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# Learners' Views of Literature and Academic Achievement in a Literature Course: A Sample of ESL Pre-Service Teachers in Malaysia

**Jamiah Baba***
Universiti Teknologi MARA
Shah Alam, Malaysia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8392-3200

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**Abstract.** The advantages and disadvantages of literature in ESL contexts has been much discussed. Proponents argue that the drawbacks can be minimised if learners' expectations, needs, and interests are carefully considered. This paper, therefore, attempts to describe learners' views of literature and the challenges they face while learning literature and to understand whether these experiences have an impact on their academic achievement of a particular literature course. 35 pre-service teachers participated in the study by answering a questionnaire that comprises multiple-choice items and open-ended questions. The respondents were purposely selected as they are training to become English teachers, have taken at least eight literature courses, and are currently enrolled in at least one literature course. Frequency count was mainly used to describe the response to each item while crosstabulations are used whenever the responses are to be compared with each other. The learners' academic grades were also analysed and cross tabulated with the items in the questionnaire. The findings show that the learners view literature positively and enjoyed learning literature, citing scaffolding and support as key factors. These findings have implications on how educators plan and teach literature courses, which can affect how ESL learners' approach and learn literature.

**Keywords:** ESL learners, literature learning, learners' perceptions, challenges in learning literature

## 1. Introduction

It has been argued that literature brings about benefits such as language enrichment and cultural awareness to learners (Floris, 2005). However, the teaching and learning of literature has been subjected to controversies because literature does carry with it incomprehensible literary language and "an undesirable freight of cultural connotations" (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 2). In short, we can see that there are some problems involved in the teaching and learning of literature, particularly in the ESL context. Understanding learners' views of literature and problems faced by them can shed light on the areas where educators need to improve most in order to make the best use of literature in developing the desired outcomes such as language competency and cultural awareness.

* **Corresponding author**: *Jamiah Baba, jamia021@uitm.edu.my*

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### 1.1 Statement of the research problem

The Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme at the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia trains ESL learners to become English teachers in government schools. In the TESL programme, the pre-service teachers are required to learn several literature courses which aim, among others, to enhance their language proficiency and develop their critical and analytical skills. Furthermore, it exposes the pre-service teachers to the use of literature, both as a subject and a resource in an English language classroom, which is the current practice and policy in Malaysian secondary schools.

The body of knowledge on the use of literature in ESL contexts posits that it has its own advantages and disadvantages (Tsang, Paran, & Lau, 2020; Krishnasamy, 2015; Violetta-Irene, 2015; Bobkina, & Domingues, 2014; Keshavarzi, 2012; Bagherkazemi, & Alemi, 2010; Paran, 2008; Sivasubramaniam, 2006; Floris, 2005; Lazar, 1993; Collie & Slater, 1987). Despite this controversy and consensus among scholars, it is obvious is that learners are the most affected party when literature is used whether as a resource (in language learning) or a subject.

Therefore, Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005) argue that students' views are important because they can influence the way they approach learning. More importantly, Williams and Burden (1997 cited in Tsang, Paran & Lau, 2020) believe that the way students view their learning is significantly related to their academic performance. Understanding students' view therefore has implications for curriculum developers, material designers and educators in bringing about more effective pedagogical approaches that match students' learning needs (Tsang, Paran & Lau, 2020). Taking these arguments seriously, the study poses four research questions:

1) What are the ESL pre-service teachers' views of literature?
2) Is there a relationship between the learners' views of literature and their academic achievement?
3) What are the ESL pre-service teachers' challenges in learning literature?
4) How can literature teaching and learning be improved from the perspective of the ESL pre-service teachers?

The current study attempts to describe how ESL pre-service teachers view literature, the challenges they face while learning the subject, and their recommendations for future practice. It also seeks to identify whether the learners' views have an impact on their academic grades. Such findings have implications on how literature is planned and taught not only in the Department but in other ESL contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

Proponents of literature argue that literature is beneficial to ESL learners for several reasons (see Tsang, Paran, & Lau, 2020; Bobkina, & Domingues, 2014; Keshavarzi, 2012; Paran, 2008; Sivasubramaniam, 2006; Floris, 2005; Lazar, 1993; Collie & Slater, 1987). According to Collie and Slater (1987), there are four reasons to include literature in the ESL context, which are, (i) literature offers valuable authentic material, (i) literature provides cultural enrichment, (iii) literature provides language enrichment and (iv) literature fosters personal involvement. These benefits are expanded by Lazar (1993, pp. 15 - 19) to include motivating material, access to cultural background, encouraging language acquisition, expanding students' language awareness, developing students' interpretative abilities, and educating the whole person.

### 2.1 Authentic material

One of the advantages of literature is that it is authentic material. As literature is not specifically written for language teaching and learning, Collie and Slater (1987, p. 6) believe that learners are exposed to language that is "genuine and undistorted". Aghagolzadeh and Tajabadi (2012) argue that authentic texts can trigger learners' critical thinking skills. This is because literary texts are open to multiple interpretation and genuine interaction (Duff & Maley, 1990 cited in Floris, 2005). Therefore, literature can "stimulate the imagination of our students, to develop their critical abilities, and to increase their emotional awareness" (Lazar, 1993, p. 19). It is suggested that the authentic nature of literary texts trains the mind better than any other discipline (Thomas, 2000 in Sell, 2005). Literature allows ESL learners to expand their language ability and knowledge of life in general through analysing and understanding fundamental human concerns depicted in literary texts.

### 2.2 Cultural enrichment

Bobkina and Domingues (2014) argue that literature is one of the best tools to help learners understand the culture and traditions of the target language. Through literature, ESL learners are able to "to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own in time and space, and to come to perceive traditions of thought and feeling and artistic form in those cultures" (Carter & Long, 1991 cited in Bobkina, & Domingues, 2014). Van (2009) posits that literature exposes learners to cultures that are different from theirs, which can expand their worldview. Learners' cultural understanding and awareness are enhanced through the use of literature as it enables them to look at the issues of culture, ethnicity, religion, race from varying perspectives, concepts and worldviews (Sell, 2005).

### 2.3 Language enrichment

According to Lazar (1993), literature makes use of certain kind of linguistic features and involves "a special, or unusual use of language" (p. 5). Because of these features, ESL learners are exposed to a range of "vocabulary, dialogues and prose" (Van, 2009, p. 2). As such, learners develop language awareness, particularly the "interesting lexical and syntactic features" of the written language (Sivasubramaniam, 2006). These arguments are in line with various studies which focus on the use of literature as a tool to develop and enhance learners' English language proficiency in many ESL contexts (see Mustafa, Kawther, & Rashid, 2020; Hassan, Engku Atek, Latiff Azmi & Azmi, 2020; Hasan & Hasan, 2019; Cheng, 2016; Keshavarzi, 2012; Paran, 2008; Hişmanoğlu, 2005). As an example, Aghagolzadeh and Tajabadi (2012) found that indeed ESL learners' language abilities can be improved through literature teaching and learning.

### 2.4 Personal involvement

Through reading literature, ESL learners are exposed to a variety of issues and themes that are relevant to the world they live in. At the same time, the texts allow them to explore various lingusitic feactures of the target language. Thinking about and making connections with the texts allow the learners to "begin to feel a sense of involvement with the target language" (Sivasubramaniam, 2006, p. 262). In this way, literature helps "to stimulate the imagination of […] students, to develop their critical abilities, and to increase their emotional awareness" (Lazar, 1993, p. 19). This is what Lazar (1993) means when she argues that literature can educate the whole person.

To reiterate, because literary texts are not written specifically for language learning purposes and are authentic in nature, literature has the potentials to improve language learners' language competency, and involve them into thinking about other cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial viewpoints critically and analytically. Obviously, the use of literature in ESL contexts is beneficial to the learners provided that they are receptive to idea and are

willing to engage with the texts. Therefore, understanding how ESL learners perceive literature is important because of its various pedagogical implications.

**2.5 Learners' views of literature**

Various researches have been conducted to look at how students view literature in different ESL contexts (see Mustafa, Kawther, & Rashid, 2020; Hassan, Engku Atek, Latiff Azmi, & Azmi, 2020; Tsang, Paran & Lau, 2020; Hasan & Hasan, 2019; Alfauzan & Hussain, 2017; Naser & Aziz, 2017). For example, in their review of studies on learners' views of literature, Tsang, Paran and Lau (2020) found that learners in higher education mostly tend to have positive views about the use of literature, particularly in the ESL/EFL context. Another study, by Mustafa, Kawther and Rashid (2020), also found that their EFL respondents were interested to learn literature as it helps improve their English language proficiency and they viewed the teaching approaches positively.

Studying EFL learners' perceptions and attitudes towards studying English literature courses, Al-Mahrooqi and Al-Wahaibi (2012) state that the more literature courses they are enrolled in, the more positive they are towards literature. Because the learners have had positive learning experiences, they acknowledge that there are interesting and enjoyable elements in their literature courses. Having a positive learning experience encourage learners to seek for more positive learning opportunities. This concurs with Dewey's (1963) argument that, to a certain extent, every experience is a moving force that affects the quality of further experiences. In this way, positive continuous experiences allow learners to grow intellectually, morally and physically.

Nonetheless, studying literature can be a daunting task for some students. In their study on undergraduate Engineering students, Sivapalan and Subramaniam (2008) reveal that almost 40% of the respondents believe literature to be irrelevant for technical students, saying that it is "too difficult and complicated" (p. 56). Adeyemi (2012) lists several student complaints about learning literature, which include, literature is difficult to understand, has difficult vocabulary, has difficult poetry aspects, is boring and confusing, difficult to pass, and requires too much thinking. Al-Mahrooqi (2012) mentions that almost all the respondents in her study would not continue to read when they find the texts challenging. Furthermore, students' motivation to read the texts can be lessened by unsuitable literary texts, preventing them from appreciating the texts (Naser & Aziz, 2017; Othman et al., 2015; Tseng; 2010), thus, missing out on valuable human concerns and issues.

Here, we can argue that how learners view literature is significantly connected to what they have experienced when learning the subject, which can determine whether the learning outcomes can be achieved. The previous studies reveal that although learners find studying literature difficult, they also acknowledge that it can enrich their language ability and allows them to view the experiences of the world from different perspectives. Such positive perceptions encourage them to seek for similar meaningful learning experiences in the future, thus help them develop into more wholistic individuals.

**2.6 Learners views and academic achievement**

Othman, Shah, Karim, Yusof, Din, Ramli and Salleh (2015) argue that how learners view a particular subject is important to their success or failure. Therefore, learners' perceptions of literature learning have an impact on the learning outcome. This is hardly surprising given that foundational works (like Horwitz, Gardner, and Dörnyei) posit that there are causal relationships between learners' perceptions and attitudes and learners' motivations to do well in the subject (Wesely, 2012). As such, Bernaus and Gardner (2008) propose that the teaching and learning process can be enhanced by understanding learners' perceptions and attitudes. This is because, according to Wesely (2012), studies on learners' attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and learning outcomes generally show that more positive learner

attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs were associated with more positive outcomes, such as more enjoyment, higher achievement, and lower anxiety. In the context of literature learning, we can say that learners who view literature positively are better able to deal with the literary texts and achieve the desired outcomes, including better grades.

**2.7 Challenges in learning literature**

Literature can pose pedagogical difficulties to both teachers and learners. The most common problem of using literature in the ESL context is the language (Floris, 2005). Floris (2005) argues that both teachers and learners view literature as difficult because of the literary vocabulary and unfamiliar grammatical structures. Krishnasamay (2015) and Violetta-Irene (2015) assert that when the selected texts and learners' language proficiency do not match, learners find the language of the texts to be challenging. Alshammari, Ahmed and Shouk (2020) reveal that their Saudi undergraduate respondents found studying English literature difficult because the texts were difficult. Furthermore, unfamiliar words, grammar and structures can obstruct learners' understanding of texts as discovered by Othman and associates (2015) in their study.

Less proficient learners tend to find literature difficult. In her study, Sidhu (2003 cited in Krishnasamy, 2015) found that learners with lower proficiency struggled to understand literary texts and therefore, deemed literature lessons boring. In another study, Alshammari, Ahmed, and Shouk (2020) discovered that those with higher English language proficiency have better understanding of literary texts compared to the less proficient ones. Therefore, the former are more appreciative of literature than the latter. It is hardly surprising that Gunakumaran (2002 cited in Krishnasamy, 2015) suggests the language of the texts and learners' language English language ability should match.

Learners' inability to understand the literary texts also prevents them from fully engaging with the texts, thus making them less motivated to read. The Omani college students in Al-Mahrooqi's (2012) study admitted to having difficulty understanding the texts when they encountered new words. Texts that are dense with unfamiliar vocabulary prevent them from understanding and enjoying the texts. Al-Mahrooqi (2012) mentions that when encountering such problems, almost all of her respondents would discontinue reading.

Floris (2005) asserts that the length of the text is potentially problematic to learners. Some learners perceive longer ones difficult while others believe shorter ones more difficult. This is understandable as poetry is relatively brief compared to prose (like short story or novel) but it has dense expressions, and expresses subjectivity more than other texts. Therefore, ESL learners generally believe that poetry does not enhance their language, unlike prose. Longer texts, according to Duff and Maley (1990 cited in Floris, 2005), might offer "extended contextual support and repetition" that allows learners better understanding. Not surprisingly, Tseng (2010) discovers that the respondents in her study preferred prose fiction like novels and short stories, only to be followed by plays and poems. Most of the undergraduates in Tevdovska's (2016) study often enjoy novels and short stories and consider poetry to be difficult to understand.

Another problem associated with literature is concerned with culture (Floris, 2005). Teachers and learners alike might not have the required cultural connection to understand the texts. Texts that are "carrying an undesirable freight of cultural connotations" (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 2) can be incomprehensible to ESL learners. This is because language learners might not have the ability to interpret the texts from a specific cultural point of view, particularly if the culture is foreign to them. Alshammari, Ahmed, and Shouk (2020) argue that many EFL learners erroneously conceive that English literature contradicts their own culture, values, and beliefs. Added to this misconception, inappropriate cultural representation can also occur as ESL learners tend to interpret the meaning of the texts

according to their own culture when dealing with unfamiliar cultural elements (Krishnasamy, 2015).

A study by Al-Mahrooqi (2012) confirms that EFL learners face difficulty when reading texts that are culturally distant from theirs. Her respondents reported that the challenges include idioms, proverbs, slangs, colloquial language, and dialects, which prevent them from understanding and engaging with the texts. Similarly, the Arab EFL learners in Alshammari, Ahmed and Shouk's (2020) study perceived English literature as inappropriate and threatening to their culture. According to Alshammari, Ahmed and Shouk (2020), the remedies for such misconception include properly selected texts, well designed curricula, and effective pedagogical strategies. In her experimental study of Thai university students, Yimwilai (2015) proved that the teaching method has a positive impact on students' attitudes toward literature.

Based on the reviewed studies, the disadvantages of literature include difficult and lengthy texts, and cultural disconnectedness, which can affect learners, particularly those with lower English language proficiency. However, these drawbacks can be addressed through sufficient support and scaffoldings such as better text selection, purposeful curricular components and meaningful teaching and learning approaches. As learners are the most to gain from the use of literature in ESL classrooms, it is very important that their needs, expectations, and interests are carefully considered so that the full potentials of using literature can be reaped.

Fundamentally, the teaching and learning of literature in ESL contexts should put the learners at the centre stage as they are the target audience who will benefit from the teaching and learning process. Therefore, meaningful contents should be developed based learners' views, needs, interests, and expectations. Learners' English language proficiency and cultural competency are the key factors to consider when selecting appropriate texts. Although literature offers authentic materials, it is important to note that texts that are too dense with unfamiliar words and loaded with cultural connotations can impede learners' understanding, thus, prevent them from engaging with the texts at a deeper level. Learners with lower English language proficiency might disengage themselves totally and lose interest in literature. ESL learners should also be exposed to a variety of genres (poems, short stories, plays, novels, etc.), however, their preference must also be taken into account. Pedagogically, literature courses should enable the learners to analyse the meanings of the texts and reflect on issues inherent in the texts through activities such as class discussions, group work and presentations.

The activities should allow the learners to think and do things on their own with the instructors acting as facilitators providing instructional support whenever and wherever necessary. The teaching and learning process should actively involve both ESL learners and instructors in building blocks of understandings and creating new knowledge. By doing so, the use of literature can bring about language enrichment, cultural awareness, and critical thinking skills, among others. Once they have a positive experience of learning literature, the learners would want to seek out other meaningful learning opportunities. In this way, ESL learners can continue to grow morally and intellectually. Based on these arguments, we can say that the benefits of using literature in ESL contexts will certainly outweigh its drawbacks.

**3. Research Methodology**

The study adopts the quantitative research approach, which involves collecting and analysing numerical data (Chua, 2012). It employed a questionnaire as an instrument to collect the required data from the respondents. According to Patten (2016), questionnaires allow researchers to gather responses that are easy to tabulate and score, and analyse the

data more effectively, which is less time consuming. In the study, the questionnaire was distributed to all Part 7 students in the TESL Department. The respondents were purposely selected because they were in their penultimate semester and had studied at least eight literature courses. Their views and experiences of learning literature can yield rich and meaningful data which could help answer the research questions. In addition, the findings have implications on how literature courses are planned, constructed, and delivered in the programme. The response rate for the questionnaire is 100% as all 35 respondents attempted all items in the questionnaire.

There are four main components in the questionnaire, which are learners' perceptions of literature, experience of learning literature in the course, challenges encountered and their preference of the genres/texts, and suggestions to improve the course. The items were developed based on existing body of knowledge and some were adapted from a study conducted by Hasan and Hasan (2019). The questionnaire, which consists of multiple-choice items and open-ended questions, was distributed at the end of a fourteen-week semester. Frequency count is used to calculate the response of each question in the single-option format while crosstabulations are used whenever the responses are to be compared with each other. Additionally, some of the items in the questionnaire were cross tabulated with the learners' achievement in the course (grades obtained at the end of the semester).

## **4**. **Findings and Discussion**

There were 74.3% female respondents and 25.7% male. This unequal distribution is expected because teacher training programmes are mostly attended by female students, especially the TESL programme. 40% of the respondents passed the course with distinction, 85.7% passed with credit, and 2.9% failed the course. The failure was due the respondent not submitting a required written assignment. The other two assessments attempted by the said respondent do not indicate his inability to comprehend and analyse literary texts. It is more of a personal disposition. The findings are presented based on the three sections of the questionnaire, which are learners' perceptions of literature, literature and their personal growth, and challenges and recommendations.

Table 1 shows the respondents' perceptions of literature based on nine items. Most of the respondents (97.1%) believed learning literature helps improve their English language proficiency. One 2.9% were unsure. They also believed that literature helps increase their cultural awareness between different cultures. This is hardly surprising because the learners are required to read texts from various parts of the world, including America, England, India, Iran, South Korea, South Africa and the Caribbean. Most learners (94.2%) viewed literature as fun while 5.7% were unsure.

The learners are more divided when it comes to whether literature is motivating. 62.9% strongly agreed, 17.1 agreed while 5.7% were unsure and 2.9% disagreed with the statement. Asked whether literature is rewarding outside the classroom, 17.1% were unsure while 80% agreed with the statement. More interestingly, 8.6% believed that literature is boring and a waste of time. The rest of the respondents either disagreed (88.5%) with the statement or were unsure (2.9%). There are various responses to the statement that literature is difficult because the texts are difficult to comprehend. 31.4% of the respondents disagreed, 2.9% were uncertain while 25.7% agreed that the difficulty stems from difficult texts.

**Table 1:** *Learners' 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 | 2.9 | 37.1 | 60.0 |
| LE2 | It helps increase cultural awareness between different cultures. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 14.3 | 85.7 |
| LE3 | It is fun. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 5.7 | 17.1 | 77.1 |
| LE4 | It is motivating. | 0.0 | 2.9 | 17.1 | 17.1 | 62.9 |
| LE5 | It is rewarding outside the classroom. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 17.1 | 22.9 | 60.0 |
| LE6 | It is boring and a waste of time. | 71.4 | 17.1 | 2.9 | 0.0 | 8.6 |
| LE7 | It is difficult because the texts are difficult to comprehend. | 14.3 | 17.1 | 42.9 | 17.1 | 8.6 |
| LE8 | It is not important to me because it contributes nothing to my future professional career. | 54.3 | 20.0 | 14.3 | 0.0 | 11.4 |
| LE9 | It helps me to grow personally, intellectually and emotionally. | 0.0 | 2.9 | 0.0 | 37.1 | 60.0 |

Many of the respondents were confident that literature has an impact on their future career (74.3%). 14.3% were unsure while 11.4% believed that it contributes nothing to their future professional career. This is surprising given the fact that literature is taught in Malaysian secondary schools both as a subject (elective) and a component in the English language syllabus. Therefore, having the ability to read, understand, and analyse literary texts are important skills that future English teachers should possess. Most of the respondents (97.1%) believed that literature helps them to grow personally, intellectually, and emotionally. Only 2.9% disagreed with the statement.

In general, the respondents have positive perceptions of literature and agreed that it does have both language and non-language benefits. However, a small number of the respondents found that literature is boring and a waste of time, literary texts are difficult to comprehend, and does not contribute to their future career.

Table 2 indicates the respondents' responses to eight items on literature and personal growth. 91.4% of the respondents felt that the literature classes are designed according to their expectations, needs and interests. Only 8.6% were unsure. All of them (100%) found that the selected literary texts interesting, and that it helps them to learn more about life (100%). When asked about whether literature helps students to participate in the class discussions, group work and presentations, 91.4% believed it is so while 8.6% remained uncertain.

**Table 2:** *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 | 8.6 | 51.4 | 40.0 |
| LPG2 | I find the selected literary texts interesting. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 45.7 | 54.3 |
| LPG3 | Literature helps me to learn more about life. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 25.7 | 74.3 |
| LPG4 | Literature helps students to participate in the class discussions, group work and presentations. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 8.6 | 34.3 | 57.1 |
| LPG5 | Literature classes help to develop my critical thinking. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 34.3 | 65.7 |
| LPG6 | Literature helps me learn about people and their experiences that are similar to my own experiences. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 2.9 | 34.3 | 62.9 |
| LPG7 | I have the ability to interpret and comment on the literary texts according to my own understanding of the text. | 0.0 | 2.9 | 8.6 | 42.9 | 45.7 |
| LPG8 | Literature is an important part of my personal development. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 5.7 | 34.3 | 60.0 |

The respondents (100%) believed that literature classes help to develop their critical thinking. The same confidence is extended to the next item, which is, "Literature helps me learn about people and their experiences that are similar to my own experiences." 97.2% agreed with the statement whereas only 2.9% were unsure. When asked about their ability to comment on the literary texts according to their own understanding of the text, 88.6% were confident they could do so. 8.6% were unsure and 2.9% remained sceptical. Most respondents (94.3%) believed that literature is an important part of their personal development while 5.7% were uncertain. This finding is hardly surprising because the respondents also showed a positive response to the previous item, which is, literature helps them to grow personally, intellectually and emotionally.

Here, we can deduce that the respondents view literature in a positive light as it enables them to explore and learn new things, develop their critical thinking skills, and allows them to engage in classroom activities such as discussion, group work and presentation. It is also important to note that the respondents found the selected materials interesting, and the classes are tailored to their expectations, needs and interests.

The ESL learners' grades were compared to two items in the questionnaire. Compared against Item LE7 (It is difficult because the texts are difficult to comprehend), Table 3.0 shows that those who did not find the texts difficult managed to pass the course with

distinction (60%) while the remaining 40% managed to pass with credit. Interestingly, those who found the texts difficult to understand passed the course with distinction (33.3%) and passed with credit (66.6%). The learner who failed the course was uncertain whether the texts were difficult.

**Table 3:** *Grade and LE7*

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Grand Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 20.0% | 16.7% | 20.0% | 16.7% | 0.0% | 17.1% |
| A- | 40.0% | 16.7% | 13.3% | 33.3% | 33.3% | 22.9% |
| B | 20.0% | 33.3% | 20.0% | 33.3% | 33.3% | 25.7% |
| B+ | 20.0% | 33.3% | 40.0% | 16.7% | 33.3% | 31.4% |
| D+ | 0.0% | 0.0% | 6.7% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 2.9% |
| Grand Total | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% |

**Table 4:** *Grade and LPG7*

| | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Grand Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 0.0% | 33.3% | 20.0% | 12.5% | 17.1% |
| A- | 0.0% | 33.3% | 26.7% | 18.8% | 22.9% |
| B | 0.0% | 33.3% | 26.7% | 25.0% | 25.7% |
| B+ | 100.0% | 0.0% | 26.7% | 37.5% | 31.4% |
| D+ | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 6.3% | 2.9% |
| Grand Total | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% |

The students' grades were also compared to Item LPG7 (I have the ability to interpret and comment on the literary texts according to my own understanding of the text). Those who strongly agreed with the statement managed to pass the course either with distinction (31.3%) or with credit (62.5%). The respondent who failed the course also believed he had the ability to interpret and comment on the literary texts. Those who were uncertain of their critical thinking ability managed to pass with distinction (66.6%) and pass with credit (33.3%). Interestingly, the respondent who felt that she was unable to interpret and comment on the literary texts according to her own understanding of the text did pass the course with credit. The findings, as shown in Table 4.0, indicate that although the learners are doubtful of their own ability to comprehend and analyse the texts, it does not affect their performance in the course.

When asked about the type of genre that they preferred, most of the respondents (65.7%) mentioned short story, followed by 25.7% poetry, 5.7% drama and the remaining 2.9% novel. This is hardly surprising because short story has shorter length (compared to drama and novel) and has less figurative language as compared to poetry. Figure 1.0 shows the respondents' preferred type of genre.

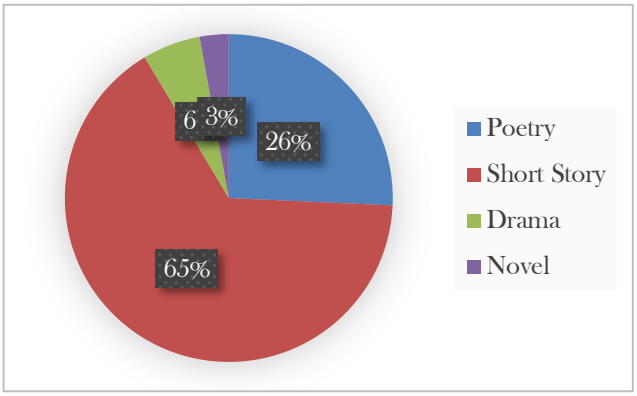


**Figure 1:** *Preferred Genre*

Concerning the major problems encountered in the class, 37.1% of the respondents noted that the texts are difficult while 22.9% felt that there was too much material. The respondents did not complain about the teaching methods, that the texts or topics are boring, and that their opinions were not asked. However, 22.9% of them felt shy to participate in the discussions whereas 8.6% believed that the exam questions were difficult. 8.6% of the respondents also mentioned other factors like difficulty in interpreting the poems, feeling overwhelmed when looking at the number of pages of the novel, and not being able to analyse the texts at a deeper level.

In general, all the respondents believed that they have had a positive learning experience. Some cited that "it has been a wonderful experience learning literature in this course", "it was fun learning all the literary texts" and "I enjoyed the process of learning". Others used phrases like "pleasant", "both fun and challenging", "good", "engaging", "fruitful", "awesome", "a new experience", "beneficial", "eye opening", "excellent", and "learned a lot" to describe what they have experienced in the course. The respondents also believed that the course has contributed to their growth, saying that "my ability in literature has improved a lot", "I learned so much while analysing the poem, short story and novel", "I have learned so many issues of the contemporary world from this course and I am now aware of the struggles that people from different society face", "[the course] helps me to see different perspectives of life from all the issues found in the literary texts provided", "I can relate to the issues as we are living in a contemporary world that deals with racism, gender discrimination, politics and many more", "I discovered other ways to approach literary texts or learn to see from different perspectives from the class discussions and lectures", "discovered a lot of cultural experiences and differences in the literary text", "I discovered that I am able to interpret most of the text learned in depth from this course", "exposed me to other culture and encourage me to think critically … really shapes the way I look at the world", and "it made me widen my views of certain things that I was unsure of in the past".

In addition, 37.1% of the respondents attributed the positive learning experience to the instructor who is "competent and dependable", "experienced and knowledgeable ", "able to make us open our eyes to many interpretations", and whose "detailed and clear explanation has helped me a lot to understand the literary work", "made me love literature more than before" and "really helped me understand better". The instructor also "celebrates all of our responses [which] has helped to boost my confidence", "[is] understanding and accommodates our needs [when facing] difficulties [to decipher] the messages of the materials", "great in making us feel at ease", and "by learning with her, my ability in literature has improved a lot". It is also worth noting that some respondents (11.4%) felt that group work allowed them to "get to know my classmates better and bond with them through the shared hardships of completing the requirements for this course" and that their "groupmates were helpful and easy to work with".

Interestingly, a few of the respondents expressed self-doubt in their ability to analyse literary texts. Some of them admitted that "I need to practice more on understanding poems", "I tend to over analyse to the point where I don't know what I'm supposed to write or say about a certain text", and "I feel like I don't have the ability in analysing and approaching literature works critically". However, this self-doubt, is not reflected in their academic achievement, as mentioned elsewhere in the paper.

As far as recommendations are concerned, a few respondents (11.4%) suggested for less materials, shorter texts, and easier texts for "those who are less proficient and found literature difficult to learn". Some also suggested for the course to be delivered face-to-face as "it would be more enjoyable to have a discussion and presentation offline". Other suggestions include "more issues relatable to current/new generation", "representation from Asian Literature, particularly Malaysian authors" (the students had previously done a course on Asian Literature that encompasses literature from Asia including Malaysia), and "more discussion on the themes and related issues".

**5. Conclusion**

It seems that the ESL learners are positive about learning literature, and this view is reflected in their academic achievement in the course. Nonetheless, other motivating factors like they are in the penultimate semester, and that they need to pass all courses before going for practicum (their teaching practice in the final semester), and eventually graduate, might also impact their efforts to do well in the course.

In general, the pre-service teachers have had a positive learning experience as they enjoyed learning the course. Although they felt challenged by the materials (volume and level of difficulty), and sometimes doubted their ability to analyse the literary texts, they managed to regulate themselves by putting extra efforts and getting support from the instructor and their classmates. Here, we need to recognize the importance of the literature teacher as a facilitator because we cannot rely on the qualities of a text alone to engage the students. By this way, their views of literature, and their ability to understand and analyse literary texts, can be further enhanced, as shown in the study.

The course was delivered online, and teaching methodologies include lectures, discussions, and group presentations. The respondents were receptive to these approaches as they are able to form their own opinions on the issues raised in the selected texts. They appreciated being given the opportunities to share their thoughts and interpretations, which according to them, helped developed their confidence in analysing literary texts.

In conclusion, positive views and positive learning experiences can boost ESL learners' self-confidence in dealing with literature, which can impact their future experience of learning literature. The findings also confirm that selection of materials is an important aspect that requires careful consideration, particularly the number of texts, and the level of difficulty. Learners' needs and ability should be considered when planning and developing course materials. Another important aspect is teaching, and learning activities should allow learners to be engaged in the lessons, their views and opinions are made to matter, and various perspectives and interpretations of human concerns and issues are celebrated. In this way, ESL learners can gain the benefits of learning literature, which are mastering the English language, and shaping their cultural understandings.

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**The Author:**

***Jamiah Baba*** holds an MSc in Adult & Continuing Education from University of Glasgow, and a PhD in Education from The University of Melbourne. She works in the Faculty of Education, UiTM. Her research interests include literature, teaching and learning in higher education, adult education, and formation of professional identities. She can be contacted at jamia021@uitm.edu.my