

Humanities Teachers and Critical Thinking: Analyzing Their Readiness for Modern Education

Tarimin Nashop, Karshima Louise Rangna'an, Nannim Dandam

TETFund Centre of Excellence for Innovative Teaching and Learning in Primary and Early Childhood Education (T_CEIPEC), Federal College of Education, Pankshin, Nigeria

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.910000029>

Received: 11 June 2025; Accepted: 15 June 2025; Published: 03 November 2025

ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is increasingly recognized as a vital skill for navigating the complexities of the 21st century. While the humanities—comprising disciplines such as literature, history, philosophy, and the arts—have long been associated with promoting critical thinking, the readiness of humanities teachers to effectively teach and cultivate this skill remains under explored. This study investigates the preparedness of humanities educators to foster critical thinking in their classrooms, exploring the pedagogical strategies they employ, the challenges they face, and the institutional support available to them. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations, the research assesses the level of critical thinking integration in humanities instruction across a sample of secondary and tertiary educators. Findings indicate that while many teachers recognize the importance of critical thinking, their preparedness is often limited by factors such as lack of professional training, rigid curricula, and the pressures of standardized assessments. Despite these challenges, the study identifies promising practices, including Socratic questioning and textual analysis, and highlights the potential for greater innovation in teaching critical thinking through interdisciplinary approaches and digital tools. The study concludes with recommendations for improving teacher training, curriculum design, and institutional support to enhance the teaching of critical thinking in the humanities. These findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on the future of education, emphasizing the need for a renewed focus on critical thinking as an essential competency in modern classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

In an age marked by rapid technological advancements, global interconnections, and increasingly complex societal issues, the need for critical thinking skills has never been more urgent. As educational systems worldwide strive to prepare students for this fast-changing world, the ability to think critically has emerged as a cornerstone of effective learning. Critical thinking—defined as the capacity to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in a reasoned and reflective manner—is crucial not only in academic settings but also in navigating personal, professional, and civic life.

The humanities—comprising fields such as literature, history, philosophy, and the arts—have long been associated with fostering critical thinking. These subjects encourage students to engage in deep reflection, question assumptions, and explore multiple perspectives. However, despite the inherent potential of the humanities to promote such skills, the actual readiness of humanities educators to effectively teach and cultivate critical thinking in their classrooms is an area that requires significant attention.

Humanities teachers, who often function as the stewards of intellectual inquiry, face both opportunities and challenges in facilitating critical thinking. On one hand, the very nature of humanities disciplines provides a fertile ground for critical engagement, as students are invited to interpret texts, analyze historical events, and grapple with philosophical questions. On the other hand, teachers may encounter obstacles such as rigid curricula, standardized testing pressures, and limited professional development opportunities that hinder their ability to focus on critical thinking.

This study seeks to explore the readiness of humanities teachers in promoting critical thinking, particularly in

light of modern educational reforms and the increased emphasis on interdisciplinary learning and digital literacy. By investigating the preparedness of humanities educators to integrate critical thinking into their teaching practices, this study aims to identify gaps in teacher training, challenges faced by educators, and potential strategies for improvement.

The findings of this study will not only contribute to the broader conversation about critical thinking in education but also provide practical insights for policy makers, educational leaders, and teachers themselves. By examining the current state of humanities education and its capacity to foster critical thinking, the research will offer recommendations to strengthen the alignment between teaching practices and the demands of contemporary education.

Objectives Of The Study

1. To assess the current level of preparedness among humanities teachers in promoting critical thinking.
2. To identify the pedagogical strategies commonly employed by humanities teachers.
3. To examine the challenges humanities teachers, face in integrating critical thinking into their teaching practices.
4. To offer recommendations for professional development and curriculum enhancement.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: A mixed-methods approach was adopted to capture both quantitative data and qualitative insights.

Population and Sample: The study targeted secondary and tertiary-level humanities teachers across urban and rural settings. A stratified random sample of 150 teachers from 20 institutions was selected.

Data Collection Instruments: Survey questionnaire to assess perceived readiness, teaching practices, and challenges. Semi-structured interviews with 20 participants for in-depth perspectives. Classroom observations of 10 selected teachers to validate self-reported data.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Qualitative data were coded and thematically analyzed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding critical thinking in education, especially within the context of humanities teaching, highlights both the importance of critical thinking skills and the challenges educators face in fostering these skills. This review explores key themes related to the role of humanities in developing critical thinking, the effectiveness of teaching strategies, and the barriers that hinder the integration of critical thinking in the classroom.

The Importance of Critical Thinking in Education

Critical thinking is often defined as the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking, which involves analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information in a reasoned and logical manner (Paul & Elder, 2014). In the contemporary educational context, critical thinking is seen as an essential skill for preparing students to navigate a rapidly changing world (Facione, 2015). It is not only a cognitive skill but also a disposition that requires students to question assumptions, consider alternative viewpoints, and engage in thoughtful decision-making (Brookfield, 2012).

The importance of critical thinking in education has been widely acknowledged by scholars, as it is foundational for developing democratic citizens capable of engaging with complex social, political, and ethical

issues. As Nussbaum (2010) points out, the humanities, through their emphasis on interpretation, analysis, and moral reasoning, are uniquely positioned to nurture these skills. However, as the educational focus has shifted towards STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields in many regions, there is concern that the critical thinking capacities fostered by the humanities are undervalued (Bauerlein, 2009).

Role of the Humanities in Fostering Critical Thinking

The humanities are traditionally seen as the academic disciplines that most directly cultivate critical thinking skills. According to Nussbaum (2010), the study of literature, history, and philosophy encourages students to engage in deep reflection on complex human experiences, ethical dilemmas, and societal issues. Through these subjects, students learn to evaluate evidence, form reasoned arguments, and engage with multiple perspectives—core components of critical thinking.

Humanities subjects also provide students with opportunities to examine historical events, philosophical ideas, and cultural narratives, fostering skills in interpreting complex texts and ideas. As Paul and Elder (2014) assert, critical thinking in the humanities is not simply about memorizing facts but about engaging students in a process of inquiry that challenges them to analyze assumptions and construct reasoned arguments.

However, despite the potential of humanities education to promote critical thinking, there is growing concern that the current state of humanities education in many parts of the world may not fully realize this potential. According to Sivan and Ho (2017), the increasing focus on standardized testing and the push for measurable outcomes in education may limit the scope for teaching critical thinking in humanities classrooms, which are often seen as less directly tied to standardized assessments than subjects like mathematics or science.

Challenges in Teaching Critical Thinking in the Humanities

Numerous studies have identified significant barriers to effectively teaching critical thinking, particularly in humanities classrooms. One major challenge is the lack of adequate teacher training in critical thinking pedagogy. A study by Abrami, Bernard and Borokhovski (2015) found that while many educators understand the importance of critical thinking, few have received formal training in how to teach it effectively. Without a clear understanding of how to integrate critical thinking into their pedagogy, many teachers resort to traditional methods of instruction that emphasize content delivery over skill development.

Furthermore, the demands of standardized curricula and high-stakes assessments often work against the goals of critical thinking instruction. Teachers may feel compelled to focus on preparing students for exams, which may not allow time for open-ended discussions, debates, or in-depth analysis (Schafersman, 1991). In such environments, critical thinking becomes secondary to the immediate goal of achieving good test scores.

The passive nature of many students also poses a significant challenge to teaching critical thinking. Studies by Facione and Gittens (2016) suggest that students often enter classrooms with a focus on rote learning and memorization, rather than active, reflective engagement with course materials. This student passivity can be exacerbated in classrooms where students are not encouraged to question assumptions or to think critically about the material being presented.

Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Critical Thinking

In response to these challenges, scholars have proposed various teaching strategies designed to foster critical thinking. One of the most widely recognized approaches is the Socratic Method, which involves engaging students in open-ended dialogue and asking probing questions to stimulate reflection and deeper understanding. According to Paul and Elder (2014), the Socratic Method encourages students to articulate their reasoning, consider alternative perspectives, and refine their thinking through discussion.

Other effective strategies include debate, case-based learning, and problem-based learning, all of which have been shown to promote critical thinking by encouraging students to analyze information, evaluate competing arguments, and collaborate with others to solve complex problems (Bailin, 2016). Additionally, textual analysis and close reading of literary and philosophical texts are fundamental methods in the humanities that

encourage critical engagement with ideas, fostering the skills necessary for critical thinking (Brookfield, 2012).

Digital tools have also been proposed as valuable aids in promoting critical thinking in the humanities. Research by Garrison and Anderson (2003) suggests that online collaborative platforms, digital storytelling, and multimedia tools can help students engage with texts and ideas in new and interactive ways. These tools not only facilitate access to diverse viewpoints but also encourage students to apply critical thinking in dynamic and creative contexts.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

The literature emphasizes the need for targeted professional development to equip humanities teachers with the skills and knowledge to effectively teach critical thinking. According to Brookfield (2012), teachers must themselves be skilled critical thinkers in order to model and mentor these skills in their students. However, many educators report a lack of opportunities for professional growth in this area, particularly in humanities education (Abrami et al., 2015).

Effective teacher training programs must go beyond theory and include practical strategies for integrating critical thinking into the curriculum. Teachers should be trained in active learning techniques, Socratic questioning, and collaborative learning approaches, all of which can facilitate the development of critical thinking skills. Moreover, training should also address the unique challenges faced by humanities teachers, such as how to balance content delivery with skill development and how to foster critical thinking in a testing-driven educational environment (Sivan & Ho, 2017).

The literature highlights the centrality of critical thinking in modern education and underscores the critical role of the humanities in developing these skills. However, challenges remain in effectively preparing teachers to teach critical thinking, due to issues such as inadequate professional development, rigid curricula, and student passivity. To overcome these challenges, a more concerted effort is needed to train humanities teachers in critical thinking pedagogy and to provide the resources and institutional support necessary to foster critical thinking in the classroom.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of humanities teachers' preparedness to foster critical thinking in their classrooms. Through surveys, interviews, and classroom observations, several key themes emerged regarding the teachers' perceived readiness, the strategies they use, the challenges they face, and the institutional support they receive. Below is a detailed breakdown of the findings:

Level of Readiness to Teach Critical Thinking

General Readiness: Approximately 64% of the surveyed humanities teachers reported a moderate level of readiness to integrate critical thinking into their teaching practices. Of these, only 22% had received formal training in critical thinking pedagogy, suggesting that while teachers are aware of its importance, many lack the specific tools or formal instruction to incorporate it effectively into their teaching.

Confidence in Teaching Critical Thinking: While most teachers expressed confidence in their ability to engage students in discussions that encourage reflection and analysis, many admitted to struggling with translating these discussions into structured critical thinking exercises. Teachers with more experience and advanced degrees reported higher levels of readiness, indicating that professional experience and academic qualifications may influence preparedness.

Pedagogical Strategies Employed

Traditional Methods: Many teachers (around 70%) rely on traditional pedagogical methods such as Socratic questioning, group discussions, and literary analysis to encourage critical thinking. These strategies are

designed to engage students in reflective inquiry and promote deep engagement with texts, ideas, and historical events.

Use of Technology: A smaller proportion of teachers (40%) reported using digital tools or online platforms to support critical thinking development. These tools included interactive platforms for collaborative learning, podcasts, and videos designed to spark discussion and analysis. However, the use of such tools was generally limited due to a lack of training or resources, and many teachers felt hesitant about incorporating technology into their classrooms.

Interdisciplinary Approaches: Only 30% of teachers integrated interdisciplinary approaches, such as combining history with literature or philosophy, to encourage students to think critically across subjects. Teachers who employed interdisciplinary methods felt that these approaches helped students understand complex issues from multiple perspectives, enhancing their critical thinking skills.

Challenges Faced by Humanities Teachers

Curricular Constraints: The most common challenge (reported by 72% of teachers) was the rigid nature of the curriculum. Many teachers felt constrained by standardized syllabus and exam-oriented teaching, which left little room for flexibility in exploring topics that might foster critical thinking. As a result, teachers often struggled to incorporate critical thinking into lessons that were predominantly focused on content delivery and exam preparation.

Lack of Professional Development: Sixty-five percent of teachers reported insufficient opportunities for professional development in the area of critical thinking. Although some teachers had attended general pedagogical training, few had received specific guidance on teaching critical thinking. This lack of professional development hindered teachers' ability to adopt new methods or tools that could enhance their instructional practices.

Student Passivity: Many teachers (58%) mentioned student passivity as a significant barrier. Students often appeared disengaged in critical thinking exercises, with a preference for rote memorization and surface-level understanding rather than deep analysis. This issue was particularly prevalent in settings where students were primarily focused on grades and standardized test outcomes, rather than on the intrinsic value of intellectual engagement.

Assessment Pressures: Teachers in institutions with high-stakes testing or standardized assessments also reported feeling pressure to teach to the test, which made it difficult to focus on critical thinking skills. These teachers felt that the emphasis on exam scores reduced their ability to encourage open-ended questions and critical reflection in their students.

Institutional Support and Environment

Institutional Autonomy: Teachers working in private or semi-autonomous schools generally reported more flexibility and support for implementing critical thinking strategies. They felt they had more freedom to experiment with different teaching methods and interdisciplinary approaches. In contrast, teachers in public schools with centralized curricula faced more constraints and less room for innovation.

Support for Professional Learning: Schools with active professional learning communities (PLCs) and collaborative teacher networks showed higher levels of teacher preparedness. Teachers in these environments were more likely to share best practices, participate in peer observations, and attend relevant workshops. Conversely, in schools without strong professional development programs, teachers reported feeling isolated and unsupported in their efforts to teach critical thinking.

Resources and Tools: A significant gap in resources was noted, with only 40% of teachers having access to instructional materials or digital platforms that explicitly supported critical thinking development. Teachers who had access to these resources felt more confident and effective in their teaching.

Summary Of Key Findings

Moderate Readiness: Most humanities teachers are aware of the importance of critical thinking but lack the specific training or support necessary to teach it effectively.

Traditional Pedagogies: Common teaching strategies, such as Socratic questioning and group discussions, are used, but there is limited incorporation of digital tools and interdisciplinary approaches.

Curricular and Institutional Challenges: Rigid curricula, lack of professional development, and pressures related to standardized assessments hinder the integration of critical thinking.

Institutional Support: Schools with strong professional learning communities and more autonomy provide better support for teachers in fostering critical thinking.

These findings suggest that while humanities teachers possess foundational knowledge and practices for teaching critical thinking, there are systemic barriers that prevent full integration of these skills in the classroom. Addressing these challenges will require concerted efforts from policymakers, educational leaders, and teacher development programs to equip teachers with the resources, training, and institutional support they need.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Professional Development: Introduce targeted training programs on critical thinking instruction for humanities teachers.

Curriculum Reform: Embed critical thinking outcomes into national curricula and assessment frameworks.

Institutional Support: Foster professional learning communities and resource-sharing networks among teachers.

Pedagogical Innovation: Encourage use of digital tools, interdisciplinary methods, and project-based learning to enhance critical engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the pivotal role humanities teachers play in fostering critical thinking—a skill essential for preparing students to engage thoughtfully with the complexities of modern life. While many educators in the humanities recognize the value of critical thinking, the research reveals a gap between their awareness and actual preparedness. This gap stems from a combination of insufficient training, rigid curricula, and limited institutional support.

Nonetheless, promising practices such as Socratic dialogue, literary analysis, and classroom debates indicate that teachers possess foundational strategies that can be enhanced through targeted professional development and curriculum reform. Schools that empower teachers with autonomy and encourage collaborative learning environments tend to cultivate more readiness and innovation in critical thinking instruction.

To meet the demands of modern education, stakeholders must prioritize critical thinking not only as an educational goal but as a pedagogical practice that is supported at every level—from teacher training institutions to policy frameworks. Strengthening the capacity of humanities teachers will not only enrich classroom learning but also contribute to the development of socially aware, analytically skilled, and democratically engaged citizens.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by the TETFund Centre of Excellence for Innovative Teaching and Learning in Primary and Early Childhood Education (T_CEIPEC), Federal College of Education, Pankshin, Nigeria.

REFERENCES

1. Abrami, P. C., Bernard, R. M., Borokhovski, E., Waddington, D. I., Wade, A., & Persson, T. (2015). Strategies for teaching students to think critically: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 85(2), 275–314. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654314551063>
2. Bailin, S. (2016). Critical thinking and education: Philosophical perspectives. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 5(2), 45–54.
3. Bauerlein, M. (2009). *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*. Tarcher Perigee.
4. Brookfield, S. D. (2012). *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Question Their Assumptions*. Jossey-Bass.
5. Facione, P. A. (2015). Critical thinking: What it is and why it counts. Insight Assessment. Retrieved from <https://www.insightassessment.com/>
6. Facione, P. A., & Gittens, C. A. (2016). *Think Critically* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.
7. Garrison, D. R., & Anderson, T. (2003). *E-Learning in the 21st Century: A Framework for Research and Practice*. RoutledgeFalmer.
8. Nussbaum, M. (2010). *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton University Press.
9. Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2014). *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools*. Foundation for Critical Thinking.
10. Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2014). *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools* (7th ed.). Foundation for Critical Thinking.
11. Schaifersman, S. D. (1991). An introduction to critical thinking. Retrieved from <https://www.freeinquiry.com/critical-thinking.pdf>
12. Sivan, A., & Ho, H. Y. (2017). Promoting critical thinking in the classroom: A curriculum-based approach. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 37(4), 503–516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2017.1295396>