

## ***The Struggle to Teach Critical Thinking through Literature***

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Literature is often seen as a powerful tool to help students think deeply and critically. Stories, poems, and plays can push learners to reflect on themes, characters, and social issues. However, in the Philippines, teaching critical thinking through literature presents many challenges. These include weak reading comprehension, limited teacher training, a rigid curriculum, and a gap between theory and practice. This essay explores these challenges, using local research to show why literature often falls short of its potential in building analytical minds.

One barrier is weak reading comprehension. A study at San Bartolome Integrated High School found that many Grade 11 students struggled to read at an adequate level. Even with the use of reader-response strategies and affective learning, learners improved in recognizing grammar and drawing conclusions—but still struggled with deeper connections in texts (Suarez & Diva, 2022). This difficulty in understanding complex texts makes it hard for learners to engage in analysis or critique.

Teachers face another obstacle: lack of training. In Albay, master teachers working on critical literacy reported that they lacked background in methods that challenge students to question power, context, and perspective. Many found it hard to stray from standard lesson plans focused on memorization (Malejana, 2020). At the university level, future language teachers also shared this dilemma. They saw the need for higher-order thinking tasks but found little support to teach these skills deeply or consistently (University of the East, 2021).

The curriculum adds another layer of challenge. Education programs in the Philippines emphasize literature for its aesthetic or historical value. Teachers often led class discussions that guide students toward expected interpretations rather than inviting independent critique (Studyco Review, 2021). This approach reflects limited instructional tools. A university case study showed that teachers learned to use different literary theories, but still felt uncertain in guiding students to use these lenses for deeper understanding (Bustamante, 2022).

A literature circle strategy, however, shows promise. Using a group-based method in Cebu, educators found that peer discussion boosted critical thinking in reading. Students in the experimental group had stronger post-test results than those following traditional methods (Castro, 2021). This suggests that student-centered methods can work—but they remain rare in many classrooms.

Beyond strategies, challenges include time limits, lacking resources, and a mismatch between student readiness and expectations. In Senior High School, teachers reported that reading and writing activities aim to build high-level thinking, but lessons often focus on simplified tasks. Some materials are too complex for students' current reading skills and leave teachers without effective ways to support them (Jucel et al., 2021).

To make literature a true site of critical thinking, meaningful change is needed in three key areas. First, teacher training should go beyond traditional instruction and include methods such as reader-response theory, literature circles, and critical literacy. These approaches allow students to personally connect with texts, engage in thoughtful discussions, and challenge conventional interpretations. Teachers equipped with these strategies can help students analyze not just what a text says, but how and why it communicates certain ideas.

Second, curriculum writers must strike a balance between aesthetic appreciation and critical analysis. While learning about literary elements like imagery or symbolism is valuable, the curriculum should also create space for interpretation, debate, and reflection. Literature classes should encourage students to consider the social, cultural, and historical contexts of texts, and to draw connections between what they read and the world they live in.

Third, schools should move away from memorization-focused learning and adopt strategies that promote inquiry. Instead of simply recalling facts or summaries, students should be encouraged to ask questions, examine differing viewpoints, and explore deeper meanings. Assignments that involve comparison, analysis, and personal reflection can foster a more engaging and critical approach to literature.

Prioritizing and supporting the teachers, rethinking the curriculum, and creating a classroom culture of exploration, literature can become more than just a subject. It can become a powerful tool for shaping independent, empathetic, and critical thinkers.

Teaching critical thinking through literature can still succeed in the Philippines. Local studies show that with the right tools, students can draw stronger conclusions, ask deeper questions, and build critical skills. But this requires will, time, and support. Ultimately, literature in the Philippines can help shape thoughtful citizens ready to reflect on their world—if educators and institutions unite around practices that value thinking beyond the page.

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