

Students' Perceptions of the Benefits and Challenges of Learning English Language through Literature

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ABSTRACT

Although many English language teachers are interested in integrating literary texts into language instruction, this approach poses several challenges. Nevertheless, students' perceptions of the potential benefits and difficulties of engaging with different English literary genres in the classroom have not yet been thoroughly investigated. By employing a qualitative survey research design, this research aims to address this gap by exploring the perceived advantages and difficulties of reading literary genres encountered by a group of 40 students enrolled in a higher English diploma programme in Sri Lanka. The students perceived literary genres as valuable contributors to their English language development. According to their perceptions, novels were particularly effective in enhancing reading skills and vocabulary, with additional benefits for writing, grammar, and speaking. Poems and short stories supported improvements in both reading skills and vocabulary, while dramas were most effective in vocabulary enhancement. However, many students found novels challenging, and a few also reported difficulties with reading short stories. The students' perceptions of poetry were mixed, with some finding it difficult and others appreciating its narrative structure and accessibility. These findings highlight the importance of selecting English literary texts that correspond to students' interests and language proficiency levels. Teachers should carefully select literary texts that match students' proficiency levels and interests to maximize engagement and learning outcomes. Incorporating a variety of genres and using interactive teaching methods, such as discussions, presentations, and group activities, can help address challenges, enhance language skills across reading, writing, vocabulary, and speaking, and foster positive attitudes toward literature.

Keywords: English language, student perceptions, English literature, literary genres, English language skills

INTRODUCTION

English literary genres (i.e., poems, novels, short stories and dramas) are included in the curriculum of many English language programmes to develop English language skills, grammar and vocabulary. It has been identified as a valuable technique for developing students' English language skills. For instance, novels help learners develop reading comprehension and critical thinking skills, whereas short stories provide engaging and manageable texts that support vocabulary building, reading fluency, and overall language development. Further, poetry helps learners develop words and expressions. Hişmanoğlu (2005) emphasized the use of literature as a popular technique for teaching both basic language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and language areas (vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation). Sharma and Vipin (2014) also assert that language is an instrument of communication that enables two or more people to establish and maintain relationships, whereas literature serves as a medium of communication through which culture is transmitted.

The use of English literary texts or their excerpts for language learning has increased over the last few years. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the role of English literature in language learning was questioned as most of teachers were unsure whether it was useful or effective for teaching a language. Literature requires distinct skills, including text interpretation, understanding context, uncovering deeper meanings, and responding analytically

in exams. During the 1970s and early 1980s, English language teaching approaches were largely communicative and focused on the practical functions of the English language. However, the 1980s witnessed a renewed interest in the integration of literature into English language teaching. This interest in literature as a valuable tool for English language teaching re-emerged in the 1980s (Hall, 2005).

In the selected research setting, a higher diploma programme in English, the syllabus incorporates various literary genres, including novels, short stories, poems, and dramas, to provide students with comprehensive exposure to literature. The diploma programme is one of the recognized and demanding academic programmes in Sri Lanka. To improve English language skills and obtain a professional qualification, students who pass the Advanced Level exams decide to pursue this diploma. Further, it is nationally recognized and highly valued as a qualification to enter the profession of English language teaching. Subsequently, the students often feel encouraged or even compelled to enroll in this programme to secure better career opportunities and gain recognition in applying for jobs in the state or private sector.

This study explored the students' perceptions of using English literary genres in the English classroom, focusing on both the benefits for English language learning and the challenges encountered. Few studies have specifically explored students' perceptions on benefits and challenges of using English literary genres (e.g., Soy et al., 2023; Taye, 2025; Dera, 2025). Although a previous study in Sri Lanka (Ahmed, 2025) has examined undergraduates' perceptions of English literary genres, it has not focused on diploma students. This study addresses this gap by providing detailed qualitative insights into how diploma students perceive the use of literary texts in English language learning, which can guide teachers in selecting and using English literary texts more effectively in classroom. The findings of this study provide insights into students' needs and challenges and provide insights for enhancing the learning English language using literary genres.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature can be helpful in the language learning process because of the personal involvement it fosters in readers. Engaging imaginatively with literature enables learners to shift the focus of their attention beyond more mechanical aspects of a foreign language. According to Collie and Slater (1987), there are four main reasons for a language teacher to use literature in the classroom: necessity of using authentic materials, providing exposure to different cultures, enhancing English language, and making students engaged in learning language. Ritlyova (2014) identify similar benefits of using literary genres in language classes.

“Students working with literature are able to think about different possibilities in solving problems that occur in the text of literature. Situations described in literature are often closely related to their own experiences. This helps them to be inventive and come up with various ideas that could be used even in their real life” (Ritlyova, 2014). Literature not only exposes students to language but also encourages critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Lazar (1993) states that a good novel presents multifaceted dilemmas and engages learners emotionally, linguistically, and intellectually, with a stimulating story, captivating themes, a strong plot, and memorable characters. The content of the novel should fit the learners' cognitive and emotional levels.

Literature can be a powerful and motivating source for writing in ESL learners which provides opportunities for various kinds of writing practices on themes, content, character and organization. Literature offers a wide range of themes that can be used for guided, free, controlled, and other types of writing activities (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). While literature in language classes is often linked primarily to reading and writing, it can also serve as a powerful tool for developing speaking and listening skills.

“The study of literature in a language class, though being mainly associated with reading and writing, it can play an equally meaningful role in teaching both speaking and listening. Oral reading, dramatization, improvisation, role-playing, pantomiming, reenactment, discussion, and group activities may center on a work of literature” (Hişmanoğlu, 2005).

When using literature to teach English language skills, literary texts should be taught in an integrated manner rather than in isolation, allowing learners to simultaneously develop reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills while engaging with cultural and thematic aspects of the text. Teachers should integrate receptive skills

with speaking and writing activities, using them to create meaningful communication, rather than focusing solely on producing words, phrases, and sentences (Hişmanoğlu, 2005, p.57). Through learning different kinds of literary texts, learners have plenty of opportunities for reading. Sharma (2014) states that frequent extensive reading widens the prospect of the reader in terms of vocabulary and usage, which invariably promotes thoughts. Thus, using literary texts promotes both language skills and critical thinking.

Poetry is a literary genre that supports learning English language skills. According to Hişmanoğlu (2005), studying poetry offers at least two key benefits: it helps students appreciate the writer's composition process by analyzing poems in detail, and it develops sensitivity to vocabulary, fostering deeper interest and stronger analytical skills. Hall (2005) also explains the educational benefits of poetry. He denotes that at first it provides readers with a different viewpoint towards language use by going beyond the known rules of grammar and syntax. Secondly, it triggers unmotivated readers owing to being so open to diverse interpretations. Thirdly, it evokes feelings and thoughts and makes students familiar with figures of speech of English language.

Short stories are valuable resources for learning both language and life lessons. In these texts, characters act out real and symbolic aspects of daily life in a variety of tones and registers, reflecting on and illuminating human experiences (Sage, 1987). Including short fiction in the ESL curriculum offers several benefits: it simplifies reading tasks for learners, broadens advanced readers' understanding of different cultures, provides challenging and creative texts that encourage personal exploration, motivates learners through authentic material, and facilitates the teaching of foreign cultures. The use of short stories is a highly effective technique in today's language classes. Short fiction is universal, allowing learners worldwide to relate to the content (Sage, 1987). It also contributes to the development of cognitive and analytical skills by presenting situations in a compressed form and enables learners to connect stories with their daily lives for more efficient and creative learning (Lazar, 2007).

Using novels in foreign language classes is a valuable technique for developing linguistic skills and cultural understanding. Novels reflect real human experiences, broaden readers' knowledge of different cultures, increase motivation through authentic material, and facilitate cultural learning (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Selecting a suitable novel is crucial, considering students' proficiency, age, interests, and alignment with course goals (Benzoukh, 2017). When carefully chosen, novels make reading lessons engaging, support vocabulary development, and improve reading comprehension, while also enhancing learners' understanding of the target language culture (Lazar, 1993).

Using drama in the language classroom is an effective resource, helping learners understand grammatical structures in context, use language to express and inform, and raise awareness of the target language and culture (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Drama also stimulates imagination, promotes creative thinking, enhances listening skills, strengthens comprehension (Hişmanoğlu, 2005, p.63). However, several challenges persist, as Shafka (2012) found that more than 70% of students struggled with the length of plays, as well as with extensive symbolism, figurative language, and complex writing styles. Addressing these difficulties can enhance the learning experience, and learners' needs, proficiency levels, and interests should be carefully considered when selecting dramas. Careful selection and guided use of dramas can enhance students' English language skills while addressing the challenges they face.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to explore the students' perceptions on the advantages and difficulties of reading literary genres. The methodology of this study was based on a qualitative survey research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative survey involving 40 students (32 female and 8 male) enrolled in the higher diploma programme provided an in-depth understanding of their perspectives on learning literature. Thirty students had Tamil as their mother tongue, and ten students had Sinhala as their mother tongue.

Most students had chosen the diploma programme to improve their career opportunities, get better jobs, earn promotions, and perform well in official and personal work. Many were also inspired by the success of previous graduates who built strong careers through the diploma. Most students had no prior experience studying English

literature at the school level or in any formal setting. Although some students had a personal interest in reading English literary genres for leisure, they had not studied these texts in their English classroom.

The students' responses were collected using a structured qualitative questionnaire, which included both closed and open-ended items. It was developed based on previous research and refined through a pilot test with two students to ensure clarity, which allowed efficient data collection from the students. The questionnaire, designed as a Google Form, was sent to 60 students via email and WhatsApp in June 2021. The students were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential. The study sample consisted of 40 students who returned the questionnaire, representing a self-selected subset of the 60 students invited to participate. The sample of students had studied the English language for many years, ranging from 1 year to more than 18 years. However, their exposure to literature was comparatively limited, as the majority (95%) had studied it for only 1 to 5 years.

Descriptive statistics, including percentages, were used to summarize the closed-ended responses, while the open-ended responses were analyzed thematically using the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). The researchers familiarized themselves with the student responses, coded meaningful ideas, and grouped them into two main themes: benefits of using literary genres and challenges of using them, which were then reviewed to ensure they reflected the participants' perceptions. Triangulation was applied by comparing the survey responses with classroom observations and field notes to ensure the themes accurately reflected the participants' perceptions.

This research drew on the experience of one of the researchers, who served as an English instructor in the programme and integrated literary genres into English language teaching. Through this approach, students were not only taught the linguistic aspects of English but were also exposed to various dimensions of literary texts, thereby enhancing their comprehension and appreciation of the materials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The students' perspectives of benefits and challenges of learning English through literary genres are discussed in the following sections.

Benefits of Using Literary Genres

According to the data obtained, English literary texts are useful in developing English language. Most participants (40%) said that novels primarily help improve reading skills while the second majority (25%) reported that novels help to improve vocabulary. Hişmanoğlu (2005) asserted that reading novels is a very effective way of building vocabulary and developing reading comprehension skills. Further, 15% of them reported that novels help in developing writing skills whereas only 3% reported they support speaking skills. 13% of the students mentioned that they help to enhance grammar.

Sage (1987) and Gabriel (2019) asserted that the use of literature in language teaching is a valuable and interesting strategy. The students' views on the role of novels in developing language skills varied depending on how effectively the novels and accompanying materials were used in the programme to support their learning. Further, it was also stated that motivation towards reading novels can be further established when the lecturer devotes more time to reading and discussing the text during the class hours. Themes and settings captivate their imagination and exploring the human condition should be included in the nature of the selected novels (Hişmanoğlu, 2005).

Poems were perceived as a supportive genre by the majority (35%) of the respondents in improving vocabulary and reading skills. Gabriel (2019) emphasized that the use of literary devices in poetry helps learners discover new words, thereby enhancing their vocabulary. While the second majority of students (28%) mentioned that poetry improved their reading skills. Notably, no one reported that it improves listening skills. Some respondents (10%) reported that studying poems helps improve grammar. Subsequently, very few (3%) reported that it developed their speaking skills. 25% of students mentioned that poems enhance their analytical skills in writing

analyses in the assessment. Students learn practically the figurative and daily use of the target language in the literary texts, especially through poems (Hişmanoğlu, 2005).

Short stories played a crucial role in the English language development of the students. An equal percentage (25%) of respondents stated that it helped to enhance reading as well as vocabulary. Short stories help students to improve language skills more effectively because of the motivational benefit embedded in the stories (Gabriel, 2019). An equal number of students (10%) of students mentioned that short stories helped them to develop writing skills, listening skills and grammar. Meanwhile, the second majority of students (20%) stated that short stories enhance speaking skills. According to the students, reading short stories was enjoyable and served as an engaging language-learning tool, as it conveyed real-world experiences through narration and characters.

Through dramas students practice and integrate reading, writing, listening and especially speaking skills (Gabriel, 2019). 45% of the students mentioned the benefits of dramas in developing speaking skills (45%), which is the majority among other skills. The second majority insisted that dramas have a role in developing vocabulary (25%). Many students stated that the dramas offered an insightful experience, allowing them to explore various aspects of life through both realistic and imaginative characters. They mentioned that they were able to reflect themselves through the characters depicted in the dramas. Literature serves to provide an exquisite excitement of emotions and a very deep insight into the nature of reality (Yaqoob, 2007). Subsequently, 13% of the students mentioned that dramas improved their reading skills. Less number of students perceived dramas as a way of developing writing skills (5%), and 3% students reported it was influential in learning grammar. Incorporating literary texts engages learners and enables them to interact, think critically and develop various language skills (Gabriel, 2019).

Overall, these findings suggest that different literary genres play distinct roles in enhancing learners' reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar. Keshavarzi (2012) further notes that literature addresses themes and topics that are inherently interesting, reflecting human experience, and presents them in ways that actively engage the reader. Incorporating English literature into language teaching has significant positive effects, as it facilitates the integration of linguistic competence into communicative competence by allowing learners to use language in diverse social contexts (Keshavarzi, 2012).

Challenges of Reading Literary Genres

Table 1 below presents the students' perception on the difficulty level they experienced in reading literary genres.

Table 1: Difficulty Levels of Literary Genres according to the Students

Literary genre	Most difficult	Difficult	Neutral	Less difficult	Easy
Novel	45%	25%	13%	10%	7%
Short stories	0%	10%	20%	15%	55%
Poems	35%	8%	18%	14%	25%
Dramas	5%	15%	27%	40%	13%

The results reveal that the students encountered challenges in reading and comprehending literary genres. According to 45% of the students, the two novels they had to read were most difficult and another 25% also found reading them quite challenging. According to their views, despite being interesting, the novels were often very long and require considerable time to fully understand the concepts and their deeper cultural and contextual background. Novels seem a difficult genre of literature to comprehend (Ashrafuzzaman et al., 2021). Students find reading a novel written in a target language difficult, boring, and unmotivating (Hişmanoğlu, 2005).

Only a few students (7%) mentioned that novels are their favorite genre, explaining that they enjoy reading them even in their first language and that novels help them understand various cultural backgrounds and social patterns. Reading novels is a very effective way of building vocabulary and developing reading comprehension skills (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Students who perceive literary texts as a supporting factor have good learning habits that can promote extensive reading (Soy, Maisarah & Sovann, 2023).

Short fiction contributes to the development of cognitive analytical abilities by bringing the whole self to bear on a compressed account of a situation in a single place and moment” (Sage, 1987). None of the students considered reading short stories as most difficult. However, 10% said they found reading short stories difficult. More than half of the participants (55%) reported preferring short stories because they were concise and easier to understand. Additionally, reading them stimulated their imagination. Keshavarzi (2012) asserted that reading short stories stimulates the learners' imagination and results in their creativity. Even after a long time, reading short stories remains memorable for learners, as they recall the events of the stories.

While 35% of students reported poetry as the second most difficult genre to read, 25% considered it their favorite, noting that its narrative nature makes it relatively easy to understand. A poet creates a situation in which the reader encounters conflict in understanding what the poet means. (Keshavarzi, 2012). 8% of the students considered poetry difficult, and 14% said it was less difficult, and another 14% felt neutral. On the other hand, in terms of the dramas, 15% of participants said they struggle reading them, while 13% named it as their preferred genre. Interestingly, 40% of students reported that dramas were less difficult than other genres, as they provide a scaffold for expressing ideas through multiple characters. The findings of this study align with Hişmanoğlu's (2005) view that drama enhances both verbal and nonverbal communication skills. The results further support his assertion that literature serves not only as a means of developing learners' written and oral proficiency in the target language, but also as a window into its culture, fostering students' cultural awareness and competence.

CONCLUSION

This study presented a group of English diploma students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges in reading English literary genres. The students perceive literary genres as vital components of their English language development and personal growth. The findings depicted that learners had diverse preferences and challenges in reading literary genres: novels were generally considered as the most challenging, while short stories were the most preferred and easily understood genre. Conversely, poetry and drama elicited mixed opinions, with perceived difficulty varying by the students' level of understanding.

The selection of appropriate literary texts is important for learners (Abdul et al., 2022). These results highlight the importance of considering learners' interests and perspectives when selecting English literary texts and designing curriculum for language classrooms. Students can improve their understanding by regularly reading English novels, short stories, and plays, and by writing reviews to express their own interpretations. Using different methods of learning, such as group discussions, pair work, and presentations can make lessons more interesting and interactive. Above all, students should be encouraged and motivated to see literature as enjoyable and meaningful, rather than a difficult subject. The study found that overcoming challenges in learning English literature requires teachers and students to collaborate using practical, engaging methods, such as relating literary ideas to real-life experiences and using examples in the students' mother tongue. When students develop curiosity and a positive attitude toward English literature, they are more likely to engage deeply with literary texts, succeed in their studies, and participate actively in classroom discussions.

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