



STUDENTS' PROBLEMS IN THE INSTRUCTION OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study reveals student-related problems as an existing phenomenon in the learning of English literature at the English Department. It refers to both the difficulties faced by the students and the students as a part of the problems. Using the qualitative descriptive method, the data were collected using questionnaires, observation, documentation, and Forum Group Discussion. Having been collected, the data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis offered by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020) consisting of reduction, display, and conclusion phases. The findings show that there are external and internal problems. The external problems include students' external factors, such as the difficulty of teaching materials and the ineffective teaching strategy. In contrast, the internal problems cover students' affective factors, such as low reading motivation and inadequate language competence. Due to its limitation, it is suggested that further research be carried out with other subjects in another university context to verify the findings.

INTRODUCTION

In a learner-oriented approach, learners play the most critical role in the teaching and learning process. Curriculum, materials, and strategy will barely be meaningful unless the learners are willing to learn. That is because the success or failure of an instructional process is determined or measured by the standard of learners' outcomes. It is the learners who perform learning activities, who achieve the instructional goals, to whom the teaching process is oriented or targeted, and whose terminal competence is measured. As the central focus of the instructional process, it is essential to elucidate students' challenges. Do students of English literature experience any significant problems? If so, what would they be?

There have been several studies focusing on the learning of English literature. Atek et al. (2020) revealed some popular approaches to learning English literature at secondary schools in Malaysia. Novianti (2016) studied how teachers selected materials for teaching literature and implemented teaching strategies and what constraints were faced during the teaching of English literature. Hapsari (2016) unfolded the literary competence needed to learn literature in the context of second language teaching. San Jose & Galang (2015) discovered the strategy of teaching literature with a learner-oriented approach.

Herlina (2016) focused on the teaching of literature by using poems to improve reading to comprehend meanings to find out aesthetical aspects of the literary works. Ismawati & Warsito (2019) studied the local wisdom in Javanese literary works as materials for literary instruction in the classroom. Handayani et al. (2020) studied the use of digital literature for the teaching of reading comprehension of narrative texts.

Iskhak et al. (2020) reviewed the reader response approach in teaching literature in the context of English as a foreign language. Mahmood et al. (2021) unfolded the effectiveness of code-mixing and code-switching in the teaching of literature in English as a second language. Manggong (2019) researched the use of memes and WhatsApp texts for teaching literature.

Sunardi et al. (2018) examined the general concept of teaching literature in the context of English language teaching in Indonesia. Rahman et al. (2021) analyzed the teaching of literature in *A Doll's House* drama. Halimah et al. (2020) studied the implementation of the critical literacy approach in teaching literary criticism using short stories which are written in the Indonesian language. F. Rahman (2018) carried out a case study at Universitas Hasanuddin Makassar, revealing the difficulties faced by the students of English as a foreign language in understanding English literary works.

Although those studies focus on the materials and strategy of teaching literature, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, none has dealt with an in-depth and comprehensive study of the

problems in the teaching and learning of literature, primarily focusing on the problems of materials covering poetry, prose, and drama genres. It has also not been entirely conclusive as to what strategy is to be used in teaching English literature, the challenges experienced by students in learning, and teachers in teaching English literature, particularly in the English Departments of state Islamic universities in Indonesia. It is the research gap that the current study seeks to address; hence lies the importance of this research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Education system involves several components, namely curriculum, materials, methods, evaluation, and teachers (Chaudron, 1988; Harmer, 2007). Curriculum that prescribes competence, material outline, and proportion of literature learning affects individual learning factors. Likewise, the relevance of the material and the attractiveness and variety of methods used by teachers are also effective in the classroom teaching and learning process. In addition, the evaluation system and the personality and motivation of teachers can also affect student enthusiasm in learning literature.

There are three layers of the factors related to learning: individual student factors (Hamzah et al., 2019), learning process factors (Islam, 2017), and environmental factors (Cletus & Edinyang, 2014). Individual student factors include talents, attitudes, interests, and motivations (Brown, 1987, p. 244) while learning factors include curriculum, materials, methods, evaluation, and teachers (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, pp. 27–32).

Learning English literature in the English Literature Department has at least two objectives to be achieved. The main thing is the ability of students to appreciate literary works to internalize the values in these works; and the second is the mastery of the target language (English) as a tool to achieve the first goal (appreciating and internalizing the values present in literary works). This second goal is a prerequisite for achieving the main goal. Without language skills, it is almost impossible for learners to be able to understand literary works whether manifested in the genres of poetry, drama, or prose (Zhuravleva, 2021).

METHOD

This study used the descriptive method of the qualitative approach. It aims to describe the existing phenomenon of teaching and learning English literature in the English Department. It covers the materials, strategy, and evaluation system and their effects on the students' literary competence. As a qualitative study, its results reflect the actual condition of the context under study and do not intend to generalize its findings to a larger population. However, it could be

beneficial to discover general principles that might apply to similar contexts. The data were verbal instead of numbers, and the decision of the data source was purposive based on predetermined criteria rather than taken randomly.

The research site was the English Department, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya. Its selection was because this department had gained national accreditation of A level, indicating its reputable qualification. It can be regarded as a typical representation of Islamic universities under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Republic of Indonesia. It has some uniqueness because it is a religion-based university that teaches general courses.

The subjects of this research were college students aged 20 to 24 and lecturers who taught literature courses at the site. After the distribution of a questionnaire, 75 students and six lecturers responded. 73% of the student respondents were female, 27% were male, and 83% of the lecturers were female, 17% were male. The students represented a range of semesters from 2 to 10.

The data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, observation, and document study. The students' questionnaire was to collect information about their attitude, motivation, perception, and their difficulties in studying English literature. The lecturers' questionnaire was to gain data about the instructional process of literature and the constraints in teaching literature. Interviews were to get complementary data from lecturers and students. The observation was done to attain views about the situations where literary instruction occurred. The data from the study of the documents (such as teachers' course outlines) were to confirm the use of materials, strategy, and evaluation in literary instruction. The study also used researchers as the human instrument (Litosseliti, 2010) to decide on the site and subjects and to collect, interpret, and analyze the data.

Having been collected, the data were analyzed depending on their types and purposes. The questionnaire responses were tallied, classified, and counted to reveal students' and lecturers' problems in learning literature. The observation field notes, interview results, and document scrutiny were analyzed using qualitative data analysis offered by Miles et al. (2020), i.e., reduction, display, and conclusion drawing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study include external and internal problems faced by students in literary instruction. The external problems include students' external factors, such as the difficulty of teaching materials and the ineffective teaching strategy. In contrast, the internal

problems cover students' affective factors, such as low reading motivation and inadequate language competence.

Problems of the Instructional Materials

Related to the instructional materials, the problems faced by the students refer to their difficulty either because of the language aspect and/or their interests. The data from the questionnaire showed that some students had difficulty understanding literary works. Their responses varied when they were further asked about the causes of the difficulty. Some of them said they did not quite understand the language, while others asserted that they were not interested in the topic of the contents. As they were asked to mention an example of a topic they did not enjoy reading, they mentioned the story of an old fisherman who went fishing on his boat alone day by day on the ocean. The respondent said it was a boring story and was not relevant to nowadays' life. That story was taken from *The Old Man and The Sea*, a novel by Ernest Hemingway (1952).

Another response showed that a student did not quite like the story about the widow who mourned her husband's death and cried for days on his grave in a tomb. She did not even care about the world outside. Her grief was described as terrible, as if the world were ending after her husband's death. Fortunately, a tomb keeper cared about her and took care of her patiently. Then, as the story unfolded, the widow who first rejected any of his help changed her mind, and she even fell in love with the tomb keeper. A female respondent said that she hated such a story very much because she got the impression that the tale undermined woman's nature. The story was entitled "The Widow of Ephesus," found among many tales in *The Satyricon* written by Petronius around 54–68 AD (2012).

Regarding the poem as the instructional materials, one of the responses indicated that the respondent did not like the poem as it was not cheerful but gloomy and fearsome. It was mentioned that the poem consists of a lot of death-related symbols. For that respondent, it was a miserable poem. It only talked about death that is, for the respondent, frightening and full of darkness. "The way a crow / shook down on me, / the dust of snow / from a hemlock tree/" (Frost, 1964, p. 270). According to the respondent, this poem was full of death symbols, and he did not like it.

As the data suggest, some literary instructional materials may be challenging for students to understand due to the content or language. Concerning language factors, the data demonstrated that language difficulty lies in the problem of the use of figures of speech and plenty of connotative meanings rather than denotative or literal meanings. Many literary works are loaded with the use of symbolizations and metaphorical expressions. It often becomes the

primary source of difficulties. The students who are still struggling to learn English as a foreign language are faced with double linguistic burdens. On the one hand, they still have inadequate mastery of the foreign language. On the other hand, they are also confronted with literary dictions and semantics that often express indirect meanings about certain things when they read literary works.

Problems of the Instructional Strategy

Instructional strategy refers to the tactics or ways the teacher implements to engage the students in the learning process. There is no panacea in methods. All methods have strengths and weaknesses. No one method can be used to overcome all problems (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). On the other hand, an instructional strategy needs to be designed and applied to make the teaching process effective and efficient. Such a principle often makes students feel that the teaching and learning activities are too demanding and the tasks too hard to comply with.

The findings disclosed some students' inability to comply with some tasks given by the teachers. They said, for example, that it was too difficult for them to have finished reading, understanding, summarizing, reviewing, and giving comments on one predetermined English novel every week. They complained because they should also do other tasks from other courses.

Another issue related to the instructional strategy, as shown by the data, was that students thought teachers' approach to literary instruction was too academic rather than artistic. It means teachers taught literature by discussing too much the cognitive aspects of the literary works and not their affective values. They would rather "talk about" literary works academically than invite the students to enjoy, feel, and experience the beauty of the works. Lecturers taught literature as if it were a theoretical product rather than a creative or imaginative output. Consequently, students improve their knowledge of literary works but do not enjoy them and improve their criticism. It is evidenced by the data that said they might have understood the literary works but could not have immensely enjoyed them.

Another issue is the lack of familiarity among students with the lecturers' teaching methods. Students are required to be familiar with the strategy used by the lecturers so that they understand what is expected of them and are prepared to engage in the teaching and learning process effectively. It was found that the lecturers adopted a learner-centered approach in the instructional process that requires students' active participation. The lecturers acknowledge that it is difficult to motivate students to be active and perform activities on their initiative. For example, when the lecturer gave the students a turn to ask questions, give comments, or suggest opinions, they tended to remain silent, and very few raised their hands to take the speaking turn.

That “silent majority” was also revealed during the discussion session. After delivering their presentation, the presenters offered the class audience the opportunity to ask questions or provide feedback on the material presented. The class barely responded to such an invitation to speak up. It was unclear to the observers whether their silence indicated that they had understood the materials; thus, they did not need to ask any questions, or they could not follow the discussion topic; hence they did not know what to ask or comment on.

Internal Problems

In addition to the external problems elaborated above, students also have some internal problems, such as insufficient language competence and low reading motivation. The responses to the questionnaire related to the student's difficulty in learning literature showed that most of them got difficulty understanding the literary works. It is supported by the result of interviewing the lecturers who asserted that students needed to improve their language ability. Another piece of evidence is shown by students' responses when asked about the effect of learning literature. They claimed that what they felt about the outcome of literacy instruction was improving their language competence.

Another internal problem is students' low reading motivation. The questionnaire results confirm this. When asked whether students possessed more than 50 books (printed or PDF) of English literary works, 86% of the respondents said they did not, and only 24% claimed that they did. The response to the question about the frequency of reading literary works indicated that 49% of the respondents only sometimes, 25% seldom, and 3% never read (printed or digital) literary works (novel, short story, poem, and/or drama). Only 23% of the respondents said they often read them. This low reading motivation is confirmed by the lecturers who stated that the main problem of literary instruction is students' low reading motivation. The lecturers said they often gave students a reading assignment whose results were to be discussed in the classroom meeting. They were often disappointed because the students seemed unable to follow the discussion well. After all, they had not read the materials before coming to class.

The lecturers also reported that even when the students were assigned to write a reading report about a particular novel and to give comments or make some literary criticism, for example, they were often confronted with the fact that students only read the synopsis rather than the whole texts of the novel. It implies that students have the problem of low reading motivation.

Discussion

Regarding the findings of external problems faced by students in learning literature, the first is related to the instructional materials, and the second is to the teaching strategy. The teaching materials, in the form of literary works or texts that students should learn, contain two elements, i.e., their content (what the texts are about) and the language by which the contents are conveyed. The contents of literary works reflect the cultural norms, values, insights, and/or traditions the authors want to convey to their readers. It may pose a problem for the readers when they are unfamiliar with such topics. When the students, as the text readers, feel that the life pictured in the literary works is not entirely relevant to their life, the works can make them not only bored but also demotivated to understand or even to read.

The instructional materials have also posed problems to the students because they are difficult due to their content or the language. Students' attitude toward reading literary texts is, to some extent, determined by the contents of the works. It goes in line with the study by Abdullah et al. (2020), who conducted their research on Kurdish students' attitudes toward learning literary works in EFL classrooms.

The content of the literary discourses is a significant variable that decides whether or not the literary work influences its readers. The readers would be absorbed, engaged, and carried by the flow of the story if the content or the plot is engaging. It often happens that the readers are engulfed and become curious to continue reading serial stories, for example, a series of imaginary *silat* (Indonesia's traditional martial art) storybooks by Asmaraman (aka Kho Ping Hoo). Kho Ping Hoo (lived August 17, 1926 – July 22, 1994) was able to captivate his fans so that they were always curious to find out the full storyline. It is especially valid based on the reader response approach, where learners feel spiritually involved in the creative process of the literary texts (Malićević et al., 2021).

In contrast, when the content of the literary work is not engaging and not interesting, readers would likely be bored. Another aspect that may cause a problem for students is the language used in the works of art. The primary source of the language problem in the text is the use of unfamiliar vocabulary and/or the use of metaphorical and figurative expressions. For example, reading "Dust of Snow," a poem by Robert Frost (1964), students might feel horrified because the poem contains symbols of death. It was about the crow, a blackbird whose sound was squeaking in the middle of the night. It symbolizes death because when it comes around and produces such sounds, it is believed that the presence of the bird indicates that a person surrounding that area is dead. The crow perches on a hemlock tree and shakes down snow dust. That utterance is full of death symbols. Hemlock is a poisonous tree, and dust refers to an

intertextual expression uttered by the priest when someone is lying dead at the funeral, “dust to dust, ashes to ashes,” snow represents coldness of feeling and whiteness of color. It also symbolizes death because the dead person (corpse) is warmthless and wrapped in a white shroud.

The use of symbols and other figures of speech is frequent in literary works, sometimes causing some difficulty for students to understand them. Therefore, it may also be problematic for lecturers to select appropriate materials for students, i.e., what principles are to consider in selecting suitable titles of literary works (novel, short story, poem, and drama) that could be taught; should they be story-wise (Dixon, 2022) moral-wise (Hart et al., 2019; Karomah & Hermawan, 2020), language-wise (Hwang et al., 2021), author-wise (Sapiro, 2016), or era-wise (Geldiashvili, 2021; Hambur & Nurhayati, 2019).

Concerning students' internal problems, it was found that the problems refer to students' inadequate language competence and their low reading motivation. As the subjects of English literary instruction are EFL learners, it is undeniable that their English competence is also targeted to be improved. It is in line with the studies that have been conducted on improving language skills through teaching EFL using literature (Mu'in, 2021; Yimwilai, 2015). As the research site was an EFL context and the student's native language is not English, the finding of this study is comparable to the previous study carried out by Mahmood et al. (2021) that claims the importance of the use of code-switching and code-mixing in the teaching of literature for EFL learners.

Another internal student problem is addressed by their low reading motivation. As was found by previous research, motivation is effective in learning success (Carissa et al., 2020; Laine, 2021; Riadil, 2020). Concerning EFL learners' reading motivation, Indrayadi (2021) asserts that external factors are more significant than internal factors. Students are motivated to read because they want to be appreciated by others, gain good grades, get information, and do assignments.

The pedagogical implication is that the lecturers of literary courses are obliged not only to properly select the literary texts that are relevant, interesting, and comprehensible to the students but also to stimulate them by giving them the feeling of success and achievement to arouse their motivation.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the problems in the teaching of English literature that EFL learners face. The findings show that there are external and internal problems. The external problems are

related to the pedagogical components, such as the instructional material manifested in the literary genres, i.e., novels, short stories, poems, and drama. Concerning this point, the problems are content-wise and language-wise. The contents are either irrelevant to the students or culturally distant from them. The language is problematic because literary texts are loaded with metaphorical expressions that have multi-layered meanings.

The internal problems include inadequacy of language competence and low reading motivation. As for EFL students, language ability is an independent variable that influences the extent of students' understanding of literary texts. In consequence, insufficient comprehension may lead to low motivation to read.

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