

## INVESTIGATING THE LITERARY COMPETENCE OF FRESHMAN UNDERGRADUATE EFL STUDENTS AT MOHAMED BEN AHMED UNIVERSITY

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### ABSTRACT

It is widely accepted that literature is not only a subject to study to obtain grades, but also a skill and a competence to acquire. In an EFL context, literature can be a rich language input resource if the skill of reading literature is mastered and the EFL learners possess a degree in literary competence. Thus, the present study is an attempt to shed some light on the literary knowledge or the literary competence that Algerian freshman undergraduate students possess at the end of their secondary studies and the beginning of their EFL tertiary studies. To do so the article will start by elucidating the key construct, i.e., Literary Competence which has gained a lot of importance in the field of education in general and in ELT, in particular. In the light of the presented definition, a literary competence questionnaire made up of 21 questions in addition to the personal information part was administered to the sample group of 60 Algerian students starting their three-year B.A. course in EFL at the University of Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Oran 2, west Algeria. The results indicate that the students possess a mixed-level of Literary Competence and though overall a limited LC, students show an awareness of the merits and benefits of literature and hold positive attitude towards it. Such results should be taken into consideration in selecting and grading the content of their literature syllabus in a way that takes them a step forward in gaining literary competence in EFL.

**Keywords:** Literary Competence (LC), Language proficiency, English Language Literature (ELL).

### INTRODUCTION

Just like a level in linguistic competence is required to start an EFL course at the tertiary level, a level in LC is also recommended to deal with literary texts included in this EFL course. Freshman EFL Algerian students come to tertiary studies after studying EFL in schools for seven years which are concluded by the Baccalaureate diploma (the national diploma of secondary studies). The students who obtained this diploma and choose to major in EFL at university should obtain good scores in the English Baccalaureate exam. The latter is a test of EFL scored out of twenty and divided into three sections: reading comprehension, language use and grammar, and written expression. In this sense it can be considered as a placement test which puts the students, according to the scores they obtain, in a language proficiency level that ranges between pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate.

However, during their exposure to EFL in their school years, these students were not exposed to English literary texts or to what is called ELL. In fact, the middle school textbooks as well as the secondary school ones hardly ever contain any literary texts, and if they contain a few;

they are not compulsory. Therefore, most Algerian freshman university students are confronted for the first time to ELL during their first year university studies.

If we do have an overview about these students' language proficiency or linguistic competence from the Baccaalaureate English exam, as stated above; we do not have an insight concerning their literary competence.

### **Aim of the study and research questions**

Accordingly, this study was designed to determine whether or not Algerian freshman undergraduate students possess any level of LC when they start their literature course at the tertiary level. In other words, the main aim of the study is to investigate the following research question: Do freshman Algerian undergraduate EFL students possess any level of literary competence when they start their tertiary ELL course? Answering this overarching question leads us inevitably to answer the following secondary questions: what attitude do these students have towards literature and literature study? What kind of literary ability and literary knowledge do they have? Answers to such questions could certainly give some enlightenment concerning the selection of the content of the student's literature syllabus.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Literary Competence (LC)**

The term Literary Competence (henceforth LC) finds its origins in literary studies rather than in ELT. It was first coined by Culler (1975) in his book *Structuralist Poetic* where he posits that the reader need to be aware of certain literary conventions in order to convert the words of a literary text into meaning. In other way, to read and process a literary text as such, students need not only the basic reading skills, but should also be sensitized to some literary conventions. In an analogy to Chomsky's linguistic competence and grammar competence, Culler (1979) mentioned the grammar of literature and attempted to pinpoint some conventions which operate for particular genres. Later on and just like the case of linguistic competence which have been extended to communicative competence, Schmidt (1982) extended literary competence to include the sociological system of literary production and reception.

According to Witte et al (2006) the LC identified by Culler and Schmidt aimed to describe the ideal users of the literary system (literary critics, experienced readers) rather than the learner or the student and perhaps even less the language learner. Yet in educational setting in general and in ELT in particular the LC pointed at is not that different from what was prescribed by Culler and Schmidt. What should be emphasized, however, is that LC "must be considered as a capacity that develops by experiences in an 'interpretive community'" (Fish, as cited in Witte et al, 2006 p.5). In other way LC is achieved through a process what makes it an ability that comes "crawling rather than walking". (Shalan2017)

In fact, several educationists and ELT researchers have pointed at and defined LC. For example Lazar (1993, p.13) agrees with Culler (1975, p.189) that competent readers of literature should be able to follow the plot of a novel and recognise the themes. They might also be able to distinguish between the plot and the subplot, understand characters' motives and attitude, recognise the narrative point of view and so on. She contends that while it might be difficult to list all the skills that make up literary competence in educational settings, teachers should be able to identify the skills of LC they target.

Brumfit and Carter (1986, pp. 16-7), on the other hand, emphasize the aesthetic and appreciative character of literary competence, they argue that "...to be literary competent is

to have the capacity to issue value judgement” about the literary work; they contend: “when we have achieved defined capacities of judgement about the literary work, then we have acquired literary competence”.

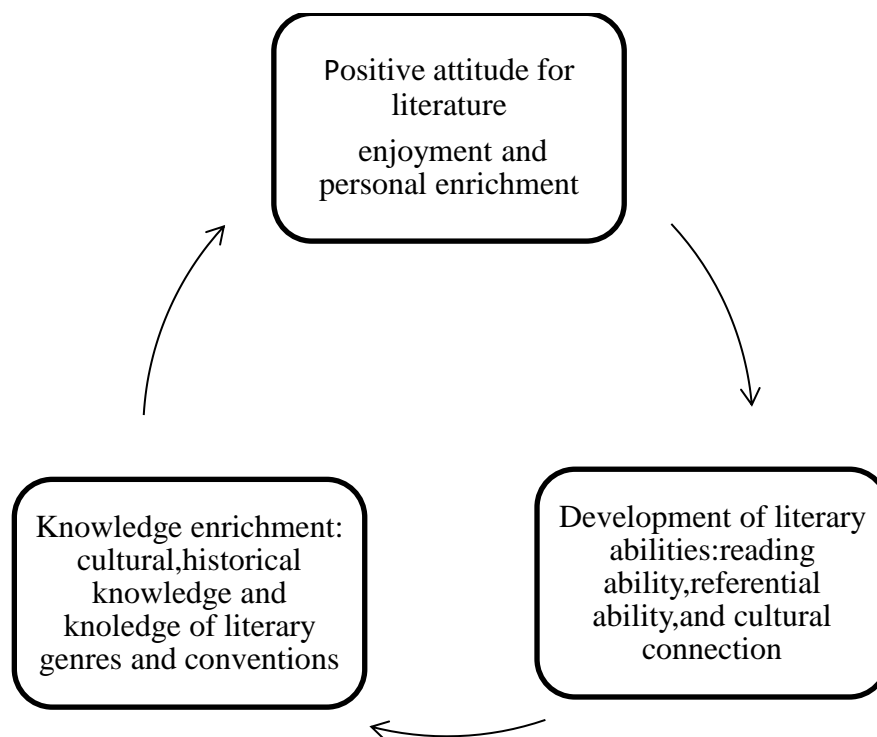
Recently, Minguez Lopèz (2014) who research children’s artistic education and inspired by Coenon (1992), who in the field of literary criticism was the first who attempted to give an exhaustive definition to LC, comes up with a definition of LC that includes three components: Abilities, knowledge and attitude.

**Abilities:** they consist of: a) the ability to decode the text through reading, i.e. reading ability, b) the ability to relate what is read to particular cultural code and c) the ability to refer the text read to other texts already read or watched ( audiovisual artistic work). That is to say a competent reader of literature uses his schema or background literary knowledge to relate previous content to new information. This implies that EFL learners should be familiar with literary texts or artistic works at least in their L1.

**Knowledge and strategies:** what Minguez Lopez means by encyclopaedic knowledge is the general cultural world knowledge which should contain knowledge of literary genres and conventions. For the sake of this study, knowledge concerns knowledge of literary conventions and literary genres.

**Attitude:** it should go without saying that competent readers of literature hold a positive attitude about literature. According to Minguez Lopez attitude pertains to predisposition for reading, interest for new languages, new subjects and new kind of texts.

Minguez Lopez represents the three components of LC in a venn diagram where the three components overlap a little bit with each other. However, we argue that holding a positive attitude about literature values and merits in education and for personal enrichment will work as a drive to read literary texts. Then, the more we read the more we will acquire the literary knowledge and improve the literary abilities mentioned above. Conversely, holding a negative attitude about literature as being boring, useless and the like of negative judgements which might have been gained from a negative past experience with literature and literary texts will be definitely a hindrance towards developing or achieving a good level in LC. That is why we argue that the three components of LC can be seen in a circular chain or in flowchart as one leading to the other as illustrated in figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Components of Literary Competence in a Flowchart (adapted from Minguez Lopez, 214)

In fact, literary competence in a foreign language is just an extension of the LC acquired in the mother tongue as observed by Brumfit and Carter (as cited in Shalan2016)

The work in the foreign language, if it is to be truly literary work, must be regarded as an extension of capacities already developed, at least partially, in mother tongue literary work, but these capacities will be refined through contact with literature from a foreign culture.

In other words, students who have positive attitude towards literature in their mother tongue and are used to read are likely to transfer this attitude to ELL and build on their abilities and expand their literary knowledge.

Following what have been mentioned above, the present study is designed to collect information about students' attitudes and past experience with literature, their literary abilities as they perceive them and their literary knowledge.

## METHOD

This study is a descriptive study. More precisely, it is a survey research which Brown and Rodgers (2002, p.294) describe as "any procedures used to gather and describe the characteristics, attitudes, views, opinions, and so forth of students...." To obtain an overview of Algerian freshman undergraduate students' LC, we need to gather their attitudes, opinions, the literary knowledge and skill they have at the outset of their academic studies.

## INSTRUMENTS

The main instrument used is an LC questionnaire (see the appendix1) designed by the research who was inspired by other studies conducted in the same area (Shalan, 2017; Mozafari and Barjesteh, 2016; Venkateswaran and Gayathri, 2012). It contains twenty-one question items in addition to the first part which concerns personal information: age, gender,

proficiency level and the mark obtained in the Baccalaureate exam of English. The aim of this first part was to determine the kind of population involved and their language proficiency level via the scores obtained in the English Baccalaureate exam. The questions are a mixture of open-ended and close-ended questions and can be divided in accordance with the three components of LC mentioned above as follows: from question 1 to question 8: past experience with literature and attitudes towards it; from question 9 to question 15: literary reading experience and literary abilities; from question 16 to question 20 type of literary knowledge in English (knowledge of literary genres and literary terms).

## **PROCEDURES AND POPULATION**

The questionnaire was administered to 60 first year EFL students out of a total of 110 students enrolled in a three-year BA course of EFL, which makes the sample quite representative of the freshmen population. It was administered at the beginning of the academic year 2018/2019 so as to gauge the level of LC they have prior to the beginning of their literature course.

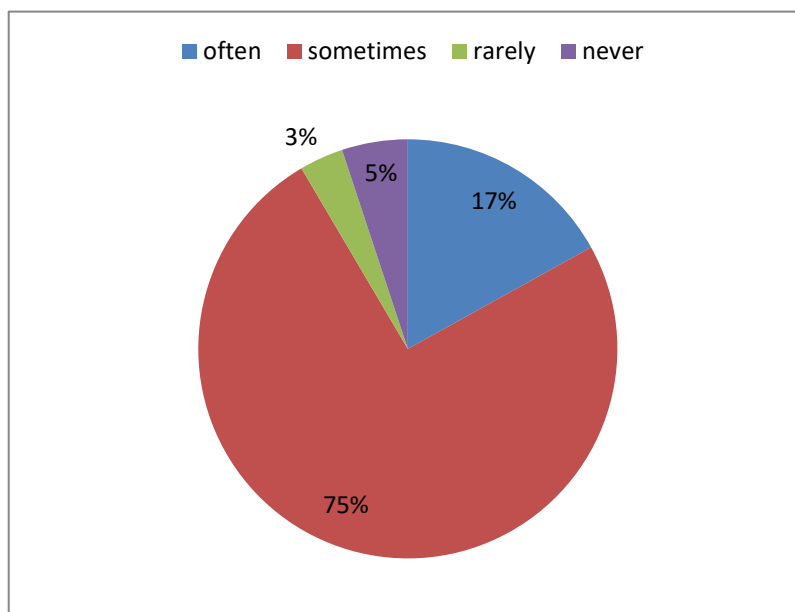
The analysis of the first part of the questionnaire reveals that 65% of the participants are female and 15% are male. 88% of them are aged between 17 and 20, only three out of 60 students are aged between 20 and 24 and another three are over 25. Concerning their language proficiency 67% of the students think that they have an intermediate level in English which matches the marks they obtained in the Baccalaureate English exam since more than 60% say that their marks are between 14.5 and 13.5 out of 20. Only 6 students think that they are advanced and they obtain marks between 16.5 and 18.5 out of 20. Still four other students say that they are only elementary. It is worth noting that the marks obtained in the Baccalaureate English exam range between 11.5 and 18.5 out of 20, which put these students in language proficiency level between intermediate and upper-intermediate.

All of these students are of Algerian nationality and origin and had their education in Algeria so their L1 is Arabic, their L2 is French and English is an FL.

## **RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Experience with and attitudes to literature: results of Q1 to Q 8**

As it was stated the aim of the first eight questions is to tap into students' experience with literature in their L1 and L2 and their attitude to it since the latter is an important element of LC. Figure 2 summarizes the findings concerning Q 1 which was about the



**Figure 2:** Frequency of Reading Literature in L1 and L2

frequency of reading literature. The results indicate that the majority of the students that is 75% say that they sometimes read literature in their L1 and L2. Only a minority of 3% say that they never read literature in their L1 and L2. The results of Q 2 confirms that these students although not prolific readers, they do actually read quite a bit in Arabic and in French. The authors and the titles that these students have read include: Yasmina Khadra: *Ce que le jour doit à la Nuit* (a novel in French), Ahlam Mostaghanemi: *The Black Suits You* (a novel in Arabic) and other titles by the same Algerian writers. Other novels include: *I Loved a Hebrew Girl* (e-book in Arabic), Victor Hugo: *Les Misérables, I changed for you, Will you Forgive me* (e books in Arabic), Abed El-Hamid Ben Hadouga: *Le Vent du Sud* ( a novel in Arabic), Paulo Coello: *Le Zahir*. If we know that all these literary works are not included in their textbooks, such answers suggest that these students did experience the reading of literary texts in their L1 and L2 for pleasure.

Q3 which aimed to determine the reasons for not reading literature was answered only by forty 40 students and the main reason for most of them that is 25students or 62% of the students was not finding time. Only a minority of 10 students out of 40 say that reading literature is boring. Still one student says that he/she gets bored quickly and doesn't want to continue. These results indicate that the majority of the students who do not read literature do not hold negative attitude about it as being boring or not enjoyable.

This positive attitude is further confirmed by the results of Q4 and Q5 since the majority of the students 61% say that the study of literature is necessary and beneficial for the preparation of their academic degree. Only 3% of the students say that they strongly disagree.

Moreover our respondents show an awareness of the advantages and the benefits of studying literature in their answers to Q5 which, on purpose, was left open-ended. More than twenty 20 students say that literature would improve their language proficiency and help them with their fluency by expanding their vocabulary. Twelve 12 students think that literature would improve their writing. For the last 8 eight students, literature would expand their mind and culture; one of these students writes the following: "literature makes you understand writers



and their feelings and opens your mind and imagination”. Indeed, such answers reflect the positive attitude that these students have towards literature.

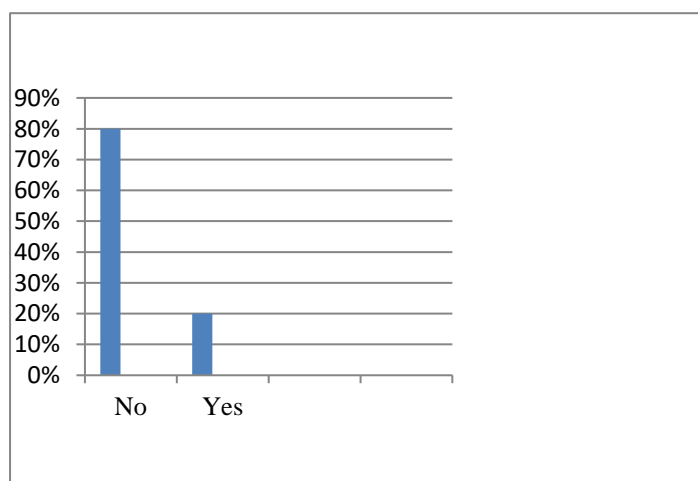
The results of Q7 and Q8 show that only 10% percent of the students already read a literary work in English whereas 90 percent of the students say that they never read a literary work in English. The works they read are: *Three is a Crowd*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Me before You*; *The Sun is also a Star*. On the other hand, 70 % of the students say that they have no idea about English writers or literary works written in English that they would like to read. The minority that is 20%, however, give titles such as: *Gone with the wind*, *Harry Potter*, *Great expectation* and writers such as: Charles Dickens, Jack London, Lord Byron, and Anne Bronte.

All in all Q1 to Q8 reveal that these students had a little experience in reading literary texts in their mother language and in their second language though they had little if any experience reading ELL. Yet they hold a positive attitude towards literature and its advantages for language development and cultural understanding which should be taken into consideration by first year literature teachers.

### Perception of literary abilities: results of Q9 to Q 15

These questions attempt to unveil the second component of LC which is literary abilities as perceived by the respondents. In other words, the questions attempt to elicit students’ perception of what reading a literary text involves.

The results of Q 9 which concerns students’ awareness of the difference between the reading of literary and non-literary texts are summarized in figure 4 below. As the figure shows 80% of the respondents are aware that reading a literary text is not similar to reading any other kind of texts. The main reasons for this difference according to the students are: “literary texts are more complex than newspaper articles”. “Literature is an art, it is deeper”, “in the story, there is the desire to read and finish read”, “literature raises emotion”. These are some of the students answers reported verbatim.



**Figure 3:** Similarity of Reading Literary and non-Literary texts

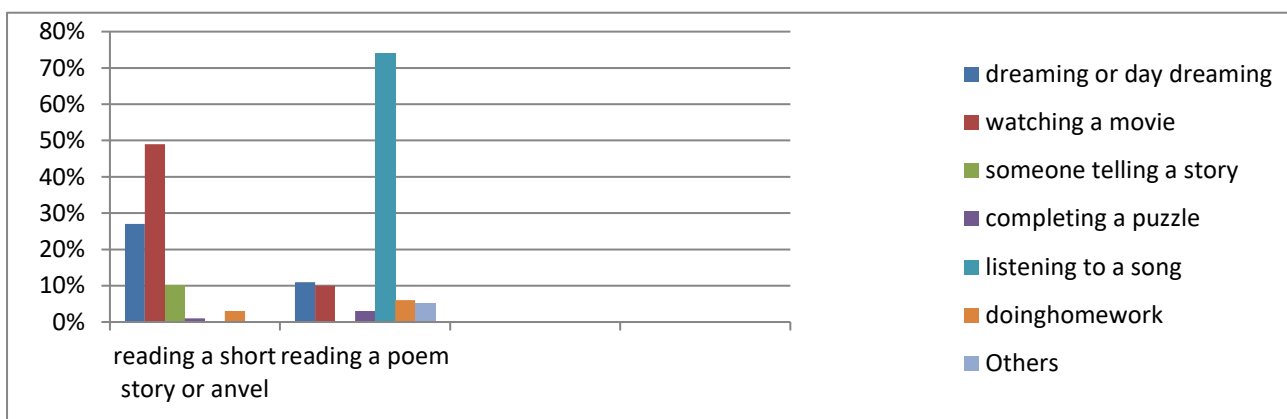
On the other hand, students do not seem to be aware of the kind of knowledge needed to decode a literary text. Forty-one 41 students only have answered Q 11, and for most of them 69% of them the main reason that made them stop reading a literary text is language

difficulty. This suggests that students perceive the reading ability as a linguistic decoding ability which might stick them at the bottom-up processes.

In addition, Q13 shows that 68% of the students say that to read a literary text, they only need good knowledge of the language and vocabulary, only a minority of 2% say that they need cultural, social and biographical knowledge to understand the reading of a literary text. The remaining 30% of the students say that they don't know the kind of knowledge involved in reading a literary text.

These results show that students perceive reading literature as a linguistic decoding ability and take the cultural references embedded in literary texts as granted; in other words, students lack the referential and cultural connection that reading a literary text involves. This might be due to their unfamiliarity with reading literary texts outside their cultural context as the results of Q1 to Q4 above indicate.

The results of Q14 and Q15 are summarized in figure 4 below which shows that the majority of the students that is more than 40% compare reading a short story or a novel to watching a



**Figure 4:** Perception of the literary reading experience

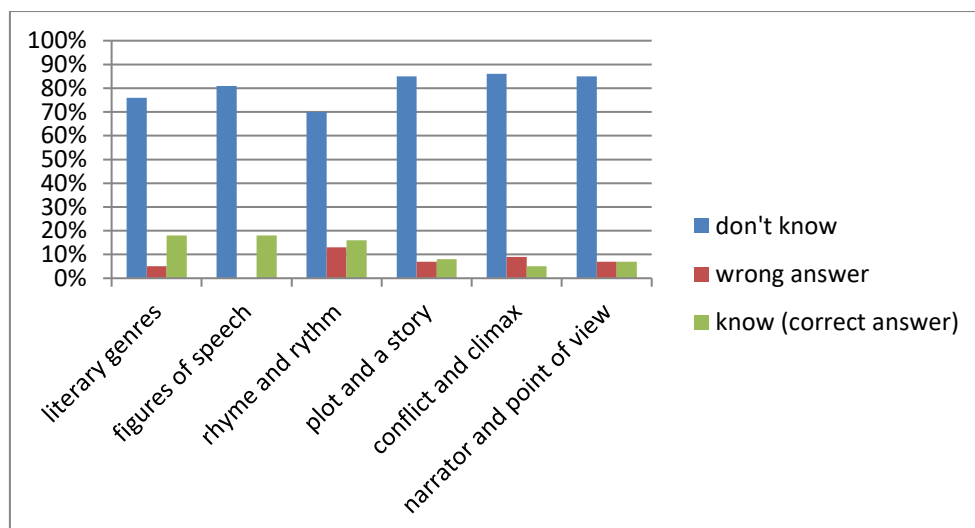
movie and almost 30% compare it to a personal experience which is dreaming or daydreaming. The same goes for reading a poem which the majority compares it to listening to a song. These results show that the students conceive reading literature as a personal and entertaining experience and are aware of the affective factor that reading literature involves.

What comes out from Q9 to Q15 is that students perceive the literary ability as a reading ability related to the linguistic decoding of the literary text and are not aware of the cultural references that the decoding of a literary text involves. Nevertheless, most of the respondents perceive the experience of reading literature as something enjoyable or pleasant and personal.

### **Literary knowledge (genres knowledge and knowledge of literary terms): Q16 to Q2**

The aim of these set of questions is to unveil students' knowledge of literary genres, conventions and literary terms which is the third component of LC. Figure 5 below summarizes the results of these last four questions.





**Figure 5:** Knowledge of Literary Genres and Literary Terms

As indicated in the figure, the results show that students have little knowledge concerning literary terms in English. The majority of the students that is more than 70% say that they don't know the literary terms they are asked about. Only a minority of 10% of the student give correct answers about the literary terms they are asked about. This may be due to their unfamiliarity with ELL.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, the results mentioned above show that the freshman EFL students possess different proportions in the three components of literary competence. First, concerning literary knowledge, the respondents have extremely limited knowledge concerning literary terms and knowledge of literary genres which may be due to their unfamiliarity with ELL. Second, although they perceive the difference between reading literary and non-literary texts and do perceive the entertaining and personal dimensions of reading literary texts, they are not aware of the cultural inferencing that reading a literary text involves. Third and most importantly, these students have a positive attitude towards literature and think its relevant for developing their language proficiency, this attitude might be the outcome of these students LC acquired while experiencing the reading of literary texts in their L1 and L2 .

In fact, these results come in contradiction with what have been found by other researchers. For example Shalan (2016) finds that 85% of the Iraqi students never read literary texts outside those in their textbooks and know about a famous Kurdish poet Ahmadi Khani only from his statue. Also, the results come counter the observation of Miliani (2003) where he posits: "...despite its potential, literature in English has become a poor relation among language-based subjects, witness the students' relative illiteracy in the area". The present study has demonstrated that these students are not utterly illiterate in the matter of literature and more importantly are aware of its importance and its potential in improving their language proficiency. Put in other way, these students have a beginner level in LC which is witnessed by their positive attitude and willingness to read.

What has to be done; however, is to extend and improve this level by avoiding to ruin student's interest and positive attitude in literature, which is the current practice, by programming "canonised literary texts which belong to former centuries"(Djafri2013, p.109) . Instead, care must be taken when selecting the content of the literature course to include

only the literary texts that are likely to build on our students' positive attitude towards literature, increase their literary knowledge and improve their literary ability. To do so the content selected need to be within the linguistic threshold (Alderson 1994) of the learners or what Shultz (1981) calls the readability of the text. Furthermore, the themes of the selected texts need to be appealing to students' interest. In this way, we may make sure that we are driving students' LC a step forward.

## CONCLUSION

One of the most important terms that have entered the realm of TEFL is LC. Proponents of LC stress the fact that literary texts are different from other texts and in order to understand them aesthetically, readers should have a level in LC. In fact, LC is relevant to ELT in many ways. First, just like linguistic competence or communicative competence, LC is acquired through a process which implies that students go through different levels of LC. Second LC converges with the areas of reading EFL and metacognitive strategies in reading. Last but not least achieving a good level in LC will enable the wide resource of ELL to be an active language input for those studying EFL in a poor input environment.

Using a survey study, the article has sought to determine the level of LC that freshman Algerian EFL students possess before their tertiary literary course starts. The results indicate that the level of LC varies between the students and that overall, though the students possess poor literary ability and literary knowledge, they do have a positive attitude towards literature, which is in our sense the driving force of LC. This suggests that the literature course objectives should target these two areas i.e., literary ability by developing literary reading skills, and literary knowledge by raising awareness of literary genres and literary terms while enhancing the positive attitude toward literature by selecting literary texts relevant to their interest and why not make them contribute in the selection of this content.

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## Appendix 1 L.C Questionnaire

### Appendix 1 Questionnaire

Dear students,

I have the pleasure to ask you to participate in a research by giving your answers openly and frankly to the following questions. Tick the box that corresponds to your answer. Whenever a space is provided, fill in with your answers. You can write in Arabic or French if you wish.

Thank you for your cooperation and contribution.

#### Personal information

- a)-Are you: a male.....  Or a female..... ?
- b) - How old are you?  
 Between 17 and 20.....   
 Between 20 and 24.....   
 More than 25.....
- c) You consider that your level of English is  
 1) elementary.....   
 2) intermediate.....   
 3) upper intermediate.....   
 Advanced.....
- d) Your mark in the English Baccalaureate exam was:.....

1) Do you read works of literature (novels, short stories, poems, plays) in your mother tongue (Arabic) or in your second language (French) in your free time?

often	
sometimes	
rarely	
never	

2) If you answered never go to question 3. Mention the titles of the literary works that you read or have been reading. If it is in Arabic, write the title in Arabic.

The title	The author
.....	.....
.....	.....
.....	.....

3) Why don't you read literature?

- a) You don't find time to.....
- b) It is difficult to understand literature even in one's mother tongue.....
- c) It is boring; you can do other things more fun than reading literature.....
- d) It is useless you don't see any benefit to reading literature.....
- Other.....

4) Do you think that studying and reading literature as part of the preparation of your English language degree is necessary and beneficial?

- a) I strongly agree.....
- b) I partly agree.....
- c) I don't know.....
- d) I strongly disagree.....

5) Say in what ways literature can help you with your English studies.

.....

.....

.....

6) Have you ever read a novel, a short story or any other literary work in English?

- a) Yes.....
- b) No.....

7) If you answered no go to 7. Mention the literary work or works that you read in English.

.....

.....

8) Mention some of the literary works written in English or the writers writing in English that you would like to read. If you don't know any, mention that

.....

.....

9) Do you think that reading a literary text is similar to reading any other text ( a newspaper article, a guide ...etc.)

- a) Yes.....
- b) No.....

10) If you answered yes, in what ways it is similar/ if you answered no, in what ways it is different.

.....

.....

.....  
.....  
.....

11) Have you ever read a piece of literature in any language and put it down because you didn't understand it?

- a) Yes.....
- b) No.....

12) Why couldn't you understand it?

- a) Its language was too difficult and sophisticated.....
- b) It referred to certain social and cultural aspects that you couldn't make sense of.....
- c) Both a) and b).....
- d) The style of the writer was not straightforward.....
- Other.....

.....

13) What sort of knowledge do you need to understand the reading of a literary text?

.....  
.....  
.....

14) What can you compare reading a novel or a short story to?

- a) Dreaming or daydreaming.....
- b) Watching a movie.....
- c) Listening to someone telling you a story.....
- d) Completing a puzzle.....
- e) Doing homework and preparing for exams.....
- Other.....

.....

15) What can you compare reading a poem to?

- a) Listening to a song.....
- b) Watching a film.....
- c) Watching a painting.....
- d) Dreaming.....
- Other.....

.....

16) In what forms comes literature? Mention some of the literary genres that you know? (If you don't know say I don't know)

.....  
.....

17) Mention some of the figures of speech that you know. ( If you don't know, say I don't know any)

.....  
.....

18) What are rhyme and rhythm and where do we find them? (If you don't know, mention it)

.....  
.....

19) What is the difference between a plot and a story?

.....

20) What is the difference between the conflict and the climax?

.....

21) What is the difference between the narrator and the point of view?

.....

.....

Thank you