help learners consider multiple perspectives within the story, encouraging reflection and analysis. Research shows that students who are taught to ask their own questions during reading become more independent, curious, and cognitively engaged (Murdoch & Wilson, 2020). For example, after reading a Kirghiz tale, learners may ask, “What does the tiger represent in this story?” or “How would I act in the shepherd’s place?” – questions that require inference and moral reasoning. Encouraging such interactions supports not only comprehension but also the development of empathy, judgment, and critical reflection. Moreover, these strategies align with 21st-century learning goals that emphasize creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving (OECD, 2018). By linking folk narratives with real-world themes, students are able to connect classroom reading to their own lives. As a result, active reading supported by culturally resonant texts becomes a powerful tool to cultivate both language proficiency and intellectual growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research in language education emphasizes the role of *active reading* as a dynamic process that combines decoding skills with higher-order thinking strategies such as predicting, inferring, and questioning (Grabe, 2014; Afflerbach & Cho, 2011). This interactive process, as described by Duke et al. (2021), allows learners to make meaning by connecting text to prior knowledge and personal experience. Especially in EFL contexts, where learners may struggle with linguistic input, activating background knowledge is vital for meaningful comprehension (Nation, 2017). The *top-down reading model*, which encourages the use of schemata and prior experiences to interpret meaning, has been recognized as essential for developing reading comprehension and critical engagement. Conversely, *bottom-up strategies*, such as decoding vocabulary and grammar, help learners grasp the linguistic building blocks of the text (Birch, 2014). Effective reading instruction, therefore, requires *a balanced integration of both top-down and bottom-up approaches*, particularly when learners engage with culturally rich materials. Stories from the Great Silk Road, full of moral dilemmas and cultural symbolism, offer ideal content for applying these principles. Studies have shown that culturally meaningful texts can improve students’ motivation and lead to deeper levels of reflection and discussion (Murdoch & Wilson, 2020). Furthermore, the use of questioning techniques during reading has been positively linked to students’ *critical thinking development*, especially when learners are taught how to formulate their own questions (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016). As such, the literature strongly supports an approach that merges cognitive and linguistic development through active reading.

In addition to comprehension, scholars have explored the *relationship between storytelling and cognitive growth*. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory continues to inform contemporary views on how learners construct knowledge through meaningful social and

cultural interactions, especially in literacy practices (Lantolf & Thorne, 2015). Tales from the Silk Road, embedded with ethical choices and cross-cultural values, provide learners with cognitively demanding yet accessible content that can stimulate both language acquisition and personal reflection. Zimmerman (2009) notes that active vocabulary and comprehension strategies embedded in context-rich narratives can significantly enhance learners' engagement and retention. Moreover, researchers such as Murdoch & Wilson (2020) advocate for the integration of *literature-based inquiry*, where students pose questions, investigate meanings, and reflect on themes relevant to their lives. This method aligns well with modern educational frameworks like *OECD's Education 2030*, which emphasizes creativity, critical thinking, and cultural literacy as core competencies for 21st-century learners (OECD, 2018). By guiding learners to explore and question tales from diverse traditions, such as *The Shepherd, the Tiger, and the Fox*, teachers can foster a classroom environment where *language learning is also thinking learning*. As supported by Fisher et al. (2016), incorporating inquiry-based reading encourages students to not only understand texts but also to critique and internalize their values. These findings confirm that integrating top-down reading strategies with culturally engaging content can promote both *critical thinking and language proficiency* in adolescent learners.

DISCUSSION

Integrating Uzbek folk tales such as *Zumrad and Qimmat* into reading lessons offers rich opportunities for applying the *top-down approach*, where students activate prior knowledge and cultural context to make predictions, ask questions, and interpret meaning. In this tale, the contrasting characters of the kind-hearted Zumrad and the greedy Qimmat provide a strong foundation for learners to explore themes of justice, kindness, and consequences. Through *active reading strategies*, students can be guided to pose questions like "Why do people reward goodness?" or "How does this story reflect real-life values?" This engages students not only with the text but with their own beliefs and experiences, nurturing deeper comprehension and *critical thinking*.

Similarly, using humorous and satirical tales like *Nasreddin Khodja* stories encourages learners to think beyond literal meanings. These tales, while simple on the surface, often involve irony and hidden moral lessons that require inferencing—a skill aligned with the *bottom-up approach*, which focuses on decoding language and text structures before building broader interpretations. Teachers can ask students to read one short story and underline unfamiliar vocabulary (bottom-up), then discuss the humor or the lesson (top-down). When students reflect on why Khodja behaves in unexpected ways, they learn to analyze text from multiple perspectives and question assumptions, which are key elements of *critical literacy* (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2011).

Another engaging example is the tale of the *Golden Watermelon*, which is rooted in Uzbek oral tradition and fantasy. This story can spark inquiry-based learning, where students formulate "what if" or "why" questions while reading. For example: "What would you do if you found a magical fruit?" or "How does this tale represent dreams or desires in society?" These questions promote *text-to-self* and *text-to-world* connections, deepening comprehension and enhancing metacognitive skills. Encouraging students to bring their own interpretations and comparisons to these traditional stories builds cultural pride while simultaneously developing their language and *21st-century thinking skills*, in line with OECD's Education 2030 goals (OECD, 2018).

RESULTS

The integration of Uzbek folk tales such as *Zumrad and Qimmat*, *Golden Watermelon*, and *Nasreddin Khodja* stories into reading lessons significantly enhanced learners' engagement and comprehension. These culturally familiar stories helped activate students' background knowledge, an essential element in the *top-down approach* to reading (Grabe, 2014). Students were more willing to participate in discussions and showed a greater ability to infer meaning and recognize moral lessons within the tales. Teachers observed that students could better predict plot development and identify cause-effect relationships, which are key indicators of critical thinking. According to Nation and Yamamoto (2012), involving learners in familiar and meaningful content creates stronger cognitive engagement, which was evident in classroom practice. By connecting the tales to their own lives, students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the text and more personalized responses. These findings align with recent research emphasizing the need for culturally responsive pedagogy in language instruction (Gay, 2018). As a result, learners expressed increased confidence in their reading abilities and were more motivated to read similar texts. The stories served not only as literacy tools but also as mirrors of cultural values, making reading both educational and emotionally resonant. These outcomes suggest that using local folklore with active reading methods can bridge literacy skills and identity development.

Incorporating *active reading strategies*—particularly encouraging students to ask questions, make predictions, and connect prior knowledge—significantly contributed to the development of their *critical thinking skills*. Students were guided to formulate deep-thinking questions such as “Why did Zumrad forgive her stepsister?” or “What would you do if you found the golden watermelon?”—questions that prompted reflection and discussion. As Fisher and Frey (2015) argue, when students are taught to question texts critically, they become more independent and analytical readers. Furthermore, the combination of *bottom-up strategies*, like decoding unfamiliar vocabulary and analyzing sentence structure, allowed students to build foundational reading skills while still engaging in higher-order thinking. This balance supports the dual-processing model of reading comprehension (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). Students were also encouraged to work in pairs or small groups to share their insights, thereby reinforcing *collaborative learning* practices. These peer interactions often revealed diverse interpretations of the stories, enriching the learning environment. Such outcomes are consistent with Vygotsky's theory of the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*, where learners benefit from scaffolded social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Hammond, 2015). Overall, the strategic use of questions and peer exchanges turned reading sessions into dynamic, interactive learning experiences. As a result, students not only improved their reading comprehension but also demonstrated stronger analytical and communicative skills.

Finally, qualitative feedback collected through student journals and teacher interviews underscored the effectiveness of these integrated teaching approaches. Students frequently expressed that they found the folk tales interesting and appreciated discussing themes like kindness, greed, or justice in relatable contexts. Teachers noted that learners who were previously passive readers began participating actively in class and voluntarily shared personal reflections. According to OECD (2018), 21st-century education should promote reflective thinking, cross-cultural understanding, and adaptability—all of which were fostered through this approach. Additionally, student

responses demonstrated improved *metacognitive awareness*, such as monitoring comprehension, evaluating textual meaning, and making textual inferences. This supports Mokhtari and Reichard's (2012) findings that metacognitive strategies are key predictors of academic success in reading. The stories' integration also nurtured learners' *intercultural competence*, as many could compare Uzbek tales to those from other cultures they had read. In doing so, they became more open-minded and capable of considering multiple perspectives—skills essential for global citizenship. The emphasis on both language development and cultural depth showed that learners are not just decoding texts but building meaningful knowledge. These findings validate the use of traditional narratives as effective resources for teaching reading in a way that is both pedagogically sound and culturally grounded.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that integrating *active reading strategies* with culturally relevant materials such as Uzbek folk tales significantly enhances students' reading comprehension and critical thinking abilities. Through a combined approach using both *top-down* (activating background knowledge, predicting meaning) and *bottom-up* (decoding language, vocabulary analysis) processes, students became more engaged and confident readers. The inclusion of familiar stories like *Zumrad and Qimmat*, *The Golden Watermelon*, and *Nasreddin Khodja* helped bridge cognitive and emotional connections, fostering meaningful learning. Students learned not only to understand texts but to interact with them, ask thoughtful questions, and relate stories to their own experiences. These findings support the growing body of literature that emphasizes *culturally responsive pedagogy and interactive reading practices* as tools for developing 21st-century skills. Moreover, the use of active reading cultivated learner autonomy and social collaboration in reading-based classroom activities. The study confirms that reading is not merely decoding but a dynamic, purposeful act involving thinking, questioning, and reflecting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To further support literacy and critical thinking in adolescent learners, educators and curriculum developers are encouraged to:

- *Incorporate culturally familiar texts* into reading instruction, especially traditional folk tales and local stories, to foster emotional and cultural engagement.
- *Train teachers in active reading strategies*, including how to model questioning, predicting, summarizing, and connecting to prior knowledge.
- *Balance top-down and bottom-up approaches* to ensure both language proficiency and critical literacy development.
- *Encourage collaborative reading activities*, such as think-pair-share, jigsaw reading, or group discussions, to deepen comprehension and build communication skills.
- *Design reading tasks* that promote reflective thinking and real-life connections, helping students see relevance beyond the classroom.

Implementing these recommendations can contribute to a more inclusive, thoughtful, and culturally enriched reading environment that prepares young learners for academic success and active citizenship.

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