

# Building Literacies at Tertiary Level: Integrated Tests for Reading Comprehension and Written Expression to Algerian University Learners

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## Abstract

This article considers some of the reasons teachers usually regard literature as an appropriate tool of language classroom learning. These of literary texts can be a powerful pedagogic tool. This study describes some of the approaches to teaching literature and provides a rationale for integrating the teaching of literature as an approach to language classroom. For university teachers, the study of literature is indispensable because it exposes students to meaningful contexts. Integrating reading comprehension and written expression at university involves the effectiveness of literature type and the objectives planned. In this sequence, two experimental reading tests are administered.

**Keywords:** learning, literature, skills, stylistics, teaching approach

## 1. Introduction

One of the most significant developments in Algerian education over the last decade is the large increase of the teaching of English through literature. The teaching of EFL through contextual aspects takes a paradigm that concerns teaching and learning reading strategies. Including the theory of reading and texts (reading and readers), there is a move from comprehension to interpretation (Wallace cited in Cook & Seidlhofer, 1995).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the relevance of literature in both the teaching and learning strategies. The adopted approach is an experimental research data, performed during the first semester of the present academic year 2019-2020. The experiment took place at the Department of English Language and Literature at Mascara University, Algeria. It concerns the first year students and their reactions toward the two types of texts: a recent piece of literature about a famous chief executive officer's daily life as an informal reading comprehension test, and then, an official reading comprehension and written expression exam represented in a historical text.

Subsequently, the research undertakes a series of comprehension and written expression activities. A qualitative data was provided when a number of 34 students were questioned about the types of literature they aimed to encounter with their teacher. Basic elements are arranged for the sake of obtaining results and their validity (Seliger & Shohamy, 2000).

## 2. Literature Review

Literacy refers to the ability to read and write at a certain level whereby people can understand and use written communication, either in printed or electronic forms. The UNESCO (2018) defines literacy as the capacity to identify, understand, interpret, create and communicate. It involves a continuum of learning and developing knowledge. Thus, the purpose of literacy is said to develop learners' language, reading, and writing abilities. Subsequently, the ability to connect letters with sounds regarding the alphabetic principles is basic for a good reading (UNESCO).

Once can deduce that when we think of a text, we naturally think of a stretch knowledge (OUP, 1987), such as a business letter, a leaflet, a news report, a recipe and so on. Any type of literature fulfils a meaning like the following small stretches of literature: 'Keep Quiet' - 'Keep off the Grass' or 'Danger'. If then, we want to

understand a literary text; we have no physical elements to rely on. We have only to go deeper through the text (to read for the purpose of understanding). We may so far consider the following communicative literacy triangle (trinity):

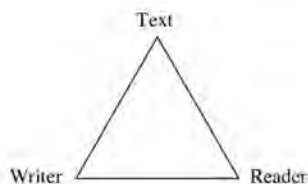


Figure 1. Language triangle

### 2.1 Stylistics Domain

The concept of stylistics is meant to help to understand the meaning of a text through interpretation. It is “A branch of linguistics which studies the characteristics of situationally distinctive uses of language, with particular reference to literary language...” (Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998, p. 3). Weber (1996) draws forward six language functions as follows:

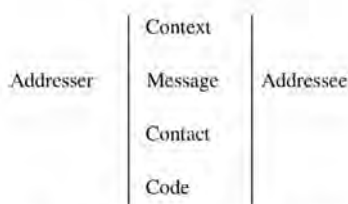


Figure 2. Language functions (Weber, 1996, p. 13)

This schema indicates a need to understand the various perceptions that concern stylistics. The language style concerns analysing literal texts, starting from the addresser (author) and ending with the addressee (reader). The goal of most stylistics is not only describing texts features, but to show their functional significance, i.e. their interpretations (Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998).

Reading is said to be an engagement with text meaning, and a recognition of which comes from our linguistic and literary competences (Birch, 1989). Some explain that any literary text has no meaning, but we as readers, invest it and give a meaning to it. This leads to make a distinction between conventional and literary texts. So far, Widdowson (1975) interprets literature in its three varieties: the linguist treats literature as a text, the literary critic as messages, stylistics treats it as discourse.

### 2.2 Conventional Texts

Conventional and literary texts represent a major area of interest within the field of reading. By definition, any reader coming across a text, it leads him/her to a referential vacuum, referring to one's schema or reference (B. Neddar, 2006). When we read a conventional text (as a newspaper article about politics or science), we automatically make a connection with the outside world. It provides an exo-contextual reference (Neddar, 2006). Again, any conventional text must obey four maxims: quality, quantity, relevance, and manner, while dealing with facts and truthfulness as it might be illustrated in the following figure:



Figure 3. Conventional text scheme

### 2.3 Literary Texts

If we want to know the subject ‘he’ in a poem for example, we have to read the whole poem in order to know it, because there is no outside context but only the text itself. This can be defined as literature which does not claim the truth, neither does it carry facts. Literature is supposed to bring conviction. Hence, literature is viewed to explain the following three meanings:

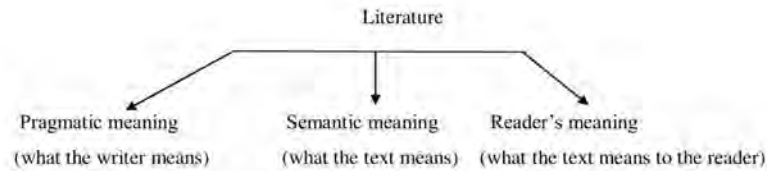


Figure 4. Literature meanings (B. Neddar, 2006)

In addition to Neddar’s literature figure, Hyland defines literature as: “A loaded term, a deficit label which carries with it the social power to define, categorise and ultimately exclude people from many aspects of life” (Hyland, 2002, p. 54). It might be added that many of the texts provided by teachers, show no interest to their students, always curious to study modern and updated literature.

### 2.4 Teaching and Studying Literature

One particular focus that helps to conceptualize the idea of teaching literature is to engage with medium and long term goals of disciplinary literacy (R. Breeze & Gerns, 2019). Specialists in the area of language and literature keep on asking themselves what literature and stylistics are, and whether they can help readers acquire the necessary skills to interpret a literary text. Also, in the light of the experiment developed with first year university students, two kinds of literature were administered in order to seek for students’ effects and outcomes because: “Writing together with reading, is a central aspect of literacy” (Hyland, 2002, p. 53).

To this extend, reading is not only a compulsory academic university module to be studied, but also a social practice because it is a means of connecting people and provides social meanings. Baynham (1995) describes literacy studies as an involvement of a concrete human activity not just towards literature but also what is surrounding people as written languages (danger warnings, instructions, and so...).

For many students, the message conveyed through written texts are not well understood (Paula J. Clarke et al., 2014). In addition, Hyland (2002) makes a nexus between the two main issues, namely writing and literature as social phenomena. He resumes this connection of literature and society as follows:

- There are diverse literacies linked to the different domains of life.
- Literacies are practised for certain limited to wider social goals.
- Each literature is specific for a precise historical period of time.
- And, finally, literacy as social practices is a literature of written texts.

A primary concern of the notion of literature is that it is a discipline along the academic studies. Bartholomae (1986) asserts that students’ task at university is to speak and sit down to write a language. Then, they find it easy to notice their writing mistakes since they are accustomed with an academic literacy environment.

## 3. The Study

Literacy covers an essential set of competences at different educational levels, starting from Middle school to university English learning. Literacy is said to compass the ability to understand and communicate knowledge, arguments and feelings through semiotic systems, particularly written English (R. Breeze & Gerns, 2019). This literacy scope explains the relation between literature and the reader, signified as the joint between the message and the receiver (reader).

The study demonstrates the contribution of English reading lessons towards the learning of the language, and the essential reading tools to convey English language learning.

### 3.1 Defining the Hypotheses

This paper centres on the impact of the academic reading comprehension taught in parallel with written expression within the same module at the English Department of Mascara University, in Algeria. The study addresses the following two research questions:

- To which extent does literacy contribute in enhancing the learners' motivation.
- Does explicit academic reading improve students' learning?

On the basis of the addressed research questions, we can formulate the forthcoming hypotheses which seek to answer the question whether university literacy is going along with students' expectations and at which level is literature involved in improving students' English language level:

- It is noticeable that teaching literature at university is supposed to develop and enhance the learning of English. However, some reading practices have negative impacts when it comes to literacy choice, courses practised, and mostly, students' lack of motivation.
- Literacy teaching is drawn upon both theoretical insights and classroom practices. This paper offers a study case of a group of first year university students, including both reading and writing tasks through undertaking a test to explore how cognitive and perceptual abilities are perceived.

### 3.2 Methodology

Based on a qualitative research data, an experimental study case was undertaken involving a number of 34 Algerian university students, aged between 18 and 20 years. All of them were studying Reading Comprehension and Written Expression module at the English Department at Mascara University, Algeria. This module was learnt at a rate of three hours per week along the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020.

As a part of their semester's canvas, the teacher administered a reading comprehension test last December, which was a pre exam task when students were not under a test stress. This experimental testing phase was followed last January, by a tutorial exam consisting of the first semester official exam as it is in Table 1. All 34 students fulfilled both tests under exam's condition and previously attended together, the module of Reading Comprehension and Written Expression courses.

Table 1. Study case design

| Number of students | Action                              | Purpose                              | Schedule      |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| 34                 | Experimental test                   | Pre testing                          | December 2019 |
|                    | Correction session                  | Intervention<br>(Teacher's feedback) | December 2019 |
|                    | Tutorial Exam (First Semester exam) | Post test                            | January 2020  |

It has been noted that this present research centres on the impact of academic reading and writing module in order to situate the main issues of discussion. It is advisable to point out the students' motivation which is obtaining the Bachelor degree. The studied literature of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) covers specific skills required by academic contexts, to say, the mastery of formal written English (Hyland, 2006; Jordan, 2010; Menken, 2013).

## 4. Results and Discussion

During the first semester of the current academic year 2019-2020, first year English Language students were confronted with a set of 20 reading and writing sessions. As it is a part of their university curriculum, some literary texts were printed and studied together with the teacher. It is worth mentioning that the motivational aspect was to drill students for official exams. The first test concerned the text entitled 'Business diary: Eugene Kaspersky' (Appendix A). However, the second studied literature was the official exam having the topic about Queen Cleopatra VII (Appendix B).

### 4.1 Tests Scoring Outcomes

This study attempts to get an in depth results and also opinion from the part of participants (Dawson, 2002). The first reading and writing text reflects one thing, the high score obtained by students according to the following table:

Table 2. Experimental test scores

|       | -10 / 20 | +10/20 | Total |
|-------|----------|--------|-------|
| Boys  | 01       | 12     | 13    |
| Girls | 02       | 19     | 21    |
|       |          |        | 34    |

This description reports an essential point, the high score obtained by both boys and girls. Only three (one boy and two girls) did worse and the majority (31) had at least the average (10 points out of twenty), a result which represents a percentage of 91% of success. Importantly, this means an increasing student' motivation and eagerness to do better.

However, the official exam done last January denotes a big failure regarding the final evaluation. Table 3 shows a considerable decrease in obtaining at least the average, that is to say, 10 out of twenty. These low marks are resulting from a status where students are put in a real exam's situation including time limit (90 minutes), stress and probably other factors which are discussed later.

Table 3. First semester exam scores

|       | -10 / 20 | +10/20 | Total |
|-------|----------|--------|-------|
| Boys  | 10       | 03     | 13    |
| Girls | 18       | 03     | 21    |
|       |          |        | 34    |

#### 4.2 Reading and Writing Tests Analyses

The purpose of this paper is also to make a deeper analysis of students' answers through scrutinizing the different reading and writing activities performed. It is an investigation of testing usefulness of reading comprehension (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). It is essential to differentiate between reading comprehension and written expression tasks. Respectively, both tests scores (experimental and official) are illustrated in graphs. This data analyses is meant to find out some of the reasons affecting students' abilities to undertake a given test.

#### 4.3 Experimental Test Investigation

This section is meant to offer the findings of assessing a reading comprehension experimental test (Appendix A). Henning (1987) assumes that the reading items demonstrate the validity of each language item correlating with the total score. In this sense, I divided the reading test into three main parts: the first one dealing with comprehension questions (tasks B & C) containing WH questions and true or false activities. Both of them are preceded by a kind of a warming up work named as a pre reading task. Yet, during this pre official testing, students were not allowed to use extra documents such course books, dictionaries or any other reference material.

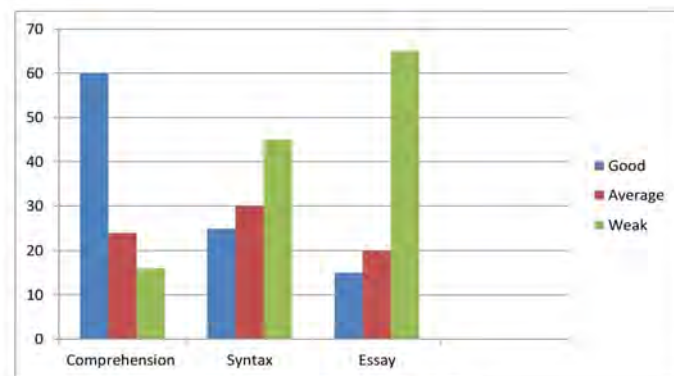


Figure 5. Experimental Test Scoring

Figure 5 represents a bar-graph shows a considerable success at the reading and comprehension designed tasks. It is seen as an engagement of the readers (students) with the text through consciousness and sense of interpretation (Hyland, 2002). The module of Reading Comprehension & Written Expression offered to students an encounter with authentic, updated, and motivating texts provided by their teacher. But, for the general language skills which constitute the most basic component of language rules, students did not excel as they did at comprehension questions. Medium results are noticed at the level of grammar where the main topic was about punctuation which is a feature only of the written language (Raines, 1983). However, a low performance was realized at essay writing dealing with writing a famous person's daily activities.

The academic writing skill was reinforced during lectures accomplished by the teacher. Lectures aiming at enhancing the writing performances through essay writings drills. The crucial point is when writing success represented only fifteen percent. A much debated question is whether students feel unable to produce a good

piece of writing, or simply as it was observed on their answer sheets, they were meeting complications at the levels of constructing cohesive devices and making lot of grammatical mistakes.

4.4 Official Exam Investigation

Among the multiple motivational reasons that have an impact of practising intensive reading tasks, a significant students’ motive is undoubtedly, scoring and exam’ marks. This factor has proven its legitimacy for learners who consider undertaking exams is a part of their duties. The second Reading Comprehension and Written Expression module’s exam (Appendix B), enabled the teacher to evaluate his students’ proficiency via an official assessment associated with marks need for administrative obligation. The following figure 6 shows students’ scores and performances.

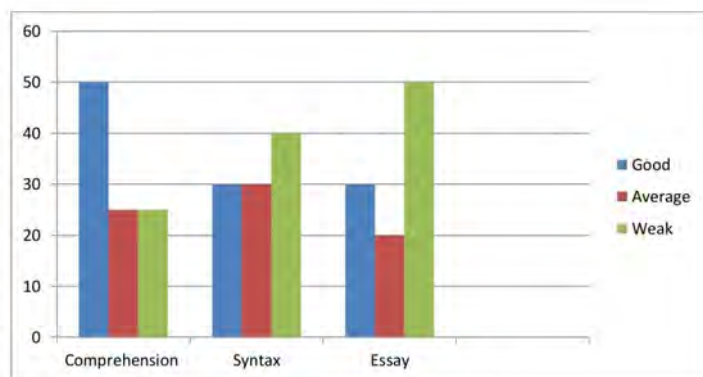


Figure 6. Exam’s Test Scoring

4.4.1 Analysis of Reading Comprehension Results

The reading comprehension testing is meant to assess students’ reading skill and determines their abilities in understanding passages. As Hanauer (2001) puts it, reading involves an interaction between the reader and the reader’s additional knowledge of the reading process. Figure 4 shows approximate similar results obtained at the first task which concerned the comprehension questions. It signifies that the greatest percentage goes towards the success of the majority in answering comprehension questions. The first activity questions were designed to test comprehension as well as vocabulary. It is then, noticed that students reacted positively to the first task, justifying their positive answers due to an intensive reading of the text before tackling the questions. Even though, the students’ answers were not completely correct vis-à-vis language forms, the ideas they contained were right. Whereas, the second section about vocabulary was a perfect achievement for the most of the examinees (about 90%). It is necessary to point out three kinds of relationship concerning written texts (Geoffrey et al., 2003): the relations existing between the author and his text, the reader and the text, and the text and the culture. This latter facilitated lot of student’ responses because of their little knowledge of some of the Egyptian dynasties. Table 4 provides this first task scoring which concerns comprehension answers.

Table 4. Reading comprehension scoring

|        | Type of questions              | Failing | Need improvement | Proficient | Totality |
|--------|--------------------------------|---------|------------------|------------|----------|
| Task 1 | Short sentences required       | 07      | 15               | 12         | 34       |
| Task 2 | Recognition of word definition | 11      | 6                | 17         | 34       |

4.4.2 Analysis of Written Expression Results

The written expression part of the subject contained two types of tasks: four activities related to grammar and syntax mainly about punctuation and capitalization (Appendix B) and the second part devoted to essay writing. The results obtained were as follows:

Table 5. Written expression scoring

|        | Type of Instructions      | Failing | Need improvement | Proficient | Totality |
|--------|---------------------------|---------|------------------|------------|----------|
| Task 1 | Justifying commas         | 12      | 03               | 19         | 34       |
| Task 2 | Justifying capitalization | 15      | 07               | 12         | 34       |
| Task 3 | Punctuating a text        | 03      | 08               | 23         | 34       |
| Task 4 | Gaps filling              | 05      | 15               | 14         | 34       |
| Task 5 | Essay writing             | 12      | 15               | 07         | 34       |

## 5. Discussion

This quantitative data determines the syntactical results obtained at the official exam administered last January 2020. Table 5 describes students' answers. They were satisfactory while justifying the use of commas in the first task, and did better when it was a matter of punctuating a given text. On the contrary, it is quite noticeable the weak performances in justifying the use of capital letters (Task 2) and also, the failure at gaps filling in task 4 concerned with the use of prepositions. It should be noted that the misunderstanding of prepositions lead a miscomprehension of a given text. It is recommended that a good reader: "needs to be familiar with the precise meaning of the particular grammatical devices used, structure words, word order, word forms and broad patterns of sentences" (Geoffrey et al., 2003, p. 95).

Investigating essay's writing is a continuing concern within language teaching and learning. Table 5 is an explanatory compile of a set of 34 essays on one topic (Appendix B). Only seven students were good enough in producing this piece of writing, twelve have failed, and fifteen need improvement. The essay's measurement was based on correcting the English language fluency like linguistic accuracy and handwriting quality. Moreover, textual measures were important in correcting these essays. Students made enormous errors in spelling and syntax. The results analysis reveals that the apparent failure is the misuse of punctuation. Finally, in the feedback review, the teacher might provide a brief recap of what works and what does not work. In this sense, McCulloch (2015) claims that rather than relying on language courses to give students the requisite knowledge for content classes, teachers should work cooperatively to ensure their classes provide students with the support they need to facilitate both knowledge of content and knowledge learning.

## 6. Conclusion

The current study explored the use of two kinds of literature testing; one related to an experimental test and a second one referring to an official university reading comprehension exam. The study used a classical measurement in assessing students' answers which provide valuable findings about reading comprehension and written expression university modules. The study gives an assessment tool for determining students' failures in comprehending a part of literature and also, in producing a piece of writing. These results help teachers to design academic courses to prompt their students' linguistic competencies. Finally, teachers need to bear in mind that the choice of updated texts and successful reading methods are significant features which enable students to learn all essential components of literacy.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### *Reading & Writing Testing*

#### **Business diary: Eugene Kaspersky**

eugenekaspersky is ceo of kaspersky lab, the russian security software company. the company is based in moscow and has offices in 29 countries. its main competitor is symantec. most of the company's sales are outside russia.

Kaspersky spends 50% of his time in Moscow, but the other 50% he travels. He is often away for more than three weeks at a time. When he is away, he attends meetings, goes to trade shows and sometimes gives presentations. When he is in the office, he spends time talking informally to colleagues – at their desks or in the company restaurant.

The Moscow office is like a big family. Many people in the office are friends. Some go on holiday together. Everyone dresses informally. Kaspersky normally wears shirts and jeans, but he has a suit for important meetings with presidents and prime ministers.

In Moscow, he does not get up early, especially after a business trip. "On some business trips, I only get three or four hours' sleep a night, so I need to relax," says Kaspersky. At the end of a busy Moscow office day, he goes to the gym with his personal trainer. "It's a great way to relax after a busy day in the office." If he can, he also takes two days off a month.

Holidays are important too. "In winter, I go skiing. In the summer, I often go to the mountains, where I can't use the Internet or my mobile phone. But I can get a satellite connection." (by Mary Watkins, from Pearson, 2012)

**Task A:** *Before you read the article, discuss these questions.*

- 1- What do you think is a typical day in the life of the CEO of a big company?
- 2- How much time do CEOs spend travelling?
- 3- Do CEOs need holidays?

**Task B:** (after reading) *Answer these questions.*

- 1- Is Kaspersky a formal or informal CEO?
- 2- Is most of his business in Russia or in other countries?
- 3- Does he work 24/7 (24 hours a day, seven days a week)?

**Task C:** *Choose the correct option to complete the sentence*

- 1- In Uruguay, ..... begins in December. (Summer / summer)
- 2- The .....of Croatia works in Zagreb. (President / president)
- 3- Anne-Marie speaks .....really well. (Italian /italian)
- 4- There are twelve .....months. (Hijri / hijri)

**Task D:** *Put the right capitalization for the first paragraph*

eugenekaspersky is ceo of kaspersky lab, the russian security software company. the company is based in moscow and has offices in 29 countries. its main competitor is symantec. most of the company's sales are outside russia.

**Task E:** *In an essay, describe a daily life of an important man or a famous artist.*

## Appendix B

### Reading & Writing First Semester Exam

#### The text

It is the name of several queens and princesses of the **Egyptian** dynasty. The most famous of them was Cleopatra VII (about 63-30 **B.C**), the daughter of Ptolemy XI Auteles, king of Egypt. Upon her father's death in 51 B.C, Cleopatra, then about seventeen years old, and her brother, Ptolemy XII, a child of about twelve years old, succeeded jointly to the throne of Egypt with the provision that they should marry. In the third year of their reign, Ptolemy encouraged by his advisers, assumed sole control of the government and drove Cleopatra into exile. She promptly gathered an army in **Syria** but was unable to assert her claim until the **Roman** general and statesman Julius Caesar arrived at **Alexandria**. Yielding to the fascination of the Egyptian queen, Caesar became her lover and espoused her cause. He was for a time hard pressed by the **Egyptians**, but ultimately triumphed and about 48 B.C., Ptolemy XIII was killed. Therefore, Caesar proclaimed Cleopatra queen of Egypt.

#### The questions

##### A/ Reading Comprehension

1. *Supply a suitable title to the text.*
2. *Did Julius Caesar marry Cleopatra? Justify your answer from the text.*
3. *Why did Cleopatra marry her younger brother?*
4. *Find in the text words whose definitions are the followings:*
  - Traditional beliefs and rituals.
  - The state of being banished from one's home or country.

##### B/ Written Expression

1. *Justify the use of capital letters for each of the underlined words in the text.*
2. *Rewrite the following paragraph using the correct punctuation and capitalization.*

cleopatra was the forced by customs to marry her younger brother ptolemy XIII after settling their joint government on a secure basis cleopatra went to rome where she gave birth to a son cesarion later named ptolemy XIV

3. *Fill in the blanks with the appropriate prepositions.*
  - \* I was not quite satisfied ..... the exam results.
  - \* We are very excited ..... our trip to Spain next week.
  - \* My cousin is married ..... a famous American.
  - \* Wearing a seat belt can protect you ..... being killed in a car.
  - \* Many people took advantage ..... the low prices offered by the new shop.
4. *Essay: Do you prefer a nation's leader through heritage or election? Give some reasons in a short essay.*

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