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## Beyond the Literary Analysis Essay

*A scrutiny of EFL Students' Performance,  
Errors and Challenges*

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### *Abstract*

The present study attempts to investigate the difficulties students face while writing a literary analysis. The investigation is threefold; first, an evaluation of students' performance is carried out through an analysis of essay papers. Then, in order to gain more insight into how the students, themselves, view their performance in literature; qualitative attitude questionnaires were administered to 120 EFL students enrolled at the English department. At the third level, open-ended questionnaires were distributed to literature teachers in order to reveal their perspectives about the pedagogical challenges in relation to literature teaching in general and literary essay writing in particular. The investigation findings confirm the students' low attainment in literary analysis essays. The results display a disillusioning divergence between the pedagogical expectations and the actual achievements. Moving beyond a simple reading or a recommended interpretation to sound reasoning and an in-depth analytical performance seems to be extremely strenuous for students.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking skills; Essay writing; EFL students' performance; Literary analysis; Reading literary texts ;

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing is a multi-layered competence that students are required to be equipped with so they will be able to write different types of texts about different topics. The process of writing is commonly linked to the courses studied in class. However, when it comes to literature, writing literary analysis constitutes an important cognitive skill that bears its root in the students' private process of critical reading and literary interpretations. Therefore, writing about literature is believed to be different from other types of writing.

At the university level, students begin writing about literature in their very first year, displaying their analyses and answers in essays compositions. Nevertheless, both students and teacher frequently struggle in the process of building up questions and answers related to literary works. Students on the one hand, find difficulties in providing a convincing adequate literary analysis and, on the other hand, teachers struggle to explain what makes a fit literary essay (Lee, 2009). In literary studies, the gap between students' performance and teachers' expectations is an area of ongoing research and this study aims at exploring the difficulties related to students' performance in general and in literary analysis essays in particular. The study covers three performative dimensions; first, the area of reading a literary text as an EFL student and the critical thinking skills that are supposed to be acquired and manifested. Second, the conducted research study gauges the written performance and the literary analysis essay through an in-depth content analysis. Third, the challenges and difficulties students face in writing a literary essay. The study is a thorough exploration of both the teaching methods, and the students' attitudes towards their literary performance.

### I. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### I.1. Literature and Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking and problem-solving have become buzzwords spreading in the academic sector. The latter fundamental skills are set as primary educational objectives and students are supposed to be equipped with and able to apply these skills outside the classroom walls. Vincent Ryan Ruggiero (1988) defines critical thinking as "*any mental activity that helps formulate or solve a problem, make a decision, or fulfill a desire to understand; it is a searching for answers, a reaching for meaning.*" (p. 2). In the literature department, students enrolled in literary studies do not go beyond this wide-reaching objective and the curriculum is designed to enhance individuals' thinking skills and high cognitive performance. In the EFL context, where the focus is mainly on language acquisition and language proficiency, literary texts are initially harnessed to attain the targeted linguistic aspects. Literature serves as a rich source and a vivid authentic model of language in use. Then, while proceeding in higher education, literature turns to reinforce the students' critical thinking abilities. The shift from a simple comprehension of the literary text into higher intellectual skills through analysing, interpreting, and responding to literary texts becomes the main trait of the literature course.

Accordingly, much research has been conducted to explore the interrelationship between, reading literary texts and enhancing students' critical thinking skills. Esplugas, C. and M. Landwehr conducted a study in the area of EFL students' reading literary texts and critical thinking reinforcement (Esplugas and Landwehr, 1996). The study deals with two main aspects: the linguistic difficulties of students in reading literary texts, and in the process of interpreting these texts. Esplugas and Landwehr believe that:

*"critical thinking involves not only discovering meaning in a work but also substantiating an interpretation by carefully reading and weighing all the "evidence" in the text, by analyzing that evidence in a logical manner, and by drawing well-reasoned conclusions from the material,"* (1996, p. 29).

The study suggests that when students are explicitly equipped with critical thinking abilities, they may develop their own reasoning and become unfettered individuals. This aptitude can be reached when the literary text is considered as a tool to be manipulated by the reader and not a challenge to be overcome or surpassed. In this regard, Bretz, M. and Persin, M. (1987) state that: *"Instead of searching for the one "correct" meaning in a text, students are encouraged to discover a multiplicity of meanings by applying the critical approach."* (p. 71). Gillian Lazar (1993) also refers to this prospect in her practical guide to the teaching of literary texts claiming that: *"We should not expect to reach any definitive interpretation of a literary text with our students. Rather we should use the text as the basis for generating discussion, controversy, and critical thinking in the classroom."* (p 3).

Along with developing critical thinking skills through literature texts, many researchers attempt to understand the relationship between the two aspects, and some go further designing some teaching methods that may aid achieving this goal. Esplugas and Landwehr argue that a successful class in literature should not merely confine itself to traditional classroom methodology in which students follow the teacher's cues. Instead, the instructor should enable the students to exercise their critical thinking skills in interpreting a text, (Esplugas and Landwehr, 1996). It is worth mentioning that when it comes to teaching methods, the concepts of critical thinking and literature are interchangeable; the teacher proceeds either from literature to critical thinking or from critical thinking to a literary text. That is, the process of reading literary texts can never depart from higher thinking order, (Tabáčková, 2015). Evidently, in order to understand a literary work, students need more than language proficiency, but also mental efforts and constant pondering between the different elements of the text.

In the Algerian context, with the implementation of the Competency-Based Approach and the ongoing reforms endorsed at the level of university, the pedagogical objectives that stand behind literary studies are related to the overall educational plan that calls for reinforcing students' autonomy and high thinking skills. As an illustration, the literature textbook designed for students and teachers, *Bridging the Gap: Literature, Language and culture*, (2011), reflects a gradual shift in the pedagogical objectives. The literature class starts with the language-based approach at the first-year level. Then, with advanced language proficiency, students get involved in the critical approach. This pedagogical trail is ideally harnessed to make literary texts a source for enhancing students' critical thinking skills.

### **I.2. EFL Students' Literary Performance between Expectations and Reality**

As mentioned earlier, reading and writing about literature goes hand in hand with reasoning. The latter reflects an individual competence that is refined via private readings, class discussions and ongoing acquisition. Many research studies have proved that EFL students seem incapable of delivering these abilities and skills. In their research, Chi-An Tung and Shu-Ying Chang (2009) state that students are less mature in an EFL context, and according to them, the factors of this immaturity are complex and multi-layered rooting in the prior learning habits and experiences that are mostly reproduction-oriented. Students, according to the researcher are rarely

given the chances to question, explain, or evaluate the “knowledge” instructed in the classroom.

To a certain extent, it is true that both the reading of literature and writing about literature require higher intellectual abilities, hence it is considered among the most effortful tasks EFL students have to face. It is assumed that the fact of not being able to write an adequate literary analysis starts with the disability of reading adequately. By reference to the categorization of low levels and high levels of thought introduced by Crawford, A., Saul, W., Mathews, S., and Makinster, students, first practice critical reading, and then they proceed to critical thinking about the text that they have read. (Crawford, A., Saul, W., Mathews, S., and Makinster, J. 2005). Tabačková (2015) argues that though critical reading and critical thinking about literature are two distinct concepts, they cannot be separated from each other. Accordingly, reading literary texts is never a passive activity; rather, readers in the EFL context should overcome the linguistic difficulties and move on to the interaction with the writer, and meaning construction.

Poor linguistic proficiency, however, is not the only constraint against adequate performance in literary studies. In their article, Tayb Bouzid and Le Roux examined the challenges experienced by Algerian Arabic-speaking students and lecturers in meeting the proposed learning outcomes in English Literature. They came out with three main sources that may inhibit success in English literary studies. In addition to language impediment, the latter researchers found that inappropriate teaching strategies and poor student self-efficacy also stand behind the students' failure. (Bouazid and Le Roux, 2014). While discussing the Turkish students' low attainment in literature Ceren Işıklı and Aslı Ö.Tarakçıoğlu (2017) also referred to low motivation, lack of confidence, inadequate teaching methods, exam stress, underqualified teachers, and insufficient in-service training as challenging factors. (Işıklı, C., and Tarakçıoğlu, A.Ö 2017). These studies indicate that when designing literary courses at the pedagogical curricular level, the practical implementation confronts many challenges effecting the teaching practices to the students' performance.

### **1.3. Errors and Difficulties in the EFL Students' Literary Analysis Essays**

One practical way to understand the students' cognitive performance in literature is to examine their production and find out the major difficulties and errors. According to Kroll and Schafer (1978), “*errors help the teacher identify the cognitive strategies that the learner is using to process information.*” (p. 243). Rather than labelling learner errors as avoidable elements, trying to benefit from them to a certain extent is beneficial for learners and teachers reciprocally (Yildiz, 2016). As far as the present study's scope, understanding students' errors and difficulties would provide more insight into the actual dilemmas in writing literary analysis essays.

Moreover, it is of high importance to first understand the students' mission in the literary analysis essay, and more precisely, it would be necessary to understand what is meant by the word, analysis. In Blooms' taxonomy of educational objectives, 'analysis' is set as a fifth level in the cognitive domain. An analysis of a literary work may discuss how the various components of one work relate to each other; how two separate literary works deal with similar concepts or forms; or how concepts and forms in literary works relate to larger aesthetic, political, social, economic, or religious contexts.(Bloom. B., 1956). In this case, students are required to read a variety of literary genres, analyse different literary texts, understand the assigned question, build convincing arguments, and support them with textual or contextual

evidence. However, while proceeding with this cognitive mission, producing a text analysis, EFL students' written production would not be free from errors. EFL students' performative struggle goes beyond language and syntax errors and expands to the extreme difficulties in generating literary interpretations and in communicating ideas.

Although many research studies have been conducted about writing skills and writing about literature, there are still controversies about what literary analysis should be and what can be considered as an adequate literary analysis essay, what deprives students from writing an adequate essay that reflect higher thinking skills.

The present study probes these issues and investigates whether students' are practically oriented to develop their critical thinking skills in literary studies. In an attempt to generate better understanding about the subject, the students' performance in literary composition is analysed. The performance is abridged to the essay writing, since the latter is generally the basic representation that provides a clearer image on the students' profile and through which their skills are officially assessed. In addition to that, the teaching habits and the students' attitudes in the reading and writing phases are examined. In brief, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What are the students' difficulties in reading and writing about literature?
- What are the major errors in their literary essays? In terms of essay content and structure?
- What are the Literature lecturers' challenges in teaching literature in general and the literary essay in particular?

## **II. RESEARCH METHODS**

### **II.1. Context and Participants**

The sample is third-year students enrolled at the English department of M'Hamed Bougara University, Algeria. It is important to note that students have already undertaken academic writing classes starting from sentence structure, paragraph writing, and different types of essay writing. The participants are 120 students, aged between 20 and 24, consisting of males and females of Berbero-Arbic origins

### **II.2. Data Collection and Analysis**

The literary performance is to be assessed in terms of both reading/interpretative skills and productive/writing skills. An in-depth analysis of 120 students' essays is achieved via performance-assessment analytic rubric designed for the research purpose.

As an initial research tool, a rubric includes the specification of the skills being examined and what constitutes various levels of success. Two types of rubrics are often used in scoring performance, holistic and analytic (Mertler, C. A., 2001). A holistic rubric evaluates the overall performance in a qualitative manner. Analytic rubrics break down the performance into different levels of behaviour and assign point values to each. Points are then totalled to derive a quantitative measure of performance (Griffith, Wanda, and Hye-Yeon Lim, 2012). In this present study, an analytic rubric is favoured so the essays can be approached and assessed in extensive way by covering different criteria of performance. Hence, more information about students' strengths and weaknesses would be provided. The suggested rubric includes the following five criteria of performance:

- *Introduction and Conclusion:* These two elements provide an opening and a closure to the literary essay, and demonstrate a direct link between the students' thinking skills and the given question. In order to gain more insight into the students' reflective conduct, the students' tendency in opening and ending the literary analysis essay are to be examined.
- *Body paragraphs:* This criterion mainly probes the students' ability to support the essay thesis with logical progression and sound thinking. At this level, the students' ability to provide strong arguments, vivid interpretations and accurate textual evidence is observed.
- *Style and Overall Organisation:* This level tackles the students' ability to write a coherent and organised essay with outstanding paragraphs, formal academic style, appropriate word choice, and expressive consistent writing.
- *Literary Analysis:* This criterion makes up the essay content. Ideally, providing a sound analysis that relates to the question and not a mere regurgitation of what have been learnt by heart is the primary objective. The students' ability to reflect analytical thinking and clear reasoning, providing balanced arguments and text evidence, presenting interpretative commentary are searched for in the sample essays.
- *Writing Mechanics:* This criterion examines the errors at the syntax level, the spelling, punctuation problems, in addition to the grammar errors.

Then, as a secondary quantitative step, the above-mentioned criteria of performance are to be ranked into five levels of performance, starting with essays that demonstrate high performance exceeding expectations, to essays that reflect low performance. Before launching the essays' analysis, it was necessary to ensure the validity of the rubric content. Therefore, four experienced literature teachers were consulted. The result of their evaluation was positive, approving the validity of the suggested criteria. Moreover, in order to avoid any biased assessment, the rating process was conducted three times with a time interval of two weeks. Then, to check the level of the internal consistency and reliability of the scale adopted in the research rubric, Cronbach Alpha coefficient is calculated. As a final step, the qualitative data was coded and SPSS statistical program was used for the percentile values.

As a second research strategy, students' attitudes questionnaire is employed. Probing students' attitudes is considered as one of the main factors that helps understanding the students' overall performance. According to Candlin and Mercer, students' attitudes towards the target language, its speakers and the learning context may all play some part in explaining their success or failure (Candlin and Mercer, 2001). In line with this pedagogical perspective, surveying students' attitudes towards literary analysis essay would provide some clues to understand their failure to excel in composing adequate literary analysis essays. In the present study, 120 online questionnaires were distributed in order to have factual data regarding with the students' difficulties in reading literary texts, their interpretative challenges and literary essay writing. The questionnaires help understanding their reading and writing experiences, and find out what students really need to improve their ability in essay writing.

Finally, open-ended questionnaires were administered to investigate the literature teachers (lectures and course tutors) prospectations regarding challenging matters they are facing when teaching literature in general and more specifically the

writing about literature. The survey probes the practices in the teaching phase, the assessment phase, and the feedback strategies.

### III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

In relation to the reliability of the results obtained from the suggested analytic rubric, the Cronbach alpha coefficient is measured. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2010), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability index is acceptable for values above 0.80, and Hair, J.F., Black, W.C., Babin, B.J. and Anderson, R.E. (2010) confirmed that values above 0.70 are satisfying. In the present study, the obtained result of the Alpha reliability estimate for the reliability in rating students' writing performance is 0.819. This coefficient confirms that the scale used in this research rubric was observed as reliable and acceptable for assessing students' literary analysis essays.

As for the results obtained from the literary essay analysis, table 1 below refers to the distribution of the students' five criteria of performance throughout the five degrees.

**Table 1:** The Distribution of the Students' Performance in the Literary Analysis Essay

	Exceeds expectations 4	Meets expectations 3	Quite meets expectations 2	Below expectations 1	Missing expectations with serious problems 0
Introduction and conclusion	4.56%	25.37%	28.33%	31.34%	10.4%
Body paragraphs	0%	13.43%	31.32%	38.83%	16.42%
Overall organisation and style	4.98%	13.94%	32.97%	37.46%	10.65%
Literary analysis	1.20%	12.88%	25.61%	35.02%	25.29%
Writing mechanics	2.67%	11.94%	36.26%	36.86%	12.7%

With regard to the first criteria of performance, the results about essays' introduction and conclusion provide a valuable understanding of the students' weaknesses. As shown in table 1, 4.56% of students were rated in scale 4, with a significant minority in exceeding the expected performance. While about 28% whose performance quite meets the expectations, 31% of the students reflect some problems performing below the expectation.

Body paragraphs constitute the students' answers that are demonstrated in relevant topic sentences, adequate arguments, pertinent textual evidence, outstanding interpretations and comments. The results obtained from the analysis of the essay sample reflect critical difficulties in performing adequately. More than 38% of the students perform below the expectations, and about 16% are rated on scale 4 missing the expectations.

The results from the essay analysis indicate another strenuous aspect in the writing of literary analysis essays. Nearly 5% of students outperform expectations in organizing their ideas and thoughts in a well-structured format. Few students

achieved scale 3, meeting the expectations, and about 32% quite met the expectations. The majority of the students do not show a strong ability to organize their thoughts and more than 10% have written in an extremely bad way.

Literary analysis constitutes the fourth criterion of performance. Only 1.20% of the essays reflect high analytical thinking, clear reasoning, and a balance in providing text evidence and interpretive comments. About 12% of the essays reflect satisfactory performance while nearly 25% show a quite acceptable performance. On the other hand, the majority of the essays indicate a poor performance; with 35.02% under the level of expectations, and 25.29% reflect a failure to fulfil requirements for literary analysis.

Moreover, the essays' writing mechanics denote some unsatisfactory performance. According to the results, nearly half of the students make critical errors in the writing process and language use. The distribution of the scale shows that students' performance ranges between quite satisfactory and below the expected requirements. About 36% of the essays show quite acceptable writing performances, and about the same percentage of 36% perform below the expected level.

In addition, a brief glance over the distribution of the students' writing performance shows that no essay is error-free. The analytic rubric aids in identifying and categorizing major errors and table 2 below illustrates five categories of errors that appeared in the essay samples. The recorded errors from the different erroneous linguistic aspects focus mainly on the grammatical and mechanical ones. To be more precise, the analysed grammatical and mechanical aspects are, sentence fragment, subject-verb agreement, conjunction, and punctuation. The process of errors' identification, categorization, and evaluation is backed up by Pit Corder's theory of Error Analysis (1981).

**Table 2: An Illustration of Errors Appeared in the Essay Samples.**

Type of Error	Illustration	Corrections
Sentence fragment	Okonkwo <i>represents</i> as a success	Okonkwo <i>is represented</i> as a success
Subject –verb agreement	The flow of the tragic events <i>lead</i> to his downfall	The flow of the tragic events <i>leads</i> to his downfall
Conjunction	Since the novel belongs to the post-colonial discourse <i>therefore</i> it aims at portraying the African	Since the novel belongs to the post-colonial discourse, it aims at portraying the African ....
Double use of nouns	The novel <i>it</i> represents	The novel represents
Punctuation	the novel belongs to the post-colonial discourse <i>therefore</i> it aims at portraying the African ....	... the post-colonial discourse; <i>therefore</i> , it aims at portraying the African ....

Before moving to the findings related to students' attitudes towards their own learning experience and written performance, it is necessary to trace the participants' backgrounds. The survey shows that some students (30%) are open to other languages' literature and read outside the class. In terms of the main objectives of reading literature, 40% of the participants read literature to improve their linguistic proficiency; about 35 % believe that reading literature helps in improving critical thinking.



Reading literature to express a personal response to a literary work and share it with the class, do not fall within the scope of the students' interests. Only a limited number of participants (10% only) express pleasure in reading literature.

When asked about their reading experiences, about 50% of the participants said they read certain critics in addition to the given literary work. 31% said they read the summary of the assigned work and rely on literary critics, and the remaining 19% read the assigned work only. As for the frequency of reading, 59% read the assigned work only once, 38% read the chapters' summary and sometimes get back to the original literary work, only 20% of the participants read the literary work more than once. In order to probe the efficiency of the students' reading, the participants were asked to describe their reading experience. While 25% agree that they can make interpretations while reading, between 35% and 40% find themselves unable to individually read, interpret, and make a link between the different elements of the literary work. They find it necessary to check the suggested interpretations from critics and online resources. Diving into the participants' while-reading challenges, almost half of the students struggle with language and 42% of the participants claim that while reading, the concentration on deviated language and the different events of the text prevents them from making interpretations.

More than half of the participants find the literature lectures that offer mere theoretical reflections on the literary works insufficient. On the other side, the majority of the students find the course sessions more effective where they can enhance the analytical skills. According to the research findings, the in-class tasks and home assignments cover a variety of essays and paragraphs discussing a variety of questions. However, the majority of students find no balance between the efforts devoted to reading and writing about literature. That is to say, the focus is mainly on discussions about literary texts rather than producing written essays.

In terms of written performance, 77% of survey participants would rather write an essay answering a direct question than do a close reading of an extracted passage. In relation to the essay content and strategies to build adequate answers, 64% of the participants claim that they rely on the points discussed in class or previously read in some literary critics. Only 36% of participants attempt to provide autonomous answers to the questions and smoothly incorporate their own personal insight into the essay. As far as the essay structure is concerned, half of the participants find it difficult to organize their ideas and provide a coherent essay from the introduction to the conclusion. Providing adequate textual support from the primary source seems to be a tough task for about 52% of the participants.

As major challenges, students claim that there is less attention and time given for literary essays. According to them, the courses have somehow failed to provide a strong basis for writing adequate essays. Other students claim that the lack of sufficient time to elaborate and discuss a whole book is another major challenge. Others claim that not being able to choose the literary work and read what is on the agenda increases their demotivation and widens the gap towards the desired achievement. Some quoted comments from the participants are introduced below:

*"What is challenging in literature is to write an essay that crosses over the expectations of teachers."*

*"Deducing the literary devices and patterns from the literary works and finding the link between the different passages is so challenging for me"*

In relation to teachers' attitudes towards the students' performance and the teaching circumstances, the survey's participants are teachers who delivered lectures

and courses with an average teaching experience that ranges between 2 and 12 years. According to them, the objective of the literature class at the third year level is to mainly improve critical thinking skills. Teachers' responses show that they are aware of the significant shift in approaching literary texts, from a language focus to a broader focus on thinking skills. Literary texts shift from being a source of language in use to a tool that is manipulated by students in active reading and interaction. Teachers state that improving critical reading and interpretation, assisting students in thinking outside the box, allowing them to be aware of foreign culture, and demonstrating familiarity with major literary texts and literary movements are the most important pedagogical objectives.

When asked about the selected syllabus, 50% of the teachers think that the selected literary works are matching with the students' linguistic proficiency. The remaining half, however, claim that the students' linguistic competencies are lower than the literary texts, which makes their reading mission more laborious. In addition to that, the participants point up another pedagogical discrepancy. When coming to the practices, the majority of the teachers argue that there is no balance between 'reading' and 'writing' assignments. In other words, while a typical literature class is meant to enhance the students' make interpretations and analysis several literary materials, these latter tasks are accomplished via teachers' explanations, with little written production. In this sense, students seem to be oriented to reading literature over writing about it.

The teachers' overview about the in-class discussions is also explored through the survey and the findings bring out another challenging aspect. 7 out of 12 participants argue that despite the highlighted objectives, the in-class focus often moves away from developing 'higher thinking skills' to being on 'the comprehension skills.' In an attempt to cope with the low language proficiency of some students, and the laziness of the others who neglect reading the whole assigned works, the lesson ends up with the explanation of the different aspects of the literary text with a total teacher-centred approaches.

When it comes to designing tests and exam questions, the research findings show that 83% of teachers depend on what has already been addressed in class rather than testing students' thinking abilities through new, undiscovered literary works. As for the pedagogical objectives they intend to assess, teachers claim that in addition to language and writing skills, they evaluate students' critical thinking, interpretative reading, and knowledge about the literary work. They also assess students' ability to bolster their opinions with appropriate evidence from the text and other academics' output.

When teachers were asked about how they view their students' performance, 60% reported that most students are incapable of communicating their ideas in a coherent essay with an explicit thesis, an introduction, outstanding body paragraphs, and a conclusion. The teachers' description of the students' overall performance reflects a negative perspective. Some quoted illustrations are introduced below:

*"The overall performance of students in their literary analysis essays seems to be informative and a bit engaging for a limited number of excellent students, but most students' essays offer a weak performance."*

*"The students are not able to critically analyse and interpret the ideas, values, and themes that appear in a particular literary genre and texts. They do not show any critical skills in their literary productions."*

As a follow-up inquiry, the survey probes the reasons behind this weak performance, and teachers suggest that:

*"Students fail to deliver their ideas in a coherent essay since they rely on generalization instead of being concise and precise in delivering their message. For instance, students fail to write an effective thesis statement as they lack the ability to grasp the meaning of the given topic."*

*"Some of them [students] fail to transmit their ideas into a coherent essay due to the lack of knowledge about the given topic. Sometimes, students' poor language is the main reason for their failure."*

*"The lack of practice; one or two sessions per week is not enough and most students wait till the test or exam to produce a literary essay!"*

When asked about their feedback, the majority of teachers revealed that feedback helps in motivating students, and they often give feedback, especially when students show effort. Teachers often offer written feedback on the exam/test sheets; however, almost all of the participants agree that a detailed oral explanation of the students' flaws is rarely provided due to the lack of time.

Similarly, to the students' survey, the teachers' survey concludes with a question on the most challenging aspects of the literature class. Most teachers find it difficult to engage students in class and in group discussions. Language difficulties and students' reluctant attitudes, considering literature as a boring and difficult subject, inhibit a successful literature class. It is necessary to bring to a conscious level that, in addition to the aforementioned challenges, teachers frequently highlight the sad reality of the huge, overcrowded classes and the lack of pedagogical resources as one of the everyday struggles for many classes and the literature class as well.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The research findings demonstrate a wide gap between the expected skills and the actual attainment. The essays' examination confirm the students' inability to provide an adequate literary analysis; more than half of the students perform below expectations or miss the expectations. Many essays are actually rehearsals of the memorized notes or paraphrases of literary works. Students' failure to exhibit higher analytical performance is rooted in the inadequate reading strategies. This is confirmed with the analysis of extracted passages, where most students fail to approach the assigned passages with a close reading. It seems difficult for students to decipher the deviated language of literary texts because most of them are not equipped with the necessary language awareness and literary competencies, thus they are less involved in meaning making and interpretation. When the passage is offered in their hand, they are not qualified enough to conduct an immediate, rigorous close reading. This failure stems from the low language proficiency and lack of autonomous skills in approaching literature.

Moreover, the research findings indicate that students' output implies major problems in their writing habits, especially those related to coherence. According to the analytic study of the essays, over-generalizing topic sentences and missing the thesis statement are common problems faced by students. The low linguistic competence leads to a sort of perturbation in the writing flow, which pushes students to lose their track in the writing process. Also, the scrutinized essays reflect a serious scarcity of *savoir-faire*; most essays denote a lack of expertise and training in writing.

During the dedicated one or two hours, most students struggle between finding and constructing meaning on the one hand, and conveying their ideas in a clear-cut way, on the other hand. Furthermore, it seems that the students' biggest challenge is to be aware that they are conducting an analysis. The biggest flaw in essays is the lack of consistency, mainly in tense use. The majority of students rely on the narrative tenses, using the past forms, and then they abruptly shift to the present. This reflects the students' tendency to retell the story where 'long summaries' replace synthesized viewpoint and in-depth analysis.

Writing literary essays challenges students not only to recall and express in writing what they already know, what they have read, and what they have grasped and reviewed in class, but they also gauge the students' ability as problem solvers, critical thinkers, and autonomous individuals. Essay questions require students to synthesize information about the literary text, and organize thoughts into a sequence of coherent, logically related phrases and paragraphs. According to the research findings, answering one of the research questions, there is a slight divergence from what is meant to be achieved. The investigation reveals that students' performing below expectations is associated with a lack of awareness about their essential mission in the literature class in general and the literary essay in particular. The low level in literary analysis reflects the students' narrow reading strategies and superficial involvement with the literary texts, low critical thinking skills and lack of mental training. The essay structure also witnesses a huge deterioration in terms of coherence, body paragraphs, style, and writing mechanics. These drawbacks result in 'memory essays' and 'dependent performance'.

Results from the students' survey also indicate that the failure in essay analysis owes its roots to the reading strategies and the in-class involvement as well. The students-text-teacher triangular mechanism reflects a major failure. The critical thinking skills that should be manifested in the reading phase are almost absent. Instead of developing autonomous reading strategies, students look for who to rely on. First, they escape reading the texts independently, relying on critics and summaries, then the reliance shifts to be on their teacher. Students' dependence habits make them passive and ineffective thinkers. This transcends from the reading stage to the production stage. On the one hand, students try to overcome the reading challenges by grasping the teachers' explanations, and then they attempt produce 'memorized essays'.

The students' dependency can be linked to their backgrounds. Most students remain passive because they are unaccustomed to carrying out autonomous missions; additionally, external learning circumstances exacerbate this situation. The pedagogical paradigm rejects any sort of passive learning and promote whole class participation. Paradoxically, in class, there is no option but to abide by this passive mode of dependence. The survey findings reveal that the reduced time amount for discussion is one of the hindering aspects that prevent students' exposing deep individual reflections. In this way, even when students are ready to interact and hold mature discussions with their teacher or their fellows, they may find themselves deterred by some external conditions.

In addition to that, the language obstacle as well as the historical and cultural backgrounds of the texts overwhelm most students. Ideally, along the way to overcoming all these challenges, students develop their critical thinking that is reflected in their essays. However, about 40% of students reaching third-year level report that they read literary texts to improve their linguistic proficiency. While almost the majority of students still work on their linguistic issues, it would be inequitable to require a critical reading or interpretative discussion. The students' low linguistic competence and reading goals reflect that they are not able neither to generate their own ideas about literary texts nor to articulate others' ideas.

In line with the students' ability to articulate their ideas in a critical analysis essay, students admit that their struggle is to satisfy the teachers' expectations, and this is in fact a serious deviation from how the students' composition and perspective should be. Similarly, to what has been found from the essays' analysis, students' production is characterized by 'take away' interpretations. Writing skills are frequently insufficient, and critical thinking skills are barely demonstrated. This deficiency can be justified by the students' reading-writing disconnection. As illustrated in the research findings, at their best, 59% of students read the literary work only once, and this does not conform to adequate reading strategies. According to the four recognisable stages to reading literary fiction, the reader can start by an initial reading where he/she establishes what the play, poem or prose is about, then for deeper comprehension, a close analysis is to be conducted. Then, on the back of the close analysis, the reader would form what is called an interpretation of the text, and finally, the evaluative judgement is the ultimate stage (Phelan, J.W., 2020). These stages require more than one reading, and to be able to formulate a written analysis, it is necessary to read the literary work more than once. Having students who skip reading and others who read only once puts the reading endeavour in a critical state, and a full-fledged production would be unattainable.

Students' attitudes and dealing with literary criticism offer another avenue of exploration. Tracing the importance of literary criticism in literary reading and essay writing, Robert Protherough (1989) reports that, "*The discipline of literary criticism needs to be seen not as a body of information to be acquired but as an activity to be practiced.*" (p.19). Instead of interacting with literary critics and elaborating one's arguments, it is important to highlight that the students' dealing with literary critics, either inside or outside the classroom, is a sort of receptive process through which they can imitate the proposed analysis of different literary texts from an unlimited number of critics. According to the research findings, practicing criticism, interacting with the available analysis, and developing an independent one are all severely limited.

At a psychological level, students' performance seems to be largely threatened by their mental or emotional state. On some occasions, students are caught by boredom and demotivation studying literary texts out of interest, and in some other situations, they remain anxious about reading texts that are above their linguistic level. This is in addition to the general state of mind during tests and exams, where the production is effected by a high level of panic and apprehension. Literature curricula are frequently based on classic texts that contain a large amount of unfamiliar vocabulary, and students are also challenged by some literary aspects that necessitate stylistic explorations or cross-cultural reading. These elements captive the students' minds, and when they do not find external support, the level of their demotivation increases. This is confirmed by the students' responses when they claim that they do better in home assignment essays because they get better opportunities to understand the literary passages and the feeling of being judged is reduced. Accordingly, the assessment is a further level of passive performance since the students' production tends to be more teacher-directed and the analysis is limited to 'suited' what the teacher is looking forwards. A similar attitude is revealed in Protherough's study (1989), where he shows that "*students' performance illustrates that examination seem to inhibit rather than assist development, and instinctive response is replaced by what is called 'close analysis' and 'pulling apart' or analytical clinical dissection.*" (p. 32). Moreover, the huge demand for an explicit essay format shows that students are not ready to be autonomous in their production, and there is no trust in their

writing skills. This verity goes in line with the findings related to the analysed essays, reinforcing the lack of expertise and *savoir-faire*. Nevertheless, despite their 'passivity', 'demotivation', and 'dependency' students reflect their readiness to be independent, active readers throughout alternative pedagogical means. By reference to their preferences, students report that they would rather express their opinion towards literary texts in online forums or in-class sub-group discussions, which implies an urgent revision of the traditional ways of teaching and learning strategies.

In an attempt to draw some conclusion upon the teachers' attitudes towards the students' performance, the findings provide broader understanding on the teaching conditions, the in-class undertaking of literary materials, and literature assessment strategies. First, the teachers' responses towards the literature class objectives and their description of a typical literature class disclose the gap between the intended outcomes and the actual in-class practices. Teachers are frequently caught between two opposing conditions, adhering to the pedagogical agenda and seeking higher cognitive skills in literature courses on the one hand, and struggling with students' demotivation, low linguistic proficiency and traditional teaching methods on the other hand. Consequently, the majority of teachers reported that the literature class objectives are diminished to text comprehension; hence, little teacher-students interaction is delivered. The teacher-text -students' triangular mechanism is accordingly affected by overarching factors and considered as a failure according to teachers. This failure is also reported in a similar research study at the level of Tlemcen University. The researcher explored the teachers' attitude towards literature classes and according to the findings the majority of teachers reveal that teachers utilise most of the time talking and explaining "facts" about literature to the students, and in the class, it is the teacher who "works through the text", not the students (Amaria Fehaima, 2014).

Moreover, teachers indicate that this distortion in teaching habits is initially encountered in the selection of the literary materials and designing the literature syllabus. While incorporating students' preferences into instructional practices would rather help students make considerable gains in both the literary and language competence ( Ylmaz Cevdet, 2012), it seems that the existing strategies in the selection of literary material tend to pass over the students' linguistic level and interest effecting their motivation and ability to read, understand, and interpret. Teachers claim that the few written production in class is an extra restriction for students. It is true that while reading, students face many difficulties to construct ideas; yet in case they succeed to read critically, they are not sufficiently trained to articulate their thoughts in written compositions. This reality confirms that students' low attainment in essay analysis start with the scant reading and is deteriorated by the in-class strategies.

The findings reflect a deficiency in ongoing learning, extensive production and constructive feedback. The large number of students (about 40 students' classes) with different learning styles and difficulties, and the reduced time allotted for the course and the production (one hour and a half per a week) make it extremely difficult for students to be fully engaged in writing literary analysis essays. Teachers' survey shows that not only the students' performance that is not at the desired level, but further consideration of the teaching habits is required.

## CONCLUSION

As the title implies, the present study is an exploration of the EFL students' difficulties in literary performance in general and the essay writing in particular. The

three core constructs of the study are the literary essay papers, the students' learning strategies and attitudes towards literature classes, and finally the teachers' practices and attitudes towards both literature teaching and students' performance. In regard with the research questions, while the literary text are employed to enhance the higher cognitive skills, the research findings confirm the disillusioning divergence from this objective. This discrepancy is confirmed through the in-depth scrutiny of the students' essays that unveils most weaknesses in writing adequate literary analysis. The low attainment is stemmed mainly from unsuccessful reading strategies. In addition, both students' and teachers' responses to the research survey provide larger insights into a number of factors and contexts lying behind missing the expected outcomes. Low language proficiency, demotivated student, traditional teaching strategies and unsatisfactory circumstances are among the critical issues that make the set of objectives unreachable. In order to reconsider the effective role of literature in EFL classes, it is highly advisable to develop an adequate pedagogy, which will assume a place for teachers to lead the students towards an independent ability to read and appreciate literary texts as well as to enhance their essay writing skills.

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