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Assessing Iraqi Learners' Perceptions and Attitudes through Reading Literary Texts(*)

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Assessing Iraqi Learners' Perceptions and Attitudes through Reading Literary Texts

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to assess how reading literature has affected the cultural experiences of Iraqi students. This study was conducted among third-year students at the department of English and literature to evaluate their cultural background in reading literature. The responses of the students to reading literature were compiled using a survey to gather data. The study involved asking a minimum of 42 Iraqi students, with 86% of the respondents being female and 14% male. The researcher employed closed-ended questions from a questionnaire in order to gather information about the students' literary reading experiences. A variety of statistical tools were used to analyze the data. The study's outcomes (Mean=3.63) show that Iraqi students' experiences and attitudes were accepted to a full degree as a result of reading literary texts. According to the results of a survey on the cultural experiences and personal information through reading literature, the majority of Iraqi students have favorable attitudes and positive perceptions toward reading literature. The majority of students choose literary texts over non-literary ones when reflecting on their own experiences, attitudes, or observations, as well as on past experiences, present needs, and connections to the text's ideas.

Key words: Iraqi learners, perceptions and attitudes, literary Texts.



تقييم تصورات المتعلمين العراقيين ومواقفهم من خلال قراءة النصوص الأدبية

قيصر عباس عبد الرضا
المديرية العامة للتربية في ذي قار

الملخص

الهدف من هذا البحث هو تقييم كيفية تأثير قراءة الأدب على التجارب الثقافية للطلاب العراقيين. أجريت هذه الدراسة على طلاب السنة الثالثة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية والأدب لتقييم خلفيتهم الثقافية في قراءة الأدب. تم تجميع ردود الطلاب على قراءة الأدب باستخدام استطلاع لجمع البيانات، واشتملت الدراسة على سؤال ما لا يقل عن 42 طالبًا عراقيًا، 86% منهم إناث و14% ذكور. واستخدم الباحث استبيانًا مغلقًا لجمع معلومات عن تجارب القراءة الأدبية للطلاب، وتم استخدام مجموعة متنوعة من الأدوات الإحصائية لتحليل البيانات. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة (المتوسط = 3.63) قبول خبرات الطلاب العراقيين واتجاهاتهم إلى درجة كاملة نتيجة قراءة النصوص الأدبية، وفقًا لنتائج استطلاع حول التجارب الثقافية والمعلومات الشخصية من خلال قراءة الأدب، فإن غالبية الطلاب العراقيين لديهم مواقف إيجابية وتصورات إيجابية تجاه قراءة الأدب. يختار غالبية الطلاب النصوص الأدبية على النصوص غير الأدبية عند التفكير في تجاربهم أو مواقفهم أو ملاحظاتهم، وكذلك في التجارب السابقة والاحتياجات الحالية والصلات بأفكار النص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المتعلمون العراقيون، تصورات واتجاهات، نصوص أدبية.



1. Introduction

In EFL classrooms, there are a variety of tasks and activities that can be used to teach literature. According to Muthusamy, Salleh, and Michael (2017), students prefer variety in their practices and exercises. To increase students' interest in reading literary texts, teachers can use a variety of activities and teaching strategies in literature classrooms, including group work and a variety of texts (Padurean, 2015). Additionally, there is no need to limit literature instruction to a single activity or approach. It heavily depends on what the students need, what the teachers can do, and how much experience they have (Padurean, 2015). While there are many literary practices, it is clear to all teachers and students that literature is a very effective subject in all EFL class activities today (Garzón and Castaeda-Pea, 2015). Reading and discussing literary works in EFL lessons has many benefits. According to Stefanova et al. (2017), reading literary texts in an EFL/ESL class would be more interesting to the students during the lecture than reading historical or scientific texts.

Literature is regarded as a useful tool in the classroom because it addresses universal themes like human feelings and emotions, such as hatred, rage, affection, marriage, departure, and death, as well as the natural world (Das, 2014). Reading any literary work can help readers improve and develop their language skills because literature and language are closely related (Pardede, 2011). If they are directed toward enabling the student to respond comprehensively and more appropriately to the texts, literature discussions in the classroom are a crucial foundation for enhancing language knowledge. To pique students' interest in reading literary texts in literature classes, teachers can employ a variety of activities and teaching strategies, including group projects and a variety of texts (Padurean, 2015). Additionally, there is no need to limit literature instruction to a single activity or approach. It heavily depends on what the students need, what the teachers can do, and how much experience they have (Padurean, 2015). While there are many literary practices, it is clear to all educators and students that literature is a very effective subject in all EFL class activities today (Garzón and Castaeda-Pea, 2015). Reading and discussing literary works in EFL lessons has many benefits. According to Stefanova et al. (2017), reading literary texts in an EFL/ESL class would be more interesting to the students during the lecture than reading historical or scientific texts.



2. Related Literature

In an EFL classroom, literature is one of the most important tools for improving students' literary comprehension and thinking skills. When teaching literary texts in EFL classes, Adam and Babiker (2015) stress that it is more motivating than reading everyday texts to advance language proficiency. In a similar vein, Ceylan (2016) observed that students are interested in the use of critical thinking activities in understanding literary texts in language classrooms because the activities encourage them to think more about causes than outcomes. Additionally, Kohzadi, Aziz Mohammadi, and Samadi (2014) claimed that utilizing literary texts in EFL/ESL classes exposes students to artistic values through imaginative or creative writing. The researchers claim that this value will increase students' enjoyment of reading and studying literary texts. In addition to interaction, the EFL/ESL courses will teach students how to develop critical reading and thinking skills.

Babae and Yahya's (2014) study revealed that using literature in the EFL classroom has a number of advantages. First and foremost, teaching literary texts in EFL classes can boost students' feelings, imagination, and cultural awareness of other cultures' customs, especially those of native English speakers. Second, it is stressed that teaching literature in EFL/ESL classrooms will enhance the encouragement of language learners. Additionally, Adam and Babiker (2015) emphasize that teaching literary texts to EFL or ESL students is more inspiring than reading everyday texts for language improvement. As a result, using authentic resources, such as numerous literary texts in EFL classes, has become necessary due to the significance and benefits of the implementation of literary texts in EFL classes as well as the shift in teaching English from traditional approaches to communicative approaches (Bobkina and Dominguez, 2014). According to a study by Fathi, (2019), the literature component will give students authentic materials, motivate them to learn more about other cultures or traditions, and improve their critical reading and interpretive skills through the use of real texts. Due to the variety of literary works, including novels, poems, fiction, and plays, literature has emerged as a vital and practical tool in EFL classes for learning culturally appropriate English (Yanti, 2019). Additionally, Fowler (2019) emphasized the critical role literature plays in helping people learn and acquire good English. The ability to express a wide



range of experiences is fostered by literature, in accordance with Mainland (2013), and helps students learn about various cultures. As a result, there are many similarities between encouraging students to speak a foreign language and assisting them in communicating. As a result, in order to be a successful instructor, one must develop the ability to adapt to and use a broad range of effective learning strategies.

3. Methodology

The questionnaire was used to collect information on the learners' cultural backgrounds and literary reading experiences. The questions aimed to learn more about the cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and reading attitudes of the students. There were two sections to the questionnaire. The first section of the questionnaire asked for personal information about the subjects, including their gender, where they lived, who encouraged them to read literature, how many hours they spent reading, and where they got their inspiration from. The second section of the survey asked about the cultural background and literary experiences of the respondents. A Likert five scale response was used for the items.

Part One: Demographic information

Table 1 indicates the participants' background information. The majority of participants were female ($n = 36$, 85.71%), with only 6 males (14.29%) taking part in the study. The reason for this difference between participants is that most female students in Iraq prefer the Faculty of Education to be teachers for primary and secondary schools in future.

Table 1: Gender (Questionnaire)

	Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	male	6	14.3	14.3
	female	36	85.7	85.7
	Total	42	100.0	100.0

Table 2 shows 28 participants (66.67%) lived in urban areas, with the remaining 14 participants (33.33%) residing in rural settings. The reason for this is that the research site is situated in the urban area of the Thiagar province in Iraq.

Table 2: Location (Questionnaire)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Urban	28	66.7	66.7
	Rural	14	33.3	33.3
	Total	42	100.0	100.0



Table 3 indicates the majority of participants ($n = 21$, 50.00%) stated that they received encouragement to read from their teachers, followed by family ($n = 8$, 19.05%), friends ($n = 7$, 16.67%), and the media ($n = 6$, 14.29%). Results reported that the percentage of 50 % of respondents of Thiqr University receive support and encouragement from their teachers compared with other resources.

Table 3: Encouragement to read

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Friends	7	16.7	16.7
	Family	8	19.0	19.0
	Media	6	14.3	14.3
	Teachers	21	50.0	50.0
	Total	42	100.0	100.0

Table 4 indicates most respondents either read for less than 1 hour a week ($n = 17$, 40.48%) or for between 1 and 3 hours ($n = 16$, 38.10%). Four participants (9.52%) indicated that they read between 3 and 5 hours each week, while 5 (11.90%) stated that they read more than 5 hours during that period.

Table 4: Hours spent for reading every week

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	less than 1	17	40.5	40.5
	1-3 hours	16	38.1	38.1
	3-5 hours	4	9.5	9.5
	more than 5 hours	5	11.9	11.9
	Total	42	100.0	100.0

Table 5 indicates that around a third of participants stated that they reread literary texts that interest them once ($n = 13$, 30.95%), twice ($n = 15$, 35.71%), or three times or more ($n = 13$, 30.95%), while only 1 participant (2.38%) stated that they never reread interesting literary texts.

Table 5: How many times re-read the interesting text

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Once	13	31.0	31.0
	Twice	15	35.7	35.7
	Thrice	13	31.0	31.0
	Never	1	2.4	2.4
	Total	42	100.0	100.0

Part two: Participants' cultural background in literature

The results of the second part of the questionnaire were in logical descending order from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Basically, participants expressed agreement with all positively worded items and were



neutral or disagreed with all negatively worded items. These results could mean that, overall, they hold positive attitudes towards reading literature. Table 4.43 indicates participants' responses to the 15 questionnaire items. Evaluation ranges were calculated to simplify interpretation of item means as follows (Denman & Al-Mahrooqi, 2019; Fernandez, 2013):

Agree strongly:	(4.20–5.00)
Agree:	(3.40–4.19)
Neutral:	(3.39–2.60)
Disagree:	(1.80–2.59)
Strongly disagree with:	(1.00–1.79)

Table 5: Questionnaire item responses

Item	N	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
1. I like reading literary texts in the English language.	42	3.81	1.35	1.00	5.00
2. I am interested in the history of literature.	42	3.71	1.20	1.00	5.00
3. Literary texts In English do not interest me.	42	3.38	1.15	1.00	5.00
4. When reading a literary text, I try to make use of the text experience.	42	3.83	1.31	1.00	5.00
5. I enjoy reading literary texts for the sake of getting knowledge.	42	3.83	1.32	1.00	5.00
6. Literature helps me to consider people that possibly have been disregarded in life.	42	2.36	1.30	1.00	5.00
7. I think people should spend less time talking about literature or writing.	42	3.67	1.32	1.00	5.00
8. Sometimes in literature I notice feelings that I have been neglected in my everyday life.	42	3.55	1.42	1.00	5.00
9. I don't believe that literature is socially accepted and preferred.	42	3.76	1.10	1.00	5.00
10. I am very fond of writing short stories.	42	3.57	1.45	1.00	5.00
11. One of my main reasons in reading literature is to appreciate the understanding that the author has of society and culture.	42	3.88	1.11	1.00	5.00
12. After reading literary texts which I enjoy, I keep thinking about the characters as if they were real people.	42	4.24	1.10	1.00	5.00
13. I prefer literary reading to increase my cultural experiences.	42	3.83	1.36	1.00	5.00
14. I think acting out scenes from a story is just a waste of time.	42	2.86	1.52	1.00	5.00
15. I am proud if I can understand a short story without any problem.	42	4.17	1.23	1.00	5.00



Table 5 indicates that one of the 15 questionnaire items received a mean placing it within the Strongly Agree response range. This was item 12, "After reading literary texts that I enjoy, I continue to wonder about the characters almost as though they were real people" ($M = 4.24, SD = 1.10$). Items with means within the Agree response range included item 15, "I am proud if I can understand a short story without any problem" ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.22$) Item 11, "One of my primary reasons in reading literature is to appreciate the author's understanding of society and culture" ($M = 3.88, SD = 1.11$), item 4, "When reading a literary text, I try to make use of the text experience" ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.31$), item 5, "I enjoy reading literary texts for the sake of getting knowledge" ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.32$), and item 13, "I prefer literary reading to increase my cultural experiences" ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.36$). Other items with means in the Agree response range include item 1, "I like reading literary texts in the English language" ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.35$), item 9, "I don't believe that literature is socially accepted and preferred" ($M = 3.76, SD = 1.10$), item 2, "I am interested in the history of literature" ($M = 3.71, SD = 1.20$). Item 7, "I think people should spend less time talking or writing about literature" ($M = 3.67, SD = 1.32$). These were followed by item 10, "I am very fond of writing short stories" ($M = 3.57, SD = 1.45$), and item 8, "In literature, I sometimes recognize feelings that I have been neglected during my daily life" ($M = 3.55, SD = 1.42$).

The results of the questionnaire show that participants expressed neutrality in response to two negatively worded items. These were item 3, "Literary texts in English do not interest me" ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.15$), and item 14, "I think acting out scenes from a story is just a waste of time" ($M = 2.86, SD = 1.52$). They also disagreed with the remaining negatively worded item, which was item 6, "Literature enables me to understand people that probably disregarded in life" ($M = 2.36, SD = 1.30$). These results could mean that, overall, the participants hold positive attitudes towards reading literature.

4. Results of the questionnaire

As indicated earlier that the main purpose of using questionnaire was only to know and compile information about learners' cultural and personal background in reading literature. The results of the first part of the questionnaire (participants' demographic information) show that the majority of participants were female ($n = 36, 85.71\%$), with only 6 males



(14.29%) taking part in the study and 28 participants (66.67%) lived in urban areas, with the remaining 14 participants (33.33%) residing in rural settings. The majority of participants ($n = 21$, 50.00%) stated that they received encouragement to read literature from their teachers, followed by family ($n = 8$, 19.05%), friends ($n = 7$, 16.67%), and the media ($n = 6$, 14.29%). Most respondents either read for less than 1 hour a week ($n = 17$, 40.48%) or for between 1 and 3 hours ($n = 16$, 38.10%).

5. Conclusion

In light of the results of the second part of the questionnaire (participants' own cultural background in literature) showed that participants basically expressed agreement with all positively worded items and were neutral or disagreed with all negatively worded items. These results indicated that, overall, of the participants hold positive attitudes towards reading literature. The study's findings confirm that literary texts may serve as a primary source or a genuine motivator for learners' cultural background, entertainment, and language acquisition. The study also demonstrates how important it is for learners to become familiar with the various ways in which the target language can be expressed by reading literary works.

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