

An Affective Approach to Teaching Literature: I Feel Therefore I am

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Abstract

The present research paper seeks to ascertain whether students respond emotionally to literature—as it is argued that the emotions experienced during reading help interpret literary texts. To that end, the study departs from an investigation of students' personal responses only to determine whether emotion-based responses exist in the EFL context, thus answering the central question that guides this work: do affective responses to literature exist? The stakeholders involved in this study are master-one, EFL students who specialize in literature and civilization at the University of Oran 2, in Algeria. These students were asked to answer a mixed-methods questionnaire. Of the 61 students concerned with the study, thirty-one have answered. The analysis of the ensuing data showed that affective responses to literature are quasi-nonexistent, thus the urgent need to reassess the current literature teaching approaches.

Keywords: Emotions, EFL students, literature, literary experience, personal responses, teaching approaches

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Introduction

What is literature for? The answer to this question comes with many implications, particularly in the pedagogical realm. When it comes to the teaching of literature, some factors come into play, namely the text, the author, and the reader. Traditional approaches to teaching literature emphasized the text and its author. The analysis of texts to decipher the hidden meanings was primary. Nevertheless, the newly-emerged approaches, particularly the reader-response approach, laid a heavy emphasis on the reader. It has been argued that the reader contributes to the interpretation of literary texts. Through their personal responses—which are based on past knowledge, experiences, emotions, and culture—readers can enrich and vivify the text, making it more meaningful than ever.

Literature is destined to fulfill an aesthetic function. That is to say, all that taps into the essence of the individual: feelings, emotions, perceptions, attitudes, vision, preferences, etc. However, this is not the case in the EFL context where it has been turned into a factual science, since it is devoid of all that characterizes the individual and makes them unique. Although the modern teaching approaches to literature focus the spotlight on students, i.e., the readers, lending them a considerable degree of autonomy to reflect upon the literary text and respond to it, students still lack aestheticism. While they are supposed to be founded in the affective realm, students' personal responses are generally evidence-based and oriented towards objectivity. This is partly due to the approach taken to teaching literature that, though it encourages reading responses, disallows those responses founded on emotions. The best-case scenario is that in which students would use both their mental faculties and their emotions to interpret the literary text. Thus, the purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to find out whether students' personal responses to literature exist. Second, to determine whether these responses are based on students' feelings and emotions. An attempt to fulfill the foregoing objectives means answering the central question of this paper: to what extent do students respond emotionally to literature? In this regard, students—who specialize in literature and civilization, in the department of English, at the University of Oran 2, in Algeria—were asked to answer a questionnaire dedicated to this cause.

Literature Review

The Cultural Approach

The Cultural Model, or language as content (Lazar, 1993), is a traditional approach to teaching literature (Hadjoui & Kheladi, 2014) where learners are supposed to find out about the text's context from different perspectives: social, political, literary and historical (Rahimipour, 2019). In the words of Isariyawat et al. (2020), "it [the cultural model] urges understudies to find and investigate social, literary and recorded components of the content" (p. 1323). Not only does the cultural model show the universality of thoughts and ideas, but it also promotes learners' awareness of those cultures and ideologies that are different from theirs (Yimwilai, 2015). Finally, the cultural approach is concerned with the quality of ideas that many educational systems and teachers strive to attain (Rahimipour, 2019). In this regard, Padurean (2015) argued that the cultural approach "does not focus on mere language acquisition but also on the knowledge of the country's culture and ideologies" (p. 196).

The Language-Based Model

The language-based model, otherwise known as the language model (Hernández, 2011), is concerned with how language is used within the literary text (Hammad, 2012). Simply put, “the main focus is on language as the literary medium” (Fauziah, 2016, p. 148). The language model departs from the idea that students develop their knowledge when working with common and recognizable grammar and lexis (Padurean, 2015). According to Bibby and Mcilroy (2013), “a literary text may be used to provide exemplars of particular grammatical points and/or lexical items” (p. 19). For Fehaima (2018), the language-based model paves the way for learners to increase their understanding of language by confronting them with various themes and topics. Though there are a few literary goals that are expected to be achieved in this model, overall, the study of language overrides that of literature (Isariyawat et al., 2020; Rahimipour, 2019). This means that, insofar as language is concerned, opting for the language-based approach to teaching literature would be the right choice (Rahimipour, 2019). Finally, the language-based model allows students to not only experience literature but also respond to it (Mart, 2019).

The Personal Growth Approach

In this learner-centered approach (Hammad, 2012), the focus is placed on a particular use of language in a text and a specific cultural context (Rahimipour, 2019). In actual fact, this approach—which is an amalgamation of the language and the cultural models (Savvidou, 2004)—has students respond to the narrative by connecting it with their personal experiences (Hadjoui & Kheladi, 2014; Lazar, 1993; Yimwilai, 2015), which is why some associate it with the personal response approach (Mustakim et al., 2018). In general, the personal growth model emphasizes the students’ personal involvement in reading literature. In other words, it helps students attain what Carter and Long call “an engagement” in reading literature (as cited in Hadjoui & Kheladi, 2014, p. 116).

The Integrated Approach

It has been noticed that the aforementioned models, namely the cultural modal, the language-based modal, and the personal growth modal, overlap (Hadjoui & Kheladi, 2014). Thus, taking into consideration those three literature teaching models theorized by Carter and Long, Savvidou went further to set forth what she called an integrated approach to literature teaching (Marin, 2017). The model that she suggested is based on the premise that the foregoing three models can be systematically reconciled (Marin, 2017). She urged that there is a need for a literature teaching approach that not only allows learners to access literature but also helps them develop their language (Savvidou, 2004).

The Reader-Response Theory

The reader-response theory has its origins in the realm of literary criticism, particularly in the work of the famous literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt whose transactional theory of reading emphasizes the rapport between the reader and the text in the process of meaning-making (Ali, 1993; Demény, 2012; Duarte & Castaneda-Pena, 2015; Larson, 2009). The theory is based on the premise that the reader’s response to the text is as significant as the content of that text (Youssef, 2021). In other words, just as the text is paramount—particularly its content—so is the reader’s response to that text (Youssef, 2021). Spirovska (2019) wrote, “The reader, with his past experiences, beliefs, expectations, and assumptions, interacts with the perspectives in the text, and

meaning is determined as the result of this interaction” (p. 22). According to Mart (2019), the act of responding not only contributes to textual understanding but also encourages intellectual as well as emotional involvement with the text. Iskhak et al. (2020) contended that “the notion ‘response’... refers to both intellectual and emotional reactions towards the texts being interpreted” (p. 119). As for Robinson, she maintained that the reader’s emotions help interpret the literary text (Konrad et al., 2019). Mart (2019) added that the emotional responses, which stem from the text-reader relationship, improve class instruction. Regarding the latter, the idea of adopting the reader-response approach comes from the conviction that learners’ needs are important (Takroumbalt & Boulenouar, 2021).

Methods

The aim of this research is to validate the claim that students’ emotional responses to literature are nonexistent in the EFL class. To fulfill this objective, both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used. Qualitative data were important in this study as much as the quantitative data. Students’ thoughts and ideas added more credits and validation to this research.

The Participants

The participants are first-year master students who specialize in literature and civilization. They study in the English department, at the University of Oran 2, to complete their academic year 2018-2019. There are 61 students. However, only 31 of them—28 females and eight males, aged between 20 and 45—returned answered questionnaires.

Table 1. *Demographic information*

		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	8	26%
	Female	23	74%
Age	20-25	24	77.4%
	25-35	3	9.6%
	35-45	3	9.6%
	45-55	1	3.2%

Research Instruments

The present study has made use of a mixed-methods questionnaire, dedicated to students. It comprises 15 questions. Some are closed questions, while others are open-ended. Overall, the questions are centered on such themes as teacher-student relationship, textual interpretation, students’ goals, teacher’s attitudes, and writing about literature.

Research Procedures

Data were gathered by means of an online questionnaire in the period between 2018 and 2019. The latter is designed by Google Forms, an online software that helps create surveys and questionnaires. After identifying the sample, which involves master one, literature-and-civilization students, the researcher took to Facebook to contact the students concerned with the study. In fact, these students are members of a Facebook group where they share all that is related to their studies and master course, such as changes in schedule, the teacher’s leave-of-absence notice, pdf files,

etc. Eventually, the questionnaire was posted in that group. Whenever a student finishes responding to the questionnaire and clicks on/hits submit, the results will automatically reach the sender, i.e., the researcher. However, out of the 61 students who share the aforementioned specialism, only 31 answered the questionnaire. The results were then converted into Microsoft Office Excel sheet to be analyzed and ultimately discussed. Finally, as far as data analysis is concerned, it should be noted that some qualitative data were quantified through the coding system.

Results

Does Your Teacher Inform You About What You Will Accomplish by The End of the Literature Course?

Table 2. *The transfer of the intended learning outcomes*

Answer	Yes, s/he does	No, s/he doesn't
percentage	75%	25%

The goal of posing this question is to find out whether students are informed about the learning outcomes that they are expected to achieve by the end of the course. The findings showed that a significant proportion of students (75%) revealed that they are not informed about what they are expected to achieve, while a quarter of them (25%) confessed that they are actually told about what they are supposed to accomplish by the end of the course.

What Do You Think Your Teacher Expects from You?

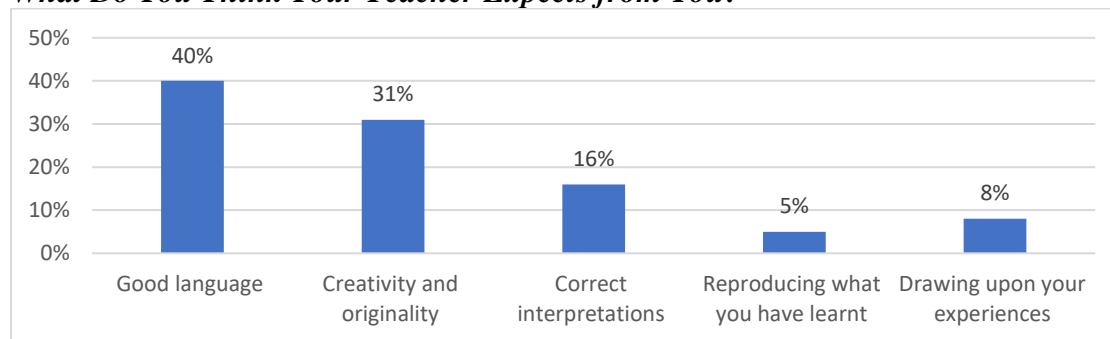


Figure 1. Teacher's expectations

In this question, students had to use their current knowledge and intuition to determine their teacher's expectations. The findings showed that 40% of the participants bet that their teacher expects good language, while around a third of them (31%) believed that creativity and originality are what their teacher usually expects. A minority of the informants (16%) revealed that they are expected to make correct interpretations. An even smaller minority, representing 8% of the sample, said that drawing upon experiences is probably what their teacher would expect them to do. The tiny minority left (5%) claimed that the teacher expects them to reproduce what they have learned in class.

How Often Does Your Teacher Invite You to Express Yourself in Class?

Table 3. *The frequency of being invited to express opinions in class*

Frequency	Always	Sometimes	Never
Percentage	50%	33%	17%

The researcher asked students this question to learn how often they express themselves in class. In this regard, half of the informants (50%) express themselves sometimes, while a third of them (33%) always do so. The remaining 17% claimed that they never engage in expressing themselves in class.

How Does Your Teacher React to Your Personal Interpretation of a Literary Passage/Text?

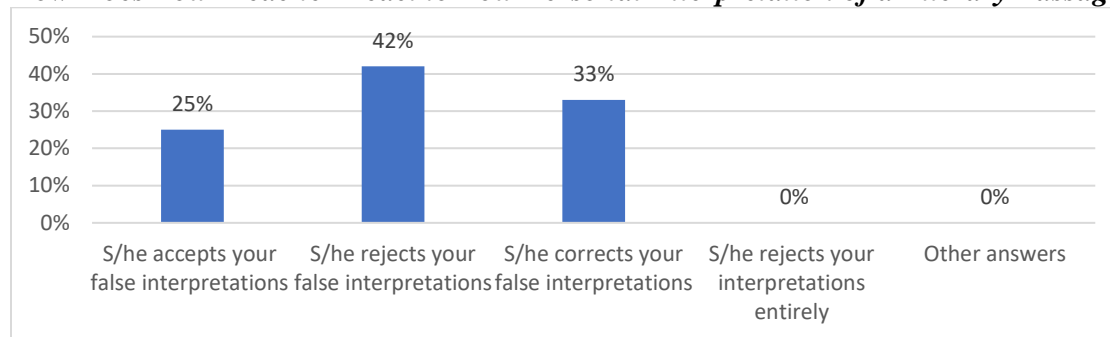


Figure 2. Teacher’s attitudes towards students’ personal interpretations

The purpose of this question is to learn about the teacher’s reaction to their students’ personal interpretation of the literary passage, or text. In this regard, 42% of students claimed that their teacher rejects their false interpretations, while a third of them (33%) revealed that their teacher corrects their interpretations when they are false. Only a quarter of the informants (25%) confessed that their teacher welcomes and accepts their false interpretations. No one (0%) mentioned anything about the fact that their personal interpretations are rejected regardless of whether they are right or wrong.

In Your Exam, Do You Respond With the Exact Information That You Have Received From Your Teacher During Lectures/Classes?

Table 4. The similitude between students’ exam answers and their teacher’s input

Answer	Yes, I do	No, I don’t
percentage	53%	47%

This question was intended to elicit answers as to whether students reproduce the same information they have received from their teacher on their exam papers. In this respect, slightly over half of the informants (53%) disclosed that, in their exam, they respond with the same information that their teacher has provided them with during lectures. On the other hand, the proportion left (47%) revealed that they do not do so.

Does Your Teacher Accept New Information on Your Exam Paper?

Table 5. The teacher’s attitude towards new information

Answer	Yes, s/he does	No, s/he doesn’t
percentage	58%	42%

The informants were asked this question in order to know whether their teacher accepts new information on their exam papers. In this regard, over half of the informants (58%) reported that their teacher does accept new information, while the 42% left claimed that he or she does not.

What Are Your Exam Answers Based on?

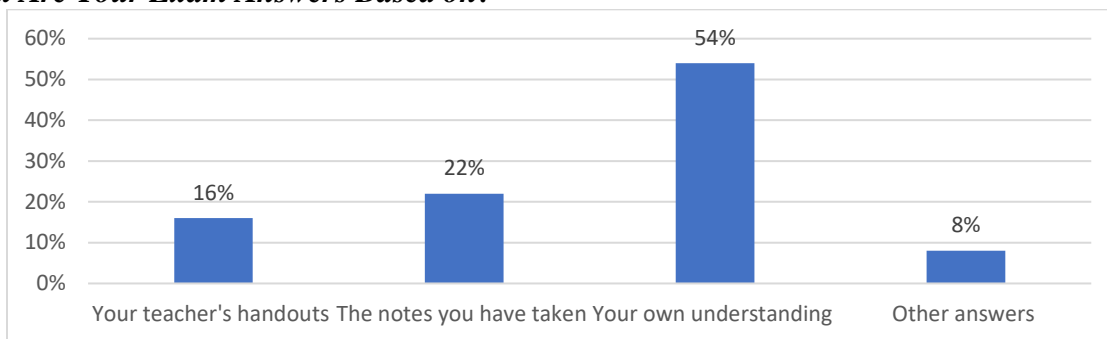


Figure 3. The sources of students' exam answers

The rationale of this question is to learn what students' exam answers are based on. In this respect, slightly over half of the participants (54%) reported that their answers are based on their understanding and interpretation. Twenty-two percent of the informants said that their answers hinge upon the notes that they have taken during the lecture. Another minority, representing 16% of the sample, disclosed that they rely on their teacher's handouts. However, the remaining 8% of the participants decided to jot down their own answers:

- All of them.
- 1+2 (the teacher handouts and the notes I have taken during the lectures).
- The teacher handouts and the notes I have taken during the lectures.
- My answers are based on the three suggestions that you proposed.
- It depends on whether the teacher is open to different ideas. Some teachers tend to be stubborn so I needed to give them what they want in order to pass the exam.

Do You Write Your Opinion in Your Literature Essay?

Table 6. *Writing opinions in essays*

Answer	Yes, I do	No, I don't
Percentage	35%	65%

This question is addressed to students so as to find out whether they express their opinions in their essays. Thus, as displayed in the table above, a significant number of students, representing 65% of the sample, confirmed that they write their opinions in their essays, whereas the remaining 35% confessed that they do not do so.

How Do You Interpret the Text?

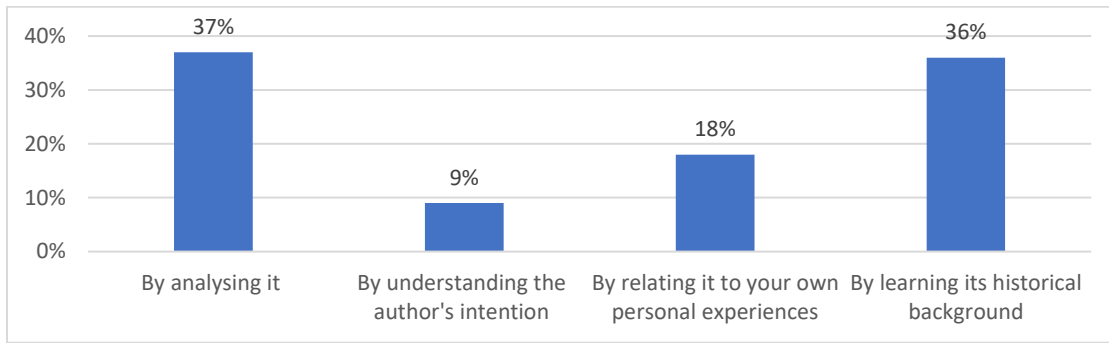


Figure 4. Ways of interpreting the literary text

The main motive in asking this question is to reveal how students interpret the text. The findings showed that slightly over a third of the respondents (37%) admitted that they interpret the text by analysing it, whereas 36% of them stated that they rely on the historical background of the text for interpretation. Another portion of the participants, representing 18% of the sample, confessed that they relate the text to their personal experiences. Only 9% of those students surveyed claimed that they interpret the text by understanding the author’s intention.

Why Do You Study Literature?

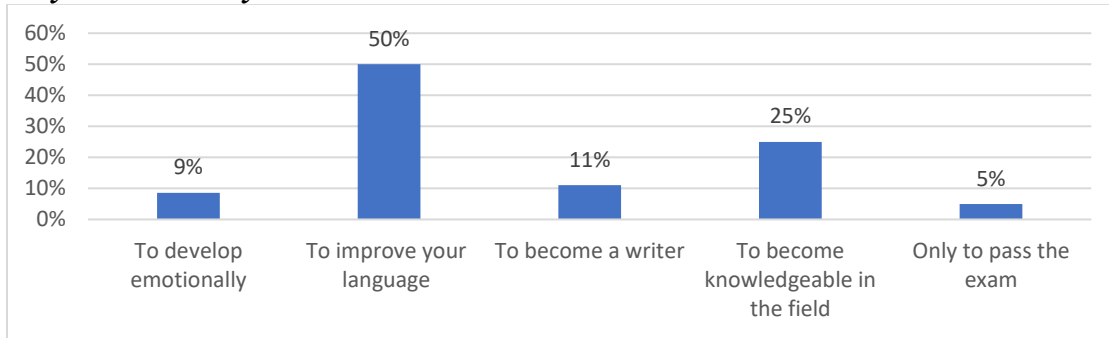


Figure 5. The goals of studying literature

This question seeks to investigate the students’ goals of studying literature. The findings showed the following: half of the students surveyed (50%) study literature for the purpose of improving their language; a quarter of the students (25%) reported they want to become knowledgeable in the field; a small minority, representing 11% of the total sample, shared their goal of becoming writers; nine percent revealed that emotional development is their ultimate goal; only 5% of the informants confessed they study literature only to pass the exams.

In the Field of Literature, What Aspect About Yourself Do You Wish to Improve This Year?

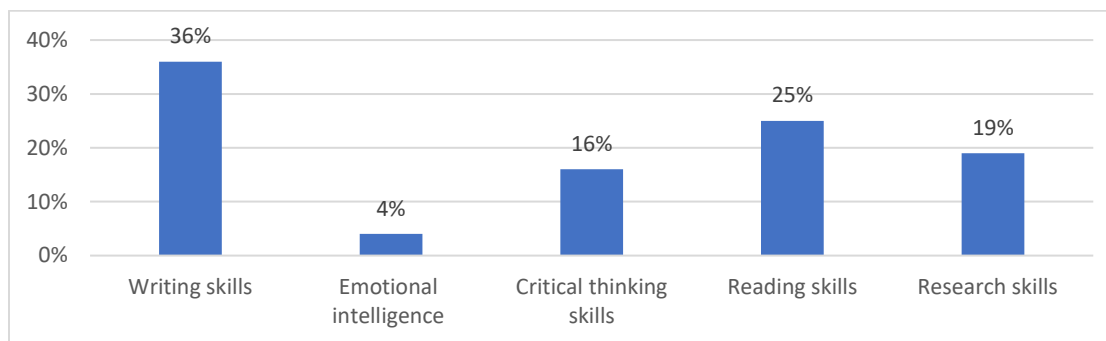


Figure 6. Students' literature-related goals

This question intends to uncover what students strive to develop in their master one course. The results showed that slightly over a third of the informants, representing 36% of the sample, are after developing their writing skills, while a quarter of them (25%) seek to improve their reading skills. These results also showed that 19% of the participants want to enhance their research skills in the field of literature, and 16% of them wish to advance their critical thinking skills. Nonetheless, only 4% of those students surveyed set their sights on ameliorating their emotional intelligence.

How Do You Usually Respond in Your Literature Essays?

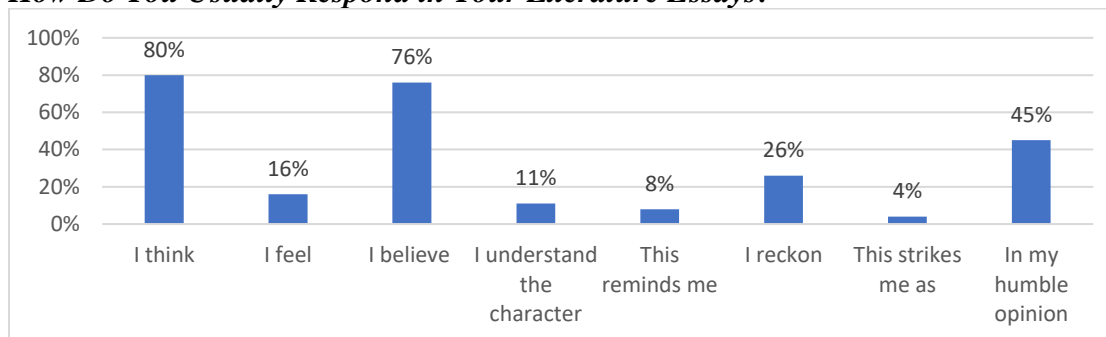


Figure 7. Ways of responding in literature essays

The rationale behind asking students this question is to find out how students usually respond to literature in their essays. Answers to this question would allow for more than one option. In this regard, the results displayed in the graph above showed that the majority of students (80%) opted for "I think", which is their usual way of responding to literature. Almost a similar percentage of students (76%) chose "I believe" as their typical response. As expected, about half of the participants (45%) selected the famous phrase "in my humble opinion", while slightly over a quarter of them (26%) revealed that they usually use "I reckon" when they respond. On the other hand, a minority of students, representing 16% of the sample, picked "I feel", and an even smaller minority (11%) went for "I understand the character". This is followed by a tiny proportion, which represents 8%, that usually makes use of the expression "this reminds me of". Only 4% of students, however, reported that they usually answer with "this strikes me as".

What Do You Think Literature Is About?

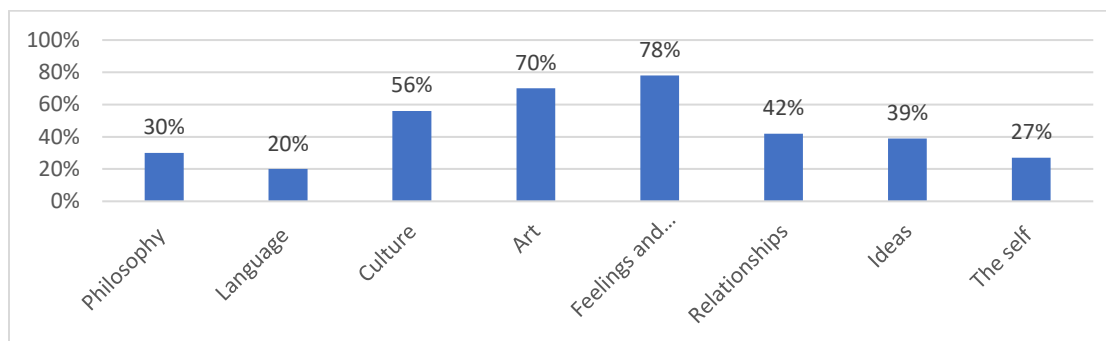


Figure 8. Students' conception of literature

This question aims at discovering how students perceive literature. Just as in the previous question, here, too, the participants are permitted to select more than one option. The findings showed that the majority of those students surveyed, representing 78% of the sample, think of literature in terms of “feelings and emotions”, while 70% of them perceive it as “art”. Another proportion, representing 56% of the total number of participants, sees literature as “culture”. For some students, who represent 42% of the total sample, literature is about “relationships”. Others, 39% of the total, believe that literature is about ideas. Around a third of the informants (30%) reported that literature is “philosophy”, while about the same proportion (27%) asserted that literature is about “the self”. Finally, 20% of students concluded that literature is purely about language.

What Makes You Happy When You Read Literature?

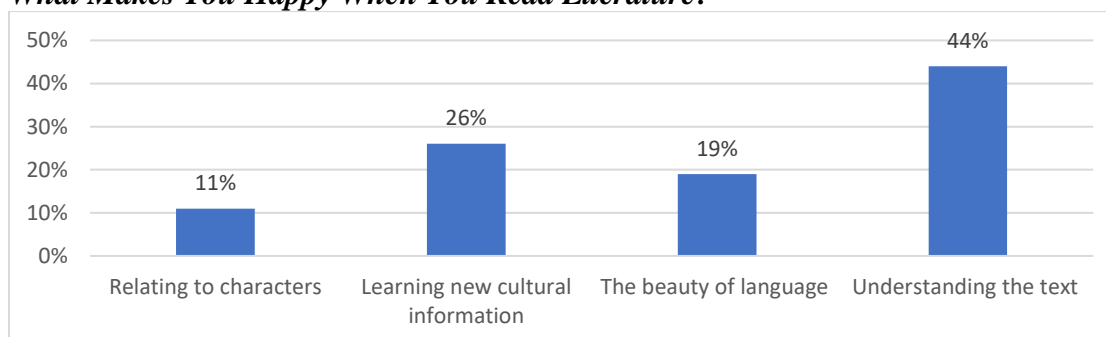


Figure 9. Students' sources of pleasure in reading literature

Students were asked this question to learn their source of pleasure behind reading literature. In this respect, nearly half of the participants (44%) revealed that understanding the text makes them happy, while 26% of them reported that learning new cultural information contributes to their joy of reading. A small number of students, representing 19%, disclosed that it is the beauty of language that cheers them up. The tiny minority of students left (11%) affirmed that they feel happy when they relate to characters.

What Are Your Debates With Your Teacher Centered on?

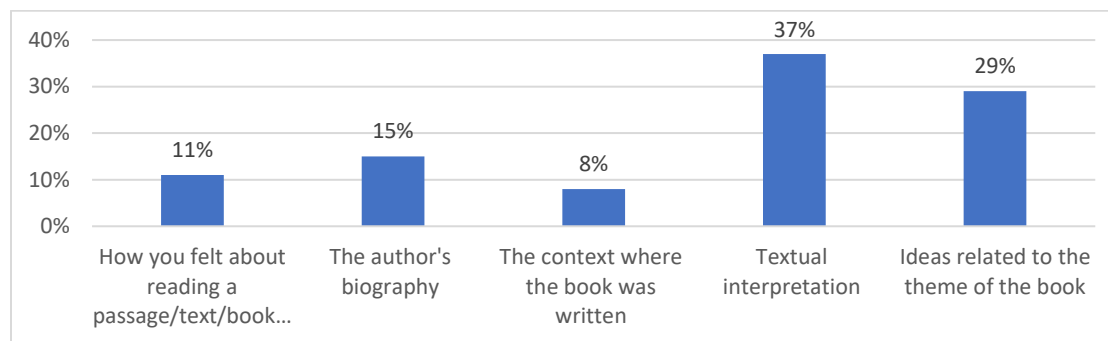


Figure 10. The foci of the teacher-student debates

By asking this question, the researcher seeks to find out what a literature debate in a master class is generally centered on. The results demonstrated that according to 37% of those students surveyed, literature debates are centered on textual interpretation. As for the proportion representing 29%, they reported that such debates tackle ideas related to the theme. However, only 15% of the participants said that their debates are based on the author's biography. Almost a similar proportion (11%) claimed that the debates they have with their teacher revolve around how they felt about reading a particular passage, text, or book. The remaining tiny minority (8%) said that they debate the context where the book was written.

Discussion

This research paper has sought to learn the extent to which students respond emotionally to literary texts. As expected, and based on the foregoing data analyses, students' responses confirmed that emotional responses are quasi-nonexistent in the EFL literature classroom. Although students think of literature in terms of feelings and emotions, the latter do not constitute their goals. This runs counter to the principles of the reader-response theory, according to which, responses to literature originate not only in cognition but also in personal experiences and emotions. Furthermore, this study revealed that textual interpretations occupy the content of the class, so students study the language and the historical background of the text to make interpretations, which explains the prevalence of some traditional approaches to teaching literature, such as the cultural approach and the language-based model. This can also account for the presence of some old teacher-centered practices, particularly the practice of memorizing and reproducing the content dealt with in class in the exam paper.

Moreover, the respondents have reported that their literature course is based on analyzing literary texts and learning about their backgrounds, such as the author's biography, the socio-cultural context where the literary work was written, etc. However, these practices rarely invite students' personal responses, since they deal only with facts or objective analyses of texts. This also explains why students avoid writing their opinions and lean towards objectivity through their frequent use of objective language. Nevertheless, the classroom debates, according to the findings, are not exclusively centered on the study of the author's biography and the context of the literary work. They also digress to tackle other ideas related to the theme of the work under study, which encourages a flow of ideas (brainstorming), creativity, critical thinking, and communication in the classroom. This insinuates that students' autonomy in terms of sharing their thoughts and emotions is exercised only in class—not in the exams and assignments. Students are generally invited to

express themselves in class, yet their autonomy is limited since it cannot go beyond the classroom discussions.

Clearly, based on the results, students avoid giving their opinions. This is, probably, because they are not confident about their knowledge and language level. They may think that they can never get to the level of a critic—who was once a beginner, just like them. Or they may prefer to keep it neutral and stay as objective as possible, simply because they do not want to involve themselves—for some unknown reasons. Furthermore, students not sharing their thoughts and emotions can be explained in relation to their expectations as well as their teacher's. When a teacher has low expectations for his or her students, they will create a Rosenthal effect. Students, in this case, would feel incapable of fulfilling what their teacher really desires them to accomplish. In the reversed scenario where the teacher sets high expectations, the result would be the Pygmalion effect. That is to say, students would be motivated and, therefore, capable of reading and writing about literature.

It is noteworthy that teachers do not communicate their expectations—technically the intended learning outcomes—to their students. This is confirmed by the students' answers to the first question of the questionnaire. Students do not know what is expected from them. This is probably the reason why they developed the practice of reproducing what they have learned in class, which is still prevalent. Surprisingly, when the researcher asked the students to guess what their teacher expects mostly from them, many reported that it is language. Incidentally, their teacher's expectation, though unshared, correlates with their ultimate goal—that of understanding the literary text. Teacher's expectations—termed the intended learning outcomes in this research—provide students with a road map to determine their goal and decide how to attain it. When these expectations are not shared, students will then be forced to guess what is expected from them. Creativity, critical thinking, figurative language, arguments, and illustrations are some of the expectations that teachers may have of their students and which need to be clearly communicated to them.

Moreover, the findings show that students study in a teacher-centered environment as some of them have to rely on either their teacher's handouts or the notes they have taken during their lectures in order to pass the exam. This insinuates that knowledge is imparted to students as a fixed entity expected to be reproduced in the exams. Though both teachers and students know for a fact that literature is not limited in terms of interpretations, it seems that they are relying on a set of established interpretations that have become factual information expected to be memorized and retrieved when necessary. This research has proved that a lot is at stake, particularly the learners' autonomy, when teaching is centered on the teacher. Knowledge is neither the teacher's propriety nor the students'. The world of literature is so vast that it can't be delimited by the teachers' views or narrowed to a set of established interpretations. Students' answers substantiate the claim that the literature teaching instruction is teacher-centered. However, the banking model of teaching and learning numbs creativity and does not contribute to students' emotional growth, which is one of the aims of this research. The pedagogy of freedom, which is the antidote to the pedagogy of the oppressed, in this context, would encourage students to voice their opinions and emotions.

It should be noted that most of the time, students' interpretations are rejected, yet this contradicts their claim that their teacher accepts new information and is open to new ideas. They also maintain that they do express themselves in class. Having said that, it seems that the teacher has expectations and preferences as to novel information. In other words, he has a personalized set of assessment criteria to judge whether that information (interpretation) is 'correct' or 'false'. Teachers have their reasons for rejecting their students' interpretations. A study conducted by the researcher, which involves 23 EFL teachers from seven Algerian universities, showed that teachers have different assumptions as to what makes a 'correct' interpretation. While some teachers believe that an interpretation is 'correct' as long as it does not go off-topic, others assert that false interpretations are not based on reason, evidence, or theory. They rather exist in the realm of unfounded subjectivity. Thus, the main issue that has been addressed in this research is the rejection of learners' interpretations, especially when these are based on their feelings and emotions.

Finally, the analysis of the students' responses shows that students lean towards the mastery of language—they strive to improve their reading and writing skills in particular. Students believe that language is the most important in the field of literature, so, instead of relying upon their personal experiences and emotions, they place an emphasis on the analysis of language. What is more, students think that mastery of language is what their teacher expects them to achieve. There seem to be reasons behind students overfocusing and prioritizing language over other aspects, such as emotional involvement in the text, when dealing with literature. First, students may believe that the only way to improve their language is through reading literature. Second, some students study literature for exams only, so they are convinced that language itself will suffice to pass the exam. Last but not least, there are some students who think that literature is purely about language. For these students, understanding language is synonymous with understanding literature. In this case, as noted by Rahimipour (2019), the language-based approach would be effective within this category of students.

Conclusion

This research aimed at substantiating the claim that affective responses to literature are hardly ever present in the EFL literature classroom. Accordingly, the findings of this study showed that students are not involved emotionally in the literary experience. As a matter of fact, these findings drew back the curtain on how some competences, such as linguistic competence and critical thinking, are prioritized over emotional competence, which calls for the reassessment of the current literature teaching approaches. Ultimately, the study underscored the need to put students' emotional responses at the core of the literary experience, for this will help them develop not only their literary competence but also their emotional intelligence.

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