

EFL Undergraduates' Attitudes toward the Study of Literature at Jazan University, KSA

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Abstract

The study of literature occupies a predominant place in the curriculum of nearly all foreign language departments. While a great deal of investigations has been conducted on second language acquisition through literature, not many studies have concentrated on learners' attitudinal inhibitors towards the study of literature. The current study fills an existing gap in the literature as it attempts to uncover undergraduates' attitudes toward the study of literature in foreign language classroom. It also aims to investigate the factors leading to the loss of interest in English literature among undergraduate students of most Arab universities, particularly in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Although literature comprises the fundamental part of the undergraduate programs in majority of the English departments; there is a high degree of uncertainty about the function of literary texts in second language acquisition. As soon as a choice is available, the students tend to choose almost anything except literature. The opinion survey carried out among 74 undergraduates of English major at Jazan University, suggests that the greater number of the learners possess favorable attitudes toward the study of literature, although they encounter certain challenges pertaining to pedagogy and the inability to cope with culturally charged texts due to lack of proficiency in English. To address these issues, the educators are recommended to abandon the traditional teaching approaches which exclusively focus on memorization, and adopt student-centered approaches that lead to intense engagement and enjoyment. Also, accommodating students' voices in selecting the text book would be a healthier practice.

Key words: *Attitudes, Literature, Pedagogy, Cultural unfamiliarity, Memorization,*

1. Introduction

Changes in educational sectors and the changing needs of the society have shaken the once unquestioned status of literary studies across the world. According to recent studies, educational institutions have advocated less emphasis on literature in favor of language; leading to a huge space segregating the language and literature sections in most universities. There is comparatively little clarity among literature teachers about what role the literary texts should perform (Brumfit & Carter 2000). Consequently, it is not exaggerating to notice literature classrooms where the teacher spends the major part of the class time translating the texts and supplying notes to prepare the learners for examination point of view. This approach mostly disregards the deeper knowledge and skills the learners are expected to master from their confrontation with literature. George (2020) is of the opinion that teaching language through literature calls for a complete involvement of the teacher and the taught; however, the traditional approaches to teaching literature emphasize language usage rather than language enrichment. The structural perspective to language learning, with the prominence on 'correctness' in grammatical form, and retelling of a range of graded structures, restricted lexis, etc., constitute an approach inappropriate to teaching literature. Moreover, the repeated overlearning of a structural form ruins the learner's motivation, although it has the advantage of getting the learner ready for the written examination. The existing trend necessitates the need for the present investigation.

Bearing in mind, the importance accorded to literature courses in the English departments of most Saudi universities and the enormous expenditure on education within the Kingdom; it is indeed surprising to find that the undergraduates' attitudes toward literature courses are almost non-existent. Literary texts

are often considered as representing a fixed, complicated language; far removed from real life communication (Collie & Slater, 1987). The survey instrument used for this study and the researcher's perceptions of the learning habits of the undergraduate students of English major indicate that the first reason that could be associated with students' lack of interest in literature is the unsuited teaching methodology. The teaching of literature is often considered as an extensive process of simplification or even translation by the instructor (Collie & Slater, 1987), and the students are expected to be passive listeners. There is little chance for either individual responses or participation; the learners are seldom given the opportunity to share their own views. The method being used, largely ignores the deeper insights or skills that the learners are expected to gain from their confrontation with literature. Brumfit & Carter (2000) is of the opinion that the teaching of literature is 'muddled with limited awareness of methodology'. To understand and appreciate a literary text, critical thinking and personal involvement is indispensable. Nevertheless, learning by rote is regarded as the principal academic process in most Arab countries; there is less scope for creative thinking or self-expression in the class.

The second possible cause of diminishing interest in literature courses is the rigid choice of textbooks. Due to unfamiliarity with the target culture, students find it difficult to understand culturally-charged texts (Davis, et. al. 1992). The curriculum in the English departments in KSA and other Arab countries are often the replica of the Western Universities especially, Britain and North America. English majors in the West will have had considerable familiarity with the literary texts by the time they enter the undergraduate program. On the contrary, the Arab undergraduates often have to start from scratch. Hence, they are overwhelmed with the great number of texts that are too unfamiliar and too daunting for them. According to Elham & Aida (2016), culturally varied studies like world literature, African literature, Arab literature, women literature, Latin American literature and postcolonial literature are largely incorporated in the syllabus of Western universities, but these are scarcely found in Arab universities. Consequently, students' negative attitudes towards the study of English literature can be linked to lack of target cultural knowledge.

The third factor is the low language proficiency of the learners; due to which they experience a huge gap separating the language and literature components. According to Alharbi (2015), owing to low language competence of the students, the teachers are compelled to transform the teaching of literature into an extensive process of interpretation or even translation, keeping the classroom teacher-centered. Furthermore, Fareh (2010) is of the opinion that the English teachers in Saudi Arabia spend a great deal of time imparting knowledge and seldom allow the scholars a chance to share their views or clear their doubts; subsequently, students take a passive role in the learning process. Prior to joining the undergraduate program, a Saudi student might have been acquainted only with a limited number of literary texts, which are generally taught in a conventional manner, with the main focus on the intellectual context (Elham & Aida (2016)). However, on joining university, the learners experience a sudden change from the level of literal translation of simple everyday events or dialogue to comprehension of considerably long text books with extremely complex lexis, sophisticated style, and content. Hence, it is not surprising to find learners' lack of aptitude for English literature.

The fourth explanation for students' lack of interest in literature could be associated with the examination centered teaching approach, where the prominence is on imparting information in an examination-oriented manner. The learners are expected to take all this in, and reproduce it at the time of examination (Collie & Slater, 1987). As mentioned above, memorization is the most commonly used exam strategy among Saudi undergraduate students. They are accustomed to replicate answers accurately as given in the text or specified by the instructor, in order to obtain high scores in the examinations (Matson, 2016). They never want to respond to questions creatively or from their own point of view, because of the fear of losing marks. As a result, the notion of analytical and the power of creative imagination is still alien in most English departments in KSA (Elyas, 2008). Undeniably, these academically faulty applications have damaging impact on learners' capacity to critically and creatively analyze a literary text, which in turn lead to students' disgust towards the study of literature.

2. Literature Review

Literary studies is considered as the principal part of the curriculum in every foreign language department, because no language is appropriately appreciated lest literature maintains its right and proper stature. Donald Stone (1997) supports the idea when he claims that the study of literature is ‘going out of ourselves in order to come home’. Also, researchers like Collie and Slater (1987) have asserted that literature is a significant source for aesthetic enrichment; genuine material for self-absorption and most of all, it strengthens language advancement. Although considered vital to language learning, students of English major in most Arab countries, particularly at Jazan University prefer linguistics courses to literature courses. If a comparison is made between the numbers of scholars pursuing their master’s and doctoral studies abroad in language and literature, it is evident that only a handful of scholars opt for literature.

Unquestionably, the study of foreign language is affected by several influential elements; the most encouraging and remarkable is the learner’s positive attitudes. Breen (2001) is of the opinion that the level of confidence, self-perception, and the frame of mind that the learners possess in the learning space have been considered as the fundamental aspect promoting to their overall success in the learning process. Furthermore, in a literature classroom, the teaching methodology has the capacity to provide suitable chances, where students’ perspective can have beneficial impact on their studies, which in turn might lead to cognitive engagement (Breen, 2001; Arnold, 1999). However, when it comes to literature teaching in Saudi context, the teachers tend to overemphasize intellectual cultivation over emotional transformation. It is unfortunate that good many of the educators treat literature courses as a means of bare intellectual skills. Brumfit and Carter (2000) support the view when they claim that the teaching of literature is ‘muddled by limited awareness of methodology’. Duppenthaler (1987) defines teaching approach as “anything that is designed to increase students’ motivation, participation in learning process and interaction between learners.”

Scholars like Al-Asmari & Khan (2014) identify the urgency of going beyond the conventional system of education in KSA, which is entirely centered on memorization and translation while dealing with the American and British English varieties. Whitehead (1968) believes that educators should have the knowledge of different methods and means to bring favorable outcomes from the teaching of literature. Kramersch (1985) also share similar view when he states that teachers teach literary texts as “finished products, to be unilaterally decoded, analyzed and explained”. In this context, it is not astonishing to find EFL learners having negative attitudes toward and poor perception of English literature. Vendler (1994) further claims that, a literature course should lead the learner to a ‘state of intense engagement’. ‘Physical engagement’ with literary texts can attract the learner into ‘intense exploratory engagement with literature.’ Unfortunately, the educators often tend to forget the fact that intellect without emotion results in passiveness and inactivity. Alharbi (2015) goes on to explain that, the low language proficiency level of Saudi undergraduate students can be attributed to the use of ineffective teaching methods, keeping the classroom teacher-centered. These issues can be addressed to a great extent by the adoption of contemporary approaches to teaching with more focus on skill development and critical thinking. Sofi (2015) too condemns the method of rote learning and the teacher-oriented model still used in Saudi Arabia. Sofi proposes the need for having well trained teachers who can make effective use of communicative and learner-centered education, blending hypermedia.

The key to success in using literature in EFL classroom depends predominantly on the works selected. According to Al Maleh (2005) and Hamdi (2003), the crucial issue while teaching English literature in the Middle East is that the English departments implement nearly the same syllabus and allot textbooks that are typically used in Western universities. George (2020) is of the view that the chosen text should not be too much above the reading proficiency of the learner; they need to be selected cautiously and approached in a way that encourages aesthetic association between the learner and the text. The criteria for suitability and selection of textbooks should be based on the specific group of students, their requirements, interest, cultural and social background, and language proficiency level. The ethical, religious, and social significance rooted in foreign literature usually tend to clash with the students’ Arab and Muslim culture and beliefs (Asfour (1983); Dahiyat (1983) & Zughoul (1983). Collie and Slater

(1987) further affirm that it is essential to choose books which are pertaining to the life experiences, emotions, or dreams of the learner.

It is evident from the above review of studies that a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration do exist among learners and educators, regarding the way literature is taught in the Arab world. Consequently, there is an immediate need to explore all the aspects of education, the methodology used and the choice of textbooks. It is to be noted that despite the existing challenges in the literature classroom, students in general are aware of the benefits of studying literature in EFL program. Obeidat (1997) reports that the dominance of the language and linguistic sections of the English curriculum does not contribute much to improve learners' language proficiency; while literature courses aid the undergraduates master the language characteristics of contemporary English, communicate effectively, and become innovative, imaginative, and analytical learners. The outcomes of various studies and first-hand experience of being with Arab learners for more than two decades, the researcher stresses on the fact that the teaching of literature can be made more effective, stimulating, and engaging, with the right selection of texts and right approaches.

3. Research questions

The research largely concentrated on inquiring into two of the following research questions:

1. How favorable are the undergraduate students' attitudes toward the study of literature in EFL classroom?
2. What are the independent variables that affect the learners' attitudes toward the study of literature?

4. Research methodology

4.1. The context

The study was executed in the department of English, Samtah University College at Jazan University, KSA, during the first semester of the academic year 2023 - 2024. Due to cultural and religious deliberations, separate campuses are set up for the male and the female students, and they are being educated by male and female teachers respectively. The teachers on both campuses are advised to stick to the course specifications and study materials approved by the university. Literature courses amount to roughly 25% of the entire courses, which includes: Introduction to literature, Literary criticism, Post-colonial literature, Victorian literature, American literature, Poetry, etc.

4.2. The sample

The respondents of the study constituted 74 female undergraduate students ranging between the ages of 20 and 25, from the Department of English, Samtah University College, Jazan University. The researcher adopted quota sampling; selecting the respondents from levels 10, 11, & 12. Quota sampling is a non-probability sampling method, in which the subjects are selected in accordance with the pre-planned qualities, so that the total sample will have equal division of features as the general population (Davis, 2005).

4.3. Research instrument

The instrument used for data collection was an online survey questionnaire. It was aimed to obtain information on students' attitudes toward the study of literature and to identify potential reasons for their disinterest in learning literature courses. The questionnaire consisted of 16 question items, divided into five categories: 1. the general tenor of the learners' attitudes toward the study of literature, 2. attitudes towards the teaching methodology used in literature classrooms, 3. attitudes towards the selection of textbooks and cultural unfamiliarity, 4. attitudes towards the course content and low language proficiency level, 5. attitudes towards Examination-centered approach (rote learning). The responses of the students were calculated using a 5-point scale, ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

5. Findings

The aim of the present study was to investigate the undergraduates' attitudes toward the study of literature within the EFL classrooms of Jazan University. The survey considered several factors that might significantly impact learners' attitudes, and the reasons for their lack of motivation to study literature. The findings about these attitudes are illustrated below to exhibit the results of the data analysis:

5.1. How favorable are the undergraduates' attitudes toward the study of literature in Jazan University EFL classroom?

To address the first research question, regarding the undergraduates' attitudes toward the study of literature, the researcher calculated the percentage of responses to the 1st and 9th items of the questionnaire as indicated in the table below: (see appendix A)

Table 1: Students' Responses on their Attitudes toward the Study of Literature

| | | 5 | | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | | |
|-----------|--|------|----|------|----|-----|---|------|----|------|----|------|
| | | SA | | A | | N | | D | | SD | | |
| Questions | | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | Mean |
| 1 | Do you think literature classes are enjoyable and stimulating? | 34.2 | 25 | 20.5 | 15 | 4.1 | 3 | 13.7 | 10 | 27.4 | 21 | 3.18 |
| 9 | Do you think studying literature will have a lot of benefit in your future life? | 23.3 | 18 | 30.1 | 22 | 11 | 8 | 28.8 | 21 | 6.8 | 5 | 3.33 |

The above table defines undergraduate students' motivation and encouragement in studying literature courses. When asked on a five-point scale how much they agreed with the first question, (Do you think literature classes are enjoyable and stimulating?) 34.2% (n = 25) of the sample expressed strongest agreement that the literature classes are enjoyable and stimulating and chose 5, while 20.5% (n = 15) indicated the next strongest category, selecting 4. Among the remaining students, 4.1% (n = 3) marked 3; 13.7% (n = 10) pointed 2; 27.4% (n = 21) revealed strongest disagreement, selecting 1. Furthermore, 23.3% (n = 18) indicated strong agreement with the second question concerning the benefit of studying literature, 30.1% (n = 22) signaled agreement choosing 4; while 11% (n = 8) chose 3, 28.8% (n = 21) chose 2 and 6.8% (n = 5) chose 1 respectively. Considering the average of responses to questions 1 and 9, it is obvious that only 54% (n = 40) of the survey respondents indicated positive attitudes towards the study of literature, while 46% (n = 34) expressed dissatisfaction.

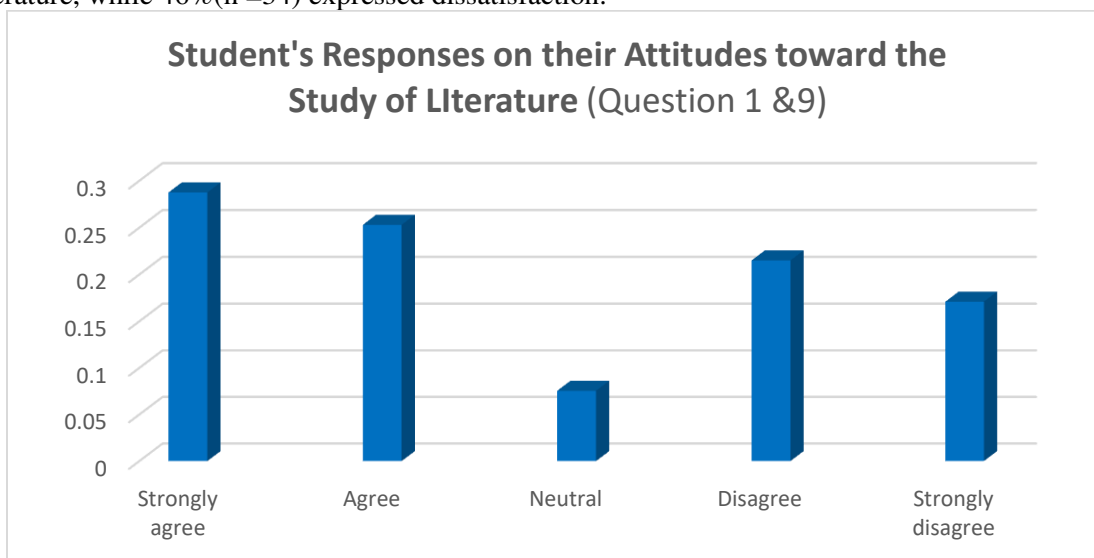


Figure 1

Examination of the table and figure above showed that there is relatively small difference between the students who possess positive (54%) and negative (46%) attitudes toward the study of EFL literature. The attitudes expressed through the above two survey items resonate with the earlier claim that if a choice is given, almost half of the learners are not interested in studying literary texts as part of the EFL English program.

5.2. Does the methodology used for teaching literature affect learners' motivation negatively?

To answer the second research question concerning the elements that determine learners' attitudes toward literature courses; responses to items 2 – 5 in the questionnaire were calculated to gather students' opinion regarding the teaching methodology used in literature classrooms of Jazan University. The responses show that a good number of the respondents are disappointed with the teacher-centered approaches that are being implemented, as indicated in Table 2:

Table 2: Students' Responses on the Pedagogy used for Teaching Literature

| | | 5 | | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | | |
|---|---|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|
| | | SA | | A | | N | | D | | SD | | |
| | Questions | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | Mean |
| 2 | Do you get opportunities to share your opinion and views about certain events or situation in the class? | 28.8 | 21 | 27.4 | 20 | 9.6 | 7 | 11 | 8 | 23.3 | 18 | 3.26 |
| 3 | Do you think the literature class is more teacher-centered; teacher explains everything and you have to just listen to her? | 46.6 | 35 | 28.6 | 22 | 15.1 | 10 | 5.5 | 4 | 4.1 | 3 | 4.09 |
| 4 | Do you think literature classes help you develop skills like creativity and critical thinking? | 23.3 | 17 | 24.7 | 18 | 11 | 7 | 13.7 | 10 | 27.4 | 21 | 3.05 |
| 5 | Do you think the study of literature helps you improve oral proficiency? | 26 | 19 | 28.8 | 22 | 4.1 | 3 | 28.8 | 22 | 12.3 | 8 | 3.32 |

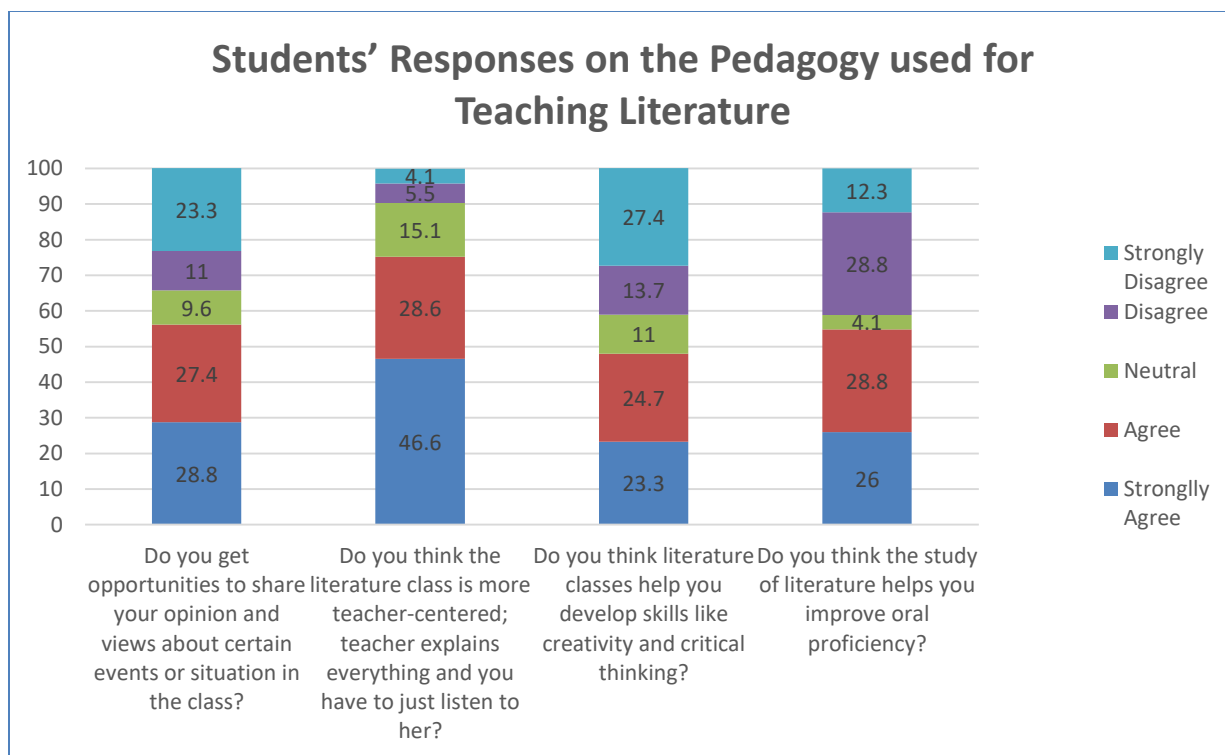


Figure 2

As shown in table 2, in response to item 1 (Do you get opportunities to share your opinion and views about certain events or situation in the class?), 28.8% of the respondents expressed strong agreement with the opportunities they get in the classroom to express their views; more or less the similar responses which is 27.4% were obtained from the next strongest category. However, 9.6% were neutral in their agreement; 11% indicated disagreement; while 23.3% of students expressed strong dissatisfaction. Overall, 56.1% (n =41) expressed agreement and 43.9% (n =33) disagreed with item one. Although 41 students are contented in the literature classroom; it should not be left unnoticed that 33 of them are discontented with their classroom experience.

Moving to the second item (Do you think the literature class is more teacher-centered; teacher explains everything and you have to just listen to her?), it is alarming to notice that 46.6% of the subjects strongly agreed that literature classes are more teacher-centered, while 28.6% pointed agreement. 15.1 % students were not sure of the answer and chose the third category; 5.5% expressed disagreement and 4.1% strongly disagreed. Out of the 74 survey participants, 56 of them marked item two negatively; 10 were not sure of the answer and only 7 students were satisfied about the pedagogy used in EFL literature classroom, with a very high mean of 4.09. The findings are relatively consistent with several earlier studies which claim that the teaching of literature is ‘muddled by limited awareness of methodology’ (see. Brumfit 2000; Collie & Slater, 2008; Alhamdi 2014; Duppenthaler, 1987).

Furthermore, the third item in the table above (Do you think literature classes help you develop skills like creativity and critical thinking?), revealed that 23.3% of the participants strongly agreed that the study of literature helps develop their skills; while 24.7% indicated agreement choosing the next strongest category. However, 11% opted the third category; 13.7% chose 2 and 27.4% chose 1, expressing strong dissatisfaction towards the teaching of literature. Overall, 36 of the survey respondents agreed that the study of literature supports skill development while 38 of them expressed discontent. Considering the responses to item 2 &3, it is observed that the dissatisfied students outnumber the satisfied ones,hence, it can be concluded that the respondents do not appreciate the way literature is taught in an EFL setting.

In response to the fourth item (Do you think the study of literature helps you improve oral proficiency?), 26% of the sample strongly agreed that they were able to improve oral proficiency and

28.8% reported agreement. Among the remaining participants, 4.1% are unsure; 28.8% indicated disagreement and 12.3% reported strong disagreement. This showed that overall 41 students elicited positive response to the survey question, while 33 of them do not consider the study of literature as a means to improve oral fluency.

5.3. Can learners’ diminishing interest in literature be associated to unfamiliarity with the target culture and culturally charged texts?

The second reason which affects learners’ attitudes toward literature courses is the selection of culturally charged texts. The present findings strongly support the claims of earlier researches which attributed huge importance to the selection of text books as the key to success in EFL classroom (see. Al Maleh,(2005); Hamdi, (2003); Asfour, (1983); Dahiyat, (1983)&Zughoul,(1983).The responses to Questions 6, 7, and 8 reveal that the majority of the respondents have negative attitudes toward the books selected and the difficulties they encounter due to cultural unfamiliarity, as demonstrated in Table 3:

Table 3: Students’ Responses on Selection of Textbooks and Cultural Unfamiliarity

| | | 5 | | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | | |
|---|--|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|
| | | SA | | A | | N | | D | | SD | | |
| | Questions | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | Mean |
| 6 | Do you think text books by British or American authors are easy to understand and learn? | 17.8 | 13 | 11 | 9 | 21.9 | 16 | 19.2 | 14 | 30.1 | 22 | 2.71 |
| 7 | Do you think text books by Arab authors are easy to understand and learn? | 53.4 | 40 | 30.1 | 23 | 8.2 | 6 | 2.7 | 2 | 5.5 | 3 | 4.26 |
| 8 | Do you think cultural unfamiliarity makes literature classes more difficult and boring? | 43.8 | 33 | 35.6 | 26 | 15.1 | 10 | 2.7 | 3 | 2.7 | 2 | 4.16 |

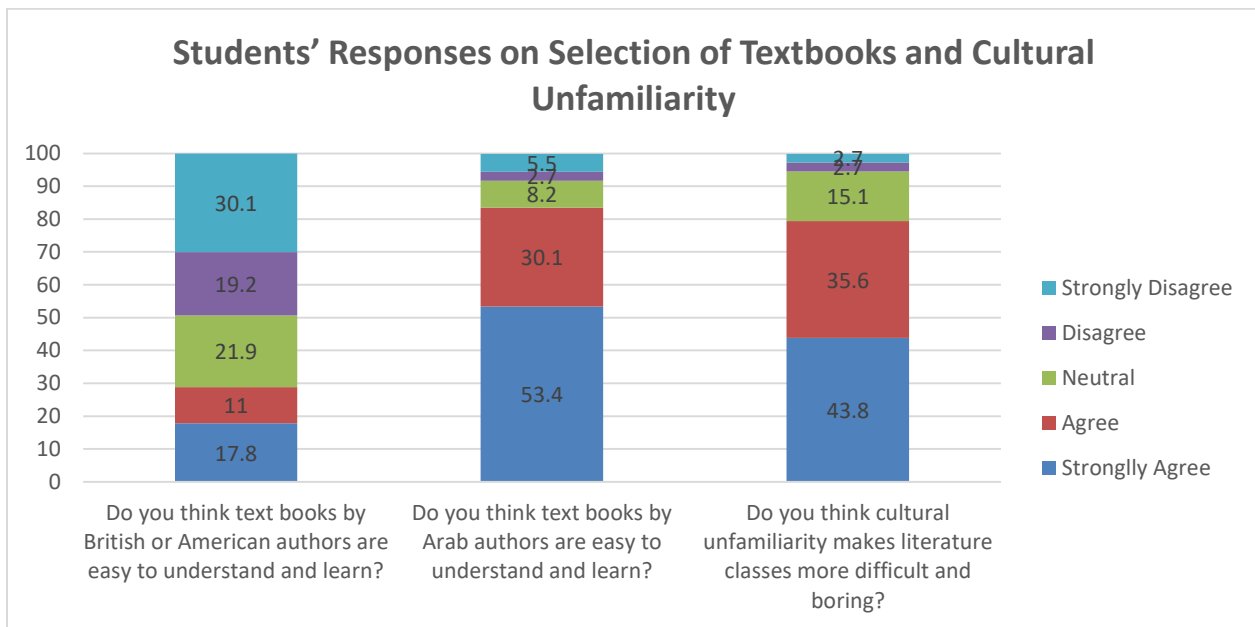


Figure 3

It is evident from the responses to question 6 (Do you think text books by British or American authors are easy to understand and learn?) in the above table, that only 17.8% of the sample indicated strong agreement with the selection of Western literature; while 11% expressed agreement, selecting 4.

However, 21.9% participants expressed neutral agreement, selecting 3; 19.2% showed disagreement, selecting 2; and 30.1% indicated strong dissatisfaction on the prescribed literary texts for EFL undergraduate program at Jazan University. To be more specific, 22 students of 74 supported the current choice of books; whereas, 52 of them are discontented with the texts they are expected to learn. The findings agree with Al Malah, (2005) & Hamdi, (2003) that text selection is crucial as it can alienate Arab learners from their own individuality, cultures, and family background.

On the other hand, in response to question 7, (Do you think text books by Arab authors are easy to understand and learn?) 53.4% participants strongly believed that literary texts from the Arab world would be easy to comprehend and learn; 30.1% reported almost the same view, selecting the next strongest agreement, 4. Among the remaining respondents, 8.2% were unsure of the answer and chose 3; 5.5% indicated disagreement and 5.5% strongly oppose the idea of implementing books by Arab authors. In other words, 62 students, (a huge majority) preferred studying Arab literature, whereas, only a handful, 12 students were happy to learn Western literature.

Question 8 asked the students to specify the degree to which they agreed or disagreed that cultural unfamiliarity makes literature classes more difficult and boring. In response, 43.8% students selected 5, indicating strong agreement that cultural unfamiliarity do affect their understanding of literary texts, followed by 35.6% learners who chose 4, expressing agreement. Of the remaining students, 15.1% selected 3; 2.7% selected 2 and 2.7% selected 1, showing that cultural unfamiliarity did not influence them negatively. The findings reveal that 59 students hold a negative view towards studying Western literature, while only 15 students possess positive attitudes. Thus, the responses to questions 6, 7 & 8 resonate with the earlier claim that due to unfamiliarity with the target culture, students find literature classes difficult and uninteresting.

5.4. Do low language proficiency levels of the learners affect understanding and appreciating literary texts with abstract vocabulary and sophisticated style?

Low language proficiency level of the undergraduate students is another significant factor leading to learners' lack of interest in literature courses. It is explicitly evident from the responses to questions 9, 10, 11, 12 & 13, that the majority of the learners are not able to engage themselves sufficiently in the class, because of the use of unfamiliar vocabulary and figurative language - which ultimately indicate learners' lack of fluency in English.

Table 4: Students' Responses on Low Language Proficiency Levels

| | | 5 | | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | | |
|----|--|------|----|------|----|------|----|-----|---|-----|---|------|
| | | SA | | A | | N | | D | | SD | | |
| | Questions | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | Mean |
| 10 | Do you think language courses are easier than literature courses? | 30.1 | 22 | 30.1 | 22 | 20.5 | 16 | 9.6 | 7 | 9.6 | 7 | 3.63 |
| 11 | Do you think literature subjects are difficult because of the use of unfamiliar vocabulary and figurative language? | 41.1 | 29 | 32.9 | 25 | 13.7 | 10 | 5.5 | 4 | 6.8 | 6 | 3.94 |
| 12 | Do you think you are not able to understand and appreciate the literary text due to lack of fluency in English language? | 37 | 27 | 34.2 | 26 | 13.7 | 10 | 11 | 8 | 4.1 | 3 | 3.87 |
| 13 | Do you think you can improve language skills | 35.6 | 27 | 41.1 | 30 | 11 | 8 | 9.6 | 7 | 2.7 | 2 | 3.97 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|------|----|----|----|-----|---|------|----|-----|---|------|
| | if given more chance to engage in group and peer work? | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 14 | Do you think reading literary text can improve your language ability? | 28.8 | 22 | 26 | 19 | 9.6 | 7 | 32.9 | 24 | 2.7 | 2 | 3.43 |

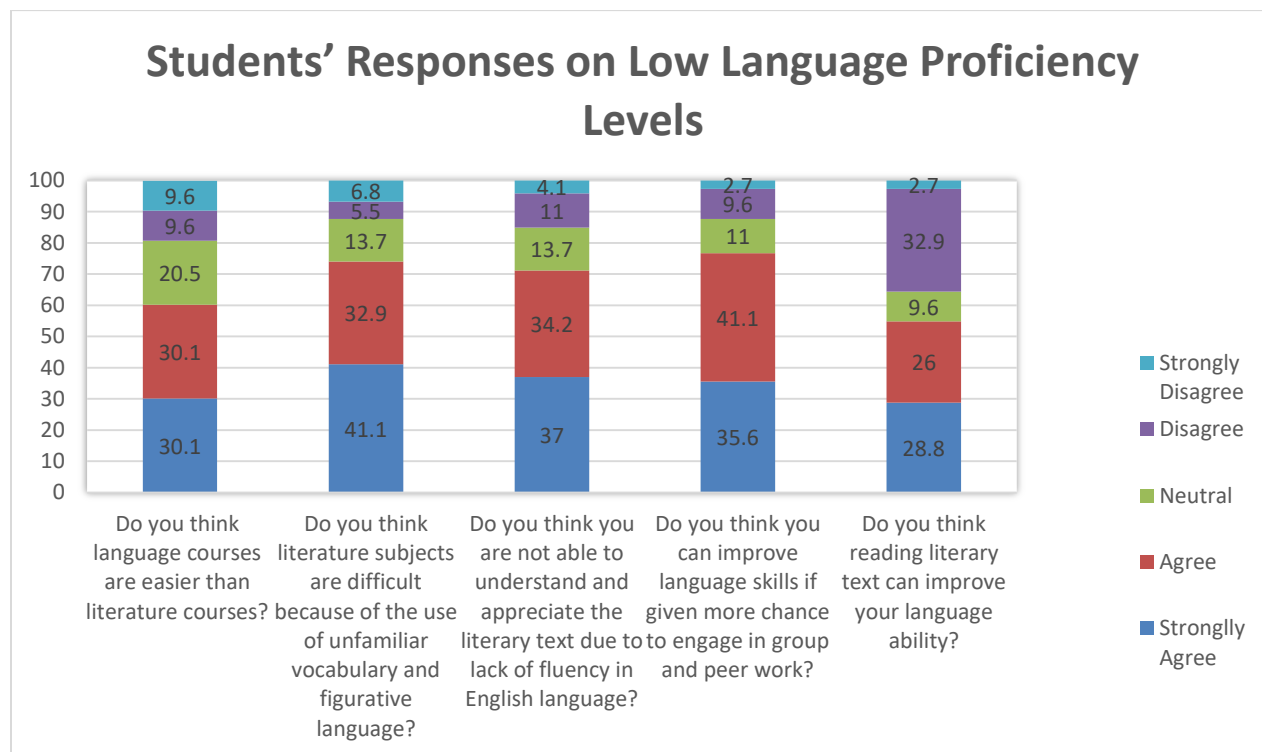


Figure 4

In response to question 10, (Do you think language courses are easier than literature courses?) 60.2% (n = 44) students pointed their liking towards language courses in comparison to literature; while 39.7 (n = 30) believed that literature courses are comparatively better than language courses. Analyzing the responses to question 11, (Do you think literature subjects are difficult because of the use of unfamiliar vocabulary and figurative language?) it is observed that 74% (n = 54) of the respondents are of the opinion that literature subjects are difficult because of the use of unfamiliar vocabulary and figurative language; the remaining students, 26% (n = 20) claim to have positive attitudes towards studying literature. Additionally, the responses to question 12 (Do you think you are not able to understand and appreciate the literary text due to lack of fluency in English language?) also indicated that most respondents 71.2% (n = 53) agreed that they are not able to understand and appreciate the literary text due to lack of fluency in English language while only a small number, 28.8% (n = 21) do not face difficulties in understanding and appreciating literary texts. The findings of questions 11 & 12 demonstrate significant correlation between the number of dissatisfied (74% & 71%) and satisfied (26% & 28.8%) students; both the items indicating students' lack of proficiency in English. The findings of question 13 (Do you think you can improve language skills if given more chance to engage in group and peer work?), reveals that 76.7% (n = 57) of the respondents believed that they can improve language skills if they are given opportunities to engage in group and peer work; whereas, 23.3 (n = 17) indicated negative attitudes. The last question was intended to measure learners' aptitude in reading literary texts. 54.8% (n = 41) believed that extensive reading of literary texts can improve language ability; while 45.2% (n = 33) indicated disapproval.

The above findings correspond to the findings of Alhamdi, (2014); Al-Asmari& Khan, (2014); Alharbi, (2015) and Sofi, (2015) who associated Arab students’ low language ability on the curriculum and the pedagogy.

5.5. Do Examination-centered Teaching Approaches affect learners’ skill development?

Various studies revealed that memorization is the most commonly used exam strategies among Saudi undergraduate students (Matson, (2016); Joanne & Stephen,(1987); Elyas, (2008); Al-Asmari& Khan, (2014). Students’ reaction to question 15 &16, re-eco the claims of earlier studies; the majority of the respondents exclusively focus on rote learning as the most effective examination strategies, as evidenced in table 5:

Table 5: Students’ Responses on Examination-centered Teaching Approaches

| | | 5 | | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | | |
|----|---|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|
| | | SA | | A | | N | | D | | SD | | |
| | Questions | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | Mean |
| 15 | Do you think memorizing the content is the best way to prepare yourself for the examination? | 44.4 | 32 | 36.1 | 27 | 13.9 | 10 | 2.8 | 2 | 2.8 | 2 | 4.15 |
| 16 | Do you think understanding the content and writing in your own words is the best way to prepare yourself for the examination? | 33.3 | 23 | 22.2 | 16 | 4.2 | 3 | 12.5 | 10 | 27.8 | 21 | 3.18 |

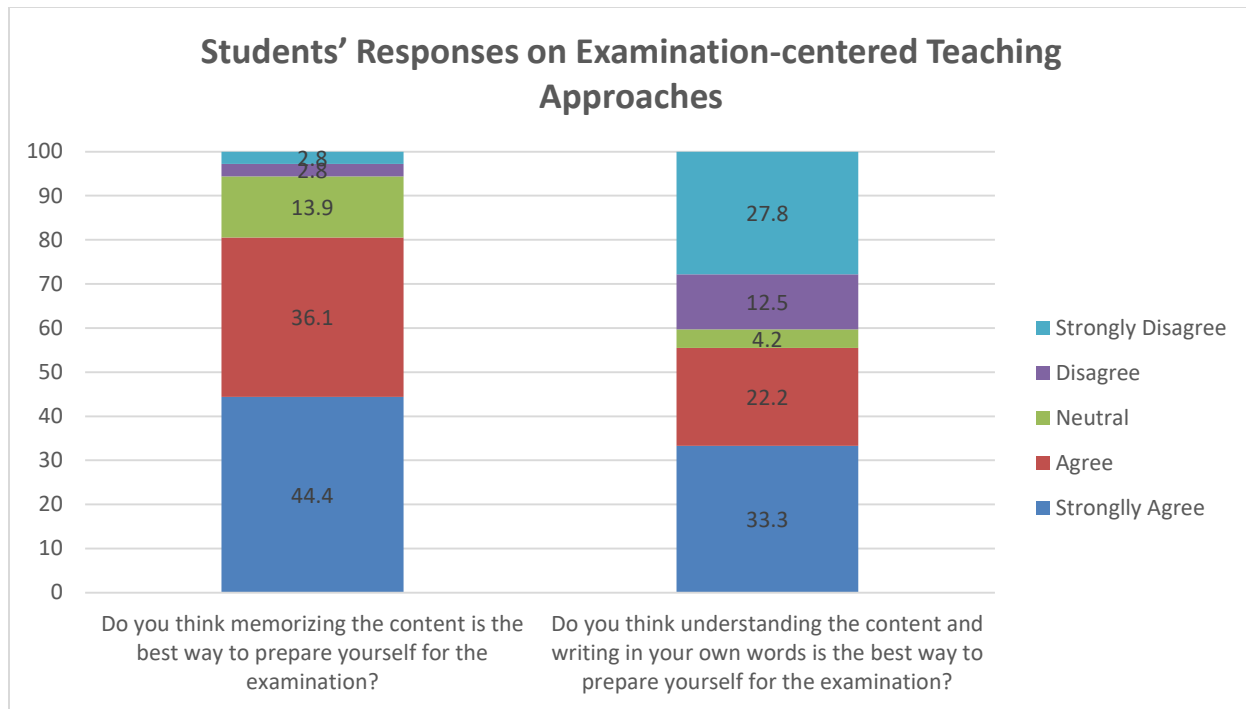


Figure 5

The survey results of question 15 showed that, 44.4% of the informants strongly believed that the most effective way to prepare for the examination is to memorize the content, choosing five, while 36.1 marked the next strongest category, four. The remaining students responded in the following way: 13.9%

marked three; 2.8% marked two and 2.8% expressed strong disagreement, choosing one. All in all, 59 students consider rote learning as the most effective learning methods, while 14 of them do not think memorization is a healthy learning strategy. (one student did not answer the question). However, in response to the last question, 33.3% of the sample strongly agreed that understanding the content and answering the questions using own words is the best exam preparation tactics; 22.2% students supported the view and expressed agreement. Among the rest, 4.2% opted for the third category; 12.5% selected 2 and 27.8% chose 1, expressing strong dissent on the view. It can be noticed that there is only a small difference between the students who agreed (39) and disagreed (34). The findings indicate that the learners do have positive attitudes towards developing their skills, nevertheless, they are forced to opt for memorization due to lack of English language proficiency.

6. Discussion

A close examination of the descriptive statistics indicated that 54% of the undergraduate students of English major who answered the survey questionnaire demonstrated positive attitudes toward the study of literature; while 46%, nearly half the population showed negative attitudes. Further, the study attempted to uncover the significant factors that influence learners' attitudes, and the reasons for their lack of motivation to study literature. The most prominent among them are the use of unsuited teaching methodology, with little or no room for personal involvement. Data analysis indicated that almost 75% of the respondents (with a mean of 4.09) expressed strong dissatisfaction towards the teacher-centered teaching approaches. The issue of learners' low proficiency in English could very well be attributed to the use of ineffective teaching methods, exclusively focusing on memorization. For instance, the study revealed that 71% of the participants (mean 4.15) believed memorization as the most effective examination strategy; which again points to the unsuited teaching methodology.

Additionally, the study observed that there is a general sense of dissatisfaction among the learners due to cultural unfamiliarity with the text and the difficult vocabulary they have to master. It is frustrating to note that 71% of the sample (mean 4.16) is not happy with the selection of texts; while 84% of the respondents (mean 4.26) preferred studying Arab literature to Western literature. The present findings fall in line with the findings of scholars like Elham & Aida, (2016); James (1992); Al Maleh, (2005) and Hamdi, (2003) who criticized the unrepresentative selection of textbooks; not including any literary work by Arab authors. As mentioned above, learners' lack of language proficiency and rote learning habit can be associated with the rigid choice of text books; the view is further affirmed when 71% of the sample indicated that they are not able to understand and appreciate the literary text due to lack of fluency in English language. Finally, the study unveils that, despite the existing challenges in the literature classrooms, students in general (54%) are aware of the benefits of studying literature in EFL program. Having analyzed students' responses to the survey questionnaire, the outcomes of various studies, and the researcher's own first-hand experience of being with Arab learners for more than twenty years, lead to the conclusion that the teaching of literature can be made more effective, absorbing, and engaging, with the right selection of texts and the right approaches.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, based upon the findings of the study, it can be presumed that the majority of the learners possess positive attitudes toward the study of literature, although they encounter certain challenges pertaining to pedagogy and the inability to cope with culturally charged texts due to lack of proficiency in English. These issues can be safely addressed mostly by the educators themselves. As teachers of English, we may not be successful in convincing the decision makers, officials, and parents to hold the teaching of literature in high regard, but we can recapture some of the students with our efforts to upgrade the quality of teaching. The most effective way is to abandon the traditional teaching approaches, which exclusively focus on memorization, and to adopt student-centered approaches that lead to intense engagement and enjoyment in the classroom. The question of cultural unfamiliarity could be handled greatly, linking the themes and characters of the text to students' personal experiences. Furthermore, as 84% of the sample indicated strong inclination towards the study Arab literature, it is worth accommodating students' opinion while selecting the teaching material. Lastly, the study recommends assessing learners' knowledge of English language before accepting them to English major.

8. Recommendations for further research

The sample size of the study was limited to only one Saudi University (Jazan University), which might have impacted the accuracy of the findings and arriving at more detailed and solid conclusions. Hence, there is a need for further studies in other Saudi Universities of KSA, not only to have a more comprehensive understanding of learners' attitudes toward the study of literature, but also to explore in detail the specific challenges they encounter.

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Appendix

Appendix A – Survey questionnaire

| S.No. | Questions | Strongly agree (5) | Agree (4) | Neutral (3) | Disagree (2) | Strongly disagree (1) |
|-------|---|--------------------|-----------|-------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1. | Do you think literature classes are enjoyable and stimulating? | 34.2% | 20.5% | 4.1% | 13.7% | 27.4% |
| 2. | Do you get opportunities to share your opinion and views about certain events or situation in the class? | 28.8% | 27.4% | 9.6% | 11% | 23.3% |
| 3. | Do you think the literature class is more teacher-centered; teacher explains everything and you have to just listen to her? | 46.6% | 28.6% | 15.1% | 5.5% | 4.1% |
| 4. | Do you think literature classes help you develop skills like creativity and critical thinking? | 23.3% | 24.7% | 11% | 13.7% | 27.4% |
| 5. | Do you think the study of literature helps you improve oral proficiency? | 26% | 28.8% | 4.1% | 28.8% | 12.3 |
| 6. | Do you think text books by British or American authors are easy to understand and learn? | 17.8% | 11% | 21.9% | 19.2% | 30.1% |
| 7. | Do you think text books by Arab authors are easy to understand and learn? | 53.4% | 30.1% | 8.2% | 2.7% | 5.5% |
| 8. | Do you think cultural unfamiliarity makes literature classes more difficult and boring? | 43.8% | 35.6% | 15.1% | 2.7% | 2.7% |

| | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 9. | Do you think studying literature will have a lot of benefit in your future life? | 23.3% | 30.1% | 11% | 28.8% | 6.8% |
| 10. | Do you think language courses are easier than literature courses? | 30.1% | 30.1% | 20.5% | 9.6% | 9.6% |
| 11. | Do you think literature subjects are difficult because of the use of unfamiliar vocabulary and figurative language? | 41.1% | 32.9% | 13.7% | 5.5% | 6.8% |
| 12. | Do you think you are not able to understand and appreciate the literary text due to lack of fluency in English language? | 37% | 34.2% | 13.7% | 11% | 4.1% |
| 13. | Do you think you can improve language skills if you are given more chance to engage in group and peer work? | 35.6% | 41.1% | 11% | 9.6% | 2.7% |
| 14. | Do you think reading literary text can improve your language ability? | 28.8% | 26% | 9.6% | 32.9% | 2.7% |
| 15. | Do you think memorizing the content is the best way to prepare yourself for the examination? | 44.4% | 36.1% | 13.9% | 2.8% | 2.8% |
| 16. | Do you think understanding the content and writing in your own words is the best way to prepare yourself for the examination? | 33.3% | 22.2% | 4.2% | 12.5% | 27.8% |

Appendix B – Tables

Table 1: Students’ Responses on their Attitudes toward the Study of Literature

Table 2: Students’ Responses on the Pedagogy used for Teaching Literature

Table 3: Students’ Responses on Selection of Textbooks and Cultural Unfamiliarity

Table 4: Students’ Responses on Low Language Proficiency Levels

Table 5: Students’ Responses on Examination-centered Teaching Approaches

Appendix C – Figures

Figure 1: Students’ Responses on their Attitudes toward the Study of Literature

Figure 2: Students’ Responses on the Pedagogy used for Teaching Literature

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