

# Literature in Foreign Language Education Programs: A New Perspective

Ibrahim Abukhattala

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Misurata University

Misurata, Libya

E-mail: Ibrahim.abukhattala@mail.mcgill.ca

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## Abstract

Many of the studies on the subject of literature as an essential part of the English education programs in Arab universities has concentrated on only professors' views and attitudes to these courses. By contrast, the following article describes a qualitative investigation on how former students and presently in-service English teachers felt about studying English literature during their university years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six English-major graduates who teach EFL at high and secondary schools in Misurata, Libya. The study has revealed that participants were not positive about literature courses as they maintain that these courses have contributed little to their language development and teaching careers. They have narrated several factors which limited benefiting from these courses. Some of these factors are the teaching and learning practices in the language classroom, the difficulty and oddness of vocabulary and structures of literature texts and the lack of skills in English. Based on the interviews, reflections and implications of these barriers are made.

**Keywords:** literature, linguistics, English education programs, higher education, Arab world

## 1. Introduction

In the Arab world, the role of literature courses in the curriculum of English language teaching (hereafter ELT) programs has been the subject of significant controversy (Al Mahrooqi, & Al-Shihi, 2012; Haggan, 1999; Obeidat, 1997; Salih, 1986; Zughoul, 1986, 1987; Bader, 1992). Scholars in the Arab academy have either defended or challenged the inclusion of literary courses in the curriculum of ELT programs. This debate has created a dichotomy between them and produced conflicting views.

Some linguists (e.g., Zughoul, 1986, 1987; Bader, 1992) believe that literature courses are taught simply because they have traditionally been part of the ELT curriculum and argue that such courses do not contribute to students' practical goal of achieving linguistic proficiency. Additionally, they judge them as impractical and irrelevant to the objectives of language teaching and conclude that the predominance of such courses in the ELT curriculum has been the reason behind the failure of these departments to produce competent users of English. In contrast, literature specialists (e.g., Obeidat, 1997; Salih, 1986;) claim that literature presents natural language, involves the learner with the text and can thus develop linguistic and language teaching skills, increase cultural competence and foster literary awareness. For these justifications, they regard literature courses as a necessary component of English language teacher education and urge universities to put their main emphases on literature instead of language and linguistic courses.

Although, this issue of including literature courses in the curriculum of English departments has been much studied, there is a paucity of information in the published work in regard to students' perceptions, opinions and views on this long held and open-ended debate. Most of these studies have constantly dealt with the subject from the professorial viewpoint (e.g., Qiping & Shubo, 2002; Obeidat, 1997; Zughoul, 1986, 1987; Bader, 1992). In other words, the question of teaching more language and linguistics courses at the expense of literature, or vice versa, has been examined only by specialists and scholars of these disciplines.

However, one cannot deny that there are some studies which do look at learners' beliefs but typically these studies employ traditional student questionnaires which are designed with the underlying assumption that the researcher and respondent agree on the characteristics of effective courses (e.g., Zorba, 2012; Küçükoğlu & Arikan, 2011; Tseng, 2010). These questionnaires and surveys fail to sufficiently identify student perceptions and views in depth. Further, course evaluations by the end of a course may not always be adequate in ascertaining whether or not the learning outcomes are being met (Marsh, 2007). Student evaluation may also only present an incomplete picture of the effectiveness of a course. Questions in surveys and questionnaires where the participants are forced to respond only to the set of items included on the questionnaire do not elicit meaningful answers. In other words, a response of a student on a single question does not make it possible to capture a particular quality (Feldman, 2007; Marsh, 2007). Any conclusions drawn from these data must be considered tentative and exploratory, given the difficult nature of interpreting purely quantitative data (Feldman, 2007). While finding of these studies can be helpful in documenting

attitudes to courses, they give little direction as to whether these courses has any impact on students language proficiency.

This study aims to take a critical look at the arguments presented by advocates of both positions. It hopes to reveal the present state of literature teaching in the ELT program in Misurata university, in isolation from the opinions of linguistics and literature scholars. Through qualitative interviews, recent graduates of the program are invited to reflect back on their language and literature learning experiences. The rationale behind selecting such participants is based on the belief that students are not able to make more accurate judgments on teaching quality and course value until they have been away from the course and possibly from the university for several years and have already started their careers. Although the study is conducted in Libya, findings might also be relevant for other countries with similar educational systems and linguistic situations.

## 2. Literature Review

Although great efforts have been made to enhance the teaching-learning process of English, ELT programs in Arab universities still fail to produce the desirable results, and the graduates' proficiency in English remains inadequate and below expectation even after many years of formal English learning (Pathan & Al-Dersi, 2013; Javid, Farooq & Gulzar, 2012; Fareh, 2010; Orafi & Borg, 2009). Many studies have revealed that Arab students of English who take international English language proficiency tests such as TOEFL and IELATS score extremely low marks as compared to their counterparts from other countries (Rababah, 2001; Zughoul, 1985). Moreover, there is an informal feedback and a general consensus among faculty members, educators, and employers that the competence of students and graduates in the basic language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking is far from satisfactory (Bader, 1992).

Considering the seriousness of the matter, and possible solutions, Arab academics have examined what these departments are offering their students and different explanations and conflicting writings on the issue were presented. Some attributed deficiencies in the graduate' language proficiency to a domination by literature courses, as it is commonly assumed that literature courses represent the bulk of courses offered in English departments (Javid, Farooq & Gulzar, 2012; ) while others believe that Linguistic and language courses are to blame. Whether emphasis should be given to language and linguistics, or literature, or concurrently both, is still an ongoing debate (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Wahaibi 2012). Available literature shows that contributors to this debate could be classified into two positions: the linguistic, and the literary.

Those who associate with the linguistic position are in support of the view that language and linguistics courses are of much more academic and professional value for Arab students in their future careers, while those who follow the literary stance maintain the view that literature courses are far more useful than those in language and linguistics.

In a number of provocative articles, Zughoul (1985,1987, 2003) presents arguments for the language courses. In 1987 he conducted an influential study in which he strongly supports including more language and linguistics courses ELT programs. In this particular study, Zughoul examined the curricula of a number of English departments at Arab universities (the universities of Baghdad, Iraq; Damascus, Syria; Kuwait, Kuwait; Yarmouk, Jordan; Amman, Jordan) and the two American universities in the region . He concluded that the curricula of these departments (with the exclusion of the American University of Beirut) are heavily dominated by the literature component. He brings into focus three major features identified as English literature's disadvantages in the ELT programs which are: inappropriate cultural load, structural complexity and non-normative use of language.

Zughoul maintains that all English literature is loaded with "racist, reductionist, prejudiced and hostile views of our own" (221). He also includes the argument that language of literature violates the norms of natural and common language and due to its structural complexity and its unique use of language, it does little to contribute to the enhancement of language skills. Zughoul further contends that learners' exposure and knowledge of literature, American or English, is unrelated to their career requirements or occupational goals after graduation, in view of the fact that Arab graduates with a B.A. in English usually become English teachers.

Although this major argument against the use of literature in ELT classes was made more than two decades ago (Zughoul, 1985), there is no evidence that it has been taken into account and more recent studies have added strength to this line of reasoning (Javid, et, al. 2012 Al-Jarf , 2008; Rababah, 2003. For example, Javid, et, al. (2012), based on a study conducted in different Saudi universities, conclude that the overemphasis on literary courses has been one of the causes of the failure of English departments in these universities. They reveal that literature courses taught in the English departments were not relevant to English teaching preparation nor to the development of graduates' English language proficiency.

Conversely, the literary scholars have emphasized the role of literature courses in ELT programs. The essence of their argument is that literature is the only practical component that can promote and increase language proficiency (Salih, 1986; Obeidat, 1996 & 1997). Obeidat (1996), for example, maintains that English departments in the Arab universities are actually heavily dominated by the language and linguistics component more than by other courses. The following is his claim to put an end to the problem of language deficiency among ELT students:

‘As a specialist in literature, I support the view that literature, not language/linguistics is what is needed to help English departments upgrade their offerings and standards, on the one hand, and to streamline them with the Arab World's practical, albeit, pressing educational and cultural needs, on the other hand (p. 33).

Although language teaching and linguistics teaching are two related but independent fields, Obeidate categorizes them as one component in his argument for more literature courses in the LTE program. Language courses entail teaching and developing the actual productive and receptive skills of a language while linguistic courses involve rising the metalinguistic awareness and building up the ability to treat the language as an object. It is true that linguistic courses may not teach the language but about the language. However, from the same dimension one could say also literature courses do not teach the usual and regular uses of the language but only about the poetic and odd uses. Haggan, (1999) describes Obeidat's classification as 'inaccurate and misleading' (p.22) and charges him with 'unfairly attacking the linguists in the English department for an implied weakness of the students' English' (p. 23).

It is important to note that Obeidat's views are understandable and expected as many writers worldwide, despite the scarcity of research based conclusions, repeatedly express their unconditional support to the inclusion of literature courses in the ELT curriculum. Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi (2012), for example, assert that "... the current consensus of opinion regarding the integration of literature in language programs, is overwhelming, and by far exceeds the points of controversy' (p. 209), and some authors even invite language teachers to 'refute the arguments of those scholars who are against the use of literature as a tool for language teaching'' (Bobkina & Dominguez 2014, p. 257).

Nevertheless, the place of literature in this specific education context (i.e., Arab universities) is still a matter of long-standing discussion and, thus, ELT departments have been in an uncertain state of direction. On the one side is the crying need of society that the English education program produce competent language teachers with adequate qualifications to cope with teaching practice, which, it seems, has not happened yet. On the other side are the arguments of the academics who are concerned with transmitting the knowledge of their respective disciplines.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Setting*

The context of this study is Misurata university. It is a public state university in Libya. With a total enrolment number around fourteen thousand students, it is one of the biggest institutions in Libya. The study was carried out in the English department, faculty of Arts. Currently over 600 students are enrolled in this English program. The education in public universities is regulated by the Ministry of Higher Education and the universities comply with these regulations. However, the term "English department" should not be misleading as it is not equivalent to English departments in the English-speaking countries. The education system in Libya is different from the American or British system. In Libya, university students generally receive an eight semester long study, at the end of which they get a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree. English major students study linguistics, literature, applied linguistics and language pedagogy, as well as general Knowledge courses and Educational courses. As is the case in other Arabic countries, the students' level of English language proficiency is hypothetically around or above intermediate level when they enter the university, and they are supposed to reach a near-native level of competence by the time they finish their studies. The current English program requires students to complete a total of 47 courses to obtain BA. Majority of graduates take language teaching as careers.

#### *3.2 Participants*

Participants in this study are 6 in-service teachers of English. Four of them are females and two are males. All graduated from the department of English, Misurata University, within the range of the last four years. Due to the topic of the study, it was decided that it would be more relevant to include only recent graduates as they all still familiar with the literature-oriented courses given at the department of English and they have at least some practical teaching experience.

#### *3.3 Research Questions*

This inquiry focuses on the experiences of six former students concerning studying literature courses in the English education program in Misurata university. Specifically, the two questions addressed are:

- Have literature courses been beneficial to your language development?
- Do these courses have any positive impact on developing your teaching skills?

#### *3.4 Qualitative Approach*

The objective of the qualitative researcher is to understand, rather than to generalize, the ways in which participants make meaning of their experiences. Understanding comes with the interpretation and analysis of the expressions of those experiences. The goal of this research was to collect participants' views and opinions, recent teachers of English and former university students, on literature courses offered at the department of English. They were asked to draw on their own experiences as former university students to express their own ideas and views about this issue. The notion of asking recent graduates to provide detailed feedback on this issue is unique to this study.

The primary data are collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with these participants who have taken all literature courses offered at Misurata University. Unlike the quantitative approaches adopted in the majority of the studies which investigated the similar phenomenon, qualitative approach was adopted to explore in-service teachers beliefs with the intention of revealing a more holistic picture of their belief structures. Such research, by employing a qualitative methodology, is believed to enrich our understanding by revealing a detailed picture of the processes in-service teachers undergo during their teacher training in relation to their beliefs about learning and teaching

Interviews are, as many researchers suggest, “conversations with purposes”. Interviews involve personal interaction; therefore cooperation, and a certain comfort level between interviewer and interviewee is essential. Researchers might, intentionally or not, impose their values on the phrasing of questions. The point is that the success of the interviews is highly dependent on the researcher’s interpersonal, and communicative skills, and cultural knowledge skills. I was ideally positioned to ask my informants to share their thoughts and feelings with me. Being an instructor in the department where these participants graduated from helped me to establish a positive rapport with my informants and, it helped me to know which questions to ask, and how to interpret the responses.

In interviewing these participants, I hoped to investigate their views on literature teaching in their university language education. I also hoped to discover the causes of these beliefs. My intention, however, was to collect this information without letting the participants know specifically what my research questions were. The rationale behind this was that I did not want to seem to be merely offering a choice between two extremes, namely, that literature teaching was either desirable or undesirable. Second, since I had my own views on the topic with regard to the study, I did not wish to influence the participants’ answers in any way. Third, I hoped that by engaging the participants in conversation rather than confronting them with pointed questions that they would take an interest in discussing their language learning experiences. Essentially, I attempted to avoid an interview situation in which participants’ responses might be shaped by their perceptions of what I wanted to hear.

In construing these interviews I was searching not for objective truths but for responses that revealed learners’ perspectives on teaching literature. I recognized that these perspectives are dynamic and that the responses I obtained in my interviews would not necessarily be replicated in interviews conducted at a subsequent time or by another interviewer. It was my goal, however, to encourage a dialogue about students’ perceptions of studying literature.

### *3.5 Data Collection*

Semi-structured individual interviews and open-ended questions were conducted with participants. I explored students’ experience of the curriculum. Each interview lasted from 45-60 minutes. Interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed verbatim. Their consent was taken about the use of audio recording beforehand. This data collection technique has provided a rich body of information. Interview data was examined in-depth aiming to obtain the emerging themes. Initial coding revealed a number of basic themes that were arranged to form organizing themes. Subsequently, organizing themes were iteratively discussed with participants and were renegotiated when differences existed. After further analysis, the organizing themes were condensed into themes discussed in this paper. Representative quotes were selected for each theme. All the participants were asked to suggest a pseudonym for themselves that the researcher could use in writing up.

## **4. Findings And Discussion**

Participants were all very keen to improve their English and teaching skills, and approached the language classes with enthusiasm. However, their attitude to the literature courses was more ambivalent. Although they acknowledge the existence of enjoyable and informative elements in literature courses in general, participants stated that literary courses did not have much effect on developing their language proficiency and they have not significantly helped them to succeed in their profession as English language teachers. The following is a selection of representative quotes from the data:

Literature is good but for me as an English teacher in a high school, it is not useful. I think good courses must make you feel like what you are learning could make a difference later on your careers.

I really love English and I think it is a privilege to have a good command of it. I understand that literature is a component of the language, but for my case as an English teacher, it is not a priority. You need first to learn the basics of the language. Maybe at advanced levels you can study it (Sara).

Literature courses did not help me in my teaching. Vocabulary was very old and structures were strange so it was impractical and irrelevant to my career objectives and I think it was useless learning. I almost forgot all of it (Nadir)

I admit literature helps you in understanding the culture but it does not help you improving your language proficiency. Also, English is a foreign language in Libya, so you do not have any exposure to creative use of English (Fatima).

I think it is good to learn rhetorical English but for the time being I need to learn non-literary flawless English. I want to sound fluent in front of my students, as I am the model to be followed (Aisha).

This overarching finding is the exact opposite of what has been concluded by previous publications and popular views (e.g., Zorba, 2013; Bataineh, 2014; Obeidat, 1997; Salih, 1986). As revealed in the interviews, several factors militated against benefiting from these courses. These factors are categorized into four themes which are: Teaching and learning practices; difficulty and oddness of vocabulary and structures; The unfamiliarity with concepts and ideas of the literary work; and lack of skills in English.

#### 4.1 Teaching And Learning Practices

Based on the interviews, teaching methods used by instructors in this department was significant in causing students' unenthusiastic attitudes towards literature. How literature classes were conducted was not encouraging nor stimulating for students. Many participants expressed this sentiment in the following comments:

Well, I love literature. I used to enjoy Arabic literature very much. I think even English literature is enjoyable but the way the way it is taught is horrible (Najwa).

I think making literature interesting depends on the teacher. He/she can motivate students. Honestly, our literature classes were very boring, particularly the classics and I didn't enjoy it at all (Sara).

Instead of eliciting guided reactions to literary works, instructors retreat into teaching about literature rather than teaching literature itself. Classes, which are teacher-centred and teacher-directed, usually consist of a long lecture on the background of a piece of literature and reproduction of borrowed critical opinions of canonical texts. Examples of their statements are:

Teachers would present the biography of the author and his/her works and we had to memorize all of this stuff. Stuff like when he was born and when he died... we had to know his writings in a chronological order. We had also to memorize the meanings of all those odd and old words and basically that was it (Fatima).

They (i.e., instructors) want you to regurgitate line by line from the textbook or from the critical reviews which they have already dictated (Aisha).

I think teachers taught us more historical development of literature than literature itself. That is what they focused on more (Nadir).

Classes were very boring...one in fact gets confused whether it is a literature class or history...you just don't feel that the teacher is giving English literature (Fatima).

Interaction in literature classes was mainly one way: from teacher to students, with little or no involvement of students in understanding and appreciating the texts on their own. In this regard, Jaffar (2004) makes a relevant point in noting that "To a non-critical reader, books only provide facts but a critical reading also involves answering how a text portrays the subject matter. In doing so, a relationship is developed between an author and a reader with text as their meeting point of reference (p. 15). Participants recalled that if ever there are discussions, the questions that teachers ask are of a testing nature rather than an instructive one. Instead of valuing different reactions, only one response is expected and accepted as being correct. This is confirmed by many remarks in the interviews:

We just kept quiet and listened to him/her reading from a book or some sheets for almost two hours. We did not interrupt. We had no opportunity to speak or to express our ideas....it is very rare when he asks a question. They fail to spark any kind of interest in the topics (Sami).

...we sit quietly and the teacher starts asking...he would say (you over there, what is the meaning of X and Y...sometimes he will make fun of you if you do not give the expected answer...every member in the class is nervously waiting for their turn...I think it is a kind of parrot learning, yes it is not useful learning at all...(Najwa).

You have to answer exactly as in the book. He does not accept even a paraphrase. So we have to memorize all of these tiny details. They did not teach us how appreciate literature (Sami).

These practices tend to promote memory-oriented study of literature. The teacher explains the meaning of the text followed by dictating to students what has been said and some importantly related notes. The inevitable consequence of all of these is that the students hardly feel the necessity to have a direct encounter with the texts. They are passive recipients of ideas and concepts and are not encouraged to react to what they read, or think critically, or do any original writing on the texts. Some of the comments are:

I don't remember I have ever been assigned any extra reading in any of my literature courses....we just relied on the teacher's dictated notes and the selected textbook and that is all (Fatima).

You don't need to think just memorize the stuff and that is it. We were not taught the rhetorical devices of the language or how to write or speak eloquently (Najwa).

A significant aspect of the data collected is that participants connected literary strong knowledge with the ability to teach effectively. Many participants indicated bluntly that they believe their teachers did not have solid literary knowledge to teach professionally. Response to literary texts requires deep knowledge of literary criticism and cultural competence which, according to participants, these teachers do not possess. In these interviews, teachers' knowledge of subjects and preparation and their elocutionary skill were under severe criticism, as the following statements show:

I think most of the literature instructors are not knowledgeable. You feel it as soon as you observe and listen to them..they do not have much to offer. Actually one of them, who was teaching poetry, told us that his speciality is 'library studies'. Just imagine: non-native English teacher whose speciality is 'library studies' teaches poetry...what you expect from his teaching. I know it is hard to believe but that was the truth (Fatima).

I found difficulty to understand what one of them was talking about. We were not used to the way they speak English. He had a very heavy and usually unintelligible accent. He even made horrible grammatical mistakes. It is funny, literature teacher and his English is not superb (Nadir).

One of my teacher used to interject her many personal anecdotes which had nothing to do with the literature material. I think it was just a way to kill time because she did not know what to teach. She becomes nervous as she starts talking about the material. Immediately you observe that they don't demonstrate any passion for the material in the course (Sara).

I think almost all of them were not culturally competent to teach English literature. They couldn't facilitate the texts and they couldn't speak freely about their subject area. My view is that you need to belong to the culture of the literature you want to teach if you want to excel (Sami).

Apparently, some of these teachers have no adequate training in teaching literature, they find reading aloud and lecturing about background is much easier. Additionally, this practice is in harmony with the traditional teaching styles which has been so dominant in Libyan foreign language classrooms.

Literature teaching, especially for non-native English teachers is a challenging job. If it is not conducted well, it could be uninspiring and students lose interest in literature. All literature teachers in this department are non-native speakers of English from different Asian countries who were hired by university. They all have an MA degree. However, it is alleged that far fewer of them have degrees specific to the subject in which they teach. Because of the acute shortage of literary teachers in the department, any instructor who shows interest in teaching literature may be assigned a course. There are no prerequisite requirements to teach literature except a postgraduate degree, and so many instructors are at best merely interested rather than specialized in literature. One participant comments:

I think literary background of the instructor is neglected in literature teaching. Imagine, one of the instructors teaches us 'sociolinguistics' and teaches 'drama' to the other group concurrently. So as you see specialization is not obligatory in teaching literature (Fatima).

The ineffectiveness of literature courses in the ELT curriculum has been complicated by department's uncertainty of the objective of literary teaching, whether it is enhancing the language skills of the students, conveying the cultural values latent in literary texts, or cultivating in the learners a sufficient competence for reacting personally to literary texts, and interpreting and value them properly. As a result, instructors have not made genuine efforts to clarify to themselves what precisely they are intending to build up in learners except by making unclear assertions, such as developing language proficiency, exposing students to great literature and enlarging their literary competence. This is one of the core problems with literature teaching at this English department.

Participants articulated their dissatisfaction with the lack of clarity of course objectives and requirements which led to arbitrary traditional approaches instead of an eclectic, reflective and systematic approach to achieve goals. The following is a selection of representative quotes:

Teachers do not communicate the objectives of the courses and no clear course syllabus. They had never given any course outline (Najwa).

In all of my literature courses, I didn't know what the focus was on. Is it introducing and practicing literature notions? Is it expanding vocabulary? Is it familiarizing us with history of English literature? Or is it just understanding the English culture? (Sami).

I think the problem is that teachers do not know what they want to teach. They do not have any specific goals or plans. You deduce this as they have no teaching strategies or purposeful activities (Aisha).

What can be inferred from these statements is that there is over-emphasis on literary history rather than on literary works. Students study literary history to understand a string of names of authors, literary works and the social and political situation of each literary period. this kind of teaching does not foster students' literary competence nor their linguistic capability.

#### 4.2 *The Difficulty And Oddness Of Vocabulary And Structures*

Contrary to the assumption that literature texts provide learners with real-life language in different situations to practice and authentic input of English, participants maintain that literature texts are entirely different from other forms of writing and speaking in English. Literary language is not typical of everyday life, and it is not similar to the language encountered in modern textbooks. As English is a foreign language in Libya, and participants were 'non-literary' students, participants were daunted and alienated by texts whose language is remote in time and style from the variety they are learning. Some of their comments are:

I think the language of many texts is not useful at all. What you will need it for. It is very old and nobody uses it. Why I should learn it, I really do not know (Sara).

I do not appreciate the stilted style of texts. I need practical English. I need a natural language to communicate in every day situations (Najwa).

I really can not understand what I need Shakespeare's texts for. Who would use his language nowadays? We should have exposure to contemporary English (Fatima).

This concern has been raised by Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan (2011) in their judgment of the value of teaching literary texts. They admit that literary texts "are loaded with obsolete and outdated words such as "thee and thou" not normally seen in Standard English which, in turn, would contribute to aversion" (214). Robson (1989) also maintains that because there are many unusual syntactic structures and lexical difficulties embedded in literature, it can do little or nothing in attaining language proficiency.

At this point of discussion, a case could be made that most of the literary advocates narrowly associate "authenticity" only to literary texts. Literature, after all, is only one strand of the authentic material that can be used in teaching foreign languages along with other non-literary resources. The sources of authentic materials are countless, but the most common are newspapers, magazines, TV programs, brochures, movies, books, and the likes. Many of them are well-written, motivating and intellectually inspiring works in contemporary English beyond the range of literature.

#### 4.3 *The unfamiliarity with concepts and ideas of the literary work*

Literature will only be motivationally effective if students can genuinely engage with its thoughts and emotions and appreciate its aesthetic qualities. As has been noted in several studies, Libyan students have too limited linguistic skills to analytically respond to literary texts as works of art. The unfamiliarity with literary terms and concepts had been a

factor in their lack of interest in literature. In western universities students will have had significant contact to literature by the time they join higher institutes. In Libya, they start studying original classic English literature with no previous preparatory courses. As soon as they start studying literature, they are swamped with the big number of literary works. Some of their typical complaints and suggestions include:

My problem is that I cannot probe into the real theme of literary work and thus it is very difficult for me to comment and express my ideas (Aisha).

I studied Arabic literature before and I am a big fan of it. But the case is different with English literature where you have to know the plot, character and theme and many other new terms and notions (Sami).

Absolutely I have no background in those historical developments in English literature such as Renaissance, Neoclassicism, Romanticism and others. I have never studied them before. I think these are could be of importance to English people because they are part of their heritage. They are not relevant to us (Nadir).

As the above quotes show, participants were not taught how to respond critically to texts and search beyond the apparent meaning. This finding may be connected with traditional Arabic attitudes towards Arabic literature. Interviewees did not have enough background to enter the world of the text in order to have an insight into the multi-level meanings and symbols of the texts rules if need be. It is therefore important to train and teach students how to question not only the instructor's point of view but also that of the author's.

#### *4.4 Lack Of Skills In English*

Proficiency in English needs to be a prior condition for developing literary competence and aesthetic appreciation. For without a grasp of language, students may not be able to understand much in expressing their appreciation of literature. The limited linguistic proficiency leads to inaccurate decoding of the text which makes it impossible for the reader to enter into the literary world. Advantages and drawbacks of using literature in the foreign language classroom can be viewed in Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1981), which maintains that language is acquired through comprehensible input. "Comprehensible input" can be defined as language that is simplified or appropriate to the learner's level. Implicit acquisition of a language occurs when input to the learner is just a little beyond the learner's present linguistic competence ( $i+1$ ). There is reasonable doubt whether complicated literary texts can be comprehensible input for L2 learners, especially for those with low level of proficiency. The interviews revealed a link between students' language proficiency and their attitudes towards literature. Some participants commented:

I find it strange that while we still struggle with producing correct simple sentences, they want us to critically appreciate literature texts (Sara).

My English was not good enough to develop literary sensibilities. It is impossible to be aware of conventions of the literary tradition if I am not fully familiar with language conventions (Najwa).

To develop literary criticism, you need to have a native-like competence and ability to read between lines. I am still too far from this level (Fatima).

The question which remains without a convincing answer is how can a foreign student with limited English language proficiency really engage with the original classics of English literature such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Hopkins, and many others? Literature is fraught with responses to this question but none is a research-based answer. In a conference paper reporting on literature courses offered in pre-service English teacher training program in Macedonian university, Keatinge (2013) persuasively asserts that:

Reading and studying literary texts requires a level of language proficiency which are rarely found amongst contemporary students. Reading requires, a willingness to allow meaning and intelligibility to emerge rather than to gather meaning immediately, it requires a sensitivity to language and an intellectual sophistication and tolerance of ambiguity which many students are simply incapable of reaching (p. 15).



## 5. Implications And Conclusion

This study aimed to present recent graduates' experiences, perceptions, and views regarding the role of literature in the ELT programs in a Libyan university, and to underline the need for more qualitative studies done in different contexts. Specifically, this study reported on the students' perceptions of literary courses taught to them in their English classes and their attitude towards literature in general. As participants are aware of their responsibility for raising the quality of language teaching and learning in the schools where they teach, most of the participants do not hold a very positive attitude towards the literary courses introduced in their class. They stated categorically that their aim in joining the language department was to improve their productive and receptive English skills, and to be effective language teachers and not to become English literature specialists, and demanded more language teaching methodology courses.

In light of the powerful cases these participants have made, one is tempted to state that literature should not be an integral part of the teacher education curriculum in this specific teacher education context. However, as it is widely assumed by many authors that literary material is beneficial to the English learner, we needed to scrutinize closely the aspects which make them ineffective in this context. In this study, the greater part of the negative attitudes and feeling for literary courses was a result of the inappropriate teaching styles and unproductive practices still exercised in Libyan foreign language classrooms.

Given these circumstances, perhaps it is likely that to be more productive in the future to reduce the literature component and to concentrate instead on the development of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, in the hope of producing students who might eventually be capable of pursuing the advanced academic study of literature. For this specific educational context, literature teaching does not seem to really meet the immediate academic and occupational needs of students. It appears as an additional skill which this department cannot afford to spend and invest more time and energy on, at least for the time being. This suggestion is based on local and temporal concerns.

The recognition of the considerable significance of literature in foreign language learning by some literary advocates does not mean that they have also worked out a definitive agreement in regard to how to teach literature, what genre is more useful, or at what level should literature be introduced (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Edmonson, 1997). The debate by academics is still far from over on these questions. Additionally, the positive impact literature courses assumed to have on accomplishing language proficiency has been questioned even by the supporters of the literature inclusion (e.g., Shanahan, 1997; Hanauer, 2001).

Research to date on this topic is inadequate, and further empirical research is needed to validate the importance accorded to literary materials in language classrooms. Published studies and articles present a large number of unproven assertions that literary works improve linguistic proficiency and communicative performance, and promote their inclusion, with no reservation, in ELT programs worldwide. Although many writers certainly have faith in literature as beneficial learning component, testing these subjective impressions will result in better guidance for the selection of ELT courses. Learners may or may not be better served by literature, and there is still insufficient rationale for or against their use. Horowitz (2013) describes the arguments for using literature in language classrooms as 'dull' and persuasively reminds that

“before teachers make the decision to use literature with their classes, they should think hard about how the actual activities performed in class fit in with their students' needs and wants. Are the students studying English as a second or as a foreigner language? ....Are they learning English for professional or vocational purposes, for personal enjoyment, or for some combination of motives? Are they in class because they have to be or because they want to be? Do they have a strict time limit on their English studies or not?....This list of questions....we should ask before adopting any material or method' (p. 115).

This study is based on recent graduates' judgments on the inclusion of literary courses in the ELT program. More objective data could have been gathered if other techniques such as non-participant observation in literature classes was employed. Furthermore, including more participants could have presented more thorough perspectives about this issue. It is also important to mention here that the educational milieu of the study could possibly influence the findings. The same study might produce different results in other settings. Therefore, it would be fair to call for more research in various contexts to better understand the contextual factors that influence the issue under investigation. Despite the limitation, this qualitative study permitted a deeper insight into students' general English learning and attitudes toward literary courses. In addition, it drew productive suggestions from students for better English education in Libyan universities.

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