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Can Course Design and Language Competence Contribute to the Understanding of Literature for EFL Students? A Case Study at a Saudi Arabian University

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ABSTRACT

Teaching literature without a prerequisite in a Saudi Arabian University curriculum for EFL students revealed a variety of impediments, including a lack of critical and analytical skills, ambiguity tolerance issues, and a low level of English proficiency. This research aims to examine the course limitations and assessments and provide a development strategy to improve those key skills. As a result, the study separated the topic into numerous questions that constitute the primary axes the research aims to address. The first question is whether the existing course design, ENG280 Introduction to Literature, is appropriate for level 4 students. The second question concerns whether a prerequisite should be included in the academic plan. The final question concerns how students' English proficiency affects their understanding of the course. Methodological triangulation is used to address these questions appropriately. The utilization of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods provides the availability of high-quality data required to improve the findings. The data was collected using a lecturer's questionnaire and an English language competence test. The language competence test is aligned with the 2020 edition of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). The study highlighted flaws in the course design and assessments, including advanced skill expectations that were inappropriate for fourth-level students' linguistic and skill capabilities. As a result, the study provides developmental suggestions for course design and assessments that can successfully address issues connected to students' linguistic and literary abilities. Implementing the improvement plan will simultaneously enhance the students' linguistic level and develop their critical analysis abilities. Students will also have sufficient time and diverse assessment methods that align with their linguistic and literary capabilities, providing them with encouragement and motivation to learn.

KEYWORDS:
Course design; Literature teaching; Linguistic competence; Literary competence.

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Introduction

Introduction to Literature with the code ENG280 is the course under study, and it is implemented as one of the mandatory courses for students of level 4 in the departments of English and Translation at a Saudi Arabian University. The course is divided into three sections: short stories, poetry, and drama, with a variety of direct and indirect, critical and analytical questions on each literary work. The course aims to introduce EFL students to the different genres of literature and the leading literary terms. However, the course requires advanced critical and analytical skills and other mental abilities such as visualization and imagination, all of which the students have not been previously introduced to. Therefore, to ensure the achievement of the specified objectives and the sustainability of the program, certain criteria should be considered in the course design and implementation plan. Of such criteria, literature provocative nature and the low proficiency in the English language stand out as the most critical.

According to Krishnasamy (2015), unless the course matches the students' real levels of proficiency, it risks producing "a mismatch between the text selected and students' language ability" which would indeed affect the implementation of the course and the achievement of its objectives. Language proficiency plays a major role in understanding literature (Hasna et al., 2024). A student cannot connect the dots if he does not understand the literal meaning, which is usually the first step before a more in-depth reading. In his book, Literature, Spoken Language and Speaking Skills in Second Language Learning, Jones (2019) focused on the concern that "language proficiency would become an interfering factor, especially on their students' control and interpretation of pragmalinguistic features". A sufficient command of English would then be inevitable to ensure the student can keep up with the unique nature of literature, mainly characterized by high information density resulting from the use of metaphoric language and symbols (Sun, 2023). The first and subsequent steps rely on other factors, such as tolerance of ambiguity and persistence to meet the pace and load of the course, which may require more than one reading for a full understanding of the idea and message. It is, therefore, why English literature is a serious academic discipline that prompts many potentials in EFL students.

The basic contention is when students should be learning this course and if they need a prerequisite with the fundamental skills, they need to develop for studying literature. The question comes first: language proficiency or literature learning has been controversial for many educationalists. In a master dissertation on the objectives of teaching literature in Zambian Secondary schools (Mwape, 1984), the scholar remarks that "the weak L2 student probably needs literature more than the more proficient L2 learner". Supporting the same opinion, EFL students can learn linguistic features while pursuing the literary interpretation of authentic work (Teranishi et al., 2015). In a study on the problems of English literature teaching to EFL high school students in Turkey, English literature…is immensely resourceful and can provide for any level of proficiency: beginner, intermediate or advanced (Işıklı & Tarakçıoğlu, 2017).

On the other side, in a recent study by Naji et al. (2019), it is argued that literary texts are generally unsuitable for language learning for several reasons. One of the reasons they mentioned is that language of literary texts is usually 'obscure and complex,' that it is somehow divorced or different from ordinary 'everyday' language; the language which students encounter in literature could be archaic or contain unusual words that students are

not likely to encounter in other contexts". This is because literary writers use metaphoric and symbolic language besides other innovative ways to view the world differently from ordinary people. Naji et al. continue, "literature can be a source of neologisms, as writers invent new words to express innovative ways of viewing the world". Other reasons include the extension of syntactic rules in a way that violates grammatical norms and word order. Students can only develop new grammatical structures and expand their existing language system but not learn new ones when the basis does not exist. Language learning is a separate process with its own learning strategies that would definitely interfere with literature learning process and would very likely cause many pauses in the learning process (reading or analysis).

Along with language proficiency, the appropriateness of teaching Introduction to Literature ENG280, with its current content and no prerequisite, is a matter of question. The course reflects serious content and methodological limitations that impact the students' general understanding, as well as the individual objectives of each chapter of the course. The inconsideration of literature provocative nature, whether in the designing of the course or the assessment tasks, results in other related problems, including tolerance of ambiguity and the unwillingness to read the full prescribed texts.

Introduction to Literature, with its various course designs, has piqued the interest of researchers in recent years due to the challenges that have arisen. In the study 'Challenges to Teaching English Literature at the University of Hail: Instructors' Perspective' Hussein and Al-Emami (2016), students' cultural perspectives were identified as the primary barrier to a proper understanding of the course materials. Another study on the same course, but with a different course design, is 'Challenges to Studying English Literature by Saudi Undergraduate EFL Students as Perceived by Instructors' (Alshammari et al., 2020; Lshammari et al., 2020). The study examined 20 teachers' perspectives on their experience teaching that course. They focused on the students' unwillingness to study literature in the first place, as well as instructional tactics that can address this issue. A more recent study examined PowToon animation's function in teaching English literature to EFL students, noting that students are more engaged when working with online projects and resources (Yuliani et al., 2021).

The previous studies touched on various topics related to teaching literature to EFL students but fell short of addressing the critical issue of course design and assessments. While factors like students' cultural perspectives and instructional strategies are important, the primary challenge with the Introduction to Literature course at a Saudi Arabian University is the course design, selection of literary works, and a limited range of assessment methods. This recent study highlights a fundamental aspect: even when all learning conditions are favorable, including a conducive classroom environment, a competent teacher, and students receptive to different cultures, an ill-designed or overly exhaustive course will yield unsatisfactory outcomes.

Course design studies are crucial for those involved in Letter or TESOL departments because they offer a structure for developing interesting and successful curricula that satisfy the department's and students' requirements and objectives. A well-designed course encourages learning and participation from students. By researching course design, stakeholders can construct courses that are designed rationally, use appropriate teaching approaches, and incorporate different assessment strategies. This maximizes learning outcomes by ensuring students stay motivated and actively engaged throughout the course.

Course design studies also aid in optimizing resource allocation. By carefully arranging the course structure, content distribution methods, and evaluation kinds, stakeholders may deploy resources effectively. This includes leveraging the correct balance of human resources (such as instructors and teaching assistants), technical tools, and physical items to promote student learning and create a positive educational experience (Bloemert et al., 2019).

To fulfill the preceding conditions, literature course designers must acknowledge the curriculum's distinct characteristics and the intricate nature of its genres. The challenging nature of literature education has attracted the attention of numerous researchers in the fields of literature and pedagogy, who strive to identify the most effective teaching methods. Their goal is to facilitate a seamless understanding of the material and foster linguistic proficiency and literary acumen development. Of the main challenges researchers face in their studies is the English language. Işiki and Tarakçioğlu (2017) state that techniques and teaching methodologies in Turkey should be incorporated to "first target development of students' linguistic competence rather than their literary competence". In his book A Comprehensive Handbook for Ordinary Level Literature in English, Kachele (2022) explains the importance of linguistic competence in literature teaching in the following points:

Language serves as the medium through which literature is conveyed. Essentially, literature is created through language, meaning that without language, there would be no literature. Literature transforms and elevates ordinary language into a creative form. This process systematically deviates from everyday speech and employs figurative language. Furthermore, language aids students in developing skills for analyzing various literary texts.

Other challenges of teaching literature include loss of motivation, stylistic difficulty, and degree of cultural (un)familiarity. Hussein and Emami (2016) state that "unfamiliarity with the cultural and social background of the text is the most serious student-related challenge". Accordingly, students had great difficulty relating texts to real-life experiences. In a recent study, Vu et al. (2022) attach considerable value to motivation in the academic domain and its direct and strong relevance to success; "motivation constructs that are beliefs about competence and efficacy influence achievement by inducing self-regulatory, academic behaviors".

Hussein and Emami (2016) offer a wider perspective that discusses a larger set of variables affecting EFL students' processing ability at Hail University, Saudi Arabia. A part of this perspective is applicable to the situation at Qassim University. The variables included text-related challenges, student-related challenges, and instructors and pedagogy-related challenges. The difficulty of the prescribed texts on both the linguistic and cultural levels and texts with too many figures of speech are two of the shared text-related challenges in both Hail University and Saudi Arabian University. Students' unfamiliarity with the cultural context, their inability to relate to the literary text, and their lack of motivation and interest to participate actively in the class are the student-related challenges that had a huge impact on their linguistic and literary competence.

Therefore, course design studies play a pivotal role in upholding accreditation standards and ensuring the delivery of quality education. Accreditation bodies typically mandate evidence of systematic course design and evaluation processes. By engaging in course design studies, stakeholders can showcase their dedication to educational excellence and continuously enhance the caliber of their programs. This commitment to quality directly

impacts the institution's reputation, as well-designed courses that yield positive student outcomes and high satisfaction rates reflect favorably on the institution as a whole. Consequently, the department's reputation is elevated, attracting high-achieving students and esteemed faculty members and fostering an environment that cultivates academic distinction.

Course materials design has a significant impact on students' learning experiences. According to the University of Michigan's (Hille & Cho, 2020) "Design Principles for Online Course Materials," a well-designed course should be clear, consistent, and multimedia-based. This includes employing simple language, following a consistent style, and including a variety of elements such as written content, visual content, and interactive components. Furthermore, their guidance (Guney, 2019) emphasizes the importance of multimedia in improving learning retention and engagement. They say: "Multimedia instruction has been shown to improve learning outcomes and increase student motivation." The notion of learner-centered design is also prominent, as Educause in Kavalier et al (2006) noted in "Putting Learners First." They suggest "by considering learners' characteristics, interests, and goals, educators can tailor course materials to match their needs, fostering a more meaningful and impactful learning journey." Furthermore, the University of Washington (Fournier, 2024), in its paper "Writing Effective Learning Objectives," emphasizes the necessity of connecting course content with specific learning objectives. They offer guidance: "Clearly articulated learning objectives provide a compass for both instructors and students, ensuring that course content and assessments work in tandem to achieve desired outcomes." These principles, supported by recent research, provide a foundation for developing dynamic and effective course materials that address the requirements and preferences of modern learners.

To fulfill the preceding conditions, literature course designers must acknowledge the curriculum's distinct characteristics and the intricate nature of its genres. The challenging nature of literature education has attracted the attention of numerous researchers in the fields of literature and pedagogy, who strive to identify the most effective teaching methods. Their goal is to facilitate a seamless understanding of the material and foster linguistic proficiency and literary acumen development. One of the main challenges researchers face in their studies is the English language. Işiki and Tarakçioğlu (2017) state that in Turkey, techniques and teaching methodologies should be incorporated to “first target development of students' linguistic competence rather than their literary competence" (p.12). In his book A Comprehensive Handbook for Ordinary Level Literature in English, Kachele (2022) explains the importance of linguistic competence in literature teaching in the following points:

Language serves as the medium through which literature is expressed. Without language, literature would not exist. Literature transforms and elevates ordinary language into something creative. In this process, it diverges from everyday speech, utilizing figurative language instead. Additionally, language aids students in developing skills for analyzing various literary works.

Other challenges of teaching literature include loss of motivation, stylistic difficulty, and degree of cultural (un)familiarity. Hussein and Emami (2016) state, "unfamiliarity with the cultural and social background of the text is the most serious student-related challenges". Accordingly, students had great difficulty relating texts to real-life experiences. In a recent study, Vu et al. (2022) attaches considerable value to motivation in the academic domain and its direct and strong relevance to success; “motivation constructs that are

beliefs about competence and efficacy influence achievement by inducing self-regulatory, academic behaviors" (p.9).

Hussein and Emami (2016) offer a broader perspective that discusses a larger set of variables affecting EFL students' processing ability at Hail University, Saudi Arabia. A part of this perspective is applicable to the situation at a Saudi Arabian university. The variables included text-related challenges, student-related challenges, and instructors and pedagogy-related challenges. The difficulty of the prescribed texts on both the linguistic and cultural levels and texts with too many figures of speech are two of the shared text-related challenges in both Hail University and Saudi Arabian University. Students' unfamiliarity with the cultural context, inability to relate to the literary text, and lack of motivation and interest to participate actively in the class are the student-related challenges that greatly impacted their linguistic and literary competence.

In the light of the above statement of problem, the study seeks to provide answers to the following questions: (1) What are the limitations of the course design and assessments of Introduction to Literature ENG280 in a Saudi Arabian University, and how can they be addressed?, (2) Should a prerequisite be incorporated in the academic plan, and what are its main features?, and (3) Which stage is most appropriate for students to learn the course Introduction to Literature ENG280 with its current skills requirements? These questions have been investigated from two different- though interrelated angles: student-related challenges and text-related challenges.

Method

Context

Introduction to Literature (ENG 280) is a fourth-level course that introduces students to the fundamental genres, notable authors, and critical analysis techniques of English literature. Spread across 45 teaching hours, the course encompasses 13 diverse topics. These topics comprehensively cover the three primary literary genres: short stories, poetry, and drama. Within the realm of short stories, students delve into a curated selection, including "The Japanese Quince," "Miss Brill," "Gooseberries," "Hills Like White Elephants," "The Lottery," and "Young Goodman Brown." Turning to poetry, they explore masterpieces such as Emily Dickinson's "A bird came down the walk," A.E. Housman's "Is my team ploughing?," William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper," Thomas Hardy's "The man he killed," and Philip Larkin's "Toads." In the realm of drama, they focus their studies on 'The Sandbox.'

The prescribed activities are group discussions, group assignments, and presentations. Assessment is tripartite, comprising a midterm exam, periodic quizzes, and a comprehensive final examination. The learning process revolves around three basic modes: lectures, class discussion, and teamwork.

One notable limitation of the course lies in the static nature of its content and assessment structure, which has remained unchanged from 2019 to 2023. The current study specifically focuses on 2019, 2020, and 2021, as these years witnessed the highest student enrollment, thereby providing a larger dataset for more conclusive results and statistical analysis.

Sample

The present study was conducted on 163 students of level 4 of the English and Translation departments at a Saudi Arabian University. The study was carried out for three successive years, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Student Participants*

Year	N	%
2019	58	36%
2020	57	35%
2021	48	29%
Total	163	100

Instruments

The researcher integrated both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection. The use of 'methodological triangulation,' which refers to "the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods and analysis in studying the same phenomenon" (A. Hussein, n.d.), ensured the availability of the quality data needed to enhance the findings. The quantitative method, which enabled a numerical analysis of data, represented the micro-perspective of the individual participants of the learning problems, while the qualitative method was used to capture information related to the course content and methodological-specific shortcomings, which were not conveyed in the quantitative data.

The study employed a range of instruments and techniques to gather qualitative data. One such technique was focus group discussions, which facilitated discussions and interactions, offering valuable insights into shared opinions and attitudes toward the course and specific topics. Observations served as the primary tool for the researcher to collect information on student interactions and reactions. The third instrument, which validated the researcher's prior observations, was document analysis, encompassing various forms of written exams. This analysis also included feedback from students through instant messaging and email communications. By utilizing these three tools, the researcher was able to collect high-quality data that was further supported and enhanced by the quantitative data collected. The combination of these methods provided a comprehensive understanding of student perspectives and experiences, allowing for a rich and nuanced analysis of the course and its impact.

The study used a lecturer's questionnaire and a language proficiency test as its main quantitative data collection tools. In order to ensure the reliability of the datasets, the questionnaire was piloted on a small group of students of the English and Translation departments at a Saudi Arabian University, and it was tested for reliability and internal consistency by applying the Cronbach's Alpha test. For the six-statement questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficient value was found at 0.722 (Table 2), indicating that the questionnaire was reliable and internally consistent.

Table 2. *Reliability and Internal Consistency Statistics: Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient Values for 3-point Likert Scales Questionnaire (pilot study)*

	Scale Mean	Scale Variance	Total item score correlation	Cronbach Alpha Coefficient
Statement 1	1.25	0.182	0.485	
Statement 2	2.55	0.435	0.550	
Statement 3	2.4	0.435	0.619	0.722
Statement 4	2.05	0.762	0.739	
Statement 5	1.85	0.726	0.901	
Statement 6	2.65	0.317	0.497	
N=20	(α)= 0.722		Variance = 6	

The dataset was analyzed on 3-point Likert scales, as shown in Table 3, with mean scores calculated using the formula for rating scales known as "Gap Width= Sequence Width/ Group Count" to determine score intervals.

Table 3. *3-Point Likert Scales Score Intervals*

(3) Serious Problem	2.3 – 2 .9
(2) Moderate Problem	1.5 – 2.2
(1) Not a Problem	1 – 1.4

The English proficiency test 'English Unlimited Placement Test' was retrieved online from the Cambridge University Press (Richards, 2001). All participants' names were removed prior to the administering of study ethics. The test was aimed to assess the students' proficiency level in English according to the six 'criterion' levels of the CEF (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *CEFR Levels for Proficiency in English*

	Starter	Elementary	Pre-Intermediate	Intermediate	Upper-Intermediate	Advanced
CEFR Levels	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Written Test Score	0-15	16-35	36-55	56-75	76-95	96+

Data collection procedures and analysis

The study employed a comprehensive set of tools to gather qualitative data, including focus groups, observations, and document analysis. By facilitating discussions and interactions, focus groups uncover shared opinions and attitudes toward the course and specific topics. Observations served as the primary instrument for understanding student interactions and reactions. Document analysis, which included written exams and student feedback through instant messaging and email, validated the researcher's observations.

The analysis of the qualitative data involved a meticulous process. The researcher began by organizing the data into categories with specific titles. They then examined the data within each category, looking for variations, exceptions, and conflicting data points. Through constant comparison across different academic semesters, the researcher identified the main issues about course design, topics, and assessments. By utilizing these analytical

techniques, the researcher was able to gain valuable insights and develop a deep understanding of the course's impact, as well as the students' perspectives and experiences.

For the quantitative data analysis, a computer package program (version 28) SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used to run all the statistical operations needed. The six statements of the questionnaire, represented in Table 2 and numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 were designed to collect quantitative data that substantiate the analytical and theoretical sections of both the first and second research questions. Students were asked to rate these statements about the different challenges of studying the specific course under study. The issues of these problems were then studied and analyzed according to the lecturer's thoughts and qualitative study of the course specifications and the prior studies on the same field. Thus, statement 1 (Texts are not interesting for me, and don't fit my age) and 2 (Texts are difficult and rich in metaphoric and symbolic language) served the second research question, while statement 3 (There is no enough time for activities and discussion.) served the second research question.

The language proficiency test was applied to provide the data needed to answer the third research question about the appropriate stage when the course ENG280, with its current skills requirements, should be taught. The test contained 120 multiple-choice questions, 20 for each level, from Breakthrough to Mastery, as shown in Table 4. The scores were interpreted according to the teacher guide, and answer keys were retrieved from the Cambridge University Press site. A summarized version of the results was provided by combining percentages of students' scores.

Results and Discussion

First research question:
What are the limitations of the course design and assessments of Introduction to Literature ENG 280 at Qassim University?

The teacher's questionnaire provides a detailed critique of the course design, specifically addressing each section (genre) of the course book. It also identifies limitations in the assessment tasks. The responses offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by students and the course material, shedding light on the initial research question.

Table 5 demonstrates the mean scores of students' responses about the challenges of studying the literary course ENG280 in level 4. A 3-point Likert scale is used to rate their opinions.

Table 5. *Mean scores of students responses on challenges of studying the ENG280 course*

		Problems of Studying ENG280	Mean	St.D.
Text-related Challenges	1	Texts are not interesting for me, and don't fit my age.	1.25	0.439
	2	Texts are difficult and rich in metaphoric and symbolic language.	2.56	0.642
	3	There is no enough time for activities and discussion.	2.62	0.551
Student-related Challenges	4	I am unable to relate the story/play to real life.	2.48	0.737
	5	I am unwilling to read the whole text of the prescribed literary works.	2.38	0.705
	6	I am unwilling to participate in the in-class or non-class activities because there are no assessment marks allotted for them.	1.87	0.619

Analysis of the mean scores of the students' responses on challenges of studying the literary course ENG280 revealed that among the course-related problems, the 'Texts are not interesting for me and don't fit my age' and 'Texts are difficult and full of metaphoric and symbolic language' were the most serious problems. When the prescribed literary texts were studied, it was found that their content was highly challenging.

Considering the specific course under Introduction to Literature ENG280, one of the first sections of 'Short Stories' works was The Japanese Quince by John Galsworthy, a sample study of 'Plot.' Although the work was quite short, it could not be classified as having low information density. The work was replete with symbols and images extending from the beginning description of Mr. Nilson's looks and feelings till the close of the study. Even the title 'The Japanese Quince' was used both literary and symbolically. Although the main aim of studying this work was simply to describe the plot, students showed palpable confusion trying to understand the story and the main message, and they would focus on this instead. Even the questions that were incorporated into the work were more advanced and needed to have good enough analytical skills to be answered.

Another work that seemed inappropriate for the element the chapter was focusing on was Hills Like White Elephants by Earnest Hemingway. The title of the chapter was 'Point of View', the main element it focused on. Even though, when it came to Hills Like White Elephants, students were found struggling with the dialogue, trying to understand what it was about, what the title meant, or what the phrase 'the awfully simple operation,' which was the core of the dialogue, referred to. Some students misinterpreted it as a lung operation relating to the man's remark, "It's just to let the air in," and consequently analyzed the whole story and the points of view of both the man and girl incorrectly. The ambiguity of maintaining 'the awfully simple operation' unrevealed to the reader added up the difficulty of the excessively symbolic text. The title, the railroad junction, the bags with labels on them, and the two sides of the station were all symbols. The inability to understand what these symbols meant or referred to, or their connection with the story, formed mental obstruction for students and eventually hindered any point of departure or attempts to develop reading-related skills.

One of the questions students struggled with was: 'In Hills Like White Elephants, the point is objective. Does this mean that we cannot tell whether the author's sympathy lies more with one character than with the other? Explain your answer.' However, the question was a direct assessment of the understanding of the 'point of view,' the way it was worded confused the students. Most of the students left it blank and chose not to answer it. When asked, they replied that they did not understand the question or even the story. From another angle, most of the students said that they could not relate the different incidents of the story together to form a coherent picture. The below pictures are samples of students' answer sheets.

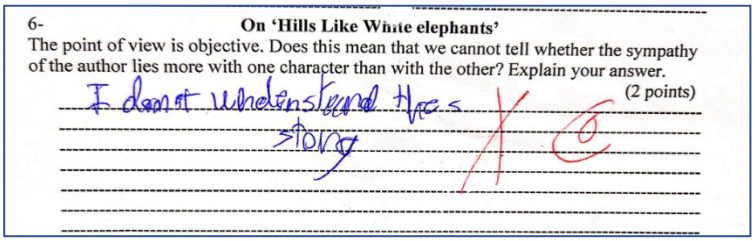


Figure 1. *The student simply wrote that she did not understand the story*

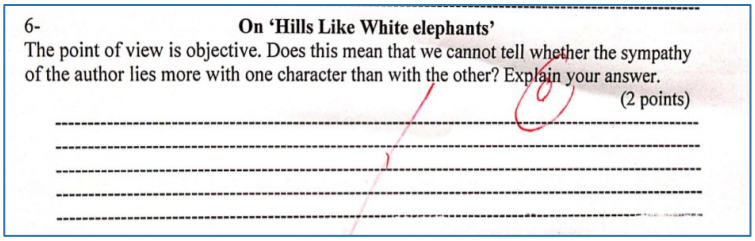


Figure 2. *The majority of the students left the question unanswered*

Another story that shared Hills Like White Elephants its difficulties was Young Goodman Brown. This short story was studied under the light of 'Fantasy',' and although it is a good fit, some of its parts are quite symbolic, representing stop signs for most students. Names of characters, for example, were one such part. Students could not infer deeper meanings or associations from these names and were disoriented when they were asked about their allegorical meanings. The question addressed to them was 'What allegorical meanings may be given to Goodman Brown? His wife? The Forest? Night (as opposed today)? Brown's journey?' This question was one of the prescribed questions in this chapter 'Fantasy,' but it obviously headed for something different and targeted more advanced analytical skills. It was inappropriate for both the intended lesson and the students' literary competence level. Most of the answers were left blank, as expected. The below pictures are samples of students' answers to the same question.

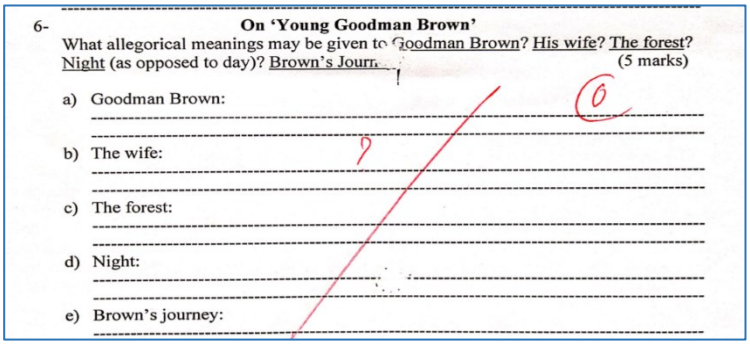


Figure 3. *The majority of the students left the question unanswered*

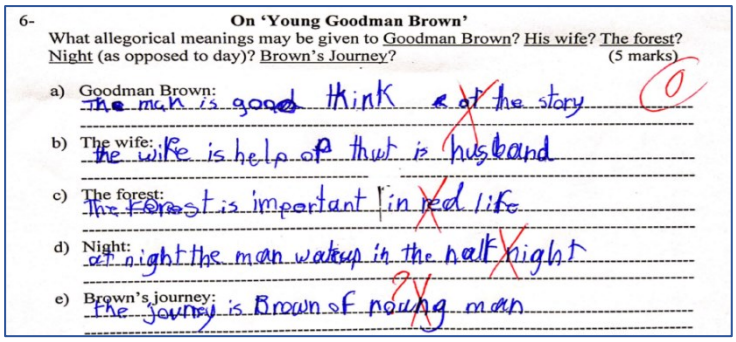


Figure 4. *Regardless the grammatical and spelling mistakes, the student's answer is irrelevant*

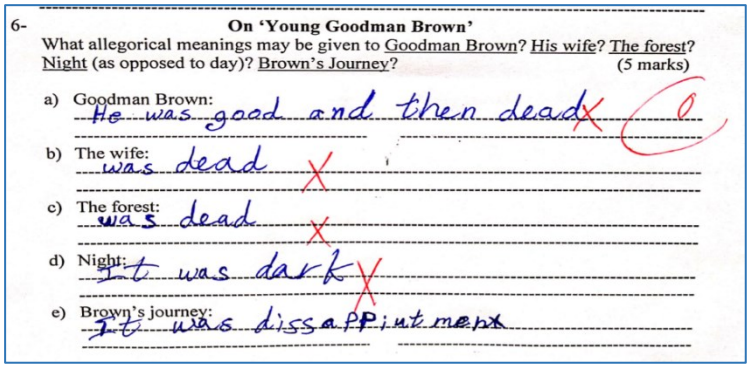


Figure 5. *The student's answer is irrelevant*

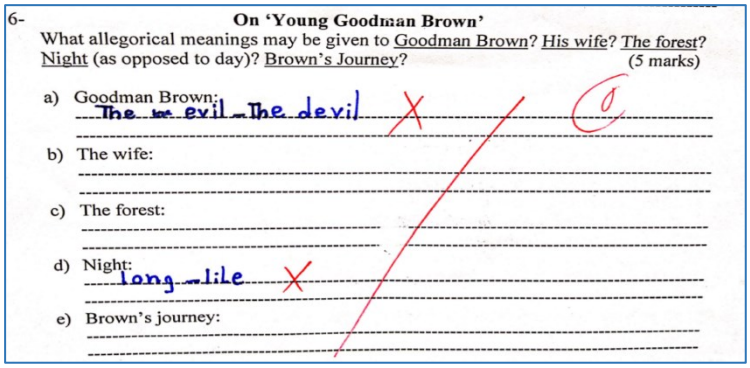


Figure 6. *The student could not infer the correct allegorical meanings*

The second genre the book introduced was 'Poetry'; students struggled the most in this part. One of the prescribed poems that students exerted much effort with both linguistically and textually was 'A Bird Came Down the Walk' by Emily Dickinson. Although the poem consisted of short stanzas, the juxtaposition of the run-on sentences along with the complicated original images made the poem quite inexplicable for students. They found themselves helplessly hand-cuffed by the metaphoric language and images that eventually limited their understanding. Another inappropriate poem because of its difficulty with poetical language was Toads by Philip Larkin.

Although students were introduced to the basic elements of poetry and its fundamental terms at the beginning of this part, it was still challenging to apply or relate what

they learned to the texts. Many questions on poems previously explained were addressed to them, such as 'What is the type of irony in 'soils / with its sickening poison'? Explain your answer. (On 'Toads' by Philip Larkin) Most students answered with 'Dramatic irony,' which is inaccurate. Only a few students gave the correct answer and could accurately explain it. The pictures below are samples of answers to that question.

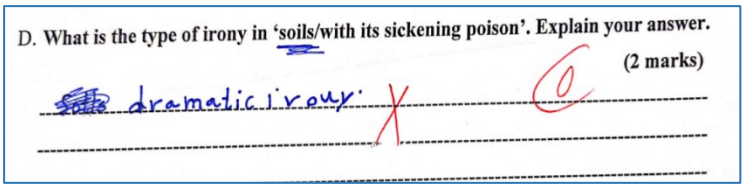


Figure 7. *The student's answer is incorrect*

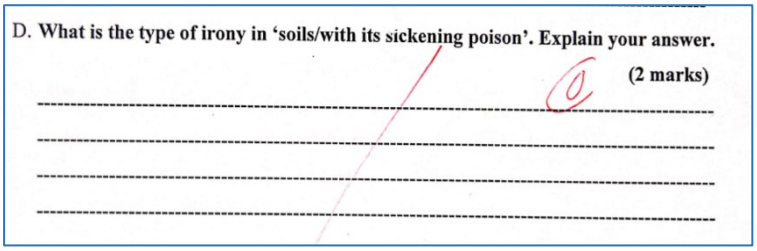


Figure 8. *The student left the answer blank*

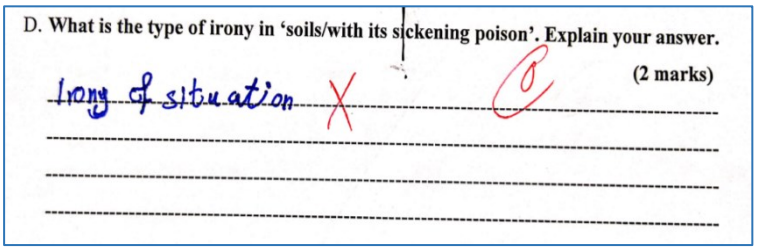


Figure 9. *The student's answer is incorrect*

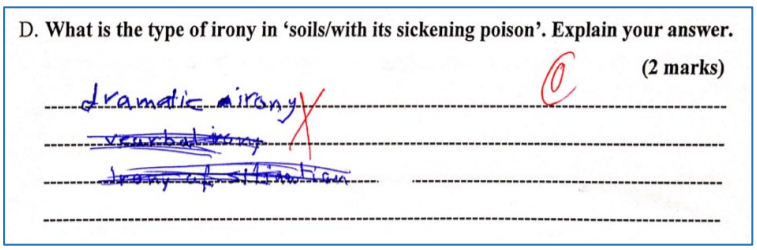


Figure 10. *The student's answer is incorrect*

The third section of the course was 'Drama', and it introduced students to skills that were previously practiced in their academic lives: visualization and critical analysis. Visualization and critical analysis were unquestionably needed throughout this course, but they proved highly significant in this section in specific. The play introduced to the students was The Sandbox since it is simple in language and action. Students had no difficulty with the language of the text but rather with relating it to real life and giving their own critical analysis. When they were asked about the aspects of contemporary American life presented in the play, they were unable to relate the story to real life. When they were asked to give their

opinion of the play, the majority replied that they did not like it. The pictures below are some of the students' answers to the same question.

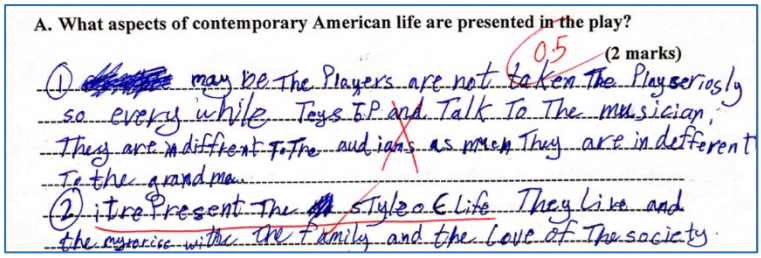


Figure 11. *The student's answer is incorrect in the first point and incomplete in the second*

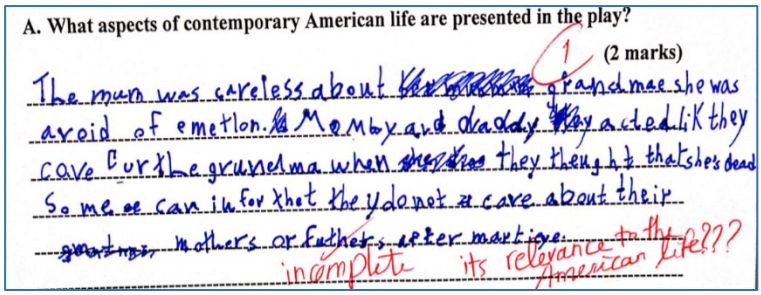


Figure 12. *The student could only describe the treatment of Grandma by Mummy and Daddy, but failed to relate it to the contemporary American life*

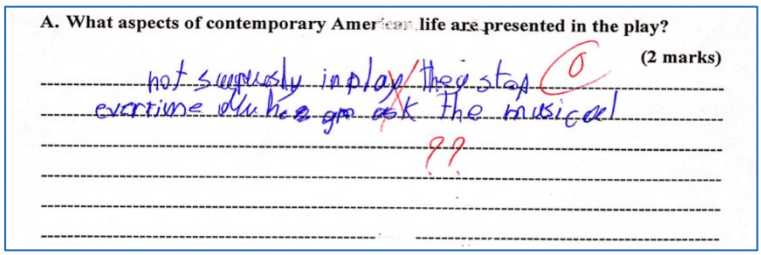


Figure 13. *Regardless of the too many grammatical and spelling mistakes, the student's answer is incorrect*

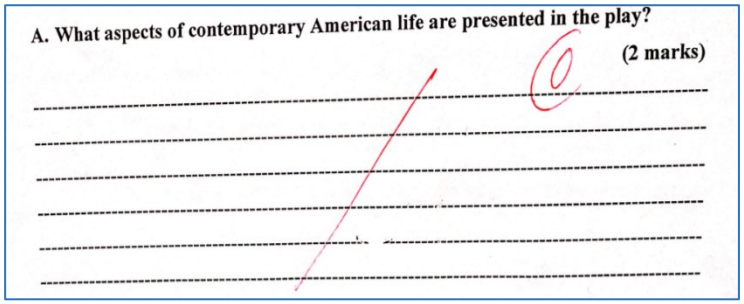


Figure 14. *The student left the question unanswered*

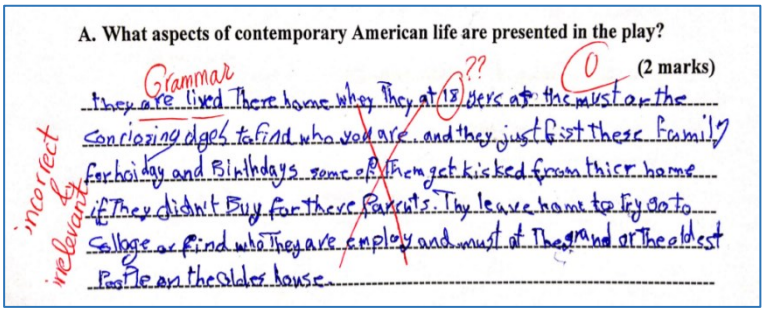


Figure 15. *Regardless of the too many grammatical and spelling mistakes, the answer is irrelevant*

Although statement 4 was not classified as serious, its mean '1.87' revealed that it was a moderate problem that negatively affected the students' contribution in the in-class and non-class activities as well as discussions. Acting as recipients did not promote sufficient development of any required skills, such as analytical and critical ones. The assessment tasks of this course ENG280 were very restricted and did not encourage any activities or in-class participation, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. *ENG280 Table of Assessments*

No.	Assessment Task	Proportion of Total Assessment
1	Midterm	20%
2	Quiz	20%
3	Final Exam	60%

Encouraging analytical group-work tasks that focused on exchanging points of view and developing students' critical and analytical skills allow students to be negotiated and develop their skill of persuasion through logic and drawing evidence from the literary texts before them. As the faculty offers prodigious opportunities for interdisciplinary activities, students should not have difficulty carrying out group work tasks in or out of class. On the same point, the Behaviorist theory indicates that; "Learners are not intrinsically motivated or able to construct meaning for themselves. Deductive and didactic pedagogies, such as graded tasks, rote learning, and memorization, are helpful" (Pernia, 2008). Cognitive-related tasks should then be plunged into the process of ELT as a major part of the assessment of students on both language and humanitarian levels.

One of these tasks is to encourage students to develop their reading skills and extend their knowledge limitations by consulting the available textbooks in the faculty library. Developing a reading community should be prioritized among university students where the specified textbooks are not limited, but primary sources and secondary sources can be chosen by students, assessed, and evaluated for appropriateness by instructors (Tsagari & Sifakis, 2014). Widening the current narrow repertoire of literary texts is dramatically important in developing the students' cognitive skills and extending awareness of the metaphoric play and imaginative shifts distinctive to literature.

From Table 5. challenges such as 'I am unable to relate the story to real life' and 'I am unwilling to read the whole text of the prescribed literary works' were revealed as serious student-related challenges. These challenges were strongly connected with tolerance of ambiguity as well as poor capacity for imagination and visualization. For challenge 4 'I am

unable to relate the story/play to real life,' students showed a weak visualization ability and connect between the different incidents of the literary works and real life. For this particular kind of problem, the following techniques were suggested.

Drawing snapshots of reality and connecting them to literary tests is one of the best and most effective ways of teaching literature. It has long been applied in various ways, including movies that would quite probably lure students into literature. According to Romero et al. (2020), "movies were played as an introduction to the literary works, and in other cases, they were not shown until the end of the teaching cycle".

Figure books also have a fruitful role in the teaching of literature. Using them in conjunction with literature helps students visualize and understand the stories fully. Therefore, having a picture alongside the story is more tempting. A drawing by each individual student to represent the main lines of the text before them is also fruitful. It will, at least, clear the most annoying ambiguities of vision that come along with the literary texts.

Another rewarding activity for the development of imagination and visualization skills is role play. Turning the text into a play helps understanding the characters and peering inside their hearts and minds to experience their feelings, eventually enabling students to lay facts and draw conclusions perfectly. They will be able to analyze actions they were previously hovering over in a hopeless, disjointed experience.

The unappealing attitude the students showed when requested to read the whole literary texts for the prescribed works was closely related to the ambiguity of the texts and the unfamiliar grammatical, lexical, phonological, and cultural cues that cannot be directly interpreted. Pawlak and Mystkowska (2018) explained this situation "With their specific nature of novelty, complexity and insolubility, these situations easily meet the requirements of ambiguity, creating threats and tension. The learner who has not mastered the foreign language does not understand what is happening around them". The issue of tolerance of ambiguity and the language proficiency level of students overlapped, and in this case, the lecturer's instructions and explanations were useless and provided no real solution to the aforementioned problem of tolerance of ambiguity as long as the text remained unclear.

For more accurate results on the English proficiency levels of level-4 students, students were requested to take the CUP English placement test. Analysis of the results helped in the study findings.

English Language Proficiency Test

The analysis of data provided by the English Placement Test revealed the low proficiency level of level-4 students. The test was applied to level-4 students of three successive years for the reliability of results, and the differences were not noticeable. The majority of students from the academic year 2019 were found to be A2-B1 proficient (CEFR Elementary & Pre-intermediate), as shown in Figure 16.

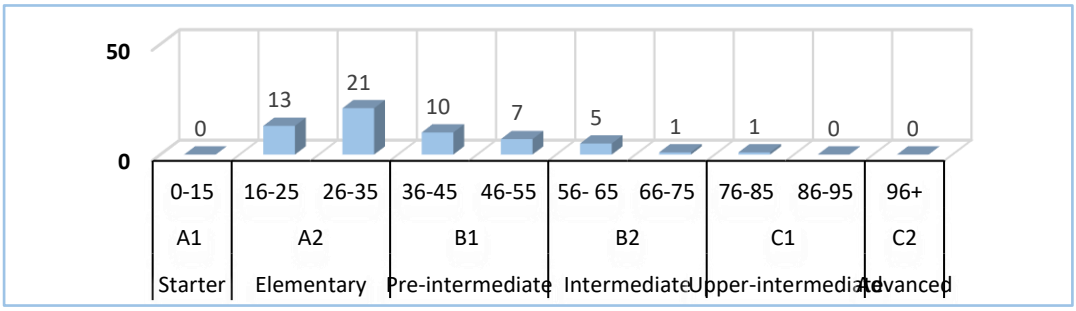


Figure 16. *English proficiency levels of level-4 students of the academic year 2019*

As for level-4 students of the academic year 2020, the study found that the majority of students were A1- B1 level (CEFR Starter- Pre-intermediate). Only three students were placed at the B2 level, which is a significantly low number.

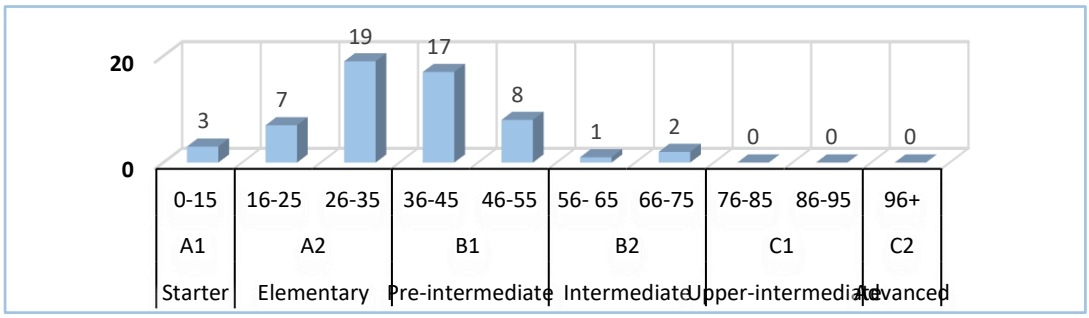


Figure 17. *English proficiency levels of level-4 students of the academic year 2020*

The majority of level-4 students of the academic year 2021 received low results. As shown in Figure 4, 13 students were placed at A2 level (CEFR Elementary level), and 43 students were placed at B1 (CEFR Pre-intermediate level). Only one student was placed at the B2 level (CEFR Intermediate level), and one at the C1 level (CEFR Upper-intermediate level).

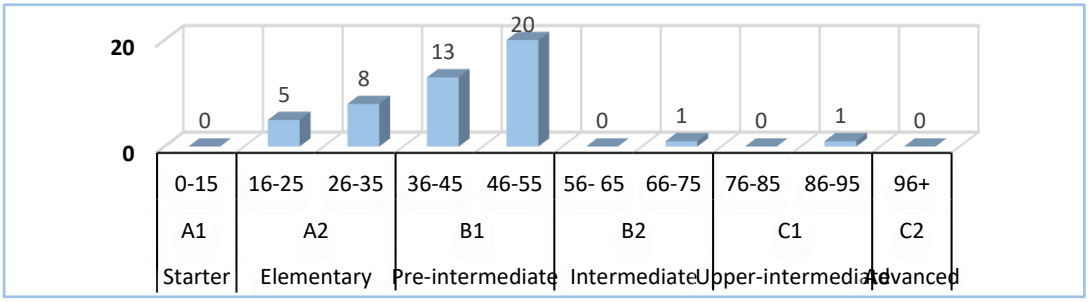


Figure 18. *English proficiency levels of level-4 students of the academic year 2021*

Second research question:
Should a prerequisite be incorporated into the academic plan, and what are its main features?

The previous challenges made the texts boring and unsuitable for the students' age group. Though text-related, these challenges were the basic trigger for the most serious student-

related problems. Introducing students to literature with highly poetic and powerful texts in symbolism was discouraging and unattractive. According to Craster et al. ALCAB (2014); "The selected works must achieve a balance between linguistic accessibility and intrinsic interest". On the same point, Ana Bela Almeida et al. (2020) stated that; "The choice of texts and how they are taught are key to the successful implementation of the literature element". One suggestion was to use simpler materials instead for the early levels. ALCAB (Craster et al., 2014) recommended "extending the range of works eligible for study to include other genres such as biographies, journals, diaries, and letters, to offer students a wider choice". Other choices include micro-contos/ micro-fiction and low information-density texts, including simple poems and stories.

The implementation of micro-fiction and simple stories and poems with low information density has plenty of pros. One of them was that they focus on one skill at a time; for example, a story whose figurative and symbolic language was to the minimum would draw the students' full attention to the plot and how to analyze and represent it. Another work would basically represent symbols with no other ambiguities of style or unordinary use of syntactic rules of figurative language to keep symbols the focal point of students. Targeting one objective in every work would help students understand it fully and would indeed serve as a catalyst for longer works.

Aside from the necessity of implementing texts with low information density, micro-fiction are also beneficial in the literature learning process. It enables teachers to focus on the element of study while still having enough time for discussion and activities. Almeida et al. (2017) explained the favorability of micro-contos "that they are very short, self-contained literary texts. This means that, unlike when using a novel or short story, the full length of the text can be addressed and explored during the class, leaving ample time for discussion and other activities. These short texts are also widely available in many languages through online collections in blogs, webpages, and social media".

Using bilingual/translanguaging practices is also very useful and has been proven beneficial in many universities around the world, such as Shakespearean courses where mother-tongue translations are used to help students understand and evaluate the text without any reference to the original text. Naji et al. (2019) commented on the implementation of such practices; "It is interesting to see the use of two languages to make the meaning clear, and such bilingual/translanguaging practices are common around the world…wherever there is a gap between the language proficiency of the learners and the literary text".

Third research question:
Which stage is most appropriate for students to learn the course Introduction to Literature ENG 280 and its current skill requirements?

The student responses provided valuable insights. The current course content and assessments are deemed more suitable for senior-level students, as the recommended prerequisites would allow for the development of critical and analytical skills. English proficiency test results indicate that senior-level students are better equipped to appreciate literary texts due to their improved comprehension skills, enabling them to focus on the text's nuances. The proficiency levels of level-4 students from various semesters were largely similar, with most students falling between A1 and B1 levels. This is significantly below the required B2-C1 proficiency level for the Introduction to Literature (ENG280) course. Consequently, it is suggested that students at levels 6 or 7 would be better prepared and

more capable of meeting the English language proficiency requirements for this specific course. These higher-level students are expected to possess the advanced language skills needed to actively engage with the course content, participate in critical discussions, and successfully navigate the academic challenges inherent in the course curriculum.

Conclusion

There are several conclusions to draw from the current study. First of all, it can be concluded that the major cause of problems in learning the specific course under study, Introduction to Literature ENG280, cannot be definitively stated to be 100% ascribed to students. The course's advanced skill requirements pose a serious challenge for level-4 students that handicap their constant attempts to understand the main objective of the course and its different chapters. The texts chosen for the course and the intricate analytical and critical questions coupling them are not commensurate with the potential and knowledge of the world of level-4 students. As a result, students lose interest in the course and find themselves incapable of appreciating the beauty of literature.

Given the previous conclusion, a prerequisite is suggested for level-4 students, and a re-adjustment for the current course is found mandatory. The prerequisite will focus on the very specific objective of each chapter using simple literary texts or micro-contos and direct questions. Development of the basic knowledge of literature and its literary terms is targeted. Besides, triggering and improving key skills for the study of literature, like visualization, analyzing, and criticizing, should be allotted special attention during the design of the prerequisite to be appropriate for level-4 students who are introduced to literature for the first time.

Given the fact that only some of the students were found at the required proficiency level of the course, and that the majority were placed at such low levels of A2 and B1, it seems unrealistic and illogical and indeed self-defeating to expect a literary competence that leads to good-enough performance during examinations. The inability to understand what they read adds up to their unpreparedness for the level of skills needed. Students end up failing to appreciate the aesthetic values of the prescribed literary texts and all tasks associated with them, such as interpreting the texts, outlining moral values, or even paraphrasing the literary text, which seems the easiest task in comparison to the understanding and evaluation of the metaphorical language embedded.

English literature is very advantageous in this regard. It offers a wide repertoire of materials that appeal to any level of skills or language proficiency. Texts with simple storylines, plots, grammar, and vocabulary are available. Incorporating them into the prerequisite, previously suggested, will offer students an enriching and appealing learning experience. It will pave the way for the students to a more complicated and in-depth curriculum. Students will show better literary competence in the course and, more importantly, in the world and real life.

The study is focused on a specific course, Introduction to Literature ENG280, offered to level-4 students at a Saudi Arabian University, which may limit its generalizability to other courses or educational contexts. Additionally, the data collection instruments, including a lecturer's questionnaire and English language proficiency test, provide valuable insights but may not capture the full range of student experiences and perspectives. The study also

primarily focuses on student-related and text-related challenges, which may overlook other potential factors influencing the course's effectiveness.

Future research could involve a broader scope, examining multiple courses and institutions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Including a larger and more diverse sample of students and lecturers would provide a more comprehensive perspective. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, could be employed to gain deeper insights into student experiences, perspectives, and suggestions for improvement. Furthermore, exploring the impact of additional factors, such as prior literary knowledge, cultural background, and instructional strategies, on student engagement and learning outcomes would be valuable.

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