

## **An Investigation into Prospective Teachers' Attitudes to Using Literature in the EFL Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

The present study has a twofold goal. On the one hand it examines the pros and cons of using literature in the ESL/EFL classroom. On the other it investigates the feelings and thoughts of prospective teachers of English as a foreign language concerning the inclusion of literature in the EFL classroom. In order to concretize the views of prospective English language teachers on the inclusion of literature in the EFL classroom an opinion survey of questionnaires was applied to 50 prospective teachers.

### **Introduction**

English language teaching has tended, perhaps especially since the 1950s and 1960s, to focus on more practical levels of language use. Language has been seen as functional, marketable worldwide: the teaching and learning of English as a Second or Foreign Language has in some ways threatened to reinforce the potential divide between Language and Literature Studies.

Due to this trend in language teaching the place of literature in foreign language curricula became a matter of heated discussion, embodying multiple and often clashing views. Where there are those who maintain that literature can contribute very little to language learning. Others believe that literature can contribute a great deal.

This debate did not stop at this issue only, but it extended to some other controversial issues like: the amount of literature that should be included in foreign language curricula; the type of the literary genre that should be taught; the criteria for selecting literary texts, how, when, where, and why it should be used.

### **Reasons Advanced Against the Inclusion of Literature**

There has been a relatively great debate criticizing the inclusion of literature in the EFL classrooms. Obeidat (1997:30) quotes some Arab educators' views concerning the inclusion of literature in the EFL classrooms. Obeidat says that some educators claim that the predominance of literature has been in one way or another, the cause of the failure of English departments in the Arab world to graduate competent students who are equipped with the linguistic knowledge

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that meets the needs for English as a language of international communication. Surprisingly enough, a large number of educators argue that literature impedes the students' progress in language learning.

The criticism directed against the inclusion of literature in the EFL classrooms; however, did not come out of vacuum. The opponents of literature in the EFL classrooms advanced some reasons for the exclusion of literature. These reasons can be summarized as follows:

### **1. Irrelevancy of literature to the students' future work.**

Many educators have emphasized students' knowledge of English or American literature does not seem to be relevant to their work after graduation. Students who graduate with a B.A. in English language and literature at any Iraqi or Arab university often go into teaching profession, or, at best, into some clerical and administrative work. (Zughoul, 1986:11) as cited in Obeidat (1997: 33).

### **2. Structural complexity and unique use of language.**

Since one of the goals of EFL teachers is to teach the grammar of the language, literature, due to its structural complexity and deviant use of language, does little to contribute to this goal. (Mckay, 1982:529)

### **3. Conceptual difficulty.**

Literature often reflects a particular cultural perspective; thus, on a conceptual level, it may be difficult for EFL students.(Ibid)

### **4. Lack of practical value.**

Educators feel that literary texts do not teach EFL students to communicate in the foreign language. They think of the language of literature as being totally different from practical, everyday exchanges.(Schloss,1981:29)

### **5. Students' lack of the analytical skills.**

Studying literature requires students to produce works of literary criticism and literary appreciation which are more complex than mere language comprehension. Such works require efficient analytical strategies which foreign students manifestly lack. Lacking such analytical methods to propose their own views, students often resort to the adoption and recycling of ready made critical judgments. (Buckledee,2002:8)

### **6. Lack of authentic assessment.**

Authentic assessment is not accomplished in most literature classes. Usually the students are told what they are expected to know about a short story, a poem, a novel or a play and then they reiterate the lectures back to the teacher. So.

lecturers won't be able to receive a realistic examination of what the students know and retain from reading literature through this process. (Leger, 2008:2)

#### **7. Selecting literature.**

Generally, the major criterion for selecting literary texts is not their accessibility for non-native EFL students, but their status as major works. A text which is extremely difficult on either the linguistic or cultural level won't be accessible to all students. (Buckledee, 2002:8). So, the literature curriculum which focuses on the text or on the content, not on the students won't be of great benefit due to its linguistic, grammatical, and conceptual difficulty. (Bernhardt, 2001:196)

#### **Reasons Advanced For the Inclusion of Literature**

As there has been a great criticism to the inclusion of literature in EFL classrooms, there has also been a praise and support to the inclusion of literature in the EFL classrooms. Many specialists support the view that literature not linguistic courses is what is needed to help English departments to upgrade their offerings and standards to graduate good competent students.

Specialists interested in literature frequently criticize the language oriented courses for their failure to provide students with much language competence. Linguistic courses, as Joseph John (1989) remarks, "cannot provide students with much language competence." He suggests that "language and linguistic courses are primarily concerned with the theoretical aspects of language, and their only function is to provide the students with knowledge of the linguistic rules and principles, a knowledge which, to some extent, restrains the students' use of language." Furthermore, he argues that linguists would want students to learn about the language rather than the language itself.

While specialists in literature criticize the language/linguistic oriented courses, they at the same time praise the literary courses and they believe that the inadequacies of teaching linguistic courses can be overcome if EFL learners are exposed to English literature through various forms of writing including fiction, poetry, drama, and essay. As John (1989:19) affirms that, "a student of linguistics learns about language, while a student of literature learns language as used in poetry, fiction, drama, or any other genre.

#### **The Educational Value of literature**

Sage (1987:7) believes that no reason for the study of literature would stand up if it did not consider the effects of literature on learning not just language learning but all kinds of learning. Hence, many educators have stressed the educational value of the inclusion of literature in the EFL classrooms. They emphasize that the study of foreign literatures broadens students' horizons, informs and enlightens their judgment, and teaches them human wisdom and integrity. (Schloss, 1981:31).

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### **The linguistic Importance of Literature**

All EFL teachers share the objective of promoting their students' awareness of the structure of the language on both levels of usage, which involves knowledge of linguistic rules, and use which entails knowing how to use these rules for effective communication. The question is, can a literary text contribute to knowledge of either of them?

McKay (1982:529) assures that most present day literary texts assume that literature can provide a basis for extending language usage. McKay quotes Povey (1972:187) who argues that "literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax."

### **The Cultural Value of Literature**

There are those who argue that a language cannot be taught without culture. Kramsch (1993) quoted in McKay (2001:329), for example, maintains that if language "is seen as a social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. For this reason, EFL students require more than language instruction; they also need an orientation to the target culture. This culture is at best sometimes unfamiliar, and often completely unknown to these students. Teachers and administrators who have struggled with this difficulty have always found a solution in the cultural values inherent in and transmitted through literature. Sage (1987:5) explores some specialists' advocacy of literature as an effective vehicle of cultural learning. He quotes (Scott: 1964) who believes that literature is "one of the most obvious and valuable means of attaining cultural insights." (Rosenblatt: 1978) wrote "literature is an effective vehicle of cultural learning that empowers the reader to overcome the limitations of sex, race, or culture." (Povey:1979) affirms that "literature is a link towards that culture which sustains the expression of any language."

Very often literary texts cover the four dimensions of culture: the aesthetic dimension in which a language is associated with the literature, film, and music of a particular country; the sociological dimension in which language is linked to the customs and institutions of a country; the semantic dimension in which a culture's conceptual system is embodied in the language; and the pragmatic dimension in which cultural norms influence what language is appropriate for what context.(McKay,2001:328) .So, one dare say that literary texts provide an ideal context for exploring cultural differences.

### **The Development of the Four Skills**

The inclusion of literature in the EFL curriculum provides an ideal way to integrate the development of the four basic skills.

Literary texts are ideal as content for extensive reading programmes in EFL classrooms. They increase students' interest in reading English. (McKay, 2001:326). Literature can form the basis of an extensive reading program with the attendant acquisition of new vocabulary as well as grammatical forms. Extensive reading of literature can encourage students to develop positive attitudes towards reading. (Strong,1996:291)

Literature also offers an excellent context for developing listening skill. Teachers can use texts available on audiotapes to encourage students to listen to literature read by professionals. A clear advantage of this is that such material exposes students to a variety of dialects and voice qualities. (Ibid)

Perhaps the greatest benefit of using literature in EFL classrooms is its potential for developing students' speaking skills, particularly their sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. Story dialogues used in literary texts differ from dialogues written for traditional language learning texts in that such dialogues typically offer a detailed account of the speakers' backgrounds and role relationships. Hence, story dialogues provide students with a basis for judging the appropriateness of language use. (Ibid: 327)

Literature can be used to develop students' writing abilities by having students write personal essays about the literary texts they read. Using writing in this way offers two benefits. First, it provides students with a way to express their personal interpretation of a story, thus it promotes their aesthetic response to the literary texts they read. Second, it helps them to learn to support their opinions and conclusions with relevant information. (Ibid: 328)

### Selecting literature

The key to success in using literature in the ESL class seems to McKay (1982:531) to rest in the literary works that are selected. A text which is extremely difficult on either a linguistic or cultural level will have few benefits. One common method of solving the potential problem of linguistic difficulty is the simplification of the text. There are, however, serious disadvantages to using this approach. As Honeyfield (1977:434-35) quoted in (McKay, 1982:531) points out, simplification tends to produce a homogenized product in which the information becomes weak. The additional words in the text tend to spread the information out rather than to localize the information. Furthermore, the simplification of syntax may reduce cohesion and readability. Since proficient readers rely heavily on localized information and cohesive devices, deleting these elements will contribute little to the development of reading skills.

So using simplified versions wouldn't be of benefit in the EFL class. Are there any alternatives? One obvious solution is to select texts which are accessible to EFL students. However, readability and accessibility counts typically are based on some measure of vocabulary difficulty and some indices of syntactic complexity, such as sentence length. In dealing with literature, these

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counts, of course, give no indication of the complexity of the text in terms of plot, character, or cultural difficulty. (Ibid: 532)

A second solution is to select texts from literature written for young adults. Such literature, which tends to have the following characteristics. Frequently, the theme of such literature deals with the problem of personal growth and development. Furthermore, most literature for young adults tends to be relatively short, and the characters usually limited to a small cast of characters with a young adult as the central character. Most importantly, from an ESL perspective, many of the books tend to be stylistically less complex. Donelson and Nilsen (1980:14-15)

In addition to selecting literary texts that are stylistically uncomplicated, it is important to select themes with which the students can identify. Certainly, one common experience of most ESL students is their struggle with a language and culture with which they are unfamiliar. Thus, literature which deals with either of these themes should be highly relevant to them. (McKay, 1982:532)

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Questions**

In the light of the aforementioned reasons advanced for the inclusion and exclusion of literature courses in the EFL classrooms, three main questions guided this research study:

1. What is the importance of literature courses in the education of the prospective English language teachers?
2. What literature courses do these prospective teachers find most beneficial and why?
3. What changes do they suggest to improve the effectiveness of these specified courses?

#### **Data Collection**

The research study data were collected through a questionnaire which was conducted to 50 prospective English language teachers who are studying at the department of English, college of Education, university of Basrah.

#### **Description of the Questionnaire**

The questionnaire is composed of ten questions that are put to investigate prospective teachers' attitudes to using literature in the EFL classroom. The questions address prospective teachers' views towards: the necessity of the literary courses for their development as English language teachers; ranking of literary courses according to their beneficence; the impact of these courses on the development of their language skills; the content of the literary courses offered to them; the number of texts for each course; the place of the teaching of

language skills; the place of the historical-biographical knowledge; and the need for additional courses.

The questionnaire questions were identical to those used by Arikan (2005), with the exception that slight changes have been done on some questions so as to suit the teaching situation at the department of English, college of Education, University of Basrah.

The questionnaire was conducted during the second semester of the academic year 2008-2009. Specifically during the last week of the teaching practice period of the surveyed prospective teachers.

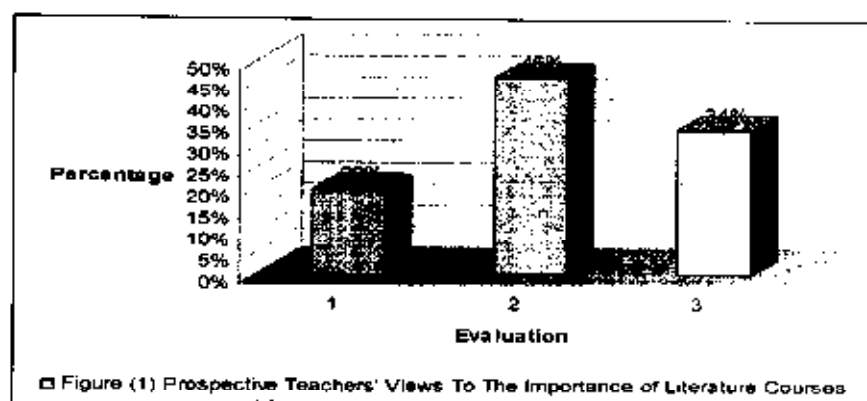
## Questionnaire Findings

1. Are literature courses necessary for your development as an English language teacher?

**Table (1) Prospective Teachers' Views to the Importance of Literature courses**

Participants	Not Necessary	Necessary	Very Necessary
Prospective Teachers	20%	46%	34%

The results of the prospective teachers' questionnaire show that 80% of them asserted the necessity of the literature courses; 34% and 46% respectively opted for very necessary and necessary. However; only 20% of them believe that these literature courses were not necessary. It can be suggested that the majority of the prospective teachers themselves realize, and then emphasize that literature has an impact and place in their development as teachers. Figure (1) below graphically draws prospective teachers' views about the importance of literature courses.



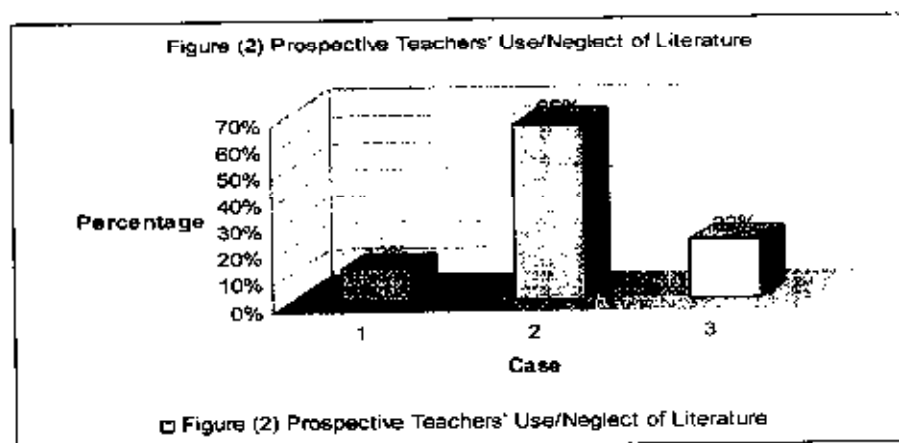
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2. Do you use what you have learned in these courses in your present teaching contexts as a teacher trainee?

**Table (2) Prospective Teachers' Use/ Neglect of Literature**

Participants	Not Really	Somehow	Definitely
Prospective Teachers	12%	66%	22%

The majority of the surveyed prospective teachers affirmed that they have, to some extent, used what they learned in these courses in their present teaching contexts. 66 % of them claim so. 22 % of them claim that they, definitely, have used what they had learned in these courses in their present teaching contexts. 12 % of them denied their use of what they had learned in these courses in their present teaching contexts. Figure (2) below graphically represents prospective teachers' use or neglect of literature courses in their teaching contexts.



3. Which literature courses have been most beneficial to you as a teacher trainee?

**Table (3) Prospective Teachers' Ranking of Literature Courses According to Their Benefit**

Participants	Introduction to literature	Novel	Drama	Short Story	Poetry
Prospective Teachers	20 %	14 %	14 %	38 %	14 %

The ranking of the literary courses according to their benefit to the surveyed prospective teachers, shows that short story is the most beneficial of these courses where (38 %) of them rank it as the most beneficial course.



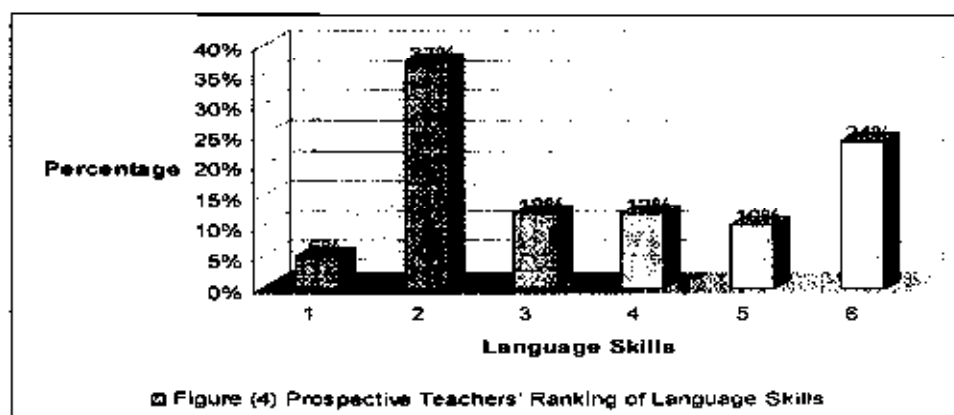
Introduction to English Literature comes at the second place were (20%) of them vote for it. The other three courses show similarity in their final assessment by the prospective teachers with 14% for Poetry, 14% for Drama, and 14 % for Novel. Figure (3) below graphically represents prospective teachers' ranking of literature courses according to their benefit.

**4. Which of your language skills and abilities have/had improved in these courses**

**Table (4) Prospective Teachers' Ranking of Language Skills**

Participants	Listenin g	Speakin g	Readin g	Writin g	Gramma r	Vocabul ary
Prospective Teachers	5 %	37 %	12 %	12 %	10 %	24 %

In terms of the relationship among the aspects and skills of the English language and literature courses, 37 % of the participants claimed that their speaking skill improved with the help of these literature courses while those who claimed their reading and writing skills improved made up 12 % for each one of them. The respondents who believe that their listening has benefited from these courses make up 5 % only and grammar 10 %. However, 24 % of the surveyed prospective teachers found literature courses very beneficial for acquiring new vocabulary items. Figure (4) graphically draws teachers' ranking of their skills that had improved in these courses.



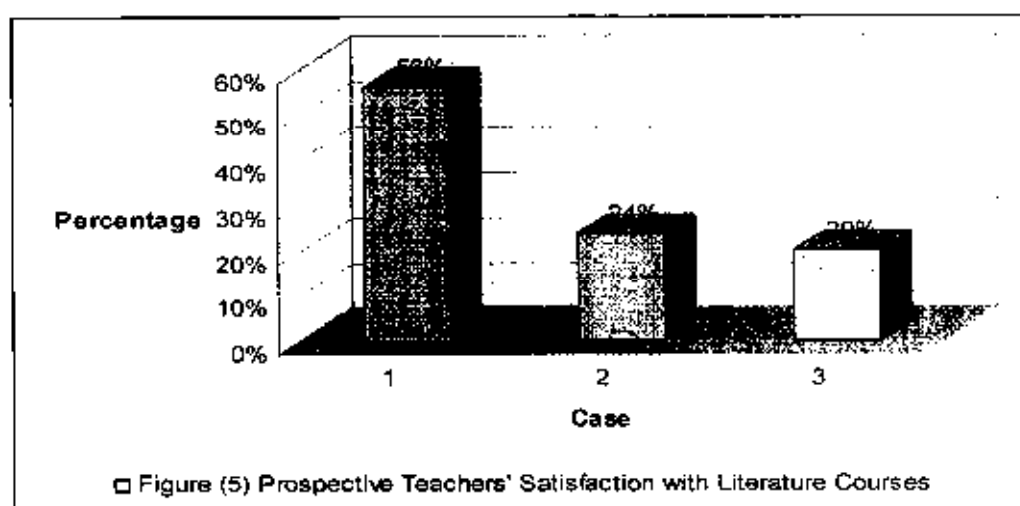
**5. Are you satisfied with the overall content of the literature courses in this department?**

**Table (5) Prospective Teachers' Satisfaction with Literature Courses**

Participants	Yes, but it needs changes	Yes	No
Prospective Teachers	56 %	24 %	20 %

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The question investigates if the respondents were satisfied with the contents of these literature courses, only 20 % of the prospective teachers respond negatively. Surprisingly, 56 % of them are satisfied with the literature courses offered to them, however, they claim that all literature courses need minor changes even though they may remain as they are in the current curriculum. Thus, it can be said that despite the fact that only 24% of the respondents seem to be fully satisfied with the contents of these courses, the problems with the contents are minor and not formidable. Figure (5) below graphically draws teachers' evaluation to the literature courses offered in this department.



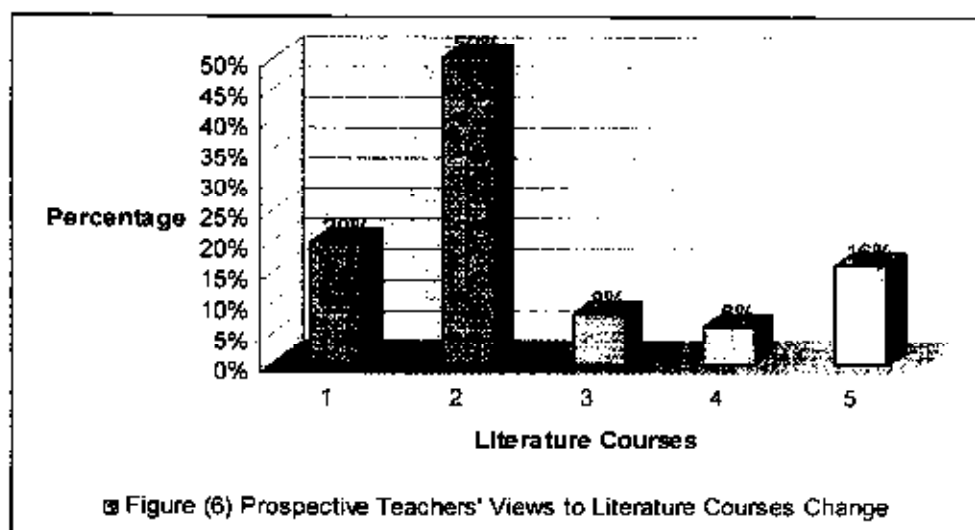
### 6. Which courses' syllabi require most urgent and serious change?

**Table (6) Prospective Teachers' Views to Literature Courses Change**

Participants	Introduction to literature	Novel	Drama	Short Story	Poetry
Prospective Teachers	20 %	50 %	8 %	6 %	16 %

In terms of the evaluation of each of the literature courses, respondents point at two courses as requiring urgent change. 50 % of the surveyed prospective teachers believe that novel courses require the most urgent change. However, despite the prospective teachers' evaluation of Introduction to English Literature course as the second best course in beneficence to them, it is surprising, yet noteworthy, that 20 % of the surveyors demand that the content of the Introduction to English Literature course is the one that necessitates the most urgent change. Following that, Poetry makes up 16 % of the responses. Short story and Drama courses make

up 6 % and 8 % respectively. Figure (6) below shows teachers' views to literature courses change.



#### 7. What should the place of literary texts be in these courses?

Table (7) Place of Literary Texts

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When asked what should the place of the texts in these courses, 58 % of the prospective teachers preferred the decrease of the number of the texts, whereas 42 % felt that it would be better to expose to more texts.

#### 8. What should the place of teaching skills be in these courses?

Table (8) Place of Teaching Language Skills

Participants	Less teaching skills is needed	More teaching skills is needed
Prospective Teachers	20 %	80 %

The majority of the prospective teachers affirmed that more teaching skills is needed in these courses, where 80 % claim so. 20 % of them think that less teaching skills is needed.

#### 9. What should the place of historical-biographical knowledge be in these courses?

Table (9) Place of Historical-Biographical Knowledge

Participants	Less such knowledge is Needed	More such knowledge is Needed
Prospective Teachers	66 %	34 %

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When asked what should the place of biographical and historical knowledge to be taught in these courses, 66 % of those surveyors demand minimizing such knowledge. Thus, it can be said that, the majority of the surveyed prospective teachers demand to minimize such knowledge, while 34% of those prospective teachers wish to maximize such knowledge.

### **10. Should there be additional/elective literature courses?**

**Table (10) Additional Literature courses**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Prospective Teachers</b>	<b>72 %</b>	<b>28 %</b>

The last question asked to the respondents was whether they would like to have additional or elective courses such like world literature, film and literature, literary theory, etc., 72 % of the respondents approached the idea positively. Such a result might be used to emphasize that, for the participants, literature means to be a connector between these students' linguistic and cultural development, bridging their professional and educational growth with the target language and culture as well as the students' their own life styles through various means. At last but not least, students' positive opinions about having additional literature courses show that they see these courses as necessary and informative.

### **Conclusions**

In the light of the data gathered from those prospective teachers, the following conclusions are drawn out:

1. Prospective language teachers of English are concluded to be great supporters to the inclusion of literature courses in the English language teaching curricula, where they themselves realize and then emphasize that literature has a great impact on their development as English language teachers.
2. The majority of the surveyed prospective teachers of English are, to some extent, well-equipped to use what they have learned, in the literary courses offered to them during their study, in real teaching contexts.
3. Long and non-literal literary texts are less beneficial than short and literal texts. This might be a result of two reasons; first, long literary texts are tiring to the students for being full of lengthy details the matter that lead to the loss of entertainment. Second, non-literal or figurative texts might be more difficult to be accessed by the students than literal texts.
4. Oral language skills are developed greater than other skills; this is because of the heavy reliance on such skills as speaking, discussing, and reading in tutoring the literary courses.

5. As the data suggest, these prospective teachers want to have more access to literature related courses such like 'Literature for Vocabulary Development' or 'Film and Literature' through which the students will have access to the authentic use of the language. Thinking that such courses will have a positive effect on these students' language skills such courses must be taught at least as elective courses.
6. The findings reveal that there are certain aspects in the syllabi of these courses to be retained and some others to be reviewed and reconsidered. Hence, students, even though they are content with these courses, demand minor changes in the curriculum design. It is the students' argument that certain literature courses necessitate urgent content changes. Introduction to literature course, the one that students find beneficial most, is the first in this list.

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## أسقضاء وجهة نظر المدرسي حول تدريس الأدب في صفوف اللغة الأنكليزية كلغة أجنبية

### الخلاصة :

إن للدراسة الحالية هدفٌ ذو جنبتين فمن جهة تتفحص آراء المناصرين والمعارضين لأستخدام الأدب في فصول اللغة الأنكليزية كلغة أجنبية أو كلغة ثانية. ومن جهة ثانية فهي تحقق في مشاعر وأفكار مدرسي اللغة الأنكليزية المستقبليين (المطبقين) فيما يتعلق بأدخال الأدب في فصول اللغة الأنكليزية كلغة أجنبية. ومن أجل وضع وجهات نظر مدرسي اللغة الأنكليزية المستقبليين في واقع ملموس فقد طُبّق أسلوب استبيان على 50 مدرس مستقبلي للغة الأنكليزية لأستعراض وجهات نظرهم فيما يتعلق بأدخال الأدب في فصول اللغة الأنكليزية كلغة أجنبية.