

Obstacles Experienced by Saudi Undergraduate Students in Studying English Literature

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Abstract

Acquisition of English gives you the freedom to explore innovative opportunities. For years, in Saudi educational institutions, English has been taught with prime importance. At the university level, English literature is included in the curriculum as a means of learning English as a Foreign Language. However, as in other countries where English is considered a second language, students in Saudi Arabia confront many problems in learning English, mostly in studying English literature. Because of the lack of target language proficiency and target cultural understanding, English literature students in Saudi Arabia are not interested in studying English literature. As a result, the students are unable to understand the assigned literary texts and are erratic about the contents of literary texts. This study aims to investigate the major difficulties and barriers faced by Saudi students in their English literature classes and their attitudes toward the language itself. The findings of this study suggest that students majoring in English literature have poor knowledge of English literature and a poor understanding of English culture, which leads to disinterest and demotivation in studying English literature.

Keywords: *English literature, target language proficiency, target cultural understanding, confront.*

1. Introduction

Interactions between nations are only possible in the English Language. English is the language of science, technology, and international communication in the fields of business, research, scientific development, and so on. English is necessary in all countries for development in the fields of communication with other countries and for systematic high-tech advancement. Logically, educationalists, legislators, and other decision-making bodies in Saudi Arabia are acutely aware of the necessity of English. The legitimate position of English in Saudi Arabia is as an elementary foreign language. It is the primary foreign language taught in Saudi Arabian government schools. English is also taught in private schools, universities, and various industrial and governmental institutions.

Nowadays, those who are efficient in communicating in English have a brilliant future and widespread employment possibilities, enriching their knowledge in different fields, increasing their understanding of other cultures, making it easier to go abroad for higher

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studies, and also for leisure pursuits, such as traveling overseas for pleasure. Therefore, EFL programs at universities should include English literature to improve students' English proficiency. For some reasons, this attempt was not fully successful. One study suggested that "second-language learners were demotivated to study English texts because of different cultural, attitudinal, and emotional barriers" (Hussein & Al Emami, 2016). Some investigations have proved that EFL learners take English literature courses as the most complicated part of their English learning as the contents of the texts contain figurative vocabulary, complex sentences, and complicated grammatical rules.

The Higher Commission for Education Program in Saudi Arabia, as cited in Al Shumaimeri (2003), has asserted that "the ultimate aim of education in Saudi Arabia is to make students understand Islam correctly and comprehensively, to implant in them the Islamic creed, to imbibe in them the Islamic values, teachings, and ideals, and, above all, to spread Islam. At the same time, they want to develop society economically, socially, and culturally, and more importantly, to prepare the individuals to make meaningful contributions to the strengths of their community".

Confrontation in English literature mostly arises because of the ethical and religious values highlighted in English literature, which is completely the opposite of Islamic values and lifestyles in Saudi Arabia. In the course of this study, we will attempt to determine the challenges that English literature students face because of this struggle.

Al Shumaimeri (2003) believed that "Teachers have pointed out that students leave the secondary stage without the ability to carry out a short conversation". This statement suggests that students are not experts in English even after learning the subject for many years in schools in Saudi Arabia. This lack of proficiency in English is another significant barrier to studying English literature.

2. Background: Significance of the study

The lack of interaction and enthusiasm of the students as well as their inability to achieve the target level in the field of studying literature, have made us think about this research. Not only the students but also the teachers face many problems in teaching English literature. To ensure effective teaching of literature the teachers should ensure that the students are motivated and interested in learning and acquiring the English language, as well as conceptualizing the content of the textbook. Studying English literature is a type of practicing the language in different contexts. While studying literature, students are engaged in different activities related to language, such as analyzing the plot, discussing the main themes, character analysis, and summarizing the story. At the same time, they have to know the history and culture of that particular textbook. They can also improve their vocabulary level, perfect their capability of using words in different contexts, and increase their creativity. They can be made more efficient in critical thinking by studying the literature. After reading a text, they should be able to assess the composition, verse, play, short stories, and other literary works. To achieve all the above-discussed abilities, the participation of the learners in the class is extremely important. To convey the message of the text and deliver an effective lecture, the class should be interactive, but the passive attitudes of learners enfeeble the outcome of the lecture. The classroom should be learner-centered and activity-based. Because of their low level of proficiency, the learners sometimes feel that the teacher should use their mother tongue in delivering lectures.

It is a matter of controversy whether in the English language class mother tongue should be allowed or not. However, it is notable that Saudi students feel comfortable and confident when the lecture is delivered in their language.

To ensure a complete perception of the text, the necessity of reading the full original text cannot be ignored. Both students' and teachers' participation in the class or class

discussion is based on reading the text, which leads to a complete idea of the text. As class hours are limited, the teachers try to ensure that students have a clear idea about the text before starting the lesson and reading the text in class. However, teachers find that students are reluctant to read the text. Therefore, the students do not get the full conception of the text that the author intends to convey. If the students are not engaged in the class, it turns into a teacher-centered class, and the students lose interest in attending the lecture. If they study more, they will achieve more discernment regarding the text. This clear perception of the text makes them interact in class with the teacher and their peers. They ask more questions and gain deep insights into the text. Therefore, reading the recommended text is not a choice but an essential requirement for all literature students. But the reality is something different, students write ambiguous and fuzzy answers because of their superficial knowledge of the recommended text. One report suggested that “students mainly read the abridged versions of the texts, short notes, or key points instead of the original texts (WAEC, 2021)” (Ugwu, 2022).

Writing skills are a very important part of literature, but because of the poor writing skills of students, it becomes somewhat impossible for them to continue their literature courses. The teachers of English literature receive students in the class at the university level, but unfortunately, some of them are not even capable of writing a single correct sentence despite studying the English language at the school level. Another frustrating issue is learners’ examination scripts. The learners are very poor in answering elaborate and descriptive questions, and in reproducing the events.

3. Objectives and Research Questions

Data collected from this study are anticipated to focus on issues related to obstacles faced by Saudi students in learning English literature. The questionnaire aimed to investigate these issues. This study presents an analysis of students’ attitudes toward studying English literature. The questionnaire was designed to identify three types of difficulties students face in their courses related to literature.

3.1. Difficulties related to culture

Saudi students sometimes feel a cultural rift with stories in English literature. There is a huge difference between the two cultures in their ways of living, psychological build-up, religious beliefs, and so on. Questions 3 and 4 aimed to determine the nature of this cultural rift. British and American literature are the focal point of study in the Department of English at King Khalid University. Simultaneously, students take other associated courses such as syntax, phonology, morphology, and translation. The department expects its English majors to have a clear idea about British and American culture so that they can develop both language ability and a thorough knowledge of literary history and theory, and enhance their understanding of a wide range of cultures and intellectual traditions. The study of literature helps them to think critically about complex topics stated in literary works from different perspectives.

3.2. Difficulties related to language

Most of the Saudi students do not have sufficient proficiency in the English language to understand the literature clearly and completely. Therefore, they are not interested in studying the literature. Questions 1, 6, 7, 9, and 10 aimed to investigate the hardships students face in studying English literature due to language proficiency. Turay. G.M. (2021) shared his personal experience, “I enjoyed British literature (ii) very much, although I could not fully understand those poetic texts. Generally, when I was an undergraduate myself, a struggling reader of those texts, I could not fully understand what many of the texts meant because at least in the past I still lacked enough command of English.” Belonging to a non-English-speaking country Saudi undergraduate students experience the same barriers while studying the literature. For a literature student, it’s

obligatory to know the perfect use of sentence structure and vocabulary which is also a part of the acquisition of language.

3.3. Difficulties related to interest in learning English

Maximum Saudi students are not interested in learning English. This adverse attitude toward learning a foreign language lessens students' interest in studying English literature. Questions 2,5,8,11,12 aimed to determine the student's interest in studying English literature. Saudi students' chief concern for learning English is the ability to communicate; they do not feel the importance of literature, as studying literature is not a direct method of learning a language. They have a misconception that literature does not help them in getting a lucrative job. For practical purposes, by avoiding literature, learners place more emphasis on conversation to cope with real-world situations.

3.4. This investigation was conducted by the following 12 research questions.

1. Do you feel that studying English literature is difficult for you?
2. Are you interested in studying English literature?
3. Do you feel that the contents of English literary texts do not match your culture?
4. Do you feel that the characters you find in the English literary texts do not match the characters surrounding you?
5. Do you feel that studying literature helps develop ethical, spiritual, psychological, and philosophical values?
6. Do you feel that studying English literature will improve your English- language skills?
7. Do you think that your English language proficiency is not sufficient to understand English literary texts?
8. Do you believe that studying English literature will help you to find a suitable job in the future?
9. Do you feel that the content of a literary text is difficult to understand?
10. Do you feel that the language used in English literature is different from common English?
11. Do you think studying the literature is only a waste of time and effort?
12. Do you feel that you do not need to study English literature?

4. Methodology:

This study was conducted at the Science and Arts College of Tonumah, King Khalid University in Aseer, Saudi Arabia from September 1, 2023, to September 30, 2023. An acceptable sampling method was used to assemble data from both male and female Saudi undergraduate English majors. A 12-item, self-composed questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire consists of closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was evolved by the researchers grounded on the student's participation in English literature classes, their performance in the tests, and also the classroom observation of the teachers. Descriptive figures and qualitative techniques were applied to explain the data.

5. Results and Data Analysis:

Initially, data were collected using a questionnaire that was based on the goals of the study. The questionnaire included (65) male and female English literature major Saudi students from the English language and translation department at the Sciences and Arts

College of Tanumah, King Khalid University. The highest percentage of participants were females (65.4%), while the males (34.6%) were less than them. Most of them were at upper levels, who assumed that they had covered the literature courses offered in their relevant degree plans in the previous semesters. The participants provided their responses regarding the problems they face in studying English literature, accordingly, the collected data were analyzed and processed, and the results were concluded as follows:

51% of participants considered that studying English literature was difficult, but 48.5% responded that studying literature was not difficult. Notably, most of the students consider studying English literature as a challenging task.

Regarding student proficiency standards, 54.6 % of the respondents replied that their English language proficiency was sufficient, while 45.5% replied that English language proficiency was not enough, their response concluded that most students' language proficiency was insufficient, and this can be considered one of the difficulties that affect students oral and written communication. This presumably results in drawing students away from understanding the literature.

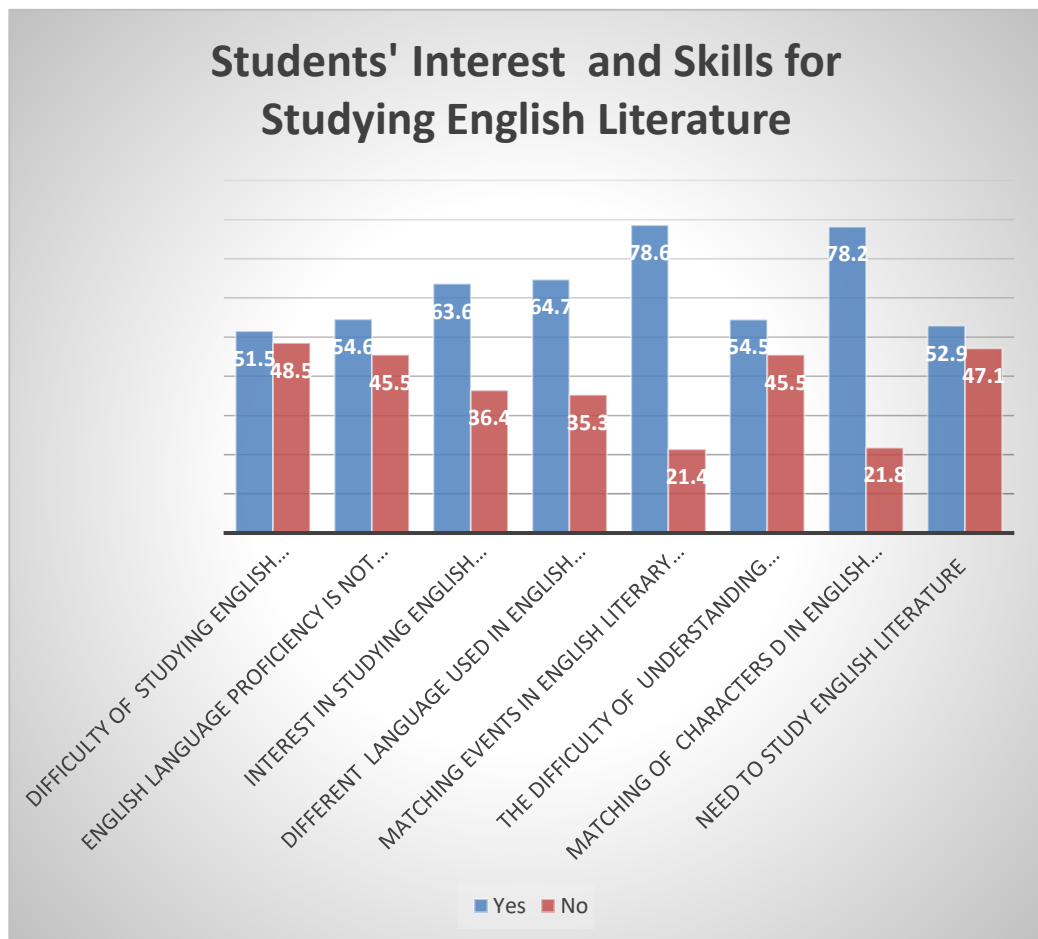
Regarding students' interest in studying literature, 63.6% had no interest in studying literature; in contrast, 36.4% were interested in studying literature. 64.7% believed that the expression used in academic texts was different for them, while 35.3% gave a negative response toward this aspect.

78.2% felt that characters in English literary texts matched with the characters surrounding them. A total of 21.8% of the participants felt that the characters did not match with the people they know. In addition, 54.5 % had difficulty understanding and comprehending the literary text content. Based on the overall participant responses, it can be summarized that students' language deficiency prevents them from understanding and interacting with the content of the academic texts and that the characters in the literary texts are difficult to comprehend. It seems clear that the students understood the external aspects of the literary texts, but it was difficult for them to understand the inside content. 52.9 % answered that it is necessary to study English literature, and 47.1% gave a negative opinion that no need to study literature due to linguistic deficiency.

Table 5.1 Students' Interests and Skills for Studying English Literature:

Statements	Percentage	
	Yes	No
1. Difficulty in studying English literature	51.5	48.5
2. English language proficiency is not enough	54.6	45.5
3. Interest in studying English literature	63.6	36.4
4. Different language used in English literature	64.7	35.3
5. Matching events in English literary texts with culture	78.6	21.4
6. The difficulty of understanding literary text contents	54.5	45.5
7. Matching of characters in English literary texts	78.2	21.8
8. Need to study English literature	52.9	47.1

Chart 5.1: Students Interests and Skills for Studying English Literature:



Regarding the importance of studying English literature, the responses given by the students are as follows:

The participants had positive opinions about the significance of studying English literature's help in finding a proper job in the future. 67% agreed with its importance while 33% disagreed. It suggests that most of the students know the importance of English literature in their lives. 63.4% believed that studying English literature could improve their English language skill while the rest of them 36.6% chose that it didn't help them in improving their language skill.

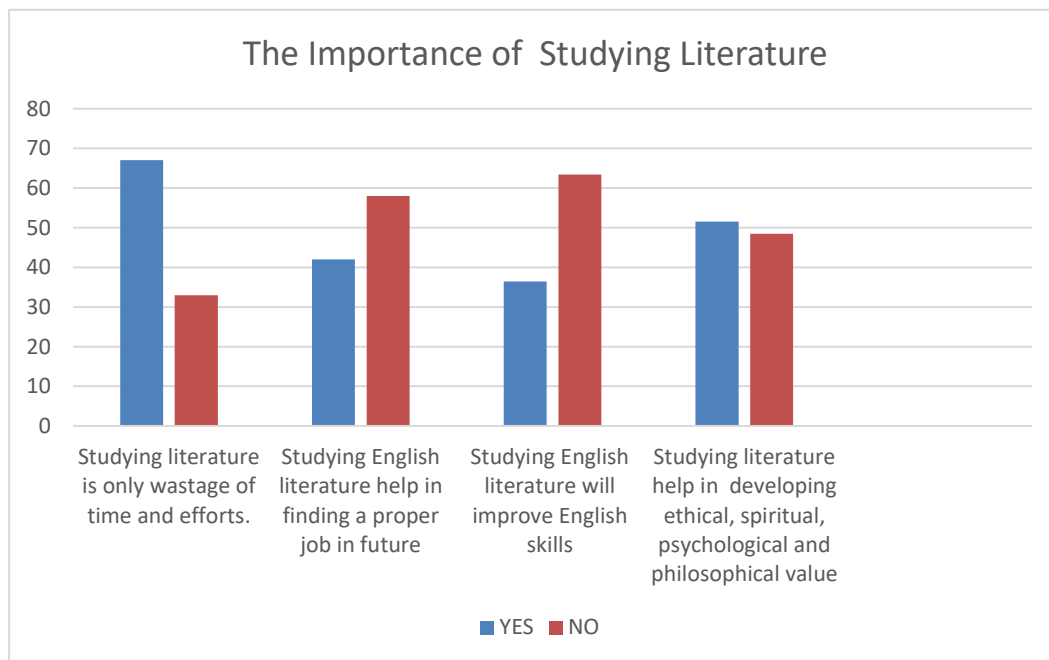
42% agreed that studying literature helps in developing ethical, spiritual, psychological, and, philosophical values while 58% were against them.

51.5% considered studying English literature as only a waste of time and effort but, in contrast, 48.5% believed that they needed to study English literature.

Table 5.2 The Importance of studying English literature for students:

Statements	Percentage	
	Yes	No
9. Studying English literature helps in finding a proper job in the future.	67	33
10. Studying literature helps in developing ethical, spiritual, psychological sych and philosophical values.	42	58
11.. 11. Studying English literature will improve English language skills.	63.4	36.6
12. Studying literature is only a waste of time and effort.	51.5	48.5

Chart 5.2. Importance of studying English literature for students



5.3. Discussion:

From the above-mentioned results, it can be interpreted that students have negative perceptions of studying English literature. The results also exhibit that teachers face many confrontations that restrict their delivery of quality teaching.

The current study attempted to determine the reasons Saudi students avoid studying English literature. This study revealed many reasons that prevented students from studying English literature. One of the most mentionable obstacles for students studying English literature is the difficulty of literary texts. However, not all English literary texts have the same difficulty level. The absence of interest from some students in literature is another main cause. Learners' misunderstanding of English literature as unsuitable, unrepresentative, and inconsistent with their culture is one of the reasons for the difficulty in understanding the content of English literature. Among the most important discomforts that students face, are the lack of familiarity with linguistic aspects, poor levels of proficiency, poor previous background knowledge, and negative attitudes toward studying literature. Among the reasons for the difficulty in studying literature is the lack of students' recognition of the significance of English literature in all aspects of their lives, including professional and cultural, and its role in promoting noble values and morals, in addition to its role in developing their language skills.

5.4. Recommendations and implications drawn from the study:

The researchers suggested some solutions to the problem of difficulties faced by Saudi undergraduate English literature majors. Researchers recommend that the solution to this problem should be found and solved by students, teachers, and syllabus designers inclusively. The English language curriculum in the Saudi educational system must include erudite textbooks and good literary activities in the early stages and consider the level of difficulty of these selected texts. Learners' current abilities and level of competence should be taken into account to communicate the goals of their literary content by choosing works in series and collections that suit the students, improving their attitudes toward literature, and encouraging them to study English literature and improve their level of proficiency. These selected works can improve the overall performance and positive theory of the study of English Literature. The literary texts chosen for Saudi

students should support their cultural and psychological foundations so that they can relate themselves to the contents.

Students should be apprehensive of the fact that learning the English language is not only a subject to secure passing marks but also a skill to make them capable of being perfect in the job market worldwide. It is a life skill, they have to acquire to confront the modern world.

The curriculum and syllabus of literature courses should be revised and updated frequently to motivate and attract students. Therefore, syllabus designers should consider their interests and level of proficiency. It will help to avoid dissatisfaction with the students and to achieve the desired goals and objectives.

Teachers should use modern teaching aids, such as projectors, and the Internet, to make the class interesting and effective. Some famous, attractive movies have been produced based on stories of prominent literary texts that can be exhibited in literature classes and used as teaching aids.

The admission procedure for English literature courses should be standard and sufficiently strict. Students' English level should be tested before they are allowed to be admitted to literature courses for the smooth continuation of their studies.

Teachers should be provided with theoretical and practical training to make learning successful and engaging, as well as to achieve the target level of learning.

Based on the proficiency level of the students, their native language can be used in the class to give them a clear conception of the text, to make the class engaging, and to help the students analyze the text. If the level of the students is poor, using L1 in the class can ensure their participation and comprehension and they can ask the teacher for an explanation and involve themselves in the classroom consultation.

The number of hours allocated to literature classes should be increased. This will help both teachers and students spend more time discussing topics related to their courses. Several articles have reported that time constraints are an external challenge faced by teachers and students. (Farhanah & Hadina, 2022; Ukat & Hanita, 2022; Ain Suraya & Norhanim, 2020; Yulnetri, 2018; Tayib & Hassan, 2020). According to Ain Suraya and Norhanim, (2021), "The limited time assigned to teaching literature can make it difficult for teachers to complete a huge amount of content. This makes it difficult for students to understand and appreciate the recommended text" (Ugwu, 2022).

6. Conclusion

Studying the English literature is an interesting challenge. Although it opens doors to its students in multiple worlds of knowledge and culture, it also poses several challenges that complicate the study of this specialty. English literature is considered to be a subject that builds up students' language skills and develops their understanding of English-speaking countries' cultures and traditions. The literature also develops one's knowledge of healthy human values and enhances the power of critical thinking. Nowadays English language skills are needed for work and further studies. Graduates who can use English effectively in different areas of expertise have great demands in the job sector. A worldwide range of careers is open to English language graduates, such as teaching, creative writing, journalism, editing, reviewing, publications, etc. This research attempted to highlight the main challenges faced by English literature students in Saudi Arabia. A group of challenges was demonstrated, most of which focused on the students' weak linguistic abilities and skills. The researchers recommend that more research should be conducted on how to enhance students' linguistic proficiency and improve their attitudes toward English literature.

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