

# Poetry for EFL: Exploring Change in Undergraduate Students' Perceptions

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**ABSTRACT:** This study explores undergraduate students' beliefs concerning the potential of poetry as a resource for EFL before and after the administration of a lesson plan based on a poem. To this end, 132 students were surveyed to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data on the linguistic, motivational and intercultural benefits which literature has been said to contribute to EFL. The results show that, in the pretest, students believe poetry-based English lessons to be more useful for developing linguistic knowledge than for intercultural or motivational gains. In the post-test, however, students assign significantly more importance to the motivational and intercultural components. This change seems to highlight the overly instrumental nature of the instruction students received during their schooling in EFL.

**Key words:** poetry for EFL, student beliefs, motivation, intercultural dimension, linguistic competence.

**Poesía para la clase de inglés: explorando el cambio en la percepción de estudiantes universitarios.**

**RESUMEN:** Este estudio explora la percepción de estudiantes universitarios en relación al potencial de la poesía como herramienta en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera antes y después de la impartición de una secuencia didáctica basada en un poema. A tal fin, 132 estudiantes completaron un cuestionario para obtener datos tanto cuantitativos como cualitativos acerca de los beneficios lingüísticos, motivacionales e interculturales que se presupone que la literatura puede aportar a la enseñanza de la lengua extranjera. Los resultados demuestran que, en el pretest, los estudiantes consideran que las lecciones basadas en poemas son más útiles para desarrollar conocimiento lingüístico que ganancias interculturales o motivacionales. En el post-test, sin embargo, los estudiantes asignan una mayor importancia, que resulta estadísticamente significativa, a los componentes interculturales y motivacionales. Este cambio parece apuntar a la naturaleza exclusivamente instrumental de la enseñanza recibida en anteriores estadios de su educación en lengua inglesa.

**Palabras clave:** poesía para la clase de inglés, percepciones de estudiantes, motivación, dimensión intercultural, competencia lingüística.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE USE OF LITERARY TEXTS IN TFL

Theorists have argued in favour of using literature for foreign language (FL) teaching on the grounds that novels, short stories, poetry or drama are authentic, non-trivial texts that

can enrich the learning experience both linguistically and culturally while simultaneously serving as a source of motivation and personal involvement (Carter, 2007; Duff & Maley, 2007; Hall, 2015; Lazar, 2009). Taken together, all of these features combine to create a unique teaching opportunity, since it is precisely the dynamic tension between poems as literature and poems as linguistic texts that can enable teachers to establish connections between the language, themes and discourse of poetry to enhance foreign language learning and broaden educational goals holistically (Paran, 2008).

The growing interest in the role of literature, and poetry in particular, in foreign language learning has not been paralleled by a growth in empirical research where findings to date are still scarce. So far, researchers have explored classroom talk in literature-based language lessons at university level (Scott & Huntington, 2007); the effects on language acquisition of completing cloze exercises using literary texts (Isaac, 2002); how readers extract meanings from a poetic text (Hanauer, 2010); the views of teachers towards the use of literature in language learning (Harlow & Muyskens, 1994; Weist, 2004); and the positive effects of using creative poetry writing as a means of approaching the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) (Hanauer, 2010, 2015).

Students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language through literature has received little empirical critical attention and produced conflicting results. The investigations undertaken with intermediate learners of French as foreign language in Australia (Martin & Laurie, 1993) and students of French and Spanish in the USA (Harlow & Muyskens, 1994) coincide in highlighting the lack of enthusiasm reported by students towards the contribution of literature to the development of their foreign language skills. A lack of confidence in their language skills and their ability to engage in literary analysis were among the main concerns expressed by these students.

In relation to poetry as a literary genre, Yeh (2005) in Taiwan, Khatib (2011) in Iran and Çetinavcı and Tütüniş's (2012) in Turkey reported that EFL adult students in high school and university contexts reacted favourably to task-based poetry activities when it came to developing their reading, speaking, writing and listening skills. These studies contrast with an earlier study by Hirvela and Boyle (1988) whose Chinese students of English language and literature found poetry the most difficult and least enjoyable of the literary genres they had worked with. Similar results were reported by Akyel and Yalçın (1990) whose Turkish EFL high school students considered poetry as making the least significant contribution to developing their language skills. Along the same lines, the study by Ghazali et al. (2008) with Malaysian EFL high school students obtained negative attitudes towards the reading of poems, which were deemed uninteresting and excessively demanding both linguistically and cognitively.

The research available on students' views on literature as a tool for learning also reveal a number of methodological shortcomings. Studies into learners' attitudes have employed questionnaires and interviews as the main instruments of data collection. However, the approaches adopted to date have either been overly broad and focused on gathering students' general impressions of different literary genres (Baba, 2008; Butler, 2006; Ghazali, 2008; Hirvela & Boyle, 1988) or overly narrow, and selectively focused on exploring some of the theoretical advantages proposed by scholars in the field. These studies have enquired into the linguistic dimension separately (Yeh, 2005), or into a combination of the linguistic and cultural (Davis et al., 1992; Martin & Laurie, 1993) or linguistic and motivational dimensions (Çetinavcı & Tütüniş, 2012; Vural 2013).

Recently Hanauer (2015), in keeping with the principles of systemic functional linguistics, has remarked the use of literature in FL should overcome isolationist realisations, thus favouring the intersection of linguistic, intercultural and motivational concerns. Considering FL learning from this perspective assures that meaning-making through the articulation of L2 discourse also advocates students' personal growth and critical thinking. This holistic understanding of the contribution of literary texts to FL can be seen in two recent studies (Duncan & Paran, 2017; Bloemert, Paran, Jansen & van de Grift, 2019) in that students' opinions were surveyed in relation to the whole spectrum of the benefits that literature-based lessons might bring to FL. In Duncan and Paran (2017) participants tended to point out literature's potential to induce linguistic competence, while cultural and motivational benefits were mentioned to a much lesser extent. Bloemert et al. (2019), in contrast, reported a clear awareness on the part of the participants that the use of literature for EFL had resulted in the production of forms of knowledge which encompassed linguistic competence, knowledge of the typical stylistic features of literature, socio-historical knowledge of the period in which the literary text was written and personal growth.

Given the methodological shortcomings identified in existing research, and the paucity of criticism which has approached the generation of linguistic, intercultural and motivational learning from an interconnected perspective, the following questions were formulated:

1. Do the students surveyed hold positive views towards poetry as a tool for EFL learning?
2. Do their attitudes towards poetry as a tool for EFL learning vary as a result of experiencing poetry-based lessons as part of their course?

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants in the study were 132 undergraduates (84% women and 16% men) in their last year of a four-year degree in Primary Education at a University in southeast Spain. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 37 years old, although most were in their early twenties. All the students were taking a compulsory EFL upper-intermediate module.

### **2.2. Instruments, data collection and analysis**

The data collection instruments consisted of a questionnaire (Appendix A) and a teaching unit (Appendix B). The questionnaire aimed at determining the beliefs held by students concerning the potential of poetry as a resource for learning English before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the administration of a poetry-based teaching unit. The questionnaire contained 17 items to be scored on a 7-point Likert scale, with a score of 1 corresponding to complete disagreement with the given statement and 7 to full agreement. After each item, a blank space was provided for students to justify in writing their numerical valuations in as much detail as possible based on their personal experiences or beliefs. 61% of the students completed this part.

To design the questionnaire, firstly, a series of items was shortlisted from theoretical studies of the alleged benefits of literature for teaching and learning a foreign language and adapted to refer specifically to poetry. These items fell within three dimensions: the linguistic, the intercultural and the motivation dimensions which encompassed, respectively, seven, two and eight items. Next, three experienced specialist EFL associate professors were invited to comment on the questionnaire and refinements were made where necessary. The final selection of the questionnaire included 17 items. The instrument was then piloted with a group of 40 final year EFL students at the same university to ensure that all items were sufficiently clear. Their suggestions allowed us to rephrase problematic items.

The mean frequencies of the students' responses and the standard deviations were then calculated. Paired sample t-tests were run for pre and post-test scores for the three components to indicate any statistically significant change in student beliefs. Before conducting the t-tests, the normality of the sample was confirmed through a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ( $p > .005$ ). Bogdan and Bilken's (2003) constant-comparative method was used to identify the themes present in the comments provided. Interrater agreement in this respect was found to be 90% and any disagreements were resolved by discussion between both raters.

The three lessons the students experienced were designed based on a poem called "Why I stayed" (Waugh, 2016, p. 68) which addresses the topic of violence against women (Appendix C). The authors of the present study ensured the 17 items surveyed in the questionnaire were embedded in the lesson plan. The text was selected after having considered carefully Lazar's criteria (2009) for literary text selection—type of course, factors connected to the text itself, and learners' cultural, linguistic and literary backgrounds.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study is guided by two research questions which, below, are responded, firstly, in relation to the three components looked at holistically. Secondly, the results obtained for the items included within each of the three components are provided and discussed in depth. As for the first research question, which sought to elucidate whether undergraduate students held positive views towards poetry as a tool for EFL learning, the results show that was the case both in the pre-test and the post-test since the mean scores for the three components at both stages were above the neutral value, which for the present study was 4 (Table 1).

*Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Component Scores and Paired Sample t-test Before and After the Implementation of a Teaching Unit based on a Poem (n=132).*

COMPONENTS	PRETEST		POST-TEST		
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	<i>p</i> value	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
Linguistic component	5.07 (1.06)	4.98 (1.17)	0.92	2.32	0.08
Intercultural component	4.56 (1.11)	5.10 (1.18)	0.00	-6.55	0.47
Motivation component	4.64 (1.03)	5.36 (0.98)	0.00	-9.34	0.72

In regard to the second research question, whether learners' beliefs towards poetry as a tool for EFL learning varied as a result of experiencing poetry-based lessons as part of their course, the results (Table 1) demonstrate different trends of change depending on the component. For the linguistic component, change is slightly negative in the post-test ( $M=5.07$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ;  $M=4.98$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ) while for the intercultural component ( $M=4.56$ ,  $SD=1.11$ ;  $M=5.1$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ) and the motivation component change is clearly positive in the post-test ( $M=4.64$ ,  $SD=1.03$ ;  $M=5.36$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ). The paired sample t-test results (Table 1) demonstrate a statistically significant increase for the intercultural ( $t=-6.550$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) and motivation ( $t=-9.340$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) components while the linguistic component evidences a non-statistically significant decrease in the post-test ( $t=2.326$ ,  $p=0.922$ ). In order to determine the magnitude of the effect, eta squared was calculated. The eta squared statistic revealed an almost imperceptible effect size for the linguistic component (.08) and a medium effect size for the intercultural (0.47) and the motivation (0.72) components.

The analysis of qualitative data led to (i) the categorization of comments per component; (ii) the identification of the reasons whereby student beliefs were positive at the pre and post stages; and (iii) the formulation of the themes that mediated the statistically significant increases towards the post-test for the intercultural and motivational dimensions. A total of 209 comments were computed—83 in the pre-test and 126 in the post-test. In the pretest, most comments referred to the linguistic component (28%) followed by comments relating to the motivational (9%) and intercultural (3%) components. The post-test revealed a different order in the perception of the advantages of poetry-based lessons: 33% of comments highlighted motivational benefits, 16% addressed linguistic advantages and 11% referred to intercultural perceived gains. These data evidence a marked increase in the comments provided for the motivational and intercultural components after the implementation of the teaching unit. As stated above, such increases were statistically significant.

Of the 209 comments provided, 126 (40%) were of a tautological nature—stating the item with a different wording—and therefore did not reveal any reasons which could help us interpret trends of change. The coding of comments revealed seven themes which seemed to mediate the differences observed between the pre and post stages: (i) an attentional trade-off; (ii) the methodological approaches to EFL instruction previously experienced by students; (iii) the perceived interest of topics in poems in comparison to those in textbooks; (iv) the universal and profound nature of poems, which fostered students' personal connection towards the topics covered; (v) the perception of poetry as a merely lyrical and/or abstract genre; (vi) the suitability of poems to adjust to the limited duration of a lesson; (vii) the understanding of culture as a monolithic entity; and (viii) the satisfaction students obtained from interpreting the poem independently.

Following the general interpretation of data provided above, in the subsections below, a detailed item-by-item breakdown of quantitative and qualitative results alongside their discussion are provided for the three components.

### 3.1. Linguistic component

As regards the linguistic construct, both in the pre-test and the post-test students indicated a belief that poetry is an adequate means of developing reading skills (item 1) ( $M=4.71$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ;  $M=4.68$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ), writing skills (item 2) ( $M=4.75$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ;  $M=4.71$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ),

speaking skills (item 3) ( $M=4.91$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ;  $M=4.85$ ,  $SD=1.26$ ) and listening skills (item 4) ( $M=4.81$ ,  $SD=1.30$ ;  $M=4.70$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ). They also showed agreement that poetry-based EFL lessons lead to an improvement in pronunciation (item 5) ( $M=5.41$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ;  $M=5.36$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ), grammar (item 6) ( $M=5.06$ ,  $SD=1.30$ ;  $M=4.89$ ,  $SD=1.30$ ), and lexis (item 7) ( $M=5.85$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ;  $M=5.71$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ). For all the linguistic items, and consequently for the whole component, the variation between the pre and post tests revealed a slightly descendent trajectory which, as already mentioned, was not statistically significant ( $t=2.326$ ,  $p=0.922$ ).

Students' agreement both in the pre and in post-tests with the suitability of poetry for enhancing skill development in EFL classes, whether writing, speaking, listening or reading (questionnaire items 1, 2, 3 and 4), is in line not only with existing theoretical criticism (Bobkina & Domínguez, 2014; Lazar, 2009), but also with the findings of the few available empirical studies that have addressed this point. Baba (2008), with 170 Malayan informants, Butler (2006), with 85 South African students, Bloemert et al. (2019) with 635 Dutch students and Duncan and Paran (2017) with 264 students from different European countries documented similar rates of agreement as regards the use of literature for obtaining linguistic gains.

The present study also reported high levels of agreement regarding the adequacy of poetry-based lessons for improving pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary (items 5, 6 and 7). These findings conform to the views of specialised criticism both theoretically (Lazar, 2009) and empirically (Baba, 2008; Butler, 2006). However, these quantitative studies did not offer any reasons to account for learners' positive views. The analysis of our students' comments allowed us to overcome this limitation. Two themes emerged: the methodological approaches to teaching EFL they had previously experienced, which did not foster communication and mainly relied on grammar explanations (14 comments in the pretest and 9 in the post-test) (Example 1), and the contention that topics in poems were attractive in comparison to those in textbooks and therefore encouraged language practice (Example 2) (12 comments in the pretest and 13 in the post-test). For the linguistic construct, no other themes could be established both at pre and post stages since most of the comments were of a tautological nature, simply repeating the ideas in the questionnaire statements but with different wording (Example 3).

#### *Example 1*

- English lessons, at least according to my experience, rely too much on learning grammar. Poems offer interesting topics which encourage students to practice the language (pretest).
- I loved the lessons because they were very communicative and we could speak a lot (post-test).

#### *Example 2*

- Poems are a good way to learn English because they deal with interesting topics. Topics in textbooks are always the same and very superficial (pretest).
- Violence against women is a good topic to talk about in class because it is out of the spectrum of the topics covered in textbooks and there is a lot to say (post-test).

*Example 3*

- Writing about poems is good for learning English as my writing improves (pretest).
- I learnt some new words working with the poem (post-test).

Although, as previously shown, students' beliefs on the items within the linguistic construct were positive in the pre and post-tests, the trajectory inscribed after the instructional sessions was slightly descendent, even if that decrease was not statistically significant. This was probably due to a trade-off effect which attracted learners' attention towards the other two components, intercultural and motivation. Evidence in support of this trade-off effect emerged in the students' comments of the intercultural and motivation components, as discussed below.

### 3.2. Intercultural component

Both in the pretest and the post-test, students considered poetry not only as a sound means of obtaining cultural knowledge of the L2 (item 8) ( $M=4.7$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ;  $M=5.12$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ) but also that knowledge of the L2 can lead to a clearer awareness of one's own culture (item 9) ( $M=4.43$ ,  $SD=1.44$ ;  $M=5.08$ ,  $SD=1.56$ ). This high level of agreement confirms theoretical stances on the matter, which highlight the impossibility of acquiring an L2 without truly understanding its culture (Byram, 2008). Baba (2008) and Martin and Laurie (1993) also report high agreement with values of about 80% for intercultural awareness and for the capacity of literature to help students develop a deeper understanding of their own culture. Carrollli (2008), Butler (2006), Bloemert et al. (2019) and Duncan and Paran (2017) document lower rates of agreement. In the case of Carrollli (2008) and Butler (2006), this might be due to the nature of their research whose primary focus was not on obtaining information on the usefulness of literature for EFL but on determining general reasons why students liked it—entertainment for Carrollli (2008) and improved language proficiency for Butler (2006) received the highest values in these studies. In Bloemert et al. (2019) and Paran and Duncan (2017) students barely mentioned intercultural benefits, probably because they were asked about the usefulness of literature-based lessons through general open questions. This might have led students to focus on linguistic gains, which was the aspect they were more likely to associate with EFL lessons.

As shown in Table 1, change between the pre-test and the post-test was found to be statistically significant ( $t=-6.550$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). The students' comments provided two reasons that helped explain this trend. One of them, already alluded to above, is an attentional trade off. After experiencing the lessons, the students showed their *surprise* (8 comments) that classes could be undertaken from the incorporation of intercultural difference (Example 4). This surprise might have enhanced their noticing of the intercultural dimension, in contrast to the linguistic component, which while remaining at a higher level, may have been taken more for granted given the grammatical emphasis of the instruction these students might have received in previous EFL lessons.

In addition to the trade-off, the statistically significant increment evidenced for the intercultural component in the post-test might be attributable to the dismantling of a prejudice which was present at the pre-test. Such a prejudice consisted of the perceived diametrically-opposed nature between Spanish and British cultures (3 comments) (Example



5). This inflexible and inward-looking view of culture is no longer documented in the post-test where comments demonstrated the emergence of intercultural awareness, even if this involved relating the two countries on the basis of the exertion of violence against women (Example 6). The potential of literature-based EFL lessons to tackle intercultural prejudice had not been informed empirically by previous research.

*Example 4*

- Never before have I had lessons where I could contrast the differences between my own country and another one and that is something I enjoyed (post-test).

*Example 5*

- I don't think I can learn about Spanish culture in EFL lessons. EFL lessons deal with English traditions and festivities. I cannot see the connection between both countries (pretest).

*Example 6*

- I was surprised at how researching on gender violence in England made me think about gender violence happening in my own country (post-test).
- I thought gender violence was more typical of male-chauvinistic countries like Spain. But after the classes the conclusion I drew is that it happens everywhere (post-test).

### 3.3. Motivation component

As was the case for the items within the linguistic and the intercultural components, students' views towards the use of poetry in EFL were positive at both test times. The motivation component evidences the greatest shifts between pre and post-test scores indicating that, after the implementation of the teaching sequence, student motivation rose due to the poem's authenticity (item 10) ( $M=4.65$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ;  $M=5.44$ ,  $SD=1.53$ ), its briefness (item 11) ( $M=4.50$ ,  $S=1.21$ ;  $M=5.13$ ,  $SD=1.42$ ) and the non-triviality of its topic (item 12) ( $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ;  $M=4.81$ ,  $SD=1.36$ ). Likewise, students also valued highly, with scores which were higher in the post-test than in the pretest, the possibility the poem gave them to use their interpretative skills and not only their knowledge of the language (item 13) ( $M=4.79$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ;  $M=5.62$ ,  $SD=1.38$ ), to express their opinions and feelings (item 14) ( $M=4.61$ ,  $SD=1.42$ ;  $M=5.47$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ) and to understand other peoples' emotions and feelings (item 15) ( $M=4.79$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ;  $M=5.53$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ). Students' motivation was also boosted, again to a greater extent in the post-test, because of the poem's capacity to trigger an aesthetic experience (item 16) ( $M=4.86$ ,  $SD=1.50$ ;  $M=5.72$ ,  $SD=1.51$ ) and because of the positive impact which the students perceived that working with the poem had (item 17) ( $M=4.48$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ;  $M=5.22$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ). The t-test value obtained for the whole motivation construct ( $t=-9.340$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) revealed the increase towards the post-test was statistically relevant. Such an increase, once again, seemed to be induced by students' positive surprise at how the English lessons were conducted (Example 7). This feeling of surprise is widely present in the post-test comments for the motivation construct (16 comments) and probably emanates from the discovery that EFL can be conceived not only as a linguistic endeavour—an instrumental understanding of this discipline likely engrained in them from their own schooling and their teachers' understanding and implementation of this discipline—but as a process



which might encompass other content and learning objectives such as, in the specific case of Example 7, raising awareness on a social justice issue.

*Example 7*

- I was surprised at the fact that the lessons did not only consist of learning grammar and vocabulary but also of reflecting on domestic violence and even of learning how to detect it. For me, all this was very motivating (post-test).

Student beliefs of specific items also need to be considered when it comes to explaining the statistically significant ascendant trajectory in the post-test inscribed by the motivation component. The authentic nature of poems (item 10) was seen as an advantage for EFL learning both in the pre-test and the post-test comments (Example 8). Such positive views support the predominant scholarly opinion that authenticity is a motivation-boosting element (Lazar, 2009). Agreement in the pre-test appeared to be mediated by the awareness that poems are written by real people to whose experiences it is easier to relate (3 comments). The four comments provided in the post-test revolved around this same idea but merged with the novel awareness that the experience with an authentic text worked properly because they counted on the teacher's help in interpreting it (Example 9).

*Example 8*

- Knowing that the author of the poem I am learning English with wrote it to express his feelings is motivating as I am dealing with something that is authentic (pretest).
- The poem was written by a person of flesh and blood and that encouraged me to get involved with the analysis of the text and with the completion of the activities proposed much more than in normal English classes (post-test).

*Example 9*

- I loved the poem because it dealt with a topic on everybody's lips which is real not only for the woman who wrote it but also for many more women. And yet, I must reckon that without my teacher's help and the activities we did to interpret it I could not have either understood or enjoyed it (post-test).

Poetry's typical compactness (item 11) has been theorized as increasing students' motivation (Lazar, 2009). The results of the present study confirm such insights empirically with high rates of agreement at both test times. Post-test students' comments—in the pre-test no comments for this aspect were provided—, grounded the rise in agreement rate in two reasons. On the one hand, the typical brevity of poems keeps students from getting tired when working with the text (4 comments). On the other hand, a poem perfectly fits the duration of a lesson, which helps learners not lose track of the text for the following class (3 comments) (Example 10).

*Example 10*

- I liked working with the poem because it was short and I did not lose my concentration or get bored (post-test).
- For an hour-long class the poem was perfect as we could finish reading it and not waste time in the next class trying to remember what it was that you had read before (post-test).

The non-triviality of poetic topics (item 12) obtained positive results in the pre and post- tests, which, once again, supports theoretical takes on the matter (Lazar, 2009). The idea that seems to mediate statistically significant change towards the post-test, as stated in 11 comments (2 in the pretest and 9 in the post-test), was that topics in textbooks are perceived as uninteresting (Example 11).

*Example 11*

- The themes of poetry are interesting in comparison to those in textbooks (pretest).
- I would have never thought that in the English class a topic like this could be dealt with. I found the idea fantastic (post-test).
- The topics in textbooks are stupid most of the times. Learning English with the poem on gender violence was infinitely better (post-test).

The mean scores obtained for item 13—whether students believed they might enjoy learning English with poetry because that entails the use not only of their knowledge of the language but also of their interpretative skills—indicate high rates of agreement both in the pre-test and the post-test (Example 12). Such a positive reception conforms to theoretical and empirical views, that the active, self-discovery approach, which literature-based English lessons favours, leads not only to a communicative understanding of EFL (Bloemert et al., 2019) but also stresses that “the confidence gained in one’s own problem-solving strategies is probably at least as important as the results of interpretations themselves” (Martin, 2000, p. 11). Comments in the pre-test highlighted, precisely, the satisfaction that a learner might feel when able to interpret a poem independently (3 comments). In the post-test, comments continued to be positive but, as was the case with the item on authenticity, students conditioned their agreement on receiving help from the teacher regarding the interpretation process (4 comments) (Example 13).

*Example 12*

- Using poems in English lessons might push us to reach our own conclusions because poems contain metaphors that can be interpreted in many different ways and one has to think a lot to interpret them. Personally, I would enjoy interpreting texts on my own but that is not common in English classes where the texts used are so straight-forward that their interpretation can be taken for granted (pretest).
- The classes have allowed me to express my opinions and have debates with other classmates. It is a pity English classes are not normally like this (post-test).

*Example 13*

- Although I like interpreting poems and learning English with this poem was nice it was a bit difficult because there were words and structures which I didn’t know. But my teacher was there to help me and everything was fine in the end (post-test).

Items 14 and 15, which sought to establish to what extent students believe poetry-mediated English lessons are of use for understanding and expressing emotions, both their own and other people’s, were perceived very positively by students at the pre and post stages. For

Lazar (2009), Bobkina and Domínguez (2014) and Xerri and Xerri Agius (2015), literature's connection with emotions stands out as the biggest contribution that this art has to make to EFL. In the absence of empirical findings to illustrate this claim, the results offered in this study are of some interest. Students' comments allude to the same reason at both stages (2 comments in the pretest and 5 in the post-test): we can all empathise with the themes of poetry due to their universal and profound nature (Example 14). The fact that similar types of comments were provided at both stages does not allow us to isolate a reason, which explains why change was positive and statistically significant towards the post-test. Once again, the trade-off hypothesis might have entered into play here.

*Example 14*

- Poets express what they feel through their poems and I like knowing how other people feel about topics like love, happiness or death and comparing them with my own. That widens the understanding of myself and that of the world around me (pretest).
- The poem really moved me and I was able to sympathize with the woman's suffering. But not only that, the poem also made me think of people around me who are going through this situation. Why are English lessons not always like this? (post-test).

Although both in the pretest and the post-test students agreed that the beauty of poetry (item 16) and its potential to induce social change (item 17) might make English lessons more motivating, the rise in the agreement rate demonstrated in the post-test seems to be due to the overcoming of some misconceptions present in the pre-test regarding the understanding of poetry. Concerning social change, in the pre-test some students conceived poetry merely as a lyrical genre, clearly a misconception that rules social themes out of the spectrum of poetry (2 comments). After the implementation of the lessons, however, this belief had disappeared completely and it was students themselves who, in their comments, seemed to acknowledge their previous prejudice, thus also valuing poetry's adequacy for social contestation (4 comments) (Example 15). The interest shown by students in this respect—this item obtained the highest mean increase between the pre-test and the post-test—, is in line with the results obtained by Stefanova, Bobkina and Sánchez-Verdejo Pérez (2017), who reported EFL lessons based on a novel led vocational training students to a heightened awareness of current social topics such as immigration, discrimination and bullying. Whether still minimal, the recent attention which using social justice topics for motivating students in literature-based EFL classes is attracting seems to provide support for a strand of EFL research (Crookes, 2013) that is increasingly advocating the understanding of this discipline at the crossroads of the development of communicative competence and the rise of critical consciousness towards ourselves and the world around us as a way to promote social justice.

The beauty of poetry as a motivation-boosting element in EFL classes, another under researched variable (Carrolli, 2008), also appeared to be mediated by a misconception. The positive and statistically significant increase in the post-test might be explained by the disappearance of comments relating to issues of perceived emotional distance and artificiality, which had been present at the pre-test (3 comments), and which students highlighted as keeping them from appreciating the beauty of poetry (Example 15). The post-test comments, however, report a growing awareness on the part of learners that poetry might also lie in everyday topics even if they unveil mankind's dark dimensions (5 comments) (Example 16).

*Example 15*

- Poetry is the realm of emotions and not social justice (pretest).
- I had never thought a poem could make me think so much about domestic violence (post-test).

*Example 16*

- My idea of beauty is less artificial and abstract than what is represented in poetry (pretest).
- Before the classes I could have never thought that such a hard and realistic topic as domestic violence could be elaborated as beautifully as the poem does (post-test).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The empirical nature of this study advances the field of EFL for two main reasons. Firstly, empirical research, unlike theoretical explorations, is still extremely rare (Paran, 2008; Carter, 2007; Teranishi, Saito & Wales, 2015). This paucity of research is evident in that for a good number of the variables analysed there were no empirical data available, which clearly warrants future research in this direction so that the findings of the present study can be disputed or supported. Secondly, the fact that change between the pre and the post-tests was measured in terms of its *statistical* significance makes this study of interest since the very few studies which had previously used a pre-post survey empirical design to tap into student beliefs (Baba, 2008; Butler, 2006) failed to establish the real significance of the data obtained. The absence of literature in EFL textbooks and teachers' own lesson plans (Skela, 2014) might precisely stem from the lack of sound empirical evidence that such an approach would seem to be beneficial for EFL learning/teaching. Conducting rigorous empirical research then manifests itself as a key issue regarding the use of literature in EFL classes.

Another conclusion to draw comes from the fact that in the post-test the most usefully perceived constructs were the intercultural and the motivation ones with rates that were positive and statistically significant in contrast to those obtained for the linguistic component. This signals that the students surveyed are willing to understand EFL as a discipline which, besides helping them acquire a good command of the linguistic system, also fosters their autonomy as thinkers, their aesthetic sensitivity or their awareness towards issues of social justice, just to mention some of the most highly valued non-linguistic variables.

Underlying the broader understanding of EFL which seemed to emerge from the experience recalled in the present study, there is another implication worth mentioning: the positive impact of contextually situated awareness when it comes to induce reflection on students' own identities as learners, a rather underexploited technique in language teaching (Lamie, 2004). In this study, students' first-hand experience of the poetry-based lesson plan amplified their identity systems as learners to a great extent, fostering the emergence of critical positions and personalized ways of conceiving EFL. If we accept Lamie's claim (2004) that teachers tend to apply new methodologies only after witnessing positive change in themselves, and bearing in mind that the students surveyed were not only learners but also future teachers, it can be expected they transfer the perceived innovations into their own future pedagogical practices, questioning, therefore, deeply rooted institutional assumptions about EFL being an instrumental endeavour.

Finally, some other lines of enquiry stemming from the present study include tapping into the effect of different ages and proficiency levels in student beliefs regarding the adequacy of literature-based lessons or surveying the beliefs of both experienced and novel EFL teachers. A contrastive analysis of motivational and linguistic gains also reveals itself as a task worth undertaking.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A. Questionnaire items

Instructions: Indicate your degree of agreement with the following statements by circling the appropriate number.

<b>(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Somewhat Disagree (4) Neither Agree Nor Disagree (5) Somewhat Agree (6) Agree (7) Strongly Agree</b>	
1. Using poetry as a tool for EFL can help me develop my reading skills.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. Using poetry as a tool for EFL can help me develop my writing skills.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. Using poetry as a tool for EFL can help me improve my speaking skills.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. Using poetry as a tool for EFL can help me develop my listening skills.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. Using poetry as a tool for EFL can help me improve my pronunciation.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. Using poetry as a tool for EFL can help me improve my knowledge of grammar.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. Using poetry as a tool for EFL can help me expand my knowledge of vocabulary	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8. Using poetry as a tool for EFL can help me become aware of the culture of English-speaking countries.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9. Using poetry as a tool for EFL can help me better understand my own culture.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
10. Using poetry as a tool for EFL motivates me because it is authentic material.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
11. Using poetry as a tool for EFL motivates me because poems are short texts.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
12. Using poetry as a tool for EFL motivates me because the topics are non-trivial.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
13. Using poetry as a tool for EFL motivates me because it encourages me to express my opinions and feelings.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
14. Using poetry as tool for EFL motivates me because it helps me talk and understand other peoples' emotions and feelings.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
15. Using poetry as a tool for EFL motivates me because I have to use my interpretative skills and not only my knowledge of the language.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
16. Using poetry as a tool for EFL motivates me because poetry is beautiful	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
17. Using poetry as a tool for EFL motivates me because it deals with values that might have a positive impact on me or on the world around me.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7



### Appendix B. Summary of the lesson plan

#### *Stage 1. Heroes against domestic violence*

- Whole group discussion of problems students have in their present-day lives.
- Whole group discussion of problems in society.
- Defining the qualities and characteristics of a heroine/hero in pairs.
- Guessing the hero, the teacher describes. In the definitions, the teacher uses and models relative pronouns for the whole class.
- Inferring the rule of relative pronouns from the definitions above in pairs.
- Preparation in small groups of the description of a real-life hero/heroine using different relative pronouns (defining, non-defining, possessive relative pronouns).
- Each group reads aloud their description to the rest of the class who guess who it is.
- Explanation of the final task which consists of recording a short 3-minute video on DVD in which a hero or heroine arrives to solve the problem they are going to read about in the following poem. In the video, the group has to present a context for the situation expressed in the poem, solve the problem, show the reaction of the victim in the poem and explain what happens next to the protagonists of the situation.

#### *Stage 2. Illustrating domestic violence*

- Individual reading of the poem (“Why I Stayed” by Leslie Waugh) and underlining of any problematic vocabulary or expressions.
- Analysis of the poem with the teacher. Difficult vocabulary and expressions are explained at the students’ request, and questions asked to check their understanding of the poem.
- Underlining of all the verbs in the poem in the past tense and classification of regular verbs according to the different pronunciation patterns.

#### *Stage 3. Understanding why some women go back*

- Whole class discussion of the sentence in the poem “when he took her back” and formulation of hypotheses as to why some women might decide to go back home with the aggressor.
- Individual Internet research (with recommended web pages) on the main reasons for women not to leave the abuser. Students will then decide in pairs which of the reasons mentioned in the text are present in the poem.
- Writing a 100-word composition hypothesizing as to which two of the reasons defined from the previous research might apply to the woman in the poem and what the writer would do if they were prey to (or saw) domestic abuse. Students’ attention will be brought to the fact that conditionals should be used (an aspect covered in previous lessons). In the event that students do not remember these structures properly, the teacher might consider a brief revision of the structures prior to the writing task.
- Completion of the final video task in small groups.

**Appendix C**

“Why I Stayed” (Waugh, 2016, p. 68)

The question isn't  
why we fought  
or why you put  
your hands  
around my neck  
and broke me over  
the purple plastic Ikea table  
we used as a nightstand  
next to the mattress  
on the dark linoleum floor

but why I stayed with you  
for many months more,  
allowing myself to be strangled  
from the inside out,  
until I thought  
there would be nothing left  
for anyone else to hold.