

Students' Perceptions of Using Literary Materials in The Classroom. How Should the Teachers Do It?

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:
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This study explores Indonesian EFL students' perceptions of literary works as classroom learning materials. While the literature has shown that literature enhances language skills such as reading comprehension, writing, and cultural awareness, limited research has examined students' views on how literature should be taught. Data were collected from 35 university students through structured interviews and were analyzed thematically. Results indicate that students strongly prefer stories, especially short stories, over poems or drama texts due to their accessibility, familiarity, and engaging narrative format. Reported challenges include difficulties in interpreting implicit meanings, following complex plots, and understanding figurative language. Students emphasized the importance of teacher preparation and suggested structured activities across pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages, including multimedia use, class discussions, role play, and extensive reading. Findings highlight the critical role of teachers in creating enjoyable, culturally relevant, and skill-oriented practices. Integrating stories into EFL classrooms can foster reading habits, critical thinking, and speaking skills.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of literature in EFL classrooms has many potentials to be exposed. In regards of the teachers who are teaching them, the use of literary materials are positive because it could develop students' skill in writing argumentative (Kasih, et.al., 2021); the use of short story in literature could develop students' reading comprehension as well as other language skills (Hussein & Barzani, 2020); it could also develop students' skill in reflective writing if the teachers were able to implement suitable approaches in teaching literary works such as language-based approach, reader response approach and philosophical approach (Febriani, et.al., 2022). Teaching literature using the Wattpad application was also able to promote reader response approach in teaching it and gave students learning experience in enjoying literary works at the same time (Anggitasari et.al., 2020). Literary works can as well serve as authentic materials for EFL classrooms to develop students' language content learning in terms of reading and writing (Nanda & Susanto, 2020). However, getting the perceptions of using literary materials from the students' side are intriguing because a few studies discuss on the benefit of using literary works for EFL students instead of getting their interest toward literary works themselves. A study conducted in Thailand stated that EFL students showed positive attitude toward literary works since they can improve reading, speaking, writing skills, and improve vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking (Isariwayat et.al, 2020); the use of novel with interactive instructions in reading was constructive for students to experience learning with authentic text (Sasalia & sari, 2020); but it deprived to encourage students' sensitivity for creative text toward self-reflection after learning (Viana & Zyngier, 2019). Thus, this study is exposing students' appeal in using literary works for their learning. It is critical to scrutinize students' perception in using literary material in the classroom because most students still struggling with vocabulary and grammatical structures of the

literary work (Soy, Maisarah, Sovann, 2023). Another one, the way teacher communicates during discussing literary work suggests that students may perceive it negatively because they may feel that they do not get anything from the discussion. Teacher's engaging messages during communication is important during learning activity with literary work (Falcon & Leon, 2023). The more positive message from the teacher, the more likeable students toward the learning especially in discussing literary work. This is also one of students' challenges in studying literature (Alshammari, Ahmed, Shouk, 2020). Students may have negative attitudes toward literature because lack of familiarity with the text, cultural misconception, and mediocre instructional arrangements. Thus, it is significant to reveal what do the students want with literary works in their class and what do they want their teachers to do with those materials. Hence, the formulated research question is 'How EFL students voice their appeal toward the use of literary works as a learning material in the class?'. This is to make the teachers manageable to use literary works for their classes more enjoyable and provide EFL students with exercises that are accessible to help them appreciating the creative works.

English Teaching in Indonesian Context

English language teaching in Indonesia can be described fairly from three similarly researches. That ELT research are viewing Indonesian ELT from different aspects, such the improvement of speaking ability for the learners, the mastery of vocabulary and grammar for better speaking ability, and the application of literature for English teaching to help learners defining their purpose in studying English. Those point of views in ELT teaching in Indonesia are accountable for the development of English teaching as a compulsory foreign language in the Indonesian classrooms which is acknowledged by the government. However, the discussion of using literary works in Indonesian EFL class have not searched positively. Some studies are focusing on the advantageous in using literary works in the class but, small numbers of studies are investigating students' opinion toward the way of using literary works as a learning material for EFL class. However, the investigation on students' opinion toward the use of literary works as a learning material are not discussing on how the teachers should create a conducive learning from the students' own expression. The discussion on students' perspective was focusing on getting their opinions toward the use of certain teaching method or type of literary works to use in the class. The collected opinion from the students did not examine further on how to provide an enjoyable learning atmosphere for the students to learn English using literary works especially in EFL classroom.

English Teaching is To Improve Speaking Ability

One study conducted by Zacharias (2003) mentioned that English language in the eyes of Indonesian speakers falls into two divisions which are English spoken in America and English spoken in England. From those divisions the way the language is spoken, the closer in pronouncing English word to either American way of speaking or England way of pronunciation counts for the better skill in English language. The teaching of English in Indonesia, partially, gives more attention to speaking ability and pronunciation skills. The attention of directing English language teaching in Indonesia into speaking proficiency is suggested in the national curriculum so that communicative competence

nuances the curriculum of ELT and teachers' syllabus in the classroom. Speaking becomes main point of learning English as foreign language in Indonesia. This impedes the mastery of reading level among EFL students in Indonesia. According to PISA reading test, the range of proficiency covers seven scales which includes students' ability to assess the quality and credibility of information students see on screen and understand the message inserted in the image, and to manage conflict across texts, an aspect of reading literacy that was not highlighted in past assessments of PISA test (OECD, 2019). The previous PISA test which was released in 2018 qualified for digital literacy that is computer-delivered assessment which prevent students living in a country who were still using paper-based test to get the best benefit of PISA criterions. Reading in PISA 2018 computer-based reading assessment was classified into one of the three reading processes of which "locating information", "understanding" or "evaluating and reflecting". This classification applied at the level of the individual item which requires individual effort in getting message from written text. Students who can get the message written and think about it critically are more likely to possess stronger writing and problem-solving skills, which will further enable them to succeed in their careers (Venugopalan, 2019). The ability in improving students' critical thinking can be facilitated through using literary works in the class (Kaowiwattanakul, 2021). However, the discussion on how to implement literary works as a learning material was overlooked.

English Teaching is To Improve Vocabulary Mastery and Grammatical Structure

A different study which was conducted by Ivonne (2005) emphasized on the importance of vocabulary attainment in foreign language teaching. The targeting of vocabulary comprehension is advised in Indonesian national curriculum as well. The use of various texts in EFL classrooms are concentrating on building up vocabulary ability for students to be able to read English texts or any text which is written in English. This learning target was set to improve literacies level for Indonesian learners so that English teaching in Indonesia, a part of expecting ESL students to be skillful in speaking ability, is to help raising students' reading ability at the same time. Therefore, the supports of ELT teaching in Indonesia should be plan on increasing vocabulary skill. Thus, students can gain better achievement in reading ability as well as spoken one. In case of using literature in the classroom, low level of students' proficiency in vocabulary and grammar may be the only reason students' reluctant in doing the subject course (Hussein & Al-Emami, 2016) and it may not be the only reason (Krishnasamy, 2015) because students need to get familiar with literary work used in the class. Students' familiarity with the literary text can be a challenge especially if the target culture is different from the students.

English Teaching is To Improve Cultural Understanding Through Literature

Another study which was conducted by Soekirno (2004) suggested different idea of ELT teaching in Indonesia. Based on her experience in engaging herself with English literature especially D.H Lawrence's literary work as her favorite, she proposed a critical awareness for EFL students in Indonesia. Her aspiration is to seek benefit of learning English for oneself, to consider the role of English in global world and to contemplate one's position in learning English within Indonesian context. Her research is expressing the essential

point in learning English in Indonesia through enjoying literature. She encourages to affirm multiple identities of Indonesian studying English while enduring native tribe identity, for example Indonesian Javanese, Indonesian-Madurese, Indonesian-Papuan, Indonesian-Dayak, Indonesian-Macassar or Indonesian-Moluccas who are studying English. This study offers different idea of English language teaching which is unusual from those other two studies. Apart from pronunciation, vocabulary comprehension, and the achievement of two language skills facilitated through vocabulary skill, the importance of studying English is supposedly originated from the user's contemplation in becoming skillful with English language. This study is a standpoint in encouraging EFL teachers in Indonesia to use literary works as a learning material in Indonesian EFL class so that students who are studying English as a foreign language can identify themselves as an Indonesian studying English facilitated with literary material (Abida & Kuswardani, 2017). However, the discussion of using literary material such as poem, short stories, novel, or drama in class was various, thus the research on exploring into ways of utilizing literary works as a learning material are constructive especially in EFL classroom which disregard the students' judgement on ways of using literary material in their class.

Canon or Non-Canon Literary Works for EFL Students

The selection of literary works to use in EFL classrooms would be set on canon works since they were easy accessibility (online and in school libraries), timelessness, and availability of ready-to-use materials (Niederlechner, 2024) but, teachers need to know what happen during discussion so that they can have students' perspective on specific issue materialized on the selected literature (Bloemert, et.al., 2017). As suggested by Avara (2021) on ways to select literary works for classroom used which she adapted it from Lazar's (1993) text selection criteria; the consideration of selecting literary works should think about students' age, intellectual maturity, emotional understanding, linguistics proficiency, students' literary background, students' interest, and students' cultural background and to what language skills that the literature would be used for. This conform the idea of getting students' voice in using literary works in the class and to support conducive learning when literary works is used as a learning material. The selection of literary works to use in the classroom should become main consideration (Christopher, 1995, p.192-197). The considerations could include linguistic density of the text in terms of vocabulary, the cultural implication and relevance of the reader about its historical and social context, and the pedagogical value of the text in terms of its connections to other literary works and real-life experiences (Abbas, 2023, p.6)

RESEARCH METHOD

Data collected for this study was from university students who had taken introduction to literature/literature in ELT course. The students were registered in one of prominent university located in western part of Surabaya, Indonesia. They, as many as 35 students were voluntarily filling in structured interview which was distributed through google form. The data, then categorized into thematic classification that revealed the preferred literary works to use as a learning material in the class, challenges students were facing during learning facilitated with literary works and their desired learning activities to go

with the literary material. Thematic analysis is also part of researcher's reflexive on meaning-based patterns (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Hence, there is no one specific way to do thematic analysis since it depends on the nature of the study (Finlay, 2021). It is essentially a practice of revealing a meaning which is not fixed within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The chance to interpreting the data with thematic analysis is undefended so that the expected information concerning students' voices for finding the suitable way for their teacher to use literary materials in the classroom is disclosed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result from data collection showed that on preferred literary works to use in the class, most students chose stories or short stories as their preferred literary work to use as a learning material over poem or drama text. Students were having three different literary works during the course. They were stories or short stories, poem, and drama texts. Discussing novels were avoided because of time limitation and meeting schedule. Since most students chose stories, thus, the discussion was focusing on revealing the challenges and desired learning activities to go with stories or short stories. Most of student participants selected stories or short stories as their preferred literary works in the course and overlook to discuss on other literary works like poem or drama texts. It is so because stories or short stories were more entertaining compared to poem and drama text. The format of stories can be found easily like in reading application called webtoon and basically it was like reading activity, so the students felt the sense of familiarity between reading stories and reading other texts. Thus, they found less difficult reading stories than reading poem or drama text because of casualness format of the text. Through stories or short stories, students could visualize the flow of the narrative and imagine the situation in their head. Moreover, the description of the characters, the setting, the plot was compelling. The characters in the story were not like everyday characters but they were created and crafted to match the setting and the plot (Mardiningrum & Larasati, 2024, p.7). The use of stories or short stories were able to assist students' curiosity relating to how the story would end, how the conflict would resolve and how the characters anticipated the plot so that they felt comfortable to read a story or short stories.

Relating to challenges that the students were facing during learning facilitated with literary works, most of them stated that literary works were intricated (Rifqi, et.al, 2022, p.1015). The most response from the students relating to their challenges in reading literary works was essentially on reading habit which makes it difficult for them in understanding literary texts. Some students said that they were having hard time in finding implicit message of the text because the arrangement of setting and the plot that were different from one story to another. Some were said that they needed several times reading it until they get to the point of the story as a whole because the characters' description and their dialogue were hard to follow. One of the students said that the teacher had not explained on symbols and figurative speech beforehand so that he was unable to get the meaning of symbols he found in the story right away. Further, he wrote that he had difficulty in understanding the statements from the character because he did not understand the understatement that one character said to the other one. The student was insinuating on reading between the lines which is a skill in reading comprehension. Another student mentioned that the problem was not on a selected text, but it was on

him because he had not trained himself to read. Sometimes, the story had many characters in the form of names and person which made him difficult to remember which one which. However, only one student confirmed that he had difficulty in vocabulary that prevented him from understanding the story. From the challenges that students were facing when dealing with literary works, the most problematic situation was finding the starting point to able to follow the rest of the story. It showed that EFL university students did not find vocabulary in stories or short stories confusing any longer. Only one student stated that he still had difficulty with grasping unfamiliar vocabulary in the text. Most of the students agreed that many characters in the story were complicating and small numbers of students suggesting that the teachers should introduce symbols and figurative language beforehand.

Related to students' desire with learning activities to go with the literary work as a learning material, most of them said that they need practice in reading literary works. To elaborate further on the intended practice, I divide the responses into three stages which are before reading stories or short stories, whilst reading and after reading them. Before reading the selected stories or short stories, the students want their teacher to: (a) explain the story to make them more interested with it, (b) explain what they need to do in reading the story, (c) start with familiar topic, (d) use technology or any social media to introduce the story to the students, (e) introduce background story before the students read it so that they become familiar with theme, (f) introduce generic structure of the stories like characters, complication, resolution and conclusion of the story for the students to make them easier following the narrative of the event, (g) use interesting learning media like movie to introduce the story so the students have more options in understanding the text visually (h) choose more fun and humorous theme of the stories. From the students' response, it can be concluded that the highlight of utilizing literary works as a learning material is in the teacher's hands. Teachers' ability to manage literary works in the class was discussed by Affandi et.al. (2022) which stated that lack of knowledge prevented EFL teachers in using literary works as a learning material. Thus, it is crucial to have some preparation before the teachers perform their teaching session with literary works. Preparations included planning what stories to use, prepare some practices to go with the stories which may contain using social media, technology or movies to introduce the selected stories as a learning material. The selection of theme of the stories is also vital to get students' attention toward the stories. Considering the context and culture of selected literary material can assist students to practice their speaking skill (Amelia & Hikmawati, 2019) because they need to get involved in the discussion with various topics which can be materialized through discussing theme or characters of a selected stories. If the stories are unfamiliar, the discussion won't emerge, and the students would think that studying literature is boring and difficult.

Whilst reading stories, the students want their teacher to: (a) create a whole class discussion of the story, (b) read a aloud the story before start discussing it (c) provide more stories, not just one in reading activities, (d) use role play to act out the story, (e) use quizzes to help students understand the story, (f) create various interactive activities to provide conducive learning environment like asking students' opinion about the topic, (g) discuss cultural element like myth or legend that relates to theme, (h) use the story as a speaking practice. The activities originated from students' responses are indicating a

critical thinking activity with literary works (Widiastuti & Syamsi, 2022, p.482). Critical thinking with stories or short stories advises the students to comprehend, analyze, build a connection, and draw a conclusion with the story. This is in line with students' suggested activities in whilst reading which stated that 'teachers should create various activities to provide conducive learning environment like asking students' opinion about the topic'. Asking students' opinion about the selected story encourage their critical thinking on the characters, the plot, or the setting of the story. Teachers can also ask the students to give comment on the ending of the story based on their version so that the students will find out that taking literature class is exciting and helpful for them to practice speaking after reading the story. The student also mentioned 'use story as a speaking practice' which suggested that literary works can be used as speaking material at the same time. So, students did not focus on finding implicit message of the text but, they could also practice their speaking ability to discuss the indicating message from the characters, to discuss the setting and plot if the story, to discuss gestures of the characters that they found in the text so that they have many opportunities to speak up their opinion about the story generously. Wilson (2011) offered a relevance theory to help EFL students with interpreting what the characters in the story are implying. Relevance theory utilize perlocutionary and illocutionary act to identify the targeted message inserted in the sentences stated by the characters. The relevance theory is helpful to provide practices in verbal communication. The sentences stated by the characters in the stories are replicating the similar sentences people used in common conversation. So, the students can find the sentences credible to be analyzed and examined.

After reading story, the students want their teacher to: (a) ask the students to recreate the story with their preferred ending, (b) focus to discuss about one story and not discussing other stories although those are relevant, (c) recommend more stories for extensive reading, (d) ask students to tell the class stories that they have read from extensive reading activities. From the students' opinion, it was clear that literary works can promote students' reading habits. The students want the teacher to recommend some activities outside the class like giving them some optional reading selection or suggested reading selection for them to have more time to practice with finding main characters that build up the story and finding supporting characters that help expanding the characterization of the most mentioned name in the story. The students also wanted the teacher to discuss the selected story as a springboard to boost their language skills instead of discussing different story which they were familiar with. The familiarity of the selected story with students' background culture is important because students want to have some discussion after they complete reading the story. If the background culture is too distant, the students may not have anything to say during the discussion and the class would not be agreeable any longer.

CONCLUSION

In summary, students' voices relating to the use of literary materials for their class are accepted. Students feel comfortable studying English facilitated with literary materials like stories or short stories because the format is familiar for them. Students can easily find stories or short stories in other reading subject or any reading applications online. Whereas poem and drama text, the format is specific and cannot easily found in other

reading subjects so that they feel hesitant to choose poem or drama text as their favorite type of literary materials.

The recommendation to use literary materials in the class is to help students to practice speaking skill with the selected stories. Literary material is helpful to assist students with their language skill given that the teachers can arrange appropriate practices to go with the selected stories. Students prefer using stories to practice speaking so that teacher can employ relevance theory offered by Deidre Wilson where the teachers introduce perlocutionary and illocutionary to the students to get the implied message from the characters' sentences. The teachers also give notice for the students regarding symbols, figurative language, and metaphor beforehand so that the students become aware when they meet the symbol by chance during their reading. Introducing symbolic meaning, figurative language, and metaphor is effective to assist students to get more understanding during reading.

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