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# Teachers' Perceived Knowledge in Developing Critical Thinking in the Literature Classroom

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**Abstract**

Critical thinking skills play a vital role in making sound decisions, developing creative and innovative thinking, and producing graduates and members of society who can contribute effectively to the country's development. Hence, teachers should develop these skills among their students as they are crucial in producing graduates capable of solving problems and proposing innovative solutions to problems in their lives and society. This paper describes the results of a study aimed at ascertaining how teachers from six Malaysian secondary schools felt about their knowledge and ability in teaching and developing critical thinking skills in the literature classroom. The paper concludes with the implications of the findings in developing students' critical thinking ability.

**Keywords:** Critical Thinking, Critical Reading, Fostering Critical Thinking, Teachers' Knowledge, Teachers' Perception

## Introduction

*"The great majority of men and women, in ordinary times, pass through life without ever contemplating or criticising, as a whole, either their own conditions or those of the world at large."*

*(Russel, 1991)*

Critical thinking is the ability to engage in reasonable, reflective, and contemplative thought that allows one to decide what to believe or do (Ennis, 2011). In the contemporary setup of 21st century education, being able to think critically is a core academic skill. Beyer (1995) defines critical thinking as the process of making clear, reasoned judgments, which is a precondition to making sound decisions, while Ruggiero (2012) conceptualizes it as a type of thinking that is attuned to analysing issues, solving problems, or making decisions. Bertrand Russel, in his famous 1919 quote, included the element of contemplation in his conception of critical thinking. From these propositions, we can deduce the nature and purpose of critical

thinking, which is essentially, a deeply intellectual cognitive process that centres on analysing and contemplating on issues and reasoning them out to solve problems and make informed decisions.

Due to the cognitive processes involved in it, exercising critical thinking thus enables people to produce creative and innovative solutions to issues and problems, in addition to allowing them to be wiser and more responsible in their decision-making. In the school or education context, critical reflection empowers students to assess the quality and authenticity of information sources, helps them to decide their courses of action, and improves the way they express their ideas. Hence, critical thinking and reflection have numerous benefits for students—not just for their academic performance, but more importantly, for their future careers and livelihood (Pescatore, 2007; Jaswal et al., 2022 ). Naturally, university graduates who exhibit the ability to think systematically, reflectively, and reasonably are more likely to get hired by employers than graduates who lack the ability to do so. In addition, the value of critical thinking does not stop upon graduation. Once students are out into the real world, critical thinking matters even more. The far reaching consequences of critical thinking are upheld by the World Economic Forum, who declared critical thinking as one of the vital 21st century skills (New Vision for Education : Unlocking the Potential of Technology, 2015). Critical thinking is also credited as playing an integral role in Education for Sustainable Development (Taimur & Sattar, 2020), supporting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. There are certain characteristics of critical thinkers that make them effective people and valuable assets to society. For instance, students who are successful critical thinkers weigh all alternatives objectively before reaching a decision or conclusion about an issue. They think and reason based on sound evidence, question subjective knowledge and examine the credibility of all information before deciding to use it for whatever means. Critical thinkers are impartial, open-minded, and well-informed, and often come across to others as sceptical. With their critical reflection skill, they can judge the quality of an argument and draw cautious, yet evidence-based conclusions on matters that are discussed. Hayes (1990) expands this repertoire of skills to include intellectual competencies such as drawing correct inferences, making apt comparisons, determining causes and effects, recognizing over-generalizations, and distinguishing between facts and opinions.

Having these cognitive abilities to augment their academic learning is a clear benefit for students, teachers, and faculty, as well as for schools and universities. The habits of mind of critical thinkers reduce the likelihood of their making faulty judgments detrimental to themselves, the school, and society. Graduates who have a critical and reflective mind have an advantage over their less critical peers and are an intellectual asset to the industry and society. Similarly, school students who have critical dispositions are school assets—they are less dependent on teachers and better able to make intelligent decisions concerning their academic and personal lives. Therefore, given these benefits, learning institutions—both primary and tertiary—should make it their imperative duty to develop critical thinking competencies in students as this is an effective way to improve the country's intellectual worth and human capital development,

While critical thinking is highly desirable, it is an elusive attribute among students. Educators and employers alike have frequently bemoaned the fact that students and graduates lack critical thinking skills (Noah and Aziz, 2020; Terblanche and De Clercq, 2021). For instance, a former CEO of a Malaysian talent scouting company lamented that Malaysian graduates in the present day and age do not have the critical dispositions needed to perform

many on-the-job tasks or solve problems at the workplace (Cheah, 2014). In another report, about 70 percent of school students were said to lack the ability to answer questions beyond those low-level ones presented in their textbooks (Munirah and Suryani, 2016). These laments are frequently read about and heard and are echoed internationally across many countries that have reported similar situations. In the Australian job market, for example, employers have made a public demand for employees to be critical. A striking 92 percent of them described their new graduate employees as "deficient" in critical thinking.

Likewise, the same pattern of decline in thinking was reported in the United States, where most of its schools have forsaken the teaching of critical thinking, resulting in the loss of critical thought in much of American life and society (Mendelman, 2007). The grievances shared by educators and employers worldwide show how important it is for students—and other members of society for that matter—to be able to look at things analytically. The emphasis on critical thinking is well deserved as it is a vital life skill that will benefit every member of society. Since critical thinking skills are equally needed for effective university learning and job performance in the workforce, they must be encouraged and developed at an early age, and apart from the home, the next best place to shape the skills is the school. Several researchers working in the area of critical thinking believe that the skills can be taught, and children at a very young age can benefit from critical thinking as their ability for critical thought improves with age (Kennedy, 1999). Furthermore, it is also believed that being able to think critically does not occur "randomly or without effort; it takes “structured, deliberate, and repetitive exposure and practices” (Pescatore, 2007) for students to develop insightful thinking (Changwong et al., 2018).

The question is—how do we foster critical thinking? In the educational context, it is imperative that we focus on teachers as they, apart from parents, play an essential role in shaping students’ thinking. Teachers can stimulate critical thought and contemplation by doing quite the simplest things. They can start in the classroom, for example, by creating learning activities that require students to just observe their surroundings and ask basic questions about the things they see around them. Students can be coached to ask simple questions such as, “What do I already know about this?”, “How do I know it is correct?”, “What sources haven’t I checked?” and “What am I overlooking or taking for granted?” At a higher cognitive level, teachers can help students to make meaningful connections between what they observe and what they know. Clearly, it is very important for teachers to encourage students to examine their assumptions, view things beyond the surface level, and provide thought-provoking feedback to students’ thinking. To be able to stimulate critical thought, teachers must have the necessary pedagogical knowledge and be adept at selecting and formulating questions that can get students thinking in the right direction. It must be stressed that what teachers do, the activities they carry out in the classroom, and the strategies they use to deliver lessons will influence the way students think and respond in class.

Scholars and researchers have both accentuated the need to teach critical thinking in the classroom (Mok, 2010; Ennis, 2011) but such undertaking and responsibility do come with a certain prerequisite. To infuse criticality and reflection into students’ thought processes, teachers need to possess substantive knowledge and skills—and the confidence to do so—especially if such a task is to be executed in the literature classroom. Our concern in this paper is whether teachers have what it takes to shape students’ critical thought and reflection. Do they have the knowledge and ability to infuse critical thinking into their instruction? In this article, we address this fundamental concern, looking specifically into how teachers perceive

their knowledge and ability to teach and develop critical thinking skills in the teaching of literature.

**Teaching Critical Thinking Through Literature**

Literature was coined from the Latin word, litaritura or litteratura, which means “writing formed with letters.” Essentially, in its broadest sense, literature means any written work, although some definitions of it do go beyond the written form to include spoken and sung texts, such as those stories told in folk songs such as, “A Sailor’s Life” (England) and “Puteri Santubong” (Malaysia). More restrictively, literature is defined as any form (or genre) of writing that has clear literary merit (Lumen Learning, 2017) in agreement with the general meaning offered by (Davids, 1983) which is any creative writing that has artistic value.

In school, literature is studied in three different genres that include prose, poetry, and drama. The three genres help students to learn about the culture and customs of different countries, which is why literature study is often said to be a student’s window to the world. According to Moody (1980) literature gives learners great enjoyment and gratification as its content is often closely related to the human condition and learners’ real-life situations, particularly the portrayal of feelings, emotions, and relationships. Through literature study, learners learn to enjoy and appreciate the cultures, norms, and principles of other people that are different from their own (El-Helou,2010) consequently broadening their minds through exposure to myriad views, ideals, values, histories, cultures, and customs conveyed in the literary texts.

Hayes (1990) argues that “literature study can be an effective means of teaching critical thinking” because “understanding literature requires intelligent judgments and decisions based upon reasonable and reflective thought”. On this, we concur with Hayes (1990) because the nature of studying literature itself entails a great deal of emotional engagement, contemplation, and critical analysis. Reading literary works such as Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” Samuel T. Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” Joseph Konrad’s “Heart of Darkness,” and William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” can move students to greater heights of imagination, inviting them to connect "actively and personally" (McRae, 1991) to the characters involved and the stories being told. In fact, students can empathize with the characters even more significantly if they can draw a parallel between themselves and the experiences of the characters. As correctly claimed by Daskalovska and Dimova (2012), "the interpretation of literary texts involves students emotionally, awakens their imagination and creativity, and requires personal response and reaction".

Feeling a sense of connection to the stories, characters, emotions, or predicaments unveiled in literary texts is an excellent trigger for active student participation in a literature discussion or analysis. Unlike other classes, a literature class cannot be characterized by silence, passivity, teacher domination, and teacher talk. Literature study requires that students comprehend and interpret what they have read, thus giving teachers many options on how to engage them in varying levels of critical reflection and analysis. In class, students may be asked to state their opinion on the plot, setting, theme, or a character’s motive. In case they fail to make themselves clear or coherent, teachers can further ask students to rephrase or paraphrase their explanations, therefore opening yet another avenue for teachers to help students re-examine their claims and beliefs and identify where they may be wrong in their thinking. Such lines of inquiry enable students to recognize the faults in their reasoning and facilitate self-correction. In brief, the literature classroom offers teachers many opportunities to shape and sharpen students’ critical dispositions, which was our precise

reason for choosing literature study as the context of this research. To reiterate, the purpose of our research was to examine how teachers judge their ability and knowledge to develop critical thinking among students in the literature classroom.

**Method**

Our research employed the qualitative case study method involving English literature teachers from selected Malaysian schools. Our primary aim was to examine their views and perceptions of their knowledge and ability to infuse critical thought and dispositions among students through literature. Analysing the views of these teachers as "a specific case" can help to reveal the complexity of the issue or phenomenon (Stake, 1995) we were interested in, which in this instance, was the teachers' perceived knowledge and ability to develop critical thinking in students. We chose to do a case study because the method provides rich, "thick" descriptions of the phenomenon being examined (Merriam, 2009) and simultaneously answers the whys and hows (Yin, 2008) of developing critical thinking through literature. In addition, this approach would allow us to thoroughly explore and understand the teachers' experiences of inculcating critical thought in their natural school setting by gathering information from in-depth interviews. Thus, we believed that using a case study would help us to obtain rich and in-depth information about the teachers as a specific group and how they viewed their knowledge and ability in developing critical thinking in their students (Patton, 1990).

**Instrument**

To obtain the data, we used interview questions and protocol in two formats—written and spoken—in accordance with how the interviews were carried out. We included several specific questions and some open-ended ones that were followed by probes (Merriam, 2009). Both question formats specifically focused on and probed into the teachers' views about their knowledge and ability to teach critical thinking skills in the literature classroom. After the demographics, the teachers were asked to explain their experience in teaching reading and critical thinking and share their views on whether they had the knowledge and ability required to infuse critical thinking in their literature instruction. Compared to the written interviews, the face-to-face interviews gave us more leeway to ask semi-structured questions as they were done one on one with the teachers, so we could probe further into the responses that we needed more clarification on. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

**Participants**

The interview participants were 16 teachers (15 female and 1 male; aged 26 to 50) from six schools who taught the English Literature component to lower secondary classes (i.e., Forms One, Two, and Three). Originally, 18 teachers were invited to participate in the research, but two of them declined. Most of the 16 teachers had vast teaching experience ranging from six years to more than 20 years. Only two of the teachers had less than five years of professional teaching experience. They were selected through purposive sampling using three inclusion criteria: (1) having at least two years of literature teaching experience at their respective schools; (2) willing to answer the written interview questions; and (3) willing to be interviewed face-to-face and tape-recorded while reflecting on their experiences in teaching the literature component.

The inclusion criteria were crucial to ensuring that the right teachers were selected for the study from whom rich and authentic data could be collected on their perceived

knowledge and ability to develop critical thinking in the literature classroom. The first criterion, teachers' literature teaching experience, was especially important in giving the study a proper understanding of what was done in class to foster critical thinking. Having taught literature in schools as a natural setting should give the teachers enough familiarity with the issues and challenges concerning the teaching of critical thinking, allowing them to respond to the issues under investigation with a broader perspective. The number of interview participants (n = 16) was deemed sufficient to provide ample opportunity for the study to identify themes to answer the research questions as the data reached the level of saturation. The purpose of interviewing 16 teachers was to maximise information.

**Data Collection**

The interviews were all conducted individually and were done in two modes, i.e., orally and in writing. The teachers were first given the interview questions in writing and were later interviewed individually in face-to-face meetings. The purpose of sending the written interview questions before the face-to-face meeting was to give the teachers ample time to understand what the interview would be about and to allow them to write, freely, their first thoughts and ideas about teaching critical thinking in the literature study context. They were given two days to complete the written part, and data from their written interviews were used to support the face-to-face interview data. A gap of one week was allowed between the written and face-to-face interviews, a two-pronged strategy we used to prevent the teachers from providing repetitive answers and to avoid disrupting their schedules or putting them under any kind of strain. After a week of scrutinising the written data, we ran the face-to-face interviews, which took at least an hour each, with some running slightly longer than an hour. Both data sources (i.e., the written and face-to-face interviews) were compared and integrated to further enrich the data and gain a better perspective on any issue left unaddressed in either one of the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

We analysed the interview data using a thematic content analysis that followed Creswell's six-step procedure (Creswell, 2014), which we adopted to ensure a holistic interpretation of the extracted themes. The first step in this procedure was organising and preparing the data. According to Creswell (2014), this process involves "transcribing interviews, general scanning of the materials, typing field notes, cataloguing all visual materials, and sorting and arranging the data into different types depending on the source of information". In our study, the interviews were first audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and saved in a series of Word documents that were named with a file-naming convention indicating the participants' pseudonym and the time and location of their interviews. Second, we read through the verbatim transcriptions to gain a general sense of the themes contained within them and to reflect on the overall meaning of the themes. The reading was done twice, the second time to check the transcriptions again and compare them against the recorded audio to identify if we had missed out on any important point or if we had misunderstood certain statements. Once we were satisfied with the quality of the transcripts, we read through them again, more carefully and thoroughly this time, to get an overall meaning of the participants' views. Third, we coded and categorised the data by chunking each interview document into smaller bits of information to ease the analysis and reporting process. We then carefully established categories and sub-categories based on the conceptual similarity of the extracted themes (Saldana, 2013) and checked the coding several times with the identified categories and sub-

categories to confirm if they accurately represented the participants' responses (Creswell, 2014). In the fourth step, we used coding to generate themes, which were conceptually linked to form a narrative that would address the research objectives. The last step was making meaning out of the findings by giving them proper and well-grounded interpretations. From the developed codes, we formulated the themes that could answer the study's research questions. This process entailed organising the themes into larger perspectives so that we could see the bigger picture and make sense of the data.

**Results**

Our thematic analysis of the interview data extracted three major themes on the teachers' views of their knowledge and ability. First, the teachers were of the view that although they did have the knowledge to teach critical thinking in the literature classroom, they did not, however, have the confidence to execute such teaching. Second, they expressed a lack of familiarity with the skills needed to incorporate critical thinking into literature study. Finally, the teachers felt they needed more specialized training on how to develop students' critical thinking through literature.

**Theme 1: No Confidence to Teach Critical Thinking Despite Having the Knowledge**

The teachers in the study did not doubt the benefits of incorporating critical thinking into the teaching of literature. They believed that such higher-order cognition would yield many favourable outcomes in students, yet their expressed lack of confidence kept resurfacing in the interview testimonies. The teachers were convinced that they had the knowledge to infuse critical thought in the classroom but were hampered by their lack of confidence to implement such instruction. Hence, the first theme extracted from the interview data was the teachers' not having faith in themselves despite perceiving that they had the knowledge of how to develop students' critical thoughts:

*"I am not confident to guide students to think and read critically." [Ms. M]*

*"I'm not confident to teach the skill because I haven't practiced it in class." [Mr. A]*

Not having that much-needed faith was indeed a stumbling block, they admitted. The teachers professed an interest in teaching the skills, but the absence of confidence resulted in their struggling with the instructional process. Their lack of confidence, they explained, was due to inadequate training on how to design lessons incorporating critical thinking elements. It was very challenging for them to effectively integrate the skills into the literature component, which led some of them to doubt their ability to produce learners who could think critically.

The same issue of confidence was earlier addressed by Milligan (2020) whose study reported teachers' lack of faith in their ability as being a major obstacle in the teaching of critical thinking. A teacher's pedagogical knowledge and competency are central to planning good lessons, but a lack of faith and confidence in themselves can preclude them from delivering even well-planned lessons effectively. As correctly stated by Milligan, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in teaching critical thinking play an essential role in ensuring that students develop the habits of mind characteristic of critical thinkers.

Related to their not having the confidence to teach critical thinking, the teachers reported that it was not easy to engage students in thinking critically. As remarked by Ms Z:

*"I am not very confident because it will take a lot of time to be able to engage the students to think critically" [Ms Z]*

In Ms Z's view, developing critical thinking in students is a time-consuming task, and her doubt was caused more by the time factor than by the lack of self-efficacy beliefs. Ms Z's concern is understandable because, in the Malaysian curriculum, only one lesson per week is allotted for the Literature subject. Considering the time limitation, teachers may find it exacting to focus on the literature content and thinking skills simultaneously in the forty minutes of class time they have. As most Malaysian teachers would agree, there is a tremendous amount of content (e.g., themes, plots, settings, points of view, values, characterization, etc.) to cover in the existing literature curriculum, and focusing on the content would seem more like a wise choice than spending time on developing critical thought—when time is not on their side.

Apart from the aforementioned reasons, many others can contribute to teachers' lack of confidence. For instance, teaching critical thinking requires skills that need time to develop, and the teachers in this study might not have had enough exposure to how such skilful teaching is done. Their in-service or pre-service teacher training might not have imparted the necessary pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) to create lessons that blend critical thought and literature appreciation. Not having the PCK to deliver literature lessons imbued with critical thinking was a point mentioned by one participant, Ms J:

*"I'm not one hundred percent confident (to teach critical thinking/reading) … I didn't know how to pursue the literature and so on…these are things that were never really taught to us during our teacher training" [Ms. J]*

As explicitly stated by Ms J, she did not know much about the teaching methodology of critical reading and thinking to enable her to infuse the skill into her literature lessons. Ms J's lack of confidence was justified as it is, in fact, challenging to incorporate critical thinking into the literature lesson design without proper training. This finding is congruent with that of Al-Kindi and Al-Mekhlafi (2017); Ennis (2015); Paul (1993) who found that insufficient background and a lack of experience in the teaching of critical thinking have posed some challenges to the teachers they studied.

The testimonies of the teachers in our study tell us that just having theoretical knowledge of the skills (i.e., the "know-whats") is not adequate to give teachers the confidence to implement them in literature study (Haas and Keeley, 1998; McKee, 1988). It will take years of real classroom practice for teachers' "know-hows" to develop fully and to reach this stage of instructional adeptness, teachers' procedural knowledge needs to be frequently practiced, challenged, tested, revised, modified, and re-implemented.

**Theme 2: Lack of Familiarity with the Skills to Teach Critical Thinking**

The second theme that emerged from our analysis of the interviews was the teachers' lack of familiarity with the skills to teach this higher order thinking. A few participants lamented that their unfamiliarity with the pedagogy of critical thinking precluded the teaching and development of the skill in the literature classroom. Understandably, the teachers might have felt uncomfortable implementing something they perceived to be "new". For instance, two teachers shared the following reflections during the interview:

*"I am not that familiar with the skills to teach critical reading/thinking" [Ms P]*

*"I may have problems if I am not familiar with the skills and teaching method [to teach critical thinking in the literature class]" [Ms Z]*

As reported in the literature, teachers' unfamiliarity with teaching methods other than the traditional, didactic ones can be linked to their classroom practices. Often, teachers tend to focus on providing information to students rather than worrying whether they can think at

high cognitive levels (Haas and Keeley, 1998). Most teachers generally subscribe to the didactic information transmission view of teaching and rarely dwell on teaching students to think critically. Wilson (2019) asserts that it is not surprising to find some teachers perceiving critical thinking as "unfamiliar, too challenging and even inappropriate given their traditional roles and teaching contexts". Given this perception and their lack of familiarity with the methods needed to foster this important skill, teachers may completely disregard the teaching of it and stick to traditional, didactic teaching that emphasizes the factual approach to learning instead of stimulating critical thought and reflection among students (Griggs et al., 1998; Maki, 1998). We concur with Apple (2004) and Kuhn (2019) who have underscored the fact that it is insufficient to instruct students only on the lowest cognitive level of knowledge or recall as this will achieve little in helping them advance towards higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and 21st-century learning goals.

Nonetheless, despite their unfamiliarity with it, the teachers in this study believed that literature lessons would be greatly enhanced with the incorporation of critical thinking. As stated by Ms. P, *"learning will definitely be more interesting once critical thinking and learning are involved."* However, to achieve this, teachers need to be professionally and comprehensively trained in pedagogy to ensure their teaching of critical thinking is effective and reaches the goals of 21st-century learning.

**Theme 3: The Need for More Training on Critical Thinking Pedagogy**

The third theme that emerged from the data is that teachers felt that they knew how to teach the skills but required training on the specifics. A few teachers admitted that their knowledge and experience in teaching critical reflection skills were rather general and limited and indicated the need to improve their competency through courses and workshops:

*"…it would be better for me to improve myself by attending workshops or courses." [Ms. R]*

To understand better the nature of the required pedagogical exposure, we probed deeper into their training backgrounds. We discovered that six teachers never had any pedagogical training at all, while five of them (31.3%) had received some form of training at least once in their teaching career. The rest (about 31%) had attended a relevant training twice or more, but it had been quite some time ago that they attended the workshop. From this information, we understood why the teachers felt under skilled and needed more training on the pedagogy of critical thinking.

The teachers with some exposure to the pedagogy explained that they had received training on: (1) Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats, where the workshop had focused on the various aspects of student thinking; (2) critical reading and thinking from their university courses that had emphasized communication skills, problem analysis, problem-solving, and decision making; (3) "HEBAT-Hayati Eksplorasi Berfikir Aras Tinggi," a programme that demonstrated how to apply thinking in daily life to be productive citizens, and how effective thinking could instil good values and help students to communicate and express themselves better; 4) HEBAT reading strategies, which dealt with understanding the underlying meaning of a text, reading by relating issues to oneself or their surroundings, and reading with specific techniques (i.e. QUACK); and 5) LADAP, an in-service training for local teachers that explained the strategies of developing rational thinking and decision-making in students, leading them to become broad-minded and able to evaluate the credibility of information sources.

These were a few of the training programs that some of the teachers had previously attended on critical thinking and critical reading. The participants claimed that the training they received was insufficient to educate them clearly and in detail on how to incorporate

critical thinking into school lessons. Hence, they insisted on more workshops that illustrate the ways and means of integrating critical thinking skills into literature lessons, specifically. One teacher, Ms L, said that she would welcome such workshops from the Ministry of Education, stressing the importance of learning how to vary critical reading activities apart from the ones typically used by teachers:

*"I think I have just enough knowledge…. But I would prefer to attend a more formal workshop on teaching students to read or think critically. It is because I need to vary the activities of reading instead of the one that I used on everyday reading activities now." [Ms L]*

Ms L believed that further, and relevant workshops would help teachers to diversify their instructional methods and develop new ideas to improve how they approached the teaching of critical thinking and reading. Some of the teachers in this study felt that their instructional practices would be substantially upgraded if the Ministry and schools could support their classroom practices with proper training and resources.

**Discussion**

The findings revealed that some teachers involved in the study shared that they lacked confidence and familiarity with teaching the skills and required more training. Ms. R reminisced on her one-day course that she attended on higher-order thinking skills. She mentioned that they did not discuss in-depth the strategies used to help them help the students to think critically. She said that she ended up referring to the notes from the course and her knowledge to help her learn more about the skills. The findings also suggested that teachers need in-depth exposure and more hands-on practice in critical thinking education to effectively teach critical thinking skills to the students. Ms. W lamented that teachers need the skill first to teach critical thinking skills to the students. Both teachers expressed how they believed that more in-depth exposure and practice on the critical thinking skills would have helped them teach the skills effectively in class.

Furthermore, it is true that without proper practice, the knowledge of critical thinking skills alone is insufficient to allow them to practice the skills effectively in the classrooms, especially in teaching literature. Numerous studies suggested that the acquisition of critical thinking skills is not autonomous (Ekinci and Ekinci, 2017) and knowledge gained should be acquired and practiced. The results from a few studies such as Palavan (2020) and Ekinci and Ekinci (2017) indicated that even those who possess the skills could not effectively use critical thinking skills in many situations requiring them to think critically. It is undeniable that teachers naturally play an utmost important role in teaching critical thinking skills to the students. Still, we should not deny the fact that it requires well-trained teachers who use the skills to activate and enable students to acquire critical thinking skills (Genc, 2008). Having teachers who can think critically and being able to teach students to think critically will directly impact the students that they educate. Palavan (2020) mentioned that teachers who have excellent knowledge of the subject matters they teach and at the same time could think critically can have a positive impact on the students they are teaching and vice-versa. He also stated an example stating that Finland credited the teachers for their high-performance results in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). They believe in the quality of their teachers that allow them to achieve excellent results in PISA. They firmly believe that the teachers play a crucial role that helping the country to achieve such a high result (Stacey, 2010). Thus, it is vital that we ensure our educational institutions, mainly those that train teachers, pay attention to critical thinking education. This would help us produce students who can think and use critical thinking skills in their daily lives once the teachers are well-

trained. Teacher training and education on critical thinking will also help teachers learn different methodologies and how to use critical thinking skills. Once they can acquire the skills and effectively use them, they can refine their pedagogy, especially in embedding and infusing the critical thinking skills in their subject matters, especially in this case to help students learn literature effectively.

Moreover, Palavan (2020); Tsui (2002) state that teachers could benefit from the training sessions. These sessions create an opportunity for the teachers to share many things, including their teaching successes and frustrations with other colleagues dealing with similar situations. This is true as teachers involved in this study also reported that peer discussions assist their teaching. The ministry of education and teacher-training institutions should consider ways to help teachers effectively teach critical thinking and ensure that they are well-equipped with the knowledge and skills before teaching the students. The continuous support from the ministry of education and educational institutions is essential in ensuring Malaysia achieves her educational aspiration and philosophy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the study's findings brought to our awareness a critical issue of teacher beliefs and efficacy. The issue at hand is not that the teachers were unwilling to impart critical thinking in the literature classroom, nor did they express a lack of belief in its importance and benefit to the students of literature. Rather, quite the opposite is true. The teachers in this study had expressed a general lack of faith in their competency to teach the skill, reiterating the same shaky confidence throughout the interviews that they did not understand it enough to be able to incorporate it effectively into their literature instruction. This concerned us as researchers because literature as a school subject should provide a vast platform for the teachers and students to explore ideas constructively to develop critical thinking.

In a successful literature class, students can demonstrate and practice critical thinking through literary analysis activities (Khuankaew, 2010). Reading literary texts with a critical eye, questioning the ideas talked about by the characters in the story, and relating the plot to real-life situations are several cognitive strategies that can sharpen the mind. Othman et al. (2001) and Langer (2000) support the utility of literature study in the development of students' critical thought, clarifying that it is plausible to develop such criticality in thinking in the literature classroom because students—being readers of literary texts—often go beyond the texts to understand the ideas and issues presented in them, making hypotheses, and testing their assumptions as they go along. These cognitive strategies promote critical and analytical thought as the literature work is read and assessed from a critical lens. It is the use of these cognitive strategies within authentic literature appreciation activities that makes the literature class a good platform for learners to practice and develop critical thinking.

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