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An Investigation into EFL Students' Difficulties in Understanding and Interpreting Literary Texts: Case study of Second year EFL Students at Ibn Khaldoun University

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ABSTRACT: *One of the important skills that EFL students should work on is reading because it plays an important role in the educational system as well as in communication. Many second or foreign language learners have regarded reading as the most important skill (Grabe, 2002). The search for a model or process which could suitably account for more effective and efficient reading comprehension, and appreciation of text for EFL learners has been a controversial and challenging concern among many EFL theorists and researchers as well as practitioners (Carrell, 1988; Smith, 1982). This paper attempts to shed some light on the frequent problems that university students meet while reading the literary texts introduced by their teachers as the latter aim to widen their horizons and to introduce them to new cultures. The results revealed that a large number of students have problems in understanding and interpreting literary texts such as understanding the relationship between the writer/poet, period of the text, and the theme/s of the literary work; finding out and interpreting figures of speech; difficulties in suggesting a rich variety of classroom implications in relation with using literature in teaching English; and finally the pronunciation and intonation difficulties.*

KEYWORDS: EFL Students; Difficulties; understanding and Interpreting; Literary Texts; Reading skills

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Introduction

Broadly speaking, whenever we talk about EFL students, we should include literature since it is a legitimate and valuable resource for language teaching. In fact, in language teaching, literature can help the students master the vocabulary and the grammar of the language as well as the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A number of activities that involve the students' application of these skills can be developed with the reading of literary works. EFL students are lucky to study the literature of other people, which opens new horizons and broadens their minds and spirits. However, the first question that we must ask is do our students read literary texts? If so, to what extent do they reach to a better understanding and interpretation of the literary texts presented by their teachers? The first assumption is that students do not read literary texts and the second one is that those who read literature meet a number of difficulties but they do use some strategies in order to overcome them.

I. The importance of teaching literary texts to University students

All researchers in the field of literature agree on the idea that teaching literary texts to university students is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, they argue that literature fosters critical thinking and analytical skills, enabling students to interpret complex themes and diverse perspectives. Engaging with various narratives encourages empathy, as students encounter lives and experiences different from their own. Moreover, literary studies enhance communication skills, allowing students to articulate their thoughts and arguments effectively. Additionally, literature for them serves as a reflection of cultural and historical contexts, helping students understand the societal forces that shape human experiences. Ultimately, the study of literary texts cultivates a deeper appreciation for language and art, enriching students' intellectual and emotional lives.

II. Methodology

A. Participants

The participants in this study were 53 EEL students (second year) who were randomly chosen for this study. They were males and females of different ages.

B. Instrument

The instrument used as a tool for this investigation is a questionnaire. The latter is composed of ten questions, which show the difficulties that they meet when dealing with literary texts and the strategies they use in order to understand them and what advantages they get from reading such texts.

III. Analysis of the Questionnaire

We are going to give a detailed analysis of the questionnaire so that we pass to the discussion of the obtained results.

Q1: Do you read literary texts?

Yes	No
47	03

Table 1. Students Reading habits

As far as the first question is concerned, almost all the questioned students said that they read literary texts. Such action is not limited only to what they get inside the classroom but what they also read at home for pleasure. 47 students out of 50 said they read literary texts and only 3 said that they do not read.

Q2: What kind of literary texts do you read?

Novels	Short stories	Drama	Poetry
17	37	2	5

Table 2. Students Reading Preferences

The above table shows that the majority of the questioned students read short stories with 37 answers followed by novels with 17 answers, poetry in the third position with 5 answers and finally drama with only two answers.

Q3: What kind of difficulties do you meet when reading literary texts?

Difficult or unknown words	Complex sentences	Not understanding the theme	Difficult figures of speech	Pronunciation difficulties	Identifying Characters and the roles
36	10	10	14	5	2

Table 3. Students' Difficulties

From the above table, we notice that students meet different difficulties when reading literary texts; 36 students said that they meet difficult and unknown words, 14 of them told us that their problem is difficult figures of speech, both difficulties of complex sentences and problems of not understanding the theme got the same number of answers with ten students. Five students told us that they have pronunciation difficulties and finally two students said they meet difficulties in identifying the characters and their roles.

Q4: What strategies do you use to understand the literary texts?

Using the dictionary	Activating background knowledge	Collaborating with friends	Rereading the text many times	Asking questions to the teacher
28	17	4	30	5

Table 4. Students' Understanding strategies

In order for students to overcome the above mentioned difficulties, they use certain techniques. 30 students said that their technique is rereading the text for many times, 28 of them said that they prefer using the dictionary followed by 17 students who opted for activating their background knowledge, 5 students prefer asking questions to their teacher and finally only 4 students who prefer collaborating with their classmates.

Q5: What do you think are the advantages of studying literature in English?

It helps to acquire a rich vocabulary	It helps to discover new cultures	It teaches us how to be good writers	It helps to improve our reading comprehension
37	21	14	25

Table 5. advantages of studying literature

Concerning the advantages that students have when studying with literature in English, the suggestion that got the highest number of answers is that it helps them to acquire a rich vocabulary with 37 answers. The second advantage is that it helps them to improve their reading comprehension with 25 students, followed 21 answers for the third suggestion which is helping them to discover new cultures and finally 14 students said that it teaches them how to be good writers.

Q6: Are you satisfied with the texts that are introduced by your teacher?

Yes	No
41	9

Table 6. Students' Satisfaction about Literary Texts

When we asked students about their satisfaction with the texts introduced by their teacher, 41 students said that they are satisfied with what they read in the classroom, however only 9 students told us that they are not satisfied.

Q7: Why or why not?
Most of the students said that the literary texts introduced by their teacher are interesting, distinct and rich in vocabulary and cultural aspects.

Q8: Does reading literary texts help you to communicate with people in English?

Yes	No
44	6

Table 7. Usefulness of Reading Literary Texts

As far as question 8 is concerned, 44 students agree on the idea that studying literature helps them to communicate with people in English and only 6 out of 50 who have an opposing view.
Q9: In what way?
Most students said that studying literature helps them to acquire a great number of vocabulary, which is the best way to communicate with people.

Q10: What suggestions do you like to make to your teacher?
In the last question, students suggest to have more sessions of literature and more texts so that they can perform better.

IV. Discussion of the Results

In terms of the observed outcomes, a majority of students demonstrate engagement with a variety of literary texts, including short stories, novels, drama, and poetry. However, these texts present several challenges for students, encompassing lexical complexity, thematic intricacy, pronunciation difficulties, and comprehension of figurative language. To comprehend such texts, students employ various strategies, such as consulting dictionaries, seeking clarification from teachers, activating prior knowledge, and engaging in collaborative learning with peers. Importantly, the study of literature offers a range of advantages that students collectively acknowledge.

Regarding the seventh question, all students express satisfaction for several reasons, including the opportunity to explore new cultures, expand their vocabulary repertoire, encounter inspirational texts, and engage with significant themes. Moreover, students uniformly express a desire for additional literature sessions and a broader selection of texts.

VI. Conclusions

This study aimed to uncover the difficulties encountered by Algerian EFL learners when reading literary texts and their impact on reading comprehension. A questionnaire was administered to a randomly selected sample of second-year students at Ibn Khaldoun University. The collected questionnaires were analyzed in detail. However, based on the results, it was determined that the sample size was insufficient to yield valid results. Consequently, the initial hypothesis was rejected, and it can be asserted that studying literary texts significantly affects the development of EFL learners' reading comprehension, vocabulary, and other language skills. In other words, the performance of students who engage with literary texts is superior to those who do not read at all. Thus, literary texts play a crucial role in enhancing the language skills of Algerian EFL learners.

The findings of this study offer implications for English teachers, who should give greater attention to teaching literature. The following implications are identified:

Teachers should recognize the importance of using challenging and high-quality reading materials that align with learners' interests and needs. The use of such materials, including short stories, should be encouraged.

This study highlights the difficulties faced by EFL learners when using older literary texts. Therefore, it is recommended to consider the use of stories, which are comprehensive and promising forms of texts, as an integral part of EFL reading instruction.

Critical reading is emphasized as a significant aspect of modern education. Students should be taught logical reading skills, analysis, comparison, questioning, and evaluation in various subjects. The study suggests that critical reading strategies such as answering questions, previewing, making predictions, reading between the lines, analyzing, and engaging in pair discussions can enhance critical reading and reading comprehension.

The study provides evidence for the crucial role of literary texts in fostering reading comprehension through a critical reading approach. Consequently, the findings have important implications for syllabus designers, material developers, and creators of reading textbooks. By carefully selecting appropriate texts, especially including literary texts, they can achieve better results in reading instruction.

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