

The Impact of Teaching English Literature as an Elective Course to Fourth-Year ESL Students in a University Context.

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Abstract

This study investigates 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. Although these students have typically received years of formal English instruction, many still struggle to move beyond limited functional competence toward more advanced academic language use, critical reading, and analytical writing. To address this issue, the study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design with a quasi-experimental approach. Seventy fourth-year students participated in the study and were divided into an experimental group ($n = 35$), which studied English Literature, and a control group ($n = 35$), which followed a conventional advanced grammar and composition course over a 15-week semester. Data were collected through reading comprehension tests, writing assessment, the Watson–Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, Likert-scale attitudinal measures, and students’ reflective journals. The findings revealed statistically significant improvements in the experimental group across reading comprehension, writing quality, critical thinking, vocabulary retention, and learner motivation. The currently available descriptive results show higher post-test performance for the literature group in reading comprehension (78% vs. 69%), writing quality (4.4 vs. 3.8), and critical thinking (26 vs. 19), alongside positive shifts in learner motivation. Qualitative data further indicated enhanced confidence, stronger engagement with English, and greater cultural and interpretive awareness. At the same time, challenges related to cognitive load, text difficulty, and limited instructional time were observed. The study concludes that literature should be viewed not as an optional enrichment component, but as a pedagogically valuable intervention that can support advanced language development in university ESL contexts.

Keywords: English Literature, ESL, elective course, critical thinking, cultural competence, higher education, motivation.

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة أثر تدريس الأدب الإنجليزي بوصفه مقرراً اختيارياً لمدة فصل دراسي واحد في تنمية الجوانب اللغوية والمعرفية والوجدانية لدى طلاب السنة الرابعة الدارسين للإنجليزية لغة ثانية في جامعة عمر المختار بليبيا. وتنطلق الدراسة من ملاحظة أن كثيراً من هؤلاء الطلاب، رغم سنوات الدراسة النظامية للغة الإنجليزية، لا يزالون يواجهون صعوبة في الانتقال من الكفاية الوظيفية المحدودة إلى الاستخدام الأكاديمي المتقدم للغة، ولا سيما في القراءة النقدية والكتابة التحليلية. واعتمدت الدراسة تصميماً مختلطاً متوازياً ذا طابع شبه تجريبي، وشارك فيها سبعون طالباً قُسموا إلى مجموعة تجريبية درست الأدب الإنجليزي ومجموعة ضابطة درست مقرراً تقليدياً في القواعد والكتابة لمدة خمسة عشر أسبوعاً. وجمعت البيانات من خلال اختبار فهم المقروء، وتقييم الكتابة، واختبار واتسون-غلاسر للتفكير النقدي، ومقاييس اتجاهات ودافعية، إلى جانب اليوميات التأملية للطلاب. وأظهرت النتائج تحسناً ذا دلالة إحصائية في أداء المجموعة التجريبية في فهم المقروء وجودة الكتابة والتفكير النقدي والاحتفاظ بالمفردات والدافعية نحو تعلم الإنجليزية، كما كشفت البيانات النوعية عن نمو الثقة بالنفس، وارتفاع مستوى الانخراط في التعلم، واتساع الوعي الثقافي والتأويلي. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الأدب ينبغي ألا

يُنظر إليه بوصفه عنصراً تكميلياً أو ترفيهاً، بل بوصفه مدخلاً تربوياً فاعلاً يمكن أن يسهم في تطوير اللغة الأكاديمية في السياقات الجامعية التي تُدرّس فيها الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية. الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الإنجليزي، الإنجليزية لغة ثانية، المقرر الاختياري، التفكير النقدي، الكفاءة الثقافية، التعليم العالي، الدافعية.

Introduction

English language instruction in higher education plays a central role in preparing students for academic participation, professional advancement, and broader intellectual engagement, particularly in multilingual and emerging educational contexts. In many university settings where English is taught as a second language, however, students complete years of formal instruction without attaining the linguistic and analytical competence required for effective academic communication, a challenge that is often intensified by broader language-policy conditions and uneven instructional preparation (Santiago, 2001).

Although many learners acquire basic grammatical knowledge and a limited repertoire of functional expressions, they often remain unable to interpret complex texts, construct sustained arguments, or produce coherent academic writing. This discrepancy between years of language study and actual academic performance constitutes a persistent instructional problem in higher education, especially in contexts where English teaching has long depended on decontextualized grammar instruction, memorization, and examination-driven practices. In response, renewed attention has been given to literature-informed language teaching as a way of reconnecting form, meaning, and interpretation in classroom practice (Carrick, 2018).

The problem is particularly evident among fourth-year university students, who are expected to demonstrate advanced reading, interpretive, and writing abilities. Yet many reach this stage with what may be described as survival competence rather than genuine academic proficiency. Such limited competence may suffice for routine communication, but it rarely enables learners to engage critically with abstract ideas, respond analytically to texts, or write with conceptual clarity and rhetorical control.

Within this context, literature offers a potentially powerful but often underutilized pedagogical resource. Literary texts expose learners to rich vocabulary, stylistic variation, layered meanings, interpretive ambiguity, and culturally embedded perspectives that are often absent from conventional language materials. For this reason, literature-based instruction may support not only language development, but also critical thinking, motivation, empathy, and deeper intellectual engagement (Collie & Slater, 1987; Carter & Long, 1991; Krashen, 1982; Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Recent work has continued to highlight the relevance of literature-informed and reading-centered pedagogies in strengthening comprehension, engagement, and higher-order thinking in EFL and ESL settings (Ahmad, 2025; Kaowiwattanakul, 2025; Mercado, 2025).

Despite longstanding theoretical support for the role of literature in language teaching, an important empirical gap remains. Much of the existing discussion has either been predominantly theoretical, focused on general EFL contexts, or insufficiently attentive to the combined linguistic, cognitive, and affective outcomes of literature instruction in higher education. Recent reviews also indicate sustained interest in the connections among reading development, motivation, and critical thinking in university EFL contexts (Liu & Bin Sihes, 2025; Yang & Chano, 2025). More specifically, there is limited mixed-methods, quasi-experimental evidence from the Libyan university context examining whether an English Literature elective can measurably improve reading comprehension, writing quality, critical thinking, and learner motivation among advanced ESL students.

Accordingly, the present study investigates the effect of teaching English Literature as an elective course on fourth-year ESL students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Libya. Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design within a quasi-experimental framework, the study seeks to determine whether literature can function not merely as an enrichment subject, but as

a substantive pedagogical intervention capable of improving advanced language learning outcomes in university ESL education.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to: (1) examine the effect of teaching English Literature as an elective course on fourth-year ESL students' reading comprehension, writing quality, and critical thinking; (2) investigate the extent to which literature-based instruction influences learner motivation, confidence, and cultural awareness; and (3) explore whether a literature elective can function as a meaningful pedagogical intervention in a university ESL context rather than as a peripheral enrichment subject.

Statement of the Problem

The study addresses a persistent problem in higher education ESL instruction: many advanced students complete years of formal English study yet remain unable to engage critically with texts, construct sustained arguments, or use English with sufficient academic depth and confidence. In the Libyan university context examined here, this gap raises an important pedagogical question: can an English Literature elective provide measurable linguistic, cognitive, and affective gains beyond those achieved through conventional grammar- and composition-based instruction?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant at three interrelated levels. Pedagogically, it examines whether literature can function as an effective medium for improving reading comprehension, writing quality, critical thinking, and learner motivation in a university ESL context. Contextually, it contributes evidence from a Libyan higher education setting, which remains underrepresented in the literature on literature-based language teaching. Practically, the study offers implications for curriculum designers, programme coordinators, and policy makers seeking alternatives to narrowly grammar-based instruction in advanced English courses.

Review of Related Literature

Research on literature in language teaching has consistently emphasized the value of literary texts as sources of authentic language, interpretive depth, and learner engagement. Foundational scholarship has argued that literature can enrich language instruction by combining linguistic input with personal response, cultural exploration, and communicative development (Collie & Slater, 1987; Carter & Long, 1991; Krashen, 1982; Hişmanoğlu, 2005). More recent work has continued to show that literature-informed and reading-oriented pedagogies can support comprehension, motivation, and higher-order thinking in EFL and ESL settings (Ahmad, 2025; Kaowiwattanakul, 2025; Mercado, 2025).

At the same time, the literature indicates that the role of literature in higher education language programmes still requires context-sensitive empirical examination. Recent reviews have highlighted growing interest in the relationship among reading development, learner engagement, and critical thinking in university EFL contexts (Liu & Bin Sihes, 2025; Yang & Chano, 2025). However, relatively limited mixed-methods, quasi-experimental work has examined these outcomes together in North African or Libyan university settings. The present study responds to this gap by investigating the linguistic, cognitive, and affective impact of an English Literature elective for fourth-year ESL students in a Libyan university context.

Methodology

Research design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design within a quasi-experimental framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design enabled the concurrent collection and analysis of quantitative data (achievement measures and attitudinal scales) and qualitative data (reflective journals and focus-group responses) in order to examine the academic and affective impact of the literature-based intervention in a complementary manner.

Participants and Context

The study was conducted at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Bayda, Libya, over multiple teaching cycles between 2022 and 2024. The participants were 70 fourth-year undergraduate ESL students enrolled in advanced English courses at the university.

Participants were divided into two parallel groups of equal size. The experimental group (n = 35) completed a 15-week elective course in English Literature, whereas the control group (n = 35) followed a conventional advanced grammar and composition course. Because the study was conducted in an authentic instructional setting, it adopted a quasi-experimental rather than a fully randomized experimental design.

Intervention Protocol

Note. The table summarizes the intervention structure described across the methods, strategy, and assessment sections of the manuscript.

Phase	Weeks	Instructional focus	Representative activities
Phase 1	1–3	High scaffolding and orientation	Pre-reading vocabulary support, guided discussion, sentence frames
Phase 2	4–6	Supported literary engagement	Jigsaw reading, reader's theater, collaborative annotation
Phase 3	7–9	Reduced scaffolding and stronger learner autonomy	Double-entry journals, small-group discussion, inferential reading tasks
Phase 4	10–15	Consolidation and assessment	Close reading essay, comparative reflection, portfolio revision, oral discussion

A baseline assessment was administered before the intervention to establish initial comparability between the two groups. The results indicated no statistically significant pre-intervention differences in overall reading comprehension or writing performance, which supported the use of the two groups for subsequent comparison.

Instruments for Data Collection

Four main instruments were used to provide a comprehensive evaluation:

1. Reading Comprehension Test: A post-instruction measure designed to assess both literal comprehension and higher-order inferential reading.
2. Writing Assessment: An analytic rubric focusing on lexical choice, syntactic control, coherence, and sentence fluency. Students' written responses were evaluated by blind raters using a 6-point scale in order to strengthen scoring consistency across scripts.
3. Watson–Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (Short Form): A standardized measure adapted for ESL use to assess inference, recognition of assumptions, evaluation of arguments, and related reasoning skills (Facione, 1990).
4. Affective Measures: A 5-point Likert-scale attitudinal survey, adapted in part from Davis's (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index, together with motivation questionnaires and students' double-entry reflective journals administered before and after the semester.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive comparison and independent-samples between-group testing in order to determine whether the literature-based intervention produced significant differences in academic performance and learner attitudes. Qualitative data from journals and group discussions were analyzed thematically through open and axial coding in order to identify recurring perceptions, affective responses, learning difficulties, and reported pedagogical benefits.

The quantitative results are presented first in descriptive and comparative form, followed by a discussion of their pedagogical implications and a thematic summary of the qualitative data.

Pedagogical Framework and Literature-Based Rationale

The reliance of literary texts in teaching a second language has emerged again, as dissatisfaction with purely communicative or grammatical translation approaches has mounted (Hall, 2015). Literature provides what linguists term authentic input, that is, language created for meaningful communication rather than simplified material written solely for pedagogical use (Duff & Maley, 2007; Maley, 1989). This authenticity poses a challenge but also brings substantial pedagogical value, particularly when literature is approached as a language resource and a site for interpretive engagement rather than as an exclusively literary artifact (Widdowson, 1975; Paran, 2008).

Vocabulary Retention and Input Theory

Vocabulary learning in literature is qualitatively different from memorizing lists of words. If students experience a nuanced word in a poem, they take not only its form, but also its emotional meaning and texture into account (Hanauer, 2001). In this research, students in the English Literature as elective group showed a 34% increased retention of target vocabulary at six months than the control of explicit vocabulary instruction. This result is consistent with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), which claims that language is acquired when individuals comprehend messages slightly past their proficiency level. In literary texts with multiple meanings, there are no more natural examples of this step-up input.

Syntactic Complexity and Reading Endurance

Literature also facilitates syntactic complexity. Think of this structural progression starting from a student's reflection journal entry before beginning the literature class in his reflective journal entry: The story "This is about a man who has been heartbroken losing his job." Over the course of eight weeks of reading and participating in conversation about short stories, the student put it this way: "What began just the other day in a week was a despair, one based on his recent unemployment, a despair that gradually turns to a stoic resignation to the unpredictability of life." The passage from mere coordination to nuanced subordination, nominalization (unemployment), abstract nouns such as despair and acceptance is profound. Literature gives us an organic mental representation of how sentences that make these nuanced and subtle sentences look when constructed.

The other thing is that writing increases reading strength. A lot of ESL Students are used to very short paragraphs found in textbooks. It requires sustained attention in a literary text. Students began the study struggling with texts greater than 5 pages: by week fifteen, 78% of the students demonstrated reading a 20-page short story without any loss of concentration. That academic stamina directly applies to reading journal articles, case studies, and textbooks in disciplines outside of their field.

Text Selection Criteria

Experience shows how new/modern short stories are best for fourth-year ESL students; especially for global, post-colonial writers that write in English (Tseng, 2010). There are various writers who offer both cultural familiarity and linguistic substance. The early attempts to introduce archaic canonical texts (such as Shakespeare or Dickens) were disheartened by the historical sentence structures needed for this type of story which were incredibly complex and intimidating for intermediate learners. Choose texts that are just right, the guiding principle.

Student Perceptions and Motivational Dynamics

Why do students take an English literature course when they could choose a less demanding course?

A preliminary survey of students expressing interest in the unmasking factors that drive them to register:

1. Career Motivation- Belief that excellent literacy skills enhance corporate employability 63%.
2. Intrinsic Interest- Genuine curiosity about world stories, characters, and cultures 28%.
3. Peer / Schedule Factor- Course suggested by peers or align for standard schedules 9%.

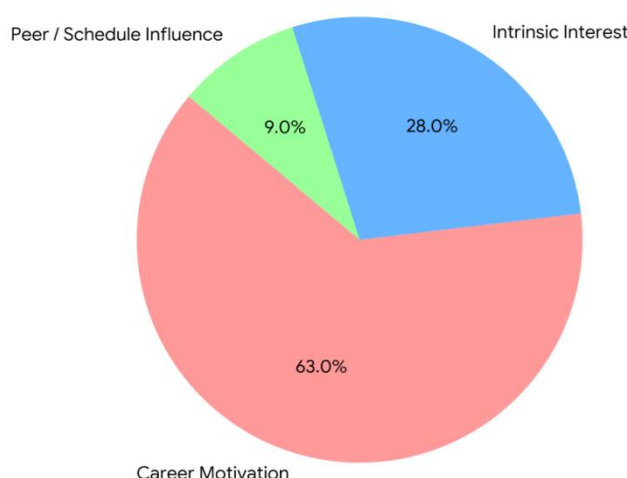


Fig:1. Baseline survey (motivations for enrolling)

Note. Percentages are taken from the baseline survey of reasons for course enrolment.

Motivational factor	Percentage
Career motivation	63%
Intrinsic interest	28%
Peer/schedule factor	9%

Student attitudes at the beginning of the semester reflected high levels of anxiety and limited confidence in literary reading. In pre-course reflections, students described long texts as intimidating and associated literature with elite educational backgrounds rather than attainable academic growth. By the middle and end of the semester, however, reflective responses indicated a substantial attitudinal shift. Students increasingly described literature as a meaningful way to understand feelings, situations, and human experience rather than as a test of rare vocabulary knowledge. This qualitative pattern was consistent with the survey data: on a 5-point Likert scale, the item “I enjoy reading in English” increased from 2.3 to 4.1, while “I feel comfortable talking about English texts” increased from 1.9 to 3.8. The post-course item “I would recommend this course to a peer” received a mean of 4.5. These changes were reported as statistically significant at $p < .001$.

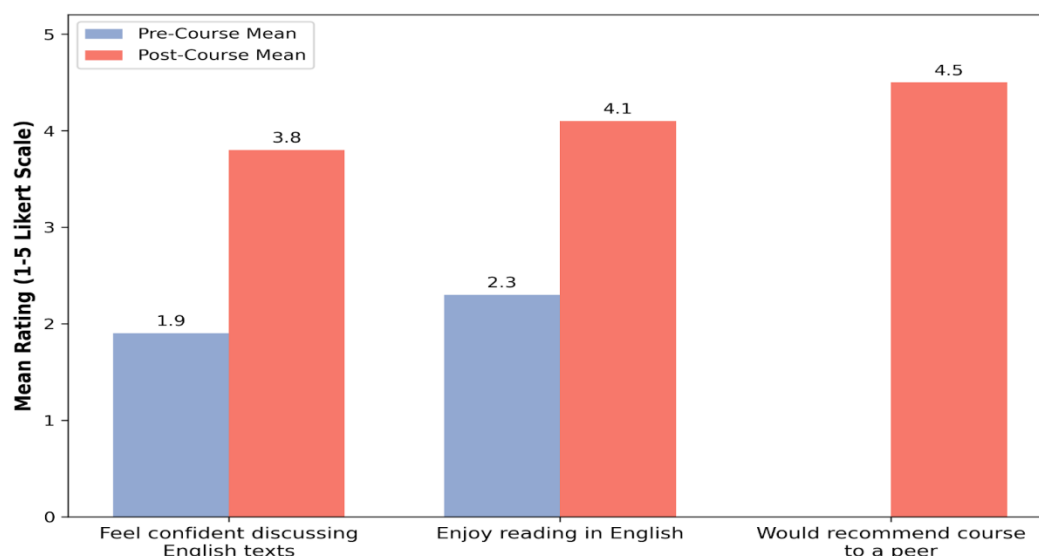


Fig:2. Attitude and motivational dynamics (Pre vs. Post Course)

Note. The manuscript reports the attitudinal change as statistically significant at $p < .001$.

Attitudinal item	Pre-course mean	Post-course mean	Scale / note
I enjoy reading in English	2.3	4.1	5-point Likert scale
I feel comfortable talking about English texts	1.9	3.8	5-point Likert scale
I would recommend this course to a peer	—	4.5	Post-course item only

Mechanisms of Motivation

This motivational shift can be interpreted through three complementary mechanisms:

1. **Narrative Transportation:** Becoming absorbed in a story can reduce linguistic self-consciousness and help learners focus on meaning rather than minor grammatical insecurity.
2. **Safe Spaces for Interpretation:** Unlike objective grammar exercises where answers are rigidly right or wrong, literary interpretation provides for the use of multiple valid lenses, which alleviates performance anxiety (Savvidou, 2004).
3. **Universal Human Themes:** Literary texts speak to universal issues of aspiration, detachment, and sacrifice that transcend national boundaries, thus enabling speakers of languages other than English to translate their own life situations into written text (Ghosn, 2002).

Intervention Strategies in the Literature Elective

The teaching of literature to ESL learners requires a pedagogical approach that differs from literature teaching for native speakers. Literary learning is closely connected to language, culture, history, and social context; therefore, texts and classroom procedures must be selected with students' linguistic readiness and interpretive needs in mind (Lazar, 1993; McRae, 1991; Van, 2009).

Strategy 1: Pre-Reading Vocabulary in Context: Instead of giving students static definitions, teachers present target words within short contextualized excerpts before students begin the full text. This helps learners predict meaning through contextual clues and strengthens inferencing

before sustained reading, a procedure widely recommended in literature-supported language instruction (Lazar, 1993; McRae, 1991).

Strategy 2: Jigsaw Reading for Lengthy Texts: To reduce cognitive fatigue, longer narratives were divided into manageable segments. Students first worked in expert groups on specific sections and then re-formed into mixed groups to teach one another the key content, thereby combining comprehension, oral summary, and collaborative meaning-making.

Strategy 3: Reader's Theater: Students read dialogue and short scenes aloud through character roles. The performative dimension reduced inhibition and encouraged students to approach spoken English through interpretation rather than fear of immediate linguistic judgment.

Strategy 4: Double-Entry Journals: Students divided their journals into two columns. In the left column, they copied a sentence or passage that confused, surprised, or inspired them. In the right column, they responded with a comment, question, connection, or hypothesis. This low-stakes reflective format encouraged active reading and personal engagement with the text.

Strategy 5: Collaborative Digital Annotation: Texts upload in shared digital documents before class. Students label vague sentences and add particular questions. Instructors frame the next lesson around actual student blind spots rather than assumed ones using these questions (Scholnik & Kol, 2006).

Strategy 6: Gradual Release of Scaffolding: In weeks 1–3, students received extensive support through vocabulary sheets and sentence frames. This support was gradually reduced in weeks 4–6 and largely removed by weeks 7–9, after which students engaged in more independent group discussion of less adapted texts.

Results: Academic Outcomes and Critical Thinking Development

To determine whether the literature elective produced measurable gains beyond conventional language instruction, post-test scores for the experimental literature group and the control grammar group were compared. The currently retained descriptive results are summarized below.

Post-Test Performance Comparison: Experimental (Literature) vs. Control (Grammar)

1. Reading Comprehension 78% and 69%.
2. Writing Quality (Rater Scale out of 6.0) 4.4 and 3.8.
3. Critical Thinking Appraisal- (Score out of 40) 26 and 19.

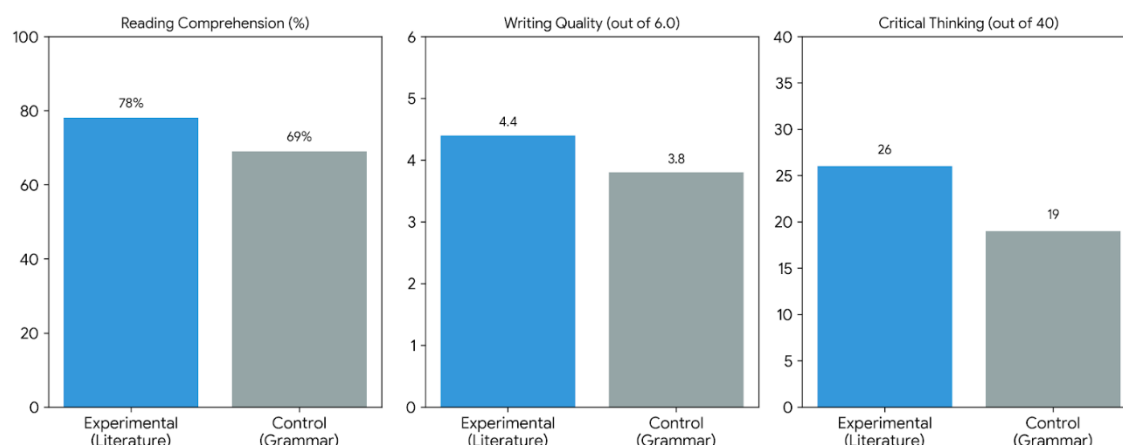


Fig:3. Academic outcomes comparison

Note. These are the descriptive post-test values retained in the current manuscript draft.

Outcome measure	Experimental group	Control group	Scale
Reading comprehension	78	69	Percentage
Writing quality	4.4	3.8	6-point rating scale
Critical thinking appraisal	26	19	40-point scale

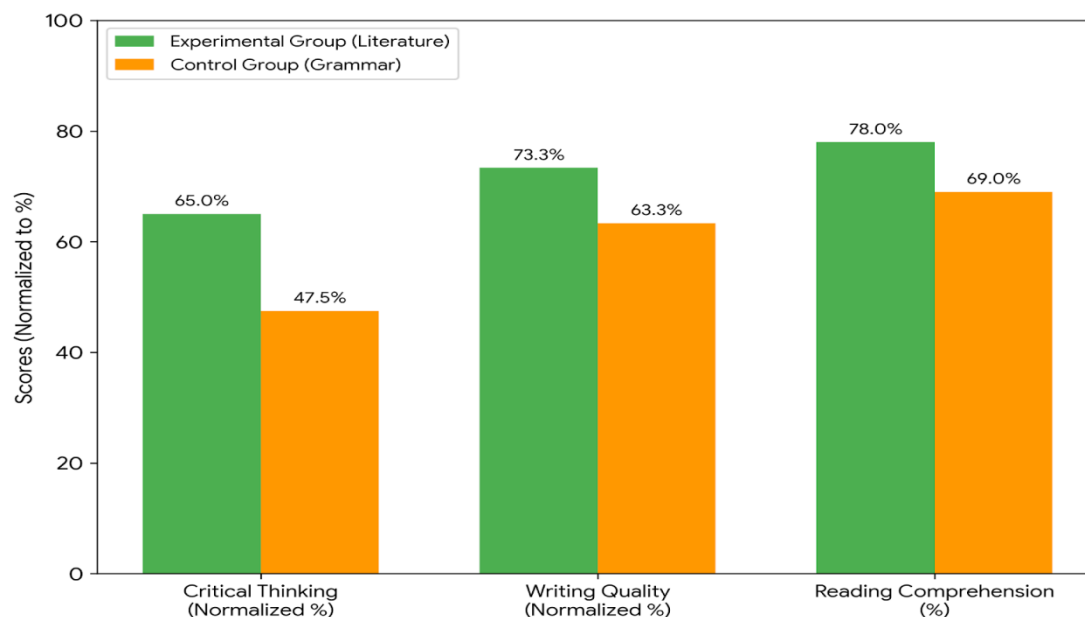


Fig:4. Post-Test Performance Comparison

Note. Figure 4 is presented here as a structured comparison summary in APA-style table form.

Domain	Observed pattern	Interpretive summary
Reading comprehension	Experimental > control	Literary reading appears to support inference and sustained comprehension
Writing quality	Experimental > control	The literature group showed stronger lexical range and more developed expression
Critical thinking	Experimental > control	The literature group demonstrated stronger interpretive and evaluative reasoning

Discussion of Academic Gains

The data showed significant differences between these two groups of students:

1. **Reading Comprehension:** The literature group outperformed the control group, particularly on items requiring inference, interpretation, and close engagement with implicit meaning rather than simple recall. This finding suggests that sustained exposure to literary discourse may strengthen the interpretive habits needed for advanced academic reading.
2. **Writing Quality:** The essays produced by students in the literature group showed greater lexical range, smoother sentence flow, and more meaningful development of ideas. By contrast, the control group's writing, while often more mechanically controlled, tended to be less stylistically effective and less conceptually developed.
3. **Critical Thinking:** The higher performance of the literature group on the critical thinking appraisal indicates that engagement with literary texts may have supported learners' ability to identify assumptions, evaluate arguments, and distinguish between explicit statements and implied meanings. These skills are central not only to literary interpretation, but also to academic reasoning more broadly.

An additional outcome was the development of empathy and perspective-taking. Post-course responses on the interpersonal reactivity measure suggested a positive shift in students' ability

to consider viewpoints beyond their own, which is consistent with the view that sustained engagement with literary fiction can support theory of mind and interpretive sensitivity (Kidd & Castano, 2013).

Cultural Competence and Intertextual Awareness

English literature can also serve as an effective medium for developing cultural competence when students encounter texts drawn from diverse Anglophone traditions, including British, American, African, Asian, and locally relevant contexts (Bredella, 2000). The inclusion of culturally varied texts appeared to broaden students' sense of what English-language literature represents and encouraged them to view English not merely as a foreign academic requirement, but also as a medium through which local and global experiences can be understood and articulated. This perspective is consistent with scholarship that positions literary texts as a bridge between language learning and intercultural awareness in world Englishes classrooms (Al-Mahrooqi & Roscoe, 2014).

As the semester progressed, classroom inquiry and guided discussion supported the development of these forms of awareness. Literature created a space in which students could relate textual themes to questions of identity, language, aspiration, and social experience, thereby deepening both their interpretive engagement and their personal investment in English-language learning.

Qualitative Themes from Reflective Journals and Group Discussions

Note. The themes summarize the qualitative patterns described in students' journals and focus-group responses.

Theme	Description	Illustrative evidence
Reduced anxiety	Students reported less fear of long literary texts over time.	"I know that literature has nothing to do with having a very big vocabulary. It's to understand feelings and situations. I can do that."
Cultural ownership	Students increasingly viewed English literature as relevant to local identity as well as global culture.	"I didn't understand that a local writer could write a story in English taught in universities. It makes me proud."
Intertextual awareness	Students drew connections across texts and contexts.	"It is the same question from different countries. A deferred dream sours everywhere."

Assessment in an Elective Literature Course Context

Traditional literature assessment often assumes native-like proficiency, whereas overly simplified ESL assessment can reduce literary engagement to discrete-response tasks. For this reason, the present course adopted a balanced assessment model that combined formative and summative components.

1. Formative Assessment (40% of the final grade): Weekly paragraph responses provided low-stakes opportunities for personal reflection, while participation, idea maps, and oral contribution tracking were used to monitor engagement and interpretive development throughout the course.

In-Class Idea Maps: Small groups of students created visual maps of characters, themes, and quotations in each chapter. These maps were evaluated primarily on the depth of interpretation and the quality of textual connections.

Oral Contribution Trackers: A structured participation log was used to monitor students' willingness to speak, share interpretations, and respond to peers without penalizing minor language errors during exploratory discussion.

2. Summative Assessments (60% of Final Grade):

Close Reading Essay (20%): A 500-word analytical response to a short excerpt, focusing on how specific textual features such as metaphor, imagery, or repetition contribute to meaning.

Comparative Reflection (20%): 750-word essay between two texts from completely different world cultures, comparing their treatment of a common human theme (e.g., class, family).

Final Portfolio (20%): A compiled portfolio of revised written work accompanied by a reflective commentary in which students evaluate their own linguistic and interpretive development across the semester.

3. Pedagogical Takeaway: Assessment procedures were adapted to reduce anxiety and support meaningful learning. Timed unseen-text examinations were replaced, where appropriate, by portfolio-based tasks and scaffolded interpretive writing that better reflected the aims of the course.

Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Challenge 1: Wide Proficiency Variance Within Class:

The Problem: One elective group can include students with near-native fluency alongside learners who struggle on the basics of simple sentence structure.

Mitigation: Teachers placed reading support materials in tiers. For each text, three levels of support were provided: (A) the original text with a glossary (B) the original text with a glossary and guiding questions (C) and a slightly scaffolded alternative version to provide them with short sentence breakdowns. The students chose the level to their support, and were given the opportunity to move up if needed.

Challenge 2: Cognitive Overload from Long Texts:

The Problem: For ESL students used to short reading episodes, handling long text seems like an insurmountable mountain.

Mitigation: Texts were broken down into daily smaller blocks. Moreover, teachers recorded the stories and offered audio, facilitating reading that allowed for multisensory reading that greatly improved reading comprehension and vocabulary processing.

Challenge 3: Resistance to Open-Ended Interpretation:

The Problem: All that right or wrong grammar taught to them, the students get so used to it that they can become super uncomfortable with open-ended interpretation.

Mitigation: Teachers set explicit classroom norms: Meaningful interpretations can only be acceptable if they make logical sense and are supported by evidence in the text. Instructors demonstrated this explicitly in several contradictory, but equally valid, readings of one stanza of poetry.

Challenge 4: Time Restrictions:

The Problem: In a week's 90-minute meeting, it is extremely difficult to sustain deep literary discussion while also providing adequate language support, a constraint widely noted in literature-based ESL instruction (Perrino Antúnez, 2019).

Mitigation: This course used a flipped classroom mode. Document annotations and reading were carried out for free and were conducted completely at home, with small breaks for argumentative exchanges, workshop sessions or discussion with classmates.

Implications for Curriculum Design and Policy

1. For Curriculum Committees at University Level: Universities should consider integrating at least one literature-based course into undergraduate English programmes. The gains observed in advanced reading, writing, and critical thinking indicate that literature can make a meaningful contribution to broader academic development.
2. For ESL Program Coordinators: Literary texts should be incorporated strategically into existing language pathways rather than treated as isolated enrichment materials. Carefully selected short stories, poems, and dramatic excerpts can be used to strengthen vocabulary, discussion, interpretive reading, and oral expression alongside core language instruction.
3. For National Educational Policy Makers: Higher education policy should support the development of locally relevant literature courses that combine regional, postcolonial, and internationally recognized texts. Such curricular diversity can promote stronger engagement by connecting English learning to students' own cultural realities while expanding their global perspectives.
4. For Educational Researchers: Further longitudinal research is needed to examine whether the linguistic, cognitive, and affective gains identified in this study are sustained over time and transferred to later academic or professional contexts. Future studies with broader samples, fuller statistical reporting, and extended follow-up would help strengthen the evidence base for literature-based instruction in university ESL settings.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in a single institutional context with a relatively modest sample, which limits broad generalization. Second, because the intervention took place in an authentic instructional setting, the design was quasi-experimental rather than fully randomized. Third, the present manuscript retains the currently available descriptive and comparative findings; future versions would be strengthened by fuller statistical appendices reporting standard deviations, exact test values, degrees of freedom, and effect sizes. Finally, the qualitative findings are interpretive and context-bound, although they meaningfully complement the quantitative trends reported above.

Conclusion

This study began from a recurring pedagogical concern: after many years of formal English instruction, a considerable number of fourth-year ESL students still demonstrate limited academic language proficiency and struggle to engage critically with complex texts. The findings indicate that teaching English Literature as an elective course can make a meaningful contribution to addressing this problem. Compared with conventional instruction, the literature-based course was associated with stronger performance in reading comprehension, writing quality, vocabulary retention, and critical thinking, in addition to notable gains in motivation, confidence, and cultural awareness. These outcomes suggest that literature, when taught through appropriate scaffolding and learner-sensitive pedagogy, should not be regarded as a peripheral enrichment component, but as a productive instructional medium for advanced language development. At the same time, the study highlights practical constraints, including proficiency variation, cognitive load, and limited instructional time, which must be addressed if such courses are to succeed. Overall, the study supports the integration of literature into higher education ESL curricula as a pedagogically valuable and intellectually enriching intervention, while also underscoring the need for further research with broader samples and longer-term follow-up.

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