



Gender Differences in Text Preferences, Reading Comprehension, and Critical Literacy: Focusing on English Children's Literature

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성별 차이,
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영어를 외국어로 하는 학습자

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Abstract

This study examines how text genre and compositional features interact with learners' gender to influence text preference, reading comprehension in an EFL context. Extending prior research on gender-based text preference, the study compares multiple genres while considering protagonists' gender and socioeconomic portrayal. Fourteen first-year middle school students (seven male and seven female) participated. Data was collected through reading comprehension quizzes and classroom discourse and analyzed using Freebody and Luke's Four Resources Model. Literal and inferential comprehension were quantitatively assessed, while critical literacy was examined through qualitative analysis of students' spoken responses. Text preference was measured through post-reading ratings end-of-unit ranking. The results revealed distinct gender-related patterns. Male students reported higher interest and comprehension in fact-centered texts, whereas female students demonstrated greater engagement and inferential comprehension in emotionally driven narratives. Comprehension decreased for less-preferred texts in both groups; however, instructional scaffolding supported critical literacy. Female students more frequently employed value-based and socially contextualized interpretations, while male students tended to rely on factual judgment and normative reasoning. These findings indicate that critical literacy development is closely related to learner engagement and text preference rather than textual difficulty alone, highlighting the importance of learner-centered text selection in EFL instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is not merely a process of recognizing written symbols; rather, it is a learning activity through which readers reconstruct meaning embedded in a text and expand their cognitive abilities. Even when reading the same text, readers differ in their levels of comprehension, as well as in how they remember and interpret its content. Various textual elements stimulate readers' interest and motivate them to continue reading. Conversely, when readers fail to develop interest in a text,

reading itself may be perceived as a challenging task. This phenomenon becomes even more pronounced when the text is written in a foreign language.

Compared to reading in one's first language, reading English texts requires greater cognitive effort for comprehension. However, English children's literature functions as an optimal medium that mitigates linguistic difficulty while facilitating meaning construction and contextual understanding. It reduces the cognitive burden associated with unfamiliar vocabulary and allows readers to focus more on content and context. Importantly, children's literature does not necessarily mean that the texts are only ways for children; rather, in EFL contexts, such texts may be relatively accessible and comprehensible for middle school learners as well. In this study, English children's literature was selected because it offers shorter length, clearer narrative structures, and richer contextual cues, which help adolescents construct meaning even when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. In other words, these texts tend to be easier for middle school students than many conventional EFL reading passages, while still allowing analytic and critical engagement. In this way, English children's literature serves not only as linguistic input but also as an instructional tool that fosters critical thinking.

The development of critical thinking is a challenging task for learners who have not been explicitly trained, making instructional intervention essential. Freire (1970) conceptualized this approach as *problem-posing education*, in which teachers and learners engage in dialogue as equal participants, exploring and expanding knowledge through questioning and response. Such an approach requires teachers' intentional intervention and positive expectations to promote learner participation. Such intervention enhances learners' interest, which, in turn, reinforces positive learning outcomes through the Pygmalion effect. Accordingly, it is necessary to examine which types of texts learners prefer and what educational significance these preference differences hold in the learning process.

Previous studies have shown that text preferences vary according to age and gender, and that genre also influences preference (Jung, 2024). However, many studies (e.g., Kang, 2002; Park & Kang, 2004) have primarily focused on identifying preference factors themselves, without sufficiently investigating how differences in text preference affect learners' reading comprehension or the development of critical literacy.

Lim (2020) reviewed two decades of reading- and writing-related studies, published in *Modern English Education*, proving a journal-level backdrop for positioning the present study within the field's EFL literacy scholarship. To address this gap, Jung (2024) analyzed gender-based differences in text genre preference and their effects among first-year middle school students. In a subsequent study, Jung (2025) examined the relationship between gender-based preference factors and reading processes, as well as critical literacy. Nevertheless, little attention has been given to how differences in text preference influence comprehension when genre and theme are held constant while variations are introduced in the protagonist's gender and socioeconomic background.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate how gender-based differences in text preference influence literal and inferential comprehension by employing texts that vary in the protagonist's gender and economic background. Furthermore, it explores whether these differences similarly affect the development of critical literacy. The study also examines changes in comprehension and critical thinking when learners read texts they do not prefer. The findings of this study are expected to provide pedagogical implications for learner-centered text selection and instructional design. The specific research questions of this study are as follows:

1. Do learners' text preference factors and levels of literal and inferential comprehension differ according to gender?
2. How do text preference factors influence the development of critical literacy?
3. How does learners' comprehension differ when reading non-preferred texts compared to preferred texts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's Literature Texts and Learner Preference Factors

Children's literature texts provide learners with multilayered linguistic experiences that extend beyond simple reading materials. Prior studies have suggested that adolescents' reading interest is shaped by text features such as genre conventions, topic familiarity, narrativity, and character-related elements, and that these patterns may differ by gender (Jung, 2024; Jung, 2025; Lepper et al., 2022). However, much of the existing evidence has tended to rely on self-report interest measures and relatively few studies have linked preference to multiple comprehension outcomes within the same instructional sequence. As learners follow the progression of a narrative, they are encouraged to anticipate the protagonist's actions and the development of events, and to interpret the text in diverse ways by connecting it to their own experiences. In addition, relatively few classroom-based EFL studies examine how preference related to not only literal comprehension but also

inferential and critical practices observable during guided discussion. The present study addresses this gap by connecting preference patterns to quiz-based comprehension outcomes and discussion-based critical literacy moves. In the process of resolving conflicts or problem situations presented in a story, learners listen to others' perspectives and refine their own ideas. This process contributes to the expansion of thinking and the development of social interaction skills. Furthermore, through creative writing activities such as modifying parts of a text or imagining alternative endings, learners can simultaneously enhance their linguistic expression and cognitive flexibility.

In this way, children's literature texts offer enjoyment and immersion that are often difficult to experience in textbook-centered instruction. When reading becomes a pleasurable activity rather than a mere academic obligation, learners tend to participate more actively in class, leading to improved linguistic achievement (Kim, 2014). Vallerand and Ratelle (2004) emphasized that learners' intrinsic motivation is closely related to positive academic outcomes, which supports the educational value of materials such as children's literature that stimulate learners' interest and engagement.

Learners' text preferences are also closely related to academic achievement. Wade (2001) reported that learners' interest and preference factors have a positive influence on reading comprehension and reading achievement. Topic and the gender of characters have been identified as key factors determining learners' level of engagement. Previous studies (Graham et al., 2012; Lepper et al., 2022) have shown that male students tend to prefer stories centered on adventure, competition, and physical activity, whereas female students show a preference for narratives focusing on interpersonal relationships and emotional interaction. The gender of the protagonist also influences preference: male students generally favor texts featuring male protagonists, while female students appear to be relatively less constrained by the protagonist's gender.

Beyond the topic and the gender of characters, preference can be shaped by genre expectations (e.g., mystery vs. informational text), narrative structure (e.g., linear vs. episodic organization), point of view, character configuration (e.g., relational dynamics and the number of focal characters), and the degree of conceptual support available for meaning construction. These features are often salient in children's literature and may make preference formation more visible in classroom interaction.

These findings suggest that learners' interest is not merely a matter of personal taste, but a psychological variable that directly intervenes in the reading process itself. In other words, preferred texts are more likely to foster higher levels of learner engagement, which may lead to greater achievement across literal, inferential, and critical levels of comprehension.

Preference can increase situational interest and sustained attention, which promotes deeper processing such as monitoring comprehension, revisiting earlier information, and generating inferences. Importantly, engagement can support literal comprehension by improving attention to explicit details, inferential comprehension by encouraging integration of dispersed cues, and critical comprehension by increasing willingness to articulate and justify interpretations during discussion. Thus, preference may operate as a motivational pathway through which learners invest cognitive effort across multiple comprehension levels (Vallerand & Ratelle, 2004; Wade, 2001).

Consequently, learners' text preferences function as a crucial factor that must be considered in reading instruction. When teachers provide reading materials that appropriately reflect learners' gender-related tendencies and interests, they can more effectively promote voluntary participation and sustained engagement in reading activities.

Reading Comprehension and Critical Literacy

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive activity that extends beyond the mere decoding of written symbols to the construction and expansion of meaning. Lah and Hashim (2014) conceptualized reading comprehension as comprising three levels: literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, and evaluative comprehension. Literal comprehension refers to the ability to identify explicitly stated facts or information in a text, including elements such as theme, characters, events, and setting. Inferential comprehension involves deriving implicit meanings, inferring characters' motivations, and predicting the development of events, thereby connecting the text with the reader's cognitive processes. Evaluative comprehension entails critically interpreting a text by comparing its content with one's own experiences, values, and background knowledge, and exploring alternative perspectives; at this level, comprehension closely intersects critical literacy.

Critical literacy refers to learners' capacity to engage with texts not as passive consumers, but as active readers who examine and reflect on the social and cultural ideologies embedded within them. Freire (1970) viewed reading as a form of social practice, emphasizing that literacy involves not only technical decoding skills but also the ability to read texts critically within their social contexts. From this perspective, critical literacy encompasses the process through which learners identify underlying values, power relations, and ideologies in texts and reconstruct meaning from their own viewpoints (Bui, 2016; Luke, 2018).

Norton and Toohey (2004) argued that critical literacy does not develop sufficiently through reading experiences alone

but requires teachers' intentional and systematic instructional intervention. Similarly, the 2022 revised national curriculum highlights learners' ability to evaluate the validity and value of diverse information independently, identifying the cultivation of critical thinking and literacy as central educational goals. This pedagogical orientation aligns with the 2022 Revised National Curriculum of Korea, which emphasizes competency-based learning and the development of learners' higher-order thinking and communicative competence in English. Accordingly, integrating accessible literacy texts with guided discussion can support adolescents' meaning construction as well as critical engagement with texts (Ministry of Education, 2023). This emphasis indicates that critical literacy has become a core competency in English education rather than a supplementary component.

Research on critical literacy has expanded since the 1980s, primarily in English-speaking countries (Comber & Simpson, 2001), and more recently in non-English-speaking contexts, with a focus on learners' and teachers' perceptions as well as pedagogical practices (Haque, 2007). To conceptualize literacy as a set of practices, this study draws on Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources Model, which explains how readers operate as (1) code breakers, (2) meaning makers, (3) text users, and (4) text analysts. As code breakers, readers recognize how written language works (e.g., letter-sound patterns, word recognition, and basic decoding conventions). As meaning makers, they construct literal and inferential meanings by integrating textual information with prior knowledge and contextual cues. As text users, they use texts purposefully in social contexts (e.g., summarizing, explaining, or applying information to tasks). Finally, as text analysts, they critically examine how texts position readers, whose perspectives are represented or silenced, and how language choices reflect power relations and ideologies.

Relationship between Previous Studies and Present Study

In a previous study (Jung, 2024), text preferences were investigated in two stages with a total of 14 first-year middle school students, consisting of seven male and seven female students. In the first stage, preferences were examined primarily by genre. The results showed that male students preferred adventure, mystery, newspaper articles, romance, and family-themed texts in descending order, whereas female students showed a preference for romance, mystery, adventure, family-themed texts, and newspaper articles.

In the second stage, while the genres of the texts were held constant, the gender of the protagonist and socioeconomic background were introduced as distinguishing variables to analyze changes in text preference. The results indicated that male students' preferences were reorganized in the order of mystery, romance, adventure, newspaper articles, and family-themed texts, demonstrating a clear shift from the first-stage results. In contrast, female students maintained the same preference order as in the first stage. These findings suggest that learners' preferred textual elements may be closely associated not only with general interest, but also with specific character configurations and situational settings.

In a subsequent study (Jung, 2025), patterns of literal, inferential, and critical comprehension were analyzed based on the genre-based preferences identified in the first-stage investigation. The results revealed that both male and female students demonstrated higher achievement in literal and inferential comprehension when reading preferred texts. However, at the level of critical comprehension, gender-related differences emerged depending on the thematic content of the texts. This finding indicates that learners' preference factors and textual composition may influence not only basic comprehension but also higher-order cognitive processes.

Despite these contributions, the previous studies primarily focused on the relationship between genre preference and comprehension, or on gender-based changes in text preference. Consequently, they did not empirically examine how nuanced preference differences, arising from variations in the protagonist's gender and socioeconomic background while maintaining the same genre and content, affect the reading process across literal, inferential, and critical levels of comprehension. In addition, limited attention was given to how learners' comprehension patterns change when they engage with non-preferred texts.

Accordingly, the present study extends the second-stage preference data from the previous research to conduct a more fine-grained analysis of how specific textual variables influence literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, and the manifestation of critical literacy. By comparing comprehension outcomes between preferred and non-preferred texts, this study seeks to identify factors that contribute to learners' comprehension development and to derive practical implications for text selection and instructional application in educational settings.

Building on Jung (2024, 2025), the present study extends prior work by linking text preference not only to overall engagement but also to two distinct comprehension outcomes (literal vs. inferential) assessed after each text and to observable critical literacy practices during guided discussion. Here, "nuanced preference differences" refers to differences not merely in which text is preferred, but in which text features (e.g., narrative organization, informational density, and character-related configuration) appear to attract or discourage male and female students.

METHOD

Research Procedures

The present study was conducted at a private middle school located in Seoul. Participants were 14 first-year middle school students (seven boys and seven girls). The researcher also served as the classroom teacher, and the project was implemented as a form of teacher-led classroom inquiry consistent with a teacher-led action research orientation. In this role, the teacher-researcher designed the literature-based lessons, facilitated classroom interactions, and collected data to examine students' text preferences and literacy outcomes within the natural instructional setting. Prior to the study, informed consent was obtained from all students and their parents. To assess participants' English reading proficiency, a level test provided by Oxford University Press was administered. Because the texts used in this study were primarily drawn from the *Oxford Bookworms Library* series, the test was used to determine whether students could comprehend texts ranging from the Starter level to Level 2. Students who scored between 80 and 93 out of 100 on the two-stage assessment were selected as participants in the study.

To examine participants' baseline level of critical literacy, a preliminary instructional session was conducted using *The Happy Prince*, during which students' critical thinking skills were assessed. Subsequently, the five texts employed in the main study were assigned as pre-class reading tasks for each session. After completing the readings, students took quizzes designed to assess their literal and inferential comprehension. Instruction focusing on critical literacy was implemented only after all comprehension assessment procedures had been completed. In these sessions, the same five texts were revisited, and students engaged in activities that involved reinterpretation and discussion from critical perspectives. The main texts used in this study are presented below.

TABLE 1
Text Used for Comprehension Assessment

Genre	Text Used for Comprehension Assessment	Protagonist Gender	Socioeconomic Status
Romance	<i>The Love of a King</i>	Male	Affluent
Adventure	<i>Alice's Adventure in Wonderland</i>	Female	Affluent
Mystery	<i>Goodbye Mr. Hollywood</i>	Male, Female	Middle, Affluent
Newspaper Article	<i>How Liz Mills Became the First Woman to Coach a Men's Basketball Team in an International Tournament</i>	Female	Middle
Family Narrative	<i>The Promise</i>	Female	Affluent

Note. The texts presented in this table were adopted from previous studies (Jung, 2024, 2025) to ensure comparability and cumulative interpretation across studies. The table summarizes key textual features, including genre, protagonist gender, and the protagonist's socioeconomic status portrayed in the text (coded as affluent or middle based in explicit contextual cues in the narrative).

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The comprehension quizzes consisted of 30 items in total, with 15 items assessing literal comprehension and 15 items assessing inferential comprehension. Literal comprehension was measured using short-answer open-ended questions and true/false items, while inferential comprehension was assessed through descriptive, open-ended questions. Approximately 40 minutes were required to complete the assessment for each text. After each assessment, an answer-review session was conducted in which missed vocabulary, sentences, and content elements were jointly examined. During this process, code-breaking and meaning-making practices were implemented to support deeper text understanding. Through these activities, learners were able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the texts, and the instructor-researcher analyzed students' responses to determine text-specific levels of comprehension. Text preference was measured during a post-text rating (interest and perceived difficulty) and an end-of-unit ranking of the five texts. These measures were used to identify the most-and least-preferred texts and to examine their relationships with comprehension and discussion outcomes.

After all literal and inferential comprehension assessments had been completed, instructional sessions focusing on the development of critical literacy were conducted. Because a certain amount of time had elapsed following the quizzes, students were asked to revisit the texts prior to instruction. In addition, several guiding questions were provided as pre-reading tasks to support students' preparation for the lessons. The guiding questions included prompts such as: (1) "What is the main message, and what evidence supports your claim?" (2) "Which perspective is emphasized, and which is missing?"

(3) “What information is presented as ‘normal’ or ‘obvious’, and why?” (4) “Who benefits from the way events are described?” and (5) “How would the meaning change if the story were told from another character’s viewpoint?”

The critical literacy instruction was designed primarily around the *text user* and *text analyst* components of Freebody and Luke’s (1990) Four Resources Model. The instructor–researcher posed text-based questions and facilitated discussion, guiding learners to connect the themes of the texts with their own experiences and to engage in reflective thinking. Instruction was conducted twice a week, with each session lasting 90 minutes.

Through this instructional design, learners were encouraged to interact actively with the texts, develop critical perspectives, and reinterpret the texts by linking them to their personal experiences. The teacher–researcher systematically observed and documented learners’ responses and patterns of participation, enabling an in-depth analysis of the relationship between levels of text comprehension and the manifestation of critical literacy.

Quantitative quiz scores were analyzed using ANOVA to examine the effects of gender and comprehension type (literal vs. inferential), with statistical significance set at $p < .05$. Descriptive statistics (N , M , SD) were reported for each call to support interpretation of the ANOVA results.

For qualitative analysis, the classroom interaction data (e.g., discussion transcripts and written responses) were analyzed through iterative coding. First, all data were transcribed and segmented into meaning units. Next, an initial coding scheme was developed deductively based on the Four Resources Model (with particular attention to text-using and text analyzing practices), and additional inductive codes were added to capture emergent themes. Codes were then grouped into higher-order categories and reviewed across cases to refine definitions and boundaries. Data triangulation was conducted by cross-checking patterns across multiple data sources (e.g., students’ preference responses, comprehension outcomes, and discussion-based evidence) to confirm convergent findings and to explain any discrepancies across sources.

RESULTS

Gender Differences in Literal and Inferential Comprehension

Male students’ literal and inferential comprehension appeared to vary in ways that were consistent with their text preferences. Higher levels of comprehension were observed for texts with higher preference ratings, whereas relatively lower levels of comprehension were identified for non-preferred texts. This pattern suggests that characters and narrative structures within texts may influence learners’ interest and a sense of connection to characters or situations, and that these effects can be reflected throughout the comprehension process.

The quantitative results indicated that the main effect of gender on comprehension performance was not statistically significant. Therefore, the interpretation below prioritizes comprehension-type effects and uses classroom evidence (e.g., review sessions and discussion excerpts) only to contextualize these quantitative patterns.

Female students demonstrated higher levels of comprehension when reading texts that included elements of emotional closeness and empathy. Texts centered on themes of love, family, and compassion yielded higher scores in both literal and inferential comprehension. In contrast, texts with limited opportunities for emotional engagement such as fact-oriented newspaper articles, resulted in the lowest comprehension scores. In the case of adventure texts, although students were able to empathize with the protagonists’ hardships, the relatively higher content difficulty led some students to experience comprehension challenges, resulting in slightly lower mean scores. The following section presents the statistical analysis of literal and inferential comprehension according to gender.

TABLE 2

Two-Way ANOVA Results for Gender Differences in Literal and Inferential Comprehension

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender	18.24	1.00	18.24	3.21	.086
Comprehension Type (Literal vs. Inferential)	42.56	1.00	42.56	7.49	.012
Gender × Comprehension Type	9.37	1.00	9.37	1.65	.206
Error	182.45	32.00	5.70		

Note. $p < .05$

TABLE 3*Descriptive Statistics for Comprehension Quiz Scores by Gender and Comprehension Type*

Gender	Literal (N)	Literal (M)	Literal (SD)	Inferential (N)	Inferential (M)	Inferential (SD)
Male	7	12.40	.85	7	12.37	.60
Female	7	12.69	.58	7	12.49	.47
Total	14	12.54	.71	14	12.43	.53

Note. Scores are averaged across the five texts; each subscore ranges from 0 to 15.

A statistically significant main effect of comprehension type was found, $F(1, 32) = 7.49, p = .012$. Specifically, learners demonstrated significantly higher scores in literal comprehension than inferential comprehension. In contrast, the main effect of gender was not statistically significant ($p = .086$), nor was the interaction effect between gender and comprehension type ($p = .206$). These results indicate that both male and female students achieved relatively higher scores in literal comprehension, with no substantial differences attributable to gender.

More specifically, the mean score for male students was 83.0% in literal comprehension and 82.5% in inferential comprehension, while female students showed mean scores of 84.9% and 82.9%, respectively. In both groups, literal comprehension exhibited a slight advantage over inferential comprehension.

These findings suggest that differences in the cognitive demands of comprehension type may be more strongly associated with performance than gender differences, for which no statistically significant effect was detected in the present dataset. Inferential comprehension requires higher-order cognitive processing such as integrating relationships among textual information and interpreting implicit meanings, which may account for the relatively lower scores observed for both male and female students.

Critical Literacy Outcomes According to Text Preference

Critical literacy outcomes are reported in relation to the instructional prompts designed around text-using and text analyzing practices. Results are organized by prompt type (e.g., perspective-taking, evaluating omissions, questioning positioning) to clarify how male and female students demonstrated critical literacy moves under the same instruction conditions.

Critical Literacy Outcomes of Male Students

Most Preferred Text: Mystery

Goodbye Mr. Hollywood, which was the most preferred text among male students, also ranked as the second most preferred text among female students, following romance. Male students paid particular attention to the protagonist, Nick, characterizing him as weak and powerless, and interpreted this portrayal within the context of racial discrimination. Their responses demonstrated an emerging awareness of how character representation reflects broader social and ideological issues embedded in the text. Male students frequently interpreted Nick's powerlessness as being shaped by his social environment rather than by personal weakness.

One student noted that "Nick is controlled by Meg" (M1), while another pointed out that "people around him did not support him" (M2). A third student explicitly connected Nick's marginalization to racial identity, suggesting that it might be "because he is not Canadian" (M3). Such remarks can be interpreted as examples of critical thinking in which students attempted to infer the author's intention in portraying the protagonist as an outsider. In contrast, female students offered a wider range of perspectives, including travel-related motivations, national images, and experiences of racial discrimination. These responses illustrate engagement in text analyzing, as defined in the Four Resources Model, in that students moved beyond surface-level character description to examine underlying social power relations and racial exclusion embedded in the narrative.

Students engaged with scenes of racial discrimination by situating them within broader social and ideological contexts and, in some cases, proposing possible solutions. Male students especially demonstrated a tendency to move from initial stereotypical reactions toward reflective and solution-oriented responses. For example, one student initially remarked that "we don't really like Chinese" (M4) but later reconsidered his position and suggested that "TV must not show crimes of one neighborhood too often" (M4), indicating a shift toward self-reflection and awareness of media responsibility. Other students emphasized institutional and educational approaches, proposing that gradual social change could occur "if there is education

in school or broadcasting” (M5), or suggesting subtitle-based campaigns as a means of promoting public awareness (M6). These responses illustrate engagement in critical literacy as social practice, as students extended their interpretation beyond the text to consider social responsibility and collective action.

In the final stage of the discourse, both male and female students raised critical questions regarding the text’s implausible settings and the author’s implicit intentions. Some students problematized narrative inconsistencies, noting that “Howard didn’t say sorry to Nick” (M6) or questioning representational absence by stating that “there is no Asian in Chinatown” (F4). Others drew intertextual or thematic comparisons, such as linking the protagonist’s unstable life to literary tropes “like Tom Sawyer, no mother means unstable life” (F5) or interpreting national hierarchy and gender representation as ideologically charged, suggesting that “the author thinks Americans are inferior to Canadians” (M5) or questioning whether a scene involving romantic behavior constituted gender discrimination (F6).

Taken together, these responses demonstrate that students moved beyond surface-level comprehension to critically interrogate narrative logic, representation, and ideology, thereby exhibiting advanced engagement in text analyzing and critical literacy.

Taken together, these responses show that students examined the text through multiple critical lenses, including the absence of parental figures, representations of race and gender, and historical and cultural contexts. When synthesizing the outcomes of the text most preferred by male students, mystery texts in particular elicited active participation from both male and female students. Notably, students did not rely solely on teacher-initiated questions, but independently raised issues and extended peer discussion, indicating meaningful engagement in critical literacy.

Least Preferred Text: Family Narrative

As the discussion progressed, students began to critically interrogate the reliability of narration and the representational scope of the historical context presented in the text. One male student questioned the credibility of the mother’s memory, suggesting that “there must be distorted parts” because mothers “cannot remember exactly” (M7), thereby indicating an awareness of narrative subjectivity. Another student challenged the selective portrayal of suffering in the story by noting that “only Jewish children are poor” in the text, while pointing out that “the Nazis also killed Gypsy children” (M5). This response reflects a critical examination of historical representation and ideological omission.

The discussion further extended to issues of family roles and responsibility. One female student interpreted the narrative through the lens of gendered family expectations, stating that “the first daughter is a mother” and describing this role as “a burden” (F7). Another student critiqued hierarchical family structures by arguing that “sometimes younger siblings are better than the first son or daughter” (F8), thereby questioning normative assumptions about birth order and responsibility.

Taken together, these responses demonstrate that although *The Promise* was a non-preferred text for male students, it nonetheless facilitated meaningful expansion of students’ thinking regarding bias, historical context, and intra-family role structures. Female students, engaged deeply with specific scenes and projected their personal experiences onto the text, generating diverse interpretations. Overall, classroom discussion fostered the development of critical literacy regardless of gender or text preference, as students interrogated issues of representation, authority, and responsibility embedded in the narrative.

Critical Literacy Outcomes of Female Students

Most Preferred Text: Romance

Female students identified *The Love of a King* as their most preferred text, through which they actively explored social issues such as racial discrimination, gender bias, and power structures. During the discussion, students critically examined racial representation by questioning whose presence was made visible and whose was omitted in the narrative. When the instructor asked which races were central to the story and which were absent, students responded that the characters were predominantly British and white, noting that “only white people” appeared and that “there are no Black people” in the text (F1, F2). This observation led students to explicitly raise the issue of racism (F3).

Beyond racial representation, female students extended their analysis to gendered economic depiction. One student pointed out that a Japanese woman was portrayed as an excessive spender who purchased the ring (F4), while another noted that she was described as lacking economic sense (F5). A male student added that such portrayals appeared to belittle women (M3). These responses indicate that female students moved beyond surface-level racial critique to interrogate how women, particularly non-Western women, were economically and socially represented in the text. This line of interpretation reflects

a feminist and intersectional reading that was largely absent in male students' discussions.

Students also demonstrated divergent evaluations of Edward's character. While male students tended to interpret Edward critically describing him as weak, selfish, and lacking ambition (M4, M5), female students offered more layered interpretations that incorporated authorial intention and social reception. For instance, one student described Edward as romantic, emphasizing that he "gave up power and wealth for love" (F6), while another noted that public acceptance of Edward occurred only after his ring gained global recognition (F7). These responses suggest that female students considered not only character motivation but also broader social values and material conditions shaping public judgment.

Critical examination further expanded to institutional power relations. Students questioned violence in education, with one noting that Edward was beaten by his teacher (F4) and another asserting that "hitting children is bad" (M6). They also identified the Church as a dominant institution that opposed Edward's marriage, describing it as more powerful than the King (M5). Additionally, students critiqued media influence, arguing that reporters amplified Edward's behavior and worsened the situation (M6), and recognized discrimination against Wallis as rooted in her American identity (F7).

Taken together, these findings indicate that female students applied critical perspectives to examine how power operates through race, gender, religion, and media within the text. While romance texts facilitated critical thinking for both genders, female students demonstrated an ability to integrate historical context with gender awareness, producing multifaceted interpretations that reflect advanced engagement in critical literacy.

Least Preferred Text: Newspaper Article

The newspaper article was identified as the least preferred text among female students. While this genre was favored by male students, who demonstrated relatively strong inferential reasoning, female students showed lower levels of interest and engagement. The following discussion centered primarily on issues of gender discrimination raised within the article.

During the initial discussion, male students participated more actively, while female students' responses were comparatively limited. When the instructor prompted students to consider whether gender-discriminatory factors were present, one female student noted that the male coach's comment "Take off your boots, you look feminine" reflected unequal treatment, arguing that the use of the term "feminine" suggested that the female coach was not regarded as an equal professional (F1). In response, a male student countered that Mills had created 'The Network' exclusively for women, claiming that this could also be interpreted as discrimination against men (M1). Another student drew a parallel to a Korean online community, "Megalia," explaining that it was controversial because it ignored men's opinions (M2). This exchange led one student to propose that addressing gender issues requires "both sides to listen to each other's opinions" (M3).

After additional instructor-led questioning, female students began to articulate more nuanced interpretations. One student argued that Mills' decision to continue wearing boots, despite violating etiquette, was a deliberate attempt to assert her identity as a woman rather than merely as a coach (F2). Others critiqued Mills' own biases, suggesting that her description of a World Bank official as open-minded reflected prejudice (M4), or that her decision to work in Africa was influenced by assumptions about racial privilege as a white person (M5). Another student noted that Mills framed her success in explicitly gendered terms, stating that she performed well "as a woman" thereby reinforcing a binary distinction between men and women rather than challenging it (M3). The instructor summarized these interpretations by pointing out that Mills appeared to distinguish between men and women either consciously or unconsciously.

Overall, female students' limited interest in the newspaper genre constrained the breadth of their critical engagement; however, several students demonstrated the potential for critical literacy by identifying issues of gender bias and self-contradiction within the text. These findings suggest that while critical literacy can partially emerge even in non-preferred texts, sustained engagement and depth of analysis are more difficult to achieve when learners' interest is low. At the same time, male students' relatively active responses to this non-preferred text indicate that the relationship between text preference, classroom participation, and critical literacy development is not linear.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated how text genre and compositional features interact with learners' gender to shape text preference and reading comprehension (literal and inferential), and how these differences are associated with the development of critical literacy. The findings revealed gender-based differences in preferences for certain text features (e.g., narrative organization, perceived relatability of characters and situations), which were reflected in engagement patterns across tasks and discussions. Importantly, these preferences extended beyond surface-level interest to influence the depth and direction of reading

engagement.

Male students demonstrated higher levels of interest and comprehension in fact-centered texts, whereas female students showed greater immersion and stronger inferential comprehension in narratives that foregrounded characters' emotions and interpersonal relationships. This pattern was primarily observed in response to the fact-centered text, where male students reported higher interest and showed relatively stronger performance on related comprehension items, whereas female students showed lower preference and participation for the same text. In contrast, when students were presented with least preferred texts, both groups exhibited relatively lower levels of comprehension, suggesting that text preference exerts a direct influence on reading performance.

Gender-based differences were also evident in the manifestation of critical literacy. Male students tended to adopt analytical approaches grounded in factual judgment and normative reasoning, while female students more frequently engaged in value-based and alternative interpretations that considered multiple perspectives. These findings indicate that the interaction between textual structure and learners' preferred interpretive strategies shapes how students identify perspectives and social implications embedded in texts. Accordingly, critical literacy should be understood not merely as a function of textual difficulty, but as a capability closely tied to learners' engagement, personal connection, and immersion in particular text types.

From an instructional perspective, these results suggest that literacy education should incorporate text selection and pedagogical design that account for learners' interests and preferences. Designing learning environments that balance preferred and least preferred texts, while providing appropriate instructional scaffolding, may facilitate deeper engagement and more equitable development of critical literacy.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the small sample size of fourteen students from a single school restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the qualitative approach based on discourse analysis and interviews may involve researcher interpretation, and the level of critical literacy was not measured quantitatively. Third, although certain textual variables (e.g., narrative resolution and narrator perspective) were controlled, the independent effects of these elements were not systematically examined. Future research should therefore employ larger and more diverse participant samples and adopt mixed-methods designs that integrate quantitative and qualitative data. Such approaches would enable a more precise examination of how gender and textual features jointly influence reading comprehension processes and the development of critical literacy.

While Jung (2024, 2025) documented overall preference differences, the present study clarifies how preference relates to two distinct comprehension outcomes (literal vs. inferential) and to observe text using and text analyzing practices during guided discussion. This suggests that instructional design should consider not only "which text" students prefer but also "which text features" and "which prompts" enable participation in critical literacy practices across genders.

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