Literary Works and English Literature Students - A Study

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Abstract
Students engage most deeply with literary works when texts connect to their own experience and when teaching treats them as active interpreters. This paper examines how undergraduate and postgraduate students of English literature engage with literary works, using a thematic framework drawn from reader-response theory, literature pedagogy and postcolonial critique. Four themes are developed: reading as a transactional, personal act, language barriers and linguistic confidence among students for whom English is a second or additional language, the canon, curriculum and cultural relevance, and the broader value of literary study for empathy and critical thinking. The paper proposes a mixed-methods design (a questionnaire plus semi-structured interviews) analyzed with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. This study examines how undergraduate and postgraduate English literature students engage with literary works. Drawing on reader-response theory, literature pedagogy and postcolonial critique, it develops four themes: reading as a personal transaction, language barriers and confidence among second-language learners, the canon and its cultural relevance, and the value of literary study for empathy and critical thinking.

Keywords: English literature, literature students, reader-response, canon, second-language learners, thematic analysis

1. INTRODUCTION
English literature as an academic discipline has long been shaped by questions of who reads, what is read, and how reading is taught. Students enter literature classrooms with varied linguistic backgrounds, reading habits and expectations. In multilingual contexts such as India, English literature is also taught through a language that is often a student's second or third, and through a canon that largely originates outside the student's own culture (Viswanathan, 1989).
This study asks how students encounter literary works as learners and readers, and what helps or hinders meaningful engagement.

1.1 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review
Reader-response theory. Rosenblatt (1938/1995; 1978) argued that meaning arises from a *transaction* between reader and text rather than residing in the text alone. Fish (1980) extended this with the idea of interpretive communities: readers interpret according to shared conventions learned in institutions such as classrooms. For students, interpretation is therefore both personal and socially trained.

Literature in language education. Widdowson (1975), Collie and Slater (1987), Carter and Long (1991), Lazar (1993) and Hall (2005) discuss how literature can be taught to learners of English, stressing language-based approaches, personal growth and cultural understanding. Langer (1995) describes reading as "envisioning," where students build and revise imagined worlds while reading.

The canon and postcolonial critique. Eagleton (1983) treats "literature" as a historically constructed category tied to institutional values. Viswanathan (1989) shows how English literary study was used as an instrument of cultural authority in colonial India, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that language and literature shape colonised people's self-perception. Scholes (1998) calls for teaching reading as critical textual production rather than reverence for a fixed canon.

Humanistic value. Nussbaum (1997; 2010) argues that literature cultivates the narrative imagination and empathy needed for democratic citizenship. Kidd and Castano (2013) reported experimental evidence that reading literary fiction improved performance on theory-of-mind tasks, though later

replication efforts have produced mixed results, so this claim should be treated cautiously.

Research Gap. Much of this work is theoretical or concerns classrooms in Western contexts. Less empirical work examines student voices in multilingual undergraduate settings, which this study addresses.

2. Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the main themes in how English literature students relate to literary texts.
2. To examine the role of language proficiency and cultural background in comprehension and interpretation.
3. To explore students' views on the canon and curriculum.
4. To assess perceived benefits of literary study beyond examination performance.

3. Hypothesis

The hypothesis of the study are:

1. **H1 :** Students' engagement with literary texts is shaped mainly by personal response, so students who link texts to their own experience will report higher engagement than students who read mainly for examinations.
2. **H2 :** Language proficiency and cultural background are positively related to comprehension and interpretation, so students with lower English proficiency will report more difficulty understanding and interpreting texts.
3. **H4 :** Students will report that literary study improves empathy, critical thinking and perspective-taking, in addition to helping them pass examinations.

4. Conceptual Themes

Four themes organise the study, each tied to a body of scholarship.

Theme	Core idea	Key sources
T1:Personal transaction	Meaning is made through the reader's experience	Rosenblatt (1978); Langer (1995)
T2: Language and access	Proficiency shapes comprehension and confidence	Carter & Long (1991); Lazar (1993)
T4: Value and empathy	Literature builds imagination and critical thought	Nussbaum (1997, 2010); Kidd & Castano (2013)

5. Methodology

The study uses a convergent survey methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018): a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, analysed together.

5.1 Design

Quantitative data is collected in the same period, analysed separately, then merged to compare and complement findings.

5.2 Participants and Sampling

- **Population:** BA and MA English literature students at colleges or universities in one region (for example, Tamil Nadu).
- **Questionnaire sample:** 150 students, Simple random sampling by year and gender.
- **Interview sample:** 12 to 15 students, purposive sampling for variation in language background and performance.

5.3 Instruments

1. **Questionnaire:** 5-point Likert items plus open-ended items, covering reading habits, language confidence, attitudes to the canon and perceived benefits. Pilot with 15 students and check reliability (Cronbach's alpha of at least 0.70).
2. **Interview guide:** 8 to 10 open questions (for example, "Describe a text that stayed with you. Why?").

5.4 Data Analysis

- **Quantitative:** descriptive statistics (mean, SD, percentages); optional chi-square or t-tests for group differences (year, medium of schooling).
- **Qualitative:** six-phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006): familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up.

5.5 Ethics
Informed consent, anonymity, voluntary participation, secure data storage, and institutional ethics approval.

5.6 Limitations
The limitations of the study are:
Self-report bias, a regionally bounded sample, and limited generalisability.

6. Findings and Discussion (Literature-Based Synthesis)
These findings synthesise themes reported in the cited literature; they are not new empirical data.

Reading as personal transaction. Research in reader-response traditions finds that students engage most strongly when they can link texts to their own experience, and that purely exam-oriented teaching tends to push them toward "efferent" reading (reading for information to be reproduced) rather than "aesthetic" reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). *Implication:* teaching should invite personal response before analysis.

Language and access. Studies of literature teaching to learners of English commonly report that vocabulary, archaic or figurative language and unfamiliar idiom reduce confidence, and that language-based activities (paraphrase, close reading, discussion) help (Lazar, 1993; Hall, 2005). Students may understand a plot but hesitate to offer interpretations in English. *Implication:* scaffolding, translation-supported discussion and low-stakes writing can build confidence.

Canon and relevance. Postcolonial scholarship suggests students in formerly colonised contexts may experience canonical British texts as culturally distant, while valuing them as cultural capital (Viswanathan, 1989; Ngũgĩ, 1986). Including Indian English writing, translated regional literature and world literature can narrow this distance without discarding the canon. *Implication:* pair canonical and local texts in comparative frames.

Broader value. Students often describe literary study as expanding empathy, perspective-taking and critical thinking, consistent with Nussbaum's (1997, 2010) arguments. Experimental evidence on empathy effects is suggestive but contested (Kidd & Castano, 2013), so claims should be modest. *Implication:* assessment should reward interpretation and argument, not only recall.

Overall discussion. The four themes interact: language confidence affects willingness to respond personally, and the relevance of the canon affects motivation. A curriculum attentive to all four is more likely to produce engaged, independent readers.

7. Recommendations
Literature students are active interpreters whose engagement depends on personal connection, linguistic support, curricular relevance and a sense of purpose. Five recommendations follow:

1. Begin texts with personal-response tasks.
2. Provide language scaffolding alongside literary analysis.
3. Diversify syllabi with local and translated literature.
4. Use assessment that values interpretation over memorisation.
5. Run empirical follow-up studies in your own institutional context.

8. Conclusion
Literary works play a significant role in developing the language skills, critical thinking, creativity, imagination and cultural awareness of students. The study of English literature provides students with opportunities to explore different literary genres, authors, themes, characters and social values. Through the reading and analysis of literary works, students can develop their communication skills, emotional understanding and appreciation of different cultures and human experiences. Understanding students' interest in literary works is essential for identifying their reading preferences, learning experiences and challenges in studying English literature. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the relationship between literary works and English literature students, highlighting the importance of literature in their academic, intellectual and personal development. The findings may help teachers adopt effective teaching strategies and encourage students to develop a deeper interest in reading and appreciating literary works.

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