

External & Internal Factors Affecting EFL Students' Learning of English Literature A Case Study of Libyan Undergraduate Students at University of Zawia -Libya

Fuozia A. Ohaidah

Dpet. of English/ Faculty of Languages & Translation
University of Zawia / Libya

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7344-2077>

f.waheedah@zu.edu.ly

Abstract

Studying English literature is interrelated to studying English as a foreign language (EFL). However, EFL learners prefer to avoid studying English literature due to several challenges that may extend from difficulties inherited in literature itself to the learning and instructional processes. Therefore, this study aimed at investigating the reasons that may discourage Libyan EFL students to study English literature. The sample of this study consisted of 40 (15 4th Year students and 25 3rd Year students), Division of Linguistics, Dept. of English. Faculty of Languages & Translation, Zawia University. A quantitative questionnaire developed by the researcher was employed to collect the data. Descriptive statistics and qualitative methods were employed to interpret the gathered data. The reported results show that Libyan EFL students' ability to learn English literature, in particular, is shaped by a mix of linguistic, cultural, motivational, instructional and environmental factors. More specifically, two main different types of factors that play an important role in the phenomenon under investigation have been identified: **a) External Challenges**, including: teaching methods, teacher's level of competence, and lack of adequate learning resources, **b) Internal Challenges**, such as: linguistic difficulty, students' poor language proficiency, students' lack of cultural knowledge, students' negative attitudes, cognitive demotivating factors. Some model approaches to teaching literature that suit different goals have also been suggested,

with the view that if properly applied, students' language skills and creativeness will be improved and, above all, literature will be popularized within the classroom and beyond.

Keywords: English literature, English literary texts, EFL learners/teachers, teaching/learning, challenges to studying English literature.

العوامل الخارجية والداخلية التي تؤثر على تعلم طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للأدب الإنجليزي

دراسة حالة للطلاب الليبيين بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات والترجمة، جامعة الزاوية - ليبيا

فوزية أحمد المقطوف اوحيدة

أستاذ مساعد / قسم اللغة الإنجليزية / كلية اللغات والترجمة / جامعة الزاوية - ليبيا

ORCID: 0009-0004-7344-2077

f.waheedah@zu.edu.ly

المستخلص:

دراسة الأدب الإنجليزي مرتبطة بدراسة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL). ومع ذلك، يفضل متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية تجنب دراسة الأدب الإنجليزي بسبب عدة تحديات قد تمتد من الصعوبات الموروثة في الأدب نفسه إلى عمليات التعلم والتعليم. لذلك، هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في الأسباب التي قد تثني طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الليبيين عن دراسة الأدب الإنجليزي. ضمت عينة هذه الدراسة 40 طالباً (15 طالباً في السنة الرابعة و25 طالباً في السنة الثالثة) من شعبة اللسانيات، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات والترجمة، جامعة الزاوية. تم استخدام استبيان كمي طورته الباحثة لجمع البيانات. وتم استخدام الإحصاءات الوصفية والأساليب النوعية لتفسير البيانات. أظهرت النتائج أن قدرة طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية الليبيين على تعلم الأدب الإنجليزي، على وجه الخصوص، تتأثر سلباً بمزيج من العوامل اللغوية والثقافية والتحفيزية والتعليمية والبيئية.

بشكل أكثر تحديداً، تم تحديد نوعين رئيسيين مختلفين من العوامل التي تلعب دوراً مهماً في الظاهرة قيد الدراسة: أ) التحديات الخارجية، وتشمل: طرق التدريس، مستوى كفاءة المعلم، ونقص الموارد التعليمية الكافية، ب) التحديات الداخلية، مثل: الصعوبة اللغوية، ضعف كفاءة الطلاب في اللغة الإنجليزية، نقص إلمام الطلاب بثقافة اللغة الإنجليزية، المواقف السلبية للطلاب تجاه الأدب الإنجليزي، العوامل المعرفية المثبطة للدافعية. كما تم اقتراح بعض النماذج لتدريس الأدب الإنجليزي التي تناسب أهدافاً مختلفة، والتي ترى الباحثة أنه إذا تم تطبيقها بشكل صحيح، ستُحسّن من مهارات الطلاب اللغوية في تعلم الأدب الإنجليزي داخل الفصل وخارجه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الإنجليزي، النصوص الأدبية الإنجليزية، متعلمو/معلمو الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، التعليم/التعلم، الصعوبات في دراسة الأدب الإنجليزي.

Introduction:

▪ Statement of Problem:

English literature is an essential component of EFL programs as it helps students develop linguistic competence, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. It is believed that through the study of literary genres such as novels, short stories, poetry and drama, students are exposed to authentic language and a variety of cultural perspectives that enrich their understanding of English beyond grammar and vocabulary. Despite these benefits, many EFL students come across serious obstacles when they study English literature (Alshammari et al., 2020).

Basically, these obstacles are caused by limited language proficiency, unfamiliar vocabulary, complex literary language, cultural differences, figurative expressions, and insufficient background knowledge. In addition, some students find it extremely challenging to analyze literary texts, identify themes and literary devices, and express their interpretations successfully. To these we can add teaching methods, limited access to appropriate learning resources, and low student motivation (Alshammari et al., 2020; Belarbi, 2025).

Pedagogically speaking, understanding the challenges faced by EFL students in learning English literature is essential for improving teaching practices and improve students' learning experiences. by pointing out the hindrances that impede students' comprehension and appreciation of literary texts, teachers can develop more effective instructional strategies and provide appropriate support.

Therefore, the aim of the current study is to investigate the major factors underlying challenges that EFL students face with studying English literature and to suggest possible solutions that can enhance their academic performance and engagement with literary works.

▪ Research Questions & Hypotheses:

The study aims at answering the following questions:

1. What are the main difficulties Libyan EFL students face when studying English literature?
2. Which factors (internal, external) contribute most to these difficulties?
3. What teaching strategies can improve Libyan EFL students' learning/understanding of English literature?

The research questions above can be formulated into the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis I:** Libyan EFL students experience significant difficulties with studying English literature.
- **Hypothesis II:** Both internal and external factors contribute to students' difficulties with learning English literature.
- **Hypothesis III:** Interactive teaching methods improve Libyan EFL students' understanding and appreciation of English literature.

Review of Related Literature:

❖ Importance of teaching/Learning of English Literature in EFL Contexts

Broadly speaking, literature does play a significant role in the teaching and learning of the English language, particularly among non-native English speakers enrolled in ESL or EFL programs. The ability of literature to improve students' cultural awareness, an

important facet of language learning, is also well acknowledged (Jaufillaili, 2023). As a result, a significant amount of study has been done on using literature to teach ESL and EFL students. In general, studies have shown that literature significantly aids in the development of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in addition to the four language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Elklic, ErGgen, Kayintu, & Karaca, 2011; Floris, 2004; Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011; Maley, 1989; McKay, 1982; Riverol, 1991; Turker, 1991; Yeasmin & Azad, 2011) (all cited in Jauffillaili, 2023).

But before emphasizing that literature can be difficult for EFL learners, we have to show the importance of learning literature in general and English Literature in specific. Literary studies help its reader to understand the world socially, economically and politically, and it improves the language learning due to its eloquence of language through stories, plays, novels & poems. Accordingly, Learning literature gain insights, develop the sense of critical thinking and improves the ability to write in a sophisticated way (Muhammed, 2023). To these benefits we now turn.

The importance of literature in learning English language can be listed in the following order (Shafiq & Zaid, 2024):

• **Validity:**

Literature is genuine and authentic. Literature is motivating, authentic, full of educational values, fun and rich in cultural values, provides language input and awareness, and encourage self-reflection. Literature deals with significant topics that are closely attached to the reader. Authenticity is a highly necessary principle that is mostly found in novels and plays.

• **Motivation:**

Since motivation is an important aspect that a student need to learn, Literary text is considered the best tool for motivation. In other words, literature can exceed both culture and time and attach directly to the reader in different places of the world. Accordingly, it develops language responsiveness, inspires communication and discussions, and educates the whole learner's personality.

•Globalization:

Generally speaking, literature generally deals with universal conceptions such as death, love & revenge...etc. Such concepts do exist in all cultures. This kind of comparison between the culture of the learner and the culture of the country that the learner wants to learn their language, makes it easier to understand and helps learning quickly.

•Intensive Reading:

The key for a best way to practice reading is through literature. Investigating and understanding literary texts requires close reading skills. It is proved that incorporating literary materials in reading lessons can help students extrapolate meaning from the text's language, enhance them to use dictionaries because of the literary texts' large vocabulary, which greatly expands students' understanding.

•Grammar:

It is through literature that learners notice variety of grammatical structures. Student's competence is enhanced by examining sentence structures and comprehending the grammatical usage of writers. In addition to the formal language used in the literary works, they occasionally use colloquial language. For example, novels and drama use more colloquial language that gives the reader access to a wider range of vocabulary that broadens their understanding. All of these give the student a reliable resource to practice grammatical structures. It is common knowledge that the greatest source of intricate grammatical constructions is literature.

•Critical Thinking:

Literary texts frequently convey complex viewpoints and concepts. Reading literature raises critical thinking, which improves language proficiency. Reading literature can make students comprehend, connect, and explore ideas, which enables them to apply the four language-learning abilities. A good teacher may encourage their students to read, write, think, and discuss in English by employing literature as a teaching tool. "It is believed that with good critical thinking ability, college graduates can be better prepared to compete

and exercise their rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a global community.

• Writing Skills:

Literature provides a solid foundation for writing practice when it comes to writing goals. Students will be able to produce an analysis or their own summary of a work in their own words after reading a poem, short story, or novel. As a result, it improves students' writing practice and proficiency. Studying literature can enhance writing skill through paraphrasing, summarization, and adaptation. These techniques are very beneficial ESL / EFL writing exercises.

❖ Obstacles EFL students face with studying English Literature

Milal et al. (2022) claim that an instructional process involves several components, namely curriculum, materials, methods, evaluation, and teachers. As to learning literature, curriculum with its prescription of competence, relevance and outline of material, attractiveness and variety of teaching methods, and the evaluation system, and the personality and motivation of teachers can affect student enthusiasm in learning literature. They go further to insist that learners play the most critical role in the teaching-learning process. The success or failure of an instructional process is determined or measured by the standard of learners' outcomes. As the central focus of the instructional process, it is essential to elucidate students' challenges. Do students of English literature experience any significant problems? If so, what would they be?

The bulk of reviewed literature identifies *five* levels of difficulties related to studying literature (Hossain, 2024):

1. **Poor Linguistic Proficiency:** linguistic proficiency and vocabulary limitations are a significant barrier. Students are confronted with the disparity between their own low general English proficiency and the advanced, archaic, or metaphorical language used in literature. Limited vocabulary and poor command of complex syntax prevent students from understanding the text, leading to poor comprehension.
2. **Lack of Cultural Familiarity:** EFL students often struggle to understand literary texts due to a lack of background knowledge

regarding the historical, social, or cultural context of the target literature. Cultural differences between the learners' home culture and the culture depicted in literature can lead to misinterpretations or lack of engagement.

3. **Lack Motivation:** Negative attitudes toward reading literature, low self-confidence, and poor motivation are major hurdles. Students may find literature irrelevant to their immediate needs, such as professional language proficiency, which reduces their motivation to invest effort in understanding complex texts.
4. **Poor Critical Thinking Skills:** Literature requires interpretation, analysis, and evaluation, which some students lack if their previous education focused solely on rote memorization or basic grammar.
5. **Negative Reading Habits:** Students often lack the habit of reading outside of their prescribed textbooks, which limits their exposure to different writing styles and genres.

These factors frequently result in learners facing high levels of anxiety and a sense of alienation from the material, reducing their capacity to appreciate or critically engage with literature.

❖ Internal and External Factors Causing Difficulties of Studying English Literature:

Based on the tabulated data reported by Nawi & Nor (2023), the factors affecting EFL students' learning of English Literature can be categorized and discussed based on two categories: *internal* (student-related), and *external* (teacher-related, and environment-related). Here is a summary of these categories.

• Internal Factors (Student-related challenges)

There are several recurrent challenges that are related to students: attitude, personality, language competency, and basic literary knowledge.

○ Students' attitude

One of the factors influencing studying English literature is students' negative attitudes. Students' negativity towards learning literature can stem from several reasons. Firstly, students' cultural bias and low motivation to learn foreign literature can push them away from

learning literary texts (Tayib & Hassan, 2020). Next, lack of interest makes students undervalue the need to learn literature in English as a school subject, which can negatively influence their attitude towards it (Ain Suraya & Norhanim, 2021). Lastly, students who are unaware of the importance of learning literature can be negatively influenced by it (Tayib & Hassan, 2020).

○ **Students' personality:**

In addition to students' attitudes, their personalities can also become a hindrance in teaching them literature. Tayib & Hassan, (2020) think that students' shyness and lack of confidence can equally cause a problem for their teachers in the literature classes. Students are too passive and reluctant to take part in their teachers' discussions and activities.

○ **Students' language competency:**

Students' English language competency is an alarming factor that can pose a huge problem with English literature lessons. Students who have poor proficiency in English might face a problem understanding the deeper message and meaning that literary texts are trying to convey as students are only able to understand the literal meanings of the works. This is because the language used in literary texts is usually difficult and archaic, which can confuse students with limited vocabulary (Nawi & Nor, 2023).

○ **Students' basic literary knowledge:**

The last challenge related to students is their basic knowledge of literature. One of the issues faced EFL students in learning the literary text is that they lack basic knowledge of literary components, which is the technical part of the literary texts such as the plots, characters, and settings. Students who do not have a solid foundation in this basic literary knowledge might find it difficult to analyze the literary texts in depth. One reason to explain this is the little exposure to literature in schools (Noraishah et al., 2015) (mentioned in Nawi & Nor, 2023).

• External Factors (Teacher- and Environment-Related Challenges)

➤ Teacher-related challenges

Nawi & Nor (2023) and Hossain (2024) reach the consensus that the recurrent instructional and pedagogical issues mostly identified as related to the teachers are teachers' incompetence and inappropriate teaching methods, as well as poor curriculum design. They assume that the use of teacher-centered, traditional methods instead of engaging, and student-centered approaches hinders students' critical thinking abilities. According to them, literature is sometimes introduced too late in the curriculum, or students are given outdated, difficult, or unappealing texts, which reduces the popularity of the subject. What follows is a summary of the challenges they identified.

○ Teachers' Incompetence

Teachers should be competent in the teaching of English literature as literature plays an important role in supporting students' language development, cultural understanding, and building their critical and analysis skills. However, one of the most identified challenges in the teaching of literature is teachers' incompetence. Unqualified teachers hinder the process of teaching literature in the classrooms. Teachers' incompetence can be accounted for by the fact that they did not specialize in English literature but in English Language teaching. Another factor that can contribute to teachers' incompetence is lack of self-confidence and pedagogical training. Teachers who lack confidence in their abilities and the necessary training teach literature can be demotivated to teach literature.

○ Inappropriate Teaching Methods

Another problem with the teaching of literature that derived from the teachers is the use of inappropriate and ineffective teaching methods in the classrooms. teachers with limited teaching method knowledge tend to rely on whatever approaches previously available. These inappropriate teaching approaches result in students lacking in focus and co-operation in class during literature lesson due to teachers' weakness in giving good explanations and elaboration on the literature text. To make matters worse, some teachers still use old traditional

ways of dull and less creative literature teaching and refuse to try new interesting techniques of teaching.

One of the commonly used traditional methods of literature teaching is teacher-centered approach where the teacher acts as the dominant figure in explaining and translating literary texts to the students without taking students' input.

➤ **Environment-Related Challenges:**

There are several demotivating external challenges in the teaching of literature. Here are some common difficulty-inducing factors.

○ **Text Selection:**

Many studies have come up with the conclusion that the culturally and contextually foreign themes presented in literary texts studied by EFL students pose on of the most common problems associated with text selection (Gatdula et al., 2022; Dahiru, 2020; Faiza & Azlina, 2020; Harwati & Mohamad Asyraf, 2019; Yahya, 2017) (all cited in Nawi & Nor (2023); (Hussein & Al-Emami, 2016: cited in Hossain (2024).

To this can be added the difficult language level of literary works used in the text selection as a challenge to the teaching of literature. Research has shown that high level of language used in literary text would cause difficulty for the teachers in teaching literature to students. Some literary texts contain complicated and unfamiliar vocabulary that even teachers found it difficult to explain. Text-selection issues such as the level of linguistic and stylistic difficulty, influence the productivity of the teaching-learning process (ibid).

○ **Poor learning environment**

As a matter of fact, a poor learning environment hinders their capacity to teach students successfully and also interferes with students' ability to focus (Ugwu, 2022) (cited in Nawi & Nor, 2023). One problem in poor learning environment commonly faced by teachers is the large number of students in a class. Teachers find it difficult to provide individualized attention to students in a crowded class (Tayib and Hassan, 2020). When it comes to teaching literature, a crowded class is one of the serious obstacles faced by literature teachers. It might be challenging for teachers to keep track of the lesson's flow in a large-

sized class because students' learning styles and personalities differ widely (Farhanah & Hadina, 2022) (cited in Nawi & Nor, 2023).

Still within the domain of teaching English literature, we can add the difficulties caused by lack of resources. For instance, inadequate access to supplementary materials like literary criticism, audio-visual aids, or library resources limits students' understanding. Also, absence of libraries would cause problems such as lack of teaching resources and reading texts materials (Hossain, 2024).

○ **Time constraint:**

Limited time allocated in teaching literature can make it difficult for teachers to cover a large amount of material. Likewise, students find it difficult to fully understand and appreciate the literary texts they are studying (Nawi & Nor, 2023).

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that teachers consider 'having difficulty with the time allocation to teach literature' to be the most serious problem. As Ain Suraya and Norhanim (2021: 15) put it:

... the allotted hours for teaching literature are not enough. In implementing interesting literature approaches, the arrangement and preparation of the lessons take a lot of time. ... time constraints hinder the implementation of literature teaching approach in the classrooms.

❖ **Review of Previous Studies:**

Understanding English literature can be a challenging endeavor for undergraduate students, particularly those in non-native English-speaking contexts. EFL undergraduate students usually face significant challenges in understanding and learning English literature due to its complex language and foreign culture (Anaam, 2025). This literature review, therefore, explores the various difficulties faced by EFL undergraduate students in studying English literature. The review synthesizes findings from various studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles these students encounter.

In this connection, the researcher points out that recent research increasingly rejects the idea that the main problem is simply that EFL students have "weak English". Instead, the evidence suggests that difficulties arise from an interaction among language proficiency, literary competence, cultural knowledge, reading strategies,

motivation, curriculum design, instructional practices, and students' previous experience with literature.

As for the layout and presentation purposes, the studies in question are analyzed and tabularized as follows.

No	Author/ Year	Purpose	Findings
1.	Anaam (2025)	investigates the challenges encountered by undergraduate students at Taiz University, Yemen, in comprehending English poetry	Multifaceted obstacles in understanding English poetry: ▪ Language-related issues: limited vocabulary; unfamiliarity with idiomatic expressions; complexity of poetic devices ▪ Students' anxiety and lack of confidence
2.	Nawi & Nor (2023)	▪ Systematic Literature Review (SLR) conducted to identify important challenges in teaching and learning English literature	▪ Organize challenges into student-related, teacher-related and external factors ▪ Demonstrate the problem is multidimensional rather than attributable solely to students
3.	Jaufillaili (2023)	investigate the criteria employed by English literature Indonesian teachers in selecting literary works ▪ identify challenges faced by teachers when instructing Indonesian EFL students in English literature ▪ examine the strategies teachers use to overcome these challenges	▪ Primary considerations for selecting literary texts include factors such as length, language complexity, canonical status, and the author's cultural background. ▪ Challenges encountered encompass reading habits, English proficiency, and the availability of resources
4.	Belarbi (2025)	▪ Shed some light on the frequent problems that	▪ Problems in understanding and interpreting literary texts such as understanding the relationship

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No	Author/ Year	Purpose	Findings
		university students meet while reading the literary texts	between the writer/poet, period of the text, and the theme/s of the literary work ▪ Finding out and interpreting figures of speech ▪ Difficulties in suggesting a rich variety of classroom implications in relation with using literature in teaching English ▪ Pronunciation and intonation difficulties
5.	Claro et al. (2025)	Provide a contextualized understanding of the vocabulary difficulties faced by EFL students of English in reading literary texts	▪ Reveal several vocabulary difficulties including encountering unfamiliar words, misusing words and spelling problems
6.	Halim et al. (2020)	▪ Address some basic reasons for Saudi students' loss of interest in studying literature ▪ Discuss some factors that affect Saudi students' lack of motivation to study literature	▪ Reveal that Saudi most students find it difficult to study and understand literature ▪ Most Saudi students found English literature not to be useful in the latter part of their lives
7.	Tayib & Hassan (2020)	▪ Investigate the factors underlying the challenges Kurdish literature teachers face while teaching literature components at the university level ▪ It also explores how literature teachers overcome challenges	▪ Most serious set of reasons behind the challenges resulted by students ▪ student-related difficulties attributed to teachers' lack of both theoretical and practical knowledge about teaching literature effectively, and to the students' concentration on memorization rather than understanding and creativity in

No	Author/ Year	Purpose	Findings
			the process of learning
8.	Alshammari et al. (2020)	Investigate Saudi teachers' perspectives on reasons discouraging Saudi EFL learners to study English literature	- Revealed that there were six main different types of challenges, namely: a. literature inherited difficulty b. learners' cultural misperceptions c. learners' negative attitudes d. learners' intrinsic demotivating factors e. unfamiliarity/ learners' poor prior knowledge f. instructional difficulty

❖ The Libyan Context:

For contexts such as Libyan universities, teaching and studying literature is especially important as local research indicates that students' needs and perceptions of literature courses have not yet been investigated as extensively as they have in other EFL contexts. Besides, research in this area is noticeably limited, causing such a significant research gap. Actually, there is emerging work from Libya, but considerably more evidence is required concerning Libyan university EFL students' actual experiences with studying English literature. Basically, much of the existing research discusses challenges associated with learning English literature from a teaching perspective rather than focusing specifically on students lived experiences and perceptions of difficulties they encounter while studying literature (Abdalla, 2024).

From an empirical point of view, the existing body of research has identified linguistic, cultural, interpretive, motivational, pedagogical and institutional factors as posing obstacles that influence students' learning of English literature. What follows is a tabularized summary of these studies.

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No	Author/ Year	Purpose	Findings
	Abdalla (2024)	- An attempt to investigate students' needs from the Literary Reading Program at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Sciences (Suluq Campus) - Examine students' needs from English literature courses in the Libyan context to investigate their merits or shortcomings	- The Literary Reading Program has been devised without taking into consideration students' needs and perceptions. - A majority of 40% of students expressed their need to apply the text approach in their literary reading program, showing a preference of Text Approach over Literary Reading Program
	Idris & Al Shilabi (2021)	- Explore the relevance of teaching literature in an EFL classroom - Explore challenges and prospects of teaching English literature	Identify many reasons to explain the devastating results including the insufficient exposure to the language experience presented through literature
	Latif & Saeid (2025)	Investigate the impact of teaching English Literature as a one-semester elective course on the linguistic, cognitive, and affective development of fourth-year ESL students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Libya	- Statistically significant improvements in the experimental (literature) group across reading comprehension, writing quality, critical thinking, vocabulary retention, and learner motivation - Increasingly enhanced confidence, stronger engagement with English, and greater cultural and interpretive awareness - Identify challenges related to cognitive load, text difficulty, and limited instructional time

Nº	Author/ Year	Purpose	Findings
			Inclusion of literature as a pedagogically valuable intervention that can support advanced language development in university ESL/EFL contexts
Nº	Author/ Year	Purpose	Findings

The findings of the previous studies reviewed above suggest that literature, when taught through appropriate scaffolding and learner-sensitive pedagogy, should not be regarded as an optional enrichment component, but as a productive instructional medium for advanced language development. At the same time, they all highlight practical constraints, including proficiency variation, cognitive load, and limited instructional time, which must be addressed if English literature courses are to succeed. Overall, these studies support the integration of literature into higher education ESL curricula as a pedagogically valuable and intellectually enriching intervention (Idris & Al Shilabi, 2021; Abdalla, 2024; Latif & Saeid, 2025).

1. Methodology:

1.1. Research design

The current study used a descriptive survey design, applying a mixed-methods strategy to gather and examine both qualitative and quantitative information. As stated by Kothari (2004:3) (cited in Taye, 2025), “a descriptive approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative techniques enables researchers to collect both in-depth insights and data that can be statistically analyzed”.

1.2. Participants of the Study:

The study was carried out in Division of Linguistics, Dept. of English, Faculty of Languages & Translation, University of Zawia. In terms of demographics, the sample consisted of 40 female participants: 25 3rd Year students and 15 4th Year students. They were EFL undergraduate

students majoring in English and enrolled for the academic year 2024-2025. They were between 21-24 years old. The participants were chosen for:

- a. their proximity to the researcher, which allowed for easier access and a deeper understanding of the educational context;
- b. the researcher's prior teaching experience with these students for more effective data collection;
- c. being familiar with both Linguistics and Literature courses as their curriculum consisted of both courses in linguistics and English Literature
- d. having received 2-3 years of formal instruction in English literature, *Introduction to Literature Course* for 2nd Year, *Literary Selections I Course* for 3rd Year, and *Literary Selections II Course* for 4th Year.
- e. Due to the topic of the study, it was decided that it would be more relevant to include only undergraduates as they all are still familiar with the literature-oriented courses given at the department of English and they have at least some practical learning experience (Abukhattala, 2014).

The population who participated in this research was assured that the anonymity of their names and confidentiality of their responses involved in the study would be maintained (Halim et al., 2020).

Participants were selected using a simple random sampling method, ensuring every student had an equal chance of being chosen and minimizing selection bias. This approach is widely used in educational research to create a sample that accurately represents the broader student population. Also, by employing simple random sampling, the study increased the reliability and validity of its findings, reflecting best practices in educational research methodology (Taye, 2025).

While sample distribution reflects a noticeable gender imbalance, it mirrors the actual enrollment pattern in the study department, where female students significantly outnumber male students. Additionally, the age distribution showed that the total sample, fell within the age range of 21–24 years. However, these demographic details may not

affect the study's overall validity. Therefore, the findings were analyzed *without* sensitivity to possible gender-based or age-based variations. Despite the imbalance, the sample was sufficiently diverse and representative of the target population, ensuring a meaningful and relatively unbiased investigation into how literary texts affect student engagement and language learning outcomes (ibid).

1.3. Data gathering instruments:

The main gathering instrument for this study is a structured questionnaire designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data about the challenges faced by EFL students while studying English literature. It is assumed that questionnaires are the most frequently used tools in applied linguistics providing a large amount of statistically processable information in the shortest time (Ceren & Tarakçıoğlu, 2017). The questionnaire is developed by the researcher based on the research questions and objectives of the study. Basically, the questionnaire is divided into two main sections on the basis of the two major categories of factors resulting challenges. Those factors are **Internal Factors** related to students, and **External Factors** related to teachers and educational environment. In addition, some demographic information about the participants is included.

The questionnaire is made up of 21 closed-ended items and only one open-ended item. It uses a five-point Likert Scale ranging from two positives (*Strongly Agree* SA and *Agree* A), a (*Neutral* N), and two negatives (*Disagree* D and *Strongly Disagree* SD).

1.4. Procedure:

The data collection process was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data through a structured approach. With regard to using qualitative data, the researcher justifies this on the grounds that the objective of the qualitative researcher is to understand, rather than to generalize, the ways in which participants make meaning of their experiences. Understanding comes with the interpretation and analysis of those experiences. This inquiry aimed to collect Libyan EFL

undergraduates' views and opinions on difficulties facing them with studying English literature (Abukhattala, 2014).

Before completing the questionnaires, participants were thoroughly briefed on the purpose of the research and provided with clear instructions on how to fill out the forms accurately. Participants were allocated one hour to complete the questionnaire, ensuring they had enough time to provide thoughtful responses.

1.5. Data Analysis:

The study attempted to find out the main possible reasons and challenges that might prevent EFL undergraduate learners in Libya from studying English literature. More specifically, the study tried to dig deep into the demotivating factors, whether they were intrinsic in the learners themselves or extrinsic in the teaching process and learning environment, that discouraged studying literary texts as perceived by the Libyan EFL students.

Therefore, after collecting the questionnaires, the data was analyzed by first counting manually students' responses and then calculating the, frequencies, percentages, weighed mean values and overall interpretations. Here is a detailed analysis of the reported results.

➤ Five-point Likert Scale

SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)
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➤ Interpretation of Mean Values

Mean Range	Interpretation
5.00 – 4.21	Strongly Agree
4.20 – 3.41	Agree
3.40 – 2.61	Neutral
2.60 – 1.80	Disagree
1.80 – 1.00	Strongly Disagree

1. Table (1): Analysis of Internal Factors (Student-related): Linguistic Challenges

Nº	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
1.	I find literary texts difficult because they contain unfamiliar vocabulary.	45%	35%	12%	6%	2%	4.15
2.	I have difficulty understanding figurative language and symbolism used in literary texts.	40%	38%	13%	7%	2%	4.07
3.	The grammatical structures used in literary texts are often difficult for me.	35%	40%	15%	8%	2%	3.98
4.	My limited proficiency in English affects my understanding of literary texts.	42%	36%	12%	7%	3%	4.07
5.	Overall	—	—	—	—	—	4.05

Table (1) above shows that most respondents *Strongly Agree & Agree* (80%) with Item (1), and (78%) of them report similar responses regarding Item 2 and Item 4 with mean values of 4.15, 4.07 and 4.07 respectively. Participants believe that unfamiliar vocabulary, figurative literary language, and students' limited proficiency in English are the main factors underlying the linguistic difficulties they face when studying English literature. Likewise, Item (3) has a majority of 75% who *Strongly Agree/Agree* that grammatical structures used in literary texts pose obstacles to them. However, only 20% of participants either are *Neutral* to, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree* with Item (1). Also, 22% of respondents either are *Neutral* to, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree* with Item (2) and Item (4). 25% of participants either are *Neutral* to, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree* with Item (3). The overall mean value is 4.05, interpreted as *Agree*.

2. Table (2): Analysis of Internal Factors (Student-related): Cognitive and Literary Challenges

Nº	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
1.	I have difficulties analyzing poems, novels, plays and short stories.	38%	37%	14%	8%	3%	3.99
2.	I find it difficult to distinguish between the literal and non-literal meanings of literary texts.	42%	36%	12%	7%	3%	4.07
3.	I struggle to express my interpretation of a literary work.	38%	40%	13%	6%	3%	4.04
4.	I have difficulty connecting literary texts to their historical or cultural contexts.	35%	39%	14%	9%	3%	3.94
5.	Overall	—	—	—	—	—	4.03

The percentages in **Table (2)** above indicate that Item (2) and Item (3) are the most reported challenges, with 78% of students *Strongly Agree & Agree* that they are difficult. This is followed by Item (1) and Item (4), 75% and 74% respectively. These findings suggest that EFL students experience challenges not only with linguistic problems and language proficiency, but also with the cognitive processes required to interpret literary texts. In contrast, *Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree* responses produce less percentages, with 25% for Item (1), 22% for Item (2) and Item (3), and 26% for Item (4). The overall intensity of cognitive and literary challenges has the mean score of 4.03, interpreted as *Agree*.

3. Table (3): Analysis of Internal Factors (Student-related): Cultural Challenges

Nº	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
1.	Cultural references in English literary texts are difficult for me to understand.	40%	37%	13%	7%	3%	4.04
2.	I sometimes lack the	34%	41%	15%	7%	3%	3.96

Nº	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
	background knowledge needed to understand literary works.						
3.	Cultural prejudice against foreign literature affect my understanding of literary texts.	45%	35%	11%	6%	3%	4.16
4.	Historical contexts presented in literary works are difficult for me to understand.	32%	42%	15%	8%	3%	3.92
5.	Overall	—	—	—	—	—	4.06

According to Table (3), Item (3) is the most difficulty-inducing factor affecting students' learning English literature. A detailed analysis of responses indicates that 45% **Strongly Agree**, 35% **Agree**, 11% are **Neutral**, 6% **Disagree**, and only 3% **Strongly Disagree** that cultural prejudice against foreign literature poses an obstacle hindering EFL students. The mean score for this item is 4.16, indicating a relatively high level of agreement. Furthermore, the combined percentage of **Strongly Agree & Agree** responses is 80%, compared with only 20% who **Neutral**, **Disagree** or **Strongly Disagree** with the Item (3). Item (1) is ranked as the second most challenging factor, with a combined percentage of 77% **Strongly Agree & Agree** responses and a mean value of 4.04, indicating an **Agree** interpretation. This is followed by Item (2) which is agreed/strongly agreed on by 75% of respondents (mean value = 3.96). Item (4) is ranked by 74% who agree/strongly agree that it the least problematic factor (mean value = 3.92). The overall mean score of cultural difficulties is 4.06 indicating an **Agree** interpretation.

4. Table (4): Analysis of Internal Factors (Student-related): Motivation, Attitude & Personality Challenges

Nº	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
1.	I find it difficult to remain motivated and interested when reading English literary texts.	39%	36%	14%	8%	3%	4.00

Nº	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
2.	Studying English literature improves my English language skills.	3%	8%	14%	40%	36%	3.99
3.	I feel anxious when I am asked to analyze literary texts.	37%	38%	14%	8%	3%	3.98
4.	I believe studying English literature is boring and irrelevant to everyday life.	45%	35%	12%	6%	2%	4.15
5.	Overall	—	—	—	—	—	4.01

Based on the results presented by Table (4), a combined majority of 80% **Strongly Agree & Agree** with Item (1) with a mean value of 4.15, indicating an **Agree** interpretation. 76% of participants **Strongly Disagree & Disagree** with Item (2) about the usefulness of studying English literature for the improvement of their language skills with a mean score of 3.99, interpreted as an **Agree** response. Rather surprisingly, only 3% **Strongly Agree** and 8% **Agree** with Item (2). Still within the range of **Agree** interpretation, both Item (1) and Item (3) produce a combined percentage of 75% each of **Strongly Disagree & Disagree** responses with mean scores of 4.00 and 3.98 successively. The overall mean value of the motivational and attitudinal factors is 4.01, interpreted as an **Agree**.

Table (5): Analysis of External Factors (Teacher- & Environment-related)

Nº	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
1.	I think there is lack of teacher training in literature teaching.	35%	40%	14%	8%	2%	3.99
2.	I think our teachers are incompetent in English language and literature.	35%	38%	15%	9%	3%	3.93
1.	Wrong choice of teaching methods hinders my understanding of literary texts.	44%	36%	11%	6%	3%	4.12
2.	Limited time allocated to	43%	35%	12%	7%	3%	4.08

No	Item	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean
	literature classes negatively affects students' engagement with studying literature.						
3.	Poorly-equipped libraries negatively influence on students' language proficiency.	37%	41%	12%	7%	3%	4.02
4.	Overall	—	—	—	—	—	4.01

As shown by Table (5), the highest mean value was recorded for Item (3), = 4.12, indicating an *Agree* interpretation. This item is the most frequently reported teacher-related factor, with 80% of students *Strongly Agree & Agree* that inadequate teaching methods make it difficult to understand literary texts effectively. Similarly, 78% of participants *Strongly Agree & Agree* that Item (4) and Item (5) are considered to be serious obstacles. These two items have the mean scores of 4.08 and 4.02 respectively. This is followed by Item (1) with a combined percentage of 75% of *Strongly Agree & Agree* responses and a mean value of 3.99, suggesting that students see it as problematic. In addition, 73% of respondents *Strongly Agree & Agree* that Item (2) is a challenge negatively affecting their understanding of literary texts. this item has the mean score of 3.93. These challenges have received the overall mean value of 4.01 indicating an *Agree* interpretation that they represent relevant obstacles for a considerable proportion of students.

A. Content Analysis of participants' Responses to the Open-Ended Item:

Item 22 is designed as an open-ended question “*In your opinion, what could teachers do to make English literature courses more accessible and interesting to EFL students?*” asking participants to make a written statement of their beliefs and thoughts on the role of teachers in English literature teaching. The purpose was to gather data to see whether it matched or not the findings supplied by the

quantitative dataset. The content analysis technique was used to process what was provided by the open-ended question.

The following are some examples of participants' responses to the open-ended question to present and analyze the qualitative data.

Participant 1:

"Teachers should choose literary texts that are appropriate for our English level. Some texts contain very difficult vocabulary, which makes it hard for us to understand and enjoy them."

Participant 2:

"Teachers could explain difficult words, expressions, and cultural references before asking us to read the text. This would make the reading easier."

Participant 3:

"Teachers could use films, videos, pictures, and presentations related to the literary works. Visual materials would help us understand the story and its characters better."

Participant 4:

"Teachers should avoid focusing only on difficult literary terms. We need more explanation and examples before being asked to analyze things such as symbolism, irony, and metaphor."

Participant 5:

"More interactive activities, such as role plays, debates, quizzes, and group projects, would make literature classes less boring."

Participant 6:

"Teachers should give us enough time to read and understand the texts. Sometimes there is too much material to study in a short period."

Participant 7:

"I think teachers should combine language learning with literature. Explaining vocabulary, grammar, and useful expressions from the text would help us improve our English while studying literature."

Participant 8:

"Teachers should explain the cultural differences clearly because some situations and behaviors in English literature are unfamiliar to us."

Participant 9:

“Teachers should make literature relevant to modern issues and students’ lives. If we see how the themes of old texts relate to problems in today’s world, we will be more interested.”

Participant 10:

“Teachers could use simpler language when explaining difficult literary concepts. Sometimes the explanation is more difficult than the text itself.”

▪ Overall Interpretation:

The participants’ responses to the open-ended question reveal several recurring themes. The most prominent challenges can be grouped into themes such as:

1. Simplification and selection of appropriate texts
2. Vocabulary and language support
3. Use of technology and multimedia
4. Cultural and historical background
5. Interactive teaching methods
6. Student participation and discussion
7. Connection between literature and students' lives
8. Student choice and autonomy
9. Creative activities
10. Teacher support and classroom environment

The responses also demonstrate that students’ difficulties should not necessarily be interpreted as a lack of interest in literature. Rather, they may reflect the additional cognitive and linguistic demands involved in reading literature in a foreign language. Providing appropriate scaffolding before and during reading could therefore help students move beyond word-level comprehension towards deeper analysis and appreciation of literary texts.

3.6. Discussion of Results:

The findings of this study suggest that studying English literature presents Libyan EFL students with both internal (linguistic, cultural, motivational) and external (pedagogical, institutional) challenges. The

researcher believes that these difficulties are interconnected. For example, limited language proficiency may make vocabulary and sentence structures difficult to understand, while insufficient cultural knowledge and familiarity with literary conventions may further complicate interpretation. Besides, the results suggest that challenges do not arise solely from students; low level of language proficiency; rather, they are also related to psychological factors, teaching practices, the nature of literary texts, and the wider educational context (Alshammari et al., 2020; Işıklı & Tarakçıoğlu, 2017; Nawi et al., 2023; Tayib & Hassan, 2020; Halim & Halim, 2020).

As far as the Libyan context is concerned, one of the most significant obstacles identified in the present study is students' limited linguistic proficiency. Students may find literary texts particularly difficult because they contain unfamiliar vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, figurative language, symbolism, and culturally specific expressions. This finding is supported by Milad (2023), who investigated the teaching of English literature at Azzaytuna University and found that students' poor language competence was one of the major difficulties affecting the teaching of literature. The study also reported a shortage of teaching resources, suggesting that linguistic difficulties can be intensified when students do not receive sufficient instructional support.

The present findings can also be understood in relation to broader research on English learning among Libyan university students. Aljoundi and Sheik (2025) found that differences between Arabic and English created linguistic difficulties, while differences between students' cultural backgrounds and the meanings embedded in English contributed to cultural challenges. These findings are particularly relevant to English literature courses because literary interpretation requires learners not only to understand the language of a text but also to interpret cultural references, social practices, historical contexts, and implicit meanings.

The results also suggest that students' attitudes toward literature and the perceived relevance of literary courses may influence their engagement. This observation is supported by Abukhattala's (2014)

study of English-major graduates in Misurata, which found that participants were generally negative about their university literature courses and believed that the courses had contributed little to their language development and future teaching careers. This finding may help explain why some Libyan EFL students perceive literature as difficult, abstract, or disconnected from their practical language-learning needs.

A further finding that needs interpretation is the lack of appropriate teaching materials and instructional resources. Milad (2023) reported a lack of teaching aids as one of the challenges associated with teaching English literature at Azzaytuna University. Similarly, Idris and Al Shilabi (2021) argue that literature has been only partially incorporated into the Libyan EFL curriculum and identify several obstacles to effective literature teaching, including insufficient teacher training, limited instructional time, resources, and motivation. These factors may directly affect students' learning experiences because difficult literary texts require carefully designed activities, contextual information, supplementary materials, and opportunities for discussion.

Lastly, the challenges identified in this study should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that English literature is inappropriate for Libyan EFL students. Recent research conducted by Latif & Saeid (2025) at Omar Al-Mukhtar University suggests that teaching English literature can contribute to students' linguistic, cognitive, affective, and cultural development, although difficulties related to text complexity, cognitive load, and limited instructional time may arise. This suggests that the problem may lie less in the inclusion of literature itself and more in how literature is selected, presented, and taught. Appropriate scaffolding, pre-reading activities, vocabulary support, cultural explanation, group discussion, and connections between literary texts and students' experiences could make literature more accessible.

4. Conclusion:

Overall, the findings of the present study demonstrate that the challenges faced by Libyan EFL students in studying English literature are multidimensional. They involve linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, reading and interpretation skills, attitudes toward literature, teaching resources, and the wider educational context. This interpretation is consistent with recent research that conceptualizes Libyan EFL difficulties as the interaction of linguistic, cultural, institutional, and structural factors rather than as a single deficiency. Therefore, improving students' experience of English literature requires a comprehensive approach that combines language development with literary and cultural instruction. Rather than treating literature as an isolated academic subject, university programs could integrate literary texts with language practice, critical thinking, intercultural learning, and communicative activities. Such an approach may help Libyan EFL students overcome some of the difficulties identified in the present study while also enabling them to recognize the linguistic and educational value of literature.

5. Recommendations:

Based on the findings of the current study, several recommendations can be made to help address the obstacles posed by studying literature for Libyan EFL students.

1. First, English literature courses should be designed in ways that take into consideration students' language proficiency. As limited vocabulary, difficulties with complex grammatical structures, and problems with understanding literary language can make literary texts problematic, teachers should provide adequate linguistic support before and during the reading of literary works. This linguistic support can take different forms, for example, pre-teaching key vocabulary, explaining difficult expressions, and providing sufficient background information about prescribed literary texts.
2. Second, teachers should consider selecting literary texts that are appropriate for students' linguistic, cognitive and cultural

backgrounds. That is, introducing shorter and easier texts before moving to more complex works may help students gradually develop the skills required for literary analysis.

3. Third, rather than relying mainly on lectures and teacher explanations, literature classes could incorporate student-centered activities such as group discussions, presentations, reading exercises, and debates. such activities can enhance students' critical thinking and interpretation skills.
4. Fourth, teacher training and professional development should receive greater attention. teachers could benefit from training in approaches of integrating literature teaching with language learning.
5. Fifth, inclusion of effective use of technology and multimedia resources could also make studying English literature more accessible and engaging for EFL students.
6. Sixth, universities should provide students with greater access to learning resources. Digital libraries, online literary databases, audio versions of literary texts, films and adaptations, and other supplementary materials can help students understand literary texts and increase their exposure to English literature outside the classroom.
7. Finally, further research is recommended to investigate the current situation of teaching and learning of English literature in different Libyan universities. Future studies could examine teachers' perspectives, compare students at different proficiency levels, and explore the effectiveness of teaching approaches or digital resources in overcoming the difficulties identified in the present study. such research could contribute to the development of more effective English literature courses within the Libyan EFL context.

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