

Literary Text Engagement and Critical Meaning-Making among Secondary English Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study traced how engagement with literary texts shaped the critical meaning-making of secondary English learners at Santo Tomas National High School. Using an explanatory-predictive cross-sectional design, data were gathered through the Literary Text Engagement and Critical Meaning-Making Battery, which measured focused attention, emotional involvement, interpretive participation, dialogic response, persistence with textual difficulty, and critical interpretation. Descriptive statistics, bias-corrected bootstrap correlation, hierarchical multiple regression with HC3 standard errors, and dominance analysis were applied. Results showed that learners demonstrated a high level of literary text engagement, with focused attention and emotional involvement receiving the strongest ratings. Their

critical meaning-making, however, remained at a developing level, particularly in perspective awareness, use of textual evidence, and critical judgment. Overall literary text engagement was positively and significantly associated with critical meaning-making. Interpretive participation emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by persistence with textual difficulty and dialogic response. The findings indicated that learners' interest in literary works did not automatically result in deeper interpretation unless engagement involved sustained analysis, evidence-based discussion, and willingness to work through textual complexity. The study concluded that literature instruction should move beyond recall and personal reaction by integrating close reading, guided rereading, dialogic interpretation, perspective analysis, and explicit use of textual evidence. These practices may help secondary learners become more reflective, analytical, and independent readers of literary texts.

Keywords: *critical literacy, critical meaning-making, literary engagement, literary interpretation, secondary English learners, textual evidence*

INTRODUCTION

Literary reading occupies a distinctive place in English education because it asks learners to participate in the life of a text rather than merely retrieve information from it. A poem, short story, novel, or drama may invite attention to language, character, conflict, imagery, voice, and human experience. Engagement develops when learners willingly sustain their attention, respond emotionally and intellectually, connect the text with their own understanding, and remain involved even when interpretation becomes difficult. Research involving high school readers has treated attentional stance, modes of reading engagement, and self-insight as related but distinguishable features of literary reading, showing that meaningful engagement includes more than observable participation or the completion of assigned tasks (Grandits & Krek, 2023).

Literary engagement becomes educationally valuable when learners move beyond literal comprehension and begin constructing interpretations from textual details. Critical meaning-making involves noticing patterns, questioning assumptions, considering alternative explanations, and supporting an interpretation with evidence

from the text. It also requires readers to reconsider first impressions when new details challenge their initial understanding. In a study of students in Grades 10 to 12, literature instruction was described as a possible school for thinking because literary texts encouraged learners to interrupt automatic judgments and reconstruct meaning through conscious reflection. Such experiences suggest that literary reading can strengthen the habit of examining how an interpretation is formed rather than accepting the first available explanation (Koek et al., 2019).

Meaning in literature is not always produced privately. It may develop through classroom conversations in which learners compare observations, challenge one another's claims, clarify confusion, and discover interpretations that would not have emerged through individual reading alone. Student talk may include hesitation, humor, disagreement, personal reactions, and shifts in position, yet these features do not necessarily weaken literary learning. An analysis of lower secondary students' conversations about literature found that playful and double-voiced discourse could carry interpretive value when learners used it to negotiate their relationship with the text and with their classmates. Literary discussion therefore deserves attention as a space where engagement becomes visible and meaning is jointly developed (Skaftun & Sønneland, 2021).

The role of engagement is especially important when literature is read through English by learners who may still be developing proficiency in the language. Literary texts contain figurative expressions, unfamiliar cultural references, indirect characterization, shifting viewpoints, and meanings that are not stated openly. These features can enrich interpretation, but they may also create distance between the learner and the text when instruction focuses heavily on vocabulary recall, factual questions, or predetermined explanations. Case studies of literature programs in secondary English as a foreign language class showed that learners' experiences were shaped by text selection, instructional purpose, teacher mediation, and the opportunities provided for sustained reading and personal response. The findings indicate that the presence of literary texts alone does not guarantee engagement because the manner in which learners are invited to read, discuss, and interpret them remains equally important (Sun, 2023).

Literary competence further depends on the reader's willingness to enter the text while using strategies that support interpretation. Receptiveness to literature, immersion, information processing, reading strategies, and the need for structure may influence how learners approach ambiguity and construct meaning. Upper secondary English learners do not necessarily demonstrate the same patterns of literary competence even when they are exposed to similar texts and classroom requirements. Some may rely on plot and explicit information, while others attend to style, symbolism, perspective, and the relationship between form and meaning. Evidence from upper secondary English learners suggests that literary competence is connected with distinct reader profiles, making it necessary to examine both the quality of interpretation and the ways learners engage with the act of literary reading (Calafato & Hunstadbråten, 2025).

The language of the literary text may also affect the depth of the reading experience. Learners can understand the general events of a story without becoming absorbed in its world or appreciating the way it is written. Conversely, emotional involvement may encourage readers to persist when the language is demanding. A study of Grade 10 learners reading short stories in a foreign language examined absorption and appreciation as central aspects of literary experience. Its attention to pleasure, involvement, and linguistic difficulty shows why literary learning should not be measured solely through correct answers. Learners' willingness to imagine scenes, follow characters, and remain attentive to narrative development may shape the quality of the meanings they eventually produce (Ramachers & Willems, 2024).

Critical meaning-making also calls on learners to examine whose experiences are represented, whose voices are silenced, and how language may reproduce assumptions about identity and social relationships. Literary texts are not neutral containers of themes. They present particular versions of people, communities, conflicts, and values. Critical literacy instruction encourages learners to investigate authorial choices, question representations, compare perspectives, and consider how readers may respond differently according to their own experiences. Work on empathic analysis has shown how dialogue and inquiry around literature can help learners examine gender labels while balancing critical questioning with attention to the experiences of others. This approach

positions literary interpretation as both analytical and ethical because learners are asked to evaluate representation without reducing characters and social issues to simple judgments (Savitz et al., 2024).

Learners' broader reading culture may influence whether they feel capable of undertaking such interpretive work. Reading culture includes access to texts, established habits, purposes for reading, personal interest, and the value attached to reading within home and school environments. Secondary learners who regularly interact with different kinds of texts may become more confident in questioning information, recognizing implicit meanings, and evaluating an author's claims. A study of secondary school students found a positive and strong relationship between reading culture and critical reading self-efficacy, with reading culture explaining a meaningful share of the variation in learners' confidence in critical reading. The finding supports the view that critical interpretation is connected not only with isolated classroom exercises but also with sustained patterns of reading participation (Maden et al., 2026).

The need to strengthen deeper forms of reading is particularly pressing in Philippine secondary education. The Philippine country note for the Programme for International Student Assessment reported that only 24 percent of Filipino students reached at least Level 2 proficiency in reading in 2022. At this level, students can identify a main idea, locate information using stated criteria, and reflect on aspects of a text when directly guided. Almost no Filipino participants reached Level 5 or higher, where readers are expected to comprehend lengthy texts, manage abstract ideas, and distinguish fact from opinion through implicit cues. These results do not measure literary engagement alone, but they reveal continuing difficulties in the comprehension, reflection, and evaluation skills that support critical encounters with literary texts (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023).

Within secondary English classes, learners may display visible interest in stories and poems without consistently developing well-supported interpretations. Others may possess adequate comprehension skills but participate minimally because the texts, tasks, or classroom exchanges do not invite personal and intellectual investment. This distinction makes it necessary to investigate literary text engagement and critical meaning-making as connected variables. Examining their relationship may clarify whether learners who show stronger attentional, emotional, interpretive, and participatory involvement with literary texts also demonstrate a greater capacity to identify implicit meanings, analyze perspectives, evaluate textual choices, connect ideas with social realities, and justify interpretations through evidence.

Guided by this concern, the research determine how learners engage with literary texts and how they construct critical meanings from what they read. It gives attention to literary learning as an active process in which comprehension, emotion, reflection, dialogue, and judgment work together. By focusing on secondary English learners, the study may provide evidence for designing literature instruction that does not treat learners as passive recipients of established interpretations. Instead, it may support classroom practices that help them become attentive readers who can enter a literary work, question its meanings, listen to other interpretations, and defend their own understanding with care and textual evidence.

Literature Review

Literary Text Engagement as a Multidimensional Reading Experience

Engagement with literary texts involves more than reading assigned selections or answering questions about plot and character. It includes the learner's attention to language, emotional involvement in the literary experience, willingness to interpret unfamiliar ideas, and participation in activities surrounding the text. Literary engagement may deepen when learners recognize that literature contributes not only to language proficiency but also to personal reflection, cultural knowledge, and understanding of how texts are constructed. Bloemert et al. (2019) found that secondary learners identified several benefits of English literature education, although many initially viewed literatures mainly as a means of improving language skills. Differences across schools also indicated that students' appreciation of literature was influenced by how literary learning was presented and experienced in class. This suggests that engagement is shaped by the interaction among the text, the reader, the language being learned, and the instructional environment. Literature-based language learning can support

linguistic development, cultural awareness, and critical thinking, but its benefits may be limited when texts are linguistically inaccessible, culturally distant, or taught without sufficient attention to learner motivation. Appropriate text selection, guided interpretation, and opportunities for personal response are therefore necessary for sustaining meaningful participation in literary reading (Hossain, 2024).

Close Reading and the Development of Literary Interpretation

Critical meaning-making depends on learners' ability to examine how literary language contributes to meaning. Readers must recognize that mood, characterization, conflict, symbolism, and perspective are produced through deliberate choices in words, images, structures, and narrative techniques. Johansson (2023) found that middle school learners sometimes described narrative reading as difficult or uninteresting when they struggled to understand the text or could not establish a meaningful relationship with it. Their responses showed that comprehension difficulty could restrict interpretive involvement, particularly when learners concentrated on isolated events without considering narrative form and implied meaning. Literary interpretation therefore requires instruction that makes textual features visible without reducing reading to the identification of technical terms. Wilson et al. (2024) demonstrated that teaching learners to compare literary texts and examine how authors create effects could strengthen close reading, metalinguistic knowledge, literary analysis, and writing. Their findings also showed that recognizing language features alone was insufficient because learners needed to connect those features with their functions and effects. Critical interpretation becomes stronger when students can move from noticing a textual detail to explaining how it shapes a larger meaning and supporting that explanation with evidence from the literary work.

Dialogic Literary Discussion and Collaborative Meaning-Making

The ambiguity of literary texts allows readers to propose different interpretations, but these interpretations gain scholarly value when they can be examined against textual evidence. Classroom dialogue gives learners a setting in which they can express uncertainty, compare perspectives, revise earlier claims, and explain why a particular interpretation is defensible. Magirius et al. (2023) argued that high-level literary comprehension develops through discussion of questions that are both grounded in the text and open to disagreement. Questions concerning indirect information, uncertainty, and multiple possible meanings encourage learners to investigate how parts of a text relate to one another rather than search for a single answer already known by the teacher. Peer discussion may also allow learners to draw from cultural and linguistic experiences that conventional comprehension activities do not always recognize. Aragón (2022) found that bilingual learners used shared experiences and linguistic knowledge to interpret and reframe a narrative during close-reading discussions. Their exchanges demonstrated that meaning-making was dynamic and socially constructed rather than confined to the literal wording of the text. Dialogic literary instruction can therefore support critical meaning-making when students are expected to listen, question, disagree respectfully, reconsider evidence, and develop interpretations collectively.

Critical Literacy, Perspective, and Social Meaning

Critical meaning-making extends literary interpretation beyond identifying themes or explaining an author's technique. It asks learners to examine how texts represent identity, culture, power, inequality, and relationships between social groups. Zhang (2023) showed that critical literacy practices in secondary language and literature classrooms were shaped by curriculum expectations, teacher experiences, multilingual resources, digital media, and learners' cross-border knowledge. The findings emphasized that students' cognitive analysis should be connected with their histories, languages, social realities, and varied modes of communication. A literary text may therefore be studied not only for what it says but also for the viewpoints it privileges, the experiences it omits, and the assumptions it invites readers to accept. Arvianti et al. (2025) likewise found that critical literacy instruction helped learners examine texts through alternative viewpoints, connect language with sociopolitical concerns, and reflect on ethical and human values. Such reading requires learners to question familiar representations, consider experiences different from their own, investigate how language shapes social

meaning, and decide how ideas encountered in a text relate to life outside the classroom. These processes position critical meaning-making as an interpretive, reflective, and socially responsive form of literary learning.

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed an explanatory-predictive cross-sectional design to examine the connection between literary text engagement and critical meaning-making among secondary English learners. This design allowed the researcher to describe how learners engaged with literary works, determine the level of their critical meaning-making, and estimate the extent to which specific forms of literary engagement accounted for differences in critical interpretation. The variables were measured within the learners' regular educational setting without introducing an experimental treatment or altering their English lessons. The explanatory component focused on the association between the two constructs, while the predictive component identified which dimensions of literary text engagement contributed most strongly to critical meaning-making. Although predictive procedures were used, the design did not assume a causal relationship between the variables because the data were collected at one point in time.

Research Locale

The investigation was conducted at Santo Tomas National High School in Centro, Santo Tomas, Isabela. The school provided secondary English instruction in which learners encountered literary selections such as poems, short stories, narrative texts, plays, and other works prescribed or recommended within the English curriculum. The locale was considered suitable because literary reading formed part of the learners' classroom experiences and required them to interpret language, identify implied meanings, discuss differing viewpoints, and relate textual ideas to personal and social concerns. Data collection took place during a period that did not conflict with major examinations, school programs, or required instructional activities.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants consisted of secondary learners who were officially enrolled at Santo Tomas National High School and had completed classroom lessons involving literary texts in English. Proportionate stratified random sampling was used to ensure that learners from the eligible grade levels were represented according to their distribution in the school population. Each grade level served as a sampling stratum, after which participants were selected randomly from the official class lists. Learners were included when they had received parental or guardian consent, had provided their own assent, and were present during the scheduled administration. Learners who submitted substantially incomplete responses or did not complete the literary interpretation task were excluded from the final analysis. The sampling process avoided the selection of participants based on academic standing, teacher recommendation, or perceived reading ability.

Research Instrument

Data were collected through the Literary Text Engagement and Critical Meaning-Making Battery developed for the study. The first component was the Literary Text Engagement Scale, which measured focused attention, emotional involvement, interpretive participation, dialogic response, and persistence when reading challenging literary works. Its statements were answered through a five-point response scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The second component was the Critical Meaning-Making Assessment, which presented age-appropriate literary passages followed by constructed-response prompts. The prompts required learners to infer unstated meanings, interpret literary choices, examine character or speaker perspectives, evaluate representations and assumptions, and justify conclusions using textual evidence. Responses were evaluated through an analytic rubric covering interpretive depth, use of evidence, perspective awareness, critical judgment, and coherence of explanation.

The initial instrument was reviewed by a panel composed of specialists in English education, literature instruction, educational research, and language assessment. The panel examined the alignment of the items with the study variables, the appropriateness of the literary passages, the clarity of the directions, and the suitability of the language for secondary learners. Item-level content validity indices ranged from .83 to 1.00, while the scale-level content validity index based on the average method was .94. Revisions were made to statements that appeared repetitive, abstract, or open to more than one interpretation. Cognitive checking was also conducted with a small group of learners to determine whether the directions, response choices, and literary prompts were understood as intended.

The revised instrument was pilot-tested among secondary learners from a comparable public school who were not included in the main investigation. The Literary Text Engagement Scale produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .93, indicating strong internal consistency. The scoring dimensions of the Critical Meaning-Making Assessment obtained an alpha coefficient of .89. Two trained English teachers independently scored the constructed responses, and the intraclass correlation coefficient reached .91, indicating a high level of agreement between raters. Results from the pilot administration also guided minor adjustments to passage length, task instructions, scoring descriptions, and administration time.

Data Gathering

Permission to conduct the study was secured from the appropriate school authorities before contact was made with the selected learners. After the sampling process, parental or guardian consent forms and learner assent forms were distributed and explained using language appropriate to the participants. Data collection was scheduled in coordination with the English teachers and class advisers to minimize disruption to regular instruction.

The instruments were administered in two supervised sessions. During the first session, the learners completed the Literary Text Engagement Scale using coded response sheets that did not require their names. During the second session, they read the selected literary passages and completed the Critical Meaning-Making Assessment. Standardized directions were read before each administration, and clarifications were limited to procedural concerns so that no learner received assistance in interpreting the literary texts. The English teachers who regularly handled the participants did not score or inspect the responses during data collection.

The completed assessment papers were independently evaluated by two trained raters using the validated analytic rubric. Before formal scoring, the raters participated in a calibration activity using sample responses that were not part of the final dataset. Differences in scoring were reviewed through the rubric descriptors, and unresolved ratings were discussed until an evidence-based agreement was reached. The encoded data were checked against the original response sheets, and a second verification was performed to identify missing entries, scoring inconsistencies, and encoding errors.

Data Analysis

The Literary Text Engagement Scale was summarized using the mean, standard deviation, and 95 percent confidence interval for each dimension and for the overall scale. Scores from the Critical Meaning-Making Assessment were summarized using the mean, standard deviation, observed score range, and confidence interval. Distributional characteristics were examined through skewness, kurtosis, histograms, and residual plots before inferential procedures were conducted.

The relationship between literary text engagement and critical meaning-making was tested through a bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap correlation with 5,000 resamples. This procedure was selected because it provided a more stable confidence interval and reduced dependence on strict normality assumptions. The magnitude of the relationship was interpreted using the correlation coefficient together with its bootstrapped 95 percent confidence interval and probability value.

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to determine whether the dimensions of literary text engagement predicted critical meaning-making. The overall engagement score was entered first, followed by focused attention, emotional involvement, interpretive participation, dialogic response, and persistence with textual difficulty. Heteroskedasticity-consistent HC3 standard errors were used to provide more dependable estimates when the

variability of residuals was unequal. Multicollinearity was examined through tolerance values and variance inflation factors, while influential cases were checked using standardized residuals, leverage values, and Cook's distance.

Dominance analysis was subsequently performed to compare the relative contribution of each engagement dimension across all possible predictor combinations. This procedure allowed the researcher to identify which dimension consistently explained the greatest share of variance in critical meaning-making rather than relying only on the size of standardized regression coefficients. Statistical decisions were made at the .05 level of significance. Effect sizes and confidence intervals were reported alongside probability values to emphasize the practical strength and precision of the findings.

Ethical Consideration

The study observed the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, learner assent, confidentiality, fairness, and protection from academic disadvantage. Parents or guardians received information about the purpose of the research, the activities required from the learners, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures used to protect the collected information. Learners were informed that they could decline participation, omit a question that cause discomfort, or withdraw before submitting their responses without penalty.

No learner names, student numbers, or identifying classroom information appeared in the working dataset. Codes were used to connect the engagement scale with the corresponding critical meaning-making assessment. Participation and performance did not affect English grades, classroom standing, or access to school activities. The literary passages were screened to avoid content that could be developmentally inappropriate, discriminatory, or unnecessarily distressing. Electronic records were stored in password-protected files, while printed instruments were kept in a secured location accessible only to the researcher. Findings were presented in aggregate form, and individual responses were not disclosed to teachers, classmates, or other unauthorized persons. The research records were retained only for the period required for analysis, verification, and publication, after which the files were securely deleted and the printed materials were properly destroyed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. *Level of Literary Text Engagement among Secondary English Learners*

Dimension	Mean	SD	95% CI	Skewness	Kurtosis	Interpretation
Focused attention	3.88	0.61	[3.79, 3.97]	-0.42	0.18	High
Emotional involvement	3.76	0.66	[3.66, 3.86]	-0.36	0.11	High
Interpretive participation	3.61	0.69	[3.51, 3.71]	-0.21	-0.08	High
Dialogic response	3.43	0.72	[3.32, 3.54]	-0.14	-0.19	High
Persistence with textual difficulty	3.25	0.74	[3.14, 3.36]	0.08	-0.31	Moderate
Overall literary text engagement	3.59	0.55	[3.51, 3.67]	-0.29	0.16	High

Note. Mean ranges were interpreted as follows: 1.00 to 1.80, very low; 1.81 to 2.60, low; 2.61 to 3.40, moderate; 3.41 to 4.20, high; and 4.21 to 5.00, very high.

Table 1 shows that the learners demonstrated a high overall level of literary text engagement, with a mean of 3.59. Focused attention received the highest rating, indicating that the learners generally concentrated on assigned poems, stories, plays, and other literary selections during classroom activities. Emotional involvement also obtained a high mean, suggesting that learners were able to respond to characters, conflicts, themes, and situations presented in the texts. These findings showed that literature could hold the learners' attention and invite personal reactions.

Interpretive participation and dialogic response were also rated high, although their means were lower than those for attention and emotional involvement. The result suggested that learners participated in interpretation and classroom exchanges, but their involvement was less consistent when they were required to explain hidden meanings, compare interpretations, or respond to opposing views. Walldén (2022) found that character-focused literary discussions could encourage evaluation, inference, empathy, and connections between literary events and readers' experiences. The present pattern supported the value of discussion while indicating that participation needed to move beyond brief reactions and retelling.

Persistence with textual difficulty received the lowest mean and was the only dimension interpreted as moderate. Learners appeared less willing or less prepared to continue reading when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary, indirect narration, figurative language, shifting perspectives, or culturally distant references. This result identified a practical concern because sustained engagement weakened precisely when deeper interpretation was most necessary. The finding implied that learners might remain attentive to accessible literary works but withdraw when the text demanded rereading, inference, and prolonged examination. Literary lessons should therefore include structured support for difficult passages without removing the productive challenge that encourages thoughtful reading.

The narrow confidence intervals indicated that the estimates were reasonably precise, while the skewness and kurtosis values showed no serious departure from normality. The descriptive findings nevertheless revealed an imbalance within the engagement construct. Learners showed stronger attention and emotional response than persistence and collaborative interpretation. Engagement was therefore present, but it did not operate equally across all forms of literary participation.

Table 2. *Level of Critical Meaning-Making among Secondary English Learners*

Dimension	Mean	SD	95% CI	Skewness	Kurtosis	Interpretation
Interpretive depth	3.27	0.68	[3.17, 3.37]	-0.10	-0.14	Developing
Use of textual evidence	3.02	0.71	[2.91, 3.13]	0.17	-0.23	Developing
Perspective awareness	2.88	0.75	[2.77, 2.99]	0.26	-0.29	Developing
Critical judgment	3.11	0.70	[3.01, 3.21]	0.12	-0.18	Developing
Coherence of explanation	3.46	0.65	[3.36, 3.56]	-0.31	0.09	Proficient
Overall critical meaning-making	3.15	0.56	[3.07, 3.23]	0.05	-0.11	Developing

Note. Performance ranges were interpreted as follows: 1.00 to 1.80, beginning; 1.81 to 2.60, emerging; 2.61 to 3.40, developing; 3.41 to 4.20, proficient; and 4.21 to 5.00, advanced.

Table 2 indicates that the learners' overall critical meaning-making was at the developing level, with a mean of 3.15. This result contrasted with their high literary engagement. Although learners generally attended to literary texts and responded to them emotionally, many had not yet developed consistent proficiency in constructing critical, evidence-based interpretations. The difference between the two overall means suggested that being interested in a literary work did not automatically lead to deeper analysis.

Coherence of explanation was the only dimension rated proficient. Learners were generally able to organize their responses and present understandable explanations. However, the content of these explanations did not always show equal depth. Interpretive depth remained developing, suggesting that responses often identified visible themes or character traits without fully explaining ambiguity, symbolism, narrative perspective, or the interaction between literary form and meaning.

Use of textual evidence also remained developing. Learners appeared able to refer to events or statements from a text, but some responses relied on broad summaries, personal opinions, or unsupported assertions. Magirius et al. (2023) emphasized that high-level literary comprehension involves weighing alternative interpretations and testing them against evidence from the text. The present result indicated that learners needed clearer instruction in selecting relevant passages, explaining their significance, and connecting evidence with an interpretive claim.

Perspective awareness obtained the lowest mean. This finding showed that learners had difficulty recognizing how a narrator's position, a character's limited knowledge, cultural assumptions, or absent voices shaped the meaning of a literary work. Some learners may have treated the narrator's presentation as neutral or interpreted characters solely through personal approval and disapproval. The result represented a central problem for critical meaning-making because critical reading requires the consideration of whose viewpoint is represented, how it is constructed, and what alternative perspectives might change the interpretation.

Critical judgment was likewise developing. Learners could express agreement, disagreement, sympathy, or criticism, but their judgments were not always grounded in textual details or careful examination of competing meanings. Bağ and Gürsoy (2021) demonstrated that critical thinking could be integrated into secondary English instruction when analytical questioning was embedded in learning objectives, classroom activities, assignments, and assessment. The present result suggested that critical judgment should be taught as an explicit part of literary analysis rather than expected to emerge from ordinary comprehension exercises.

Table 3. *Bootstrap Correlations between Literary Text Engagement and Critical Meaning-Making*

Literary text engagement variable	Correlation with critical meaning-making, r	BCa 95% CI	p value	Magnitude
Focused attention	0.32	[0.18, 0.45]	.001	Moderate
Emotional involvement	0.28	[0.13, 0.41]	.003	Small to moderate
Interpretive participation	0.54	[0.42, 0.64]	< .001	Moderate to strong
Dialogic response	0.46	[0.33, 0.57]	< .001	Moderate
Persistence with textual difficulty	0.49	[0.36, 0.60]	< .001	Moderate
Overall literary text engagement	0.57	[0.45, 0.67]	< .001	Moderate to strong

Note. BCa confidence intervals were produced through 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

Table 3 shows a statistically significant positive relationship between overall literary text engagement and critical meaning-making, $r = .57, p < .001$. The confidence interval did not include zero, providing stable evidence of a positive association. Learners who demonstrated stronger engagement with literary texts generally produced more developed interpretations, used evidence more effectively, recognized perspectives more clearly, and expressed more defensible judgments.

The magnitude of the overall correlation was moderate to strong. Approximately 32.5 percent of the variation shared by the two overall scores could be represented by the squared correlation. This did not mean that engagement caused critical meaning-making. Rather, it showed that the two constructs tended to rise together within the observed data. Other influences, including language proficiency, prior reading experience, instructional quality, vocabulary knowledge, and familiarity with literary conventions, could also have contributed to the learners' performance.

Interpretive participation had the strongest dimension-level correlation with critical meaning-making. Learners who actively proposed meanings, raised questions, reconsidered interpretations, and explained textual details tended to achieve stronger critical responses. Persistence with textual difficulty had the second strongest relationship. This result was important because persistence received the lowest descriptive mean in Table 1 but was strongly connected with the outcome. It indicated that one of the learners' weakest areas was also one of the dimensions most closely associated with successful meaning-making.

Dialogic response showed a moderate positive relationship with critical meaning-making. Literary interaction appeared to provide opportunities for learners to hear competing interpretations, identify overlooked evidence, and revise their own understanding. Research on literary classroom dialogue has shown that well-supported discussion can move learners toward inference, evaluation, and evidence-based interpretation rather than simple recall (Magirius et al., 2023; Walldén, 2022).

Focused attention and emotional involvement were significantly related to critical meaning-making, but their associations were weaker than those for interpretive participation, persistence, and dialogic response.

Attention and emotional reaction appeared to create favorable conditions for literary learning, but they were not sufficient by themselves. Learners could concentrate on a story and care about its characters without examining how language, structure, representation, and perspective shaped its meaning.

Table 4. *HC3 Multiple Regression Models Predicting Critical Meaning-Making*

Model and predictor	B	HC3 SE	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> value	95% CI for B	VIF
Model 1							
Constant	1.08	0.25		4.32	< .001	[0.58, 1.58]	
Overall literary text engagement	0.58	0.07	0.57	8.29	< .001	[0.44, 0.72]	1.00
Model 2							
Constant	0.71	0.27		2.63	.010	[0.18, 1.24]	
Focused attention	0.08	0.06	0.09	1.33	.185	[-0.04, 0.20]	1.52
Emotional involvement	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.80	.425	[-0.06, 0.14]	1.38
Interpretive participation	0.23	0.06	0.28	3.83	< .001	[0.11, 0.35]	1.86
Dialogic response	0.14	0.06	0.17	2.33	.021	[0.02, 0.26]	1.69
Persistence with textual difficulty	0.19	0.06	0.23	3.17	.002	[0.07, 0.31]	1.74
Model summary							
	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Δ R ²	F	<i>p</i> value		
Model 1	0.325	0.321	0.325	68.42	< .001		
Model 2	0.431	0.414	0.106	27.10	< .001		

Note. Model 1 tested the overall engagement score. Model 2 decomposed the composite score into its five dimensions. The overall score was not retained in Model 2 to prevent duplication with its component dimensions. HC3 standard errors were applied because the Breusch-Pagan test indicated unequal residual variance, $\chi^2 = 12.47$, $p = .029$. Variance inflation factors ranged from 1.38 to 1.86. The largest Cook's distance was .09, and standardized residuals ranged from -2.73 to 2.49.

Table 4 shows that overall literary text engagement significantly predicted critical meaning-making in Model 1. A one-unit increase in engagement was associated with an estimated increase of 0.58 units in critical meaning-making. The model accounted for 32.5 percent of the variance in the outcome. This represented a meaningful proportion for a literacy outcome that could also be influenced by several linguistic, cognitive, instructional, and environmental factors.

Model 2 explained 43.1 percent of the variance, an increase of 10.6 percentage points over the model containing only the total engagement score. Interpretive participation, dialogic response, and persistence with textual difficulty emerged as significant predictors. Focused attention and emotional involvement did not make statistically significant unique contributions after the other dimensions were considered simultaneously.

Interpretive participation was the strongest standardized predictor, $\beta = .28$. Learners who actively constructed meanings and examined textual possibilities tended to produce stronger critical responses even after the other engagement dimensions were controlled. The result suggested that critical meaning-making was most closely connected with intellectual participation rather than passive attentiveness.

Persistence with textual difficulty was the second strongest predictor, $\beta = .23$. Its significance was notable because it was the lowest-rated engagement dimension. Learners who continued reading, reread difficult portions, examined unfamiliar language, and tolerated uncertainty were more capable of constructing critical meanings. The finding indicated that instructional improvement should not focus only on making literature easy or immediately enjoyable. Learners also needed strategies and encouragement to remain engaged when interpretation required effort.

Dialogic response was a smaller but significant predictor, $\beta = .17$. Interaction with classmates appeared to offer an additional route toward stronger meaning-making. Literary dialogue can expose learners to alternative claims and require them to clarify or revise their interpretations. Magirius et al. (2023) argued that productive literary dialogue should help students compare text-based interpretations and evaluate them against textual

evidence. The regression result supported the importance of purposeful discussion but also suggested that dialogue needed to be interpretive and evidence-centered rather than limited to casual reactions.

Focused attention and emotional involvement were not significant unique predictors. Their zero-order correlations with critical meaning-making were significant, but their predictive effects weakened after interpretive participation, dialogue, and persistence were included. This pattern suggested that attention and emotion supported deeper forms of engagement but did not independently explain critical performance. A learner could be interested in a text without examining it critically. Literary instruction should therefore use attention and emotional response as entry points toward evidence-based interpretation.

The regression diagnostics showed that multicollinearity and influential observations did not threaten the model. Unequal residual variance was detected, which justified the use of HC3 standard errors. The findings remained statistically significant after this adjustment. Nevertheless, the results should be interpreted as predictive associations and not as proof that engagement dimensions directly caused better critical meaning-making.

Table 5. *Dominance Analysis of Literary Text Engagement Dimensions*

Engagement dimension	General dominance weight	Percentage of explained variance	Bootstrap 95% CI	Rank
Interpretive participation	0.128	29.7%	[0.081, 0.174]	1
Persistence with textual difficulty	0.105	24.4%	[0.061, 0.151]	2
Dialogic response	0.082	19.0%	[0.043, 0.124]	3
Focused attention	0.064	14.8%	[0.026, 0.102]	4
Emotional involvement	0.052	12.1%	[0.015, 0.090]	5
Total explained variance	0.431	100.0%		

Table 5 confirms that interpretive participation made the largest relative contribution to critical meaning-making, accounting for 29.7 percent of the variance explained by the five engagement dimensions. Persistence with textual difficulty followed at 24.4 percent, while dialogic response accounted for 19.0 percent. Together, these three dimensions represented 73.1 percent of the model's explained variance.

The dominance findings clarified the regression results by showing how each engagement dimension contributed across different predictor combinations. Interpretive participation remained the most influential dimension, indicating that the act of proposing, testing, and revising meanings was central to critical literary performance. This finding was consistent with the view that literary expertise involves the use of interpretive practices that are responsive to the features, cultural position, and demands of particular texts rather than the mechanical application of fixed procedures (Levine, 2022).

Persistence ranked second despite receiving the lowest descriptive rating. This combination of low level and strong predictive importance identified the most urgent instructional need. Improving persistence could provide substantial educational value because many learners appeared to disengage when literary language became complex, yet those who sustained their effort tended to produce stronger interpretations.

Dialogic response ranked third. Its contribution suggested that critical meaning-making benefited from social interaction, although discussion was not as influential as learners' own interpretive participation and persistence. Focused attention and emotional involvement contributed to the total model but ranked lower. These dimensions appeared to support engagement broadly, while the higher-ranked dimensions reflected the more demanding actions through which critical meanings were constructed.

Taken together, the results showed that secondary English learners were interested and attentive literary readers, but their critical meaning-making remained developing. The central problem was not a complete absence of engagement. Rather, learners' engagement was concentrated in attention and emotional response and was less evident in persistence, evidence use, perspective awareness, and critical evaluation. The findings indicated that literature instruction should preserve the emotional and imaginative appeal of literary works while providing

deliberate opportunities for learners to examine textual evidence, question viewpoints, discuss competing meanings, and continue working through interpretive difficulty.

CONCLUSION

The findings established that secondary English learners demonstrated a high level of literary text engagement, particularly in focused attention and emotional involvement, but their critical meaning-making remained at a developing level. Learners were generally able to understand and explain literary texts, yet they showed weaker performance in perspective awareness, use of textual evidence, and sustained engagement with difficult passages. Literary text engagement was significantly associated with critical meaning-making, with interpretive participation, persistence with textual difficulty, and dialogic response emerging as the strongest contributing dimensions. These results indicated that interest and attentiveness alone were not sufficient to produce deeper literary interpretation. English teachers should therefore provide structured close-reading activities, evidence-based discussion prompts, perspective-taking tasks, guided rereading strategies, and collaborative interpretation exercises that require learners to explain, defend, and revise their ideas. Literary selections should remain challenging but accessible, with instructional support provided for figurative language, cultural references, and complex narrative structures. Schools may also strengthen literature instruction through teacher training on dialogic teaching, critical literacy, and analytic assessment. Future research should examine the same variables across wider school settings and may include classroom observation, learner interviews, and longitudinal designs to determine how critical meaning-making develops over time.

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