

## The Learning of English Literature in Malaysia: A Review of Literature

El aprendizaje de la literatura inglesa en Malasia: una revisión de la literatura

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### ABSTRACT

Literature has been a core component in English education. By learning literature, learners can learn English without having to understand the grammatical rules directly. With literature, learners can learn both the language and the other elements of it such as culture, moral values, life lessons and relatable situations. Such is the importance of literature; the Ministry of Education Malaysia has integrated it as part of the English curriculum to help increase the level of English proficiency among Malaysian students. However, this has created divisive opinions from various parties due to many challenges and issues faced by teachers and students. This paper aims to investigate the current issues and challenges faced by secondary school teachers and students in learning and teaching English literature. Through this paper, the researchers have highlighted the brief history of the introduction of literature in the English education and how the role of literature has developed throughout the years. Next, a closer look at the challenges and issues faced by teachers and students from previous studies and research have been highlighted for future researchers to take into consideration. By looking at previous studies, it has been discovered that motivation and attitudes towards learning English literature could be major factors that future researchers can further look into.

**Keywords:** English Literature, Issue, Challenges, Learning English, Attitude, Motivation.

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## RESUMEN

La literatura ha sido un componente central en la educación del inglés. Al aprender literatura, los alumnos pueden aprender inglés sin tener que entender las reglas gramaticales directamente. Con la literatura, los alumnos pueden aprender tanto el idioma como otros elementos del mismo, como la cultura, los valores morales, las lecciones de vida y las situaciones relacionadas. Tal es la importancia de la literatura; El Ministerio de Educación de Malasia lo ha integrado como parte del plan de estudios de inglés para ayudar a aumentar el nivel de dominio del inglés entre los estudiantes de Malasia. Sin embargo, esto ha creado opiniones divisivas de varias partes debido a muchos desafíos y problemas que enfrentan los maestros y estudiantes. Este documento tiene como objetivo investigar los problemas y desafíos actuales que enfrentan los maestros y estudiantes de secundaria en el aprendizaje y la enseñanza de la literatura inglesa. A través de este documento, los investigadores han destacado la breve historia de la introducción de la literatura en la educación en inglés y cómo se ha desarrollado el papel de la literatura a lo largo de los años. A continuación, se destacó una mirada más cercana a los desafíos y problemas que enfrentan los maestros y estudiantes de estudios e investigaciones anteriores para que los futuros investigadores los tengan en cuenta. Al observar estudios anteriores, se descubrió que la motivación y las actitudes hacia el aprendizaje de la literatura inglesa podrían ser factores importantes que los futuros investigadores pueden investigar más a fondo.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura inglesa, Problemas, Desafíos, Aprender inglés, Actitud, Motivación.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to learning English, literature has always been a major contributor to its process. There can be no learning English without learning literature. In other words, English and literature are two inseparable components that relies on one another. All over the world, English learners are introduced to literature in their English classes. English educators would incorporate literature as part of their component in their curriculum and syllabus. Over the years, literature has evolved into becoming a mainstay in English education (Sivapalan & Subramaniam, 2008). It is believed that learning literature can bring out the enjoyment in learning English especially for English as Second Language (ESL) learners (Arafah, 2018).

According to Keshavarzi (2012), through literature, English educators and teachers have been attracting ESL learners to learn the language beyond the restrictions of its grammatical rules and structures due to its relevance and purposeful learning. Short stories, poems, and novels are some of the literary texts used in the classrooms to familiarize ESL learners in using the language diversely. By learning poems, ESL learners are able to see the beauty of the English language and how it can be used in different ways while staying true to its grammatical rules. Learning literature opens up another dimension in English learning and is seen as one of the most effective methods to teach English without actually teaching English.

However, there have been debates and contradicting evidences in which learning literature might actually hinder the purpose of English teaching. It is also said that due to literature, ESL learners tend to become more disinterested in learning the language because they lack the required understanding to fully enjoy what is being taught. In Malaysia, teachers have been finding many ways to teach literature while getting the students to be interested without losing the purpose of English teaching and maintaining the essence of the literary texts (Muhammed, 2013). Nevertheless, this proves to be difficult due to various factors (Thamrini & Syed, 2018). Teachers themselves have been finding it difficult to teach literature since they themselves are not adequate enough to teach. A study conducted by Aziz and Nasharudin (2010) revealed that English teachers are facing difficulties in finding the right approach to teach literature to the students (Murugan & Yunus, 2019). Thus, the aim of this conceptual paper is to investigate the current issues and challenges faced by secondary school teachers and students in learning and teaching English Literature in Malaysia.

## 2. ENGLISH LITERATURE IN MALAYSIA

### 2.1 Brief History of Integration

As early as in the 1970s, literature has been introduced and used in schools as part of English Language Reading Programmes and it was officially included in the Malaysian English Learning syllabus in 2000 by the Ministry of Education (Ganakumaran, Shahizah & Koo, 2003). The integration of literature was for secondary school students and not more than 5 years later, the Ministry opted to introduce literature for Standard 4 until Standard 6. The Ministry of Education has realized the importance of literature in English education thus implemented this component in the English syllabus. It is hoped that the inclusion of literature in the English syllabus could benefit students in three aspects which are language development, cultural enrichment, and personal growth (Sivapalan & Subramaniam, 2008). It is believed that through literature, students can learn new cultures and discover the aesthetic values of the English language. Since literature involves real life situations with people and everyday activities, the students could relate this with their own lives and thus making them more interested in literature and subconsciously interested in learning English as a whole.

As the years progressed, the role of English literature has changed from being the central cog of the English syllabus to almost being fossilized and re-invented as the major powerhouse it once was (Subramaniam, 2007). The Ministry of Education has allocated a single period in the school's timetable for the subject of English literature, where the students are expected to learn novels, short story, dramas and poems. Suliman & Melor (2014) stated that the inclusion of a single period English literature would enable students to broaden and widen their views on other cultures and countries. Such is the importance of literature, a plan to make English literature as a compulsory subject in the secondary schools is included in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 and is expected to be executed in the second wave of the blueprint (2013).

### 2.2 Issues and Challenges in Teaching and Learning English Literature

Although the inclusion of English literature in the English syllabus has been around for more than 10 years, there expected outcomes are not within the intended target as the students' achievement in literature are below that what was expected of them especially in the critical thinking area of the texts (Othman et al., 2015). Past studies have shown findings that highlighted the issues and challenges faced by both teachers and students in English literature. In a study conducted by Mustakim et al. (2014), many teachers that carry a negative opinion on the integration of literature tend to conduct the lesson in a traditional "chalk and talk" method and would "spoon-fed" their students rather than coming up with creative ways to teach the subject. Teachers also have challenges as they need to explain their lesson wisely to ensure that the lessons are not only enjoyable but also meaningful (Rahamat et al., 2017; Velayutham & Yunus, 2019). These teachers would resort to become the dominant figure in the classroom while the students are simply taking everything that these teachers provide them including the answers (Ramlan, 2015). Thus, this create a repetitious environment in the classroom that most of the students find boring and eventually become highly uninterested in the lesson. This is supported by another study conducted by Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy and Jusoff (2009) whereby the result of the study showed that the teachers' strategies of teaching literature were considered as "boring" and "dull" by the students.

Students finding literature as boring and dull may be due to how the teachers conduct the lesson. Nonetheless, some of teachers themselves are unsure of how to effectively teach literature to their students (Aziz & Nasharudin, 2010). Due to this, any means of getting the students interested in learning literature might derailed. The students are not only uninterested in the lesson, they will also fail to appreciate literature as a whole. It is important to note that teachers' attitudes towards teaching literature plays an influential factor for the students and the atmosphere of the classroom as it can affect the students' motivation and interest towards the lesson (Thamrini & Syed, 2018). Students can sense if their teachers are not into the lesson as they are and this will create a negative atmosphere in the classroom.

When a teacher is not interested in teaching the lesson, the students will be affected and they will notice it right away through the teachers' effort in creating an exciting and joyful activities in their lessons. Students need a teacher that is capable of conducting entertaining and interesting activities instead of "chalk and talk" (Othman et al., 2015), which is the core of literature itself. Another reason for teachers to become disinterested in teaching literature is due to the pressure and expectation of students' performance in examinations. This could lead to teachers abandoning their creative instincts and skills and opted for exam-oriented methods in order to prepare the students for their examinations rather than truly dissecting the literary texts as it should (Choo, Abdullah & Nawati, 2017). Some of the teachers might have numerous interesting and fun activities planned but due to the pressure from the school, they might succumb to the old traditional ways of teaching.

One of the other challenges that ESL teachers and students face is the selection of the literary texts that are being used in schools. According to Irene (2014), it can be very difficult for the teachers to teach the literary texts when the language level of the texts is higher than the students' English level. Such difficulties require the teachers to explain to the students word by word and this is time-consuming for the teachers. When the lesson focuses too much on the grammatical of the literary texts, the purpose of learning literature is then lost. The students will find the literary texts too difficult to comprehend and they will become disinterested. When they are uninterested towards the subject, their attitudes and motivation will become negative. Othman et al (2015) added that the success of the students' learning literature is determined by the students' attitudes towards literature. When the texts become too difficult for them to understand, they will lose their interest and their attitudes towards learning literature will also change.

Wan Kamariah (2008) stated that students' perceptions towards poems are usually negative due to its complicated usage of the language and its figurative meanings. This shows that the students cannot relate with the content of the literary texts because the selection of texts might be coming from outside instead of local. By using international literary texts, teachers will have a challenging time to try and relate the content to the students because it could be something that the students have never experienced before. For example, if the poem talks about snowy days, the students could not relate because they might have never seen snow in real life. When this happens, the students will become disengage from the lesson because they cannot make their own examples of the situation. These are the challenges that ESL teachers and students face in teaching and learning literature. Although most lessons have been assisted by the usage of technologies, having these challenges will continue to hinder the progress of literature education in Malaysia.

### 3. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Teaching English has always been a challenge for any English teachers and educators. Over the years, English teachers and educators have been finding new methods and techniques to ensure the effectiveness of their lesson. The same can be said when it comes to teaching Literature. As literature is seen as a vital cog in English syllabus, it is essential to discover the challenges and issues that teachers and students are facing in order to improve the integration of literature in the English syllabus. Through this paper, the researcher has highlighted the brief history of the introduction of literature in the English education and how the role of literature has developed throughout the years. Next, a closer look at the challenges and issues faced by teachers and students from previous studies and research have been highlighted for future researchers to take into consideration. By looking at previous studies, it has been discovered that motivation and attitudes towards learning English literature could be major factors that future researchers can further look into. Further investigation and research are needed in the future to discover the new challenges and issues faced by English teachers in teaching literature. Due to new teaching methods that are being introduced at a fast pace, feedbacks from the teachers are essential to discover the best and effective methods to teaching literature to the students. In addition, more detailed and in-depth research on the effect of literature on students' attitudes and motivation in learning English should be conducted to see the relation between these factors. For future researches and studies, it is suggested that a quantitative or mix-method research should be conducted to gain accurate data and information on the challenges and issues faced by secondary school teachers and students. This is to ensure that a mass

group of secondary school teachers and students from all over Malaysia can participate to discover the pattern of challenges and issues that they face. The targeted participants should be secondary English school teachers with at least 3 to 5 years of teaching experience in order to relate to the purpose of this study. As for the students, a mixture of lower and upper secondary school students should be sufficient to collect the data needed. Using questionnaires for this is highly recommended as questionnaires can easily cover a large demographical spread sample (Mathers, Fox & Hunn, 2007). A mix-method design can also be used by using interview session with the teachers and using questionnaires for the students.

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