

Teaching English literature to EFL students at Azzaytuna University (Challenges and Solutions)

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المستخلص

يهدف البحث إلى التعرف على الصعوبات التي يواجهها أساتذة الأدب في تدريس مقررات الأدب الانجليزي لطلبة اللغة الانجليزية بأقسام اللغة الانجليزية بكلية اللغات والترجمة وكلية التربية , جامعة الزيتونة/ترونة. كما يهدف البحث أيضا بتقديم مقترحات من شأنها التغلب على هذه المشاكل , وقد استخدم الباحث استبان وتم توزيعه على عدد ستة أساتذة يدرسون مقررات الأدب لتحديد نوع المشاكل التي يواجهونها . وأشارت نتائج البحث لوجود بعض الصعوبات في تدريس الأدب ومن أهمها ضعف الكفاءة اللغوية لدى الطلاب و قلة الوسائل التعليمية, ويوصى الباحث بضرورة الاهتمام بتحسين مهارات الطلاب اللغوية من قبل أساتذة اللغة الانجليزية وتطوير جودة تدريس اللغة الانجليزية بشكل عام وتدريس مقررات الأدب بشكل خاص من قبل المشرقين والقائمين على العملية التعليمية بالجامعة.

Abstract

The study of literature has become a great challenge for both students and professors due to several factors. This current research paper aims at identifying the challenges literature professors encounter while teaching literary texts. It also aims at proposing some solutions to overcome the challenges. To obtain data, six literature professors from English departments at faculties of Languages and Education in Azzaytuna University participated a sample of the study. To achieve the study objectives, a mixed-method research was utilized in which data were

collected quantitatively through a 15 items questionnaire and qualitatively using three open-ended questions. The findings of the study indicated that professors of English literature are facing difficulties in teaching literature to EFL students. They all agree that most of the challenges are resulted from the low level of students' language proficiency, and the shortage of teaching facilities. The researcher recommends that a special emphasis should be given on the part of the professors and on the part of the supervisors who are responsible for the teaching-learning process in the university to improve the quality of teaching English language in general and teaching literature in particular.

Keywords: EFL. Teaching literature, Challenges, Professors of English literature

Introduction

Recently, there has been a shift towards integrating literary texts in teaching English language curriculum. Researchers such as Paran, 2006; Carter, 2007; Hall ,2005, emphasize that literature is a great value in developing language and communicative competence of language learner. Hassan (2018:15) supports the idea that "literature has always been an integral part of teaching foreign languages". Therefore, literature has been considered as an essential course in English Language departments at the university context. It is being taught side by side with the other linguistic aspects of language. Literature, according to Widdowson (1985), authentic materials which cannot be separated from language. Similarly, Leech (1996:1) confirms this fact by stating that "we generally suppose that literature cannot be examined in any depth from language, any more than language cannot be studied apart from literature".

In addition, many researchers have recognized the academic, linguistic, and cultural benefits of the study of literature. The fact is that many textbooks and research articles have been published by authors in this area as such Hill, 1986; Brumift & Carter, 1987; Collie & Slater, 1987 and Lazar, 1993, on the advantages of teaching literature in EFL classes.

Despite the fact that literature plays a vital role in developing and improving students' language, professors of literature are facing many challenges. Therefore,

the current research paper will investigate the nature of these challenges and the causes behind them.

Literature Review

Several studies have discussed the advantages of using literary genres in EFL classrooms. Researchers, such as Collie & Slator, 1987; Brumfit & Carter, 1987; Khatib & Rahmi, 2012. The first advantage is that literary texts could provide students with real materials which are considered as the samples of language in real-life contexts such as travel, advertisement, newspapers or magazines articles. Many studies have stated that literary texts offer genuine materials for the students. For example, Kataja (2018) stated that literary texts could develop students' comprehension skills with real materials. Carter and McRae (1996) found that literary texts help students to build their experiences when they are exposed to language that is as genuine and undistorted as can be managed in the classroom. According to Brumfit and Carter (1987: 15) a literary text "is authentic text, real language in context, to which we can respond directly".

The second advantage is that literary texts provide students with a wide range of individual lexical or syntactic items. In addition, literary texts contribute to language acquisition. Pinar and Jover (2012) conducted a study on the benefits of literature, and found that literary texts may provide a convenient way of encouraging language acquisition. Also, Lazar (1993) pointed that students can be offered meaningful and memorable texts that would encourage language acquisition. Therefore, students become familiar with many features of written language. As Povey (1967: 41) suggests that "literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax".

The third advantage is that literary texts can be useful in the language learning process owing to the personal involvement. In her study Violetta (2015) found that literature may have a greater educational in the classroom in that it can help to increase the emotional awareness of the students, She also stated that "Helping students to read literature more effectively is helping them to grow and mature as individual as well as their relationships with the people around them" (pp.75).

Collie and Slater (1987) point out that the study of literary texts can have beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process. Therefore, a literary text should be selected in relation to students' needs, experiences, and interest. where they can develop their language.

The fourth is that literary texts introduce students to different cultural aspects and provide the advantage m with cultural background. Literature promotes cultural and intercultural awareness especially in the era of globalization (Khatib, 2011). Literature is considered one of the best ways to understand the culture and traditions of the target language, especially in those cases in which a visit or a stay is virtually impossible. Carter & Long (1991) asserts that the study of literature enables students to understand and appreciate the culture different from their own in time and space. Literary texts, in addition, are beneficial in that they introduce students to the historical, political and social background of the country the literary text works (Siaj and Farrah, (2018).

Despite the advantages of using literary texts in language classrooms as have been mentioned above, there are also some major challenges face professors of English literature in teaching literary texts in EFL classrooms. A large number of studies have been conducted on the difficulties that are caused by many factors. (MacKay, 2001, Savvidou, 2004, Lima, 2005).

The most common problem in teaching literature is the difficulty of language used in some literary texts. Literary vocabulary and grammatical structures are often considered to be too complicated, which require much effort. This constitutes a major challenge when it comes to teach literature especially when students' language is weak as lazer (1993: 115) argues "students often feel that literary language does not stick to the most common usages, but exploits and even distorts the accepted conventions in fresh and unexpected ways". In their study, Hussein and Al-Emami (2016) point out that the linguistic and the stylistic difficulties of language used in some literary texts frustrate students to understand and participate during discussion. Also, Sarkar (2010) asserts that students' low proficiency in English is considered the main problem in teaching literature in

EFL classes. Additionally, scholars such as MacKay (2001) and Savvidou (2004) criticize the language of literary texts for being far from the convention of Standard English established for the different levels of the students. As a result, a literary text becomes far from students' level and in turn students feel frustrated to study literature.

Another major challenge is cultural aspects. Some literary texts include cultural expressions that seem to be unconventional and do not allow students to use their imaginative power. Collie & Slater (1987: 2) argue that "undesirable cultural connotations conveyed by some literary texts might also restrain the use of certain texts". MacKay (2001) also states that literature is saturated with cultural concepts that might frustrate the reader. Therefore, such cultural differences discourage students to react with the content of the literary text.

Not only the difficult language of the literary texts and the cultural hindrance, but also the selection of the literary text is another difficult factor for both instructors and students. The inappropriate choice of a literary text leads the process of teaching literature to be difficult. Therefore, when selecting a literary text, Khatib et al. (2011) suggest a number of different factors such as language proficiency, age, gender, and background knowledge should be taken into consideration. These factors, according to Lima (2005), are important as far as professors' desire to provide students with literary and linguistic experiences as well as cultural competence to deal with the text simply.

Furthermore, the researcher reviews some other empirical studies that were carried out in identifying the problematic aspects that encounter professors of English literature in teaching literary genres in EFL classrooms.

Tayib & Hassan (2020) conducted a study on the challenges facing literature teachers of EFL classes in Salahaddin university/ Erbil. The study revealed that the majority of the participants recognized the challenges were resulted from students. In other words, students focus only on memorization rather than understanding and creativity in the process of learning. The study also showed that the instructors lack the theoretical and practical knowledge about teaching literature effectively.

In their research, Al Sabiri and Kaymakamoglu (2019) point out that professors of literature face some circumstantial problems such as shortage of the equipment, lack of visual aids, and lack of technology in the EFL classes/.

In his study, El-Helou (2010) identified the difficulties facing English teachers in teaching literary genres (poetry, short story and drama) for Palestinian grade twelve textbook. The researcher selected 184 male and female teachers and 20 English language supervisors to be the study sample. In order to collect the study data, the researcher distributed a questionnaire of 25 items stating the difficulties facing English teachers in teaching literature. The findings revealed that the majority of the teachers stated that the language and the content of the literary texts are not in harmony with students' interest.

In addition, Shakfa (2007) conducted a study in which he identified the problems facing junior and senior students majoring in English literature at the Islamic University of Gaza. The study demonstrated that 80% of the respondents agreed that reading the play is the major difficulty, and 70% of them agreed that the plays they study are too long. In addition, the study revealed that the most remarkable problems students encounter in learning drama were strange expressions and unfamiliarity of some words. Chandrasena (2006) also investigated the challenges of introducing literature into foreign language studies at universities in Sri Lanka by conducting a research on students of six foreign languages at University of Kelaniya, He found out the major challenges in teaching literature are the lack of language competency of students and the use of inappropriate teaching methods.

Similarly, Chen (2002) identified the problems that encounter the teaching of literature at National Chung Cheng University in Taiwan. The researcher summarized the problems which are related to students' cultural knowledge and to their lack of language competency. He also proposed practical solutions to overcome these problems. The solution is done by providing students with

extensive reading materials to improve their reading skills, and to enrich their cultural knowledge of the target language.

Methodology

Rationale

Literature courses are taught side by side with the other linguistic courses in English departments at Azzaytuna University. However, professors of English literature always feel that English language students have low motivation because they do not participate actively during the classes. In general, students seem to be reluctant to study literature. Therefore, professors of English literature confront many challenges in dealing with literature classes.

The research questions are:

- 1- What are the most serious challenges professors of literature encounter?
- 2- How can such challenges be solved?

Objectives of the study

The present study aims to:

- 1- Identify the difficulties facing professors of English literature in teaching literary texts to English language students at English departments/ Azzaytuna University.
- 2- Find practical ways to overcome or reduce such difficulties.

The participants/sample of the study

The current study is limited to professors of English literature in English departments from colleges of Education and Languages at Azzaytuna University during the academic year 2022-2023. Only six professors, who are currently teaching literary genres in both colleges, were approached to answer the questionnaire. For the purpose of observing research ethics, the name of the participants were kept anonymous.

The instruments

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, two types of questionnaire- a close-ended questionnaire and an open-ended questionnaire - were used. The first one is the three points "Likert Scale" questionnaire ranging from one positive (*agree A*), a (*neutral N*), and one negative (*disagree D*). The closed-ended questionnaire is made up of (15) items that were divided into three categories on the basis of the three major categories of challenges, namely: student-related challenges, professors-related challenges, and other external-related challenges. The three open-ended questions were designed to investigate other challenges professors might experience in their context and to propose solutions based on their suggestions. The purpose of the questions is to clarify the findings provided by quantitative data. It should be mentioned here that the items of the questionnaire were adopted from Tayib & Hassan (2020), and were modified to serve the objectives of the study.

In order to validate the research instruments, two professors of English language from the English department in faculty of Languages and Translation were given the questionnaire as referees. They closely checked the items of the closed-ended questionnaire and the open-ended questions, and stated their comments and recommendations. Their comments and recommendations were taken into consideration when writing the final draft.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the part one – closed-ended questionnaire

A- Analyzing student-related challenges

The following table (1) shows numbers and percentages of the participants' responses concerning the challenges that related to students in teaching literature

N	Items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	low language proficiency level of students	6 100%	0 0%	0 0%
2	lack of self-confidence to participate during literature classes	5 83%	0 0%	1 16.66%
3	Students lack motivation and sense of pleasure	5 83%	0 0%	1 16.66%
4	Students' cultural prejudice against foreign literature	3 50%	0 0%	3 50%

5	Lack of prior literature knowledge of English language	6 100%	0 0%	0 0%
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In response to the first item, *low language proficiency level of students*, all the professors (100%) are in an agreement that the students' language proficiency is low which hinders them to comprehend and grasp the literary meaning of texts.

In answer the second item, *lack of self-confidence to participate during literature classes*, the majority of professors (83%) agree that students lack the confidence to engage actively with the literary texts.

Concerning the third item, *Students lack motivation in studying literature*, almost all the professors (83%) agree that students lack motivation and are not interested to study literature.

In regard to the fourth item, *Students' cultural prejudice about foreign literature*, , fifty percent of the professors agree that students are unfamiliar with the culture and social background of the literary text., whereas the other half of them (50%) believe that the students' culture is not considered the main problem that faces them.

With respect to the fifth item, *Lack of prior literature knowledge of English language*, all the professors (100%) affirm that students do not have enough background information about literature.

B-Analyzing Professor- related challenges

The following table (2) illustrates numbers and percentage regarding the challenges that related to the professors in teaching English literature.

N	Item	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Lack of training in literature teaching	1 16.66%	0 0%	5 83.33%
2	Wrong choice of teaching methods	2 33.33%	0 0%	4 66.66%
3	Lack of professor autonomy	0 0%	0 0%	6 100%
4	Incompetence in English language and literature	0 0%	1 16.66%	5 83.33%

5	Lack self-confidence in teaching literature	2 33.33%	0 0%	4 66.66%
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In response to the first item, *lack of training in literature teaching*, most of the professors (83%) disagree with this point. Only one of the respondents thinks that professors' lack of training in literature teaching is a factor that causes challenges while teaching literature.

In answer the second item, *Wrong choice of teaching methods*, only two respondents agree that the wrong choice of teaching methods is considered a main factor, whereas the majority of the respondents disagree with respect to this point. They think the challenges are not originated as a result of teaching methods.

The acquired data from the third item, *Lack of professor autonomy*, affirms that all the participants disagree (100%) and they believe that they are independent in selecting what to teach and how to teach a literary text.

The professors' response to the fourth item, *Incompetence in English language and literature*, indicates their disagreement, believing that they are competent and well-qualified in English language and literature.

With respect to the fifth item, *Lack self-confidence in teaching literature*, on one hand less than half of the respondents (33%) agree to this point. On the other hand, more than half of them (66,66%) disagree, thinking that they are confident and trustworthy in teaching literature.

C- Other/External factors – related challenges

The following table (3) states in numbers and percentages the challenges caused by other factors.

N	Item	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Poorly-equipped libraries	6 100%	0 0%	0 0%
2	Lack of teaching facilities such as visual aids and technology	6 100%	0 0%	0 0%
3	Shortage of pedagogically-well-designed materials	5 83.33%	0 0%	1 16.66%

4	Insufficient credit hours of teaching literature	6 100%	0 0%	0 0%
5	Large classes	3 50%	0 0%	3 50%

In response to the first item, *Poorly-equipped library*, all professors (100%) agree that libraries are not well-equipped for students. The poorly equipped libraries negatively influence on students' language proficiency.

To answer the second item, *Lack of teaching facilities such as visual aids and technology*, all respondents (100%) agree that there is a shortage of supportive classrooms environment such as visual aids and technology *which play a crucial role in improving students' knowledge about English literature..*

Regarding the third item, *Shortage of pedagogically-well-designed materials*, the majority of the professors (83.33%) agree that the literary materials are insufficient and not well-designed to achieve the purpose of teaching literature.

Concerning the fourth item, *insufficient number of literature teaching hours*, almost of the participants (83.33) are in an agreement that the specified teaching hours are not sufficient for literature classes.

With respect to the fifth item, *Large classes*, a half of the participants (50%) agree that the classes are large while the second half of respondents (50%) disagree, thinking that the number of students in language classes doesn't constitute any challenge in teaching literature.

Discussions

The main objective of this research is to identify the challenges that confront professors of English literature in teaching literary genres in EFL classes in Faculty of Languages & Translation and Faculty of Education at Azzaytuna University.

Discussing the results of student-related challenges

According to the obtained data shown in the tables above, it can be said that the teaching of literature in English classes is a great challenge for both professors and

students. The first major challenge was aroused from the students. All the study participants indicate that the level of students' language proficiency is considered a major difficulty. In other words, students are poor readers and not well-prepared to appreciate literary texts due to the complexity of language. This is in line with many studies such as Hussein & Al Emami (2016); Sarker (2010); Chandrasena (2007) and Chen (2009) who stated that the weakness of students' language makes the process of teaching literature is a problematic issue.

Another major problem as indicted in table (1) above is that students do not have a previous knowledge about English literature. In other words, students lack background about literary texts at earlier stages. In addition, students have not been motivated to the importance of studying literature. Therefore, they cannot participate during the class discussion because they are not interested in or pleased with what they study. Accordingly, professors of literature encounter problems in teaching literature which goes in line with the studies of Hussein & Al Emami (2016) and Tayib & Hassan (2020).

Moreover, as can be seen in table one above, the culture of the students is considered a great challenge to deal with the literary text. Some texts such as texts of plays and poems include foreign expressions and critical situations which are not in harmony with students' culture. This is indicated by Collie & Slater (1987), MacKay (2001) and Chen (2002) who pointed out that the cultural differences conveyed by some texts might restrain the use of certain texts in EFL classrooms.

Discussing the results of professor-related challenges

The results illustrated in table (2) above show that there are no challenges relate to the professors of English literature in teaching literary texts. They believe that they are well-trained and well-qualified in teaching English literature. They are also confident in their ability and independent in selecting what to teach and how to teach. This indicates that professors. of literature are not responsible for the problems that face them in teaching literature in EFL classrooms.

Discussing the results of external-related challenges

Table (3) above demonstrates the results of the external challenges that encounter professors of literature in teaching literary texts. It can be seen that professors of English literature experience major circumstantial problems such as lack of visual aids and technology. Additionally, they face problems that are caused by the shortage of literary materials in the library and insufficient time hours to cover the syllabus designed for literature courses. These challenges are in line with the challenges of previous studies such as (Tayib & Hassan (2020) and Al Sabiri and Kaymakamoglu (2019).

Analysis of part two – open-ended questions

In response to Question 1, "*What kind of challenges do you encounter when you teach English literature?*". All the participants stated the following points:

- a- Students are not competent in English.
- b- Students lack interest and motivation.
- c- Students do not have prior knowledge of literature at previous stages.
- d- The insufficient hours for literature courses.
- e- The deficiency of literary sources in the library.
- f- The shortage of supporting teaching facilities.

In response 2 Question 2, *To what extent can we limit the challenges and find solutions?* The professors believe that the process of teaching literature in EFL classes requires:

- a- Promoting the students' level of English language.
- b- Increasing students' motivation and interest.
- c- Raising students' awareness toward the role of studying literature.
- d- Encouraging students to read literary texts inside and outside classes.
- e- Providing the library with literary materials.
- f- Adding extra time for literature courses.

In response to Question 3, *Would you like to add something else regarding teaching literature in EFL classes?* One of the participants suggests that native speakers should be invited to give lectures about English literature. Another

participant proposes that professors of English literature should choose simple literary texts.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the outcome of this research reveals that teaching literature is a great challenge. Most problems are resulted from students and the other external factors. All the participants (100%) believe that student-related challenges affect their performance while teaching literature. They think that most of the challenges are due to the weakness of students' language and their lack of prior literature knowledge. Additionally, all the participants (100%) concur that the challenges are also resulted from other external factors such as the absence of supporting teaching facilities and the shortage of time allocated to literature courses.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher recommends that English language students should be encouraged to improve their level of language competency by providing them with sufficient assignments and activities. He also recommends that literary texts must be selected carefully taking into consideration students' level, needs and culture. He also recommends that literature classes should be provided with teaching facilities such as audio-visual aids and technology.

Delimitations of the study

A delimitation that should be mentioned here is the small number of participants. The sample of the study was only six professors who are currently teaching literature at English Departments in Colleges of Language & Translation, and Education at Azzaytuna University. The generalization of results would have been better if the sample was much larger. It is therefore recommended that the study be replicated with a large sample from different colleges and universities.

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