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## **EFL Student Attitudes towards Studying Literature at a Higher Education Institution in Oman**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates English majors' attitudes towards literature courses at a higher education institution in Oman. It also compares their perceptions of the challenges they face when taking these courses with their professors' perceptions of these challenges. The study has revealed that students' attitudes changed as a result of taking literature courses. In fact, the more courses they took, the more positive they were about literature. The findings also revealed professors' awareness of their students' challenges. The study offers insight into how to improve literature courses to increase student interest in them.

**Keywords:** English majors, literature courses, perceptions, challenges

### **1. Introduction**

Learning a new language can be a very challenging task. A main reason why people want to do this is to be able to communicate with people from other parts in the world. Since English now enjoys a global spread, learning this language is a very common goal. For those wanting to major in English at university this requires intensive effort and the pursuit of a heavy program of courses. The Department of English at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) thus offers many courses on aspects of the language in order to enhance student's proficiency in it. The Arts students' study plan addresses language skills, linguistics, translation, and literature and, not unnaturally, students may have different attitudes towards its content. Enthusiasm will engender high motivation and uninterest or hostility the reverse. Literature courses are a case in point.

These courses generate widely differing attitudes, ranging from love to hatred and the aim of this study is to investigate this matter. In particular, it asks for student opinions on studying literature in English. Their answers are important because they may help professors and the Department to understand what students think and why they sometimes may avoid taking such courses.

### **2. Review of Literature**

It is a truism that reading is an essential life skill, and in the context of foreign language learning it is vital for language acquisition (Mori, 2002). For foreign language students majoring in English Arts, reading is necessitated by their specialization and future profession. Brumfit (1981) believes that "reading is the most autonomous and individualizable ability in language work and literature is a rich and widely-appealing source of material for reading." (Brumfit, 1981, p. 105). This is why he supports

teaching literature to students at advanced levels, even though it might be difficult. The problem usually arises from students' inability to understand literature due to their deficient proficiency in English and their poor reading skills. Hence, they may read and translate the words, but may not be able to interpret the ideas because it is unfamiliar. In Brumfit's view, teachers should take into consideration that literature teaching is about abilities not knowledge and that sometimes students are unable to interpret the text like teachers do because they do not have the same view about things. Teachers, therefore, are urged to choose the literary work they intend to teach according to many criteria to reduce the level of difficulty that students encounter. Brumfit says that "Responding to literature is not a matter of basic understanding of the language of the text. It is the significance of the text that is important to the good reader, not its ability to be translated exactly" (Brumfit, 198, 107). Teaching literature, he insists, enables students to read beyond translating phrases and sentences and gives them the ability to interpret ideas. Other benefits are outlined by Parkinson and Thomas (2000). They hold that the authentic nature of literary texts provides students with mental training and expands their knowledge not only about language but about life in general. Reading it lets them consider other people's experiences and attitudes towards some of life's most complicated issues. Although literary study might be challenging for some students, this very challenge is in fact one of the best reasons for teaching it. Parkinson and Thomas state that "at a certain point learners come to the end of language, and the only way to keep stretching them, and sorting out the sheep from the goats, (what sociologists call the gate-keeping function), is by asking difficult questions about Shakespeare" (Parkinson and Thomas, 2000, p. 10). Hence, exposing EFL\ESL learners to literature will give both them and their teachers a clear indication of their language proficiency.

Despite literature's usefulness, however, there are challenges that face students and teachers in using it as a medium for increasing language proficiency. In their article "Teaching Literature in a Second Language", Parkinson and Thomas (2000) address these problems faced by ESL\EFL students. They mention that the remoteness of a particular text and the use of odd language can be challenging. Students sometimes cannot relate to the text and this may affect their interpretation of some of the embedded ideas in it. This was found to be true among Omani students when reading English texts that do not reflect their cultural context (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a, Al-Mahrooqi, 2012b). The common idea that literature is made to entertain and not to be taught may also be an obstacle for students (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000).

One of the most important problems, Parkinson and Thomas feel, is "the likely imbalance of knowledge and likely imbalance of power between teacher and learner" (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000, p. 12). Teachers may well be more familiar with the text and the environment in which it was written. Hence they will have a better background knowledge and understanding of the work, unlike students who are being exposed to it for the first time and might find interpreting it impossible. This difference in knowledge creates a gap between teacher and learner and may lead the teacher to unwisely controlling what the students read, think and say, thus contradicting a central point about teaching them literature, which is to encourage expression of their own ideas (Ibid).

Another problem is that in literature teaching, students are thrown into the deep sea and are expected to swim to the shore without help. They will come across very sophisticated styles and ideas which they cannot adequately interpret, explain and discuss (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a). They might fail the course because of this. The obstacles, then, are real and, as Parkinson and Thomas point out, "when one perceives something as a problem the thought becomes a fact" (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000, p. 11). If students think that literature is problematic, then their idea will become a fact and affect their performance and final outcome. When they can relate to the benefits of these courses, this may give them a positive attitude towards them; when the opposite occurs this will of course destroy their interest (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000; Al-Mahrooqi, 2012c).

Since student opinions about literature courses are important, Alan Hirvela and Joseph Boyle conducted a study on this in 1988. It suggests an equation for teaching literature in an appropriate way. This is "student attitude + teacher goals + suitable text = a course satisfying to students and teachers

alike” (Hirvela & Boyle, 1988, p. 183). Student attitudes were also studied by surveying Hong Kong Chinese adult EFL\ESL learners who were studying English Language and Literature. The survey was done before and after students took a particular literature course. The results revealed students’ fears and anxieties about such literary genres as poetry and prose fiction, something found to be also true among Omani students (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012a). These findings led Hirvela and Boyle to discuss the other variable in the equation i.e. meaning the teachers.

Teachers, they say, should be aware of students’ fears and anxieties and know how to deal with them. They suggest that “Knowing in advance the climate in which the material will be received is obviously of invaluable help in determining how to present it” (Hirvela & Boyle, 1988, 181). Consequently their survey, they believed, would help teachers to define the objectives of their courses and how to achieve them. Most instructors in the study agreed that literature was important and provided students with necessary skills and emotional growth. With this awareness the next step for them was to find suitable texts that would interest their students. This step was taken and the article showed the changes that had been made throughout the years to make the materials in these courses suitable and appealing. The effort to find appropriate novels, poems and plays had been rewarded and the popularity of Literature courses had increased due to the changes that occurred (Ibid).

EFL\ESL students’ fears and anxieties towards literature can be addressed, then, by using suitable texts taught by teachers who are aware of these fears. As a result, enthusiastic students will take these courses to benefit from the experience they gain from reading literary works, instead of taking them merely to accrue credit hours for graduation purposes. Being aware of a problem is the beginning of solving it. Hence, teachers’ awareness of the difficulties students encounter in dealing with literature will help in overcoming them. Hence, the main aim of this study is to investigate student attitudes, find out the challenges they face and see whether their professors are aware of these challenges.

### **3. Methodology**

The present study was conducted at Sultan Qaboos University’s College of Education and College of Arts and Social Sciences because students from these colleges have to enroll in Literature courses while studying at the Department of English.

The participants were students and literature professors from the English Department. The twenty eight students participating were taking at least one literature course and were in their second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth academic year. First-year students were excluded because they take no literature courses. Literature teachers were included to find out what they thought students’ perceptions were and then to compare them with their own. In total, there were 34 participants - 28 students and 6 teachers.

Given time constraints, the instrument used was an open-ended questionnaire. Although an interview was initially intended, students found they were too busy for this. Open-ended questions in any case allowed participants to express their views freely, especially because these were kept anonymous. There were two questionnaires, one for students and the other for teachers. The students’ questionnaire included enquiries concerning their thoughts and ideas about literature courses before and after taking them. It also included questions about the challenges faced in those courses and what was of interest in them. The questionnaire for teachers sought to discover what they thought their students felt about their courses.

The questionnaire was piloted on two students in order to test its clarity and to see if it would produce the required answers. Some of the questions in the questionnaire’s first version were modified, and others were omitted because they gave the same answers as other questions.

In the questionnaire’s final version, there were two questions that dealt with how students thought about these courses before and after taking them. There was also one question that asked about the number of courses that they had already taken. This was to find out if opinions about these courses

differed after they were exposed to them in class. Importantly, one question asked students about their perceptions of these courses and why these perceptions were developed. Another question asked about their ideas/feelings about these courses after taking them. The final two questions concerned both the challenges they faced and the course elements they found interesting. This allowed a comparison between the perceptions and the real challenges that students faced. For example, if students perceived the courses negatively, was that related to the challenges? And if they viewed them positively, was that related to the elements they found interesting?

The teachers' questionnaire mainly sought their opinions. What did they think students felt about the courses they taught. This, in its way, was a parallel to the thrust of the students' questionnaire.

The answers shed light on how aware teachers were about what their students thought and felt regarding literature. They also showed whether teachers were aware of the challenges that faced students and the elements that students enjoyed.

The questionnaires were distributed to male and female students and teachers, all of whom were given one week to answer them. It was believed that giving the participants enough time would make the answers more accurate because they were not in a hurry to fill out the questionnaire at once.

The gathered data was read, coded and analyzed according to the common features in the answers arising from both questionnaires. Answers to each question were analyzed individually and carefully in order to be able to compare students' responses as a group with their teachers'.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The data obtained was analyzed qualitatively. Each questionnaire was handled separately and the common answers from students were put together to discern an overall attitude. The same procedure was applied to the teachers' questionnaire. Then the answers from the students' questionnaires and those from their teacher's questionnaires were compared to discover whether they agreed upon certain aspects.

As stated earlier, the questionnaire was administrated to 28 students and 6 teachers. Of the 89.2% of the students offering comment on literature courses 44% indicated they used to have positive perceptions of literature before joining its courses, and 56% indicated they used to have negative perceptions. Eleven and eight tenth percent indicated they used to have neutral perceptions.

Students with positive perceptions agreed on a number of factors that explained their opinion and they listed the following reasons:

1. Positive influence from peers
2. They likened English Literature to Arabic literature and were excited to study it
3. They loved and enjoyed reading literature generally
4. They were interested in analyzing and understanding literary work

In general, students' appreciation of and interest in literature generated their positive perceptions regarding these courses.

On the other hand, 56% of the students used to perceive literature courses negatively due to certain factors:

1. Peers' negative influence
2. Comparing it to Arabic Literature which they considered difficult
3. The difficulties in English language
4. The title of some literature courses which sometimes seemed ambiguous.
5. Huge books that they had to carry around.
6. They had never been exposed to similar courses
7. They thought the courses would only include historical events that had to be memorized

Hence, students' perceptions were generated because of many factors, which may be similar but whose effect may differ. They may create a positive attitude or a negative one. For example, literature

in itself might be interesting to one student and boring to another. Student perceptions seem to be mainly affected by personal predisposition, and this is what was stated by the teachers.

Students with positive and negative perceptions regarding literature courses stated that there were many challenges that they encountered such as:

- The old vocabulary that may be used in the literary work
- The difficulty of such language
- The ideas of the literary work that will usually come from other cultures
- The course load: they take many literature courses at the same time
- The method of teaching and grading in these courses
- The length of lectures
- The type of tasks that they needed to deal with in tests, like writing essays
- Their lack of skills in English, especially in writing, caused problems
- The different interpretations of a given literary work. Everyone has their own interpretation and expressing this may be difficult

Students who perceived these courses negatively and students who perceived them positively faced the same challenges; therefore it can be concluded that the difficulties in studying them are not the main reason for perceiving them negatively.

Students and their teachers had the same understanding about the challenges in studying Literature. Teachers were well aware of the elements that students mentioned and considered difficult.

Although the majority of students thought that literature courses were difficult and challenging, they mentioned many elements that interested them, such as the following:

- The material itself, poems, stories etc
- Learning about cultural differences
- Developing critical thinking
- The creative work of creative writers
- Knowledge about other cultures and history
- Interpreting others' thoughts and ideas
- Analyzing the literary work
- Knowledge about many things

After taking Literature courses the percentage of those perceiving them negatively dropped to 28%.

Fourteen and two tenth percent of the students who perceived literature courses negatively did not change their attitude due to language which they said was difficult in all literature courses.

Forty five and four tenth percent of the students who used to have positive perceptions changed to negative and the reasons that they gave were these:

- Some courses are difficult and boring
- There was no discussion in the classroom
- The style of instruction and the instructors

Fortunately, 72% of the students had a positive attitude towards Literature courses after taking them, describing them as follows:

- Useful.
- Enjoyable.
- Interesting.
- Beneficial.
- Fun.

Students also added that these courses were not boring - depending on the instructors. They felt they improved their writing skills and gained knowledge of life and language itself.

It can be argued that student perceptions of Literature courses can change, since 72% of the respondents had a positive attitude after taking them. The other side of the equation, however, deserves

special attention, namely, the students who initially perceived these courses positively and then changed their mind. The change in their attitude should be studied carefully.

It was also noticed that student attitude towards literature courses changed when they took more of them. Those taking only one did not seem to develop the same understanding as students who took more than five. In fact the students were categorized according to the number of literature courses they took, and their opinions were analyzed on that basis.

- One course:

The complaint was that these courses were difficult and boring because of what other students had told them and the instructor's style. This view didn't change because they still found literature difficult and boring.

- Two courses:

Here again, Literature courses were viewed as difficult and boring, but some students showed an interest in reading. This negative attitude changed after taking the two courses. Students became more interested in reading and finding, analyzing, and interpreting ideas very appealing, although they faced some challenges.

- Three courses:

Students perceived these negatively because they had little experience and the course names made them seem hard. Later they said that they really enjoyed taking them. It was good and useful to discover knowledge about others, their cultures, and experiences, despite the difficulty with language in the material and tests set by their instructors.

- Four courses:

The general perception changed, except with one student. They were interested in their courses because they thought they would talk about stories and poems. Their attitude did not change although they found such difficulties as writing essays and understanding everything that was meant or implied in the literary work. The benefit and entertainment of reading the literary work overcame their feeling of boredom.

- Five Courses:

Students understood that they would be tackling old literary works, which made them interested but afraid of the difficulty at the same time. They found the whole experience beneficial, even though the tests and grading style were harsh. They enjoyed reading stories and poems in order to be more familiar with the language and culture involved.

- More than five courses:

The negative perceptions broadly changed, but there was criticism of both material and teaching styles. Students thought some courses took critical thinking away from them through "spoon feeding". They appreciated the work involved and knowledge gained, but thought the language and grading / testing in some of these courses was difficult.

In short, the more courses students took, the more interested in literature they became, while still finding both teaching styles and grading an obstacle. Student attitudes, then, seemed to depend increasingly not on themselves but on their instructors. This, however, was not noticed by the teachers. They did not think that either the teacher or the course content should be considered an obstacle. Most felt that students were in sole charge of how they perceived and performed in these courses.

## **5. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to find out students' attitudes towards literature and the factors underlying them. The study revealed that 56% of the students involved used to perceive literature negatively, though the majority changed their opinion after actually enrolling in literature courses. The outcome of the study highlights the effect of many factors that cause students to develop negative attitudes. The main factor underlying both negative and positive standpoints comes from the students themselves. Clearly, they all face the same experience and difficulties and yet react differently. In

addition, both students with positive perceptions and those with negative perceptions acknowledge the existence of interesting and enjoyable elements in literature courses. Teachers are all aware of their students' attitudes to literature courses and this should be advantageously taken into consideration as an advantage by those who are asked to change some approaches and techniques used in their courses. Such an awareness should make finding solutions much easier.

The 45.4% of students whose positive attitudes became negative after the literature courses need to be further studied and their change of attitude carefully analyzed. There is a need for change in many courses and students' suggestions can be helpful. Studying teaching and grading styles in literature courses could also create a big difference.

Literature courses can be very useful and engaging. They foster academic skills but also develop students' sense of understanding and general knowledge of people and the world. The immense gains involved should motivate students and literature teachers to change the current situation. The negative view that these courses are boring and difficult demands urgent attention. Change is strongly recommended.

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