

Students' attitudes towards the use of literature in language teaching

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Abstract

This study explores the attitudes of undergraduate students towards studying literature. The target population is a group of fifty students of English language in Elmergib University. Questionnaire is used as a research instrument. Data analysis has revealed that the participants show a positive attitude towards literature; they agree that literature has beneficial role in enhancing their learning of English. Yet , they have reported some concerns over complexity of literature language and its uselessness for their future careers.

Key words :literature; teaching language; attitudes.

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that literature and language are closely related. Literature is composed of language and it also provides space for the applications of language. Brumfit & Carter (1986) emphasized the role of literature as" an associate of language ."Literature is language in practice, which is clear when we consider the linguistic components, concepts and styles in play in any piece of literary work. Practically, it might be said that language can be taught through literature.

Literary material can make a valuable source for learners. As motivation is one of the fundamental factors for language learning and acquisition, then we certainly have an obligation to offer students more challenging and interesting texts and activities that will get them involved on a deeper level and create the feeling that they are using the language for real purposes. Literary elements including prose, drama, and poetry are increasingly finding their way into EFL curriculums all over the world, and, by the same token, the Libyan universities.

Subjects like introduction to literature, drama, novel and poetry are among the major courses studied by students, specializing in English. However, according to Pathan (2012), due to traditional teaching methods and the stigma attached to literature as being a difficult 'literature forms very insignificant place in the ELT curriculums in Libya. Idris & Al Shablbi (2021), state literature is only partially incorporated within the school curriculum, in spite of being an important component of effective language learning process .

Because there have been a limited number of research studies conducted in Libya in relation to the teaching of literature e.g. Idris & Al Shilabi (2021) and Pathan (2012), further investigations were essential. Also, attitudes towards the target language, the teaching material and the learning context have been acknowledged in as an important factor contributing to the overall learning process and their ultimate success in this process of learning (Breen, 2001). The present study, therefore, aimed to explore students' attitudes towards studying English literature.

Literature Review

Integrating literature into EFL curriculums has been viewed differently over the last hundred years influenced by the changes in the theories of language acquisition and the trends in language teaching. In the grammar translation method, literature of the target language was given much attention. It was read, translated, and used as samples of good writing and "illustrations of the grammatical rules" (Duff & Maley, 1991). This teaching approach considered form, and learning based on grammatical rules and the lexical items in the text; there was no literary interest and literary texts were just used as samples of grammatical structures and good writings. However, the functional-notional approached did not consider literature, since in this approach the significance is on communication and they represent genuine language samples. Literature was not seen as a communicative tool or a genuine example of language application.

Since the 1970s the language teaching trends have centered on communicative teaching methods and approaches which emphasize that

since language is primarily used for communication, the best way to learn a foreign language is through communicative activities in the classroom (Daskalovska & Dimova, 2012). The language users are required to communicate properly and effectively with other speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Intercultural skills are required and they cannot be acquired through communication materials solely. Learners need to acquire not only grammar and lexis but also the intercultural communicative skills. The interest in literature as a valuable tool in language teaching has been raised (Duff & Maley, 1991). It is in line with the new communicative approaches that have found in reading literature their desired principles namely communicative competence that asks foreign language learners to communicate in the foreign language and to consider authentic communicative conditions.

Brumfit & Carter (1986) and Lazar (1993) have rejected the notion of the existence of a particular literary language and stated that the language used in literature is an ordinary language including linguistic traits such as metaphors; similes; poetic lexis 'etc. These features cannot be seen as literature specifics because they also appear in common language .

Benefits of using literature in teaching foreign languages

Literature 'is an important aspect in studying and learning about a language and its culture. Many linguists, including Brumfit & Carter (1986); Lazar (1993) and Duff & Maley (2008), have confirmed the beneficial role of literature in teaching foreign languages. They view literary texts as providing rich linguistic input, in addition to effective stimuli for students to express themselves in other languages. In this way, literature can be a potential source of learner motivation.

Authenticity

Literature provides authentic input for language learning . According to Maley (1989) literature deals with non-trivial things which are personally relevant to them. Authenticity is a criterion considered highly significant in the current literature in EFL/ESL which naturally exists in literary texts. Literature offers a range of authentic texts in a

variety of registers appropriate to a social situation or used for communicating with a particular set of people .This presents to learners a rich reservoir for vocabulary acquisition ‘expressions and comprehensions, in a meaningful and memorable context .

Motivation

Literary texts are very motivating due to its authenticity and the meaningful context it provides. Literature involves affect and emotion, which are the perfect medium for engaging students in their learning of the language) Idris & Al Shabli, 2021). Literary texts require imaginative interpretation of the reality they present. By the help of the literary texts, the students can have access to this individual experience and are able to relate what they read to the real world. Literature has the capacity to create authentic conditions for the learners to practice and learn a foreign language with motivation. Literature is motivating material since it" exposes students to complex themes and fresh, unexpected usages of language) "Lazar, 1993.(

Cultural/Intercultural Awareness

Literature promotes cultural and intercultural awareness. Literature is a vehicle for culture especially when considering settings, characterisations, situations and assumptions, which provide awareness of difference and develop tolerance and understanding .Literature, undoubtedly, reflects a good deal of reality through the various literary tools. According to Duff & Maley (2008), literature deals with universal concepts such as love, hatred, death, nature, etc that are common to all languages and cultures. The similarities and even differences between cultures and languages can further our understanding of the whole world.

Critical Thinking

Literature is a good medium for critical thinking enhancement among language learners (Ghosn, 2002 and Van .(2009 ‘It can open horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret ‘connect, and explore (Langer, 1997). Literature nourishes readers' creative process by stirring and stretching the imagination, providing new information

ideas, and perspectives so that readers can imagine the possibilities and elaborate on original ideas. In this way, it expands readers; ability to express imagination in words and images. Engaging in literary texts enables the learners to focus beyond the grammar and the syntax of the target language. The reader pursues the development of the story and willing to share his/her personal responses. Literature can give foreign language learners opportunities for discussion, evaluation and understanding the meaning of words and phrases.

Disadvantages of using literature in English language teaching

Despite the various benefits literature may offer, there are some arguments against its use in language teaching. Literature will not help the students to promote their occupational and academic needs. Cook (1986) in Brumfit & Carter (1986) states that "the study of literary English is seldom suited to the foreign learner's needs, and the mastery of literary texts has little bearing on the learner's need to produce more functional written or spoken forms of the language."

Literary texts can be so difficult that learners don't understand them or understand them only by dint of time consuming and wearisome dictionary work (Parkinson & Reid-Thomas, 2000). Some literature concepts are difficult even for native speakers to comprehend and have difficulty understanding the significance of the text. Understandably, Learners especially with limited language competence may have difficulty understanding the content of literature. With much difficulty it is likely that students may be discouraged.

Critics of the use of literature maintain also that if literary texts reflect a particular cultural perspective they may be difficult for ESL /EFL students to read and understand cultural concepts which are unfamiliar (Tevdovska, 2016). The texts can be unacceptable due to different reasons (moral, religious reasons). This runs the risk that many ELT students will be alienated or confused by the cultural content in authentic literature due to its not matching their own social and cultural knowledge.

Previous studies

There are numerous studies that have examined the impacts of literature for EFL or ESL learning. Different scholars have strongly argued to use literature to enhance target language learning in different settings.

In the Turkish context, Ögeyik (2007) observed the perceptions of university-level EFL learners. They favored literature and language teaching through literature because literary texts offered them cultural competence, enhanced their individual creativity, and encouraged target language enrichment. Likewise, Kim (2004) interviewed the students in the literature circles that she observed, and found an overall positive response indicating involvement and enthusiasm. She also found that the students believed that the discussion of their reading contributed to comprehension, once again indicating the importance of the activities associated with using literary texts. Yang (2001), using questionnaires and interviews 'found strong support for the use of literature in a class of adult learners in Hong Kong. The interviews suggested that the students felt that the discussions of the novel they were reading were 'more "substantial" than simply answering grammar questions (Yang, 2001 .(Within the Arab world, in a study by Shah et al., (2013), five EFL professors were interviewed to share their experiences and ideas about factors influencing the teaching/learning of English as a FL in Saudi Arabia. Major factors identified included social 'cultural, and religious sensitivities and lack of motivation.

In the same context, Choudhury (2016) administered a questionnaire with 10 items to the students of Bisha University to obtain data about their attitudes towards English literature, so it is very relevant to the current research. The Questionnaire items are from English literature classes" 'I feel English culture is better than other cultures "I learn universal values and culture from English Literature ."Of the findings reached in the study is that 53% students are motivated to study English literature because they like it. However, 33% of the students were worrying about losing their identity and Islamic culture in English literature classes.

In addition, Ali (2007), in a study with Sudanese EFL learners emphasized the importance of integrating literature into language teaching; he confirms that, apart from the authenticity of language, the literature also familiarizes learners with the language culture. Shakfa (2012) explored the difficulties faced by literature students at the Islamic University of Gaza. His study showed Arabic-speaking students' attitudes and perceptions toward English drama. The study reported that students perceived English literature to be difficult because of its complex syntactic structure in addition to frequent use of metaphors and other literary devices. Students usually feel frustrated during the lengthy process of learning drama, where symbolism, metaphors, similes, and stylistic features create additional problems.

More relatively, Pathan (2012) investigated the advantage of using short stories and learners' Perceptions towards them in Libya. He concluded that " the learning material, presented in the form of short-stories, helped in transforming their initial negative attitudes towards reading comprehension skill into positive ones and also contributed significantly to easy fostering of their other related language skills ")Pathan.(2012 ،

Methodology

Participants

The participants are fifty undergraduate students of English language, who are non- native speakers of English. During their study, they have been exposed to different literary genres e.g. poetry, novel and drama. Their age varied from 19-27 years old .They are 26 females 24 males.

Research instrument

An attitude questionnaire was used as data collection instrument. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part gave information about students' personal information. These questions provided the researcher with information about the participants. The second part of the

attitude questionnaire was made up of 10 items with 5 point Likert Scale. the participants were asked to assess their attitudes towards literature on a five-point Likert scale, by indicating the extent to which they agreed with each statement using (1) SA = strongly agree, (2) A = Agree, (3) N = neither agree nor disagree, (4) D = Disagree, and (5) SD = strongly disagree.

Results and discussion

Analysis of the questionnaires

The participants' responses to the questionnaire items were analyzed in terms of their frequency and percentage .To illustrate the pattern of the respondents' answers better, the first two alternatives (Strongly Agree and Agree) and the last two (Disagree and Strongly Disagree) were combined. Table 1 presents these results.

Table :1 Students' responses in terms of frequency and percentages

	S + A	Undecided	D+SD
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Items	F	P	F	P	F	P
-1 Studying literature is enjoyable.	34	%68	10	%20	6	%12
-2 Literature helps me improve my English.	38	%76	6	%12	6	%12
-3 The themes (topics) are interesting.	34	%68	16	%32	0	0
-4 Literature class is one of anxiety and stress.	14	%28	24	%48	12	%24
-5 Drama and novel can be long and boring.	26	%52	12	%24	12	%24
-6 It helps me learn new vocabulary.	38	%76	8	%16	4	%8
-7 It helps me know about English culture.	42	%84	4	%8	4	%8
-8 It provides opportunities for group discussions.	26	%52	14	%28	10	%20
-9 The language of literature is complex and difficult to understand.	26	%52	10	%20	14	%28
-10 literature courses is of no use for my future career.	30	%60	12	%24	8	%16

From the table above, it seems that the respondents have rather positive attitudes towards studying literature. This can be obvious in responses to items 1, 2 and 3 where 68% of the students *enjoy* studying literature and the same percentage find themes they dealt with interesting. Moreover, 76% of the participants feel literature is helpful for enhancing their English proficiency. One of the most important findings regarding the claim of the inclusion of literature in the EFL classroom is approved by the fact that the majority of respondents (84%) reported that exposure to literature offered them better insight into English culture. Interestingly, almost half of the participants confirm literature provides opportunities for group discussions where they can be actively involved. This may be an indication to cooperative learning environment. The results also reveal that a remarkable number of responses, thirty-eight out of fifty, confirm that literature expand the participants' vocabulary. All the above results

seems to be in line with benefits of integrating literature into language curriculums mentioned in related literature Brumfit & Carter (1986); Lazar (1993); and Duff & Maley (2008). They all argued that literature, as well as being a motivational valuable authentic material, helps the students to expand their vocabulary 'enrich the target culture and enhance their overall proficiency.

However, some other issues emerged 'in item nine, 52% of the students (26 out of 50) reported that they face difficulty to understand the complex language of literature. This is further supported by the participants' responses to item four in the questionnaire concerning learner anxiety vis-à-vis the literature class. Nearly half of respondents responded 'neutral' to the question. Twenty eight percent reported feeling anxious indicating an inability to live up to their expectations for the literature class. In addition, 52% of the participants consider drama and novel to be long and boring compared to 24% who disagreed with the statement.

Another considerable portion of students, sixty percent of the respondents, (30 out of 50) state hold the view that literature courses will contribute nothing to their future professional careers. This is similar to the opinion held by some English language learners in Gaza who find literature irrelevant to their future occupational needs (Shakfa.(2012 '

An important point to mention here is that there is no contradiction between holding positive attitudes towards English literature and reporting facing difficulties in studying it. Students can face difficulties in studying literature and yet like it. In fact, positive attitudes make students persist in the face of challenges. Literature is challenging and motivating material since it as Lazar (1993) states" exposes students to complex themes and fresh, unexpected usages of language ." Furthermore 'some issues that have revealed like its difficult language, in terms of its complexity, its structure and the its irrelevance to their future careers are in in line with other studies findings in the Arab world Shakfa, (2012) and Mohammed, (2017.(

Conclusion

The aim of the study is to investigate the students' attitudes about studying literature as part of their Bachelors of Arts program in English. The data has been shown that the respondents have somewhat positive attitudes: most of them find studying literature enjoyable and view the literature component as essential to their general English proficiency as it expose them to new vocabulary and give them opportunities to engage in group works as well as regard it to be a window into the target language culture. In spite of this, some of the participants stated they face difficulty to comprehend the literary language and express their skepticism towards its usefulness in the long run.

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