

Using Novels in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

The first goal of this quantitative and qualitative study was 1) to look at students' perceptions of reading novels in EFL classes, 2) to learn what teachers think about the benefits of teaching novels in language classes, 3) to determine whether reading novels may inspire students, broaden their cultural awareness, and increase their language proficiency, and 4) to pinpoint potential difficulties that students might encounter while studying novels. The samples included 24 English professors who are currently teaching novels at chosen universities in Myanmar, together with 71 third- to fourth-year English specialized students. They were chosen using the purposive sampling technique. The data were gathered via a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with a few teachers. Percentage, mean, and standard deviation statistics were used to assess the quantitative data. The results indicated that students' opinions toward reading novels in EFL lessons were favorable. The teachers' conversation showed several difficulties and benefits of using novels. The results have instructional value for EFL instruction since they show how well-received a novel was in an EFL class, the benefits it offered, and the difficulties it presented with reading.

Keywords: novels, EFL teaching, language classroom

1. Introduction

The world of literature is one filled with ideas, visions, sentiments, emotions, thoughts, and beauty. Because it gives them knowledge of the language itself and the culture of the English-speaking world, reading and studying literature is a common strategy used to raise pupils' proficiency in English (Kataja, 2018). The use of literature in language learning to foster language progress, personal growth, and cultural enrichment is widely endorsed by researchers (Altun, 2018). On the one hand, some studies delay the use of literature in language learning because they believe that readers cannot comprehend literary works until they are linguistically competent.

To promote linguistic fluency, Mart (2017) asserted that several scholars favor the incorporation of literature in language acquisition at all levels. In other words, when exposed to literary works, language learners become aware of the diverse usage patterns of the target language. Siaj & Farrah (2018) said that "using literary genres in the language classroom has several benefits, including the authenticity of the literary work, the richness of the language, the breadth of imagination and creativity, and the process of critical thinking." Authenticity, motivation, language improvement, cultural enrichment, personal involvement, creativity, and the development of critical thinking are just a few advantages of reading literary works in general and novels in particular, according to the results of the current study. This finding indicates that most students and teachers concur with this statement.

1.1 Benefits of Using Novels in the Classroom

The advantages of attempting to teach any genre of literature, including poetry, theater, novels, and short stories, as part of an English language curriculum have been hotly debated over the past few decades. According to Lazar (1990), Meloni (1994), Hişmanoğlu (2005), Uyemura (2006), Gareis et al. (2009) and Alkire (2010), novels with their unique characteristics benefit students in the following chief aspects: motivation, cultural enrichment, and language improvement. For the motivation, novels are regarded by Lazar (1990), Alkire (2010), Tsai (2012), and Siaj & Farrah (2018) as enriching and stimulating literary resources in the classroom. They progressively developed intrinsic motivation, which made them feel less concerned about the language and more enjoyment from reading. A sense of accomplishment might not normally be felt after reading a textbook or other brief text results from finishing the entire novel. Then such a satisfying experience encourages people to take up further books for enjoyment. For the cultural enrichment, Lazar (1990), Hişmanolu (2005), Alkire (2010), and Tsai (2012) discovered that novels can increase students' cultural awareness. Additionally, Maples et al., (2016) emphasized that novels offer culturally pertinent content that supports students' development of relationships and empathy for others. For the language improvement, the use of novels by pupils raises their degree of language competency, according to Lazar (1990), Hişmanolu (2005), Alkire (2010), Tsai (2012), Ghiabi (2014), Maples et al., (2016). Additionally, novels are a non-threatening form of reading that give students the chance to practice their newly acquired language and literacy abilities, according to Maples et al., (2016).

1.2 Problems that Students Face while Learning Novels

The challenges that students could have when studying a novel in a language classroom have been covered in several studies. While using an original, unabridged novel as the main course material may seem "too radical a leap from tradition" (Gareis et al., 2009, p. 145), researchers

have suggested a variety of benefits of introducing authentic novels in language classrooms (Gareis et al., 2009; Hişmanolu, 2005; Lazar, 1990; Vandrick, 1997). The teacher may view it as a disadvantage that a novel does not present curriculum material in the same order as a textbook does. Students who are used to traditional textbooks' shorter passages may find a novel's lengthy text and extensive use of new vocabulary intimidating (Gareis et al., 2009; Lazar, 1990). The issues students encounter when studying a novel are as follows: large amount of vocabulary, and the length. For the large amount of vocabulary, Lazar (1990) and Faraj (2021) did research on the difficulties that students could have when learning novels, such as a significant quantity of unfamiliar terms. They emphasized the idea that students, regardless of ability, will become perplexed if they cannot decipher the meaning of many words when reading novels. As a result, learners will not want to finish reading. Teachers can create a dictionary for the learners at home to help them become familiar with the new vocabulary as one solution to this issue. For the length, Alkire (2010) and Lazar (1990) discovered that students' perceptions of novel length as a reading challenge were accurate. According to Lazar (1990), if a novel is too long for a student's level of proficiency, they won't finish reading since they'll get bored. In order to handle the class with lengthy novels, she mentioned many strategies teachers might use, such as requesting various students to describe various chapters for the remainder of the class.

Research Objectives

The followings are the study's goals:

1. To determine how students feel about reading novels in EFL classes
2. To assess students' perceptions about using novels in EFL classes
3. To determine whether or not novels can inspire students and enhance their cultural and language understanding.
4. To identify some issues that students could encounter while reading novels in an EFL classroom.

Research Questions

The experiences and viewpoints of both students and teachers will be the main focus of this study. The following research inquiries are attempted to be addressed by the study's researchers:

1. What is the prevailing opinion among students regarding reading novels?
2. What do the teachers think about the benefits of reading books in language classes?
3. Can novels inspire students and enhance their cultural and linguistic understanding?
4. Which issue might students encounter while they study novels in the classroom?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Participants in this study included 71 undergraduate students from various English departments who were enrolled in English-specific courses as well as 24 English teachers who are currently teaching novels at selected institutions in Myanmar. It should be noted that these students have already completed certain pertinent English courses, such as Advanced Writing and Reading Comprehension.

2.2 Data Collection

The researchers employed two instruments to accomplish the goals of the current study: teacher interviews and a questionnaire to assess students' and teachers' attitudes about studying fresh material. The topics covered the advantages of reading novels and the potential difficulties students can run into while learning them.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a straightforward descriptive analysis. Each questionnaire was carefully examined by the researchers, who totaled the answers. The quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS version 22. The data obtained were analyzed by using percentage, means, and standard deviation. For the qualitative data, the content analysis was made.

3. Results

3.1 Phase 1: Questionnaire Survey I

Research Question 1: What is the prevailing opinion among students regarding reading novels?

The results of the survey show how students generally feel about reading novels. The following methods of data analysis are used with the Likert scale:

Table 1. Students' general attitude towards learning novels (n=71)

No.	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1	Using novels in the classroom is beneficial.	13%	21%	6%	28%	32%	3.45	1.44	Very positive
2	Novels improve reading skills.	13%	23%	8%	27%	29%	3.36	1.43	Positive
3	Novels strengthen writing skills.	17%	26%	9%	24%	24%	3.12	1.46	Positive
4	Novels develop speaking skills.	23%	28%	11%	20%	18%	2.82	1.44	Positive
5	Novels enhance listening skills.	20%	35%	24%	19%	2%	2.48	1.07	Slightly positive
6	Novels encourage students to read outside the classroom.	26%	33%	10%	18%	13%	2.59	1.38	Slightly positive
7	Novels introduce students to different cultures.	6%	20%	6%	35%	33%	3.69	1.28	Very positive
8	Novels motivate students inside the classroom.	18%	38%	11%	21%	12%	2.71	1.31	Positive
9	Novels provide students with authentic material.	10%	12%	13%	39%	26%	3.59	1.27	Very positive
10	Novels expand students' vocabulary.	23%	19%	13%	29%	16%	2.96	1.43	Positive
11	Novels enhance creativity.	18%	23%	12%	27%	20%	3.08	1.42	Positive
12	Novels enhance critical thinking.	4%	22%	9%	34%	31%	3.66	1.23	Very positive
13	Novels help students express their feelings.	6%	23%	10%	31%	30%	3.56	1.29	Very positive
14	Novels help students overcome cultural differences.	10%	13%	15%	30%	32%	3.61	1.32	Very positive
15	Learning novels is enjoyable.	23%	16%	11%	27%	23%	3.11	1.50	Positive
16	Novels help students be linguistically proficient.	15%	15%	13%	31%	26%	3.38	1.40	Positive
17	Novels help students express their thoughts.	12%	20%	13%	30%	25%	3.36	1.36	Positive
18	Novels are the least preferable teaching material for students.	28%	30%	15%	19%	8%	2.49	1.29	Slightly positive
19	Studying novels is challenging for students.	7%	23%	6%	41%	23%	3.50	1.26	Very positive
20	Students are demotivated to learn novels.	33%	34%	19%	7%	7%	2.21	1.18	Slightly positive
21	Students face difficulty with the large amounts of vocabulary they find while learning a novel.	35%	31%	8%	15%	11%	2.36	250.00	Slightly positive
22	Length is a problem when students learn novels.	25%	20%	11%	27%	17%	2.91	1.46	Positive
23	Students face cultural difficulty while learning novels.	20%	26%	12%	22%	20%	2.96	1.44	Positive
24	Students face linguistic difficulty while learning novels.	25%	23%	11%	21%	20%	2.88	1.49	Positive
Average		17.92%	23.92%	11.50%	25.92%	20.75%	3.08	1.43	Positive

NOTE: 1. 00-1.80=Negative, 1.81-2.60=Slightly positive, 2.61-3.40=Positive, 3.41-4.20=Very positive

4.21-5.00=Completely positive

Table 1 shows that students, with an average mean score of 3.08, had a favorable attitude about learning novels. The findings show that students think books may help them in a variety of ways, including cultural enrichment (Mean=3.69), critical thinking (Mean=3.66), and bridging cultural gaps (Mean=3.61). The item with the highest mean, which claimed that "novels increase students' cultural enrichment," should be noted.

3.2 Phase 2: Questionnaire Survey 2

Research Question 2: What do the teachers think about the benefits of reading books in language classes?

The opinions of the teachers on the benefits of using novels in language classes are displayed in Table 4. The following methods of data analysis are used with the Likert scale:

Table 2. The advantages of using books in language classes, according to teachers (n = 24)

SN	Statement	Calculation			Calculation		Interpretation
		Disagree	Not decided	Agree	Mean	SD	
1	Using novels in the classroom is beneficial.	28%	18%	54%	2.26	0.87	Moderately Advantageous
2	Novels encourage students to read outside the classroom.	41%	25%	34%	1.93	0.86	Moderately Advantageous
3	Novels introduce students to different cultures.	11%	23%	66%	2.55	0.68	Fully Advantageous
4	Novels motivate students inside the classroom.	40%	21%	39%	1.99	0.89	Moderately Advantageous
5	Novels provide students with authentic material.	24%	20%	56%	2.32	0.84	Moderately Advantageous
	Average	28.80%	21.40%	49.80%	2.21	0.86	Moderately Advantageous

NOTE: 1. 00-1. 66=Lack of Advantages, 1. 67-2. 33=Moderately Advantageous

2. 34-3. 00= Fully Advantageous

Table 2 demonstrates that instructors have the highest mean score (Mean=2.55) regarding their belief that novels expose children to various cultures. The findings also revealed that educators strongly supported the use of novels in the classroom (Mean = 2.26), as well as the provision of authentic content (Mean = 2.32). They progressively developed intrinsic motivation, which made them feel less concerned about the language and more enjoyment from reading. With an average mean score of 2.22, teachers note that teaching novels in language classes is moderately advantageous.

3.3 Phase 3: Questionnaire Survey 3

Research Question 3: Can novels inspire students and enhance their cultural and linguistic understanding?

The results of the survey show how teachers feel about students' motivation, cultural awareness, and linguistic proficiency. The average mean of the factors with a three-rating scale was employed to analyze the data as the following:

Table 3. Teachers' views on students' motivation, cultural knowledge and linguistic level (n=24)

SN	Statement	Calculation			Calculation		Interpretation
		Disagree	Not decided	Agree	Mean	SD	
1	Novels motivate students inside the classroom.	37%	13%	50%	2.14	0.92	Moderately Advantageous
2	Novels introduce students to different cultures.	30%	15%	55%	2.25	0.89	Moderately Advantageous
3	Novels help students overcome cultural differences.	44%	13%	43%	1.99	0.93	Moderately Advantageous
4	Novels improve reading skills.	28%	16%	56%	2.28	0.87	Moderately Advantageous
5	Novels strengthen writing skills.	42%	17%	41%	1.99	0.91	Moderately Advantageous
6	Novels develop speaking skills.	40%	15%	45%	2.05	0.92	Moderately Advantageous
7	Novels enhance listening skills.	59%	19%	22%	1.63	0.82	Lack of Advantages
8	Novels encourage students to read outside the classroom.	34%	17%	49%	2.15	0.90	Moderately Advantageous
9	Novels help students to be linguistically proficient.	33%	21%	46%	2.13	0.88	Moderately Advantageous
10	Novels expand students' vocabulary.	38%	16%	46%	2.08	0.91	Moderately Advantageous
	Average	38.50%	16.20%	45.30%	2.07	0.91	Moderately Advantageous

NOTE: 1. 00-1. 66=Lack of Advantages, 1. 67-2. 33=Moderately Advantageous

2. 34-3. 00= Fully Advantageous

Table 3 reveals that novels have the highest mean score (Mean=2.28), demonstrate how strongly reading skills are developed by novels. As reading novels enables students to learn vocabulary, phrases, and grammar in a simpler and more ingrained manner, the teachers also feel that novels may provide practical, everyday application of English. Students, however, demonstrated a negative attitude toward developing their listening skills. The item that claimed that reading improves listening skills received the lowest mean, 1.63.

3.4 Phase 4: Questionnaire Survey 4

Research Question 4: Which issue might students encounter while they study novels in the classroom?

Table 4 presents the teachers' perspectives on the challenges that students could encounter while studying novels in the classroom. The average mean the factors with a three-rating scale was employed to analyze the data as the following:

Table 4. Teachers' perspectives on the challenges that students could encounter while studying novels in class (n=24)

SN	Statement	Calculation			Calculation		Interpretation
		Disagree	Not decided	Agree	Mean	SD	
1	Students struggle with the extensive terminology they encounter while reading a book.	31%	16%	53%	2.22	0.89	Moderately problematic
2	When teaching books to students, length is a challenge.	26%	10%	64%	2.38	0.87	Fully problematic
	Average	13.00%	58.50%	13.00%	2.30	0.88	Moderately problematic

NOTE: 1. 00-1. 66=Lack of problem, 1. 67-2. 33=Moderately problematic

2. 34-3. 00= Fully problematic

According to the data in Table 4, students who learned novels had the highest mean scores (Mean=2.38), which indicates that length is a concern. Additionally, the extensive vocabulary that students encounter while studying novels confounds them (Mean=2.22). In addition, the study offers students' perspectives on the advantages and challenges they faced in the novel class.

3.5 Phase 5: Interview Survey (n=5)

Four questions were posed to each of the five English teachers who are currently teaching novels as part of an individual interview.

3.5.1 Interview Question: Do You Believe That Teaching Literature in Higher Education Is Beneficial, and If So, Why?

According to their interview responses, every instructor participant chose "yes" in response to question

number 1. Here are some sample quotes from the teachers' responses to this query.

Interviewee (a): I think teaching novels at university is beneficial because novels provide knowledge, language improvement and entertainment and encourage creativity.

Interviewee (b): Teaching novels can develop the students' knowledge about different cultures, traditions, societies, and people. For the entertainment, it can offer real life like settings through reading novels which shapes our brains and molds our social skills to relax more.

Interviewee (c): Teaching novels gives the students the chance to use their creativity for their productive skills- speaking and writing in learning English as a second language and offer an escape for readers - enriching their lives in more ways than one.

Interviewee (d): I think teaching novels at university is beneficial because students can develop the knowledge about different cultures and societies.

Interviewee (e): Yes, teaching novels at university is beneficial because they will help students learn about the lives of the people, culture and social, economic and political environment where the novels are based.

3.5.2 Interview Question: What Challenges Might University Students Have When Studying Novels?

The second question brought up the linguistic challenges that pupils with limited language skills might encounter. Here are some sample quotes from the teachers' responses to this query.

Interviewee (a): Because of its significant length and complexity, students are likely to face some problems like low motivation, lack of prior literature knowledge and cultural prejudices while learning novels.

Interviewee (b): The problems are difficult to understand the context, memorization and concept of settings due to its long text and a large amount of new vocabulary which can be daunting to students.

Interviewee (c): Students are faced with discouraging task of communicating their needs to teachers. They must be patient with unfamiliar words while learning novels.

Interviewee (d): In my opinion, vocabulary and reading comprehension are the problems students at university are likely to face while learning novels.

Interviewee (e): The problems are that students may lack of linguistic ability, new vocabulary, cultural knowledge and motivation.

3.5.3 Interview Question: How Should Students Approach Lengthy Novels?

When question 3 was examined, practically all teachers gave nearly the same response. Here are some examples of instructor responses to this question.

Interviewee (a): The students can deal with long novels by letting them spark a passion for reading long novels as self-study by the teachers. Then, they can sketch notes or mind mapping and discussions with their friends and teachers. In the classroom, the teachers can host a classroom debate and group or pair activities concerning with the target topics of the study about novels. For the assessments, the teachers can do such as asking the questions whether they comprehend or not and giving assignments to promote their skills.

Interviewee (b): Students can deal with long novels by paying attention, learning vocabulary and culture and translating to L1.

Interviewee (c): Students can deal with long novels by picking a location that is conducive to read in, monitoring their comprehension and taking notes as they read.

Interviewee (d): Students can deal with long novels by partaking in reading challenges and by borrowing the reading time from something less important.

Interviewee (e): Students can deal with long novels by watching movies and studying outside the classroom.

3.5.4 Interview Question: How Can Students Get Over the Barrier Posed by Culture?

The teachers responded that it was crucially important to pay attention to this issue when the researcher posed the fourth question. They claimed that when students study novels, they will be able to comprehend the cultures of different people. Here are some sample quotes from the teachers' responses to this query.

Interviewee (a): The teachers can give the approaches for the students to overcome the cultural difficulty by facilitating different cultural understandings of literature texts, and providing students with opportunities to observe and experience characters' lives in the field. By doing so, the students can overcome this by learning about other cultures as a prior knowledge, sharing their knowledge in their everyday conversation, making a unique and positive contribution to the larger society, and altering organizational practices and procedures.

Interviewee (b): Students can overcome the cultural difficulty by learning different cultures and promoting their critical thinking skills in reading.

Interviewee (c): Students can overcome the cultural difficulty by learning different cultures and sharing knowledge.

Interviewee (d): Students can overcome cultural difficulty by considering different cultural communication style, by accepting all cultures and their differences and by practicing cross cultural training.

Interviewee (e): Students should acknowledge and appreciate their own and other cultural values.

In conclusion, the teachers had a favorable attitude toward using novels in language instruction. The interviews with the teachers also revealed that they think novels are generally good for students but challenging for some of them because of their length and extensive vocabulary. They offered advice to the students on how to get around these issues by teaching novels before introducing them to background information about the author and the century. Teachers could suggest that students read as a way to get over this problem by encouraging them to focus on the summary rather than each specific detail. Teachers may also ask individual students to sum up certain chapters for the class as a whole in order to manage the class with large texts. The results should provide a clear understanding of the function that novels serve in EFL courses for educators, researchers, curriculum designers, and decision-makers.

4. Discussion

The results revealed that reading novels exposes students to other cultures and aids in bridging cultural gaps. The results are consistent with Hişmanolu (2005) and Maples et al., (2016), who assert that various literary genres, particularly novels, aid students in understanding how people interact with one another in various countries. It was also found that novels expose learners to many cultures, so teachers should assist them in recognizing and appreciating their own and other cultural values in order to help them overcome the cultural barrier. Moreover, the novels enhance reading abilities. This is consistent with the findings of Shelton-Strong's study (2012), which claims that authentic reading materials push pupils to develop their own language skills. According to Febriani et al., (2022), choosing the right strategy (or approaches) to teaching literature in EFL classrooms is essential for students to do well in both their critical thinking and language proficiency domains. Reading literature provides students with a number of benefits, such as enhancing reflective and intentional learning and introducing them to critical thinking and cultural awareness (Hamid et al., 2020). The findings indicated that the length of novels is a major issue for students when studying novels in the classroom. Additionally, the teachers emphasized the idea that pupils become frustrated when they encounter novels with a lot of unfamiliar words and lengthy content. This outcome is consistent with several research that examined the issues students experience (Alkire, 2010; Lazar, 1990; Tsai, 1988). Lazar (1990) noted that the length of novels is an issue for students since they will never be inspired to finish them, and they will become bored. Lazar (1990) and Alkire (2010) concurred that if students don't love reading lengthy books, they won't learn from them and won't gain from doing so. The suggestions made by the teachers matched those made by Lazar (1993) in her study. Each group of students should summarize one chapter, and the remaining students should then discuss the summaries. This was her advice to the students. The findings of the questionnaire survey were confirmed by the interview questions for this study, which placed a particular emphasis on the value of novels in developing students' cultures. This study's interview survey revealed that novels can offer culturally appropriate content that fosters relationships, language enrichment, and personal involvement in students. According to Khatib & Seyyedrezaei (2017), literature has been found to be a useful and fascinating resource for enhancing students' linguistic abilities. In addition, the teachers underlined the value of employing novels in language classes since they provide the kind of language instruction that students require. This study aims to illustrate both the advantages and potential difficulties that students could experience when using novels in the language classroom.

5. Conclusion

Based on the research results and discussion, it could be summarized that literary texts provide students with authentic content that can be used in language classes. These also can help students improve their comprehension skills by using real-life examples. By using authentic materials, they are exposed to genuine interactions and experiences that are valuable and important to them. For using the novels in the

language classroom, the findings indicated that students' attitudes toward reading novels in EFL classes were positive. The teachers' discussion revealed several challenges and benefits of using novels. The results obtained possess educational value for EFL instruction because they show how well a novel was received in an EFL classroom, what benefits it provided, and what challenges it posed to the reading process. The findings also provide educators, researchers, curriculum designers, and policymakers with a clear understanding of the role of novels in EFL courses.

6. Recommendations

Though some positive findings were identified in this study to support the role of literature in enhancing language skills and cultural enrichment for language learners, some limitations of this study might be noted before the results could be generalized. If time had permitted, interviews with more seasoned literature teachers should have been conducted to ensure the quality of the questionnaire responses and classroom observations should have been conducted to determine whether the materials selected to teach in class corresponded with the student's views on literature as seen in the data or not.

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