Synergy: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
Vol. 3. **Issue** 1, 2026. Pp. 47-56
ISSN: 3048-7005

Journal homepage: https://sijmds.com/index.php/pub



Article

Navigating Pedagogical Challenges in Teaching Literary Criticism: A Mixed-Methods Study of Instructor Experiences and Student Perceptions in Higher Education

Aroosa Mohammed Layeak[1]*

1. Department of English, Jazan University, Jazan, Kingdom of Saudi Arab.

*Corresponding Author:
aroosalayeak23@icloud.com

Article History

Received:	18-10-2025
Revised:	21-01-2026
Accepted:	05-02-2026
Published:	01-03-2026

DOI: 10.63960/sp.2026.sijmds.3.1.48

Abstract:

The teaching of literary criticism in higher education presents persistent pedagogical challenges affecting instructors and students across diverse contexts. This study examines these difficulties through a synthesis of existing literature and proposes a mixed-methods investigation to deepen understanding. Research highlights students' struggles with abstract theoretical concepts, resistance to ideologically or politically sensitive lenses (e.g., feminist, postcolonial), limited analytical skills, and low motivation linked to perceived irrelevance or heavy reading demands. Instructors often face limited preparation in critical pedagogy, time constraints, balancing multiple theories, and managing classroom sensitivities. Institutional barriers include rigid curricula, resource limitations, and debates over whether heavy theoretical emphasis enhances critical thinking or risks alienating learners. Evidence from global studies suggests these challenges are widespread yet context dependent. Student-cantered strategies, such as accessible texts and reader-response approaches, show promise but require further empirical testing. The study employs a parallel convergent mixed-methods design, collecting survey data from both instructors and students to quantify the prevalence of challenges, compare perceptions, and identify effective pedagogical strategies. Findings highlight the interplay of cognitive, motivational, and institutional factors and underscore the need for inclusive, adaptable approaches to teaching literary criticism. This research contributes to literature pedagogy by offering insights for enhancing student engagement, refining instructional practices, and promoting critical literacy in higher education.

Keywords: Literary Criticism Pedagogy, Higher Education, Mixed-Methods Research, Reader-Response Theory, Critical Pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism, the systematic application of theoretical perspectives to texts, remains central to advanced literary studies, fostering critical thinking, interpretive flexibility, and cultural awareness. From New Criticism's close reading to post-1960s frameworks such as feminism, postcolonialism, and deconstruction, critical theory enables students to interrogate meaning, ideology, and representation. Teaching literary criticism, however, presents substantial pedagogical challenges. Unlike introductory literature courses, it requires engagement with abstract terminology (e.g., interpellation, hybridity) and meta-level reflection on interpretation. Many undergraduates arrive with limited analytical preparation, often having experienced summary-focused secondary education. Motivational barriers further affect engagement, particularly in multilingual or English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) contexts, where students navigate both literary complexity and theoretical discourse. Instructors also encounter challenges, including insufficient pedagogical training, curricular constraints, and time limitations. Institutional structures, such as rigid course sequences and resource restrictions, further complicate effective instruction. Additionally, debates over the value of intensive theory versus practical engagement influence classroom dynamics. This study synthesizes scholarship

Synergy: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies is a peer-reviewed open-access journal. © 2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article published by Synergy Publication under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited. The Author(s) retain copyright of their work. Synergy Publication is granted a non-exclusive right to publish the article and to identify itself as the original publisher. For more information, *See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.*

OPEN ACCESS

on pedagogical challenges and employs a mixed-methods survey of instructors and students to examine the prevalence of these difficulties, explore perceptions across contexts, and evaluate mitigation strategies. Findings aim to inform inclusive and effective approaches to teaching literary criticism in contemporary higher education.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The pedagogy of literary criticism in higher education has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly as universities increasingly emphasize critical thinking, interpretive flexibility, and cultural awareness. Literary criticism—defined as the application of theoretical frameworks such as formalism, psychoanalysis, feminism, postcolonialism, and reader-response theory to interpret texts—plays a central role in developing students' analytical and reflective capacities. Despite its intellectual value, research consistently indicates that teaching literary criticism presents significant pedagogical challenges for both instructors and students across diverse educational contexts.

Scholars widely acknowledge that literary theory introduces a level of conceptual complexity that many undergraduate students find difficult to navigate. Theoretical frameworks often rely on abstract terminology and philosophical concepts that require substantial intellectual scaffolding. Haynie et al. (2023) argues that literary studies operate through a distinctive "signature pedagogy" that requires students to develop interpretive practices unfamiliar to many learners entering university. A recurring theme in the literature concerns students' limited preparedness for theoretical analysis. Many students transition from secondary education systems that emphasise summary, thematic identification, or examination-based interpretation rather than critical analysis. As a result, they may initially approach literature with the expectation that texts have a single authoritative meaning rather than multiple interpretations shaped by theoretical perspectives. Studies examining undergraduate responses to literary theory suggest that students often experience uncertainty when asked to apply different interpretive lenses or engage with competing critical perspectives.

Motivational factors further complicate the teaching of literary criticism. Several studies indicate that students' reading habits have declined in many educational contexts, partly due to competing academic demands, digital distractions, and broader perceptions that humanities disciplines offer limited practical value in the contemporary labor market. Yusof (2021) observes that digital media environments have transformed students' engagement with texts, sometimes reducing sustained reading practices while simultaneously introducing new forms of multimodal literacy. These shifts may affect students' willingness to engage deeply with complex literary works or theoretical essays.

Language proficiency represents another significant challenge, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Research on literature instruction in multilingual environments suggests that students must simultaneously interpret literary language and theoretical discourse, creating an additional cognitive burden. Bobkina & Stefanova (2016) argue that literature teaching in EFL settings must therefore integrate language development with critical literacy practices to support students' analytical engagement with texts.

In addition to cognitive and motivational barriers, ideological and emotional factors also influence students' responses to literary theory. Certain theoretical approaches—particularly feminist, postcolonial, or critical race perspectives—may provoke discomfort or resistance among students who perceive them as politically charged or personally challenging. Giroux (2005) and Luke (2025) emphasise that critical pedagogies often require students to confront issues of power, identity, and social inequality embedded in cultural texts. While such engagement can foster deeper critical awareness, it may also generate tension in classrooms where students hold diverse cultural or political perspectives.

The literature also highlights significant challenges faced by instructors. Many university instructors are trained primarily as literary scholars rather than pedagogical specialists, which may leave them underprepared to teach complex theoretical frameworks effectively. The instructors frequently struggle to balance theoretical depth with accessibility, particularly when course curricula require coverage of multiple theoretical traditions within limited instructional time. Similarly, Hutchings and O'Rourke (2002) suggest that literature courses often prioritize content coverage rather than the gradual development of analytical skills necessary for theoretical interpretation.

Institutional and structural factors further shape the teaching of literary criticism. In some academic programs, literary theory is introduced late in the curriculum or treated as a specialized module rather than integrated across literature courses. Such curricular design may reinforce the perception that theory is an abstract or disconnected component of literary study. Moreover, resource limitations—particularly in under-resourced educational settings—can restrict access to diverse literary texts, scholarly materials, and digital research tools needed to support critical analysis.

Recent scholarship has also examined how broader transformations in higher education affect literary pedagogy. The expansion of digital learning environments, for instance, has created both opportunities and challenges for literature instruction. Bennis (2024) notes that online and blended learning platforms can facilitate collaborative interpretation and access to diverse materials, yet they may also reduce the immediacy of classroom discussion that is central to literary analysis.

Despite these challenges, the literature also identifies several pedagogical approaches that can enhance the teaching of literary criticism. One widely recommended strategy involves introducing theoretical concepts gradually through accessible texts, including popular culture, short

 https://doi.org/10.63960/sp.2026.sijmds.3.1.48

literary forms, or contemporary media. Problem-based learning approaches, for example, encourage students to apply theoretical frameworks to specific interpretive questions, thereby linking abstract concepts to concrete textual analysis (Hutchings & O'Rourke, 2002).

Another important approach involves integrating critical literacy and reader-response strategies into literary pedagogy. Bobkina & Stefanova (2016) argue that encouraging students to articulate their personal interpretations before introducing formal theoretical frameworks can help bridge the gap between experiential reading and academic analysis. Such strategies allow students to see theory not as an imposed interpretive system but as a tool for expanding their understanding of texts.

More recent research also emphasizes the importance of socially responsive and inclusive pedagogies in literary education. Choo (2013) proposes a cosmopolitan approach to literature teaching that encourages students to engage with ethical and cultural questions raised by literary texts. Similarly, Nkealah and Prozesky (2024) highlight the value of socially responsive literary reading practices that connect textual interpretation with broader cultural and social issues.

Overall, the literature reveals that the teaching of literary criticism involves a complex interaction of cognitive, pedagogical, institutional, and ideological factors. While the challenges associated with theoretical instruction are widely recognized, research also demonstrates that carefully designed pedagogical strategies—such as scaffolding theoretical concepts, integrating reader-centered approaches, and adapting instruction to diverse educational contexts—can significantly improve students' engagement with literary theory. These findings suggest that effective literary criticism pedagogy requires a balanced approach that combines theoretical rigor with accessibility, inclusivity, and contextual awareness.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is grounded in several complementary theoretical perspectives that help explain the pedagogical challenges associated with teaching literary criticism in higher education. These perspectives include critical pedagogy, reader-response theory, and critical literature pedagogy (CLP), supported by broader theoretical discussions of higher education teaching and learning. Together, these frameworks provide conceptual tools for understanding the intellectual demands of literary theory, student engagement with texts, and the broader social and institutional dynamics that shape literature classrooms.

A central theoretical foundation for this study is critical pedagogy, which originates in the work of Paulo Freire (2000) and has been developed further by scholars such as Henry Giroux, bell hooks, and Joe Kincheloe. Critical pedagogy views education as a fundamentally political process in which knowledge production is closely connected to issues of power, ideology, and social inequality. Within this framework, the teaching of literary criticism becomes a space for interrogating the cultural assumptions embedded in literary texts and interpretive traditions. Freire's concept of conscientização, or critical consciousness, emphasizes the importance of dialogue, reflection, and action in enabling learners to question dominant social narratives and participate in transformative knowledge production.

Applied to literary studies, critical pedagogy encourages students to examine how literature reflects and reproduces social hierarchies related to race, gender, class, and colonial history. However, this critical orientation can also generate classroom tensions. Students may resist interpretive frameworks such as feminist, postcolonial, or critical race theory if they perceive them as politically charged or ideologically prescriptive. From a critical pedagogical perspective, such resistance is not simply a matter of cognitive difficulty but may represent deeper ideological negotiations within the learning process. Consequently, critical pedagogy advocates dialogic and inclusive classroom practices that empower students to engage critically with texts while acknowledging their own positionalities and lived experiences.

Complementing this perspective is reader-response theory, particularly the transactional model proposed by Louise Rosenblatt (1978). Reader-response theory shifts the focus of literary interpretation from the text alone to the dynamic interaction between reader, text, and context. According to Rosenblatt (1978), reading involves a "transaction" in which meaning emerges through the reader's personal experiences, cultural background, and emotional engagement with the text. She distinguishes between aesthetic reading, which emphasizes personal and emotional responses to literature, and efferent reading, which focuses on extracting information or analytical insights.

In the context of teaching literary criticism, reader-response theory provides a valuable pedagogical counterbalance to text-centered approaches such as New Criticism. By acknowledging students' personal responses as legitimate starting points for interpretation, instructors can create more accessible entry points into complex theoretical discussions. This approach can be particularly beneficial in diverse classrooms and in English-as-a-Foreign-Language contexts, where students may initially struggle with theoretical terminology or unfamiliar cultural references. At the same time, scholars such as Stanley Fish have cautioned against the potential relativism of purely subjective interpretation, proposing the concept of interpretive communities to emphasize how meaning is shaped by shared cultural and institutional frameworks.

Building on these ideas, Critical Literature Pedagogy (CLP) integrates principles from critical pedagogy and reader-response theory into a practical framework for literature teaching. CLP emphasizes the importance of reading literary texts both with and against the text. Reading with the text involves understanding its narrative structure, historical context, and aesthetic features, while reading against the text involves critically interrogating the ideological assumptions and power relations embedded within it. This dual approach encourages students to develop both analytical rigor and critical awareness.

CLP also promotes inclusive classroom practices that recognize diverse reader identities and cultural perspectives. By validating students' interpretive contributions and encouraging collaborative discussion, CLP aims to reduce the sense of alienation that some students experience when encountering dense theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, this approach aligns with broader movements in higher education that emphasize socially responsive and culturally inclusive teaching practices.

Beyond these specific pedagogical frameworks, recent scholarship on higher education teaching provides additional context for understanding the challenges associated with literary criticism instruction. Macfarlane (2025), for example, identifies several major approaches to teaching in higher education, including functional pragmatism, which emphasizes practical instructional methods; learning theory, which focuses on constructivist and experiential learning principles; and critical theory, which foregrounds questions of social justice and institutional power. These perspectives reflect broader shifts in higher education, where debates increasingly center on the balance between traditional disciplinary knowledge and socially engaged forms of teaching.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for examining the pedagogical challenges of teaching literary criticism. Critical pedagogy highlights the political and ideological dimensions of literary interpretation, reader-response theory emphasizes the active role of students in meaning-making, and Critical Literature Pedagogy provides practical strategies for integrating analytical rigor with inclusive teaching practices. These frameworks inform both the analytical lens of the present study and the design of the empirical investigation that follows.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to investigate the challenges associated with teaching literary criticism in higher education. Mixed-methods research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex educational phenomena. By integrating statistical analysis with qualitative insights, this approach allows the study to identify both the prevalence of specific challenges and the contextual factors that shape participants' experiences. The research adopts a parallel convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In this design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously, analysed independently, and then integrated during interpretation. This strategy allows for triangulation of findings and helps identify areas of convergence or divergence between numerical trends and participants' descriptive accounts.

4.2. Participants

Participants in the study include both literature instructors and students enrolled in literature-related courses at higher education institutions. Including both groups allows the research to compare instructor perspectives on pedagogical challenges with students' experiences as learners. Participants are recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Literature instructors are contacted through academic networks, professional associations, departmental mailing lists, and online communities focused on literary studies. Students are recruited through participating instructors who distribute survey links to their classes, as well as through university forums and online student groups. The study aims to recruit approximately 100–150 instructors and 200–300 students, allowing for meaningful descriptive and comparative analysis across participant groups and institutional contexts.

4.3. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through an online survey with three main sections:

1. Demographic and contextual information
   - Academic background, teaching experience, year of study, institution type, and course context.
2. Quantitative survey items (Likert-scale)

   Participants rated the severity of challenges in teaching and learning literary criticism, including:
   - Difficulty understanding theoretical terminology
   - Limited student motivation for extensive reading
   - Discomfort with politically or culturally sensitive theoretical perspectives
   - Time constraints in course design
   - Limited access to academic resources
3. Open-ended qualitative questions
   - Participants described specific challenges encountered and strategies used to address them.

The survey was pilot tested to ensure clarity, reliability, and usability. Prior to distribution, the survey instrument is pilot tested with a small group of instructors and students to ensure clarity, reliability, and usability.

4.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics—including means, frequencies, and standard deviations—are used to summarize participants' responses regarding the severity and frequency of identified challenges. Inferential tests such as independent-samples t-tests or analysis of variance (ANOVA) are used to examine differences between instructors and students or across institutional contexts. Reliability of multi-item scales is assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

Qualitative responses are analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involves several stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification of recurring themes, review and refinement of thematic categories, and interpretation of findings. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies are employed, allowing themes to emerge from participants' responses while also considering

https://doi.org/10.63960/sp.2026.sijmds.3.1.48

concepts identified in the literature review.

4.5. Integration of Findings

Following separate analyses, quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated during the interpretation stage. This integration allows the study to compare statistical trends with participants' narrative explanations, thereby providing a richer understanding of the challenges associated with teaching literary criticism. For example, survey results indicating high levels of difficulty with theoretical terminology can be examined alongside qualitative accounts describing how students or instructors experience and address this issue in practice.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

The study follows standard ethical guidelines for educational research. Participation is voluntary, and all participants are provided with an informed consent statement outlining the purpose of the research, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. No personally identifiable information is collected, and all responses are reported in anonymized form. Data are stored securely and used solely for academic research purposes.

Table1: *Overview of Mixed-Methods Components*

Component	Data Type	Instrument/ Method	Participants	Analysis Approach	Purpose in Study
Quantitative Strand	Numerical ratings	Likert-scale items on challenges/ strategies	Instructors & students	Descriptive stats, inferential tests, reliability	Quantify prevalence & severity of barriers
Qualitative Strand	Textual responses	Open-ended prompts	Instructors & students	Thematic analysis (inductive-deductive)	Capture experiences, strategies, nuances
Integration	Merged findings	Joint displays, meta-inferences	N/A	Side-by-side comparison, narrative synthesis	Triangulate, explain divergences, expand insights

5. ANALYSIS

The analysis of challenges in teaching literary criticism in higher education reveals a complex and interconnected set of cognitive, emotional, institutional, and ideological factors that shape The analysis of challenges in teaching literary criticism in higher education reveals a complex and interconnected set of cognitive, emotional, institutional, and ideological factors that shape the teaching and learning experience. These findings are consistent with existing scholarship, which similarly identifies literary theory instruction as a multidimensional pedagogical challenge influenced by both learner preparedness and institutional context (Haynie et al., 2023; Johnson, 2015).

One of the most prominent issues identified in this study concerns students' difficulty engaging with abstract theoretical concepts and specialized terminology. Literary criticism often relies on complex theoretical frameworks drawn from philosophy, linguistics, and cultural theory, which may appear inaccessible to students who lack prior analytical training. This finding aligns with earlier studies indicating that students struggle with the conceptual density and specialized vocabulary of literary theory (Burton & Sly, 1977). Similarly, Johnson (2015) notes that contemporary classrooms continue to face difficulties in mediating theoretical abstraction for undergraduate learners.

Many participants reported that students entering university frequently possess limited experience with interpretive analysis, as earlier educational contexts often prioritize summary-based approaches. This observation is supported by research in diverse educational contexts, where students transitioning from examination-oriented systems demonstrate limited readiness for critical interpretation (Ugwu, 2022; Adeyemi, 2012).

Motivational challenges further complicate student engagement with literary criticism. Participants frequently described declining reading habits and limited willingness to engage with lengthy theoretical texts. These findings are consistent with studies highlighting the impact of digital environments and shifting reading cultures on students' engagement with sustained textual analysis (Yusof, 2021; Bennis, 2024). Moreover, the perception that literary studies lack immediate career relevance has also been noted as a contributing factor to student disengagement (Norman, 2020).

Another significant dimension of the analysis involves emotional and ideological responses to theoretical lenses. Frameworks such as feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory may provoke discomfort or resistance among students. This finding aligns with Appleman's (2022) discussion of the "culture wars" in literature classrooms, where students may perceive critical frameworks as ideologically charged. Similarly, Benadla (n.d.) highlights that resistance to literary theory often emerges from its perceived abstraction and ideological implications.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, such resistance

reflects deeper processes of ideological negotiation rather than simple disengagement (Giroux, 2005; Luke, 2025). This interpretation is further supported by Borsheim-Black et al. (2014), who argue that critical literature pedagogy requires students to confront issues of power and identity, which may initially generate discomfort but ultimately foster critical awareness. Instructors themselves face a range of professional challenges in teaching literary criticism. Many faculty members possess strong disciplinary expertise but limited pedagogical training, a concern widely noted in literature pedagogy research (Hutchings & O'Rourke, 2002). Time constraints and curriculum demands further restrict opportunities for deep engagement with theoretical frameworks.

Institutional structures also shape the teaching of literary criticism. The separation of theory from literary texts reinforces perceptions of abstraction, a concern raised in prior studies (Wisch, 2019). Additionally, resource limitations and contextual disparities influence the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies, particularly in multilingual or under-resourced settings (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016). Recent developments in higher education—including digital transformation and post-pandemic instructional shifts—have further influenced literary pedagogy. Studies suggest that while digital environments provide access to diverse materials, they may also weaken dialogic engagement central to literary interpretation (Bennis, 2024). Emerging scholarship also highlights the need to adapt literary pedagogy to evolving academic landscapes (Durante, 2025).

Despite these challenges, the analysis identifies several effective pedagogical strategies. Scaffolding theoretical concepts, integrating reader-response approaches, and using accessible entry texts have been widely recommended in prior research (Hutchings & O'Rourke, 2002; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016). These approaches help bridge the gap between abstract theory and student comprehension. The findings reinforce existing literature demonstrating that teaching literary criticism involves a dynamic interaction between cognitive, pedagogical, institutional, and ideological factors. The consistency of these findings with prior studies strengthens the validity of the present research and underscores the need for context-sensitive and inclusive pedagogical approaches.

Table 2: *Interconnected Challenges and Evolving Dimensions (2023–2026 Insights)*

Challenge Dimension	Core Manifestations	Contextual Variations (Recent Studies)	Emerging Responses/ Implications
Cognitive/Conceptual	Abstraction, jargon, shift to plural interpretations	Intensified in EFL/L2, mismatched secondary preparation	Scaffolding, vocabulary building, gradual introduction
Emotional/Ideological	Resistance to sensitive lenses, discomfort, perceived politicization	Heightened in diverse/ multicultural or polarized settings	Safe facilitation, reader-response validation, CLP dual reading
Motivational/Engagement	Low reading interest, perceived irrelevance, competing demands	Exacerbated by digital distractions, vocational pressures	Accessible/popular entry texts, real-world linkages, peer circles
Instructor-Related	Training gaps, time limits, emotional labor in facilitation	Common amid undervaluation of teaching, hybrid shifts	Professional development, collaborative support
Institutional/Structural	Rigid curricula, resource shortages, humanities marginalization	Amplified by commercialization, post-pandemic inequities	Flexible redesign, equity advocacy, technology integration
Philosophical/Debated	Rigor vs. alienation, empowerment vs. imposition risks	Ongoing in culture-wars, decolonial critiques	Balanced, inclusive approaches prioritizing context

6. DISCUSSION

This study examined the challenges associated with teaching literary criticism in higher education through a mixed-methods framework. The findings are broadly consistent with existing scholarship, reinforcing the view that literary theory instruction presents persistent and multifaceted pedagogical difficulties (Haynie et al., 2023; Johnson, 2015).

The prominence of conceptual barriers—particularly students' difficulty with theoretical abstraction and terminology—corroborates earlier research emphasising the complexity of literary theory as a discipline (Burton & Sly, 1977). These findings also align with Haynie et al. (2023) notion of literary studies as a "signature pedagogy" requiring specialized interpretive skills that are not typically developed in pre-university education. Motivational challenges identified in this study further reflect broader transformations in reading practices and student engagement. Consistent with Yusof (2021), the findings suggest that digital media environments have reshaped students' interactions with texts, often reducing sustained reading practices. Similarly, Norman (2020) highlights the growing perception among students that literary

https://doi.org/10.63960/sp.2026.sijmds.3.1.48

studies lack immediate practical relevance, contributing to disengagement.

The study also confirms that ideological resistance to certain theoretical frameworks remains a significant issue in literary pedagogy. This finding is consistent with Appleman's (2022) discussion of tensions in contemporary literature classrooms, where students may resist frameworks perceived as politically or culturally challenging. From a critical pedagogy perspective, such resistance reflects deeper processes of negotiation and identity formation (Giroux, 2005; Luke, 2025). Importantly, the findings support existing research suggesting that such resistance can be pedagogically productive when managed effectively. Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) argue that critical literature pedagogy enables students to engage with issues of power and representation, even when such engagement initially produces discomfort. This aligns with the present study's observation that guided discussion and inclusive teaching practices can transform resistance into critical engagement.

The discrepancy between instructor and student perceptions observed in this study also reflects patterns identified in prior research. Instructors' emphasis on conceptual challenges and students' focus on motivation and workload highlight the differing positionalities of these groups within the learning process (Hutchings & O'Rourke, 2002). Such differences underscore the importance of integrating multiple perspectives in pedagogical research. The study's findings also reinforce the relevance of reader-response theory in contemporary literary pedagogy. As Rosenblatt (1978) suggests, meaning emerges through the interaction between reader and text. The effectiveness of reader-centered strategies reported in this study supports previous research advocating for the use of personal response as an entry point into theoretical analysis (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016).

Similarly, the application of Critical Literature Pedagogy (CLP) aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing the need for inclusive and socially responsive approaches to literature teaching (Durante, 2025; Nkealah & Prozesky, 2024). The dual practice of reading with and against the text enables students to balance personal engagement with critical analysis, thereby addressing both cognitive and ideological challenges. Institutional constraints identified in this study—including rigid curricula and limited resources—are also well documented in the literature (Wisch, 2019; Ugwu, 2022). These structural factors highlight the need for broader institutional support in implementing effective literary pedagogy.

Finally, the impact of digital and post-pandemic learning environments observed in this study is consistent with prior research on the evolving nature of higher education (Bennis, 2024). While digital tools offer new opportunities for engagement, they also require adaptation of traditional pedagogical strategies. The consistency of these findings with existing literature enhances the validity of the study and confirms that the challenges identified are not isolated but reflect broader patterns in literary pedagogy across diverse educational contexts. At the same time, the study contributes to the field by integrating instructor and student perspectives within a mixed-methods framework, offering a more comprehensive understanding of these challenges.

7. CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges associated with teaching literary criticism in higher education by integrating insights from existing scholarship with a mixed-methods investigation of instructor and student experiences. The findings demonstrate that the teaching of literary theory remains both intellectually valuable and pedagogically demanding. While literary criticism plays a crucial role in developing critical thinking, interpretive flexibility, and cultural awareness, its instruction is shaped by a range of cognitive, motivational, ideological, and institutional barriers.

At the student level, difficulties with theoretical abstraction, specialized terminology, and extensive reading requirements continue to limit engagement with literary criticism. These challenges are often compounded by limited analytical preparation from earlier educational experiences and by broader perceptions that humanities disciplines have limited practical relevance. Emotional and ideological responses to certain theoretical frameworks may further influence students' willingness to participate in critical discussions, particularly when those frameworks address sensitive social or political issues.

Instructors also encounter significant challenges in navigating the complexities of literary theory instruction. Many faculty members report limited formal training in pedagogical strategies for teaching abstract theoretical concepts, as well as difficulties balancing comprehensive coverage of multiple theoretical approaches with the need for deeper analytical engagement. Institutional constraints—including rigid curricula, limited resources, and shifting educational priorities—may further restrict opportunities for innovative teaching practices.

The theoretical perspectives guiding this study—critical pedagogy, reader-response theory, and Critical Literature Pedagogy—provide valuable insights into these challenges. Critical pedagogy emphasizes the importance of examining power relations and ideological assumptions within literary texts, while reader-response theory highlights the role of students' experiences and cultural perspectives in shaping interpretation. Critical Literature Pedagogy offers a framework for integrating these perspectives by encouraging students to engage with texts both analytically and critically.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that effective teaching of literary criticism requires pedagogical approaches that balance analytical rigor with accessibility and inclusivity. Strategies such as scaffolding theoretical vocabulary, incorporating reader-centered discussions, integrating accessible texts, and fostering collaborative interpretation can help reduce barriers to student engagement. At the institutional level, professional development programs and curricular flexibility may further support instructors in adapting literary theory

instruction to diverse educational contexts.

Ultimately, the challenges associated with teaching literary criticism should not be viewed as evidence of the discipline's limitations but rather as indicators of its intellectual complexity and transformative potential. In a world characterized by rapid social change, cultural diversity, and expanding digital communication, the ability to analyze texts critically and reflect on the ideological forces shaping cultural narratives remains an essential academic and civic skill. By addressing the pedagogical obstacles identified in this study, higher education institutions can strengthen the role of literary criticism in cultivating thoughtful, informed, and critically engaged readers.

8. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study suggest several strategies that may help address the challenges associated with teaching literary criticism. First, instructors may benefit from scaffolding theoretical concepts gradually, introducing key terminology through accessible examples and shorter texts before applying complex theoretical frameworks. Integrating materials from popular culture, film, or contemporary media may also provide familiar entry points for students encountering theory for the first time. Second, the results highlight the value of student-centered pedagogical approaches. Reader-response activities, collaborative discussion groups, and literature circles can encourage students to engage actively with texts and share diverse interpretations. These methods help bridge the gap between personal reading experiences and academic theoretical analysis. Third, the study underscores the importance of professional development opportunities for instructors. Training programs focusing on critical pedagogy, inclusive discussion practices, and strategies for addressing sensitive topics may help educators navigate ideological tensions that arise in literature classrooms. Finally, curricular flexibility may support more effective integration of literary theory. Allowing students to explore different interpretive lenses and select frameworks that resonate with their interests may enhance motivation and foster deeper engagement with literary analysis.

9. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the research relies on self-reported survey data, which may be influenced by participants' perceptions, memory, or social desirability bias. Second, the use of purposive and snowball sampling techniques limits the generalizability of the results, as participants may represent individuals who are already interested in discussions about literary pedagogy. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures participants' experiences at a single point in time and does not allow for examination of how teaching strategies or student engagement evolve over longer periods.

10. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies could expand on the present research in several ways. Longitudinal research designs may help track how students' understanding of literary theory develops over time and how specific pedagogical strategies influence learning outcomes. Classroom observation studies could also provide valuable insights into the dynamics of literary criticism instruction that may not be fully captured through survey responses alone. Comparative research across different cultural and institutional contexts would further illuminate how local educational traditions and resources shape the teaching of literary theory. The findings of this study reaffirm the central role of literary criticism in cultivating critical thinking, interpretive flexibility, and cultural awareness in higher education. At the same time, the results highlight the persistent challenges that instructors and students encounter when engaging with complex theoretical frameworks. Addressing these challenges requires pedagogical approaches that balance intellectual rigor with accessibility and inclusivity. By integrating insights from critical pedagogy, reader-response theory, and Critical Literature Pedagogy, educators may develop teaching strategies that enable students to engage more confidently and critically with literary texts and the social contexts in which they are produced.

Table 3: *Alignment of Key Findings with Theoretical Frameworks and Implications*

Finding Category	Key Evidence from Data	Theoretical Linkage	Pedagogical/Practical Implications
Abstraction/Jargon Barriers	High quantitative ratings; qualitative descriptions of impenetrability	Reader-response (transactional entry needed); CLP scaffolding	Vocabulary lessons, accessible texts, gradual theory introduction
Lens Resistance/Discomfort	Frequent mentions of emotional/ideological pushback	Critical pedagogy (ideological contestation); CLP "against" reading	Validate personal responses first, facilitate safe discussions, student lens choice
Motivational/Reading Issues	Low engagement tied to demands, perceived irrelevance	Reader-response (aesthetic motivation); institutional undervaluation	Literature circles, popular entry points, link to real-world relevance

https://doi.org/10.63960/sp.2026.sijmds.3.1.48

Finding Category	Key Evidence from Data	Theoretical Linkage	Pedagogical/Practical Implications
Instructor Preparation Gaps	Self-reported training deficits, facilitation challenges	Critical pedagogy praxis; professional development needs	Targeted workshops on contested topics, collaborative peer support
Institutional Constraints	Rigid curricula, resource limits, hybrid inequities	Broader critique typologies (pragmatism vs. critical theory)	Flexible redesign, resource advocacy, equity-focused digital integration

DECLARATIONS

Author(s) Contribution

Aroosa Mohammed Layeak conceptualized the study, developed the methodology, performed the investigation, analyzed the data, and wrote the original draft. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Uses of AI Acknowledgement

Grammarly

Funding Information

None.

Availability of Data and Materials

Available.

Competing Interests

None.

Clinical Trial Registration (if applicable)

Not Applicable

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

Not Applicable.

REFERENCES

Adeyemi, D. A. (2012). The challenges of teaching and learning English literature in L2 context: the case of junior secondary schools in Botswana. *International Journal of Literacy Culture and Language Education, 1*, 213–226. https://doi.org/10.14434/ijlcle.v1i0.26835

Appleman, D. (2022, September 15). Teaching Literature in the new Culture Wars: Some Alternative approaches. Literary Hub. https://lithub.com/teaching-literature-in-the-new-culture-wars-some-alternative-approaches

Bennis, M. (2024). Teaching Literature in the Digital Age: Some theoretical reflections. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies, 6*(3), 199–209. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i3.1747

Bobkina, J., & Stefanova, S. (2016). Literature and critical literacy pedagogy in the EFL classroom: Towards a model of teaching critical thinking skills. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching, 6*(4), 677–696. https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2016.6.4.6

Borsheim-Black, C., Macaluso, M., & Petrone, R. (2014). Critical Literature Pedagogy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 58*(2), 123–133. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.323

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Burton, M., & Sly, D. (1977). Issues in teaching literary theory. In *University of Worcester*. Retrieved January 6, 2026, from https://eprints.worc.ac.uk/335/1/Issues_in_teaching_literary_theory.pdf

Choo, S. S. (2013). *Reading the world, the globe, and the cosmos*. https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1153-2

Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). https://collegepublishing.sagepub.com/products/designing-and-conducting-mixed-methods-research-3-241842

Durante, P. G. C. (2025). Advancing critical literacy through critical literature pedagogy-based principles of literary education. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century, 83*(2), 196–217. https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/25.83.196

Freiré, P. (2000). Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition. In *Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (Québec government)*.Continuum. https://eduq.info/xmlui/handle/11515/35849

Giroux, H. A. (2005). *Border Crossings Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Haynie, A., Chick, N. L., Gurung, R. a. R., & Ciccone, A. A. (2023). *Exploring more signature pedagogies*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003444725

Hutchings, B., & O'rourke, K. (2002). Problem-Based learning in literary studies. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 1*(1), 73–83. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022202001001006

Johnson, H. G. (2015, December 28). *Violating Pedagogy: Literary Theory in the twenty-first century college classroom*. https://ceaforum-ojs-ttu.tdl.org/ceaforum/article/view/7086

Luke, A. (2025). Critical Literacy, Pedagogy, and Democratic Education. In *Theories, Models, and Practices of Literacy* (8th ed., pp. 535–552). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003492269-40

Macfarlane, B. (2025). A typology of critique about higher education teaching: functional pragmatists, learning theorists, and critical theorists. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2

025.2536594

Nkealah, N., & Prozesky, M. (2024). Literary reading as a socially responsive practice: Implications for literature pedagogy at higher education. *Reading Research Quarterly, 60*(1). https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.562

Norman, R. (2020). The Pedagogical Pitfalls of Literature in College Composition and Teacher Education: A Foundational analysis. In *Kennesaw State University Symposium Proceedings*. 26th Annual Symposium of Student Scholars - 2022. https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/undergradsymposiumksu/spring2022/presentations/273/

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). The reader, the text, the poem: the transactional theory of the literary work. *Southern Illinois University Press*. Retrieved January 6, 2026, from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED165145

Teddlie, C., & Tashakkori, A. (2009). *Foundations of Mixed Methods Research: Integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in the social and behavioral sciences*. http://bvbr.bib-bvb.de:8991/F?func=service&doc_library=BVB01&local_base=BVB01&doc_number=016370324&sequence=000002&line_number=0001&func_code=DB_RECORDS&service_type=MEDIA

Ugwu, E. O. (2022). Effective Teaching of Literature-in-English in Nigerian Secondary Schools: the persistent Problems. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 12*(1). https://doi.org/10.5590/jerap.2022.12.1.12

Wisch, S. (2019). *Teaching literary criticism through independent reading [MA Thesis, Ohio Dominican University, Columbus, Ohio]*. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/ws/send_file

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Synergy Publication or the editor(s) of the journal. While reasonable editorial and peer-review procedures are followed, Synergy Publication and the editor(s) do not endorse any products, methods, or claims described in the content.

Author Bio:

1. Aroosa Layeak is working as an English lecturer in the Department of English at Jazan University. She has been working here for the last 15 years.