

University Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Literature Courses for Improving English Proficiency: A Study of on the students of Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates university students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses for enhancing English language proficiency at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The research focuses on 60 first- and second-year students aged 21 to 24, employing a 20-item questionnaire distributed via Google Forms to collect data. The findings reveal that students perceive literature courses as highly beneficial in improving vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing skills, and cultural awareness. While reading and writing skills showed significant improvement, speaking skills and oral communication were moderately enhanced, highlighting areas for pedagogical refinement. Students also identified challenges, including complex vocabulary, archaic language, and limited opportunities for oral practice. The study underscores the importance of integrating guided reading, vocabulary scaffolding, interactive discussions, and oral exercises to maximize learning outcomes. The findings contribute to the understanding of literature-based language instruction in EFL contexts and provide recommendations for curriculum development, instructional strategies, and future research aimed at optimizing the role of literature in English language education.

Keywords: English proficiency, literature courses, university students, EFL, reading comprehension, writing skills, cultural awareness, student perceptions

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) often integrates literature as a key component, aiming to enhance both language proficiency and cultural understanding. Literature provides students with authentic language input, exposure to complex grammatical structures, and a variety of vocabulary in meaningful contexts (Brumfit, 1985). Through engagement with literary texts, students encounter different perspectives, cultural nuances, and linguistic features that are less frequently available in conventional language textbooks (Brumfit & Carter, 1986). For university students, especially those enrolled in faculties such as Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, literature courses offer an opportunity to engage with English beyond functional communication, promoting higher-order language skills such as reading comprehension, analytical thinking, writing, and speaking.

Research in the field of English language teaching highlights the multifaceted benefits of incorporating literature into language education. According to Carroli (2008), literature can stimulate critical thinking and encourage learners to express personal interpretations, thereby enhancing their communicative competence. Literature engages learners cognitively and affectively, motivating them to interact with texts in meaningful ways. This interaction promotes not only language development but also the cultivation of intercultural awareness, which is crucial in EFL contexts (Chambers & Gregory, 2006). Furthermore, Cook (1994) emphasizes that literary texts expose learners to authentic discourse patterns, idiomatic expressions, and stylistic variation, all of which contribute to the development of fluency and comprehension skills.

Students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses are critical to understanding the effectiveness of these courses in fostering language development. Davis et al. (1992) argue that learners' attitudes toward literature significantly influence their engagement and, consequently, the learning outcomes achieved. Positive perceptions can enhance motivation, encourage regular reading, and increase participation in classroom discussions. Conversely, negative perceptions, often arising from difficulties in comprehension or the perceived irrelevance of texts, can reduce engagement and hinder progress (Alshammari, Ahmed, & Shouk, 2020). The extent to which students perceive literature courses as useful for improving English proficiency may depend on factors such as prior language skills, interest in literary genres, and classroom practices adopted by instructors.

Another important aspect of literature in language learning is the skill-specific benefits it provides. Literary texts can improve reading comprehension by exposing learners to diverse narrative structures, thematic content, and vocabulary in context (Babae & Yahya, 2014). Writing skills are enhanced through activities such as essay writing, text analysis, and creative responses to literary works, allowing students to practice organizing ideas coherently and using language accurately (Atmaca & Gunday, 2016). Speaking and listening skills are also fostered through classroom discussions, presentations, and group interpretations of texts, which encourage learners to articulate opinions, negotiate meaning, and respond to peer feedback (Bibby, 2012). Moreover, exposure to different cultural settings and historical contexts within literature enhances learners' intercultural competence, fostering a more nuanced understanding of language use in context (Hall, 1997; Ilyas & Afzal, 2021).

Despite these benefits, challenges remain in the effective implementation of literature courses for language learning. Students often encounter difficulties in understanding archaic or culturally distant texts, complex sentence structures, and unfamiliar vocabulary (Alshammari et al., 2020; Hassan, 2018). These challenges can impact students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses, affecting their motivation and engagement. Studies in EFL contexts have highlighted the importance of selecting appropriate texts, scaffolding instruction, and incorporating interactive teaching methods to address these challenges and enhance students' language development (Hwang & Embi, 2007; Iles & Belmekki, 2021).

In the Sri Lankan higher education context, English is taught as a second language, and literature courses are incorporated to enrich students' language learning experience. The Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka provides literature courses aimed at developing both linguistic and analytical skills among students. Understanding how students perceive the usefulness of these courses can provide valuable insights into their effectiveness in promoting English proficiency. Research suggests that learners' perceptions not only reflect their individual experiences and attitudes but also inform curriculum design, teaching strategies, and the selection of literary texts that are both accessible and motivating for students (Al-Matrafi, 2022; Abdul, Alwani, & Abdullah, 2022).

In sum, literature courses hold significant potential for enhancing English language proficiency by providing authentic language input, encouraging critical engagement, and fostering cultural awareness. Students' perceptions of these courses, including the specific aspects that contribute to language development, such as reading, writing, speaking, and cultural exposure are vital in evaluating their effectiveness. Exploring these perceptions within the context of the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at SEUSL offers insights into the ways literature can support language learning in EFL settings, guiding educators in optimizing curriculum and pedagogical practices.

Research Problem and Purpose

English proficiency is widely recognized as a critical skill for academic, professional, and personal development in the globalized world. In higher education contexts, literature courses are often integrated into the curriculum as a means to enhance language learning, providing students with exposure to authentic texts, rich vocabulary, and complex linguistic structures (Brumfit, 1985; Brumfit & Carter, 1986). Despite this, the extent to which literature courses effectively contribute to improving English proficiency remains underexplored, particularly in non-English dominant contexts such as Sri Lanka.

Students enrolled in the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) study literature as part of their curriculum, yet little is known about their perceptions regarding

the usefulness of these courses for language development. While some research suggests that engagement with literary texts enhances reading, writing, speaking, and cultural awareness (Carroli, 2008; Bibby, 2012), other studies highlight challenges such as unfamiliar vocabulary, cultural references, and limited opportunities for practical language use that may hinder learning (Alshammari, Ahmed, & Shouk, 2020; Hassan, 2018).

The research problem, therefore, lies in the gap between the intended educational benefits of literature courses and students' actual experiences and perceptions regarding their usefulness in enhancing English proficiency. Understanding this gap is essential to inform curriculum design, teaching strategies, and pedagogical interventions that can maximize the benefits of literature courses for language learning.

The purpose of this study is to examine university students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses in improving their English language skills and to identify the specific aspects of these courses, such as reading, writing, speaking, and cultural exposure that students consider most beneficial. By exploring students' experiences and attitudes, this research aims to provide evidence-based insights that can guide educators in designing literature courses that more effectively support English language development in higher education contexts.

Research Objectives

1. To examine university students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses in enhancing their English language proficiency.
2. To identify the specific aspects of literature courses (such as reading, writing, speaking, and cultural exposure) that students believe contribute to their English language development.

Research Questions

1. How do students of the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka perceive the usefulness of literature courses for improving their English proficiency?
2. Which aspects of literature courses do students consider most helpful in enhancing their English language skills?

In summary, the integration of literature into English language education has the potential to provide learners with meaningful engagement, authentic language exposure, and enhanced cultural awareness. Despite the recognized benefits, challenges such as linguistic complexity and cultural unfamiliarity may influence students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses. By investigating the experiences and attitudes of students in the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at SEUSL, this study aims to bridge the gap between the intended objectives of literature courses and students' perceived benefits. The findings are expected to provide insights into how literature courses contribute to English language proficiency and inform strategies for curriculum development and pedagogical practices that can enhance language learning outcomes in higher education contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of literature into English language education has been widely recognized as a means of enhancing language proficiency, providing students with authentic language input, and fostering critical and cultural awareness. Literature offers learners a unique opportunity to encounter complex linguistic structures, diverse vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions within meaningful contexts, which are often absent in conventional language textbooks (Brumfit, 1985). In higher education, literature courses are commonly designed to develop multiple language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking, while simultaneously nurturing analytical and interpretive abilities. Students studying literature are encouraged not only to comprehend language but also to critically engage with ideas, themes, and cultural perspectives embedded in texts, making the study of literature an invaluable component of comprehensive language learning (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Carroli, 2008).

Students' Perceptions of Literature Courses

Students' perceptions of literature courses are a key factor influencing their engagement and learning outcomes. Positive attitudes toward literature have been shown to increase motivation, participation, and the overall effectiveness of language learning activities (Davis et al., 1992). When students perceive literary texts as relevant and accessible, they are more likely to actively engage in reading, discussions, and writing exercises, which in turn enhances their linguistic competence. Research conducted in the Arab world and other EFL contexts suggests that students often appreciate literature for its ability to expand vocabulary, improve reading comprehension, and provide authentic examples of language in use (Abdul, Alwani, & Abdullah, 2022; Al-Matrafi, 2022). However, the perception of usefulness is not uniform, as some students may experience difficulties with complex vocabulary, archaic language, or cultural references that are unfamiliar to them, which can negatively affect motivation and engagement (Alshammari, Ahmed, & Shouk, 2020; Hassan, 2018). Understanding these perceptions is crucial for designing curricula that align with students' needs and promote meaningful language development.

Benefits of Literature in Language Learning

The benefits of literature in language learning are multifaceted. First, literature significantly contributes to vocabulary acquisition. Exposure to a wide range of lexical items, idiomatic expressions, and grammatical structures in literary texts allows students to internalize language patterns and apply them in various communicative contexts (Atmaca & Gunday, 2016). Reading literary works introduces learners to authentic language use, which is often more varied and contextually rich than what is found in textbooks. Moreover, literature fosters cultural awareness and intercultural competence, as students encounter perspectives, social norms, and historical contexts that differ from their own. This exposure encourages learners to reflect on cultural differences, develop empathy, and understand the social and historical forces that shape language use (Hall, 1997; Ilyas & Afzal, 2021). By situating language learning within a cultural framework, literature courses provide learners with a holistic understanding of English beyond its grammatical and lexical components.

Another significant advantage of literature is its potential to develop higher-order cognitive skills. Literary analysis requires students to interpret meaning, evaluate thematic content, and synthesize information across texts. This process encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical reasoning, which are essential for academic success in higher education (Chambers & Gregory, 2006). Writing skills are also enhanced through engagement with literature, as students practice essay writing, textual analysis, and creative expression. These activities provide opportunities for learners to develop coherent, structured, and grammatically accurate written responses, reinforcing both form and function in the language. Speaking and listening skills benefit similarly through classroom discussions, presentations, and debates on literary topics, where students articulate ideas, negotiate meaning, and receive feedback from peers and instructors (Bibby, 2012). Thus, literature serves as a comprehensive tool for holistic language development.

Challenges in Integrating Literature into Language Education

Despite these advantages, integrating literature into language education is not without challenges. One major issue is the linguistic complexity of many literary texts, which may overwhelm learners, particularly those with lower English proficiency (Alshammari et al., 2020). Complex sentence structures, unfamiliar vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions can impede comprehension and create frustration. Cultural distance is another challenge, as literary works are often embedded within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts that may be unfamiliar to learners, making interpretation difficult (Hwang & Embi, 2007). Moreover, curriculum constraints and assessment pressures in many EFL contexts may limit the time and resources available for literature courses, resulting in insufficient engagement with texts (Iles & Belmekki, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires careful selection of texts, scaffolding techniques, and the incorporation of student-centered pedagogical approaches to enhance comprehension and engagement.

Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching Literature

Pedagogical strategies play a critical role in determining the effectiveness of literature courses. Task-based approaches, where students engage in meaningful activities such as text analysis, role-playing, and creative

writing, have been shown to enhance comprehension and language use (Cadorath & Harris, 1998). Collaborative learning, through group discussions and projects, encourages peer interaction and allows students to exchange interpretations and insights, thereby reinforcing both linguistic and critical thinking skills. The integration of multimedia resources, including audio-visual adaptations of literary works, can further enhance understanding and motivation by providing additional contextual cues (Ilyas & Afzal, 2021). Providing students with background knowledge on the historical, cultural, and social context of literary works also facilitates comprehension and appreciation, enabling learners to make meaningful connections between the text and their own experiences.

Literature Education in the Sri Lankan Context

In the Sri Lankan higher education context, English is taught as a second language, and literature courses are incorporated to enrich students' language learning experiences. The Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka provides literature courses aimed at enhancing language proficiency while fostering analytical and cultural competencies. Previous studies in similar contexts have emphasized that students' perceptions of literature courses are integral to understanding the impact of such courses on language learning outcomes (Hasan & Hasan, 2019; Abdul et al., 2022). Positive student perceptions are associated with increased motivation, engagement, and improved language skills, whereas negative perceptions may hinder learning and reduce the perceived value of literary education. Consequently, investigating students' perceptions provides insights into both the successes and limitations of literature courses in promoting English proficiency.

Overall, literature serves as a powerful medium for language learning, offering linguistic, cognitive, and cultural benefits. The engagement with literary texts fosters vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, writing skills, speaking and listening abilities, critical thinking, and intercultural competence. However, challenges such as language complexity, cultural distance, and curriculum limitations necessitate careful pedagogical planning to optimize learning outcomes. Understanding students' perceptions of literature courses, particularly in EFL contexts such as the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at SEUSL, is essential for designing effective curricula and teaching strategies that enhance English proficiency and prepare students for academic and professional success. Future research should continue to explore the interplay between literature, language proficiency, and student perceptions, providing evidence-based recommendations for curriculum development and pedagogical innovation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine university students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses for improving English language proficiency. Quantitative research is appropriate when the objective is to quantify attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors, and to analyze patterns statistically (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The research design focused on collecting numerical data through structured questionnaires, allowing the researcher to describe trends, patterns, and relationships among variables systematically. Specifically, this study utilized a descriptive survey design, which is commonly used in educational research to investigate participants' attitudes, opinions, or perceptions regarding a specific phenomenon (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). The survey method was chosen due to its effectiveness in gathering information from a relatively large group of respondents efficiently, facilitating data analysis and interpretation.

The descriptive survey design provides a systematic way to capture students' subjective perceptions regarding literature courses, while allowing for statistical analysis to determine patterns and trends. By using this design, the study aimed to provide insights into how students perceive the relevance and utility of literature courses in enhancing their English proficiency. The use of a structured questionnaire ensured that the data collected were consistent and comparable across participants, which is critical for reliability and validity in quantitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Study Setting

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL). This faculty was selected due to its significant number of students enrolled in English language and literature-related courses, providing a relevant population for examining perceptions of literature courses. The faculty offers a range of courses that integrate language learning and literature studies, aiming to enhance students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills alongside cultural and analytical competencies. The choice of this setting allowed the researcher to focus on students who actively participate in literature courses, thereby ensuring that the data collected reflect informed perceptions based on actual experience with the courses (Hasan & Hasan, 2019).

Conducting the study in this context is particularly relevant because students at SEUSL often study English as a second language, and literature courses are designed not only to improve language skills but also to cultivate critical thinking and cultural awareness. The setting provides a practical environment to explore the perceived usefulness of literature courses in language development and to identify which components of the courses students consider most effective.

Sampling Procedure

A purposeful sampling technique was employed in this study, selecting participants who were most relevant to the research objectives. Purposeful sampling, also known as judgmental or criterion-based sampling, allows researchers to select participants based on specific characteristics that make them suitable for the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, students who were enrolled in literature courses within the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at SEUSL were considered eligible participants, as they had direct exposure to the courses under investigation.

The use of purposeful sampling was appropriate because the study aimed to capture informed perceptions from students who had experience with literature courses, rather than from a general population of university students. This sampling method ensures that the data collected are relevant, reliable, and meaningful for addressing the research questions. Additionally, the accessibility of the faculty and the willingness of students to participate facilitated effective data collection within the research timeline.

Participants

The study involved 60 students from the first and second years of the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language. This sample size was considered adequate for quantitative analysis and is consistent with the scale of survey-based studies in higher education research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were selected from both male and female students, ensuring gender representation and diversity in perspectives.

The first-year students provided insights based on their initial experiences with literature courses, while second-year students contributed perspectives reflecting a longer engagement with course content. The combination of both cohorts allowed for a comprehensive understanding of student perceptions across different stages of their academic journey. Demographic information, including age, gender, and year of study, was collected to contextualize responses and to explore potential variations in perceptions based on these factors. Ensuring diversity in participants strengthened the reliability and generalizability of the study's findings within the specific faculty context.

Research Instruments

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 questions. Questionnaires are widely used in educational research to collect self-reported data on attitudes, perceptions, and opinions (Cohen et al., 2007). The questionnaire was designed in Google Forms, allowing easy distribution, completion, and data collection. The instrument included a mix of Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions to capture both quantitative and qualitative aspects of students' perceptions.

Questions 1–4 collected demographic information, such as age, gender, year of study, and prior exposure to English literature courses. Questions 5–14 employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, focusing on students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses in improving their reading, writing, speaking, and cultural understanding. Questions 15–20 explored students' opinions on specific aspects of the courses, such as text selection, teaching methods, and engagement with literary genres. The design of the questionnaire ensured clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness, allowing respondents to provide meaningful feedback regarding their experiences with literature courses.

Before final administration, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of students to check for clarity, reliability, and internal consistency. Minor adjustments were made based on the feedback, including rewording ambiguous questions and ensuring that the scale items accurately reflected the constructs under investigation.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was conducted online using Google Forms, which allowed participants to respond conveniently and anonymously. An invitation to participate, including information about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality, was emailed to the students. The online format facilitated efficient distribution and collection of responses, while also minimizing disruptions to students' academic schedules. Participants were given one week to complete the questionnaire, and reminders were sent to encourage full participation.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Responses from the Likert-scale items were coded numerically (e.g., 5 = Strongly Agree, 1 = Strongly Disagree) to facilitate quantitative analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Descriptive statistics, including mean scores, percentages, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize students' perceptions regarding the usefulness of literature courses. This analysis provided an overview of overall trends and patterns in students' attitudes.

Inferential statistics, such as t-tests and ANOVA, were considered to explore differences in perceptions based on demographic variables, including year of study and gender. Additionally, open-ended responses were analyzed qualitatively through thematic coding, identifying recurring themes, suggestions, and insights provided by participants. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis provided a robust understanding of students' perceptions, enhancing the validity and comprehensiveness of the findings.

The interpretation of data focused on addressing the research objectives: examining students' perceptions of literature courses' usefulness in enhancing English proficiency and identifying specific aspects of the courses that students considered most beneficial. The results were presented using tables, charts, and narrative descriptions to provide clarity and facilitate understanding of key trends.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to completing the questionnaire. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, with no personal identifiers collected. Data were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes. The study also respected participants' right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Adhering to these ethical guidelines ensured the integrity of the research process and safeguarded the rights and well-being of participants (Cohen et al., 2007).

In conclusion, this study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to examine students' perceptions of literature courses in enhancing English proficiency. The study was conducted at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, involving 60 students from first and second years. Data were collected using a 20-question structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Ethical considerations, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality, were carefully maintained. The methodology enabled a

systematic examination of students' perceptions and provided insights into which aspects of literature courses contribute most effectively to the development of English language skills.

FINDINGS

Introduction to Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study investigating university students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses for improving English proficiency at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Data were collected through a 20-item questionnaire administered to 60 students from the first and second years of study. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items assessing perceptions of reading, writing, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, cultural awareness, and overall language development, as well as open-ended questions to explore specific aspects of literature courses perceived as most beneficial.

The findings are presented under the following sub-sections: demographic profile of participants, general perceptions of literature courses, perceptions of specific course aspects, differences based on demographics, perceived benefits, challenges, and overall trends. Quantitative data are reported using tables and percentages, while qualitative insights are presented as paraphrased student responses. Interpretation of findings is made in relation to existing literature on literature in English language learning (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Abdul, Alwani, & Abdullah, 2022; Carroli, 2008).

Demographic Profile of Participants

The study involved 60 students, including 28 males (47%) and 32 females (53%), with an equal split between first-year ($n = 30$) and second-year ($n = 30$) students. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 24 years, with the majority ($n = 38$, 63%) aged 21–22, 15 students (25%) aged 23, and 7 students (12%) aged 24.

Table 4.1 Demographic Profile of Participants

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	28	47%
	Female	32	53%
Year of Study	First Year	30	50%
	Second Year	30	50%
Age	21–22	38	63%
	23	15	25%
	24	7	12%

This demographic profile ensures a balanced representation across gender, year of study, and age groups, allowing a more nuanced analysis of perceptions. The age range (21–24) reflects the students' maturity and exposure to English, which can influence their engagement with literature courses and their perceptions of their usefulness (Hasan & Hasan, 2019).

Students' General Perceptions of Literature Courses

Participants responded to ten Likert-scale items (Q5–Q14), indicating the extent to which they agreed that literature courses help improve various aspects of English proficiency. The mean scores, standard deviations, and interpretations are presented below.

Table 4.2 Students' Perceptions of Vocabulary Improvement through Literature Courses

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Q5. Literature courses help improve reading skills	4.4	0.5	Agree
Q6. Literature courses help improve writing skills	4.2	0.6	Agree

Q7. Literature courses help improve speaking skills	4.0	0.7	Agree
Q8. Literature courses improve understanding of grammar	3.9	0.7	Agree
Q9. Literature courses expand vocabulary	4.5	0.5	Strongly Agree
Q10. Literature courses enhance cultural awareness	4.3	0.6	Agree
Q11. Literature courses increase confidence in English	4.0	0.7	Agree
Q12. Literature courses motivate me to study English	4.1	0.6	Agree
Q13. I enjoy engaging with literary texts in English	4.2	0.5	Agree
Q14. Literature courses are useful for overall language development	4.4	0.5	Agree

Interpretation: Students perceived literature courses as particularly effective for vocabulary expansion ($M = 4.5$), reading ($M = 4.4$), and overall language development ($M = 4.4$). Speaking and grammar scored slightly lower, indicating areas where additional support or complementary oral activities could enhance learning outcomes.

The frequency distribution further illustrates students' responses:

Table 4.3 students' responses for some selected questions

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q5. Reading Skills	28 (47%)	30 (50%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Q7. Speaking Skills	16 (27%)	30 (50%)	10 (17%)	4 (7%)	0 (0%)
Q9. Vocabulary	32 (53%)	25 (42%)	3 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Q10. Cultural Awareness	22 (37%)	32 (53%)	6 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

These distributions indicate that while the majority of students agree or strongly agree that literature courses improve language skills, speaking skills are perceived as moderately enhanced, highlighting a potential gap in oral communication practice.

Perceptions of Specific Aspects of Literature Courses

The study further examined students' perceptions of reading, writing, speaking, and cultural exposure within literature courses, using open-ended responses and multiple-choice items (Q15–Q20).

Reading and Comprehension Activities

A large majority ($n = 50$, 83%) reported that reading literary texts, such as short stories, poems, and plays, was the most helpful for improving English. Students emphasized that reading authentic texts exposed them to natural sentence structures, idiomatic expressions, and advanced vocabulary, which are often absent in standard textbooks.

Table 4.4 Students' Perceptions of Reading Comprehension Development

Text Type	Number of Students	Percentage
Short Stories	36	60%
Poems	28	47%
Plays	18	30%
Novels	12	20%
Essays	10	17%

Students preferred short stories and poems due to their conciseness and rich linguistic features, which allowed focused engagement with language. One participant stated, *"Reading stories helps me understand how English is naturally structured, which I cannot learn from grammar exercises alone."* These results are consistent with research highlighting the importance of authentic texts for reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Carroli, 2008; Brumfit & Carter, 1986).

Writing Exercises

Writing activities such as summaries, essays, and reflections were reported as highly beneficial by 42 students (70%). These activities encouraged critical thinking and coherent expression, improving students' ability to articulate ideas in English.

Table 4.5 Students' Perceptions of Writing Skills Enhancement

Writing Activity	Number of Students	Percentage
Summaries	40	67%
Essays	36	60%
Reflections	30	50%
Creative Writing	22	37%

One student commented, "Summarizing a poem helps me use new words correctly and improves my sentence formation." These findings align with Bibby (2012) and Brumfit (1985), emphasizing that literature-based writing enhances both linguistic and cognitive skills.

Speaking and Oral Communication Activities

Although literature courses primarily focus on reading and writing, many students reported that classroom discussions, presentations, and recitations contributed to improving their speaking skills. Out of 60 students, 46 (77%) agreed or strongly agreed that engaging in spoken activities helped them articulate ideas more confidently in English.

Table 4.6 Students' Perceptions of Speaking and Oral Communication Improvement

Speaking Activity	Number of Students	Percentage
Classroom Discussions	40	67%
Recitations (Poems/Prose)	30	50%
Oral Presentations	28	47%
Group Debates	18	30%

A student noted, "Discussing a story in class allows me to practice new vocabulary and sentence structures, which makes speaking easier." However, speaking activities received comparatively lower agreement scores ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.7$), indicating that while students recognize the benefits, they may not feel fully confident in oral expression. This finding aligns with Alshammari, Ahmed, and Shouk (2020), who reported that EFL students often face challenges in developing speaking skills through literature alone, highlighting the need for integrated oral exercises in literature courses.

Cultural Exposure and Intercultural Understanding

Students valued literature courses for providing insights into English-speaking cultures, traditions, and social contexts. 52 students (87%) agreed or strongly agreed that literary texts helped them understand cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions, and historical contexts, which enhanced both language proficiency and cultural literacy.

Table 4.7 Students' Perceptions of Cultural Awareness through Literature Courses

Cultural Aspect	Number of Students	Percentage
Cultural References in Texts	50	83%
Historical Context	42	70%
Social and Moral Themes	38	63%
Intercultural Comparisons	32	53%

Students indicated that reading texts such as Shakespearean plays, contemporary short stories, and poetry not only expanded vocabulary but also broadened their understanding of cultural norms and perspectives. One student stated, “I can understand jokes, idioms, and cultural references better after reading stories, which helps me communicate naturally in English.” This supports Chambers and Gregory (2006), who argued that literature provides a meaningful context for language acquisition while fostering intercultural competence.

Differences by Demographic Variables

Analysis of responses by gender and year of study revealed some variations:

Gender Differences: Female students reported slightly higher mean scores across most items, particularly in reading ($M = 4.5$ vs. 4.3), writing ($M = 4.3$ vs. 4.1), and cultural awareness ($M = 4.4$ vs. 4.2). This aligns with Hasan and Hasan (2019), who noted that female students often demonstrate greater engagement with literary texts and reflective exercises.

Year of Study Differences: Second-year students reported higher mean scores in vocabulary expansion ($M = 4.6$) and reading comprehension ($M = 4.5$) compared to first-year students ($M = 4.4$ and 4.3 , respectively). This may reflect increased exposure to literary texts and longer engagement with English courses, which improves confidence and perception of usefulness.

Table 4.8 Differences in Students’ Perceptions by Gender and Year of Study

Variable	Category	Mean Score Overall	Interpretation
Gender	Male	4.1	Agree
	Female	4.3	Agree
Year	First Year	4.2	Agree
	Second Year	4.4	Agree

These findings suggest that both gender and academic experience influence students’ perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses, although all groups generally agree that courses are beneficial.

Perceived Benefits of Literature Courses

Analysis of responses to open-ended questions revealed several benefits perceived by students:

Vocabulary and Language Enrichment: Almost all students highlighted the expansion of vocabulary through reading authentic texts. Many noted that literary language provided exposure to idiomatic expressions, collocations, and advanced sentence structures.

Improved Reading Comprehension: Students emphasized that analyzing poems, stories, and essays helped them understand complex English structures, infer meaning from context, and develop analytical skills.

Enhanced Writing Skills: Writing summaries, essays, and reflections enabled students to practice grammar, sentence variety, and coherence, reinforcing classroom grammar instruction.

Cultural Awareness: Exposure to texts from diverse English-speaking cultures enabled students to connect language learning with social, historical, and cultural knowledge.

Motivation and Confidence: Many students reported that literature courses motivated them to improve English independently and provided confidence in academic and social communication.

Challenges in Engaging with Literature Courses

Despite the positive perceptions, students also reported challenges:

Table 4.9 Challenges Faced by Students in Literature Courses

Challenge	Number of Students	Percentage
Complex Vocabulary	40	67%
Difficult Grammar Structures	35	58%
Limited Speaking Practice	30	50%
Cultural References	28	47%
Time Constraints	25	42%

Students noted that older literary texts sometimes include archaic language and idioms that are difficult to understand. One participant explained, “Shakespearean English is beautiful but very challenging to grasp without guidance.” These challenges highlight the need for instructor support, glossaries, and guided discussions to enhance comprehension and engagement (Al-Matrafi, 2022; Atmaca & Gunday, 2016).

Overall Trends and Patterns

Overall, the findings indicate that students perceive literature courses as highly useful for English language development, particularly for vocabulary, reading comprehension, and overall proficiency. Writing and speaking skills are moderately enhanced, while cultural awareness is seen as a significant benefit. The preference for short stories and poems reflects the importance of manageable, engaging texts.

Students aged 21–24 reported mature engagement with texts, applying analytical and reflective skills to enhance their language proficiency. Female students and second-year students showed slightly higher positive perceptions, suggesting that experience, engagement, and gender-related learning preferences influence perceptions.

The findings reinforce prior research emphasizing literature as an effective tool for language acquisition, particularly in vocabulary enrichment, reading skills, and cultural competence (Carroli, 2008; Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Abdul, Alwani, & Abdullah, 2022). Students’ challenges, such as complex vocabulary and limited speaking practice, highlight areas for pedagogical enhancement, including integrated discussion sessions, guided comprehension tasks, and vocabulary support.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In summary, students at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language perceive literature courses as a valuable medium for enhancing English proficiency. Reading and vocabulary development emerged as the most impactful aspects, while speaking and grammar skills could benefit from additional support. Cultural exposure and analytical engagement with texts provide both linguistic and cognitive benefits. Age, gender, and year of study slightly influence perceptions, with older and more experienced students reporting stronger benefits. These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of literature in English language learning, supporting the integration of literature as a core component of English curricula at the university level.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that university students perceive literature courses as highly beneficial for improving their English proficiency, particularly in the areas of vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and overall language skills. The data suggest that engaging with authentic literary texts provides a meaningful context for language acquisition, which aligns with Brumfit and Carter (1986), who emphasized that literature offers learners opportunities to encounter language in real, culturally rich contexts rather than isolated grammar or vocabulary exercises. The strong agreement among students regarding the enhancement of vocabulary ($M = 4.5$) and reading skills ($M = 4.4$) highlights that literary texts serve as a robust source of lexical input, exposing learners to idiomatic expressions, collocations, and complex sentence structures. This supports

Carroli's (2008) argument that literature allows students to internalize language patterns naturally, fostering both comprehension and retention.

Students also recognized the value of literature courses for cultural awareness and intercultural competence. Exposure to historical contexts, social norms, and moral themes in literary texts enables students to connect language learning with cultural knowledge, which is consistent with Chambers and Gregory (2006). By reading texts from diverse English-speaking contexts, students can interpret cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions that are often absent from standard English textbooks. This cultural component enhances students' communicative competence, making them more capable of navigating real-life interactions in English-speaking environments. The findings also resonate with Abdul, Alwani, and Abdullah (2022), who noted that engagement with literary texts helps learners develop a broader worldview while simultaneously strengthening language skills.

Despite the positive perceptions, the findings highlight moderate improvement in speaking and grammar skills, suggesting that literature courses alone may not fully develop oral communication competencies. While 77% of students reported that discussions, presentations, and recitations were beneficial, the lower mean score for speaking ($M = 4.0$) indicates that oral practice is limited compared to reading and writing activities. This observation echoes Alshammari, Ahmed, and Shouk (2020), who argued that EFL students often struggle with speaking proficiency when literature-based instruction is not supplemented with structured oral activities. The implication is that instructors may need to integrate more guided speaking exercises, debates, and role-play activities to ensure balanced language development.

The study also revealed that writing exercises, including summaries, reflections, and essays, contribute significantly to students' ability to articulate ideas clearly. This finding aligns with Bibby (2012), who emphasized that literature-based writing tasks enhance both linguistic accuracy and cognitive skills, including critical thinking and interpretation. Students reported that summarizing stories or analyzing poems not only reinforced their understanding of vocabulary but also encouraged the organization of ideas in coherent, grammatically correct sentences. These exercises, therefore, act as a bridge between reading comprehension and written expression, reinforcing overall English proficiency.

Demographic factors, such as age, gender, and year of study, influenced perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses. Female students and second-year students reported slightly higher positive perceptions, particularly in reading, writing, and cultural awareness. This supports Hasan and Hasan (2019), who suggested that female students often demonstrate greater engagement and reflective learning tendencies in literature courses. Similarly, older and more experienced students may better appreciate the nuanced benefits of literary texts, reflecting increased maturity and academic exposure.

The study also identified challenges, including complex vocabulary, difficult grammatical structures, and limited oral practice. Several students noted that older literary texts, such as Shakespearean plays or classic poems, contain archaic language that can be difficult to comprehend without instructor support. This is consistent with Al-Matrafi (2022), who reported that learners often struggle with historical or culturally specific language in literary texts. Therefore, it is recommended that instructors provide scaffolding strategies, such as glossaries, guided discussions, and vocabulary-focused activities, to reduce comprehension barriers and enhance learning outcomes.

Overall, the findings reinforce the view that literature courses are an effective pedagogical tool in EFL contexts, contributing to multiple dimensions of language learning. Literature not only provides exposure to authentic language and cultural contexts but also promotes critical thinking, reading comprehension, and writing skills, creating a holistic language learning environment. However, the integration of more speaking-focused activities and instructor-guided comprehension tasks could further enhance the effectiveness of literature courses. These insights are consistent with prior research highlighting the multidimensional benefits of literature in language classrooms (Brumfit, 1985; Carroli, 2008; Cadorath & Harris, 1998).

In conclusion, literature courses at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language are perceived as valuable for English language development, particularly in reading, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural competence.

The study emphasizes the need for balanced pedagogical approaches that incorporate speaking practice, guided reading, and writing activities to address identified challenges and maximize learning outcomes. By aligning literature instruction with students' linguistic and cognitive needs, educators can foster both proficiency and confidence in English, preparing students for academic and professional contexts in which English communication is essential.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated university students' perceptions of the usefulness of literature courses for improving English proficiency at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The findings indicate that students generally perceive literature courses as highly beneficial, particularly in enhancing vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing skills, and cultural awareness. The engagement with authentic literary texts, including poems, short stories, and plays, allowed students to encounter English in meaningful, context-rich environments, which contributed to their overall language development. Students also highlighted the motivational aspects of literature courses, reporting increased confidence in using English and greater interest in independent language learning. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the role of literature in providing authentic linguistic input, promoting critical thinking, and fostering cultural understanding (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Carroli, 2008; Abdul, Alwani, & Abdullah, 2022).

Limitations of the Study

Despite these positive perceptions, the study identified several challenges associated with literature-based instruction. Some students noted difficulties in comprehending complex vocabulary, archaic language, and unfamiliar grammatical structures, particularly in classical texts such as Shakespearean plays. These challenges sometimes hindered students' engagement with texts and limited the development of oral communication skills. Speaking skills, in particular, were moderately improved through literature courses, as classroom discussions and recitations were not always sufficient to provide consistent oral practice. This finding supports prior studies indicating that literature courses must be complemented with guided speaking and communicative exercises to ensure balanced language development (Alshammari, Ahmed, & Shouk, 2020; Atmaca & Gunday, 2016). Another limitation of the study is related to its sample size and setting. The research focused on 60 students from the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other faculties or universities with different student demographics or curricular approaches. Additionally, the study relied solely on self-reported questionnaire data, which may be influenced by respondents' personal biases, perceptions, or desire to provide socially desirable answers (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

Significance of the Study

Despite these limitations, the study offers significant contributions to the field of English language education and literature instruction in EFL contexts. Firstly, it highlights the multidimensional benefits of literature courses in fostering not only linguistic proficiency but also cognitive and cultural competence, reinforcing the pedagogical value of integrating literary texts into English curricula. By emphasizing vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, writing practice, and cultural exposure, literature courses provide a holistic approach to language learning that goes beyond traditional grammar- or textbook-focused instruction. Secondly, the study sheds light on students' perspectives, which are often overlooked in curriculum design. Understanding learners' perceptions enables educators to tailor course content and instructional methods to better meet students' needs and preferences, fostering more effective and engaging learning environments (Hasan & Hasan, 2019; Bibby, 2012).

Implications

The study also has practical implications for language instructors, curriculum developers, and policymakers. Instructors are encouraged to adopt student-centered approaches, incorporating guided reading, vocabulary scaffolding, structured speaking activities, and interactive discussions to enhance comprehension and oral proficiency. Curriculum designers may consider including a diverse range of literary genres that balance classical and contemporary texts, ensuring accessibility while maintaining academic rigor. Furthermore,

institutional support in the form of workshops, reading clubs, and supplementary materials can enhance students' engagement and provide additional opportunities for language practice outside the classroom. The study also reinforces the importance of cultural contextualization in English language education, as exposure to diverse cultural perspectives through literature fosters critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and empathy among students (Chambers & Gregory, 2006; Hall, 1997).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Recommendations for future research include expanding the study to a larger and more diverse sample, encompassing students from multiple faculties, universities, or age groups, to enhance the generalizability of findings. Longitudinal studies could also examine the progressive impact of literature courses on students' language development over time, providing insights into how sustained engagement with literary texts influences proficiency. Additionally, integrating qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, or classroom observations, could offer deeper understanding of students' experiences, motivations, and challenges, complementing the quantitative data obtained through questionnaires. Research could also explore the effectiveness of different teaching strategies in literature courses, such as project-based learning, collaborative reading, or digital literature platforms, in improving specific language skills such as speaking, listening, or writing.

In conclusion, literature courses at the Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language play a critical role in enhancing students' English proficiency, offering benefits in vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, writing skills, and cultural awareness. While challenges related to vocabulary complexity, archaic language, and oral proficiency exist, the integration of student-centered approaches and instructional support can mitigate these issues, maximizing learning outcomes. The findings of this study underscore the pedagogical and cultural significance of literature in English language education and provide actionable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and researchers seeking to foster holistic language development in EFL contexts. By addressing limitations and pursuing further research, the role of literature in enhancing language proficiency can be further optimized, ensuring that students are well-equipped to navigate academic, professional, and intercultural communication challenges in English.

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