

Learning literature: undergraduates' views, experiences, and academic achievement

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the debate over incorporating literature into English as a second language (ESL) classrooms, underscoring the importance of addressing learners' expectations and interests. Emphasising learners' expectations and interests not only enhances engagement but also fosters a deeper appreciation for language nuances, cultural contexts, and diverse perspectives embedded within literary works. Therefore, the study aims to understand learners' perspectives and challenges in learning literature, and assesses the impact on their literature academic achievements. The study utilised a quantitative approach that involved seventy pre-service teaching English as a second language (TESL) teachers enrolled in several literature courses. A questionnaire with multiple-choice and open-ended questions were used to gather relevant data, and responses were analysed using frequency counts and cross-tabulations. The academic grades of the learners were analysed and cross-tabulated with the questionnaire items. Overall, learners expressed positive views of literature, enjoying the learning process and emphasising the need for scaffolding and support in understanding the literature texts covered. These findings suggest implications for educators in planning and delivering literature courses, shaping how ESL learners engage with literature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The debate over using literature in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms is polarised, with some advocating for its benefits in enhancing language skills and cultural awareness [1]–[6], while others criticize it due to challenges like complex language and cultural connotations [7]–[9]. Despite these challenges, understanding learners' perspectives and motivations is crucial, as their engagement and perceptions significantly impact their learning outcomes and effectiveness of literature in ESL education [10]–[15]. Given these scenarios, the study aims to explore ESL learners' perceptions of studying literature, including the challenges they encounter and desired improvements in their learning experience. These insights can enhance teaching practices and inform policy in higher education. The study, therefore, attempts to answer these research questions: i) how do the ESL undergraduates view literature? ii) what challenges do the ESL undergraduates face in learning literature? iii) what is the relationship between the learners' views of literature and their academic achievement? and iv) how can literature teaching and learning be improved from the perspective of the undergraduates?

Learning literature offers significant benefits for ESL learners [2], [5], [16]–[18], including providing authentic material, cultural enrichment, language development and fostering personal involvement [6]. Lazar [5] expands that it also fosters motivation while expanding students' language awareness and interpretative skills. Literature enhances vocabulary, encourages a love for reading, and deepens understanding of the English language [7]. Overall, incorporating literature into language learning enriches both practical skills and personal growth.

Literature offers the advantage of presenting “genuine and undistorted” language [6], as it is not specifically designed for language teaching. Authentic literary texts are believed to enhance learners' critical thinking skills [17] due to their openness to multiple interpretations and interactions [19]. Studies suggest that engaging with literature improves cognitive abilities such as problem-solving and analytical skills more effectively than other disciplines [5], [20], [21]. Consequently, reading and interpreting literary texts encourage ESL learners to deeply engage with, and analyse materials, fostering skills that extend to other areas of life.

Literature is essential for promoting cultural awareness and understanding by exposing ESL learners to diverse cultures and ideologies [8], [22]. Through reading, learners can appreciate different traditions, thoughts, and artistic forms, gaining insight into various social, political, and cultural contexts [8]. This exposure helps them understand and value different societies and their values [23]. Overall, literature fosters cultural awareness, empathy, and a broader worldview, promoting tolerance and respect for diversity [21].

Literature introduces ESL learners to diverse writing styles, vocabulary, and linguistic features, providing a rich source of language input [5]. It involves unique language use, exposing learners to various vocabulary and prose forms [22]. Research shows that literature enhances language proficiency [24], including reading comprehension, writing, and verbal expression [1], [25]–[28]. Studies like those by Mart [17] and Zubair [18] highlight that literature improves language abilities and offers significant linguistic, methodological, and motivational benefits. Overall, empirical evidence supports the positive impact of literature on ESL learners' language development and literacy skills.

Reading literature exposes ESL learners to diverse perspectives, moral dilemmas, and philosophical ideas, prompting reflection on their own values and beliefs. This engagement helps learners feel a deeper connection with the target language [4], stimulates imagination, develops critical abilities, and increases emotional awareness [5]. Such self-reflection facilitated by literature can lead to personal growth, enhanced self-awareness, and identity development. Research indicate that literature is closely linked to academic success and fosters personal growth, self-esteem, social skills, and cross-cultural understanding [17], [25]. Overall, literature provides significant intellectual, emotional, and social benefits, although the impact can vary based on individual engagement and attitudes.

Numerous studies have investigated how students perceive literature in diverse ESL contexts [2], [26]–[31]. For example, Tsang *et al.* [2] found that students in higher education often view literature favourably, appreciating its role in enhancing English proficiency. Similarly, Mustafa *et al.* [26] noted that EFL learners expressed enthusiasm for literature, recognising its benefits in language learning and held positive perceptions of teaching methods.

Despite these positive views, some students find literature challenging and intimidating, citing issues like difficult vocabulary and complex texts [32]. Al-Mahrooqi and Al-Wahaibi [33] found that students' attitudes towards literature improve with more exposure and enjoyable experiences, aligning with the idea of Dewey [34] that positive experiences drive future learning. However, inappropriate literary selections can diminish students' motivation and hinder their engagement [31], [35]. Overall, while literature can be challenging, it is valued for its potential to enhance language skills and provide a broader worldview, motivating learners to seek further meaningful educational experiences.

Learners' perspectives on a subject are crucial as they can significantly impact their success or failure [36]. This is particularly true for literature learning, where positive attitudes and perceptions influence educational outcomes, aligning with theories by Horwitz, Gardner, and Dörnyei, who emphasise the link between perceptions, attitudes, and motivation [36]. Wesely [36] and Ramzan *et al.* [37] suggest that understanding learners' attitudes and beliefs can improve teaching and learning processes, leading to increased enjoyment, achievement, and reduced anxiety.

In literature learning, students with positive views tend to excel in navigating texts and achieving better grades. Barber and Klauda [38] found that students engaged with literary texts performed better in reading comprehension, writing, and critical thinking compared to those focusing on informational texts. This involvement in literature not only enhances language development and vocabulary acquisition but also boosts overall academic performance in these areas.

Studies highlight that ESL learners face various challenges when engaging with literature [7], primarily due to language difficulties [19]. Language mismatches between literary texts and learners' proficiency levels often impede understanding. Floris [19], Vaishnav [35], Krishnasamy [39], and Violetta-Irene [40] identify complex vocabulary and unfamiliar grammatical structures as significant barriers.

Additionally, Alshammari *et al.* [41] found that Saudi undergraduates struggle with difficult texts, further emphasising the challenge of aligning text difficulty with learners' language abilities.

The complexity of literature can also affect instruction and learner engagement. Krishnasamy [39] highlights that student with lower proficiency find literary texts hard to understand, often leading to a lack of interest in literature lessons. Conversely, learners with higher proficiency levels show better comprehension and appreciation of literary works [41]. Difficulties in understanding texts hinder motivation to read, as seen in a study by Al-Mahrooqi [42], where unfamiliar words led to discontinued reading, highlighting the need for texts that match learners' English abilities. Floris [19] notes that ESL learners often find longer prose texts, like novels and short stories, more accessible and beneficial for language learning compared to concise, dense poetry. Studies by Tevdovska [43] and Gangchuk and Dukpa [44] indicate that extended prose provides better contextual support and are generally preferred over poetry, which is perceived as more challenging to understand.

Cultural differences also play a significant role in how ESL learners interact with literature. Collie and Slater [6] and Floris [19] point out that texts with unfamiliar cultural contexts can be challenging for learners to interpret. Alshammari *et al.* [41] found that some learners view English literature as conflicting with their own culture, which can lead to misunderstandings. Idioms and colloquial language further complicate comprehension, as confirmed by Al-Mahrooqi [42]. Despite these challenges, Keshavarzi [45] demonstrates that appropriate teaching methods can positively influence learners' attitudes toward literature, suggesting that well-chosen texts and effective pedagogy can mitigate some of these difficulties [41].

Incorporating literature into ESL education presents challenges such as complex texts and cultural disconnection, particularly for learners with lower English proficiency. However, these issues can be addressed with thoughtful text selection, effective curricular design, and tailored teaching approaches that align with learners' needs and interests. By focusing on learners' perspectives and providing appropriate support, literature can enhance language skills, cultural understanding, and critical thinking, ultimately benefiting ESL students despite potential difficulties.

2. METHOD

This study adopted a quantitative, descriptive research design to explore ESL learners' perceptions of studying literature. A structured questionnaire was employed as the primary data collection tool, focusing on students' views, experiences, and challenges related to literature studies. The questionnaire consisted of 21 items divided into four sections: demographic background, literary experience, literature and personal growth, and challenges and opportunities. The instrument was adapted from established literature on the topic, particularly drawing from Hasan and Hasan [28], and revised to fit the specific context of teaching English as a second language (TESL) students.

The sample size for the study was determined based on Krejcie and Morgan [46] table for sample size determination, which is widely used to identify appropriate sample sizes for given population sizes. For a population of approximately 550 TESL students, a sample size of 226 was deemed adequate to ensure reliable results and statistical validity. The final sample comprised 31% of students who completed the online questionnaire, yielding a typical response rate in online survey research. Although this response rate is lower, strategies were employed to mitigate potential non-response bias. These included follow-up reminders to participants and comparing demographic characteristics between respondents and non-respondents to ensure representativeness.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of TESL students who were not part of the final sample. Feedback from this group helped refine the instrument for clarity and relevance. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each section of the questionnaire to assess internal consistency, with all sections achieving an acceptable threshold ($\alpha > 0.70$), indicating good reliability [47]. Additionally, content validity was ensured by adapting the questionnaire from established literature and consulting with TESL and educational research experts. Respondents' academic grades were incorporated as an additional metric to compare with their questionnaire responses. This allowed for a deeper analysis of how students' engagement with literature studies correlates with their academic performance, providing a robust evaluation of the educational impact of literature studies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in four sections. These are the demographic profile and literature achievement, literature learning experience, literature and personal growth sections, and challenges and opportunities. The last section captures students' responses to open-ended questions posed in the questionnaire.

3.1. Demographic profile and literature achievement

The demographic profile shows a significant majority of female respondents, comprising 77.1% of the total, compared to only 22.9% male respondents. This is a typical distribution in a TESL programme. The distribution of grades is indicated in Figure 1, which shows that almost all passed their literature course.

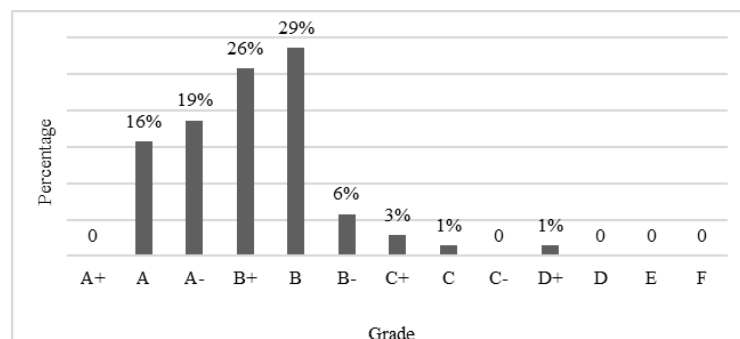


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents' grades

3.2. Literature learning experience

The literature learning experience section contains nine statements (items). The items asked the respondents about learning literature on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree, and 5 being strongly agree. The findings are shown in Table 1. The majority of respondents expressed positive views towards learning literature. Nearly all (98.6%) believed literature enhances their English proficiency, and all acknowledged its role in cultural awareness due to exposure to diverse texts. Most respondents (97.1%) found literature enjoyable, while opinions were mixed on its motivational aspect, with 88.5% considering it motivating. Additionally, 87.2% found literature rewarding beyond the classroom. Interestingly, a small percentage (7.1%) viewed literature as boring and a waste of time. Some respondents (24.3%) found literature difficult due to complex texts, while others disagreed (32.9%), and a significant portion (42.9%) were unsure. Examining grades in relation to this perception, those who found literature difficult still achieved success, indicating that perception does not necessarily correlate with performance, as indicated in Table 2. This is supported by the exception of a failed grade, attributed to incomplete tasks rather than difficulty in understanding the material.

Table 1. Students' perceptions of learning literature

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
LE1 It helps me improve my proficiency in the English language.	0.0	0.0	1.4	28.6	70.0
LE2 It helps increase cultural awareness between different cultures.	0.0	0.0	0.0	17.1	82.9
LE3 It is fun.	0.0	0.0	2.9	17.1	80.0
LE4 It is motivating.	0.0	1.4	10.0	17.1	71.4
LE5 It is rewarding outside the classroom.	0.0	0.0	12.9	18.6	68.6
LE6 It is boring and a waste of time.	78.6	12.9	1.4	0.0	7.1
LE7 It is difficult because the texts are difficult to comprehend.	12.9	20.0	42.9	15.7	8.6
LE8 It is not important to me because it contributes nothing to my future professional career.	68.6	14.3	7.1	0.0	10.0
LE9 It helps me to grow personally, intellectually, and emotionally.	0.0	1.4	0.0	31.4	67.1

Table 2. Crosstabulation of item LE7 and grade

Scale/Grade	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	Grand total (%)
A	1.4	2.9	7.1	4.3	0.0	15.7
A-	2.9	2.9	7.1	2.9	2.9	18.6
B	5.7	5.7	11.4	4.3	1.4	28.6
B-	0.0	2.9	2.9	0.0	0.0	5.7
B+	2.9	4.3	11.4	4.3	2.9	25.7
C	0.0	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4
C+	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.0	1.4	2.9
D+	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.0	0.0	1.4
Grand total	12.9	20.0	42.9	15.7	8.6	100.0

3.3. Literature and personal growth

The survey reveals strong positive attitudes towards the role of literature in personal and professional development as tabled in Table 3. A significant majority (82.9%) consider literature important for their future careers, while nearly all (98.5%) agree that it fosters personal, intellectual, and emotional growth. Respondents largely feel satisfied with literature classes, with 95.7% finding them aligned with their expectations and needs. They also perceive the literary texts used as interesting (98.6%) and valuable for learning about life (100%). Participation in class discussions and activities is high (94.3%), and the majority (98.5%) believe literature enhances critical thinking. Similarly, respondents feel literature helps them understand people and experiences akin to their own (98.6%). While most (87.1%) feel capable of interpreting and commenting on texts independently, some (11.4%) remain unsure. Nonetheless, the consensus is strong that literature plays a vital role in personal development, further affirming its importance beyond academic contexts. These findings are hardly surprising as literature posits that learning literature provides a wide array of advantages, encompassing both practical and personal realms [2], [4]–[6], [8], [16], [17], [19]. In short, the study reiterates Collie and Slater [6] argument that the inclusion of literature offers valuable authentic material, enriches cultural understanding, enhances language skills, and fosters personal engagement.

Table 3. Literature and personal growth

	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
LPG1	The literature classes are designed according to my expectations, needs and interests.	0.0	0.0	4.3	38.6	57.1
LPG2	I find the selected literary texts interesting.	0.0	0.0	1.4	34.3	64.3
LPG3	Literature helps me to learn more about life.	0.0	0.0	0.0	21.4	78.6
LPG4	Literature helps students to participate in the class discussions, group work and presentations.	0.0	0.0	5.7	21.4	72.9
LPG5	Literature classes help to develop my critical thinking.	0.0	0.0	1.4	18.8	79.7
LPG6	Literature helps me learn about people and their experiences that are similar to my own experiences.	0.0	0.0	1.4	34.3	64.3
LPG7	I have the ability to interpret and comment on the literary texts according to my own understanding of the text.	0.0	1.4	11.4	41.4	45.7
LPG8	Literature is an important part of my personal development.	0.0	0.0	5.7	32.9	61.4

The analysis of Item LPG7 (self-assessment of interpreting and commenting on literary texts) in relation to Item LE7 (perception of difficulty due to text complexity) revealed intriguing insights, as shown in Table 4. Among those who did not perceive literature as difficult due to complex texts, a significant portion (32.9%) expressed confidence in interpreting texts independently. Conversely, among those perceiving literature challenging due to text complexity, 18.6% still believed in their interpretative abilities. Notably, 35.7% of the respondents who were unsure about text difficulty felt capable of interpreting literary texts to the best of their ability. This suggests that perceived difficulty does not necessarily undermine confidence in interpretative skills, highlighting a nuanced relationship between perceived challenges and self-assessment of interpretative abilities. Probably, such findings affirm Alshammari *et al.* [41] discovery that individuals who had higher proficiency in English showed greater comprehension and appreciation of literary texts. It has to be noted the respondents are training to be teachers of ESL.

Table 4. Crosstabulation of Item LE7 and LPG7

LE7/LPG7	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	Grand total (%)
2	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.0	0.0	1.4
3	0.0	0.0	5.7	5.7	0.0	11.4
4	2.9	10.0	20.0	5.7	2.9	41.4
5	10.0	10.0	15.7	4.3	5.7	45.7
Grand total	12.9	20.0	42.9	15.7	8.6	100.0

The comparison of Item LPG7 (self-assessment of interpretative abilities) with respondents' grades yielded interesting findings, see Table 5. Those confident in their interpretative skills predominantly achieved high grades, with 28.6% obtaining A or A-, and 52.9% earning B+, B, or B-. Only a small percentage (4.3%) received lower grades (C or C+). Surprisingly, all respondents unsure of their abilities passed the course, with some even achieving distinctions (5.8%). Even those who doubted their interpretative abilities managed to pass, with one individual obtaining credit. This suggests that while some respondents may doubt their interpretative

skills, their academic performance in literature courses remains largely unaffected, indicating a potential disparity between self-perception and actual performance.

Table 5. Crosstabulation of Item LPG7 and grade

Grade/LPG7	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	Grand total (%)
A	0.0	2.9	4.3	8.6	15.7
A-	0.0	2.9	7.1	8.6	18.6
B	0.0	2.9	14.3	11.4	28.6
B-	0.0	1.4	1.4	2.9	5.7
B+	1.4	1.4	10.0	12.9	25.7
C	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.0	1.4
C+	0.0	0.0	2.9	0.0	2.9
D+	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4	1.4
Grand total	1.4	11.4	41.4	45.7	100.0

3.4. Challenges and opportunities

Based on the responses, short stories are the most favoured (56.0%), followed by poetry (30.0%), and novels trailing behind at 10%. Drama garnered the least preference at 4.0%. Some respondents suggested incorporating drama activities for better understanding, although this is deemed less feasible due to time constraints. The learners' preference for short stories can be explained by the length of the text and the language used in such texts [19]. Additionally, the findings are aligned with the studies of Tevdovska [43] and Gangchuk and Dukpa [44], in which the respondents expressed a preference for prose fiction.

The most significant issue identified by 38.6% of respondents was the difficulty of texts. Additionally, 20.0% admitted to feeling shy about contributing in class discussions, while 17.1% found the volume of materials overwhelming. Other challenges included difficulty with exam questions (12.9%) and interpreting poems, understanding specific sentences for analysis, and feeling overwhelmed by lengthy novels, mentioned by 8.6% of respondents. Notably, only a small percentage (1.4%) cited teaching methods or boring texts/topics as significant problems. Overall, the predominant challenges revolved around text complexity, exam difficulties, and overcoming shyness in class participation. The difficulty that the learners faced is not uncommon as proven by the literature. Intricate and lengthy texts pose challenges to ESL learners as found by Alshammari *et al.* [41] and Al-Mahrooqi [42] in their studies.

The respondents expressed overwhelmingly positive sentiments about their learning experiences in literature classes. They described it as “fun,” “informative,” “eye-opening,” “interesting,” “wonderful,” and “rewarding,” among other praises. The respondents highlighted how literature improved critical thinking, expanded their vocabulary, and offered new perspectives on life and literary works. The respondents also noted improvements in their literary abilities, awareness of contemporary issues, and cultural understanding. This positive view can be attributed to careful text selection, curriculum design, and effective teaching strategies as suggested by Alshammari *et al.* [41]. Furthermore, as asserted by Keshavarzi [45], instructional approaches can significantly influence students' attitudes toward literature as evident in the current study.

Despite finding the subject matter challenging, 40.0% of respondents credited their enjoyment of the classes to having a good instructor. This finding is notable because the respondents praised the instructors for being supportive, knowledgeable, and adept at fostering discussion and understanding. Some suggestions for improvement included additional exercises or lectures on poetry analysis, shorter texts, and more group work. The respondents expressed a desire for physical classes and recommended more diverse literature representation, particularly from Asian authors, and discussions on current themes and issues. Overall, while some struggled with aspects like poetry analysis, their self-doubt did not necessarily reflect in their academic achievements.

4. CONCLUSION

The respondents generally hold a positive perception of literature, acknowledging its benefits in language and non-language aspects. While a minority found it tedious or irrelevant to their future careers, most appreciated its role in exploration, critical thinking development, and active participation in classroom activities. Satisfaction with selected materials and tailored classes was evident. Addressing challenges requires a blend of instructional strategies and support systems. Educators can implement scaffolding techniques like pre-reading activities and vocabulary instruction, offer background knowledge, foster discussion, promote diverse perspectives, and provide reading choices to overcome obstacles in learning literature. Future research could focus on more diverse ESL respondents by providing in-depth qualitative insights on students' learning experiences.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest (financial, personal, or professional) in connection with the manuscript.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individuals who participated in this study. Participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, and use of the data collected, and their participation was entirely voluntary.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant national regulations and institutional guidelines, and adheres to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all individuals were informed about the nature and purpose of the research before providing their consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [JB], upon reasonable request.

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