

IUG English Major Education- Track Students' Attitudes Towards Literature Courses

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the attitudes of IUG English major students, education track towards the literature courses they have to study as part of their teacher preparation program. It also investigates the assumption that the more these students are exposed to literary texts through the context of teaching literature, the more positive their attitudes become. In order to measure the students' attitudes towards the literature courses, an attitude scale was designed and distributed to the study sample which consisted of (131) English major female students, education track. The findings of the study showed that the majority of participants had positive attitudes towards the literature courses they studied, whereas there were no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) attributed to the number of literature courses studied. In the light of these findings, the study recommended that literature instructors should help students maintain such positive attitudes towards literature through sensitizing them to the study of literature by selecting texts that involve them into a real context of language communication. Further, the study recommended that instructors predispose students to literary texts by using various approaches and techniques that reinforce students' English language skills.

Keywords: Literature Courses, Attitudes, Education Track.

اتجاهات طالبات قسم اللغة الانجليزية بكلية التربية بالجامعة الإسلامية بغزة نحو مساقات الأدب

ملخص الدراسة

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى التعرف على اتجاهات طلبة قسم اللغة الانجليزية في الجامعة الاسلامية بغزة - تخصص تربوية - نحو مساقات الأدب التي يدرسونها كجزء من برنامج اعدادهم كمدرسي لغة انجليزية، وقد استندت الدراسة على فرضية أن كلما درس طلبة اللغة الانجليزية عدداً أكبر من مساقات الأدب، كلما أصبحت اتجاهاتهم أكثر ايجابية نحو هذه المساقات. ومن أجل قياس اتجاهات الطلبة نحو مساقات الأدب، قام الباحثان بتصميم مقياس للاتجاهات وتوزيعه على عينة الدراسة المكونة من (131) طالبة تخصص لغة انجليزية - تربوية، وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن الغالبية العظمى من المستجيبات للمقياس كانت موافقين ايجابية تجاه مساقات الأدب التي يدرسونها، في حين لم تكن هناك فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية عن ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) تعزى لعدد مساقات الأدب التي درستها. وفي ضوء هذه النتائج، يوصي الباحثان بأن يقوم مدرسو المساقات الأدبية بتحفيز الطلبة لدراسة الأدب وذلك من خلال اختيار النصوص الأدبية التي توفر جواً من التواصل اللغوي الفعال، وكذلك من خلال التنوع في أساليب وطرق تدريس هذه المساقات.

كلمات مفتاحية: مساقات الأدب، الاتجاهات، تخصص تربوية.

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I. Introduction:

Some of Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) English major students, education track, and some IUG language instructors have been wondering about the value of studying literature courses as part of student teachers' preparation for language teaching and any other English related professions. In some formal and informal discussions, most of them seem to believe that literary courses contribute almost nothing to students' language proficiency or even to the profession of teaching. This study mainly aimed to find out the students' real attitudes towards and perceptions of the literature courses they study as reliance mainly on informal talk, and not systematic research. This will neither lead to uncovering the validity of those allegations nor to any informed decisions concerning what should be done concerning the number of literature courses, the types of texts, and genres such students should study; in addition, to the manner in which they should be taught.

A) Purpose of the Study

This study attempted to investigate the validity of the claims that literature courses do not significantly contribute to the language proficiency of IUG English major students, education track. This investigation depended mainly on finding out the students' attitudes towards and perceptions of the literature courses as expressed in their responses to the attitude scale items and four open-ended questions.

B) Study Questions

The study attempted to answer the following two questions:

1. What is the nature of the attitudes of IUG English major students, education track, towards the literature courses they study?
2. Are there statistically significant differences in the mean scores at ($\alpha \leq 0.5$) in attitudes towards literature courses among education track students attributed to the number of literature courses they studied?

C) Significance of the Study

The significance of the study arises from its contribution to the ongoing debate among IUG English education track students, graduates and instructors concerning the practicality and usability of the literature courses for preparing student teachers for the profession of teaching and/or any other English-related professions.

II. Literature Review:

Language learning has long been perceived as a self-sufficient process through which learners are exposed to language, usually constructed by linguists and taught by using diverse methods and techniques. However, when it comes to literature and its relationship to language learning, the former has been dismissed and deemed as a kind of luxury or even a gratuitous source of language learning. Indeed such an argument has been a point of contention between those who are in favor of teaching literature and those who are against it. Those who are in favor of teaching literature believe that teaching literature helps to build identity and enrich competence and critical thinking (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000). However, those who are against it think that there is no value of teaching literature which entails a culture remote from that of the students' mother culture. These detractors condemn literature because it promotes cultural imperialism (e.g. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986). The current study researchers' assumption is that there is a strong relationship between teaching literature and language learning. The validity of this assumption is contingent on different

factors, among which are the students' attitudes and the impact of studying literature on language learning.

A) Students' attitudes towards literature

Attitudes, the psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), toward an educational issue are extremely influential in either facilitating or hindering how it is perceived and learned. Consequently, if students' attitudes towards literature are negative, then the chances that literature will enhance their language competence and communicative skills are very slim. If the case is otherwise, then teaching literature will offer authentic situations for real and serious language learning. Numerous researches have been conducted on the role of attitude in second language acquisition, spurred by the knowledge that negative attitudes can be changed. Factors like better teaching strategies, classroom and social environment can help reduce negative attitudes (Candlin & Mercer, 2001).

The fact that most literary texts are about life and the way of living is in itself an opportunity of negotiating and debating certain themes or ideas suggested by writers. The study of literature, as such, provides the students with a real context whereby they can get involved in a 'give-and-take' relationship, thus having a real experience of language learning. The language experience needs to be contextualized and comprehensible (Krashen, 1999), and the learner should be involved, motivated, and encouraged to respond by using language (Arnold, 1990; Tomlinson, 2008).

As instructors of English language and literature for over twenty years, the researchers have had a deep conviction that literature is a key tool to language learning. Yet, this learning may not take place as it should be if students' attitudes towards literature are negative. Students should have a real passion for literature; they should have some alacrity, which will make them get involved in the act of reading and interpretation. The choice of the text is a very detrimental factor which helps in forming students' attitudes (Adedoyin & Shangodoyin, 2010). When an instructor chooses texts that involve the students culturally and emotionally, they are definitely predisposed to the study of literature.

Such positive attitudes are unlikely to be developed in isolation of the personality of the instructor and his/her style and the teaching methods being used. There is a pervasive belief that teachers' attitudes have an important impact on how students feel about themselves as well as on the rate at which they acquire academic skills. Furthermore, good and qualified instructors have the skills and the techniques that entice the students to literary texts and situate them inside these texts where they question the text and debate its possible meanings by either speaking or writing.

Another vital factor which helps to develop positive attitudes is the instructors' style in handling the literary texts. Instructors who follow different approaches and techniques of teaching literature usually succeed in motivating students and have them develop positive attitudes towards literature courses. It is usually instructors' responsibility to motivate students and get them involved in the literary texts they are studying. Students are always receptive to creative methodology, yet such methodology requires meticulous planning. Allwright and Bailey (1991) suggest that in order to determine students' receptivity to a creative approach, proper planning is required to articulate instructors' efforts to promote creativity among students.

Similarly, Moody (1988) asserts that instructors should be creative by varying the activities and tasks in their classes; in this sense, students are kept alert and become ready to respond to various kinds of stimulus. When these instructors embrace student-centered techniques, the students' self-confidence will increase. Such activities will make the students active participants in the interpretation process. In such a constructivist way of learning, the students are expected to integrate new information into their previous knowledge (Bruner, 1990). In this context the students become highly motivated inasmuch as they see themselves as meaning producers rather than just consumers of it. The students become, as Rosenblatt (1995) puts it, in a transactional relationship with the text.

B) Impact of Studying literature on language learning

According to Abraham (2010: 79),

"Learning Literature not only improves the basic skills like reading, writing, listening and speaking but also other language areas such as vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. One of the pre-requisites for language learning is that students should have a feeling for the language, which can be achieved through creative and critical use of literary texts where they can experience language in use."

Therefore, the study of literary texts will enhance the learners' language competence in general and the performative skills (speaking and writing) in particular.

Obediat (1997) asserts that literature helps students acquire a native-like competence in English; it helps them express their ideas in good English. They also learn the features of modern English; learn how the linguistic system of English language functions when it is used for communication. The students see how certain idiomatic expressions are used; they learn how to speak clearly, fluently and accurately. The result is that these learners become more proficient in English; they also become creative and analytical learners.

Therefore, teaching literature or using it in learning English is not without reasons. Collie and Slater (1990) list the following reasons for using literature in a language class - literature is an authentic source for language; it is helpful in cultural and language enrichment, and finally students will have a chance of real personal involvement. According to Maley (1989), the themes that literature deals with are common to all cultures in spite of the different approaches of the writers - death, love, human relationship, belief, nature, etc. These are relevant to all human beings at all times. In short, literature provides authentic material that can generate a new creative learning experience in class and the students in turn will come out as competent learners of both language and literature.

Teaching literature in a very interactive manner is a real chance of skill integration; the students read literary texts and then respond to these texts either by speaking or writing. In this sense, language learning takes place in a very integrated manner, mainly when text-based and student-based activities which, as Collie and Slater (1987: 8) suggest, "add fresh momentum into the teaching of literature by stimulating students' desire to read and encouraging their responses". Certainly, literary texts get the students intellectually and emotionally involved in the aesthetics of the text. They experience exquisite pleasure when they become in a dialogic relationship with the text. In this sense, the study of literary texts provides the students with a real chance of language learning.

III. Method:

A) Research design and sample

This study utilized the descriptive-analytical research design to explore the attitudes of IUG English language major students in education track towards the various literature courses they had to study as part of their teacher preparation program. Moreover, the study attempted to investigate whether there was a correlation between the students' attitudes towards literature and the number of literature courses they had already studied. Of course these attitudes are impacted by the style and the methods of teaching; however, the main focus of the research was only to examine those attitudes. A purposive sample of (131) female education track students, of whom (96) were juniors and (35) were seniors, was drawn from the study population which was (215) and (187) respectively in the first semester of the academic year (2014-2015).

B) Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the studies were collected by an attitude scale that included (25) items focusing on participants' attitudes towards the different literature courses they studied and (4) open-ended questions (See Appendix A). Responses to the attitude scale items were calculated using means, standard deviations, and percentage weights. The correlation between the numbers of literature courses students studied and their attitudes towards literature was calculated using Pearson correlation test. Students' responses to the 4-open-ended questions provided some qualitative data which substantiated the initial intuitions of the researchers as all emerging results were in favor of the research questions.

IV. Results:

Findings are mapped out into two sections, each of which answers one of the research questions.

1. Answer to the first question

The first question of the study was stated as follows: What is the nature of the attitudes of IUG English major students, education track, towards the literature courses they study? To answer this question the researchers used the frequencies, the sum of responses, means, standard deviation, the percentage weight and rank of each item of the attitude scale. The study findings reveal that strong majorities of IUG English major education track students had positive attitudes toward the literature courses they studied. These findings are self-evident from the analysis of the students' responses to the attitude scale items outlined in Table (1), which shows that the most dominant attitude among respondents was that literature courses contributed significantly to their overall learning of English. For instance, almost (80%) of respondents thought that literature courses enhanced their English writing skills, such sentence building, subject very agreement, parallelism, cohesion, and other technical writing skills. Whereas (77.25%) of them said that these courses enhanced their ability to write reports in English. Furthermore, nearly (79%) of respondents said that literature courses enhanced their vocabulary repertoire and improved their presentation skills. About (74%) of them stated that those courses enhanced their English speaking skills and their overall fluency in English, while (71.45) stated that literature courses enhanced their overall accuracy in English. In addition, (72.06%) said that literature courses improved their pronunciation.

Not only did the literature courses improve respondents' language but also their life and thinking skills. Approximately (80%) of respondents thought that literature courses

enhanced their understanding of other people, simply because the texts they were studying exposed them to the culture and the life style of those people. While (78.47%) believed that these courses enhanced their analytical skills. Still (76.34%) of respondents thought that literature courses helped them become independent learners, whereas (72%) of them said that the courses enhanced their ability to reason, sharpened their independent and critical thinking and stimulated their creativity.

No.	Item	Sum	Mean	Std.	% weight	Rank
1	I find literature courses enjoyable.	435	3.321	1.314	66.41	20
2	I find literature courses informative.	483	3.687	1.259	73.74	11
3	I am motivated to study literature courses.	415	3.168	1.388	63.36	22
4	Literature learning engages my interests.	414	3.160	1.335	63.21	23
5	Literature courses increase my motivation to study English.	427	3.260	1.298	65.19	21
6	Literature courses stimulate my creativity.	466	3.557	1.197	71.15	16
7	Literature courses enhance my ability to reason.	477	3.641	1.089	72.82	13
8	Literature courses enhance my independent thinking.	468	3.573	1.307	71.45	15
9	I apply what I learn in literature courses to my daily life.	378	2.885	1.250	57.71	24
10	Literature courses enhance my English speaking skills.	489	3.733	1.169	74.66	9
11	Literature courses enhance my English writing skills.	519	3.962	0.988	79.24	1
12	Literature courses enhance my overall accuracy in English.	468	3.573	1.082	71.45	15
13	Literature courses enhance my overall fluency in English.	483	3.687	1.068	73.74	10
14	Literature courses enhance my understanding of other people.	519	3.962	1.048	79.24	1
15	Literature courses enhance my vocabulary repertoire.	517	3.947	1.018	78.93	3
16	Literature courses improve my pronunciation.	472	3.603	1.226	72.06	14
17	Literature courses enhance my ability to write reports in English.	506	3.863	1.182	77.25	6
18	Literature courses enhance my analytical skills.	514	3.924	0.925	78.47	5
19	Literature courses enhance cooperation among students.	446	3.405	1.208	68.09	19

20	Literature courses improve my presentation skills.	517	3.947	1.055	78.93	3
21	Literature courses give me opportunities to express my opinions about general topics.	501	3.824	1.160	76.49	7
22	I wish we could study more literature courses.	370	2.824	1.475	56.49	25
23	Literature courses sharpen my critical thinking skills.	468	3.573	1.110	71.45	15
24	Literature courses help me become an independent learner.	500	3.817	1.066	76.34	8
25	Literature courses make more understanding of what goes around me.	478	3.649	1.052	72.98	12
	TOTAL	11730	89.542	17.794	71.63	

2. Answer to the second question

The second question of the study was stated as follows: Are there statistically significant differences in the mean scores at ($\alpha \leq 0.5$) in attitudes towards literature courses among students attributed to number of literature courses they studied? To answer this question, the means and standard deviations of the results of the attitude scale of the fourth level students (seniors), who were supposedly to have studied more literature courses and their third level counterparts (juniors), who were supposedly to have studied fewer literature courses were computed. Also, t-test paired sample was used to measure the significance of differences between the two groups. The results are outlined in Table (2) below.

Table 2 Means, std. deviation, t value, sig. value and sig. level to examine the statistical differences between the level							
	Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. value	Sig. level
Total	Juniors	96	88.000	17.571	1.654	0.101	not sig
	Seniors	35	93.771	17.969			

t table value at df (129) and sig. level (0.05) = 1.98

t table value at df (129) and sig. level (0.05) = 2.62

The results in Table (2) indicate that the computed (t) value (1.654) is lower than the tabled (t) value (1.98) at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) level. This means that there were no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) level between the junior and senior students. The mean of the juniors was (88.000) with a standard deviation of (17.571), while that of the seniors was (93.771) with a standard deviation of (17.969).

Thus, the findings of the second question proved that there were no statistically significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the mean scores of junior and senior students in their responses to the attitude scale items. This means that the variable of studying more literature courses did not significantly affect students' attitudes towards literature courses, which implies those students' positive attitudes toward studying literature courses were not affected by the number of literature courses they studied.

V. Discussion & Conclusion:

This study investigates IUG English major education track students' attitudes towards the literature courses they study as part of their undergraduate preparation program. In the study students responded to an attitude scale consisting of 25-Liker items and (4) open-ended questions. The results of the scale are summarized as follows: Most of the respondents held positive attitudes towards the literature courses they studied as considerable majorities of them thought such courses that literature courses greatly contributed to the enhancement of their various language and communication skills in various areas. For example, strong majorities of respondents agreed that literature courses enhanced their English writing, reading, and speaking skills in addition to enhancing their vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. These findings were also emphasized in some students' responses to the attitude scale open-ended questions. In this vein, one student respondent stated "Studying literature puts us in a place where we regularly write reports, criticisms, and analyses of literature materials leading the students to practise writing and making them more familiar with the methods and techniques of essay writing". Another respondent pointed out "Literature courses depend on a discussion between instructors and students and also among students themselves. This helps students to interact more using oral language."

The findings of this study are in tandem with those of Ujjwala's, (2013) study which asserts that reading of literary texts is interrelated and contributes to enhancing students' language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – because literary texts offer a rich source of linguistic input and can help learners to practise the four language skills in addition to exemplifying grammatical structures and presenting new vocabulary. By the same token, Povey (1972) underlines that literature is a tool to develop all language skills in terms of providing widespread and refined vocabulary usage as well as compound and precise syntax. The findings are also with those of the study of Conniff, et al. (1993), which found that introducing poetry in an adult literary class enhanced the reading and writing skills of lower level readers and motivated those learners to improve their writing due to the connections between reading and creative writing. In a similar vein, Stanford (2006) asserts that literature often furnishes a richer model for language than conversation as authors of literary texts frequently use elaborate sentences and sumptuous words, while speakers tend to employ the same few words over and over in conversation. The findings are also in agreement with what Collie and Slater (1990) as the four main reasons for using literature in language teaching and learning. Those believed that using valuable authentic material leads to cultural enrichment, language enrichment, and personal involvement.

The current study findings also revealed that a high majority of respondents thought that the literature courses they studied enhanced not only their language skills and areas but their thinking and communication skills. Additionally, the students' responses to the attitude scale showed that most students believed that literature courses made them more understanding of people's cultures, better thinkers, more creative and more independent. These findings were also capitalized on in respondents' answers to the scale (4) open-ended questions. One respondent said, "Literature courses improve my critical thinking and make me understand others in a better way and they also improve my creativity." Another respondent said, "I think studying literature helps me in my daily life. I apply what I learn in my life."

These findings are in harmony with those of (Yao & Lin, 2008) study, which confirms that teaching literature is conducive to cultivation of students' creative and critical thinking skills and aspirations. The findings also resonate with what Khatib, et al. (2011) suggest that integrating literature in English language learning can pave way for equipping students with a number of skills including development of critical thinking, analytical skills like formulation and expression of independent opinions, independent presentation of one's own interpretations. Similarly, Kantemir (1976) points out that the aim of teaching literature is to develop students' thinking and the power of comment, giving direction to the thoughts, raising the culture level of the students and developing students' feelings and imagination.

Despite the overwhelming positive attitudes which respondents held towards literature courses regardless the number of courses they studied, still some respondents expressed some negative attitudes concerning the way in which these courses are taught and the types of texts being taught. For example, one respondent complained, "Not all literature courses give the same benefits; I gained almost no benefits from some courses." Further, another respondent said, "The instructor mainly concentrates on explaining the texts, so in the exam what we think is not important", while a third stated, "Too many assignments in the literature courses make them boring." Such findings correspond with those of Gurnam Kaur (2003), who found that students viewed teaching strategies used by their instructors as boring, dull and uninspiring as they involved mainly in doing written work, especially among students with higher proficiency level. Students also indicated negative attitudes towards activities that required them to memorize facts, and where interpretations were provided only by the teacher (Wan Kamariah, 2009). Although literary texts provided /grammar contexts in which ESL students can learn more about the L2 culture (McCafferty, 2002), unsuitable texts can create a distance between the text and the readers, especially culturally (Saraceni, 2003).

Holding such negative attitudes towards the literature courses and the way of their delivery can prove to be very costly and detrimental for all stakeholders, and replacing negative attitudes with more positive ones becomes mandatory. The good news, in this respect, is that although difficult, attitude change is not impossible as they are not set in concrete (Healey, 2005); they can be changed through the learning process such as by using appropriate materials and teaching techniques (Choy, 2002).

Fauziah and Jamaluddin (2009) found that teachers used more students-centred approach in class compared to teacher-centred strategies which created a better learning atmosphere and improved students' perception and motivation towards literature. Students also need to be provided with background knowledge to fully comprehend literary texts (Horowitz, 1990). When students encounter, for example, unfamiliar cultural aspects, they tend to interpret the meaning based on their own culture, which might result in inappropriate cultural representations.

VI. Recommendations:

In the light of the study findings and conclusions, the following recommendations can help students in the education track at IUG; the recommendations will help both students and teachers. The students will maintain positive attitudes and get rid of negative ones; equally the teachers will be keen on choosing texts and following teaching approaches that

will sensitize students to literary texts and make them capitalize on the positive attitudes they have developed earlier. These recommendations are as follows:

1. Literature instructors should choose texts that offer authentic situations for real and serious language learning. Text choice is a very detrimental factor which helps in forming students' attitudes.
2. Literature instructors should help students to develop a feeling for the language, which can be achieved through creative and critical use of literary texts where students can experience language in use. All of this should be conducted by the instructions and the guidance of teachers.
3. Literature instructors should use different approaches and techniques of teaching literature so that they may motivate students and help them develop positive attitudes towards literature. Students are always receptive to creative methodology. This means that teachers should have an essential part in making students develop such positive attitudes towards literary texts.

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