



PERSONALIZING LEARNING OF ENGLISH LITERATURE: PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This research examines students' perceptions and challenges in the learning English literature. A total of 60 Form 5 students from one of the secondary schools in the district of Hulu Langat, Selangor were selected. The samples were chosen based on their level of English proficiency from three different groups of students which were good, average and weak. A set of structured questionnaire consisting of 45 items using 1-4 Likert scale instrument was designed to collect data from these respondents on their perceptions and challenges in dealing with literary text, literature lesson and ESL teachers in learning of English literature component in English Language Classroom. The overall findings of the study indicates that majority of students, respondents of this study have positive perceptions towards literary text, literature lesson and ESL teachers despite some challenges that they have been facing when learning literature. This study is essential as student's perceptions and challenges may help the teachers, educationist and curriculum developer to revise the current trend in teaching and learning literature component. Consequently, they will find the best solution to overcome the challenges which will cater students' needs for a better satisfaction in learning literature component that may lead to personalizing learning of English literature for better performance in their overall English Language result in SPM.

Keywords: Literature; Perceptions; Challenges; English language

To cite this document:

Othman, N. I., Shah, P. M., Karim, A. A., Yusof, A., Din, R., Ramli, N. A., & Salleh, N.S. (2015). Personalizing learning of English literature: Perceptions and challenges. *Journal of Personalized Learning*, 1(1): 104-112

INTRODUCTION

The English language is known as lingua franca as it is the main language of communication globally to enable people with different mother tongue to communicate with each other. In Malaysia, English Language has become the second most important language after 'Bahasa Malaysia' as the country's national language. Realizing on the significance of mastering English Language, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia, has redesigned the National Philosophy of Education that aims to produce holistic students who excel academically and have better intercultural understanding, which resulted in the re-introduction of literature into the curriculum. In 2000, literature became a part of the English syllabus when the Literature in English Component was implemented in secondary schools.

Literature has been integrated in ESL syllabus for more than 10 years. However, the achievement of the students in literature is not as expected especially in expressing their critical thinking pertaining to the literary text. It is speculated that students' poor performance in literature is contributed by their negative perceptions towards the integration of Literature in ESL Classroom that may cause them to face more challenges in learning literature. Therefore, a study to find out students' perceptions and challenges of learning literature in English Classrooms should be carried out which the result, can help the teachers to reflect on their students' perceptions and challenges regarding the literary text, literature lesson and ESL teachers. This reflection is important for teachers to react positively in dealing with the challenges to improve the teaching and learning of literature in ESL Classroom. The purpose of this research is to examine the respondents' perceptions and challenges in teaching and learning of literature as part of ESL syllabus. The study attempted to address two research questions: What are the respondents' perceptions of literary texts, literature lesson and the English language teachers? What are the respondents' challenges in dealing with the literary text, literature lesson and the English language teachers?

In 1999, the Ministry of Education announced an important shift in English Language teaching and learning in Malaysia. The major highlight of this policy change is at the teaching of literature in secondary school which is now been incorporated as part of the secondary school English Language Syllabus (Subramaniam et al., 2003). More significantly, in this new policy, the literature component has its own value in SPM English Language paper as it contributed 25 marks out of 75 total marks of paper 2 whereby 5 marks is based on the short story and another 5 marks from the poem that students learn in form 4. Meanwhile 15 marks are from the Form 5 novel. In 2000, the text used for form 4 and forms 5 are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The Text used for Form 4 and Forms 5 From the Year 2000 until 2009

Class/Form	Genre	Text
Four	Poetry	If by Rudyard Kipling
		Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare
		Si Tenggang Home Coming by Muhammad Haji Salleh
		Moonsoon History by Shirley Lim
		The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost
		There's been a Death in the Opposite House by Emily Dickinson
	Short Story	The Lotus Eater by Somerset Maugham
		The Necklace by Guy de Maupassant
		The Drover's Wife by Henry Lawson
		The Sound Machine by Roald Dahl
		Looking for a Rain God by Bessie Head
Five	Novel	Jungle of Hope by Keris Mas
		The Return by K.S Maniam
		The Pearl by John Steinbeck

The selection of texts has undergone huge changes in 2010 when a new set of literature texts has been introduced. The introduction of this new selection of literature component has not just affect the genre of the literature component learnt by students; instead it has slightly changed the format of literature section in SPM English paper. It has reduced the value of literature section from 25 marks to 20 marks whereby 5 marks are allocated for the poems section and another 15 marks are from the novel section. This change has clearly shown that the short stories and the drama that students learn in form 4 will not be tested in SPM. The reason for this new testing format maybe due to the Ministry of Education aims to encourage students to learn literature for pleasure as well as to inculcate the reading habits instead of learning literature just for the sake of examination.

This is due to the fact that students will only learn short stories and drama to expose them to different genre for them to appreciate the value of literary piece. The new selections of texts are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The Text used for Form 4 and Forms 5 Starting the Year 2010 until Present

Class/Form	Genre	Text
Four	Poetry	In the Midst of Hardship by Latiff Mohidin He Had such Quiet Eyes by Bibsy Soenharjo)
	Short Story	WERTYUIOP by Vivian Alcock The Fruitcake Special by Frank Brennan
	Drama/Play	Gulp and Gasp by John Townsend
Five	Poetry	Nature by H.D. Carberry Are you Still Playing Your Flute by Zurinah Hassan
	Novel	Step by Wicked Step by Anne Fine Catches Us if u Can by Catherine MacPhail
		The Curse by Lee Su Ann

The study of literature goes far beyond the narrow scope of the study of the English language, which looks only at grammar and the technicalities of the spoken and written language. In fact, literature is, in a sense, a social study. Literature teachers in many cases have failed to teach their students about themselves and the world (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2001). There have been many studies that have been carried out to gauge the perception of language learners and teachers on the inclusion of literature in the English Language Syllabus. The study conducted by Subramaniam, Shahizah and Koo (2003), has proven that English teachers have positive attitudes and perceptions towards the teaching of literature whereby the teachers are optimistic and have an effort to contribute towards the success of teaching and learning literature as part of English Syllabus. Meanwhile Sidhu (2003) has revealed that students have mixed perceptions of their literature lesson. Her study shows that some students have negative feelings on the literature lesson and some do look forward to learn literature due to several reasons.

The teaching and learning of literature in Malaysia has many challenges that have to be faced by either teachers or students. One of the main challenges in learning literature are caused by the text itself, such as the language of the text, especially when there is a mismatch between the selection of texts and students' language ability (Irene, 2015). According to Agee (1998), even teachers cannot agree on the type of texts that should be taught although they generally agree that the texts should promote intellectual development, independent thinking, are interesting to adolescents and meet certain cultural and aesthetic standards (as cited in Ghazali et al., 2009). Arvidson and Blanco (2004) stated that, struggling readers share the same problems which are weak comprehension, lack of interest and confidence (as cited in Ghazali et al., 2009). They spend a lot of time looking up or guessing meanings of words which might result in regressive eye movement, losing sight of the plot or the bigger picture by the time they reach the bottom of the page or the end of the story. To avoid frustration and students' lack of participation, it is vital to ensure that the language of the text match students' proficiency level and that there is a match "between the linguistic expectations in the language syllabus with those of the literature component syllabus" (Subramaniam, 2002 p.65 as cited in Ghazali et al., 2009). Unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure hamper students' understanding of texts.

The attitudes of students play a great role in determining the successful learning for the students themselves. It is an important concept because it plays a key role in language learning and teaching (Derakhshan et al., 2015; Chalak & Kassaian, 2010). They would appear to influence students' success or failure in their learning (Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009). Students with positive attitudes will spend more effort to learn the language by using strategies such as asking questions, volunteering information and answering questions (Baker, 1993 as cited in Ghazali, 2008). Students may like learning English, but their perceptions towards the literature component might not be as positive. Students can be negative, resenting their learning of the literature component. As shown in the findings of a study done by Nasharudin (2008), a group of students admitted that they are interested in learning English. However, they reacted differently when learning the literature component during the English period. Although literature seems to give opportunities for more interesting and expressive information and activities for students to explore, not all may perceive it to be something that is positive. As shown in the findings of a study conducted by Halim (2006), only a minority of students liked literature while the majority hated it. A few of them liked literature as they liked reading. They perceived literature as something that was full of adventure for them to discover, challenging their minds, enabling them to read out about other people's experiences and learning from them. Most of the students who disliked literature felt that the literary

texts were too difficult to understand as the language was not direct. The unfamiliar words were scary for them and there was too much to read. Despite of the many challenges, the teaching and learning literature still need to be incorporated in English Language classroom as it is the requirement of secondary school syllabus. However, the implementation of it has to be improved by taking into consideration the needs and desires of ESL teachers and learners.

METHODOLOGY

The participants for this study were selected based on their English proficiency level. A sample of 60 Form 5 students, who have just sat for their English Language 1119 Mid-year examination were chosen. They were from three different classes representing different levels of English proficiency. Questionnaires, interviews, observations, and journal writing were used for data collection. A structured questionnaire was used to elicit ESL teachers' perceptions, challenges and needs on the literary text and literature lesson of Form 5 English literature component in English Language Classroom. The questionnaire used was adapted from Sidhu (2003) and Sivapalan and Subramaniam (2014). The first part consist of 3 items, which was designed to elicit students' background information. The second part consist of 45 statements to gauge students' perception, challenges and needs of Literary Texts, Literature Lesson and ESL teachers. The questionnaire was distributed to 60 respondents. The English version of the questionnaire was given to the high achievers meanwhile the same questionnaire that was translated into Bahasa Malaysia was given to the low achievers. A descriptive statistic of percentage and frequency score were used in the data analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' perception of literary text is presented in Table 3. Most of the students have positive perceptions on their literary texts. Based on the answers given by the students it reveals that they really enjoy reading and learning the novel as 96.7 % of the students agreed with the statement 'I believe that the chosen novel is enjoyable to read and learn.' This may due to the fact the plot of the novel 'Step by Wicked Step' that is chosen for their literary component is really fascinating and felt like the novel really comes to life.

In addition, students found the language used in the novel as easy and simple to understand as 68.4% students agreed with the statement "I am able to understand the language use in the novel easily". Besides that, 86.7% students feel that the poems that they learn are really interesting. It seems that the poems required to be learn in form 4 and 5, which are In The Midst of Hardship, He had Such Quite Eyes, Nature and Are You Still Playing Your Flute manage to cater students' interest. Other than that, 88.6% of the students perceived the literary text positively with each and every one of them feels that the literature texts emphasize and instil them with good moral values. Regarding the perception on whether the literary text has helped students to improve their language skills or vice versa, 80.0% of the students agreed that they are able to improve their English language skills by learning the chosen literary text while only 20.0% disagreed.

Table 3. Students' Perception on Literary Texts

Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
I believe that the chosen novel is enjoyable to read and learn.	0	2(3.3)	34(56.7)	24(40.0)
I am able to understand the language use in novel easily.	1(1.7)	18(30.0)	34(66.7)	1(1.7)
I believe that the chosen poems are interesting to read and interpret.	0	8(13.3)	34(80.0)	4(6.7)
Literature text emphasizes and instils me with good moral values.	2(3.3)	5(8.3)	34(70.0)	11(18.6)
I have improved my English language skills by learning the chosen literature text.	0	12(20.0)	33(55.0)	15(25.0)

Table 4 reveals students' perception on Literature Lesson. Firstly, 83.4% of the students felt that literature lesson helped them to develop their English language skills. Moreover, 83.3% of them believed that learning literature benefits them in terms of providing knowledge and skills to answer the literature section in their SPM examination. Their literature lesson has helped them to produce better ideas and be more critical in thinking. A

majority of 75.0% students do feel that literature lesson exposes them to good sentence structures and mechanics of writing that can help them to improve their writing skills. Students have improved and managed to construct better sentence structure with the help of their literature lesson. 66.7% of the students also agreed that the literature lesson influences them to inculcate their reading habit while the other 33.3% disagreed. Students with 83.3% agreed on the statement 'I enjoy learning literature during my literature lesson'. They felt that their literature lesson was lively and fun.

Table 4. Distribution, Frequency and Mean on the Students' Perception on Literature Lesson

Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Literature lesson helps me to develop my English language skills.	0	10(16.7)	40(66.7)	10(16.7)
Literature lesson provides me knowledge and skills to answer the literature section in my SPM examination.	0	10(16.7)	35(58.3)	15(25.0)
Literature lesson exposes me to good sentence structures and mechanics of writing that can help me to improve my writing skill.	0	15(25.0)	25(41.7)	20(33.3)
Literature lesson motivates me to read and inculcate the reading habits.	1(1.7)	19(31.7)	30(50.0)	10(16.7)

Students' perceptions' on their English language teacher is presented in the Table 5. An overwhelming 91.7% of the students agreed that their teacher has a vast range of knowledge on the chosen literature piece. Students feel that their teacher is very competent and dedicated in teaching them. Their teacher was also able to answer every single question apprehended by them which clearly proves that their teacher has a wide range of knowledge. In addition, a remarkable 100% of the students strongly agreed that their teacher is very creative and inventive in making the literature lesson fun and lively. This may due to their teachers great approach and communication skills. On top of that, 83.3% of the students strongly disagree and 16.7% of them disagree of their teacher not showing positive attitude during literature lesson. This indicates that, the students believe that their teachers possessed positive attitudes, very inspirational and never demotivates them with negative attitude. Furthermore, the students with 91.5% of the students agreed and strongly feels that their teacher was amazing in explaining and helping them to understand their literary text if they had a problem. All of the students with 83.3% of them agreed on their teacher for having a superb command of English language.

Table 5. Distribution, Frequency and Mean on the Students' Perception on English Language Teachers

Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
My teacher has a wide knowledge of the chosen literature piece.	0	5(8.3)	35(58.3)	20(33.3)
My teacher is very creative in teaching literature.	0	0	20(33.3)	40(66.7)
My teacher does not show positive attitude during literature lesson.	15(25.0)	35(58.3)	5(8.3)	5(8.3)
My teacher explains to me and helps me fully understand the literary text if I have a problem.	3(5.0)	7(11.7)	25(41.7)	25(41.7)
My teacher has a good command of English Language.	0	0	20(33.3)	40(66.7)

Table 6 displays the students' challenges in dealing with the literary text. The data reveals that most of the students have problems but they will be able to overcome this challenge effortlessly with some assistance from their teachers. In fact, most of them face problem with these challenges as they themselves lack basic knowledge of their literary component. 58.3% of them agreed that they faced tough challenge and found it is difficult to understand the poetry as they feel that every word has their own underlying meaning. It is also hard for them as 56.7% of them agreed that the language used in the novel is difficult to understand. 41.6% of the students perceived the theme or the issue of the chosen literary text do cater their interest while the other 58.4% do not. The students do not seem to face much problem with the length of the novel as 58.4% of them disagreed on the length for being too long and draggy. Meanwhile, the students strongly disagree with the percentage of 80.5% as all of them disagreed on the plot or storyline to be very dull and boring. They do feel that the chosen novel suits

their interest and helps them to be more logical and mature as the novel revolves on common problems and current issue.

Table 6. Students' Challenges in Dealing with Literary Text

Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
I found it is difficult to understand poetry as they considered every word to have their own underlying meaning.	1(1.7)	24(40.0)	15(25.0)	20(33.3)
The language used in the novel is difficult to understand.	6(10.0)	20(33.3)	30(50.0)	4(6.7)
The theme or the issue of the chosen literary text does not cater my interest.	10(16.7)	25(41.7)	20(33.3)	5(8.3)
The length of the novel is too long and can be described as "dragging".	10(16.7)	25(41.7)	20(33.3)	5(8.3)
The plot or storyline of chosen novel is very dull and boring.	10(16.7)	30(63.8)	10(16.7)	10(16.7)

Table 7 summarizes students' challenges in dealing with their literature lesson. The table shows that the numbers of students who face challenges in their literature lesson are less than those who do not. A total of 91.7% of students disagreed on the statement 'Environment during the literature lesson is not conducive'. Their good perception is due to a very cosy and conducive environment during the literature lesson.

Almost three quarter of the students with the percentage of 58.3% disagreed on the disturbance of classmates who lacks of interest during the literature lesson bother their concentration. The reason is because they feel that the only thing that distracts them from concentrating throughout their literature lesson is their own attitude. By focusing and paying attention they feel nothing will disturb them.

A percentage of 75.0% disagreed with the statement 'the activity doesn't captivate my interest'. This may be due to approaches from the teachers on organizing interesting activity during the class. This kind of students also prefers the teacher to use materials that would ease them on understanding the literature better. 83.3% of them disagreed that the materials provided do not ease them on understanding the literature better. The materials provided will help them better to understand the literature piece.

As a final point, we can see the number of students who becomes demotivated to learn literature is more than those who are not. Despite their lack of proficiency, they are still interested in learning literature. Meanwhile for those who do feel discouraged, the teachers should inspire and assist them to improve their English language skills in order for them be motivated and feel no burden in learning it.

Table 7. Students' Challenges in Dealing with Literature Lesson

Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Environment during the literature lesson is not conducive.	15(25.0)	40(66.7)	5(8.3)	0
Disturbance of classmates who lacks of interest during the literature lesson bother my concentration.	5(8.3)	30(50.0)	22(36.7)	3(5)
The activity during literature lesson doesn't captivate my interest.	10(16.7)	35(58.3)	10(16.7)	5(8.3)
The materials provided don't ease me on understanding the literature text better.	15(25.0)	35(58.3)	10(16.7)	0
I always feel demotivated to learn literature during literature lesson due to my weakness in English Language.	10(16.7)	10(16.7)	30(50.0)	10(16.7)

Table 8 shows students' challenges in dealing with their English language teachers. A percentage of 83.3% were happy with their teachers teaching style. Other than that, 75.0% of the students indicated that their teacher do support their opinion pertaining the literary text while the other 25.0% do not. This shows that the teachers are doing well in moulding them. Besides that, nearly all of them with a percentage of 83.3% disagreed with the question "I could not understand my teacher's explanation due to her pronunciation". The reason is because they

feel that their teacher has good command of English and great communication skills. A majority of 95.0% of them disagreed on their teacher not portraying good values and attitude in teaching. Likewise, 83.3% of them also disagreed on their teacher using monotonous voice projection while in class. This can be simplified that all of these students do not face any subsequent problems with their teachers. In fact they feel that with their teachers, they can improve their literature understanding and their English language skills.

Table 8. Students' Challenges in Dealing with English Language Teachers

Item	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
My teacher does not create a comfortable atmosphere in the literature classroom.	20(33.3)	30(50.0)	10(16.7)	0
My teacher rarely supports my point of view pertaining to the literary text.	10(16.7)	35(58.3)	15(25.0)	0
I could not understand my teacher's explanation due to her pronunciation of English.	20(33.3)	30(50.0)	10(16.7)	0
My teacher does not portray good values and attitude in teaching literature.	27(45.0)	30(50.0)	3(5.0)	0
My teacher uses monotonous voice projection that makes the class very dull.	30(50.0)	20(33.3)	2(3.3)	8(13.3)

The finding of this study has implied that the selection of texts must meet students' interest in order to promote the positive perceptions among the students pertaining to the literary text. Therefore, as suggested by Sidhu (2003) in her study, the choice of selection of text should no longer be the only choice of a panel of teachers and educationists but it has to be discussed and enquire perception of all teachers or at least representative of teachers from each school. This is because these teachers are the one who deal directly with the students themselves thus are more aware on the needs of their students in terms of the preference of literary text. It is beneficial if English teachers could put an extra effort to plan and administer some sort of need analysis to find out the kind of genre favour by majority of their students before deciding on a novel to be used in their school. It is believed that chosen literary texts which are favoured by most students and teachers will increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning literature component in ESL classroom.

Besides that, this study supported the earlier study by Sidhu (2003), on the importance of a more diverse and challenging activities or programme of teaching literature that could go hand-in-hand with the current literature programme. Teachers should be more creative in implementing interesting teaching style to motivate and encourage students to learn literature. Teachers need to be shown models of good teaching either through simulated teacher training or video clipping of actual teaching session. Great and creative teachers will be able to help their students to discover the joy of learning literature and develop a reading habit among their students. Besides that, students should be aware on the importance of extensive reading or reading for pleasure. It is hoped that, teachers could make their students realise that there are other important and long term benefits of learning literature rather than only for the sake of answering literature section in SPM English Language paper.

In addition, teachers should be made to rediscover the joy of learning literature so that they do not become too dependent on worksheets and workbook available in the market. This study reveals that students are interested in learning literature with the integration of ICT. Therefore, teachers should incorporate current technologies in their literature lesson to cater students' needs. One of the effective ways to enhance the teaching and learning of literature is by incorporating ICT as suggested by Yunus et al. (2013), ICT can be used as a learning tool in education and a powerful tool in enhancing the teaching and learning process. Besides that, teacher should encourage the use of Internet among their students in learning literature as Yunus et al. (2012), proved that it has successfully presented information and knowledge materials which is engaging, familiar and comfortable for the learners. It is assured that the kind of teaching and learning techniques use by teachers play a huge role in making their literature lesson a success.

Findings also showed that most of the students think of literature lesson as an interesting lesson if the teachers plan and carry out creative activities such as role playing, storytelling and games. Most likely these students prefer a more structured program through interactive learning by themselves. Teachers should therefore make sure classes are filled with intriguing environment which means a more student-centred kind of style. As a result, students will be more comfortable, keen and passionate on learning literature in English Language Classroom. These desires are adequate and need to be fulfilled in order to instil good habit in terms of teaching

and learning literature lesson in an English Language Classroom and providing the students the easiest and convenient way to learn this international language.

The study also reveals that there are some students who faced problems during their literature lesson that may lead them on having lack of focus and co-operation in class. This may be due to the teachers' weaknesses themselves such as lack of good explanation and elaboration on the literature text. Therefore, teachers need to be a role model of an extensive and critical reader themselves. Teachers should first read and try to understand the piece first in order to master it and be able to explain it to the students without any doubts. Other than that, teachers should also show good examples or perhaps some rewards to instil good reading habit in students in order for the students to understand the text better. According to Shah et al. (2007), the students responded to "sometimes" was "states failure in understanding a portion of the text," expresses that they need a dictionary in order to understand certain underlying meaning in the text. This shows that the teachers need to provide dictionaries for the students throughout the literature lesson as it is essential for students to have better understanding towards the literary text. To overcome this problem the teachers have to play their huge role in instilling the students' interest towards literary components especially.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study could help teachers to reflect on their students perceptions and challenges so that they could find the solution on how to promote their students motivation and shape the positive attitude towards learning literature in English Language Classroom. By knowing these, the teachers will be able to select and implement a more appropriate method or teaching technique that can motivate their student to learn literature in their English Language classroom. Indirectly, this will affect the student positively to ensure their success in learning literature. Finally, it is hoped that the curriculum developers could gain valuable information from this study pertaining to students' needs of literary component. This information will enable them to develop literature materials that suits students' needs.

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