Learning of English Literature:
ESL Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions and Challenges

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Abstract

Learning of literature, particularly in the ESL context, has been subjected to controversy and consensus. Its proponents argue that literature learning can be beneficial for learners because it provides valuable authentic material and fosters language enrichment, cultural awareness, and personal involvement. Its opponents, however, believe that literature brings its own sets of challenges such as language difficulty and cultural disconnection. As the learning of literature has a direct impact on the learners, it is important to understand how learners view the subject and their experience in learning it. Such understanding can lead to better teaching and learning of literature in ESL classrooms. Hence, this paper attempts to discuss pre-service teachers' perceptions of, and challenges in, learning literature in a public university in Malaysia. A questionnaire, consisting of multiple-choice items and open-ended questions, was distributed to respondents enrolled in a literature course at the university. Frequency count is used to calculate the response to each question in the single-option format while crosstabulations are used whenever the responses are to be compared with each other. In addition, the learners' academic grades are analysed and cross-tabulated with the items in the questionnaire. The findings show that the learners have positive perceptions of literature and admitted to having enjoyed learning literature in the course due to several factors, including the role of the instructor. These findings have implications on how educators plan and teach literature courses, which will affect how ESL learners approach and learn literature.

Keywords: *ESL learners, literature learning, pre-service teachers, learners' perceptions, challenges in learning literature, English literature*

Introduction

Learning of literature, particularly in the ESL context, has been subjected to controversy and consensus (Bobkina, & Dominguez, 2014; Bagherkazemi, & Alemi, 2010). Its proponents argue that ESL learners can gain several benefits such as language enrichment and cultural awareness from learning literature (Tsang, Paran, & Lau, 2020; Bobkina, & Domingues, 2014; Keshavarzi, 2012; Paran, 2008; Sivasubramaniam, 2006; Floris, 2005; Lazar, 1993; Collie & Slater, 1987). Nonetheless, there are others who disagreed because literature learning also brings its own sets of challenges (Bobkina, & Dominguez, 2014; Bagherkazemi, & Alemi, 2010; Floris, 2005) such as difficult language (Krishnasamy, 2015; Violetta-Irene, 2015) and unfamiliar cultural connotations (Collie & Slater, 1987). As the target audience, ESL learners as are the most affected as they are the ones who should be attaining the benefits. Handled inappropriately, literature can pose difficulties to learners, which can discourage them, thus, hampering their full potentials. As such, understanding how learners view literature and the challenges they face when learning it can provide insights into better teaching and learning of the subject.

This paper provides exploratory insights into pre-service teachers' perceptions of, and challenges in, learning literature in a public university in Malaysia. By identifying their perceptions of learning literature,

the paper also tries to uncover the pre-service teachers' attitudes towards literature and challenges in learning it, and essentially, the understanding of how they view, approach and learn literature. Thus, the findings of the study can help educators explore and develop learning approaches that might concur with the ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of literature learning and their learning preferences.

Statement of the Research Problem

English literature as a subject is taught in the Department of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia. Students majoring in the Bachelor of Education in Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) are required to learn various literature subjects, through works of fiction, prose and poetry, in seven semesters. Students are expected to analyse, discuss and write on literary works beyond the simple and obvious level to one involving applications at a more universal level. It is believed that learning literature enables students to gain further practice in the key areas of language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, which they have to master as they are preparing to be teachers of the English language.

A review of literature affirms that there are many benefits of using literature in the ESL/EFL contexts (Alshammari, Ahmed & Shouk, 2020; Violetta-Irene, 2015; Yimwilai 2015; Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi; 2012; Paran, 2008; Sivasubramaniam, 2006; Sell, 2005; Floris, 2005; Savvidou, 2004; McKay, 1982). However, these same studies also caution that literature has its drawbacks. The two most common problems are language difficulty and cultural disconnectedness (Floris, 2005; Collie & Slater, 1987), which are mostly related to the learners. Learners are the most affected when literature is used either as a subject or a resource for language learning. As the learning of literature in the TESL Department has two-prong objectives (language competency and critical thinking ability), it is important to identify students' views and experiences of learning the subject. Such understandings have implications on the teaching and learning of literature, particularly in the planning and implementation of literature courses in the Department.

Literature reveals that most studies in Malaysia focus on secondary school students (see Haja Mohaideen, Ismail & Abd Rashid, 2020; Singh, Singh, Ja'afar, Ong, Kaur, Mostafa & Md. Yunus, 2020; Hassan, Engku Atek, Latiff Azmi, & Azmi, 2020; Pillai, Menon & Vengadasamy; 2016; Othman, Shah, Karim, Yusof, Din, Ramli & Mat Salleh, 2015; Kaur & Mahmor, 2014; Ab. Rashid, Vethamani & Abdul Rahman, 2010; Sidhu, Chan & Kaur, 2010; Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy & Jusoff, 2009; Hwang & Embi, 2007). Generally, the students found that learning literature, despite having benefits, has its own set of challenges. Such a phenomenon might also exist at the tertiary level. However, Sivapalan and Subramaniam (2008) argued that in the Malaysian higher education context, learners' perceptions and the challenges they face in learning literature have not been sufficiently explored.

Here, it is obvious that students' views have to be taken into account whenever literature is used in ESL classrooms. As such, there have been extensive studies that look at how students view literature in different ESL contexts (see Mustafa, Kawther, & Rashid, 2020; Hassan, Engku Atek, Latiff Azmi, & Azmi, 2020; Tsang, Paran & Lau, 2020; Hasan & Hasan, 2019; Alfauzan & Hussain, 2017; Naser & Aziz, 2017; Bernaus & Gardner, 2008). For example, when reviewing studies on learners' views of literature, Tsang, Paran and Lau (2020) found that ESL/EFL learners in higher education tend view the use of literature positively, despite its challenges. Similarly, the current study seeks to whether Malaysian ESL pre-teachers hold such views. Therefore, the study intends to answer three research questions, which are:

1. What are the ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of literature?
2. What are the ESL pre-service teachers' challenges in learning literature?
3. How can literature teaching and learning be improved from the perspective of ESL pre-service teachers?

Essentially, the study depicts how the learners' perceptions of, and challenges in, learning literature impact on their learning experiences, particularly those that trigger understanding of how to approach and learn literature. Taking these views and experiences seriously, this paper also seeks to provide, based on the learners' perspectives, recommendations for better teaching and learning of literature as a subject.

Literature Review

Lazar (1993, p. 5) argues that literature is difficult to define, however, she refers to it as novels, short stories, plays and poems that are fictional and convey their message through its "language which is rich and multi-layered." Because of these features, proponents of literature have considered it beneficial for literature to be taught, particularly in English language classrooms. Collie and Slater (1987) outline four reasons for using literature – (i) literature offers valuable authentic material, (ii) literature provides cultural enrichment, (iii) literature provides language enrichment and (iv) literature fosters personal involvement. Lazar (1993, pp. 15 - 19) expands its benefits to include motivating material, access to cultural background, encouraging language acquisition, expanding students' language awareness, developing students' interpretative abilities, and educating the whole person.

Lazar (1993, p. 5) states that literature involves "a special, or unusual use of language" and has a certain kind of linguistic features. Van (2009, p. 2) believes that literary texts expose learners to a range of "vocabulary, dialogues and prose". Sivasubramaniam (2006) argues that literature develops language awareness in learners, particularly the "interesting lexical and syntactic features" of the written language. Given such characteristics, literature has been considered as a resource that can develop and improve learners' language proficiency (Mustafa, Kawther, & Rashid, 2020; Hassan, Engku Atek, Latiff Azmi & Azmi, 2020; Cheng, 2016;

Keshavarzi, 2012; Paran, 2008; Hişmanoğlu, 2005). In their study, Aghagolzadeh and Tajabadi (2012) proved that literature does develop language learners' language skills.

Literary texts allow learners to explore themes and issues which are relevant to their world within the various linguistic features of the target language. Through such opportunities, learners become engaged with the texts through which they "begin to feel a sense of involvement with the target language" (Sivasubramaniam, 2006, p. 262). Thus, literature helps "to stimulate the imagination of […] students, to develop their critical abilities, and to increase their emotional awareness" (Lazar, 1993, p. 19). In this way, Lazar (1993) argues that literature can educate the whole person.

Collie and Slater (1987) state that literature is authentic material, in the sense that most literary works are not specifically written to teach a language. Thus, learners are exposed to language that is "genuine and undistorted" (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 6). Parkinson and Thomas (2000 cited in Sell, 2005) suggest that the authentic nature of literary texts trains the mind better than any other discipline. Through reading literary texts, learners are exposed to fundamental human issues, which expand both their knowledge of the language and life in general.

Literature allows learners to learn about other cultures that are different from theirs (Van, 2009) and explore universal human experiences, which can broaden their worldview (Sidhu, Chan & Kaur, 2010). Sell (2005) argues that literature enriches learners' cultural understanding and awareness as it exposes learners to among others, different cultural, ethnic, religious, racial diversity, and offers contrasting perspectives, concepts and worldviews. Such exposure allows learners to develop empathy and tolerance and practice self-reflection (Sidhu, Chan, & Kaur, 2010).

Based on these arguments, we can agree that literature, because of its authenticity, is potentially beneficial to the learners as it can reinforce learners' language ability, create cultural awareness, and develop critical thinking ability. In short, used appropriately, it can develop the whole person. Nonetheless, these good intentions would not be realised if the views and learning experiences of the intended audience are not carefully considered.

Learners' Perceptions

Perception is the process of acquiring, interpreting, organising and understanding sensory information of the environment that one lives in. The way that learners perceive a certain subject in their learning environment plays a crucial factor in their success or failure (Othman et al., 2015). Therefore, Othman, Shah, Karim, Yusof, Din, Ramli and Salleh (2015) argue that students' perceptions of the use of literature in language classrooms affect the learning outcome. Here, an awareness of the perceptions and attitudes of learners is helpful in developing an understanding of the teaching and learning process (Bernaus & Gardner, 2008).

A lot of research has been done on students' perceptions of literature classes in different contexts (such as Mustafa, Kawther, & Rashid, 2020; Hassan, Engku Atek, Latiff Azmi, & Azmi, 2020; Hasan & Hasan, 2019; Alfauzan & Hussain, 2017; Naser & Aziz, 2017; Bernaus & Gardner, 2008). Mustafa, Kawther and Rashid (2020) found that their respondents are interested to learn literature because it helps them to improve their English language proficiency and they view the teaching methods in a positive light.

In their study on EFL learners' perceptions and attitudes towards studying English literature courses, Al-Mahrooqi and Al-Wahaibi (2012) found that the student's perceptions of literature changed as they enrolled in more literature courses. The learners in Al-Mahrooqi and Al-Wahaibi's (2012) study acknowledged that there are interesting and enjoyable elements in their literature courses because they have had positive learning experiences. This is not surprising as Dewey (1963) argues that every experience is a moving force that affects the quality of further experiences to a certain extent. A positive continuous experience enables a person to grow or develop intellectually, morally and physically.

It has been argued that using literature can bring benefits to students, however, for some students, studying literature can be daunting, and possibly anxiety inducing. As shown in the findings of a study conducted by Sivapalan and Subramaniam (2008, p. 56) on Engineering students, 38.4% found literature to be irrelevant for technical students, citing reasons such as "too difficult and complicated." In addition, unsuitable literary texts can dampen students' enthusiasm to read the texts, thus preventing them from appreciating the texts (Naser & Aziz, 2017; Othman et al., 2015; Tseng; 2010) and learning valuable life lessons.

Here, we can argue that the way learners perceive literature is significantly related to their learning experiences and has an impact on the learning outcome. From the reviewed studies, learners admitted that although learning literature is difficult, it serves useful purposes like enhancing their language proficiency and exposing them to new perspectives. When learners believe that learning literature is useful and enjoyable, they will further seek similar positive learning experiences in the future, which can enable them to grow into more wholistic individuals.

Challenges in Learning Literature

Learning literature is not without its challenges. The most common problem encountered in learning literature is language (Floris, 2005). The language of the text itself can be challenging to the learners, particularly when there is a mismatch between the selection of texts and students' language ability (Krishnasamy, 2015; Violetta-Irene, 2015). In their study of EFL learners, Alshammari, Ahmed and Shouk (2020) found that learners find it challenging to study English literature due to the difficulty of literary texts. More specifically, Othman and associates (2015) assert that unfamiliar words, grammar and syntax impede learners' understanding of texts.

In her study, Al-Mahrooqi (2012) found that the students' linguistic ability makes it difficult for them to understand the texts and prevents them from fully engaging with the literary texts. The participants admitted

that it is problematic when it comes to unfamiliar vocabulary, reporting that they neither understand nor enjoy reading if a text is dense with new vocabulary. Almost all would stop reading.

Sidhu (2003 cited in Krishnasamy, 2015) found that students with lower proficiency have difficulty understanding the texts and tend to find literature lessons boring. Alshammari, Ahmed, and Shouk (2020) believed that high-proficiency English learners are better able to understand and appreciate literature compared to lower-proficiency students. Therefore, Gunakumaran (2002 cited in Krishnasamy, 2015) suggests that the language of the texts should match students' English proficiency level.

The length of the text also presents a problem as some view longer texts more difficult whereas others feel that shorter ones are more difficult (Floris, 2005). Longer texts might have offer "extended contextual support and repetition" (Duff & Maley, 1990 cited in Floris, 2005). Krishnasamy (2015) asserts that learners generally view that unlike fiction prose such as short stories and novels, poetry does not help in their language development. So, it is hardly surprising that Tseng (2010) found that the students in her study prefer prose fiction like novels and short stories, followed by plays and poems.

Another challenge of using literary texts is related to culture (Floris, 2005). Literary texts can be incomprehensible to ESL learners if they are thought to be "carrying an undesirable freight of cultural connotations" (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 2). Alshammari, Ahmed, and Shouk (2020) believed that many EFL learners have the misconception that English literature contradicts their own culture, values, and beliefs. Added to this misconception, students tend to interpret the meaning of the texts based on their own culture when they encounter unfamiliar cultural aspects, which might lead to inappropriate cultural representation (Krishnasamy, 2015).

According to Al-Mahrooqi (2012), the participants in her study reported to having difficulty reading literary texts that are culturally different from theirs. They mentioned that idioms, proverbs, slangs, colloquial language, and dialects are challenges that affected their understanding and involvement in literature. Similarly, in their study, Alshammari, Ahmed and Shouk (2020) found that Arab learners perceived English literature as inappropriate and threatening to their culture. However, they argued that such misconception can be addressed by having appropriate text selection, well-designed curricula and effective teaching methodologies.

The cited studies have proven that literature has its drawbacks, such as difficult texts, lengthy texts, and incomprehensible cultural connotations, which can affect learners, particularly those who are not proficient in the English language. These disadvantages, however, can be remedied if learners' needs, expectations, and interests are carefully considered and learners are given sufficient scaffoldings. Even if literature is difficult, when literature lessons are constructed and delivered appropriately, ESL learners can surely attain the promised benefits. Taking Dewey (1963) seriously, once learners have had a positive experience of learning literature, they would want to seek further learning opportunities that can positively impact their intellectual and moral growth.

Research Methodology

This research is a descriptive study carried out using quantitative research methodology. Quantitative research is associated with numerical data analysed using statistical tests (Chua, 2012). The target respondents were new students (Part 1) enrolled in the TESL programme in the Faculty of Education, UiTM and were studying a literature course. The respondents were purposely selected because as new students, they could provide rich data on their perceptions of learning literature, and challenges in learning the subject. In addition, the findings can help improve the material selection and delivery of the said course in the future. Questionnaire was chosen as the sole method of data collection because it enables the researcher to obtain information pertaining to the pre-service teachers' perceptions of, and challenges in, learning literature. The questionnaire was distributed to all new students of the programme, and the response rate is 100% yielding 35 samples.

The questionnaire, which comprises items on the respondents' perceptions of literature, their experience of learning literature in the course, the challenges they face, their preference of the genres/texts, and future recommendations, was distributed at the end of a fourteen-week semester. The questionnaire consists of multiple-choice items and open-ended questions. Frequency count is used to calculating the response to each question in the single-option format while crosstabulations are used whenever the responses are to be compared with each other. In addition, the learners' grades (at the end of the semester) are analysed and cross-tabulated with the items in the questionnaire.

Findings and Discussion

Female respondents represented 80% of the total number of respondents. This number is expected as teacher training programmes, particularly TESL, are more popular with females. Academically, the respondents come from various backgrounds, including the TESL Foundation programme, Malaysian Higher School Certificate (MHSC/STPM), Matriculation, and Diploma in English and other related fields. 28.6% of the respondents achieved an A or A-, 62.8% a B+, B or B-, and 8.6% a C+ or C in the course. None of the respondents failed the literature course. The findings are presented in three sections: Literary Experience, Literature and Personal Growth, and Challenges and Opportunities.

The first section, Literary Experience, presented a list of statements (9 items) that asked the respondents' views on learning literature based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being Strongly Disagree, and 5 being Strongly Agree. Table 1.0 shows the students' perceptions of learning literature based on the nine items.

Table 1.0: Students' Perceptions of Learning Literature

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
LE1	It helps me improve my proficiency in the English language.	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	80.0
LE2	It helps increase cultural awareness between different cultures.	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	80.0
LE3	It is fun.	0.0	0.0	0.0	17.1	82.9
LE4	It is motivating.	0.0	0.0	2.9	17.1	80.0
LE5	It is rewarding outside the classroom.	0.0	0.0	8.6	14.3	77.1
LE6	It is boring and a waste of time.	85.7	8.6	0	0.0	5.7
LE7	It is difficult because the texts are difficult to comprehend.	11.4	22.9	42.9	14.3	8.6
LE8	It is not important to me because it contributes nothing to my future professional career.	82.9	8.6	0.0	0.0	8.6
LE9	It helps me to grow personally, intellectually, and emotionally.	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.7	74.3

Generally, the respondents have positive perceptions of literature. All of them (100%) strongly agreed and agreed that literature helps them improve their proficiency in the English language. The same number also believed that it helps increase their cultural awareness between different cultures. 82.9% of the respondents strongly believed, and 17.1% believed that literature is fun. As for whether literature is motivating, 2.9% remained uncertain whereas 80.0% strongly agreed and 17.1% agreed with the statement. The respondents also believed that literature is rewarding outside the classroom, with 91.4% strongly agreeing and agreeing with the statement. Only 8.6% remained uncertain.

Added to this statement, the respondents also strongly agreed (74.3%) and agreed (25.7%) that literature helps them to grow personally, intellectually, and emotionally. When asked whether literature is boring and a waste of time, 85.7% did not believe it is so. Interestingly, 5.7% strongly agreed with the statement. The respondents were more divided in their views when asked whether literature is difficult because the texts are difficult to comprehend. 11.4% strongly disagreed and 22.9% disagreed with the statement whereas 8.6% strongly agreed and 14% agreed. Interestingly, nearly half of them (42.9%) were undecided. When asked about whether literature contributes to their future professional career, 91.5% believed that it is important. Only 8.6% believed that literature contributes nothing to their future professional career.

Table 2.0: Literature and Personal Growth

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

LPG1	The literature classes are designed according to my expectations, needs and interests.	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.7	74.3	
LPG2	I find the selected literary texts interesting.	0.0	0.0	2.9	22.9	74.3	
LPG3	Literature helps me to learn more about life.	0.0	0.0	0.0	17.1	82.9	
LPG4	Literature helps students to participate in the class discussions, group work and presentations.	0.0	0.0	2.9	8.6	88.6	
LPG5	Literature classes help to develop my critical thinking.	0.0	0.0	2.9	2.9	94.1	
LPG6	Literature helps me learn about people and their experiences that are similar to my own experiences.	0.0	0.0	0.0	34.3	65.7	
LPG7	I have the ability to interpret and comment on the literary texts according to my own understanding of the text.	0.0	0.0	14.3	40.0	45.7	
LPG8	Literature is an important part of my personal development.	0.0	0.0	5.7	31.4	62.9	

There are eight items in the Literature and Personal Growth section. Table 2.0 shows the students' responses to the eight items. All of the respondents (74.3% strongly agreed and 25.7% agreed) believed that the literature classes are designed according to their expectations, needs and interests. Almost all (97.1%) found that the selected literary texts interesting. 82.9% strongly believed, and 17.1% believed that literature helps them to learn more about life. This positive view is extended to the next item, which is, literature helps students to participate in the class discussions, group work and presentations. 88.6% strongly agreed, and 8.6% agreed with the statement. Only 2.9% remained undecided.

97% of the respondents viewed that literature classes help to develop their critical thinking whilst only 2.9% were undecided. When asked whether literature helps them learn about people and their experiences that are similar to the students' own experiences, 65.7% strongly agreed, and 34.3% agreed with the statement. 85.7% of the respondents believed that they have the ability to interpret and comment on the literary texts according to their own understanding of the text while 14.3% were unsure. When this item (LPG7) was compared to Item LE7 (Literature is difficult because the texts are difficult to comprehend), Table 3.0 shows that 20% of those who were undecided also believed that the texts are difficult while 80% were unsure. Interestingly, 46.5% of those who found the texts difficult, also believed that they have the ability to interpret and comment on the literary texts according to their own understanding. This shows that although the respondents found the texts difficult, they believed they can interpret the texts to the best of their ability.

Table 3.0: Crosstabulation of Item LE7 and LPG7

Scale (1 – 5)	3	4	5	Grand Total
1	0.0%	7.1%	18.8%	11.4%
2	0.0%	35.7%	18.8%	22.9%
3	80.0%	35.7%	37.5%	42.9%
4	20.0%	7.1%	18.8%	14.3%
5	0.0%	14.3%	6.3%	8.6%
Grand Total	**100.00%**	**100.00%**	**100.00%**	**100.00%**

Table 4.0: Crosstabulation of Item LPG7 and Grade

Scale (1 – 5)	3	4	5	Grand Total
A	20.0%	0.0%	25.0%	14.3%
A-	20.0%	7.1%	18.8%	14.3%
B	20.0%	42.9%	25.0%	31.4%
B-	20.0%	7.1%	12.5%	11.4%
B+	20.0%	21.4%	18.8%	20.0%
C	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%	2.9%
C+	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%	5.7%
Grand Total	**100.00%**	**100.00%**	**100.00%**	**100.00%**

The pre-service teachers' grades were compared with Item LPG7 (I have the ability to interpret and comment on the literary texts according to my understanding of the text), as indicated in Table 4.0. As mentioned previously, there was no failure with 28.6% of the respondents passing with distinction, 62.8% passed with credit, 8.6% passing the course. 50.9% of those who passed with distinction felt that they have the ability to interpret and comment on literary texts according to their own understanding of the text. This is followed by 87.5% of those who passed with credit. These findings show that most of the respondents have the confidence to interpret and comment on the literary texts based on their own understanding, as proven by their achievement in the course. A huge number of respondents (94.3%) believed that literature is an important part of their personal development. This is not surprising given their responses to Item LE9 (Literature helps me to grow personally, intellectually and emotionally) are also positive (100%).

The section on Challenges and Opportunities posed four questions to the respondents: the type of genre they prefer most, major problems they encounter in class, their experience of learning literature in the course, and any recommendations they would like to add to the course. The last two items are open-ended questions.

Figure 1.0 shows the respondents' preferred genre. The most preferred genre is short story with 45.7%, followed by poetry at 34.4%, and novel at 17.1%. The least preferred genre is drama with only 2.9%, which is not surprising given the fact that the course was delivered through the ODL mode. One respondent actually recommended that, "[m]aybe we can do an act of the drama to make classes interesting and it helps us to better understand each of the characters and the storyline." Drama performance is more viable with a face-to-face mode, which is not possible given that their classes were delivered online due to the pandemic/endemic situation. The respondents also voiced that: "I would like to experience this subject in a face-to-face physical class" and "I wish we can have a physical class for literature. It will be more fun that way."
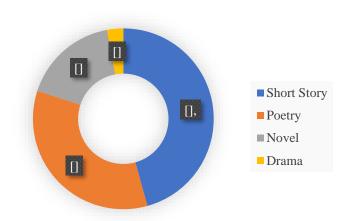
Figure 1.0: Preferred Genre

When asked about the major problems they encounter in class, 40% of the respondents believed the texts were difficult, 17.1% said the exam questions were difficult, 17.1% said they were shy, and 11.4% said there was too much material. Items on *Teaching methods* and *Boring topics or texts* were cited at 2.9% respectively. It is interesting to note that 2.9% of the respondents did not encounter any problems, citing that "[I] don't have any issue with stated problems or any other". 5.7% narrowed the issue to analysing poems, such as "understanding the meaning of a certain sentence as to analyse it, especially in poems', and "there are times when it is hard to understand some poems but I still really enjoy learning them." The respondents also pointed out that in order "to improve myself, I must read and practise analysing poems a lot."

All of the respondents had a pleasant experience learning the course. Generally, they used phrases such as "fun", "informative", "an eye-opening", "interesting", "wonderful", "enlightening", "enjoyable", "satisfying", "exhilarating", and "rewarding" to describe their learning experience. Some even added that the literature course "helps me instil my critical thinking", "helps me to increase my knowledge and helps to analyze a story and think more critically", "helps me to have a different perspective about literary works and life lessons", gives them the opportunity "to learn many new words that seems foreign to me before", "has helped me a lot

in improving my ways of thinking especially when analyzing the [literary] material", "helps me to enhance my understanding of certain topics and also expands my vocabulary knowledge as I have encountered many unfamiliar words while analyzing each material", and allows them to "learn how to interpret and understand literature".

42.9% of the respondents cited the instructor as one of the factors that make the course enjoyable even though the subject matter is difficult. They asserted that the instructor is "helpful", "supportive", "knowledge-able", "inclusive", "interactive", and encourages "us to express our thoughts, viewpoints, and disagreements freely". Despite having a good experience, 14.3% of the respondents admitted that learning literature is difficult, particularly when it comes to poetry. This is hardly surprising as poetry has dense expressions, is relatively brief, and expresses subjectivity more than other texts.

The respondents also suggested a few recommendations to the course, including to have "extra exercise and lecture on how to analyse poem […] especially for students who have difficulty in understanding a poem", or "maybe a 30-minute quiz session, or a guessing game where we make guesses and interpretations on a random poem", and "one or two materials which could address the issue that is familiar or conventional to Malaysian society".

Conclusion

Generally, the respondents have positive perceptions of literature. The findings have shown that the learning literature can help learners to reinforce their English language and expand their knowledge. They believe that literature increases their cultural awareness, contributes to their personal, intellectual and emotional growth, and future professional career. Additionally, the respondents view that literature is fun, motivating, and rewarding beyond the boundaries of the classroom, exposing them to important life lessons.

The positive perceptions were reinforced by the learning experiences that the respondents have had in the literature course. They admitted that the course matches their expectations, needs and interests as it improves their critical thinking, they are encouraged to be engaged in class through class discussions, group work and presentations, and the selected texts are interesting. Some respondents agreed that literature is difficult because the texts are difficult, however, most of them believe that they can analyse the literary texts according to their own understanding. Their academic achievement supports such an assertion.

As indicated in the findings of the study, literature can bring a lot of benefits to learners, particularly ESL learners. However, educators must always consider that the "criteria of suitability clearly depend ultimately on each particular group of students, their needs, interests, cultural background and language level" (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 8). It is also important to note that the pre-service teachers have had a positive learning experience in their literature class, and almost half of them attributed it to having an instructor who

helped them understand and enjoy the lessons. These findings have implications on how educators plan and teach literature courses.

The study has also identified some problems that students face in literature classes such as difficult texts, large amount of material that to be covered, feeling shy and difficult exam questions. These problems need to be taken into consideration and educators should find appropriate solutions because they will affect students' perceptions of literature, which will eventually affect how they approach and learn literature.

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