Difficulties Faced by Undergraduate Students in English Poetry at Taiz University, Yemen(∗)

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الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب المرحلة الجامعية
في الشعر الإنجليزي بجامعة تعز، اليمن

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب المرحلة الجامعية في جامعة تعز، اليمن، في فهم الشعر الإنجليزي. على الرغم من أهميته في تعزيز الكفاءة اللغوية والثقافية، إلا أن الشعر غالبًا ما يشكل تحديات وصعوبات كبيرة للناطقين بغير الإنجليزية، يهدف هذا البحث بشكل رئيسي إلى معرفة الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلاب في فهم الشعر.

تم جمع البيانات باستخدام استبيان مقياس ليكرت مكون من (15) فقرة، وُزّع على (86) طالبًا وطالبة من قسمي اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية الآداب وكلية التربية بجامعة تعز، اليمن، خلال العام الدراسي (2024/2025).

كشفت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلاب يواجهون صعوبات متعددة الجوانب في فهم الشعر الإنجليزي، كانت المشكلات المتعلقة باللغة، مثل محدودية المفردات وعدم الإلمام بالتعابير الاصطلاحية، من أبرز الصعوبات التي تم الإفصاح عنها. كما زادت تعقيدات الصور البلاغية، مثل الاستعارات والتشبيهات والرمزية، من صعوبة الفهم، بالإضافة إلى ذلك، شكلت الإشارات الثقافية والسياقات التاريخية المستخدمة في القصائد عائقًا إضافيًا لدى الطلاب في فهم الشعر الإنجليزي. كما كشفت الدراسة أن القلق ونقص الثقة لدى الطلاب في تفسير الشعر يسهمان بشكل كبير في التحديات.

وفي الختام، فإن فهم الصعوبات المحددة التي يواجهها طلاب جامعة تعز في تفسير الشعر الإنجليزي يمكن أن يساعد في تطوير استراتيجيات تدريسية أكثر فعالية، مما يعزز تقديرهم الأدبي وكفاءتهم اللغوية بشكل عام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القلق، الشعر الإنجليزي، التحديات، الفهم؛ الثقة.

Difficulties Faced by Undergraduate Students in English Poetry at Taiz University, Yemen

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges encountered by undergraduate students at Taiz University, Yemen, in comprehending English poetry. Despite its significance in enhancing linguistic and cultural proficiency, poetry often poses substantial interpretative challenges for non-native English speakers. The main aim of this research is to find out the difficulties encountered by students in understanding poetry. Data were collected using a Likert scale questionnaire including (15) items administered to 86 male and female students enrolled in the department of English in the faculties of Arts and Education at Taiz University, Yemen, during the academic year (2024/2025). The findings of the study revealed that students face multifaceted obstacles in understanding English poetry. Language-related issues, such as limited vocabulary and unfamiliarity with idiomatic expressions, were prominently cited. The complexity of poetic devices, including metaphors, similes, and symbolism, compounded the difficulties. Cultural references and historical contexts embedded in poems further impeded comprehension, highlighting a gap in students' background knowledge. The study also uncovered that students' anxiety and lack of confidence in interpreting poetry contribute significantly to their difficulties. Many students reported feeling overwhelmed by the ambiguous nature of poetic language and the open-ended nature of its interpretation. In conclusion, understanding the specific difficulties faced by Taiz University students in interpreting English poetry can inform more effective pedagogical strategies, ultimately enhancing their literary appreciation and overall linguistic competence.

Keywords: Anxiety; English poetry; Challenges; Comprehension; Confidence.

Introduction:

Studying literature develops our critical thinking, empathy, and creative abilities, helping us better comprehend other cultures and historical eras. It tests readers' ability to decipher intricate storylines, identify underlying themes, and value linguistic beauty. Literature is a constant presence in a world that changes quickly, providing a place for introspection, connection, and inspiration. Written, spoken, and musical writings that convey concepts, tell tales, and arouse emotions are all included in the vast and diverse field of literature. Literature is an art form that goes beyond simple expression. In other words, it provides a way to think and study the human condition. It serves as a mirror through which we may study and understand culture, society, and the person's psychology, giving us insights into the outside world and our minds. Literature spans various genres, including essays, plays, poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. According to Ezenandu (2012), In general, literature serves as a source of information for the improvement and development of literacy and the four fundamental language skills of speaking, listening, writing, and reading. Different genres present distinctive approaches to addressing morality, identity, love, and conflict. Fictional literary works, such as novels and short stories, conjure up fantastical settings that might serve as a window into the actual world or a means of escape from it. Factual tales and critical analysis are introduced and presented in non-fiction literary writing, such as essays, biographies, and history, to give readers fresh insights, ideas, knowledge and information. Literature is still prevalent in current times and may be found on a variety of platforms, including digital and conventional print media. Its adaptability to emerging technology and shifting reader preferences guarantee its applicability and relevance. We discuss universal life issues, investigate various viewpoints, and find comfort in the commonality of human experience via literature. Therefore, literature plays a crucial role in expanding our knowledge greatly.

Both pupils and teachers face different problems when learning literature. Although literature provides deep insights into society, culture, and human nature, it can be challenging to engage with literary writings because of their depth and complexity. Pupils frequently struggle to comprehend and interpret the wide range of literary genres, subjects, and historical settings.

Reading literature calls for analytical and critical thinking abilities. In addition to understanding the story framework, students must be able to decipher symbols, recognize themes, and evaluate characters. High levels of cognitive involvement are necessary for these activities, as is the capacity to integrate textual material with outside knowledge of historical, cultural, and social settings. A noteworthy obstacle is the diversity of literary forms and genres. Every genre, including poetry, theatre, novels, and short stories, has particular requirements and customs.

Poetry, for example, frequently requires the reader to grasp its rich metaphors and imagery, but a book may demand the reader to follow intricate plotlines and character development throughout a long story. Mallett (2001) shows that poetry is the most difficult genre of literary production. Studying poetry has different difficulties than studying other types of literature. Cullinan, Scala, and Schroder (1995) state that poetry is particularly suitable for language development as it uses language in its most exquisite forms. Poetic language may be challenging to grasp and appreciate due to its intricate and sometimes abstract imagery. Metaphors, similes, and other figurative language are often complex for students to understand because they require a literal understanding of the words and the ability to discern deeper, frequently elusive meanings. Farrah and Al-Bakri (2022) argue that poetry helps students grow more comfortable sharing their ideas with others and improves their linguistic proficiency as well as personality. Moreover, the diverse forms of poetry, such as sonnets, haikus, and free verse, each have rules and traditions that can be difficult for beginners to understand. Cultural and historical factors also play a vital role in comprehending poetry. Numerous poems significantly reference the particular historical, social, and cultural contexts in which they were composed. Students could have trouble grasping a poem's ramifications and intended meanings if they don't have a solid comprehension of these foundations. This cultural and historical literacy is essential because it enables students to recognize the complexity and richness of poetry. Overall, poetry is a difficult topic for pupils to acquire because of its complicated language, varied structures, aural components, and contextual depth. Targeted educational techniques that might demystify poetry and promote a more profound, intuitive knowledge and enjoyment of this distinctive literary form are needed to address these challenges.

Poetry is a form that undergraduate students frequently use as part of their more extensive literary studies, and their experiences with it might differ significantly. Poetry is usually taught at the college level to examine intricate issues, nuanced language usage, and various cultural viewpoints. However, many students struggle with poetry's particular difficulties, which can greatly affect their education. Undergraduate poetry studies provide a rare chance for students to interact with one of the most complex and expressive writing genres. It may be thrilling and complex for many students to come across poetry for the first time in a rigorous academic context. Poetry's unique elements-rhythm, meter, metaphor, and other stylistic devices-call for a different approach and frequently a higher degree of study and interpretation than prose. Lazar (1996) adds that poetry also gives pupils a better understanding of how to cultivate a cross-cultural perspective, which will aid them in becoming fluent in the target language. Students can study the writings of poets from other eras and civilizations and experiment with various poetry forms, including sonnets, free verse, and haikus. Students may better understand the range and depth of poetry expression using this all-encompassing method. Students are also encouraged to develop their voice and originality by studying poetry. Students can play with language and form by creating their poetry and participating in workshops, enabling them to communicate their viewpoints and experiences distinctively.

Statement of the Problem:

This research explores the challenges undergraduate students at Taiz University in Yemen face when trying to understand English poetry. Although poetry is important for improving linguistic and cultural competence, students often face significant challenges because of its complex language, figurative expressions, and cultural references. Previous research has focused on common challenges like a lack of audiovisual aids, cultural barriers, and limited vocabulary, but little attention has been paid to the unique challenges faced by students in non-native English speaking contexts like Yemen, especially the gender based differences in these difficulties.

Significance of the study:

This study identifies the particular difficulties Yemeni undergraduates have in understanding English Poetry, which is valuable information for

students, teachers, and curriculum makers. The research identifies challenges such as metaphorical language, complex terminology, cultural obstacles, and the absence of audiovisual aids, and it offers practical suggestions to improve teaching methods. To enhance student engagement and comprehension, the results can help teachers use more interactive, context-sensitive strategies, such as using multimedia materials or providing culturally appropriate explanations. The study also identifies gender-based variations in learning difficulties, providing a nuanced viewpoint for specialised educational solutions. The findings benefit universities with comparable student populations by adding to larger conversations on teaching poetry in nonnative English contexts outside of Taiz University. The ultimate goal of this research is to help students develop their linguistic and analytical abilities while also encouraging a greater appreciation of poetry.

Questions of the study:

1- What are the difficulties students face in understanding English poetry at Taiz University?

2- Are there significance differences between male and female students in their experience with these challenges?

Objectives of the Study:

1- To investigate the challenges encountered by students in understanding English poetry.

2- To compare the difficulties faced by male and female students in understanding poetry.

Review of Related Literature:

Understanding English poetry can be a challenging endeavour for undergraduate students, particularly those in non-native English-speaking contexts. Undergraduate students usually face significant challenges in understanding and learning English poetry due to its complex language and meanings. Poetry often needs deep historical and cultural context, critical thinking and personal insight to understand its themes completely. This literature review explores the various difficulties faced by undergraduate students in understanding English poetry. The review synthesizes findings from various studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles these students encounter. To explore the difficulties of

understanding English poetry, researchers have conducted some studies to investigate the challenges of undergraduate students in learning English poetry.

To start with, Prasad's (2004) study delivers a thorough and detailed examination of English literature instruction in Yemen. The study shows findings which attribute fundamental weaknesses in the system to poor quality teaching and a critical shortage of resources in secondary education. This foundation leaves students inadequately prepared for the linguistic challenges of university-level literature courses. A major contribution of Prasad's work is its systematic outlining of literature's educational benefits, which include vocabulary expansion, improved grammar, and the fostering of critical thinking, cultural awareness, and confidence-advantages substantiated by survey responses from Yemeni students. Rather than merely diagnosing issues, the paper proposes practical teaching strategies, strongly endorsing an integrated methodology that blends conventional literary analysis with communicative, learner-focused, and interactive pedagogical techniques. A study was conducted in Jordan by Salameh (2012) to investigate the difficulties of undergraduate students in learning English poetry. After the analysis of the collected data, the findings of the study revealed that the large number of students joining poetry courses represents one of the difficulties in understanding poetry. In other words, group discussion was not used in the class, which helps students to discuss and express their ideas in learning poetry.

The appropriate place of literature in English Language Teaching (ELT) programs, especially at the university level, is a long-standing and heavily debated issue in regions where English is a foreign language. Focusing on the Yemeni higher education context, Rajhy's (2013) research engages directly with this controversy. It reveals a deep division among teachers, categorizing them into three camps: those who firmly believe in the central importance of literature, those who argue for prioritizing linguistics and fundamental language skills, and a third group that contends every course-even literature-must primarily serve the goal of enhancing language proficiency. The study offers a sharp critique of the dominant teaching method, which emphasizes rote learning of an author's biography, historical background, and pre-digested critical analyses instead of fostering a deep, personal interaction with the primary text. This approach, the paper argues,

results in passive students who merely absorb information rather than becoming engaged critical thinkers, and it ultimately does not provide them with the functional language skills required for international communication in professional fields. Rajhy's work therefore underscores a significant gap between the high theoretical value assigned to literature in the syllabus and its poor implementation in actual classroom practice.

According to Yusef et al. (2016), the teaching of poetry at Hodeidah University is fundamentally flawed. Their study, which connects to wider problems in teaching literature in EFL contexts, finds that the main failure stems from two interconnected issues: a syllabus using old, irrelevant British poems and a teaching style that encourages students with low English skills to simply memorize notes to pass their exams. Eliasari (2018) also carried out research at Mulawarman University to find out the difficulties students face in learning English poetry. The subjects of the study were 50 English literature students. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. The results of the study showed that the students had difficulties in understanding the figurative language, figures of speech used in the poem, analysing the words and interpreting the meaning of the poem.

To find out the difficulties of undergraduate students, Wai and Abidin (2020) conducted a study in Malaysia to explore and find out the challenges and difficulties facing students when they learn English poetry. The researchers used a questionnaire to collect data from 120 students. After analysing the collected data, they found the following difficulties: poetry message interpretation, meaning and identification of poetic devices such as personification, metonymy, synecdoche, simile, figurative language and metaphor. Within ESL/EFL education, poetry teaching is recognized for its pedagogical value but is also fraught with complexities arising from linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical difficulties. The existing research, including work by Al-Saeedi (2021), is extended by a comparative analysis of two different socio-educational environments: Hajjah University in Yemen and S.R.T.M. University in India. This investigation explores a full spectrum of challenges encountered by instructors, encompassing methodological strategies, the availability of facilities (including ICT and audio-visual aids), levels of student interest, and the complexities of

teaching rhetorical and cultural components. Through the empirical assessment of hypothesized variances in pedagogical methods and technology integration, this research seeks to offer a refined, cross-cultural comprehension of the systemic and logistical issues that obstruct successful poetry instruction at the undergraduate EFL level.

Similarly, a study was carried out in Indonesia by Mastura (2022) to analyse and investigate the difficulties undergraduate students have in understanding English poetry. The study participants were 23 students. The investigator used the questionnaire to collect the data. The results of the study showed that the meanings and the figurative language of poetry are the challenges for students in learning poetry. A study was carried out by Sylvester and Mahao (2023) in Leribe; the study indicated that the students faced the following challenges in understanding poetry: the teacher-centred approach, linguistic challenges, cultural differences, imagery and meaning. From the above studies, it was noticed that undergraduate students face difficulties such as poem meaning, poetic devices, culture, images and the teacher-centred approach in learning and understanding English poetry.

Research gap:

While prior research has broadly examined the difficulties students encounter when understanding English poetry in non-native contexts-such as issues with figurative language, cultural references, and teaching methods-little attention has been paid to gender-based differences in these challenges, particularly within the Yemeni educational context. Most previous studies (e.g., Salameh, 2012; Eliasari, 2018; Wai & Abidin, 2020; Mastura, 2022) have treated students as a homogeneous group, failing to examine whether male and female students experience these difficulties differently. This study addresses that gap by explicitly investigating and contrasting the poetry comprehension challenges faced by male and female undergraduate students at Taiz University, Yemen, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how gender may influence the learning process in poetry education.

Methodology:
Design:

This study adopts a descriptive quantitative research design to scientifically study the difficulties faced by undergraduate students in

understanding English poetry at Taiz University, Yemen. Data was collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 86 third-year English students (18 male, 68 female), focusing on four key dimensions: linguistic challenges (e.g., vocabulary, figurative language), cultural/historical barriers, pedagogical issues (e.g., teaching methods, lack of resources), and affective factors (e.g., confidence, engagement). Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, percentages) were used to quantify the prevalence of each difficulty, while an independent samples t-test compared gender-based differences.

Participants:

The population of the current study was level three students of English department in the faculties of Arts and Education, Taiz University, Yemen. The data were collected from level three students. There were 86 male and female students. Sixty-eight students (68) are females, while eighteen students (18) are males. All the participants of this study were studying English poetry course as a compulsory subject in their educational programme.

Table (1)

Participants of the Study

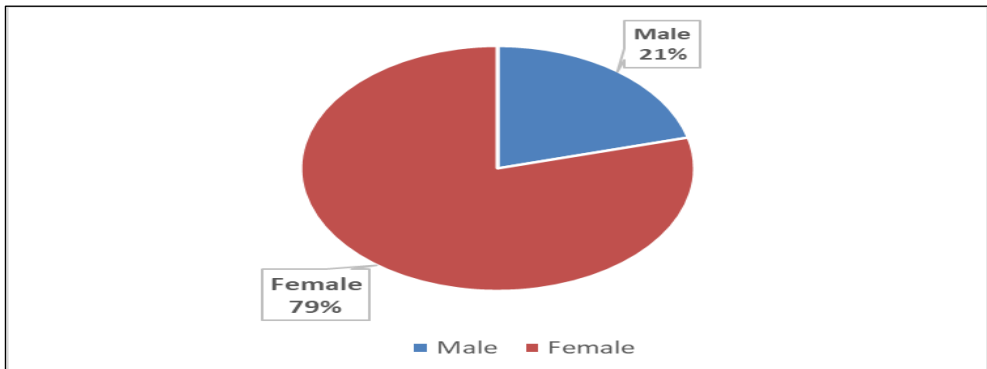| Gender	Number
Male	18
Female	68

Figure (1) Study Samples

Research Instruments:

The investigator employed a Likert scale questionnaire to collect data from the participants of the study to measure the difficulties faced by

students in various aspects of English poetry. The questionnaire includes items related to language difficulty, thematic understanding, structural complexity, and cultural context.

Validity:

The questionnaire was given to some experts in teaching English literature for their suggestions and evaluations and also to measure the relevance of the items of the questionnaire. According to their suggestions and recommendations, the researcher modified and changed some items and gave them to the experts for their approval and the selected items were used for the present study.

Research Procedures:

The researcher informed all study participants about the study's objectives and procedures. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring they understand their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time without any consequences. The researcher distributed the questionnaire to the selected sample of 86 students during regular class hours, with prior informed consent from the participants. The questionnaire was administered to the selected students, and clear instructions were given on how to complete it. Students were asked to choose one answer based on their experiences from the possible answers before each statement (Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly Disagree). Students were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire. The completed questionnaires were collected immediately to ensure a high response rate.

Data Analysis and Result:

Statistical data analysis and interpretation are essential methodologies in research, providing structured approaches to derive meaningful insights from collected data. This section explores the methodologies and techniques used to systematically analyse data, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of research findings. By employing rigorous statistical methods, researchers can uncover patterns, trends, and relationships within the data that contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Primary data was collected via a questionnaire for the students. A total of (86) male and female students at the Department of English, Taiz University

responded to the questionnaire. The data obtained from the students through the questionnaire are presented in the form of values or information for an object. To explore the students' difficulties, the investigator uses the following table that includes the answers of students to these questions.

Table (2)

Descriptive Data of students' Difficulties in Poetry

Item Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	percentage	Responses
Difficult words in the poem	4.43	.76	88.60	Strongly Agree
Lack of audio-visual in learning poetry	4.35	.98	86.98	Strongly Agree
Using old English language in the poem	4.34	1.03	86.74	Strongly agree
Use of figurative language in the poem	4.22	.85	84.42	Agree
Language of poetry	4.10	.75	81.40	Agree
Symbolism Difficulty	3.94	.86	78.84	Agree
Inability to appreciate the poem	3.78	.95	75.58	Agree
poem analysis	3.66	1.16	73.26	Agree
inappropriate teaching methods	3.56	1.33	71.16	Agree
Lack of English proficiency	3.41	1.12	68.14	Neutral
Problem culture - related	3.38	1.06	67.67	Neutral
No feeling of emotion or sensual responses	3.37	1.18	67.44	Neutral
Theme understanding	3.35	1.19	66.98	Neutral
Reading English Poems Difficulty	3.35	1.16	66.98	Neutral
Lack of books	3.21	1.34	64.18	Neutral

Table (2) shows the descriptive statistics of undergraduate students' difficulties in understanding English poetry at Taiz University, Yemen. The table lists various factors that could impact students' understanding of poetry, along with the mean scores, standard deviations, and percentages of

responses for each factor. A large majority of students (88.6%) with (4.43) mean scores strongly agree that difficult vocabulary is a major issue in understanding English poetry. Students believe the absence of audio-visual aids during poetry lessons is a significant challenge. Again, a high percentage (86.98%) with (4.35) mean scores strongly agree, followed by the use of Old English is seen as a major difficulty, with 86.74% of respondents strongly agree. Moreover, students of (84.42%) with (4.22) mean scores agree that using figurative language in the poem is a challenge for understanding poetry while (64.18**%) of respondents with** (3.21) mean scores are neutral in having difficulties with lack of books and any literary references.

Descriptive Data of students' Difficulties in Understanding English Poetry
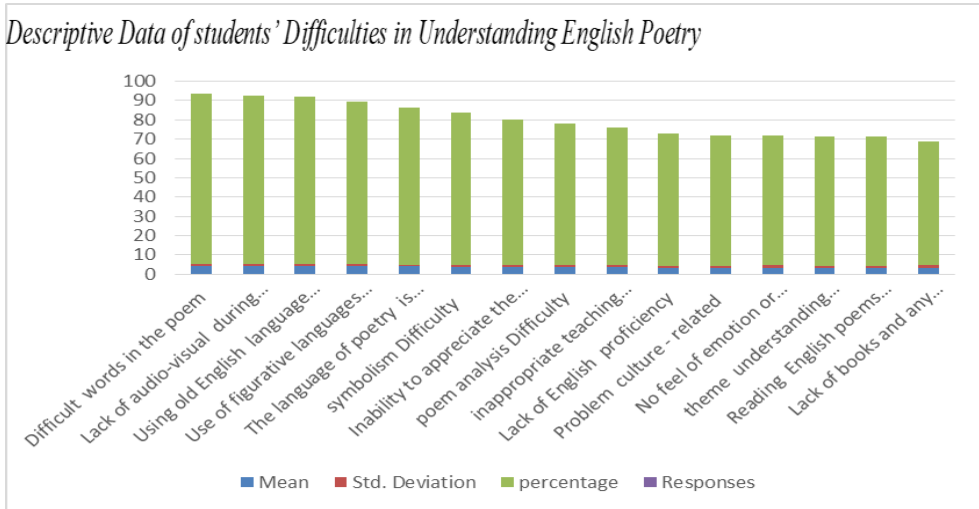
Figure (2) Descriptive Data of Students' Difficulties in Understanding English Poetry

Table (3)

Test of significance of difference between means of   Difficulties in Poetry of male and female students

Gender	No	Mean	Std. deviation	Df	t	Sig	Level of sig.
Male	18	3.53	7.19	84	2.37	.010	0.05
Female	68	3.82	7.09				

Eighty-six randomly sampled male and female students at the department of English, Taiz University were asked about the challenges and difficulties faced in understanding English poetry. An independent samples t-test

revealed that female students with (M= 3.82, SD= 7.09) faced significantly more difficulties than male students with (M= 3.53, SD= 7.19) in understanding English poetry with (t=2.37, P-value=.010). Therefore**,** there is a significant difference in the mean scores between males and females at **0.05** level. Hence, the hypothesis in this case is accepted.
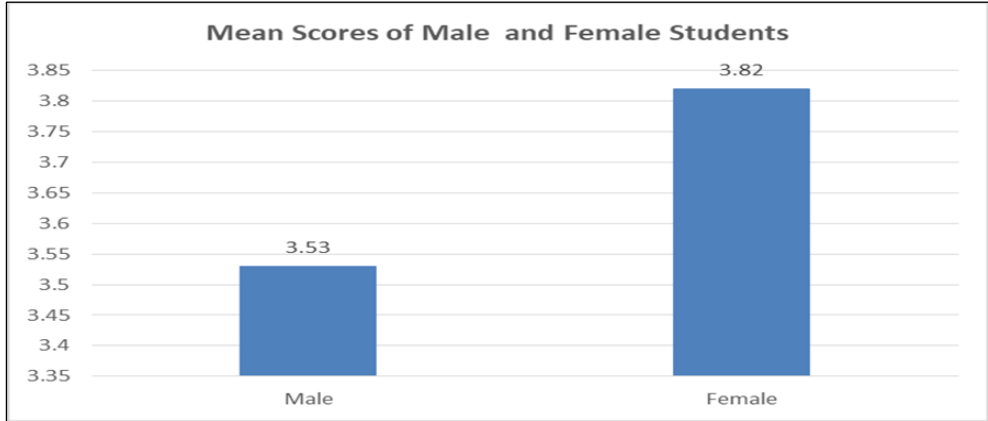

Figure (3) Mean scores of male and female students

Discussion:

The current study examined the students' difficulties in understanding English poetry at Taiz University, Yemen. Specifically, the objective was to find out the difficulties facing students in learning English poetry at their university. Moreover, the study aimed to identify any differences between male and female students related to difficulties in understanding English poetry. According to the findings of the study above related to the student's difficulties in understanding poetry, it can be generally concluded that the students face some difficulties in understanding English poetry. The results of the study showed that (88.60%) of the participants of the study have difficulties in understanding the meaning of some words included in the poem. Followed by (86.98%) and (86.74%) of the students have difficulties in understanding poetry due to lack of audio-visual aids and using old language in the poem during their learning poetry in the class. In other words, they only have to listen to the explanation of the teacher without using any materials that attract the attention of students to understand the poem

meaningfully. This result is consistent with the results found in Sylvester and Mahao (2023). Then, the findings of the present study showed that

(84.42%) of the subjects indicated that using figurative language in the poem is one of the difficulties in understanding the meaning of poetry. These results support the findings of studies conducted by Wai and Abidin (2020) and Mastura (2022) that indicated most of the students showed that it is difficult to understand the poetry due to using figurative language in the poem. Data analysis of this study indicates that (78.84%), (75.58%), (73.26%) and (71.16%) of the participants of this study have difficulties in using symbols in the poem, inability to appreciate the poem, poem analysis and improper teaching methods. After that, according to the findings of the study, some students are neutral in the following difficulties: lack of English proficiency, problem culture-related, no feeling of emotion when they read the poem, theme understanding and lack of literary books.

Regarding the differences between the male and female students in having difficulties in understanding English poetry, the findings showed that the female students have more difficulties than male students. (Table 2, Figure 3). In other words, the mean scores of female students are (3.82) while the male students are (3.53). That is to say, the female students at the department of English at Taiz University, Yemen have more difficulties in understanding English poetry.

Conclusion:

Based on the findings of data analysis and discussion, the investigator found that the students have difficulties to understand English poetry. These difficulties include high, moderate and low levels. The students showed their high difficulties with difficult words in the poem, using old English language in the poem, using figurative language in the poem and the language of the poem is difficult to understand. On the other hand, moderate difficulties include using symbols to represent meanings in the poem, students being unable to appreciate and analyse the poem and using traditional methods in teaching poetry in the class. Students also indicated that there are low difficulties facing them when they learn poetry like they are not proficient in English, the culture of the poet, no feeling of emotion when they read and learn poetry, understanding the theme of the poem, poetry reading and lack of poetry books. The analysis of the collected data also showed that female students have more difficulties in understanding and learning English poetry than male students.

To help students better understand English poetry, instructors can adopt several strategies. These include using audio-visual aids like videos and dramatizations, pre-teaching difficult vocabulary, and providing essential cultural context. Interactive activities such as group discussions and role-playing can lower anxiety and build confidence. Furthermore, updating the curriculum to include modern, relatable poems and training teachers in new methods can create a more supportive learning environment that fosters both comprehension and appreciation.

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