



Decline in the Popularity of English Literature among EFL/ESL Saudi Learners

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Abstract: This paper addresses the issues related to learners' attitudes towards studying literature, their positive as well as negative views about literature. The paper also investigates why learners do not have the interest to study literature and why they find literature to be a difficult arena when they are majoring in English. In this paper, the investigators have tried to address some basic reasons for students' loss of interest in studying literature. The investigators have also discussed some factors that affect students' lack of motivation to study literature, why they think that literature is difficult and why they also see majoring in literature will ultimately be of no use. The study was conducted on 33 female students of levels 7 and 8 of the B.A. program (English) at a university in Saudi Arabia. They were asked to answer a questionnaire comprising five questions about their attitude towards literature and if they find literature to be helpful in learning the English language. It was found that some learners found literature to be helpful in their language acquisition, while others found it difficult to study and understand literature. Some learners showed a positive attitude towards studying literature while most found it not to be useful in the latter part of their lives. However, both types of learners could not deny the importance of literature as a source for language development.

Keywords: Decline; interest; literature; motivation; students' attitude; role of language and literature teachers.



1. Introduction

The rise of communicative language teaching values literature as authentic texts in which the opportunity for vocabulary acquisition, the development of reading strategies, and the training of critical thinking take place. It is suggested that literary texts can develop the student's knowledge of a language at the levels of vocabulary and structure and the level of textual organization. Reading a novel or narrative helps students to improve their reading and writing skills, language skills and also helps them to improve their critical thinking ability in all subject areas. In spite of all these merits of English Literature, modern EFL/ESL students in Saudi Arabia are hardly interested in reading or knowing about literature.

In recent times if a student who is majoring in Linguistics is asked the question 'Why did you choose Linguistics and not Literature?' The answer would simply be 'Literature is very boring.' This has been the trend for many years now. Students are seen to be losing interest in studying literature. Gone are the days when parents would read bedtime stories to the children to make them fall asleep. These days many parents would rather give off their mobiles or tabs to make the children take their meals or fall asleep. In such a situation one comes across the question 'Why have people lost their interest in reading storybooks?' The answer is very simple. The world is becoming digital. None would like to spend his/ her time in going through pages after pages to read a story. Albalawi (2015) has pointed out that the influence of technology on peoples' lives is one of the causes of the decline of the importance of literature. This is very much true because children, teenagers, and even adults these days would rather spend time with either their laptops or, mobiles than spend time reading a book. As people are becoming too much dependent on technology, they would rather prefer to have things brought to them

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31559/baes2020.4.2.3>

Received Date: 10/5/2020

Accepted Date: 5/6/2020

immediately. Also, people prefer to enjoy many things at the same time. While working on laptops or watching TV, many would either chat through texts with friends on their mobiles or talk to them. This is especially done by teenagers who are mostly impatient and tend to be too busy nowadays. In such cases, it is very unlikely that this generation of people would enjoy a piece of literature and find time to understand it and appreciate it.

In a study conducted by Hussein & Al-Emami (2016), some major factors have been pointed out regarding why Saudi students are not motivated to study literature. It is mentioned that when a Saudi undergraduate student joins a university, he/ she is only familiar with a limited section of literary texts. It often happens that the discussion of these texts is oversimplified and all forms of analysis are not included. Moreover, though Saudi students start taking English as a compulsory subject in grade- four, English literature is totally absent from the curricula of public schools. In a study conducted by Alkodimi & Al-ahadl (2020), it is found out that literary elements including prose, drama, and poetry are included in the curriculum all over the world and the universities of KSA are no exceptions. However, EFL learners in Saudi Arabia are unwilling to have literature courses in their curriculum.

The attention of the investigators regarding the attitude of the learners towards the incorporation of literature in language classes was drawn by the fact that some learners do not feel the need of studying literature while they are majoring in English. They feel that if they are proficient in the four skills i.e. reading, writing, listening, and speaking, they can easily acquire English. Only some of the learners felt the need to have literature in language classes. As a result, the investigators tried to find out the factors affecting this lack of motivation in Saudi learners towards studying literature.

2. Literature Review

There are a lot of studies on the importance of incorporating literature in language classes and its importance regarding how it helps to improve language learning. Here are some of them which have been taken into consideration. According to Albalawi (2015), it has been pointed out that students of literature are exposed to many varieties of literary works. They read literature and interpret them. As they do their research on it, literature flourishes and remains alive. Moya (2015), states that literature excites our feelings. It orients readers in new directions. The work of literature also 'changes our lives.'

In addition, it is also claimed that literature encourages personal involvement in readers, and literary texts can help in the language learning process (Vural & Slater, 1990). It is also stated that literature helps to grow the personality of the learners. It develops a positive attitude towards reading and learning languages (Vural, 2013). Furthermore, Clandfield (2013) mentioned that literature helps learners to interact more proficiently. Moreover, according to Savvidou (2004), learners find literary texts to be more enjoyable.

According to Avci (2019), all educators agree that learners need to use their knowledge and skills in real life. It is stated that 'Literature widens students' horizons by providing knowledge'. A similar kind of view is shared by Clanfield (2013) who states that there are many reasons to incorporate literature in the classroom. Literature is authentic material. If students are exposed to authentic material, language learning becomes more effective. According to Van (2009), literature in the EFL classroom provides the learners with real-life situations. In a study by Avci (2019), it is stated that literature encourages students to participate to the fullest extent as they can improve language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Abraham (2010) adds to this view when he considers learning literature to be a holistic undertaking that "not only improves the basic skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, but also other language areas like vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation." Many linguists, including Brumfit & Carter (1986) and Parkinson & Thomas (2004) pointed out the beneficial role of literature in teaching foreign languages. They hold that literary texts offer a 'natural' context of a language used far better than ESP or EAP, thus meeting the objective of the latter in an indirect but even more effective way.

Apart from this, in a study conducted by Al-Qahtany (2016), it is pointed out that "Most Saudi learners lack the necessary reading habits in L1 and L2. In addition, they rarely make use of important reading skills when they read English texts."

If we take these factors into consideration, we cannot deny the fact that literature is invincible in contributing to the process of language learning. Without the use of literature, language learning cannot be effective at all.

3. Objectives of the study

The study discusses why students lack the motivation to study literature courses these days, how students can be motivated to study literary pieces and how teachers and institutions can help students have a positive attitude towards studying English Literature. For this purpose, undergraduate students of a university in Saudi Arabia were taken into consideration. The research paper aims to find out answers of the following research questions:

1. How can students be motivated to have a positive attitude towards studying English Literature?
2. What are the reasons that affect students' motivation to study English Literature?
3. Can teachers and institutions help students grow their interest in English Literature?

4. How can English Literature be incorporated into the language classes to help the learners improve their proficiency level in English?

4. Method

Because of the scientific and objective nature of quantitative research, the investigators have relied on quantitative research. Besides, in order to arrange the received data in simple analytical methods, for example, using table and figure, the investigators have focused on quantitative research method. However, this research could not deal with larger samples because the participants were administered the research tool during their class time, and the researchers refrained from asking other colleagues to spare their class time to involve their learners in this research. Not only that, the institutional circumstances and conditions where this research was conducted need to be mentioned as well. Extra time is not set aside for research activities. Keeping in view all these impediments, the investigators considered that by using quantitative research, without bias, their findings can be generalized, and the cause and effect relationships can be established.

4.1. Participants

The participants in this study were thirty- three female students of Levels 7 and Level 8 (undergraduate students) who were majoring in English in one of the universities of Saudi Arabia. The students were Arabic L1 speakers. They were introduced to English Literature when they were in Level 5 and by the time, they were in level 7, they got to study only four courses of English Literature. The participants for conducting the research were chosen in this way because these participants had been studying English language skills since Level 1. They studied English language skills in Level 1. It is to be mentioned here that their curriculum consisted of both courses in linguistics and English Literature. This shows that the participants were familiar with both Linguistics and Literature courses. However, the population who participated in this research was informed the confidentiality of their names and the responses involved in the study would be maintained.

4.2. Instruments

A questionnaire comprising of 5 questions related to EFL learners' perception of having literature courses in their curriculum, their level of motivation and their overall attitude towards studying English Literature was distributed among these thirty-three students. The questionnaire consisted of close-ended and yes/ no questions.

4.3. Procedure

The participants were asked to answer the questions individually and independently so that they could identify their choices and express their opinions without any influence from other participants.

The participants were studying a course in Poetry, but most of them had already been familiar with courses like Introduction to Literary forms, Short Story, Novel, and Drama.

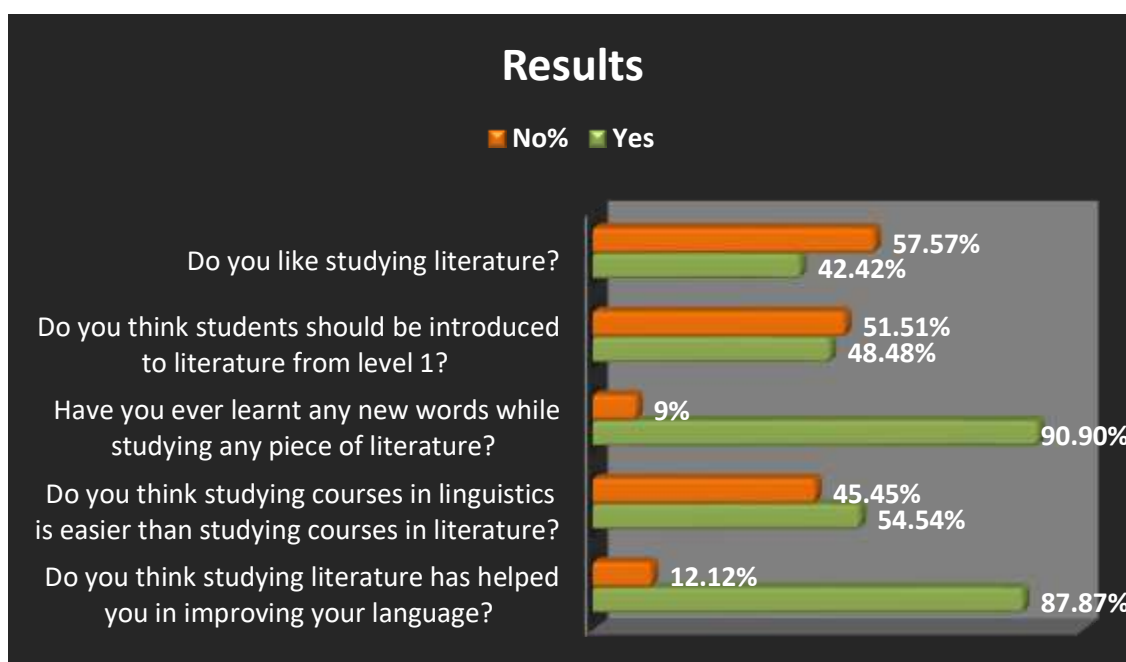
4.4. Limitations of the study

This study has some limitations. The first one is the sample size. Only students of Levels 7 and 8 were taken into consideration. The second limitation is that the investigators focused on only one university in Saudi Arabia. The third limitation is that no male student participated in this study. The results might have been different if the male students had participated in this study as well.

5. Results

After collecting the questionnaire, the data was analyzed by first counting manually students' responses and then calculating the percentage. The table below shows the number and percentage of students' responses and attitudes towards studying literature. Based on the number and percentage of students' responses, the graph which is shown below, was generated in an excel sheet.

No	Questions	No. of students (Yes)	%	No.of students (No)	%
1	Do you like studying English literature?	14	42.42	19	57.57
2	Do you think students should be introduced to English literature from Level 1?	16	48.48	17	51.51
3	Have you ever learned any new words while studying any piece of English literature?	30	90.90	3	9.0
4	Do you think studying courses in linguistics is easier than studying courses in literature?	18	54.54	15	45.45
5	Do you think studying literature has helped you in improving your language?	29	87.87	4	12.12



The Figure above shows the difference in 'Yes' or, 'No' responses of students towards studying literature.

The table and figure above showed that 14 out of 33 (42.42%) students expressed that they liked to read literature, but 19 out of 33 (57.57%) expressed that they did not like to study literature. In response to the second question, 16 out of 33 students (48.48%) said that literature should be introduced from level 1, whereas 17 out of 33 students (51.51%) said that literature should not be introduced from level 1. While answering question 3, 30 students (90.90%) said that they learned some new words studying literature. On the other hand, only 3 students (9%) said that they did not learn any new words. In response to the 4th question, 18 students (54.54%) expressed that linguistics is easier than literature, whereas, 15 students (45.45%) said that studying literature is easier than linguistics. When the participants were asked the 5th question, 29 students (87.87%) said that studying literature has helped in improving their language. On the contrary, 4 students (12.12%) said that they did not improve their language by studying literature.

6. Discussion

Based on the questionnaire which was used for the research, the researchers have made the following observation. The observation mostly focuses on the students' attitude towards studying literature and linguistics, their opinions regarding both literature and linguistics, and how they feel about the use of these courses when it comes to practical application. From this observation, it can be concluded that students at the tertiary level majoring in English seem to have a negative attitude towards studying literature. They feel that if they have chosen to study English, they can learn it only by studying courses on linguistics. There is no need for studying literature. However, contradictory viewpoints are expressed as well. The same students have mentioned that studying literature has helped them to learn new words and improve their language. They found literature to be interesting as well. It can be said that these students lack the motivation to study literature as they are not familiar with literature from the very beginning of their academic career at the tertiary level. If pieces of literature can be introduced from even Level- 2 in the form of Short Story or abridged versions of Novels, they can grow the habit of studying literature. They should not feel that it is something long and boring, but rather they can read it for enjoyment.

It can be said that students can be motivated to have a positive attitude towards studying literature. In this regard, institutions and teachers can play a great role in selecting student-friendly literary pieces and incorporate them in skills classes.

The researchers have concluded that certain factors affect the students' interest in studying English Literature which are discussed below:

Familiarity with literature

In some institutions, though the students are studying the English language, they are exposed to literature at a very late stage in their curriculum. For example, when they are in level- 5, they are introduced to literature but this also happens to be only the introduction to literary forms. Then gradually with very limited textbooks and some outdated pieces, they study literature in levels- 6, 7, and 8.

Reading courses lack literary pieces

This is another factor which makes the students not being able to form the habit of reading something outside their prescribed textbooks. In Reading classes, the focus is mainly on reading the passages which are in

their books. Most of the time the passages seem to be boring and they are not student-friendly at all. Here the question comes that if students can read such texts and try to understand the material, why can't they read short stories or even abridged versions of some classics and make it a part of their reading sessions?

Listening & Speaking classes hardly focus on literary pieces

In Listening classes, the students are mostly made to listen to some recorded conversations. Most of the conversations sound very artificial compared to the day to day speech. What students are required to do is listen to these conversations and either summarize, answer MCQ or, true-false questions. In learning to understand and speak a language, this cannot be sufficient at all. Conversations or speeches should be natural and meet the day to day needs.

No short literary pieces are incorporated in writing classes

In writing classes, many times students are asked to write short descriptions of people or places. They are also asked to write descriptive or narrative essays. Sometimes it is also seen that some textbooks contain exercises in which the beginning of a story is given and the students have to finish it, or the ending of a story is given and the students have to give a suitable introduction. These are no wonder effective techniques of teaching students to be creative. Along with these tasks, a piece from any literary work can be incorporated from time to time. For example, an extract from the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte can be presented to the EFL students. They can read the first chapter of the novel (abridged) one and give a short description of the character of the protagonist as presented in the first chapter. In this way, learners can read and then use their creativity to bring someone's character and personality to life.

Moreover, some abridged books consist of illustrations. It is true that images always interest readers more than only reading pages after pages. These images can be used in the class and students can be asked to create their own stories based on them.

Not being introduced in Vocabulary classes

It is to be mentioned that the students study courses on Vocabulary for two semesters. Most of the time it is seen that based on the curriculum, the teachers are busy completing the course which means the completion of 30 to 40 units in the book. It so happens that in this type of curriculum, the students are only engaged in memorizing the words. They hardly have any practical application of the words that they learn. The result is that they tend to forget the words as soon as they go to the next semester.

Duration of the semester

This is one of the factors which affect the students' motivation in getting familiar with the literature. As the semesters are short, students only focus on what is there in the prescribed textbooks. They do not want to give attention to any other thing which is not in their syllabus.

The low proficiency level of the students

Most students are very much averse to studying literature because of their low proficiency level in English. For students of this level, reading any piece of literature almost becomes a task impossible to accomplish.

Unskilled teachers

It is seen that most teachers, who are sometimes assigned to teach literature, are themselves not familiar with literature thoroughly because in their student life, they were used to studying either the simplified version of the literary texts or the summary of literary texts. Therefore, with their poor knowledge of literature, they can hardly engage the learners in literary texts. Apart from this, some teachers come from the linguistic background and they lack the knowledge and the skill of incorporating literature in the skills classes. A teacher whose specialization is not on literature will never try to experiment bringing literature in the classes.

Use of technology

Technology has no wonder made the lives of people easier. But being too much dependent on technology can never have a positive effect. Learners these days come with the idea that learning should all be with the help of technology. With the use of laptops/ tabs and smart phones, they can get the answer to anything (Halim, et al. 2019). For students like this, it is no wonder a difficult task to read a page of any piece of literature and ponder on it. They always feel they do not have the time, need or the patience to read something.

Reading skills

Apart from this, in a study conducted by Al-Qahtany (2016), it is pointed out that most Saudi learners lack the necessary reading habits in L1 and L2.' In addition, they rarely make use of important reading skills when they read English texts.' No doubt the studies of Alhamdi (2014) and Alharbi (2015) point out the problems regarding Saudi students' low proficiency in English on the curriculum and the teaching methods.

7. Recommendations/Suggestions

Based on the results, the researchers have suggested the following recommendations:

It is mentioned that literary texts can be studied in their original forms or simplified or abridged versions. Literary texts give a rich source of linguistic input and can help learners to practice the four skills – speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It also helps in improving grammar and vocabulary.

Introducing literature in all the skills courses

Reading a novel or narrative helps students to improve their reading and writing skills, language comprehension, and critical thinking skills in all subject areas. Schreiner (2017) clearly stated that to improve

reading skills, students must practice reading regularly and this can be done through reading literature. It has been mentioned that during early- reading instruction, those teachers who read literature in their classes often help students to improve these skills. Not only this, but Literature can as well be introduced in Vocabulary classes. Teachers can select extracts from pieces of literature and ask the students to read it and find the words which they do not understand. Later they can use them in sentences of their own. It is stated that literature can enhance the reading and writing skills as well since it helps the transfer of reading and writing skills and strategies from the mother tongue to English, and so, through teaching specific skills, literature may increase the students' general understanding of language and their ability of reading and writing in English (Hedge, 1985). It is also argued that literary texts help students to practice and develop their reading and writing skills and strategies. This contributes to the development of their reading fluency and proficiency and writing accuracy. As a result, there may be an increase in students' reading and writing speed and self- confidence (Bramford & Day, 2004). Hence, literature should play an important role in all the skills classes as well. It should not be studied in an isolated way.

Familiarizing students with literary texts

Hedge (1985) suggested that literary texts can develop the student's knowledge of a language at the levels of vocabulary and structure and the level of textual organization. The rise of communicative language teaching values literature as authentic texts in which the opportunity for vocabulary acquisition, the development of reading strategies, and the training of critical thinking, that is reasoning skills happen to be (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000). With the use of literature, learners may build new vocabulary and expand their understanding of words they already knew (Ono, Day & Harsch, 2004).

Motivating students

It is one of the duties of a language teacher to grow the interest of the students in getting familiar with literature. If teachers try to incorporate literature from time to time in their classes, students will directly or indirectly get the idea that literature is inseparable from language learning.

Use of the technology in class

Some teachers believe that if the technology is used in literature classes, students would be highly motivated in studying literature. This view is not true because some learners are disinclined in studying literature even if they are exposed to technology in literature classes. Therefore, all teachers need to remember that technology is important in teaching a foreign language, but the positive attitude of the learners learning a subject is the most important one.

8. Conclusion

Learning a foreign language is never an easy task and those who do it know well the challenges he/she has to face. Hence, language learning can never be confined to the learning of grammar or learning the four skills only. If teachers want to do away with literature, they would deprive learners of a great opportunity and a helpful means to improve the language they want to learn most comprehensively. Literature was and still is inseparable to language learning. Exposure to literature unquestionably offers better insight into new language possibilities. If learners are introduced to simple and easy to grasp literary texts more and more, they will not be skeptical regarding the usefulness of literature in the long run. Experienced EFL teachers can confidently claim that if the intention to learn English arises from within the learners, they will no doubt look for all sorts of strategies and techniques that will be suitable to their learning goals. This paper has tried to discuss the factors regarding the decline in the popularity of literature among language learners, and how teachers, as well as students, can work together to revive literature especially, in language classes. Further research can be conducted and the issue can be addressed from different angles.

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