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Challenges Facing English Language Saudi Students When Studying Literature Courses in English Language Programs at the Undergraduate Level: Problems and Recommendations

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Abstract The teaching of English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia has always focused on the communicative and linguistic rather than the cultural functions of the language [1]. In this study, the challenges faced by the English foreign language Saudi students studying literature courses at the undergraduate level at two higher education institutions; the University of Mustaqbal and Jubail University College in Saudi Arabia. This is a collaborate research study done at two different universities of Saudi Arabia. The research emphasizes on the problems of dealing with English literature for the students at the undergraduate level. Qualitative research design was adapted, primarily exploratory to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and elucidation. Purposive sampling technique was used. The focus of the study was on the major barriers and problems that Saudi students face while learning English literature. It proposes remedial measures for the said barriers and problems.

Keywords: *English literature, difficulties, challenges, English foreign language,*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

> Teaching literature is a subject, and a difficult one. Doing it well requires scholarly and critical sophistication, but it also requires a clear idea of what literature is, of what is entailed in reading and criticizing it. It requires, in fact, some very self-conscious theorizing. But beyond the questions that ought to feed any serious critic's sense of what studying literature might mean, there are questions about the relation between such sophistication and the necessities of the classroom: what, how, and when are students most likely to learn? ([2], p. 14).

Literature signifies an important module of the core curriculum in Teaching English Foreign Language (TEFL) department, and challenges surrounding the teaching of literature in the English Foreign Language context have been of interest to many for decades. Literature is authentic material. It is essential to expose learners to this source of unmodified foreign language in the classroom because the skills they attain in dealing with intricate language can be used outside the class. It develops language awareness. Making learners to study refined paradigm of language present in literary texts makes them more aware of the norms of language use [3]. Hence, the rationale of using literature in a language classroom is to make it interactive and apparently to improve the communicative competence of the learners. A line of iambic pentameter in a Shakespeare's play may be a thing of magnificence forever, but it may not seem so, initially at least, to an 18-year-old freshman who has no knowledge of literature in a Saudi context. Irrespective of the fact that English is the lingua franca of the globe, it has emerged as the most imperative means of communication in the technological age. At the outset, the bitter fact is that learners in Saudi Arabia face tremendous challenges when it comes to learning English as a second language and especially English Literature. Schulz's [4] depiction vividly reflects this problem: the lower-division foreign language learners' training is a form of "spoon feeding," and after that, learners are usually "started without mercy on the chronological study of the literary masterworks of the target language in a survey course." The anthologies of literature are too complex for an English-speaking novice undergraduate when they are still to get familiarized into cultural literacy, literary

knowledge, and conventions associated with the study of literature. According to Rahman [5] after six years of English instruction, Saudi undergraduate students failed to acquire English proficiency; he claimed that the results of the university entrance examinations showed that Saudi student exhibited low language proficiency in English. Moreover, Rahman added that even after graduation, Saudi students could barely produce satisfactory skills in English. Arab students encounter linguistic and cultural challenges that impact their performance in learning the language [6-10].

In this study, the researchers will focus on the challenges faced by the English foreign language Saudi students studying literature courses at the undergraduate level at two higher education institutions; the University of Mustaqbal and Jubail University College in Saudi Arabia. The research accentuates the problems of tackling English literature for the students at the undergraduate level. The research design was qualitative, primarily exploratory research, to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and elucidation. Purposive sampling technique was used to understand the phenomenon better. The research tools used to validate the study were questionnaire and interviews. The survey was administered at both universities and the questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions to have qualitative data of what each participant attributes to the problems they faced in learning and teaching English literature. The participants of the study were the students and faculty members of the English Language Departments; though the findings show many problems that the students face in learning English literature, the major ones will be discussed in the paper. In this study the researchers will focus on the major barriers and problems that Saudi students face while learning English literature. It proposes remedial measures for the said barriers and problems.

According to Widdowson [11] the task of literature teaching is to cultivate students' "ability to perform literature as readers" (p. 194). With all the challenges surrounding the study and teaching of foreign language literature, not much empirical research is available for guidance. In view of Parkinson and Thomas [12] the possible reason in terms of a "likely imbalance of knowledge and imbalance of power between teacher and learner" in foreign language literature courses (p.12). Furthermore, the literary texts restrict the role of the students in the process of learning and pedagogy as well. The unfamiliar cultural allusions and references in authentic literary text make it difficult for L2 learners to read beyond the literal [13] and a "superficial reading" often results [14]. Also, in teaching courses in English Literature at the undergraduate level, a state of discontent was noticed among the students during the process of studying the courses of English Literature, which negatively affected their achievement. As in Saudi Arabia, it is quite evidently noticed that English Literature, having a figurative use of language, leads to a cultural gap and a lack of comprehending a discourse which is new to the students' socio-cultural background. Thus, the teacher must motivate the perception and attitude of students to make the teaching effective. As a result of this and emphasizing the significant role of English literature in the acquisition of English as a foreign language, this study tries to identify the challenges facing students and the most prominent solutions to be provided. The teaching of English as a foreign language in KSA has always focused on the communicative and linguistic rather than the cultural functions of the language [1].

1.2. Problem Statement

Through the experience of the researcher in teaching courses in English literature at the undergraduate level, a state of discontent was noted among some of the students, during the process of studying the courses of English literature, which negatively affected their achievement. As a result of this and given the great role of English literature in the acquisition of English as a foreign language, this study tries to identify these challenges facing students and the most prominent solutions to be provided. The research problem may be stated in the following questions:

1.3. Research Questions

This study was guided by the following three research questions

Q1. What are the difficulties faced by students of the English Department when they study the course of literature?

Q2. What are the causes of these difficulties faced by students of the English Department when they study the course of literature?

Q3. How can these difficulties be addressed to overcome the barriers?

1.4. Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To determine the challenges which are faced by the Saudi students of English major in studying English Literature courses
2. To explore the causes of these challenges
3. To suggest recommendations for the students to overcome these challenges and for the teachers to facilitate delivering such material

1.5. Methodology and Sample

Qualitative, primarily, exploratory research is to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and elucidation as it intends to establish priorities and improve the research design and to provide a significant insight into a given situation. Purposive sampling technique was used to understand the phenomenon better. The research tools were a questionnaire and interviews which were applied at both Jubail University College and University of Mustaqbal. The questionnaire consisted of open ended questions to have qualitative data of what each participant attributes to the problems they faced in learning and teaching English literature. The participants of the study were the students and faculty members of the English Departments at the universities.

1.6. Significance of the Study

The findings of this research will address the challenges faced by both the students and the teachers while teaching

literature in an EFL setting. The great demand for linguistic competence in both spoken and written communication justifies the use of literature as a medium for improving student's proficiency. Thus, this research will provide recommendations on the most effective teaching strategies as well as explore areas of improvement. This research will attempt to bridge the gap between language instruction and literature by exploring both the teaching strategies and students' background in studying literature written in their native language and its effect on their performance in an EFL classroom. In addition, through this study, students can learn how to maximize their learning experience in a literature classroom.

2. Literature Review

The arguments in favour of utilizing literature in EFL classrooms have convincingly been made, and the effectiveness of literature in providing students with different components of the English language in a variety of forms has been praised. Literature is proven to foster the linguistic abilities of EFL students in particular by enabling them to experience language at its best and real form through exposure to different expressions, idioms, and structures in a contextual language. However, while there are justifiable reasons for including literature in EFL classrooms, there are challenges that are inevitable.

2.1. Reasons for Teaching English Literature to EFL Students

One of the reasons for involving literature in a language classroom is its effective reinforcement of academic skills; this is usually done through verbal or non-verbal discussions of literary work or via careful consideration while reading [15]. In particular, introducing EFL students to short stories in the classroom is proven to be beneficial. While short stories provide "motivational, literary, cultural and higher-order thinking benefits," the most benefit lies in aiding and fostering the four skills ([15], p. 2). In addition, Oster [16] argued that the discussion which students have with the teacher over a work of art enhances the four skills "in a way that minimizes the threat and encourages taking risks, both in reading and in writing" (p. 88). Erkaya [15] claimed that "short stories can, if selected and exploited appropriately, provide quality text content which will greatly enhance ELT courses for learners at intermediate levels of proficiency" (p. 3).

According to Boudreault [17] drama, in particular, is beneficial in the way it fosters the students' imagination which creates the element of fun in learning the language. More importantly, drama is seen as an art that makes language acquisition more meaningful and fluent. Through reading drama, pronunciation, new vocabulary and structure are provided to the students in "a fully contextualized and interactional manner" which enables the students to be more confident throughout the language learning process. Further Boudreault [17] discussed that the element of fun, which drama provides, is a valued, essential factor in the learning process and he stressed that, usually, students are timid in producing language and this hinders learning, but once drama is used as an activity in the classroom, language becomes more enjoyable and the students will start to become less cautious when using it, and literature is brought to life in this way.

Exposing EFL students to the experience of reading poetry is vital as it opens a new realm of handling language. Elster [18] discussed the effect which reading poetry left on the reader. Regardless of the structure, the metaphor and the imagery that teachers usually pay the most attention to in the classroom, poetry must be read for its "potential to convey intense and new ways of experiencing the world" (p. 7). Moreover, what makes poetry worthy of reading in a classroom is its ability to provide students with "formal features of language [which] become a means of drawing the reader into these intense experiences of the work and the pleasures of language itself" (p. 8).

In her article, "Literature in the ESL Classroom," McKay [19] explored whether literature should be part of language classes. She presses that "literature is ideal for developing an awareness of language use", because the language in literary work is used within a social context which determines "why a particular form is used" (p. 530). Moreover, the context of the language used in literature is cultural which "may work to promote a greater tolerance for cultural differences for both the teacher and the student" (p. 531).

2.2. Challenges Faced by EFL Students when Studying Literature

While there is much focus on the benefit of including literature in EFL classrooms, only a few researchers have conducted studies for the purpose of investigating the difficulties that instructors have when attempting to present literary material in the classroom, which most likely stem from students' attitude. In an attempt to find better teaching methods to handle such material, Davis et al. [20] explored students' attitude towards studying literary courses in a foreign language. They note that undergraduate level students seldom enrol in world literature majors. This is due to the fact that students find a "mismatch" between their language and the second/ foreign language. This discrepancy creates a barrier that they must cross in order to understand the literature at hand which usually comprises of "lengthy literary texts containing highly abstract vocabulary, complex syntactical patterns, and sophisticated style and content which even an educated native speaker often cannot read without effort." Additionally, the teaching methods which the teachers traditionally use are not particularly interesting to students. The third reason is that students' goals to obtain particular careers "may be at odds with a major dominated by the study of literary texts." The researchers also note that, possibly, besides language, students find it challenging to deal with "culturally-charged texts" which always require prior background and knowledge that aid in completely comprehending them (p.321).

In another study that focuses on determining the reason behind EFL students' attitude toward literature in Malaysia, language itself" indicated that, generally, students have a positive attitude towards the reading selections; however, they are not as enthusiastic about the teaching methods which are usually used. The conclusion

is that careful consideration should be given to students' interest in selecting literary work for the syllabi. In addition, teachers must involve the students in the class discussions and encourage them to formulate their own opinions while bearing in mind the cultural differences. However, involving the students in the class discussion is not enough; they have to project their opinions via written work or staged acts. Furthermore, the teachers must be well-equipped with these teaching methods by receiving special training (p. 55).

Taiwanese students' perception of literature is not that different. Tseng [21] found that "about half of the students like to read literary works … Specifically, students like to read contemporary literature rather than classic literature, and such works as movie novels, realistic fiction, fantasies, and mysteries are their favorites." However, it is also argued that the teacher's role of bridging any possible gaps before handling literary courses is essential (p. 53). The findings of this study have "pedagogical implications." Supplementary material, references, and media in the classroom all are effective tools to presenting literature in an EFL classroom ([21], p. 61). Moreover, the curriculum design of the literary courses for EFL students must be based on the students' preference. This is done through surveying the students in the beginning of the semester to avoid presenting a work that they are not entirely fond of which may result in a negative attitude towards literature as a whole. One of the fundamental purposes of literature in EFL classes is when students "get immersed in their favourite texts … to receive the potential linguistic, personal, and cultural benefits that literature teaching claims to provide" ([21], p. 61).

2.3. Attitude of Students towards the English Language and Literary Courses

In this context, it is appropriate to specify Arab students' attitude toward being thoroughly exposed to literature when studying the English language as a major in the undergraduate level. While there is not a great deal of research concerning Arab undergraduate students conducted towards investigating this matter, there are a few researchers who found the matter worthy of exploration; the findings of such research can be applicable to the students in question in this paper.

In their article "Attitude towards and Perception of Literature in EFL Setting: A Case Study on QU Male Undergraduate Students," Alfauzan & Hussain [22] presented the result of a case study on male undergraduate students at Qassim University Buraydah, Saudi Arabia. In their research, they "attempt … to investigate the attitude and perception of Saudi male undergraduate students towards English literature courses as a part of their BA English Program." The researchers conclude that most students of this university "have positive attitudes and perceptions of English literature, and this can be true for other EFL learners across the Kingdom" and that specific factors affect this attitude including the students' "social environment (family, friends, classmates, teachers…" (p. 14). Similar to the case of the Taiwanese students which is discussed earlier in this part, the case has "pedagogical implications." In order to engage students in the process of reading literature, "policy makers" including curriculum designers and teachers must "accommodate learners' voices in the selection of teaching material", ([23], p.14)

Although Jordanian English-major undergraduates aspire to improve their language through reading "short stories, women magazines, novels, magazines about religion, adventure books, picture magazines, newspaper world events, books about religion romantic magazines, and fashion magazines", there are obstacles that impede them from reading effectively ([24], p. 1). The findings of this study concerning Jordanian students lead to the fact that many students are unaware of the correlation between the four skills, and that they tend to think that improving the other three skills is more challenging than improving the reading skill. Moreover, the researchers found that some students admitted that the lack of language proficiency is the reason of their deviation from reading excessively as they are required to "look up difficult words and … understand the relationship between the lexical items within and among the sentences in the reading texts" ([24], p. 15). Additionally, "the unavailability of reading materials, time constraints, lack of local libraries, beliefs of having better things to do than reading, [and] difficulty of the reading materials provided by English departments" are among the main obstacles that discourage students from reading.

AlMaleh [25] argued that the most challenging of gaps to be bridged in this unique context is cultural, social, and religious. It has been observed that the issue of delivering literary material with a set of values that are entirely different than the students' is beyond linguistic; it is emotional and mental as they mistakenly tend to relate the assigned work to their own culture and society [25]. Thus, the researcher urges to train the students "to read the 'foreign' text cross-culturally by trying to bestride the cultural divide, and traverse moral controversy". The dichotomy between the students' culture and morals and the contents they read about in different literary texts creates inevitable confusion. Nonetheless and to solve this issue, teachers must develop "a discursive formulation" that ease the task of reading "cosmopolitan views." This will enable them to appreciate and respect the "cultural and spiritual energies of all religions … [to] engage the reader with tolerance and respect for the culturally different".

3. Result and Data Analysis

Primary data was collected via survey for the students and interviews with TEFL and Literature courses teachers. A total of 58 English major students of various levels at Jubail University College and Mustaqbal University responded to the survey. The findings are based on the objectives of the study undertaken.

The majority of the respondents (Figure 1) were junior and senior students, which makes it safe to assume that they have covered the majority of the literature courses offered in their respective degree plans. 61.4% of the respondents rated their proficiency level as intermediate, while 17.5% chose lower intermediate. Only 12.1 % opted for advanced. This illustrates that the majority of them may have overestimated their written and oral

communication skills. Moreover, interviewed teachers expressed that students generally face many problems affecting their communicative competence and hindering expression. Some teachers expressed that there is actually a large gap between their conversation and writing skills as the complexity is also compounded with the stigma attached to literature as being a difficult and unexciting area of learning. This probably results in the students' further drawing themselves away from literature.

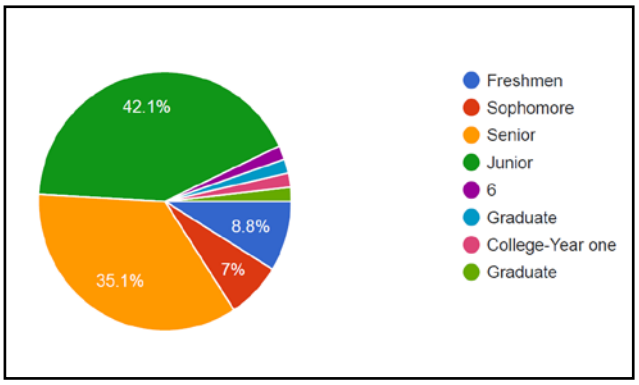

Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents According to Academic Levels

One teacher expressed that the majority of the students make many language mistakes in the beginning, and some of them do improve very well. She claimed that students face language issues due to the lack of exposure to the foreign language. Some of them do not differentiate between the English language and the literature courses taught in the English program, which makes them approach these courses as language-based rather than content-based courses. Overall, the majority expressed that students perform better in speaking than they do in writing. The above findings corroborate with the results of Linfield [26], who acknowledged that Arab learners are facing difficulties in learning English literature.

Another point which was investigated is whether the issue faced by EFL students in literature courses is a matter of a challenging content or a language barrier. Figure 2 demonstrates students' background in studying literature as a field in their mother tongue in high school.

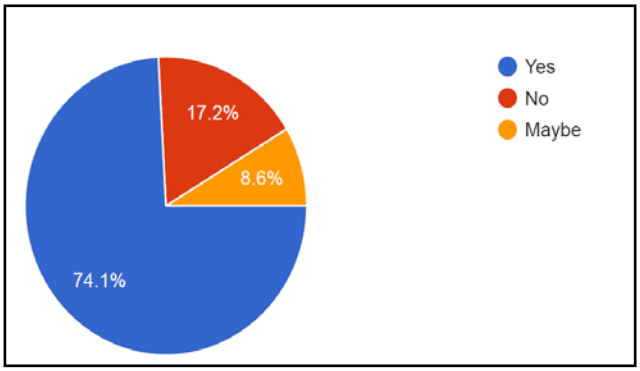

Figure 2. Background in Studying Arabic Literature

Respondents were asked to identify the problems they had faced while studying Arabic literature. While the vast majority of students did not face many challenges, some expressed that memorizing poems and understanding the literary language were difficult. Some identified Arabic grammar as their main challenge whereas others expressed that the structures and the accent of some teachers posed a challenge. It is worth noting that none of the respondents mentioned critical analysis of the poem as a challenge, which may indicate that they are not used to individual analysis of texts. It seems that they focused on the language of texts in their studies rather than critically analyzing them, which may be the reason this particular aspect is challenging for them. In the light of the above, it appears that the finding confirms the argument of a number of studies that student-related problems, like comprehending the literary text constitute the most serious problems of English literature in EFL contexts [27-35].

When asked if studying Arabic literature makes it easy for them to study English literature, 19% agreed while 37% disagreed. However, the majority were unsure. Based on their responses, they seemed to fail to connect the two (Arabic and English Literatures). They lack analytical skills in literature written in their first language, which makes it even more challenging to analyze texts in the foreign language; this is simply because they need to acquire the skills first.

On the other hand, language, new vocabulary, and critical analysis seemed to be the main issues students confront in studying English literature. Only 4.8% expressed that they enjoy studying literature and have no difficulty, and the same percentage agreed that they do not face any difficulty. The students need to tackle the subject area as well as the culture of the foreign language.

This research agrees with Keshta's [36] findings that English literature courses should familiarize students with English culture, to stimulate student's desires to learn English as an international means of communication and to develop the students ' language skills.

20% of the respondents have opted for Drama as their most favorite course while 15.8% chose Poetry. 26.3% preferred Novel while 1.8% liked all literature courses. 5.3% expressed their dislike for literature courses. Based on these results, students seem to enjoy courses where they perform and interact more than courses where they read. Reading has been identified by many literature teachers as the main issue students have with literature courses after critical thinking. The majority are simply unwilling to read. Moreover, a literature teacher expressed that the majority of the students prefer poetry simply because it is shorter than, for example, reading novels. Additionally, their lack of proper literary background makes it even more challenging for them to learn.

As per a teacher's response that the mother tongue or the first language influence makes it difficult for most of the students to comprehend the literary text like poetry or drama and especially when it comes to reading as the sounds in the Arabic alphabet are very different from the sounds of English. There are many sounds corresponding to letters in the English alphabet which cannot be pronounced easily by the Arabic learners of English. Arabic letters are pronounced distinctly each letter has an independent sound. In English an alphabet has more than one sound or the case of 'silent letters' no sound at all. Therefore, the Arab students struggle and face difficulties in learning literature courses.

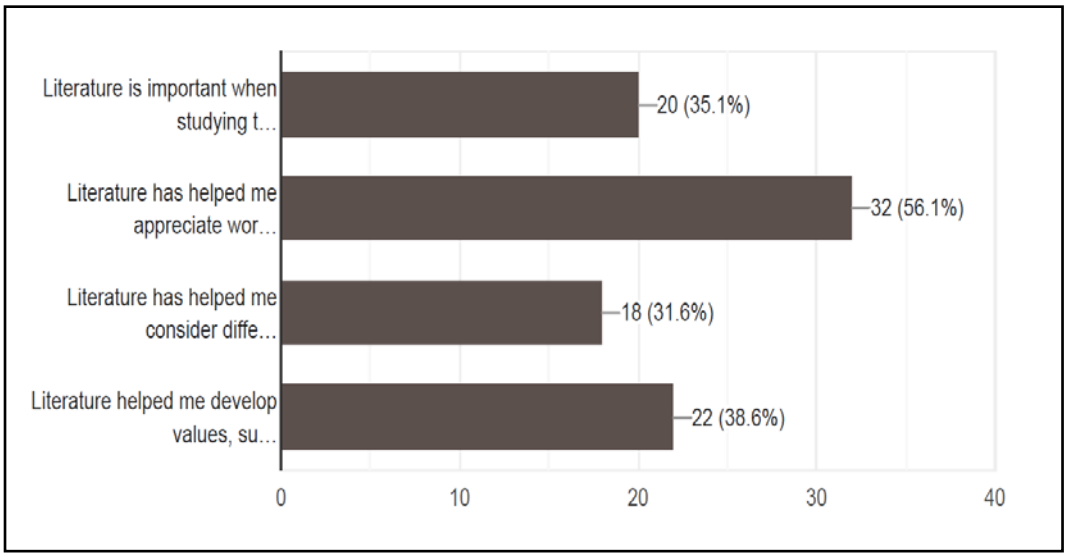

Figure 3. Impact of Literature on Students' Language Skills

A major element in students' improved performance is understanding the objectives behind studying literature in EFL classrooms. Figure 3 illustrates their responses. The highest percentage of the respondents believed that literature has helped them learn new words and their connotative aspects. This is followed by them developing different values and critical thinking skills. Respondents seemed to understand the importance of studying literature in an EFL setting. Some students even believed that studying literature allows them to practice all their language skills and hence positively impacts their language competency. This statement is true and can be related to a study earlier done by Ben Zid [37] conducted at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman reveals that students have positive views towards literature primarily because it enhances their language competence. At both the Universities a lot of focus is paid to improve the students language competence, where domination of the language and linguistic components of the English curriculum hardly improves students, while literature on the other hand helps students acquire a native-like linguistic competence, express their ideas, acquire the linguistic features of modern English, speak obviously and concisely, as well as become creative, critical, and analytical learners. Finally, the lowest percentage of the students were able to see how literature could help them understand different perspectives. This demonstrates that the majority of the students do realize the motivations behind studying English Literature.

3.1. Causes and Challenges Faced by Learners and Teachers

Since language is no longer viewed as merely a code or a number of words and expressions connected by grammatical rules but rather "a social practice of meaning-making and interpretation" ([38], p.16); the challenges and problems that are faced by foreign language teachers and learners are often significant to those intricate with foreign literature.

Al Shumaimeri [39] opined that "Teachers have pointed out that students leave the secondary stage without the ability to carry out a short conversation". This expression indicates that the students are not proficient in English language even after studying the subject for many years.

Generally, students lack research skills, time management skills, and other soft skills that are needed to succeed and most of the students are not aware of this. This affects their performance and their ability to participate. According to the survey and the interviews, students and teachers face several challenges while dealing with literature in an EFL setting. As mentioned earlier, students make many language errors, and this issue hinders them from clearly expressing themselves. Students are particularly weak in writing courses which require a lot of writing, a problem that is common among EFL students. Moreover, both JUC and Mustaqbal universities follow a strict language deduction policy, which further makes students reluctant to use the language freely as they are afraid to lose marks. The findings of the study is further supported by similar work done by Hussein, E.T., and Al-Emami, A. H. [40] on "Challenges to Teaching English Literature at the University of Hail: Instructors' Perspective". The findings revealed three main problems affecting the productivity of the teaching-learning processes, i.e. language proficiency level of the students, linguistic and stylistic degree of difficulty of the texts and the degree of cultural (un) familiarity (p.125).

One of the teachers mentioned that students have a problem in writing in general, not only in foreign language courses. Although they face the hurdle of improving their written English skill, they might have struggled with writing in schools in their language. Since spoken language develops from infancy, it is a lot harder to learn to write, a skill which develops later at school. Students need to spend more time on writing to refine it. They also fail to distinguish between spoken and written English and formal and informal forms. Students pick up conversational skills easily, and it shows up in their writing, which eventually affects its formality. Students who have good study skills and who read regularly seem to be able to improve a lot faster than their counterparts.

Critical thinking, on the other hand, seems to be challenging and the most problematic area to students. While a teacher expressed that 60% of the exercises in the

literature courses she teaches depend on critical thinking, she did not comment whether the students were able to successfully do them or not, which makes it difficult to assess the impact of those exercises.

Many students do not put a lot of work outside of the classroom. They are not used to being independent learners. They mainly depend on their work inside of the classroom and think it is sufficient. Moreover, many students tend to memorize rather than try to engage with texts. They repeat what they learn in class without much reflection, which makes advanced literature courses very challenging for many. The following is the account of a teacher's experience in trying to encourage the students to think critically, as initiatives are lacking to bring about total exposure to English language with literature ethos.

> I usually like to give them a quotation and ask them whether they agree or disagree and clarify their answer. You can see how they got the point or defend their answer; I like the idea of quotations; however, one of my colleagues told me to stop using quotes.... I think, now, that they are not up to the students' level. This year I stopped this practice. It is useless; they don't express themselves. I want them to put things together and to relate the quotation with what they have taken and done throughout the course, but they don't. Most of them memorize.

She attributes this problem to the fact that students are not trained to think critically and incorporate different critical thinking skills as well as the fact that some teachers are not trained to use critical thinking strategies. Students struggle with questions that require them to think critically as well as produce structurally correct sentences. In literature, this problem intensifies. According to a teacher, students struggle when they have to deal with ideas and abstracts. They are not accustomed to thinking in this way. The majority of them are more comfortable in language skills classes where the answer is definite and clear. Literature is much more elusive and requires more training. Students are willing to learn English, but their opinion towards literature is not as positive as it has to be. They dislike learning the literature component as they believe that it is difficult. Hence by agreeing with the findings of the study done by Nasharudin [41], a group of students admitted that they are interested in learning English. However, they reacted differently when learning the literature component during the English classroom. Literature provides an outlook for significant information and activities for students, irrespective to the fact that some have negative perception towards it. Students' poor English background may prevent them from understanding simple texts, Poetry, Fiction or Drama, which makes it difficult to try to comprehend or appreciate a literary text.

Participation in literature classes is also another issue. Unless the student is interested, they will not participate. And in many occasions, some students are hesitant to engage in class as their level does not allow them to deal with complex subject matters and they lack motivation. As Stated by Al-Hazimi [42], intrinsic motivation is more important than extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is important for the desire to learn arises from within the learners, then they will actively seek strategies and techniques that will best suit their learning goals.

To summarize, some of the challenges and causes that students face are the result of their poor background in the English Language such as language errors, difficulty understanding advanced vocabulary, and reluctance to participate. Above all is the attitude to learn and teach the literature courses. The other set of challenges is mainly caused by their lack of critical thinking skills and failure to grasp the abstract nature of some literature courses.

3.2. Strengths

Unlike the common perception that students do better in objective questions, a teacher pointed out that students actually do much better in open-ended questions in exams. They do very well when they are asked to analyze a particular character from the play or novel they are studying. However, when they are asked to provide a specific piece of information, they find it challenging. It is easier for them to provide the big picture than tackle the details. The vast majority of students are good at questions that require them to discuss themes and lines.

Some students try to experiment with language despite making many mistakes. This willingness to learn allows them to improve. Of course, not many students are like that, but those who are not afraid of using new words and structures improve faster.

Since English is the medium of instruction at Mustaqbal and JUC, students are forced to use the English language all the time. By having some foreign teacher's, students are forced to communicate in English. Being constantly exposed to the language improves students' communicative competency and also motivates them to explore the subject.

3.3. Successful Strategies and Techniques

A teacher commented that explaining the objectives of each lesson while providing an outline of the points to be covered proved effective. Relating similar concepts that are covered in the chapters was helpful as well. She claimed that once the students are provided with the big picture, understanding more challenging concepts becomes easier.

Choosing an interesting part from a literary text as the starting point of discussion is another technique that was effective for a teacher. Discussing authors like Jane Austen, her background, relating the concerns of a novel to the modern reader, disusing the effects of literary works today, and watching movie adaptations of the classics have helped in getting the students engaged and interested in the literary work.

A successful strategy to encourage students to apply critical thinking strategies and check their understanding that was carried out by a teacher is dividing the students into groups and assigning each group a question\ topic of the work of fiction. Students had fifteen minutes to prepare a short presentation (of 3-5 minutes) on their topic. The majority of the students were able to successfully accomplish the task. It enabled them to have a better understanding of the text at hand and view it from different angles.

3.4. Recommendations

Students should begin with simple exercises and then gradually move to more advanced ones. They should be

encouraged to understand the plot first and then start discussing other literary elements such the figurative language, imagery, and themes. Once students get the big picture, it should be easier for them to ease their way towards more complex topics.

To improve students' analytical and critical thinking skills, the teacher should give the students the opportunity to write in periodical revision sessions. They should be given a question to train them to write. They could work in groups and brainstorm answers to the question. Beginners should be provided with a sample on the board to follow initially, and then, as the sessions progress, they can be asked to write independently.

As it is important for students to understand the significance of studying English literature in an EFL setting, students should be able to relate to what they read. So, unlike the public opinion where students start with the classics, choosing relatable contemporary works can prove fruitful.

Students can be encouraged to read by assigning graded reading assignments where they read and reflect either individually or as a group. Another teacher recommended tackling the problem at an earlier stage where students spend more time developing their productive skills. Students also need to practice correcting their own work to identify their gaps and address them.

3.5. Conclusion

The teaching and learning of English literature at the undergraduate level in most Arab institutions, but particularly in the Saudi Arabian Universities is a daunting task for both the instructors and learners. The only challenge that most ESL instructors encounter in creating the appropriate learning environment to their students is the lack of cultural and linguistic expectations of many foreign language learners of English including Arabs [43].

While it is true that many instructors strive to improve the quality of teaching, especially with literature courses where content is another challenge faced by the students, close observation and investigation of the issue are required. It is through sharing successful practices that performances are enhanced and the quality of education is improved. Thus, this paper has addressed some of the gaps in content-based instruction while considering the feedback of both the learners and the instructors. As classes become more student-centered, activities and effective strategies should be encouraged and shared to achieve better conclusions and improve the proficiency of second language learners.

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