# INVESTIGATING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH CRITICAL READING IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY OF AN URBAN AND A RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL

BY

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# ABSTRACT

This research sought to explore teachers' practices in teaching critical reading through literature, their perceptions of their knowledge and capabilities to teach critical reading, and the challenges they faced in teaching critical reading. Also, this research investigated students' difficulties in responding to literary texts. The participants (16 teachers and 20 students) for this study were selected from one urban and one rural school in Selangor. Two types of instruments were developed and used for the data collection procedures: the first type was a checklist to understand teachers' practices and approaches in teaching critical reading in the literature classroom. And the second type of instrument was interview questions for the students and teachers. The findings indicated that the urban and rural schools' students faced similar difficulties in responding to literature texts due to i) lack of comprehension and ii) lack of exposure to the English language and its culture. Also, in exploring teachers' practices in teaching critical reading, this study found that both urban and rural teachers employed all the approaches in teaching literature: Moral-philosophical approach, personal-response approach, information-based approach, Paraphrastic approach, Stylistic approach and language-based approach. The following findings pointed out that the teachers have the knowledge of critical reading/ thinking but lack the confidence to teach the skills, unfamiliar with the skills, and know-how to teach but need more training. Furthermore, it was found that both urban and rural school teachers agreed that students' proficiency levels in English were one of the challenges. Other challenges were; teachers' role, students' attitude, class size, exam-oriented learning, do not relate to real-life and time constraint. Additionally, this research also revealed students' challenges as perceived by the teachers in responding critically to literature texts, such as 1) students have difficulty in expressing their opinions and views, 2) lack of proficiency in English and negative attitude towards reading and literature 3) lack the motivation, 4) difficult topics, 5) inability to relate to real-life, 6) inability to self-correct and improve themselves and 7) burdened by homework.

# خلاصة البحث

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف عدة محاور: ممارسات المعلمين في تدريس القراءة النقدية في موضوع الأدب، وتصوراتهم حول مستوى معرفتهم وقدراتهم على تدريس القراءة النقدية، والتحديات التي يواجهونها في تدريس القراءة النقدية. تحقق هذه الدراسة كذلك في الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلاب في الاستجابة للنصوص الأدبية. بلغ إجمالي عدد أفراد العينة في هذه الدراسة 16 معلمًا و20 طالبًا، تم اختيارهم من مدرستين في سلانجور، إحداهما حضرية، والأخرى ريفية. طورت الباحثة أداتين لجمع البيانات، إحداهما قائمة مراجعة لفهم ممارسات المعلمين وأساليبهم في تدريس القراءة النقدية في فصول الأدب. والثانية أسئلة المقابلة التي أُجريت مع كلٍّ من الطلاب والمعلمين. وقد أشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن طلاب المدارس الحضرية والريفية قد واجهوا صعوبات مماثلة في الاستجابة للنصوص الأدبية، وقد رجع ذلك إلى: 1.نقص مستوى استيعابهم. 2.عدم تعرضهم للغة الإنجليزية وثقافتها بما فيه الكفاية. أما عن استكشاف ممارسات المعلمين في تدريس القراءة النقدية، فقد وجدت هذه الدراسة أنهم في المناطق الحضرية والريفية على حد سواء، قد وظَّفوا جميع المناهج في تدريس الأدب: النهج الأخلاقي الفلسفي، ونهج الاستجابة الذاتية، والنهج القائم على المعلومات، ونهج إعادة الصياغة، والنهج الأسلوبي، والنهج القائم على اللغة. وقد أشارت النتائج التالية إلى أن المعلمين لديهم معرفة بالقراءة والتفكير النقديين، ولكنهم يفتقرون إلى الثقة لتعليم المهارات، كما أنهم لا يألفون المهارات بشكل كافٍ. ولديهم معرفة بكيفية التدريس، ولكنهم بحاجة إلى مزيد من التدريب. علاوة على ذلك، وُجد أن معلمي المدارس الحضرية والريفية قد اتفقوا على أن مستويات إتقان الطلاب للغة الإنجليزية كانت أحد التحديات. وتمثلت التحديات الأخرى في دور المعلمين، وموقف الطلاب، وحجم الفصل، والتعلم المتمركز حول الامتحان، وعدم ارتباط التعلم بالحياة الواقعية، وعامل ضيق الوقت. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، كشفت هذه الدراسة أيضًا عن التحديات التي يواجهها الطلاب في الاستجابة النقدية للنصوص الأدبية، من وجهة نظر المعلمين، مثل: 1.يواجه الطلاب صعوبة في التعبير عن آرائهم ووجهات نظرهم. 2.عدم إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية، والموقف السلبي تجاه القراءة والأدب. 3.الافتقار إلى الحافز. 4.صعوبة الموضوعات. 5.عدم القدرة على ربط ما يدرسون بالحياة الواقعية. 6.عدم القدرة على تصحيح الذات وتحسين أنفسهم. 7.عبء الواجبات المنزلية.

# APPROVAL PAGE

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# DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Nur Hazwani Binti Hanafi

Signature ........................................................... Date ........................................

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# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Technology has transformed the concept of literacy due to the ease by which students can access various materials and knowledge available around the world at their fingertips. However, with this easy access comes a necessity that requires people to be critical and analytical of the information they feed on. In the past, learners have been delimited to being described as only capable of memorising facts and learning routines or procedures. However, now as information and knowledge are easily accessible, learners are required to act as individuals who can collect and pool their resources to assist them in thinking critically and creatively upon encountering challenges in learning (Chaffee, 1992). As a result, critical thinking skills are identified as one of the twenty-first-century tools necessary to prepare learners for tertiary education and the workforce. Hence, schools and education systems around the globe are emphasising the importance of critical thinking skills.

Numerous studies conducted in the critical thinking field provide valuable insights into the significance of critical thinking skills. For example, an international survey conducted on more than 1,000 teachers to identify the most needed skill for higher education success indicated that 92 per cent of the teachers mutually recognise that critical thinking as one of the essential skills. Nevertheless, they also believe students leave school for university without "essential" critical thinking skills (Stewart, Dwyer & Hogan, 2014). Why is critical thinking skill important? Hove (2011, p.6) agreed that critical thinking skill is beneficial not only for personal benefit such as, "more opportunities, better jobs, a higher income" but it also serves the society "when the general populace can think creatively and insightfully". Another reason is: "Critical thinking is essential for social change to occur; citizens must not only think critically about what they read and view, but they must also react to transform the world" (Pescatore, 2007, p. 330).

Furthermore, the National Association for Media Literacy Education in the United States (2010) advocated motivating students in active inquiry and critically thinking about the messages that we receive and create will eventually foster students' ability to explore issues thoughtfully. Critical thinking skills "Do not occur randomly or without effort; it takes structured, deliberate, and repetitive exposure and practices for students to develop insightful thinking" (Pescatore, 2007, p. 330). Hence, it is inevitable that garnering the ability to think critically is a vital life skill that benefits learners individually and society at large.

However, regardless of how beneficial and crucial it is to foster critical thinking skills among learners, many still cannot think critically. This is evident in numerous reports by teachers and employers from various countries all over the globe in which they indicated that students lack critical thinking skills. For instance, Australia reported a public demand by employers for employees to be critical. A striking 92 per cent of them described their new graduate employees as "deficient" in critical thinking. Also, in the United States of America, it is reported that most US schools have forsaken the teaching of critical thinking; as a result, the majority of the society does not practice it (Mendelman, 2007). Another report also mentioned, "Critical thinking strategies are not extensively developed or practised during the secondary and primary education" (Hayes & Devitt, 2008, p.65).

Similarly, Al-Qahtani (1995), in his study on Saudi Arabia schools, discovered that the majority of the students lacked critical thinking skills taught in school courses. He firmly believed that it is due to instructors' incapability to teach critical thinking skills to the students. Likewise, in India, news headlines by Aaron (2016) from Hindustan Times boldly stated, "Can India Have a Future Without Critical Thinkers?". Such is also the case in Malaysia where, "The students in the classrooms are unable to answer the questions if the teachers ask an arguing question… they are not being trained to think critically" (Nik Suryani & Amalina Munirah, 2016, p. 72).

## 1.2 CRITICAL THINKING AMONG STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

Studies conducted among Malaysian students reflect that the absence of problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills hamper their ability to apply knowledge and think critically in new situations (MOE, 2012). This is apparent from Malaysia's ranking based on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In PISA 2012 (OECD, 2013), Malaysia scored 398 on reading, which is below the average of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) requirement of 496. We are ranked at 52nd out of 65 countries and stood the second-worst in Southeast Asia, lagging behind Vietnam and Thailand. The results indicate that students lack critical thinking skills. It is reported by Nik Suryani and Amalina Munirah (2016, p. 73) that, "There is 70 per cent of students in Malaysia who cannot answer the questions outer from the textbook." In another statement to the Star Online (Nov 17, 2014) by the former CEO TalentCorp, Johan Mahmood Merican stated that "Graduates these days lack critical thinking skills."

Based on the studies conducted in Malaysia, our students revealed that they do lack critical thinking skills. Today's education has begun, "to reveal symptoms of "decline" in students' ability to think well, especially when schools began to focus on the mastery of subject-content rather than the processes of deriving the products" (Rosnani & Suhailah, 2003, p.7). Similarly, Noor (2008) suggested a deficiency of higher-order thinking ability amongst students, and there is a dire need to gear students for their future to be critical thinkers. This would help them be independent thinkers to apply and use critical thinking in their personal or career life.  However, despite the importance of higher-order thinking skills, many Malaysian students fail to think critically as critical thinking has not been explicitly taught by teachers in schools (Haber, 2020; Rosnani & Hendon, 2020; Seman et al., 2017).

Most studies in Malaysia have discovered that teachers' lack of skills to teach and their understanding of critical thinking has contributed to students' lack of critical thinking skills. Teachers were also bewildered and were unable to distinguish the definitions of thinking skills and different levels of thinking (Marzano et al.,1988; Nagappan, 2002). Moreover, studies have also shown that teachers had difficulties in employing higher-order thinking skills (HOTs) and problem-solving skills in the classroom. They appear to dwell only on the superficial level of understanding the

subject matter (as claimed by Bloom (1965) that understanding is among the lowest levels of hierarchy presented in Bloom's taxonomy) instead of practising higher-order thinking skills or problem-solving skills. Apart from that, teachers also feel that it is challenging to incorporate thinking strategies in their current teaching style (Jones, 2008). To concur with these findings, in a study conducted by Nagappan (2001), he found out that twenty-six per cent of teachers did not spare any time teaching higher-order thinking, while seventy-seven per cent of teachers allotted less than 10% of the class time in teaching HOTs. He was convinced that teachers were not ready to employ their thinking skills' knowledge into practice. The confusion and lack of practice among teachers on the implementation of critical thinking in classrooms and among students significantly show that teachers have insufficient experience; hence, proper training is needed for them to be able to function effectively in teaching critical thinking in the classroom. Therefore, there is a need for both neophyte and seasoned teachers to be trained to allow them to ease the pedagogical process of teaching critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Bezanilla et al., 2021, Al-Kindi & Al-Mekhlafi, 2017; Nagappan, 2010; Suhaili, 2014)- as it is fundamental for teachers to be competent in teaching critical thinking in the classroom to allow students to learn how to think critically.

## 1.3 FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH CRITICAL READING

In addressing the problem of learners' lack of critical thinking skills, teachers need to foster critical thinking in classrooms. One of the ways to do this at the school is by introducing critical reading during the lessons. Critical reading is explained as the ability to evaluate judgment, make inferences, differentiate between facts and opinions, and recognise the writers' viewpoints and purpose (Darch & Kameenui, 1987). While the critical reader is described as a reader who evaluates from various angles such as through logical point of view, rhetorical side, historical, ethical, social, and personal perspectives with regards to the advantage of past experiences of what he/she reads before making decisions or judgements (Wheeler, 2007), and "Creates a new meaning according to himself/herself" (Asilioglu, 2008, p. 8); it is believed that critical reading is the missing link to foster critical thinking among students. My deduction that critical reading is a link to critical thinking is supported by Newton (1985), who states that, "To

read critically is to think critically. Critical thinking is a manner of assimilating and processing information and evaluating ideas (. . .) Our concern as teachers of reading is to encourage critical thinking concerning the written word" (p. 26) and Smith (1961) also stated that, "The good reader thinks critically" (p. 162).

Several studies on critical reading that have been conducted show that critical reading helps learners improve their critical thinking skills. They also showed that one of the most effective means to foster critical thinking is through the critical reading of literature. Literature texts are chosen in this study because they are so diverse that they integrate social, political, technological and encompass all parts and parcels of life. For instance, a study conducted by Commeyras (1989) presents a principle behind using dramas or fiction in teaching critical thinking skills because she believes that, "Literature reflects life, it can well be used in the classroom to promote critical thinking" (p. 703). Her approach aims to engage students using inductive reasoning in understanding the characters in a play called "Tom Sawyer". Her idea of using literature is also shared by another researcher Buckley (1986), who states that literature renders arguments and allows inferences to be made about our lives. These are the two skills that are required for quality writing. Likewise, McMillan and Gentile (1988) state that "through the posing of dilemmas and characters in the controlled setting of school, open discussions of alternatives and predictions can occur, and teachers can assist … in developing the ability to think both critically and ethically" (p. 878). Besides, Edwin (1992) highlights that literature in English allows for the development of reading skills, and it will also nurture students' critical thinking skills. Thus, it is believed that it is the best choice to use literature to help learners to think critically.

To exemplify the extent to which critical reading can be fostered using literature, Ollman (1996) combined the literary reading process with discussion and writing. A list of seven written-response formats of reading works was then presented and reviewed with the 7th graders. Every five weeks, she would ask the students to try to answer a brand-new type of written-response based on their selected novels. The result indicated that, "Students were finally thinking creatively and critically as they made meaning of literature." She even provided a quote from one of her students, saying, "After I read each book, a tiny little piece of me changes" (p. 581). This is a special note from a student that significantly shows how she/he was influenced by literature upon reading

it. Similarly, based on a reading research project on how multicultural literature can be explored to develop critical reading and thinking, Flood, Lapp, and Nagel (l993) indicated that the learners are more critical when they have to share their thoughts, feelings, and belief upon their reading assignments. The data was presented in several types of written assessments such as journal entries, formal response papers, and survey responses. They found that, "Multicultural literature may be a source of input that causes students to evaluate the validity of their beliefs and actions. It can be the vehicle that allows them to share the thoughts, feelings, and life experiences of others" (p. 421). Hence, critical reading of literary texts is fundamental in the process of critical thinking skills.

## 1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Among the issues that educators and employers have raised is that many Malaysian graduates cannot think critically (Siti Zaidah et al, 2019). Educators have argued how our critical thinking skills have suffered because teachers are under-equipped with knowledge and practice to teach critical thinking in the classrooms, and students are not learning how to think critically effectively. This is apparent in our PISA 2009 (OECD 2010), PISA 2012 (OECD 2013) PISA 2018 (OECD 2019) indicated that Malaysia gained a lower score in reading below the average of OECD's average of 496 scores. This is an indication that learners have poor understanding in constructing the meaning of what they read. The reading score also shows that learners cannot analyse, synthesise, problem-solve, articulate decisions, and identify issues. This significantly shows that we are trailing behind other countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and others in literacy and critical thinking skills. Employers have also bemoaned that graduates are unable to meet the demands of their employers because Malaysian graduates lack communication and critical thinking skills (Ambigapathy & Aniswal, 2005; Nurita, Ainon & Shahrudin, 2007). Hence, it is essential to conduct this study to determine why students lack critical thinking skills, the factors that influence our students' inability to read and think critically, and how critical thinking can be fostered among students in the English language classrooms, especially in literature class.

## 1.5 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the challenges that students and teachers face in fostering critical thinking through critical reading in English literature classrooms in two secondary schools in an urban and a rural area in Selangor.

## 1.6 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

  i.    To discern the difficulties faced by the students in responding to literary texts and the strategies they used to overcome their difficulties.

  ii.    To identify the teachers' approaches and practices used in teaching critical reading in the literature component of the ESL class.

  iii.    To explore the English teachers' perceptions of their knowledge and capabilities to teach critical reading in the literature component of the ESL class and the strategies they used to encourage critical reading among the students.

  iv.    To discern the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching critical reading and their perceptions of the challenges faced by their students in responding critically to the texts in the literature component.

## 1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

  i.    a) What are the difficulties faced by the students in responding to literary texts?

       b) What are the strategies they used to overcome their difficulties?

  ii.    What are the teachers' approaches and practices used in teaching critical reading in the literature component of the ESL class?

  iii.    a) What are the English teachers' perceptions of their knowledge and capabilities in teaching critical reading in the literature component of the ESL class?

       b) What are the strategies they used to encourage critical reading among the students?

iv. a) What are the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching students to read critically?

b) What are their perceptions of the challenges faced by their students in responding critically to the texts in the literature component?

## 1.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Most studies in the West (Wong, 2016; Facione, 1991; McPeck, 2016; Whiley et al., 2017) emphasise the importance of critical reading and how it can foster critical thinking skills. However, in Malaysia, little research has been conducted on promoting critical thinking via critical reading. This research will augment the evidence that students lack critical reading and thinking skills in the classroom. Simultaneously, it will support the reason teachers lack mastery to teach the skills. Besides, this study will attempt to address critical thinking issues that have become one of the hot topics in the ESL field. Also, this study's findings would help both teachers and learners to be critical thinkers and be aware of the concept of critical reading in literature. This would also facilitate and smoothen the learning and teaching process in materialising one of Malaysia's educational aspirations, aiming at producing learners who can think critically. Next, this study would also inform policymakers and curriculum designers on the most effective steps to improve and enhance the implementation process of critical thinking skills in the classrooms and materials used in teaching. The curriculum designers should also ensure that the textbooks to teach reading should have components that would foster critical thinking.

The findings of this study would also help the Ministry of Education (MOE) and teachers to revise the curriculum and incorporate critical reading skills in all subjects, especially in teaching literature throughout the curriculum. The MOE should also be prepared to carry out the responsibility to provide the teachers with suitable materials and ample training to improve and enhance teachers' skills in teaching critical thinking skills. This is imperative to be exercised so that they can help the learners to gain these skills. Also, teachers need to find the most effective ways to teach critical reading, especially in the literature classroom, as literature provides a platform for the learners to learn the language and culture and discuss the problems posed within the contexts.

## 1.9 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

**Critical Reading**

Critical Reading is defined as a process in which learners need to analyse, interpret, question, and evaluate texts (Kurland, 2010). He further explains the process as, "An analytic activity in which the reader (learners) rereads a text to identify patterns of elements -- information, values, assumptions, and language usage -- throughout the discussion. These elements are tied together in an interpretation, an assertion of an underlying meaning of the text as a whole." (n.p).

**Critical Thinking**

Critical Thinking is defined as "Purposeful, reflective judgement which manifests itself in reasoned consideration of evidence, context, methods, standards, and conceptualisations in deciding what to believe or what to do" (Facione, 2011, p.22)

**Literature**

Literature in this study focuses on small "l" and not the literature with big "L" as we do not focus on detailed analysis on figurative language since the emphasis is for the students to understand literary texts prescribed in the syllabus (Vethamani, 2004). In this study, literature texts can be any materials such as articles, novels, short stories, poems, newspaper cutting, magazines, and others that contribute knowledge to the reading and help develop an in-depth analysis process. Lazere (1987, p.3) believes that "Literature...is the single academic discipline that can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking.

**Rural Schools**

Rural schools are defined as schools situated inside or outside of the metropolitan area and have a population of 2500 people or less (in the school) (Johnson & Strange, 2005).

**Urban Schools**

Urban schools are defined as schools situated in a metropolitan area or city and have a population of more than 2500 people.

**English as a Second Language (ESL) Context**

English is a second language when it is learned and used in "normal day-to-day social interactions" (Wilkins, 1974). In Malaysia, English is the second language, and it is widely used and spoken in daily lives. This study is conducted in an ESL context.

**Themes**

Themes in this study are represented with lengthy words to help readers get a clearer idea of the discussion.

# CHAPTER TWO

# REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## 2.1 ORGANISATION OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter aims to show the importance of critical thinking and critical reading among learners as individuals and a part of society. There are four main parts in this chapter, with each section thoroughly explains, discusses, describes, and analyses the concept of critical thinking and critical reading and their relationship.

**Part One**, "Critical Thinking and Critical Reading", discusses the differences between critical reading and critical thinking and the relationship between both concepts.

**Part Two**, "The Need for Critical Thinking", aims to highlight the importance of critical thinking for the students individually and society at large.

**Part Three**, "Fostering Critical Thinking through the Critical Reading of Literature Texts." This section addresses the process of how to foster critical thinking through the critical reading of literature.

**Part Four,** "The Conceptual Framework", describes the framework used in this study to help develop critical reading skills in the literature classroom. It describes the teaching literature models and teaching approaches to literature. A framework is derived from these concepts as it is believed that teachers can use it to teach and foster critical thinking through critical reading in the literature classroom. And at the same time, this framework would hopefully serve as a guide in producing learners who can think critically.

**2.2 PART ONE: CRITICAL THINKING AND CRITICAL READING**

The following discussions are highlighted in this section: (1) The definitions and concepts of critical thinking (2) The definitions and concepts of critical reading (3) The relationship between critical thinking and critical reading.

**2.2.1 The Definitions and Concepts of Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking skills are required in various fields such as psychology, philosophy, education, and others. Each of these fields define critical thinking based on their specifications and approaches used in the area. For instance, in the philosophical approach, critical thinking is defined as "Skilful, responsible thinking that facilitates good judgment because it relies upon criteria, that it is self-correcting, and it is sensitive to context" (Lipman, 1988, p.39). Facione (1990, p.3) then highlights other elements that it is a "Purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or conceptual considerations upon which that judgment is based." In the meantime, according to a psychological approach, Sternberg (1986) states that it is "The mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts" (p.3) while Halpern (1998) believes that it is "The use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome" (p. 450). Some also define it as "Seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms your ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth" (Willingham, 2007, p. 8).

Then again, for some educationists, this skill is regarded as a set of higher-order thinking skills in which one of the renowned educationists, Bloom (1956), listed in his taxonomy (known as Bloom's Taxonomy). This taxonomy is a highly cited source when it involves teaching and assessing higher-order thinking skills. It is hierarchical, and in the revised version of the taxonomy (2001), "remembering" is placed at the bottom of the hierarchy while "creating" is at the top. According to Kennedy et al. (1991), Bloom's three highest levels (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) which are termed as "analyse,