The Major Barriers That Impede the Teaching and Learning of Literature: The Case of the Second Year English LMD Students at the University of Mascara

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Abstract

The present study examines the major barriers that impede the teaching and learning of literature at Mustapha Stambouli university of Mascara, and seeks to provide some solutions that would be valuable for surpassing them. It attempts to spot the obstacles that stand as a stumbling rock in front of both the teacher and learner of literature. For that aim, a questionnaire, as a primary data source, was addressed to a total of 155 students enrolled for the academic year 2014-2015, among which only 89 students responded. Interviews with teachers, practitioners and non-practitioners (i.e. those who are specialized in the field of literature and those who are not) were adopted by the researchers. Besides, class observation was included in the study, as well. The findings reveal that the misapprehension of the advantages of literature is a major obstacle with 48%, followed by the non-accordance of the selected texts with students' needs with 29%, and the difficulty of literary texts with14%. The demotivation of students is eventually left with 9%.

Keywords: barriers ; teaching ; learning ; literature ; LMD.

الملخص

تستقصي هذه الدراسة عن الحواجز الرئيسة التي تعوق تدريس الأدب وتعلمه بجامعة مصطفى اسطمبولي بمعسكر، وتسعى إلى تزويد ببعض الحلول التي ستكون ذات قيمة لتجاوزها. إنّها تحاول تحديد العقبات التي تقف كحجر عثرة أمام كل من الأستاذ والمتعلم للأدب. لهذا الغرض، تم توجيه استبيان –كمصدر أولي للبيانات– إلى مجموع 155 طالبًا مسجلين في العام الدراسي 2014–

2015، من بينهم 89 طالبا فقط أجابوا على الاستبيان. تبنى الباحثان مقابلات مع أساتذة، ممارسين وغير ممارسين (أي من هم مختصون في الأدب ومن ليسوا كذلك). علاوة على ذلك، اشتملت الدراسة أيضا على الملاحظة في الصف. وتظهر نتائج البحث أنّ سوء فهم مزايا الأدب يمثل العقبة الرئيسة بنسبة 48٪، تليها عدم مطابقة النصوص المختارة مع احتياجات الطلاب بنسبة 29٪، وصعوبة النصوص الأدبية بنسبة 14٪، لتجيء انعدام الدافعية عند الطلاب في الأخير بنسبة 9٪.

الكلمات المفتاح: حواجز – تدريس – تعلم – أدب – ل.م.د.

I. Introduction

For quite a long period, literature ceased to be the component of many lectures of English. It was about to give way, yet thanks to the recent researches stressing the importance of it in the curriculum that the teaching of literature has regained its position in EFL/ESL classrooms. Such position had been the privilege of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). Neglecting literature even continued in the Communication Language Teaching era (GLT), when deemed a redundant subject and hence was put in the margin (Collie and Slater, 1987, p.02).

Since the 1970s reforms, language learning had been centred on the communicative teaching method, and the communicative competence settled in the forefront of the scene. Hence, language teaching would not be seen outside contextual communicative activities. These activities entailed tasks that favour communication for its practicality and visibility. Problem-solving, map completion, dialogue acting, comparing a set of pictures and the like constitute the bulk of the language communication in the classroom. The need for authentic materials has brought into classrooms several teaching materials such as letters, newspaper articles, adverts, and so on. Despite all this, students' achievement was limited to the referential function of language. The text exists but deprived of its context. What encourages the students to be engaged and take part in classroom conversations is a meaningful context. The latter will arouse students' curiosity, grab their attention, widen their imagination and give them the benchmarks to deal with any issue.

To establish a link between text and context is to shift from a passive understanding to a thorough grasping and overall interaction with different typologies of texts. In such a way, the learners will be exposed to a variety of representational means that enable them to react and interact, to be emotionally involved, and thus become co-participants in the learning process.

Literature has finally found, after a long period of disregard, its ways to EFL classrooms. In the late period of the 1980s, some practitioners and language scholars brought back literature as an essential language learning material (Duff & Maley, 1991). They laid the red carpet for the return of literature basing their arguments on the benefits and conveniences it offers.

II. Research Objective

The present study aims to cast light upon the principal handicaps that hinder the teaching and learning of literature. Moreover, it tries to shovel away these obstacles so as to help students and teachers coping with any learning situation by suggesting solutions in order to overcome the set obstructions.

In specific, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do students view the module of literature?
2. Are they enough prepared to cope with it?
3. What are the primal setbacks that hamper the teaching of literature?
4. What sort of remedies shall we prescribe to overpass the entire hedges?

The hypothesis is based on the premises that:

The majority of students are demotivated and overlook the benefits of literature.

The researchers draw out their hypothesis on the basis of the following impediments:

a) The difficulty of the literary texts (lexicon, trope…);
b) Demotivation of students;
c) Non-conformity of the chosen texts with students' needs;
d) Missing out the significance of literature and its virtues.

In order to achieve the planned goals, the researchers have conducted an exploratory study. A questionnaire was addressed to the second year LMD (License - Master - Doctorate) students at the department of English, university of Mascara who willingly wanted to take part in the study. The questionnaire investigates the major

barriers that hamper the teaching and learning of this module. The researchers will subsequently analyze the data to conclude the findings, and they will finally suggest some recommendations that would be effective for overcoming these obstacles.

III. Research Methodology

The method adopted in this study was both a qualitative and quantitative one, based on a questionnaire to students and interviews with teachers as well, which have provided the researchers with the required data that correlate with the issues related to the teaching of literature at the university of Mascara.

IV. Participants

The participants of the study are 155 second year LMD students among which only 89 responded to the questionnaire. In addition to that, the interview was carried out with five (05) teachers of this module whom two (02) are practitioners in the field of literature whilst three (03) are not.

V. Instruments

The researchers have handed out a questionnaire consisting of six (06) questions to students with the hope of identifying the main obstacles that hinder them from learning literature. These barriers are as follows: demotivation, lack of knowledge on the advantages of literature, the difficulty of literary texts, lack of knowledge and the non-relevance of the selected texts with student's needs.

Moreover, interviews were conducted with teachers. They were divided into two parts: the first part deals with teachers' profile (their names, qualifications, teaching experience), with the stress made on the main barriers they encounter when teaching literature. The second part investigates the teachers' recommendations to surpass the above-mentioned obstacles.

VI. Literature Review

What motivates us to carry the present research is the lack of studies in the field. The already existing ones do not investigate the handicaps that student and teacher jointly encounter in teaching/learning literature at the university. Likewise, the available studies focus on the obstacles that impede the teacher in

teaching literature (the case here, concerns literature practitioners) neglecting those which hamper the learner.

In spite of the fact that teaching literature is a universal concern, this concern is, unluckily, given a minor importance in Algeria. This marginalization has widened the gap between the module /discipline and its admirers at graduation. The majority of students would choose to carry on their studies in post-graduation in any other discipline except in literature. Literature phobia is not a current issue. In the doctoral school organized in Oran in 2009, only three students had chosen literature while all the other twelve students preferred to continue their studies in civilization. The paucity of teachers of literature mainly practitioners is due in part to this phobia. The situation has been aggravated as there were no concepts of understanding the barriers that hinder not only the non-practitioners of it, but also the practitioners from teaching this module. Whenever any obstacle come out, be it a student-level barrier or a teacher-level one, no immediate solutions or remedies were provided.

Another hindrance stems out from the fact that students at the university are introduced to a discipline not only totally new to them but also entirely strange. The reality is that our students do not read, neither when they are forced nor do they for a mere pleasure. Students burdened by the technological explosion find it easy to have access to plot summaries than to spend weeks reading a novel. The pleasure of reading has disappeared in a digital age. Unable to read, they come to the classroom totally detached from the subject matter. As a consequence, they lack motivation; they become bored and, thus, easily surrender.

In Algeria, an extensive literature has been written on the issue. Meliani's (2003) *Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Teaching Literature*, for example, stresses the fact that teaching literature should be reconsidered, and that a successful teaching of it could, accordingly, be achieved only and thanks to integrating a multi-disciplinary approach.

In this regard, Ghouti H. (2014) in his *Towards an Integrative Approach to Teaching Literature* stipulates that we cannot teach a language without accessing to its culture and that such a practice would make literature better exploited but only within a Culture –Integrated Approach.

Djafri's (2012) *Towards Technology Integration* is a call for an urgent incorporation of technology and predominantly by

foreign literature teachers. She puts forward the integration of ICTs would not only enhance the leaning of literature, motivate students but also assure a successful teaching.

In some Asian countries which tread on the heels of the European and American models, the crucial role literature plays in any language learning is never denied. In such countries, literature and language complement one another. They are no longer regarded as separable matters but as a mother to child relationship, where language is the mother and literature is the child. In Bangladesh for example, literature with small 'l' has recently found its way to secondary schools while literature with big 'L' is taught at the university. Another example is that of Israel, wherein embodying literature in secondary schools has been given the lion's share.

VII. Reasons for Incorporating Literature in EFL/ESL Classrooms

There are countless reasons for integrating literature in the EFL/ESL classrooms. Language teaching cannot stand on its own. Therefore, the incorporation of literature in the syllabus, and this time with too much emphasis, has become a must.

The proponents of incorporating literature into the curriculum believe that the latter would help consolidate the overt and covert skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) taught in ESL curriculum. The implementation of literature in ESL/EFL classrooms will not only ignite students' interests in language but also widen their perception of the world around. Such a successful incorporation of literature can be accomplished following Carter and Long's 1991 teaching of literature models. These models are: (1) the language model (2) the cultural model (3) and the personal growth model.

Innumerable pages are written on the advantages of using literature with EFL students. Ellen. J. Langer (1997) asserts that *'because it taps what they know and who they are, literature is a particularly inviting context for learning both a second/foreign language and literacy'* (p. 607). From Langer's perspective, literature allows students to reflect on their lives, learning, and the tongue. It can open *'horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore'* (p. 607). Within the same frame, Fitzgerald (1993) says literature can be the medium to improve students' overall language skills. It does *'expose students*

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to a wide variety of styles and genres' (p. 643). Sage (1987) holds the view that it is in literature *'the resources of the language are most fully and skillfully used'* (p. 06). In fact, EFL teachers should use the best literature available as a model of language mastery. In other words, language and literature cannot be set apart as far as teaching language in isolation from literature will not stir students toward mastering the four skills.

Literature is an important constituent of the entire language program since the various benefits it offers. The following are some reasons for integrating literature into classrooms:

1- Literature provides pleasure to learners;
2- Literature shapes representations and builds experiences;
3- Literature provides a language model for both practitioners and learners;
4- Literature develops thinking skills, especially the binary thinking ones;
5- Literature improves reading abilities and attitudes;
6- Multicultural literature helps the reader to value people from different races, ethnic groups, cultures and civilizations;
7- Literature makes people cultivated.

VIII. Findings
1- Questionnaire Analysis

The questionnaire given to students was intended to gather data on the main barriers that hinder students from learning literature. This section reveals that all informants do not realize the vantages of literature, and such incognizance is, in part, due to students view of the discipline and, in the other part, to a lack of awareness. It also unveils that students are confronted with texts which have no relation to their needs, and with difficult language, too. Owing to the before mentioned barriers some of the students are demotivated.

On the basis of this, five hypotheses have been suggested:

a) The difficulty of literary texts;
b) The non-relevance of the selected texts with students' needs;
c) The lack of knowledge on the advantages of literature;
d) Demotivation;
e) The lack of prior knowledge in literature.

The participants were asked to answer by (*yes*) or (*no*) and to justify their negative answers.
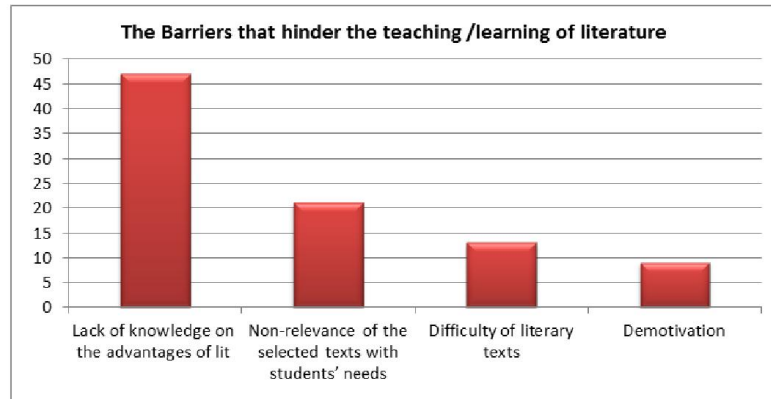
(Chart 01): **The Major Barriers that Hinder the Teaching and Learning of Literature**

48% of the informants deem the lack of knowledge on the advantages of literature major barrier number one. The non-relevance of the selected texts with students' needs comes second with 29%. Then, the difficulty of literary texts is added with 14%, followed by the demotivation of students with only 09%.

2- Interviews and Profile Analysis

The interviews were designed to collect personal information about teachers' qualification, age, teaching experience and the major obstacles they encounter when they teach literature. The results show that all teachers have a magister degree in English, with a teaching experience that ranges from 2 to 5 years. It was also brought to light that out of the five interviewed teachers only two were practitioners.

The following are the teaching impediments disclosed by interviews:

a) The absence of clear-cut objectives which define the role of literature in ESL/EFL;
b) The lack of background training in literature;
c) The lack of pedagogically-designed befitting materials.

As to remedy the above-mentioned stumbling blocks, the teachers recommend the following: an interdisciplinary approach, collaboration with specialists in the field, incorporating literature at

the secondary level with small 'l', and the readaptation of the curriculums.
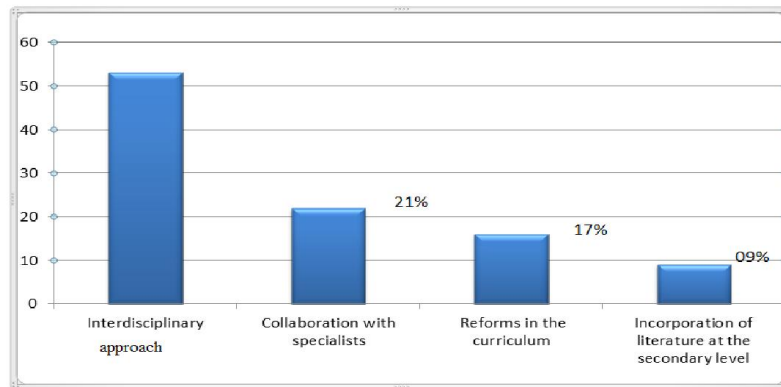
(Chart 02): Teachers Recommendations

The chart indicates that 53% of the teachers think that the curriculum should be reviewed. 22% of them call for an effective collaboration with specialists. 17% are about stressing interdisciplinary, while 9% point to the incorporation of literature at the secondary level.

As the findings of the questionnaire conclude, the main barriers that impede the learning of literature are classified as follows:

  a) The lack of knowledge on the advantages of literature;
  b) The non-relevance of the selected texts with students' needs;
  c) The difficulty of literary texts;
  d) Demotivation.

IX. Discussion of the Findings
1- The Lack of Knowledge on the Advantages of Literature

The majority of students acknowledge their ignorance about the advantages of literature. They consider it a module of no importance as far as they almost can find an answer to many questions such as: how will literature serve them in the future? Would there be a further use of what they study in literature? Unable to be satisfactorily answered, they surrender to boredom and dullness. They are all of the opinion that literature is about imagination, it cuts them from reality.

For Duff and Maley (1990: 6), three reasons are to justify the importance of using literary texts: (1) linguistic, (2) methodological and (3) motivational. Besides, other reasons are provided by Collie and Slater (1990:3) to attest the importance of studying literature. They are: (1) valuable authentic material, (2) cultural enrichment, (3) language enrichment and (4) personal involvement.

2- The Non-relevance of the Selected Texts with Students' Needs

Starting from the fact that the fulfillment of students' needs proceeds as a hindrance for the lack of motivation, one cannot deny the crucial role of taking students' needs into consideration. Careful selection of literary texts in accordance with student's interests and level of comprehension should be the main concern of pedagogues. In this respect, Elaine Harper states that the '*meaningful choice engenders willingness, and the willingness is the door to increased motivation*' (Harper 2007, 25).

The majority of students point to the fact that they are not involved in selecting texts. They confirm they were never part of the selection and that they are most of the time compelled to read, analyze, and to value texts which are far beyond their expectations. Unfortunately, in most cases the chosen texts do not fit the students' needs. Despite there are plenty of things to teach from a piece of literature, the still attitudes of students towards literary texts remain the same. Nearly all of them think that the elected texts are far beyond to meet their interests. Students are stimulated to learn what matches their expectations and conform with the learning situations. If a text is not in line with one's needs, then there is no sense for that text to be taught. The importance of understanding students' perceived needs and interests must be accentuated. It is a rather difficult task to satisfy all students' needs as these needs are not all the same, and students have different backgrounds because of the all walks of life they come from. To assure that all students have the opportunity to reach their potential, every effort must be made to meet these unique needs and foster individual interests.

3-The Difficulty of Literary Texts

Quite a good number of students are unaware of the advantages of literature. Besides, the majority of them are faced with texts that do not appeal to their needs. And even if the vocabulary is within their reach, they will undergo the same

boredom never the same as those who resist being confronted with texts whose vocabulary is far from the students reach. Medieval literature lexis, some postmodern texts, texts written in old English (archaic) in order not to cite more are among the category of texts which are too difficult to grasp.

The foreign language learners face many difficulties to understand the figurative language in literature (Carter, 1997). Therefore, giving those learners opportunities for understanding the meaning of words and phrases, discussion, evaluation and developing their interpretational and inferential skills will make them more thoughtful and effective learners and users of the language.

The difficulty of literary texts mainly arises from:

- The density with the unfamiliar vocabulary;
- The unfamiliarity with the connotative and denotative meanings of lexicons;
- The story themes and endings can be inexplicable;
- The difficulty to draw conclusions, analyze characters and predicting outcomes;
- The imagery and symbolism in texts are difficult;
- The abundance of idioms and trope in English texts.

4- Demotivation

Motivation has been the centre of attention among teachers throughout the years, and this due to the backbone of the learning process that represents. Learning is a complex and dynamic operation, and it really and truly gets completed through motivation. This latter is mostly associated with the will to learn. However, students may sometimes lose this willingness towards lectures, and this will undoubtedly set a barrier in front of them to learn effectively. Thus, limitless reasons leading to the demotivation of many students are apparent.

There is a truth that can't be denied, students who are not motivated to learn, do not learn. Unfortunately, there is no specific recipe for motivating students, yet many factors influence them to learn: interest in the subject matter, the perception of its usefulness, general longing to accomplish self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as patience and persistence (Bligh, 1971).

Ericksen maintains that "*effective learning in the classroom depends on the teacher's ability ... to maintain the interest that brought students to the course in the first place*" (1978 p. 3). Whatever level of motivation students bring to the classroom will

be converted, for better or worse, by what happens in that classroom.

The abovementioned obstacles are to a certain extent the leading force to the demotivation of student's. Such obstacles are widening the gap between the student and literature instead of getting him engaged in the field. For the students who are already disintegrated, it is quite a loss for them to discover the fascination and pleasure literature gives to its readers. Motivation, as stated before in Duff and Maley, is one main reason that should push a student to get engaged. According to Duff, motivation has to do with issues that are liable to engage learners in a personal response from their own experiences (See Personal Response Approach).

To overcome those obstacles, the interviewed teachers instruct the following recommendations which are for them credible and very suitable:

a) Applying an interdisciplinary approach;
b) Incorporating literature at the secondary level;
c) Making reforms in the curriculum;
d) Collaborating with specialists.

X. Recommendations
1- Applying an Interdisciplinary Approach

The integration of an interdisciplinary approach has become so abundant in the era of globalization, and this means that every discipline should complement each other. Short literary passages can constitute the main material of a course in literature as it teaches idiomatic language and cultural context. It can also improve reading and comprehension skills, promote correctness in both speech and writing, and encourage students to read for enjoyment. The same can be applied to other disciplines. A literary passage, for instance, may be used for teaching English tenses in grammar. Poetry can be the best resource if accurately exploited in modules such as phonology and Phonetics. It helps students appreciate the sounds of words and patterns, and it develops phonetic skills (M.Meliani & F.Benzaoui 2003). In the same vein, Odilea, R, Erkaya (2005) says by integrating literature in the curricula, students can learn the overt and covert skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – more efficiently because of the literary, cultural, higher-order thinking and motivational benefits.

2- Incorporating Literature at the Secondary Level

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The exaggerated priorities given by decision makers to technical and scientific demands constrained some English inspectors for secondary schools to forbid literary texts from language textbooks. This Censorship has prevented students from having literary backdrops to cope with literature at university. Therefore, literature, and this time with small 'l', should be incorporated in secondary schools, and short texts, excerpts of stories, novels and plays have to be taught there. By doing so, students become familiar with literature, getting themselves hooked and so prepared to contend with it at university (with capital 'L' here).

3- Making Reforms in the Curriculum

The Ministry of Education should embark on new reforms with the inclusion of literature in English language lessons in schools. These reforms should take into consideration many aspects. The chosen text must be both readable and accessible to pupils as they prefer texts that are "amusing, thrilling and not too demanding". To embody Algerian literature in English would offer a more familiar setting to learners, and could encourage students to enjoy the literary texts since being able to identify with the local characters and issues. The length of the selected texts must be emphasized.

As for The choice of themes, they should differ depending on across gender, class levels and stream. Female students like love themes much more than males. However, male students savor both mystery and adventurous texts. The foreign selected texts must be easy to be comprehended and relished by Algerian students.

4- Collaborating With Specialists

Collaboration with the subject specialist is highly suggested to restore back both teachers' confidence and effectually integrate students in the learning process. Nothing can be done unless there are mutual understanding, help and collaboration between teachers, specialists and pedagogues. Course designers should work hand in hand with specialists in literature with the hope of making diagnosis to the weaknesses, and in the meanwhile, provide remedies to the encountered dilemmas.

XI. Conclusion

This study was conducted with a view to determining the main barriers that impede the teaching and learning of literature in an EFL classroom at the University of Mascara. It has also aimed at

finding out possible ways of promoting students' willingness towards English literature.

As EFL teachers who we are, one can use his personal experience to endorse interest on reading literature and its richness, with the belief that literature provides language learners with a highly motivational material (Elliot 1990) and inspiration. Probably the key to success in using literature at the EFL classrooms relies on the choice of works and the selection of tasks that are motivating by nature.

It is commonly believed that only thanks to teaming with other teachers, working in collaboration with specialists and having a mutual exchange between different disciplines that we can increase students' learning. It is therefore our duty to disseminate awareness on the advantages of literature to our students considering that we are responsible of getting them in touch with materials that should catch their interests, too.

Last but not least, another key criterion which underlies students' successful engagement with literature in EFL is the teachers' enthusiasm for it and their ability to transmit this zealousness to students inasmuch as the motivated teachers can be highly motivating for their students, and then helping them acting with the same enjoyment and pleasure.

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Appendix
-Students' Questionnaire-

Dear students,

The present questionnaire pertains to a study on the obstacles hindering the teaching of literature in the EFL context. We would appreciate if you could find time to answer the following questions of it. So, please have the kindness to provide us with the necessary responses either by ticking the appropriate boxes or by making full statements whenever necessary.

Thank you for your collaboration.

1. How do you find the integration of literary texts in foreign language teaching?

   ………………………………………………………………………

   ………………………………………………………………………

2. Do you have any prior knowledge on the advantages of literature?

   a- **Yes** ☐   b- No ☐

3. Are the literary texts selected according to your preference?

   a- **Yes** ☐   b- No ☐

4. When studying literary texts, do you deal with extracts or complete works?

   ………………………………………………………………………

   ………………………………………………………………………....

5. What is the literary genre that you prefer the most? 1 (most preferred) to 5 (least preferred).

   a- Short stories ☐
   b- Novellas ☐
   c- drama ☐
   d- Poems ☐
   e- Novels and novel extracts ☐

6. As a student, are you motivated in the literature classes?

   a- **Yes.** ☐   b- No. ☐

   If yes, are you?

   a-Very motivated ☐
   b- Motivated ☐
   c- Slightly motivated ☐

7. Do you find difficulties in understanding literary texts?

   A-**Yes**. ☐   b- No. ☐

8. At what level of difficulty are you getting stuck? Please tick the appropriate box.

 a- The linguistic level. ☐   b- The cultural level. ☐

 c- The stylistic level. ☐

 Others, specify or explain why

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9. Do you face obstacles when dealing with literary texts?

 a- **Yes** ☐   b- No ☐

10. What are the aspects of the lack of communication in a class of literature?

 a. linguistic aspects. ☐ b. cultural aspects ☐ c. both. ☐

 Other. Please elaborate.

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Thank you for your help