

# LITERATURE FROM THE LEARNER'S PERCEPTIVE

Dr Mahmoud Ahmad Thabet al-Maqtri

*Associate Professor, Department of English Faculty of Arts, University of Ibb,*

## Abstract

This study is a survey that aimed to investigate the attitudes of the students of English department to literature courses. The idea of this research originated in the students' frequent complaints of the rationale behind including literature in the syllabus of the department. The reasons they cite are that it does not help improve their English, and it is irrelevant to their future careers. The samples of the study were 20 students of level ii and 20 of level iv\_ those who have not experienced English literature and those who already studied it, respectively. Five main and four sub-hypotheses were suggested. The first main one regarding their interest in literature was rejected for both groups do not mind having literature. The second was accepted because both see that literature does not help improve their English. The next two main hypotheses were accepted for it was found that both groups prefer modern to old literature (3.1) and prose to poetry (4.1). The relevant two sub- hypotheses (3.2) and (4.2) were rejected because there was a difference between the two groups. It was also found that novel was the number one preferred genre because of its ordinary non-poetic or archaic language.

New trends in education have shifted emphasis from that on the teacher and teaching material to that which places much weight on the learner. This seems to meet the new changes in the social and political domains. As the individual citizen is gaining in importance in society, so the learner is taking on a more significant role in the teaching/learning situation -- the classroom. The learner has to take an active role; he must be involved in the decisions that determine the content and the style of his learning, and that must be in the different stages of the teaching/learning process: planning, implementation and evaluation (see Al-maqtri 2002). As far as the content of what the learner learns, he/she is supposed to express his/her attitude to the different components of the different courses. This is what this paper is trying to probe. The students of English are studying different courses of English literary courses. However, we never ask ourselves if these courses appeal to the learners and help in improving their English as intended. We do not question the attitude of these learners towards these courses is not taken into consideration. The following pages will address this situation.

### **Background to the Study**

The students of English in the Yemeni universities, and may be in other third world countries, join the department of English and are required to study English literature courses among other courses. It is clear that what these learners want is the language so that they can get jobs where English is required or travel abroad and so on. However, the literature courses form about 60% of the courses they have to study during the four years study in the department. What is the idea behind that is not clear or at the best debatable. The researcher professor has questioned the situation and the logic behind this big number of literature courses. Students also have expressed the same doubts about the benefit of literature. This is indicated by their frequent observations and complaints of the difficulty, or the relevance of these courses to their future careers. Moreover, the students are not consulted whether they are interested in what they are studying, and whether they enjoy studying literature or not. All this was enough to invite the researcher to carry out this study to investigate the situation from the perspective of the students themselves.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There are some indications that a considerable number of students, in the Department of English, are not enthusiastic about studying English literature courses, and this is observed by the researcher and supported by the students' frequent complains or questioning of the rationale of this big number of courses.

### **The Study Hypotheses**

It was hypothesized that:

- 1.1. the study groups do not enjoy literature.
- 1.2. there is no difference between the two groups of the students regarding whether they enjoy literature courses or not.
- 2.1. literature does not play a role in improving their English.
- 2.2. there is no difference between both groups' impression of the role of literature in improving their English.
- 3.1. students prefer a new form to the old one.
- 3.2. there is no significant difference between the two groups regarding (3.1)
- 4.1. they prefer forms in prose to forms in poetic language.
- 4.2. there is a difference between the two groups.
5. the two groups view all forms of literature equally.

### **Methodology**

This study is a kind of action research in which the technique of survey was used with the questionnaire as the main tool of data gathering. Class observations and informal interviews with the target group were utilized.

### Sample and Sample Selection

The sample of the study was two groups of students studying in the English Department. They were level II and level IV. Level II students were selected with the purpose of comparing them with those of level IV pertaining to their attitudes to English literary courses. They were not yet exposed to literature courses; this might make them differ from level IV in their attitudes to literature. On the other hand, level four were already exposed to literature courses for three years or so. They might have developed certain likes and dislikes for literature. The two groups were randomly selected from the large population (180 students of both genders) of the two levels in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibb. Each group consisted of twenty students distributed equally into ten males and ten females. This makes the total number of the participants in the sample 40 students.

### Data Collection and Analysis

#### Data collection

As indicated at the beginning of this section that the main tool for gathering the data from the sample is the questionnaire. The questionnaire (see table 1 in the appendix) consists of two sets of questions. The first consists of four questions inquiring about the attitudes of the learners to literature courses, and whether literature helps them improve their English or not. In other words, these questions try to find answers to the first four hypotheses. Set B questions (see table 2 in the appendix) try to find an answer to the fifth hypothesis about the ranks of their preferences of these four main forms of literature. Set A is constructed on a four point-scale (completely agree, agree, disagree, and completely disagree). The respondents have only to tick the box under the selected scale. For set B, the participants have to decide which form of literature fits with the question given and then again put a tick in the appropriate box.

#### Validity of the tool

Before the questionnaire was given to the intended groups, it was given to three professors in the Department of English to evaluate its validity. They almost agreed on all the items. The level of their agreement was 85%.

#### Reliability of the tool

To test the reliability of the questionnaire, five copies were given to five students. After a lapse of one-week, it was given to them again, and there was 100% conformity between the two responses.

#### Data Analysis

The gathered data are tabulated, and the technique of the frequency of the responses and that of percentage are used to analyze this data. It is found that this simple statistical techniques can suffice the purpose to give to an indication of the students general attitude to English literature courses.

### **Procedures**

The questionnaire was administered to the intended two groups, and each group was given five to ten minutes time to answer the questions, which were of a close ended type. These questions were designed in a way that makes it easy for the students to answer with ease. The students did not have to take the questionnaire home. Instead, they had to fill it in the classroom. This guaranteed the return of all copies. As the students finished answering the questions, the copies were collected, and after the data were tabulated and analyzed.

### **The Rationale**

There have been many debates in different ELT circles on the logic behind including literature courses in foreign language learning/teaching. Teachers and researchers are divided over this issue. However, differences are not always bad. On the contrary, they can be quite positive. But what is often overlooked in many of such debates by both sides is the learner. Most if not all such discussions and debates have taken place in the absence of the learner who is a focal element in the teaching /learning process. It is this point that calls for the need to consider the learner and see what they think of literature courses. Another reason that necessitates carrying out this study is that it is in response to a number of students in the department who frequently express their doubt of the benefit of literature and ask their teachers to justify the inclusion of such courses. This is the rationale behind undertaking this particular study.

### **Significance of Study**

This study focused on an issue that had imposed some kind of challenge to different people like planners, course designers, and teachers. First, it drew the attention to the ever-neglected identity - the learner. In other words, any discussion or decision on curriculum or methodology is supposed to consider the learner and this did not happen. This study, gives a place to the learners so that they have a say in what they learn, here literature. Second, it is hoped that this study would shed some light on the argument whether literature helps to improve language or not. Third, it might give some guidance to educationists, professors, and teachers to be more precise of the quantity and quality of the literature to be included in the syllabus of the English departments.

### **Literature Review**

This area has been the focus of a considerable literature both locally, regionally and internationally. At the local level, the following studies are found of relevance to the topic of this study. The first of these is entitled "Is it language or Literature", a study published in the University Researcher--the quarterly journal of Ibb University (Al-Maqtri, 2004, pp.42-51). In that study, groups of students were surveyed and it was found that the main objective of studying in the Department of English was to learn the language not the literature of the target language. This was supported by the fact that those students surveyed in that study showed a lack of knowledge of their native literature (Arabic or Yemeni).

Apart from this study, one can find some critical hints in some writings here and there in which literature was attacked for being an irrelevant luxury. Of those who are critical of literature is Dr Bose an Indian professor in the English Department, in Ibb University. He felt that the whole syllabus in the Yemeni universities is poor in fulfilling the needs of the learners. It stuffs them with much literature and linguistics, and fails to equip them for their life. (2004: 23). Dr Sharyan (2003, p.400) believes that the primary objective of our students is language not literature. He goes on saying, "literature courses even though they are important in language learning, yet they are not doing much to help learners to have a good command of English (2003, p.403)."

Still at the local level, in three different symposiums held in different Yemeni universities on "language and literature", (precisely English language), different critical voices were heard questioning the rationale behind literature courses. These voices are growing stronger day by day.

In a quite recent article entitled *Poetry a Burden* by Dr Nabil Farea -- a professor of English literature in Zabid College of Education, Yemen (2007) -- helplessly, he tries to convince his students of English in his department that they still can enjoy poetry if they follow a certain procedure, which he recommends. But he misses the point that he has already started his article with a dialogue in which a group of learners express their dissatisfaction about poetry saying that it is difficult and even a burden. Not only this but also the title of his article says that poetry is a 'burden'. This again shows that we have to take into account the attitudes of the students, which may conflict with our own views as teachers.

At the regional level, namely in Jordan, Zughoul (1989) carried out a study to find out if literature leads to language improvement. He found out that literature did not have much effect on the students' linguistic proficiency. He recommended for less literature in the departments of English.

At an international level, in India, an educationist asked the following question, "Why must these young men and women of Tamil Nadu read turgid late nineteenth century essays, packed with trivial allusions to London streets, Victorian dress and English birds...? Will the university not do its students and future citizens of India a more significant service if it teaches them the English language (Saraswathi, 2004, p.5)?" In a different context, the same writer points out the vague objective of literature in India: she says, "Most of our syllabuses fail to specify objectives clearly. The implicit objective seems to be the fostering of literary sensitivity, which fails, since learners lack the basic competence to understand much less appreciate, great works of literature (2004, p.6)."

In Turkey, a study showed that students of languages refused to take any more poetry due to their hard experience with the Othman literature -- poetry in particular (Akyel & Yalcin, 1989, p.5). In another article, we read of an American learner of French in the United States, narrates his experience with French literature. He says, "As a graduate of French in the United States, we were offered one course in

advanced grammar, and eight courses in French literature, one from every century. We struggled with the impossible language of the seventeenth century classical French drama on one hand, and with the difficult to express notions of twentieth-century existentialist French writers, on the other hand. We lacked, the linguistics tools to deal with these perfect forms of language, and the result was general frustration, reading was a tremendous burden, a task certainly not sought in leisure hours (forum 1989, p.3). This last quotation shows that the problem is not specific to English literature but rather to world literature.

In China, a survey informative study was carried out with Hong Kong Chinese working adults who were studying part-time. The study aimed at finding out students' attitude to literature courses. The sample was a group of adult students studying for a degree, which combines English language and literature. These adult learners were given a questionnaire in the second year before they studied literature and then they were given a follow up survey to determine how they felt about literature. In some respects, this study is similar to our current study. The finding showed that the learners pleaded for more modern and comprehensible literature, as apposed to the revered and obscure one. Poetry for them could be somewhat difficult. Literature would be boring especially the classics. In the follow up survey, the students said they enjoyed the different literature genres as follows: novel with 44%; short story 43%; drama 7% and poetry 6%. The genres that were most hated were poetry 73%, drama 20%, novel 7% and short story 0%. (Hirvela & Boyle, 1988).

In brief, all the above studies and remarks indicate that students of different cultures are against the old type of literature; if literature is to be there, then it must be a modern type. This is justified on the ground that literature, does not improve their language and it can be quite a hard experience for them.

### The Findings

The following tables show the different responses of the learner to the questionnaire (see the appendix).

Table 1 Results in frequency of set A questions

Scale Q.	C. Agree		Agree		C. Disagree		Disagree		No Idea		Total	Level
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		
1	2	3	5	6	-	1	2	-	1	-	20	II
2	-	1	7	-	2	10	-	-	-	-	20	
3	4	2	5	5	-	1	-	-	1	2	20	
4.	4	2	5	5	-	1	-	-	1	2	20	
1	1	3	9	4	-	1	-	-	-	2	20	IV
2	-	1	1	2	7	5	-	3	1	1	21	
3	4	5	5	5	-	-	-	-	1	-	20	
4.	4	5	5	5	-	-	-	-	1	-	20	

C. =Completely M =Male; F= Female; T=Total; Q= Question; L= Level

Table 2 Results of set A Questions in Percentage

Question	Level ii	Level iv	Comment	
Enjoy Lit.	80%	85%	Hypo.1 rejected	Hypo.1.2 is accepted
Improves Eng.	40%	20%	Hypo.2 accepted	Hypo.2.2 is rejected
Prefer Modern E.L.	80%	95%	Hypo.3 accepted	Hypo.3.2 is rejected
Prefer Prose	80%	95%	Hypo.4 accepted	Hypo.4.2 is rejected

Lit: Literature; hypo: hypothesis

Table 3 Responses of set B Questions in Frequency

Question	Poetry		Drama		Novel		Prose		All these		total	level
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		
5	7	-	2	3	-	6*	1	1	1	-	21	II
6	1	7	4	-	4	2	-	2	-	-	20	
7	1	1	1	-	1	6	7	3	-	-	20	
8	7	10	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	20	
9	7	9	1	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	20	
5	2	2	1	2	6	4	1	2	-	-	20	IV
6	4	3	4	2	1	1	1	4	-	-	20	
7	2	2	2	3	5	5	2	1	-	1*	22	
8	6	9	1	-	2	-	2	-	-	-	20	
9	3	7	3	4	-	1	1	1	-	-	20	

\*Students choose more than one alternative

Table 4 Responses of Set B Questions in percentage

Literature Form	Poetry	Drama	Novel	Prose	Level
Preferred.Most	35	25	30	10	ii
	20	15	50	15	iv
Enjoyed least	40	20	30	10	ii
	40	29	8	23	iv
Improves English	10	5	35	50	ii
	9	18	23	50	iv
Difficult	85	15	-	-	ii
	75	5	10	10	iv
Archaic	80	10	5	5	ii
	50	35	5	10	iv

\*Students choose more than one alternative

From the tables above we can identify the following findings:

1. Students of both levels do not mind having literature courses in the syllabus of the Department of English (Tables 1&2).
2. More than half of each group think that literature does not help in improving their English (Tables 1&2)
3. Modern English literature is preferred to old one (Tables 1&2).
4. Literature written in prose form is preferred most by both samples (Tables 1&2).
5. Poetry is the least enjoyed by level IV students. Drama comes next (Tables 3&4).

## Discussion

### Set 'A' questions

Table 1 above indicates several points related to the data in questions. As for question (1) of the questionnaire of whether the students enjoy literary courses or not, 80% and 85 % of both level II and level IV respectively say they enjoy it. No difference between the two types of learners is expressed. The difference is too small to be of a real significance. This is contrary to our expectations that level II are more enthusiastic to learn literature due to their lack of what some people believe as a hard experience of literature as compared with level IV. This can be explained on the ground that though they have not yet experienced English literature, they have some experience with Arabic or Yemeni literature, poetry in particular. Alternatively, they simply want to explore English literature, so they want it to be there. Thus, hypothesis 1 is rejected and the sub-hypothesis 1.2 is accepted for both levels like literature, and the difference between them is insignificant.

Question (2) asks the respondents whether they believe that literature courses improve their English. Here, the responses of level II are not in agreement with first part of the second hypothesis that that literature courses improve their English. More



than half of the participants 60% of level II believe that literature does not improve their English. Even though they have not yet experienced literature, yet they already have this negative attitude to literature. The responses of level IV also, were in harmony with the second part of the second hypothesis 2.1 and see that literature courses do not improve their English. Therefore, the second main hypothesis 2.1 is accepted. As expected, the figure of level IV (75%) is greater than that of level II (60%). The second sub-hypothesis is rejected because there is a difference between the two groups in favor of level IV. Again, this is in agreement with our expectation (based on some students' frequent complaints and on our own observations). That is to say because of their hard experience with English literature, they have made their minds that literary courses do not help them to improve their English. In brief, one can say that the participants do not think that literature plays a role in improving their English.

Coming to question (3), pertaining to the students' preference between modern or old English literature, 80 % of level two students say that they prefer modern English literature written in modern English. The same can be said about level IV. The percentage here is even greater (95%). Therefore, our third main hypothesis is accepted that students prefer modern English literature because of its simple and clear language. The third sub hypothesis 3.2 is rejected because there is a difference in favor of level IV. The point that calls for attention here is that level II holds the belief that modern literature is preferred. It is not clear however, how it comes to them to share this belief. Perhaps they have heard other students complain of the difficulty of old English literature. Their experience with Arabic literature may also play a role in this belief.

Moving to the last question (4) of this set, asking about whether they prefer language in prose or poetry, 80 % of level II say they prefer to study Language in prose rather than poetry. On the other hand, the figure is 95% with level IV. Clearly, hypothesis 4 is accepted, and the sub-hypothesis is rejected. The difference again is in favor of level IV. The difference between the two groups can be explained on the ground of their experience with poetry and drama written in English.

#### Set 'B' questions

In this set of questions, the students of level II say they prefer poetry among other genres of literature (with exception of short story because it is not included in the course). About 35 % of them say they enjoy it. Then comes novel with 30%, drama 25% and prose 10%. With level IV, novel scores first with exactly half of the sample. Poetry comes next with only 20%. Then come drama and prose with 15% points for each. While it is not clear why level II chose poetry first, it is quite justifiable why novel scores first with level four. This is because of its lucid and clear everyday English, unlike that of poetry and drama. However, one can say that level II preference of poetry is not because of their knowledge of English, but because it is the most widely enjoyed genre of Arabic literature in Yemen. Novel, on the other hand, is unfamiliar to Yemenis and so is drama. Therefore, we can say that our fifth hypothesis is rejected because the two groups prefer a different form of

literature from each other. What matters here is that the majority of level IV choose novel because of its ordinary and clear English.

Question (5) is the reverse of question (4). That is to say, it is not about the genre they enjoy most but the genre they hate most. Here level II gives a different answer to that given in the previous question. They appear to contradict themselves. This time, it is poetry, which scores high; 8 students say they do not enjoy poetry. Novel comes next with 7 points; drama scores, 4 and then comes prose with 2. This shows that level II are uncertain and thus give contradictory responses because they have not studied literature yet. With level IV the responses are more logical. They chose poetry to be the most disliked one for them with the score of 8. Then comes drama 6, followed by prose 5 out of the total number 20. Novel is the least disliked with only 2 students reported not to like it. Again, the fifth hypothesis has further emphasized that advanced learners prefer genres that are written in prose.

Question 6 is rather a more specific one for question 2 in set A. It asks them which genre helps them more than other genres to improve their English. Level II chose prose as the best one with 10 scores and then novel with 7. Poetry and drama come after that. For level IV the answer has come as we expected that the novel is the genre that helps them improve their English. Here, half of the sample, i.e. 50%, say novel improves their English. The order is as follows: novel 10, drama 5, poetry 4 and finally prose 3. The third and, fourth main hypotheses are again emphasized. In other words, genres written in prose and in modern English are preferred to the students because these genres help improve their English, of course beside other advantages.

In their answer to questions 7 & 8, level II and IV are almost equal in their attitudes to which genre is difficult and archaic; Poetry comes first 75 % and 70% respectively (i.e., a majority). A similar percentage of level II say also that the language of poetry is the most archaic. Level IV gives poetry 15 scores for question 7 and 10 scores for question 8. Unlike level II, level IV believe that drama is also archaic 7, though not necessarily difficult.

## Summary and Conclusions

### Summary

This study tried to investigate the attitudes of the learners of English to literature courses. This was done through a comparison between those who already studied literature (level IV) and those who would study it in the near future. In other words, it tried to investigate their attitudes regarding their experience in literature or the lack of it. The study revealed that both levels did not mind having literature in the Department's syllabus. However, this does not mean they like it because it improves their English. On the contrary, literature for them does help improve their English. Both groups preferred modern literature written in modern language to old literature. Lack of experience of level two made them hesitant and sometimes indecisive and contradictory in their reaction to which genre they preferred most. At first, they said

they preferred poetry, and later they said it was the most difficult. Level IV, however, had already made their mind, so they were consistent in their attitude to which genres they liked most. Therefore, novel for them was the first in the list. This is in harmony with some studies that say novel is the most enjoyed genre among other forms of literature. One should not forget to mention that level II also made novel their second choice, which they said it improves their English. Prose comes first 50% and novel next with 35%. So they have come to the conclusion that whatever was written in prose was easy, and thus improved their English. For the two groups, the language of poetry was difficult and archaic. But for level IV drama was also difficult. Level II did not know about drama so it was not mentioned.

### Conclusions

1. Both groups express no objection to having literature courses in the syllabus of the English Department.
2. Students in both groups believe that literature does not help improve their English.
3. Both levels prefer modern types of literature.
4. Prose in general and novel in particular are considered the first choice of the learners because of the ordinary and relatively simple language.
5. Both groups see that poetry is both difficult and archaic. Level IV, however, chooses drama to be the second in difficulty after poetry.

### Recommendations

**The results and conclusions of this study suggest that the following are recommended:**

1. It is recommended that literature teachers choose the literary forms and texts that are enjoyed most by their learners.
2. Teachers should avoid those literary forms that are archaic or difficult for the learners.
3. Because most learners favor novel, teachers should increase the number of texts of the genre. They, however, should be careful and judicious to select those novels that are not only interesting but also educative and not in conflict with the native culture.
4. In the process of teaching literary texts, teachers should not forget that the whole issue behind literature teaching and other courses is to help their students master the language. Therefore, their teaching methods and materials should emphasize this point.
5. More research should be conducted on the role of literature in language learning for generalizations to be valid.
6. Learners concerned should be consulted of what they like and desire in their courses. Their needs should be fostered.

## References

- Akyel, A. & Eileen Y. (1990). Literature in EFL class: A study of goal-achievement incongruence. *ELT Journal*, 44/3, pp. 1-7. In CD: Nich publication Ltd 2001. Under license from Oxford University Press.
- Al-Maqtri, M.A. (2002). The Feasibility of adopting a learner-centered approach to ELT in secondary schools in Sana'a (Yemen). Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Sindh University, Sindh, Pakistan.
- Al-Maqtri, M.A. (2004). Is it language or literature? *The University Researcher Journal*, 7, 52-61.
- Bose, M.N. (2004). The curriculum of the four-year English offered in the faculties of Arts in Yemeni universities: Need of rethinking. *The University Researcher Journal*, 6, 23-32.
- Farea, N. (2007, May 10). Poetry a burden. *Oasis: A college magazine*, P.1. Issue (2), Department of English, Zabid, Yemen.
- Hirvela, A. & Joseph, B. (1988). Literature courses and students' attitudes. *ELT Journal*, 42/3, 179-184. In CD: Nich publication Ltd 2001. Under license from Oxford University Press.
- Saraswathi, V. (2004). English language teaching: Principles and techniques. Bangalore: Orient Longman.
- Sharyan, A. (2003). Literature and language teaching: A classroom -centered study. *The University Researcher Journal*, 5, 383-402.
- Zughoul, M. R. (1983). From language to literature in university English departments. *Forum XXVII*, 25-28.

**Appendix (Questionnaire)**

Dear Student,

This questionnaire is aimed at investigating your attitude to English literature courses in the department. I would be very grateful to you for cooperation in filling it. You are not required to give your name, so feel free to say whatever you think is the right thing.

**Note: 1 Please indicate your gender and level.**

**Note: 2 Please put a tick in the box below the scale you will choose.**

Questions	C. Agree	Agree	C. Disagree.	Disagree	No idea
1. You enjoy literature courses					
2. Literature courses help to improve your English					
3. You prefer modern English literature					
4. You prefer literature in prose rather than poetry					

**C. Completely  
Set 'B' Questions**

Questions	Poetry	Drama	Novel	Prose
5. Of the following literary forms you prefer most:				
6. Of the following literary forms you enjoy least:				
7. The following help to improve your English				
8. The language of the following forms is difficult:				
9. The language of the following forms is archaic.				

Many Thanks!

Dr Mahmoud al-Maqtri