

Assessing the "Literature in Action" Component: Challenges and Preferences Among Secondary School ESL Learners

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Literature in Action (LiA) component within Malaysian secondary education is purposefully done to promote a holistic language learning. However, there still exists structural classroom challenges among the students. This study aims to investigate the operational realities and challenges, and the pedagogical preferences of secondary school ESL learners. Utilizing a mixed-method design, quantitative survey data (N = 10) and qualitative semi-instructed interview were employed to gather insights from Form Three learners across varied proficiency levels. The findings revealed the exact split in regards to learners' difficulties, in which half of the students struggled with the literature component due to vocabulary deficit and unclear teacher instructions. Furthermore, it is also revealed that the students prefer linear literary texts compared to dense poetry or short story formats. A notable gap also exists between the current classroom teaching methods and the desired ones where students favored visual tools and reading comprehension tasks to be included in the literature classroom. Ultimately, integrating authentic learners' preferences in the curriculum is essential to transform literature components into an engaging L2 acquisition process.

Keywords: Literature In Action, ESL Literature Pedagogy, Learners Perceptions, Instructional Barriers, Language Acquisition

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of literature into the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom is commonly acknowledged as an important mechanism to provide authentic content and rich linguistic input and engagement. Carter and Long (1991) highlighted the essence of literature as a tripartite purpose in language learning through the language model, cultural model, and personal growth model. This echoes the statement by Lazar (1993) that highlights the stimulation literary texts may bring upon the learners' emotions, critical thinking, and personal feelings and experiences. In the context of the Malaysian educational curriculum, the inclusion of literature component in 2020 has marked a pedagogical shift toward utilizing creative texts in promoting both higher engagement in English language classrooms and better proficiency among students.

Formerly, the initiative required the learners to experience diverse genres of literary texts including poetry, short stories, and novels from both local Asian and Western authors. However, more recently, it is re-designed into the "Literature in Action" (LiA) module under the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM). This redesignation portrays the sustained commitment by the Ministry of Education in promoting student-centered, active learning. Nevertheless, Rosli Talif (1991) highlighted that the primary focus is no longer centered on whether the literature component should be integrated into the curriculum, but rather on how, when, and where it must be strategically executed to optimize the learning outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks of Literature in ESL

The integration of literary texts into the learning of second language depends heavily on pedagogy that balances linguistic acquisition and personal enrichment. Literature instruction is categorized into cultural, language, and personal development models (Carter & Long, 1991) which later expanded by theorist Lazar (1993) that highlights how L2 learners achieve maximum engagement when the texts being learnt activate their personal experiences, emotional investment, and critical thinking. Scaffolding over these theories, Siti Aqilah Abdul Rahim and Azlina Abdul Aziz (2024) emphasize the need to harmonize language decoding with personal growth in secondary ESL literature classrooms to avoid passive rote learning from compromising the benefits of aesthetic and linguistic gains among the learners. Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory further clarifies this balance which explains how limited working memory becomes even more strained when learners are to process complex input. This becomes worse if the texts are unfamiliar to the learners. Choi et al. (2024) states that, in L2 reading context, learners face higher intrinsic cognitive load when they are working on unfamiliar vocabulary, complex syntax, and literary devices that are abstract. Putra and Yanto (2025) asserts that inefficient instruction choices will further strain the learning process when they include unclear instructions and passive transcription tasks, leaving limited mental ability to interpret the texts. Therefore, integrating low-anxiety visual guidance is needed to reduce students' cognitive load to help them overcome processing barriers in the ESL literature classroom.

The Evolution of the Literature Component in Malaysia

The structure of literature in the Malaysian national school curriculum has undergone several transformations over the past two decades. In 2000, the literature component aimed to elevate English proficiency while widening cultural worldviews among the learners under the Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) (Sivapalan, 2008). However, educators often struggled to balance literature as an authentic resource for language growth with the idea of treating it as an isolated object of study (Rosli Talif, 1991). This historical friction often caused classroom practices to default to exam-oriented and teacher-centered practices (Nawi, 2023). The framework was later reconceptualized into the Literature in Action (LiA) module in the transition to the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM). It explicitly aligns with the standards of Common European Framework of References (CEFR) in prioritizing action-oriented, learner-centered and creative experiences (Amri, 2025). Nevertheless, recent research by Zaini et al. (2024) finds a continuing disconnection between the curriculum intentions and the monitored execution. Due to still being constraint by assessment pressures, educators often go back to traditional drilling methods and passive transcription tasks (Chung & Ngui, 2025), highlighting the need to examine how secondary school learners adapt with these operational realities.

Learner Challenges and Genre Preferences

Secondary school learners face substantial linguistic and instructional barriers that significantly influence their engagement with the selected literary texts. Research evidence shows that the targeted language proficiency determines a student's capacity for text interpretation. Ukat and Ismail (2022) identified restricted vocabulary knowledge and weak syntactic decoding skills as the primary sources of student anxiety, especially of those in rural Malaysian schools. For learners that often struggle with basic decoding, abstract themes and non-literal literary devices become impossible to be processed and make learning harder rather than helpful (Rezeq et al., 2018), which ambiguous instructions make it even more difficult (Harwati Hashim & Mohamad Asyraf Abd Talid, 2019). These difficulties will shape how the learners engage with different genres. Shorter formats such as poetry and short stories are usually assumed to be less intimidating as Engku et al. (2020) demonstrates how dense, non-linear, and figurative nature reduce severe cognitive fatigue among learners, especially those of low proficiency. On another note, Sahib and Stapa (2022) asserts how full-length prose fictions such as novels provide learners with continuous, predictable context which enable them to infer unknown vocabulary from the plot arrangements. This is further supported by Hossain (2024) that explains plot-driven texts will minimize cultural distance and promote better intrinsic

motivation, explaining the reason secondary ESL learners show stronger preferences for extended prose fiction compared to syntactically complex short texts.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Regardless of decades of theoretical and structural implementation, a persistent gap remains between the idealized curriculum and real classroom practice. As a result, English language competency is slowly diminishing even though the learners have gone through years of formal learning. In addition, the effort in implementing literature in the English curriculum with the aim to improve proficiency was also ineffective (Nawi & Nor, 2023). A recent study highlights the issue of learners' difficulty in learning the language, despite it being an added value to their professional development (Karnine et al, 2022). In detail, it exposes the problems among the learners such as limited vocabulary, difficulty to process figurative language and infer thematic meanings beyond the texts that they are reading. As a result, it may somehow affect how well the learners are able to think critically and respectively contribute to society in the future (Nadesan & Md. Shah, 2020).

In addition, the pedagogical design in Malaysian classrooms also tends to focus on rigid and examination-based practices. It is worth noting that the selection of complex texts, teacher-centered methods such as note-copying and passive reading, will eventually strip literature of its interactive value while instilling higher academic stress and hopelessness among the lower performing students. Although various research has addressed teachers' pedagogical strategies and institutional efforts, there remains a critical lack of data focusing on the voices of the learners in learning English literature. Thus, along with the changes over the years on the literary texts and the way literature is implemented, there comes a need to investigate the students' attitudes towards learning the component (Amri & Uri, 2025). Exploring these ideas is important to prevent a one-sided learning and teaching environment and to develop better learning materials.

Thus, this study investigates the current operational realities and learners' perceptions within the context of secondary school ESL literature classrooms. This is further guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the primary challenges secondary school students face when engaging with English literature components?
2. Which specific literary genres and texts elicit the highest levels of student interest and engagement?
3. Which classroom activities do students perceive as most effective and the expectations for future instructional design?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the mixed-method approach in which it utilizes qualitative data to explore and contextualize the quantitative metrics. The quantitative data explored the student challenges and the activity configurations were mapped using the framework of descriptive questionnaire, while the experiential nuances, classroom anxieties, and pedagogical desires were investigated through a semi-structured group interview.

The study was set at a daily government school located in Pahang, Malaysia. The school is institutionally categorized with having a rural demographic setting. For this study, purposive sampling was utilized to select ten ($N = 10$) Form 3 students across three different classrooms, ranging from lower to higher proficiency levels in English, to capture a reliable cross-section of academic tracks. Although the sampling size represents a modest quantity, this size is justified within the paradigm of qualitative and mixed-method research aimed at micro-level, exploratory classroom investigation. Thematic saturation, in which no new insights or behavioral patterns and themes emerge, often occurs within the range of 6-12 in-depth qualitative interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Purposive sampling was employed as it enables deliberate selection of information-rich data in a specific domain, allowing limited resources available to be

used effectively (Tajik & Tajik, 2024). This allows for deeper insights on students' challenges, interests, and perceptions on literature classroom activities.

Table 1 : Participants' Demographic Information

Participants Demographic (N = 10)	Profile Distribution
Gender Distribution	Female (n = 7), Male (n = 3)
Language Spoken at Home	Malay
Exposure to Target Language	English utilized exclusively in formal classroom settings
Prior Proficiency	Grade B (n = 4), Grade C (n = 3), Grade D (n = 2)

The main quantitative data collection tool consists of a modified 14-item questionnaire adapted from an institutional ESL evaluation handout. For the instrument that was employed, the survey questionnaire uses a close-ended type of answer with "Yes" and "No" as the options for the questions given. The two-answer option was chosen to avoid ambiguity and is proven to cost less time to be completed with the exact answer options provided (Jain et al., 2016). The data extraction has passed through general administrative parameters to maintain a strict learner-centered experience and actionable pedagogy. The dimensions extracted are as follows:

Table 2 : Targeted Dimensions according to Research Questions

Research Question	Variables	Items
RQ1	Linguistic and Instructional Barriers in Learning Literature	Items set in identifying sources of failure of comprehension and teacher-led clarity
RQ2	Genre and Text Preferences	Measuring students' engagement and comprehension of the assigned curriculum, including novels, poems, and short stories
RQ3	Perception on Pedagogical Activities and Recommendations	A comparative analysis contrasting the current activities carried out by teachers against the ones students find useful to be integrated

Following the survey, a one-hour semi-structured focus group interview was conducted in a neutral space to encourage open, detailed conversations in relation to the students' experiences and learning preferences.

Since a survey was employed, descriptive statistics is utilized to process raw data into percentages, frequency counts, and relative rankings. Next, qualitative interview responses were analysed using thematic analysis in which the coding of the transcripts were done to isolate recurring patterns of student frustration, structural boredom, and engagement triggers. These insights were directly triangulated with the quantitative datasets to establish a cohesive, comprehensive overview of the classroom environment (Janssen et al., 2023).

Although this study offers actionable insights into the perceptions of the LiA component, the findings must be interpreted with caution primarily due to the small sample size (N=10) that was drawn from a single rural school, despite achieving a qualitative thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006). It limits statistical generalizability to the broader ESL learners' population in Malaysia. In addition, there is a probability of social desirability bias as the findings rely on self-reported survey and focus group data. Participants may have adjusted their perceptions in relation to the challenges or activity preferences due to subject expectations and peer dynamics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings on RQ1: Linguistic and Instructional Challenges in Literature Classroom

To measure the difficulties students face within their English language literature classroom, the participants'

self-perceived problems were surveyed. The dataset obtained shows an exact split among the participants in which 50% (n = 5) reported encountering difficulties during English literature lessons, while another 50% (n = 5) reported managing without difficulties.

Table 3: Self-Reported Difficulties in Literature Class

	Frequency (n)
Yes (Encountering Problems)	
Primary reason: Inadequate English proficiency	3
Secondary reason: Unclear instructions or explanation from the teachers	2
No (Encountering No Major Problems)	
Primary reason: Adequate target language proficiency	2
Secondary reason: Clear explanations and structured instructions from the teachers	2
Tertiary reason: Perceiving literature as fun and easy	1

The raw findings were cross-examined and it shows a direct connection between language proficiency and in-class performance. The students who noted that they “do not understand English” were the same individuals that face struggles in completing literature tasks. This echoes Nawi’s (2023) systematic review that identified restricted vocabulary and low language proficiency as the main anchors of students’ anxiety and comprehension failure.

It is worth noting that having limited knowledge in using the target language will subsequently be a barrier to learning literature. Plus, the teachers’ instructional clarity is also a major factor that heavily impacts the students’ ability to either be capable or confused during the literature activities. A recent analysis by Putra and Yanto (2025) found that the critical role of teachers’ clarity is the strongest predictor of student self-efficacy in language learning. This includes clear pedagogical directions and scaffolding guidance which will assist and promote learners’ engagement in understanding the literature component.

Findings on RQ2: Genre and Text Preferences

To explore the students’ preferences in learning literature, the questionnaire evaluated the student’s alignment with the current choices of literary texts to identify which literary forms generate the highest engagement and interest.

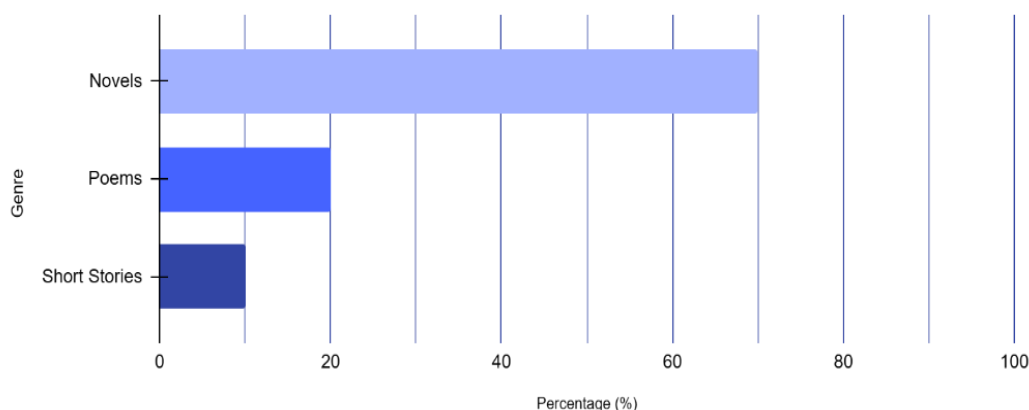


Figure 1 Students’ Genre Preferences

The figure above shows an overwhelming majority selected prose fiction rather than poetry or short stories. Looking at the specific assigned texts, most of the students, which shows a total of seven students from ten (70%), enjoy learning the novel 'Around the World in 80 Days' by Jules Verne. There is only one student (10%) who preferred learning the short story 'One is One and All Alone', and two students (20%) favoured the poem 'Leisure' by William Henry Davies. This shows that although poetry and short stories offer advantages pedagogically due to their shorter length, evidence shows that they are relatively more challenging due to the structures. Novels, on the other hand, offer a more linear and sustained narrative that allows students to gradually engage in the storyline which eventually helps generate higher curiosity among learners (Ahmad, 2014; Amri, 2025).

Findings on RQ3: Current Classroom Activities and Future Recommendations

The main goal of this study is to map out the current literature activities in secondary ESL classrooms against the specific learning activities the students find useful and effective to be integrated in the future. In evaluating student preferences, participants were asked to select their top three preferred activities, summarizing a total of 30 choices per item set (10 respondents $\times$ 3 choices = 30 total selections).

Table 4 Current Teaching Practices and Future Recommendations

Types of Activities	Current Teacher Practice	Student Enjoyment Level [n (% total choices)]	Perceived Comprehension of the Texts [n (% total choices)]	Future Desired Integration [n (% total choices)]
Group Activities	High Usage	7 (23%)	7 (23%)	4 (13%)
Reading Comprehension	High Usage	5 (17%)	7 (23%)	7 (23%)
Translation Work	High Usage	4 (13%)	5 (17%)	7 (23%)
Puzzles	High Usage	4 (13%)	2 (7%)	3 (10%)
Mind Mapping	Rare Usage	6 (20%)	5 (17%)	3 (10%)
Drawing Exercises	Never Used	4 (13%)	4 (13%)	4 (13%)
Presentations	Never Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (7%)
Role-play/ Drama	Never Used	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total Response	-	30	30	30

The quantitative data from Table 4 reveals a gap between the current teaching practices with student learning preferences. Traditional teaching methods such as group tasks, translations, and text comprehension exercises are usually applied in literature classrooms, leaving no room for more interactive and expressive activities such as mind mapping, drawing, presentation, and role-play to be experienced by learners.

This identified mismatch echoes the systemic trends found out by Zaini et. al (2024) who has observed how heavy secondary ESL literature delivery relies on structural and teacher-centered routines that are driven by exam-oriented preparation regardless of the mandates for 21st-century active learning. Surprisingly, students reported high levels of enjoyment (20%) and comprehension level (17%) for mind-mapping, regardless of how rarely applied the methods are in classrooms. This data aligns with the study by Choi et. al (2024) who found that graphic and visual sequencing tools are specifically effective in reducing cognitive load to process foreign literary components. It is worth noting that chunking abstract information into manageable, non-threatening data, which mind mapping offers, will scaffold learning especially for those in lower proficiency levels.

On the other hand, although puzzles are often applied in learning literature, students found it to be least effective in understanding literary texts (7%). This is possibly because puzzles fail to offer a deep analytical processing or context needed for students to interpret the texts, even though it can stimulate brief extrinsic

motivation among the learners when first played (Vimal & Pillai, 2024). Due to this, students perceive them as low-utility, isolated activities instead of a meaningful one.

Discussion on RQ1: Linguistic and Instructional Barriers in Learning Literature

The result that portrays exactly half of the participants struggled significantly while learning literature highlights a critical linguistic foundation to process literary texts. Within the ESL acquisition context, text comprehension tends to depend on how good a student can decode the vocabulary. Thus, as a result, if a student lacks this skill, literary texts may become a barrier rather than a resource for language learning. This equation may be magnified in a rural school setting where English is often not utilized outside of the classroom hours.

This finding is consistent with the empirical evidence by Ukat and Ismail (2022) which found that localized language proficiency is still the most predictive factor in identifying whether an ESL learner views literature learning as an active opportunity to develop their second language or a main source of anxiety in an academic setting. This means that when a student possesses an insufficient lexical repository, the intrinsic demands to understand literary texts may generate cognitive overload. In addition, Rezeq et al. (2018) believes that these language barriers may limit students' ability to look beyond literal meanings to infer cultural examples or other perspectives in the target language narratives in using literature to improve proficiency. This reality can potentially lead to the feeling of alienation while reading the texts.

Most often, this sense of detachment from the texts may be influenced by instructional choices. The raw data from the qualitative interview indicates that when teachers are ambiguous, the classroom vibe might decline into cognitive frustration and confusion. This specific classroom reality aligns with the findings from a study in 2019 whereby literature classes are usually perceived as monotonous and stressful not because of the texts chosen, but rather because the teachers do not balance structural analysis with clear, scaffolded pedagogical directions in the classroom (Harwati Hashim & Mohamad Asyraf Abd Talif, 2019). Consequently, without proper guidance, students with low-proficiency levels may experience immediate learned helplessness during the literature sessions.

Discussion on RQ2: Genre and Narrative Preferences

The surprising student preferences for the novel (70%) highlights a strategic demand for text choices that offer structural continuity. On the other hand, shorter literary texts such as poetry and short stories are usually assumed to be less intimidating for ESL learners due to their length. However, the findings demonstrate that these compressed formats provide significant comprehension struggles for students with lower proficiency levels. As stated by Engku et al. (2020), students' engagement and attitude towards learning the literature component vary significantly across different genres based on their access to predict the narrative. It is worth noting that shorter texts frequently demand dense, rapid interpretation of literary devices that are usually complex. On the other hand, a full-length novel enables struggling readers to slowly adapt to the author's specific writing style and repetitive lexical patterns across multiple chapters in the book.

This advantage possessed by novels is further supported by Sahib and Stapa (2022) in which it is argued that linear prose formats provide an ongoing environment for context. This environment allows ESL learners to successfully deduce unknown word meanings from the surrounding plot, overcoming the constant stress caused by word-by-word decoding.

In addition, the widespread popularity of Jules Verne's travel narrative over abstract texts portrays how adventurous plot dynamics will effectively trigger intrinsic motivation among the learners. Based on a study by Hossain (2024), a full storyline offers opportunities for students to immerse themselves in reading for global meaning. For example, they might skim and scan to look for plot shifts instead of becoming stuck with complex literature terms. Eventually, this structural familiarity will turn into an ideal tool for low-anxiety language acquisition.

Discussion on RQ3: Comparison of Classroom Realities and Actionable Classroom Preferences

The comparative analysis between actual classroom activities and student desires reveals a significant dichotomy within the LiA framework. Although students expressed a strong desire for interactive tasks such as group work and mind mapping, they simultaneously requested high amounts of traditional reading comprehension (22%) and translation exercise (22%) for future lessons. This split portrays an understandable survival strategy within an exam-oriented educational system.

An exact pedagogical tension was also identified by Siti Aqilah Abdul Rahim and Azlina Abdul Aziz (2024) that reported how actual daily learning routines may default back to teacher-centered methods designed to prepare students for formal writing tests. This happens despite the official national curriculum's objectives that emphasizes creativity and personal expressions in learning literature. As a result, students might have a fixed mindset that written assessments reward literal text accuracy and vocabulary knowledge, which potentially leads them to demand direct translation practices as the most effective way to secure better grades. This is further proven by the data from the group interview that reveals teacher-led exercises, like the note-copying practices, continue to dominate the classroom teaching and learning sessions:

"...our teachers make it compulsory for us to copy the notes into our exercise book at least once per week... if the teacher asks us to copy the notes, there usually will be no interesting activity for the rest of the lesson."

Chung and Ngui (2025) mentioned that this over-reliance on these practices strips literature of its interactive value, potentially turning a subject designed to appreciate language into a dry chore. Consequently, this contradicts the fundamental aims of learner-centered education the national curriculum is aiming to achieve.

In addition, while teachers in schools also need to overcome the time constraints by assigning independent reading tasks, the 100% agreement among students that they prefer reading 'together in class' portrays a direct need for immediate feedback from the teachers. To support this, an observation from a study by Velayutham and Yunus (2019) highlighted that real-time teacher feedback during a shared reading session will help prevent minor language errors from becoming a permanent language routine among the students.

In conclusion, to bridge this gap, teachers must intentionally introduce visual tools such as mind mapping and drawing activities in literature classrooms, which are often student-led. This will allow the students to organize storyline structures and meanings without relying on text summaries, especially among those of low proficiency. Consequently, this should address both engagement preferences by the students and the need to prepare for the examinations.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the reality of LiA's execution in schools, challenges faced by the students, and their preferences within a rural Malaysian secondary school ESL literature classroom. By focusing on the voices of the learners, the research generated actionable findings with three research questions as the guideline.

The findings highlighted the exact split in regards to learners' difficulties, which 50% of the students struggled with the literature component. The main cause for this struggle is the lack of target language proficiency where it is heavily compounded when the instructions from the teachers lack clarity. On the other hand, students who can manage their learning well attribute their ease to efficient, adequate and well-structured teacher explanations.

In the perspective of genre and narrative preferences, an overwhelming majority of students (70%) express their preference for a full-length prose fiction over shorter narrative such as poetry (20%) and short stories (10%). In a narrower perspective, 70% of the respondents identified Jules Verne's adventure-based novel, *Around the World in 80 Days*, as their preferred text for LiA. It is presumed that a more linear, storyline-based structure of the novel offers students a predictable contextual environment that allows them to build

their vocabulary and track plot development with ease and less cognitive fatigue when compared to abstract, syntactically dense literary texts.

Further findings identify a gap between the current pedagogical execution and student-preferred learning activities. While teachers often rely on traditional group tasks, reading comprehension activities, direct translation to L1, and puzzles, visual and engaging tools such as mind mapping, drawing, and drama are not included in the learning process. Surprisingly, the respondents identified mind mapping as highly enjoyable and effective for text comprehension, whereas gamified puzzles were chosen the least helpful. Plus, although they enjoyed creative activities, the respondents requested more reading comprehension and translation practices for future lessons to better process the texts.

These findings highlight several implications for ESL practitioners, curriculum developers, and policymakers in the education sector. Firstly, teachers must move away from passive note-copying and suchlike practices to allow students to better appreciate the language components. Educators should also prioritize low-anxiety visual tools such as mind mapping, drawing, and role-playing exercises in scaffolding text comprehension among the learners. Not only that, curriculum designers should consider and prioritize narrative continuity and clear plot structures in selecting the texts, especially taking into account the lower proficiency students. This will foster an engaging reading journey which eventually promotes global reading skills among high school students.

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