

# LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE KBSM ENGLISH LITERATURE COMPONENT

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**Abstract:** This study explores learners' perceptions towards the KBSM English Literature component for upper secondary. The focus of this study is on learners' perspectives and attitudes towards the component, their perspectives towards their teachers' teaching of the component, as well as teachers' perspectives towards the component. Two groups of learners were involved, namely current learners and ex-learners. 50 students from a secondary school in Skudai and 50 undergraduates of the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, as well as 4 upper-secondary English teachers contributed to the findings of this study. Questionnaire was used as the instrument for the collection of data. Descriptive statistics was used in the analysis of data, specifically in the form of mean. Data obtained from current learners were compared to the data obtained from ex-learners. On the whole, the results of this study showed marginal differences between the two groups of learners surveyed.

**Abstrak:** Projek ini mengkaji persepsi pelajar-pelajar terhadap Komponen Sastera Bahasa Inggeris KBSM untuk tahap menengah atas. Tumpuan kajian ini adalah dari segi perspektif dan sikap pelajar terhadap Komponen Sastera, perspektif pelajar terhadap pengajaran komponen tersebut oleh guru mereka, serta perspektif guru terhadap komponen tersebut. Kajian ini melibatkan 2 kumpulan pelajar, iaitu pelajar menengah atas semasa dan bekas pelajar. Seramai 50 pelajar dari sebuah sekolah di Skudai dan 50 pelajar dari Fakulti Pendidikan Universiti Teknologi Malaysia serta 4 orang guru Bahasa Inggeris menengah atas telah menjadi responden untuk kajian ini. Instrumen yang digunakan untuk kajian ini adalah soal selidik. Data telah dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif dan debentangkan dalam bentuk min. Data yang diperolehi dari pelajar semasa dibandingkan dengan data dari bekas pelajar. Secara keseluruhannya, kajian ini menunjukkan perbezaan yang kecil antara kedua-dua kumpulan pelajar tersebut.

*Keyword:* KBSM English Literature component, learners' perceptions

## Introduction

### Problem Statement

Students in Malaysia have varying levels of proficiency in English. Some students excel in English, while others face difficulty in their efforts to master the language. Even before the Literature component was introduced, the lack of proficiency among students in Malaysia was already a worrying issue to the Ministry of Education.

While it is common to find big numbers of students conversing fluently in English in schools in big cities like Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru, there is still a large majority of learners throughout the country having poor command of English, and they can hardly utter proper sentences in English. Teachers at that time were concerned about the component becoming an added burden in English language learning. There was a question on whether this component would actually benefit students in Malaysia on the whole, considering the status quo of that time. A few students, for instance, might have a personal liking towards literature, while many others may study it just 'for the sake of the examination'.

One of the underlying issues in the implementation of this component is the suitability of the component for Malaysian students. A substantial percentage of the texts selected are texts authored by foreign writers. Students throughout Malaysia have diverse knowledge about literary works, whereby some students have never been exposed to foreign literary works, while others may be familiar with some foreign literary pieces. For students who have little or no knowledge or exposure to foreign settings and cultural background that appear in the texts, it may be nearly impossible to clearly visualize what is being portrayed, thus hampering their ability appreciate the literary works.

Another issue that some people might have been worried about was the lack of teachers who were competent enough to teach Literature. The situation was that not all the existing English teachers were trained to teach literature, and some had never even studied Literature before. Hence, their teachers' ability to teach the component effectively comes into question. Other problems on the part of teachers could be in terms of the amount of time to utilize to teach the component, considering that the component is integrated as part of the English Language syllabus, and that it is taught during English lessons. Lazar (1994) notes,

“... many teachers often have very limited time in which to complete a syllabus, and consider including literary texts in a lesson an unnecessary and time wasting distraction, while students themselves frequently lack the interest and motivation to work with such texts.”

### **Objectives Of The Study**

The objectives of this study are:

1. a) to compare the perspectives of current learners and ex-learners towards the Literature component.  
b) to compare the attitudes (i.e. Literature for pleasure, Literature for exam) of current learners and ex-learners towards the Literature component.
2. to compare current learners' and ex-learners' perspectives of their teachers' teaching of the Literature component.
3. to investigate teachers' perspectives towards the Literature component.

### **Significance Of The Study**

Currently there is no concrete evidence to show whether learners have positive, negative or indifferent perspectives and attitudes towards the Literature component. The findings of this study are important to provide information on the perspectives of current learners and ex-learners towards the Literature component, their perspectives of their teachers' teaching of the Literature component, as well as teachers perspectives towards the component. These findings could shed some light regarding how relevant and feasible this component has been as part of the English Language syllabus. According to Sell (1995),

“In any educational context, what is feasible depends on prevailing sociocultural circumstances, or attitudes towards the target language within the mother-tongue culture, on the type of learners to be dealt with, and on available resources of time, money, personnel and space.”

The findings could possibly be used as feedback to suggest on whether the Literature component should be retained as it is in the syllabus, revised, or perhaps discontinued, based on the respondents' responses.

## **Scope Of The Study**

This study involved two groups of learners, namely ex-learners and current learners. Ex-learners consisted of final-year undergraduates in the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, selected from among those who had sat for the SPM examination in the year 2001. Current learners were selected from among Form Five students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Skudai, Skudai, Johor. Questionnaires were distributed to these two groups of learners which the researcher selected. Meanwhile, 4 teachers, 4 ex-learners and 4 current learners were selected for interview.

The study compares the findings of these two groups to identify if there are any differences in the perspectives and attitudes of the pioneer batch and the current batch of learners. It also looks into teachers perspectives towards the Literature component.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Instruments**

This research utilized both the quantitative and qualitative research methodology. The instruments used in the collection of data were questionnaire and interview.

### **Questionnaire**

Wallen & Fraenkel (2000) state that the use of questionnaires enables the consistency of responses across respondents to be enhanced, while Nunan (1992) states that it “provides respondents with a range of possible responses set by the researcher”. For these reasons, a set of questionnaire containing 25 questions divided into three sections was developed by the researcher. These three sections are namely learners’ perspectives towards the Literature component, and attitudes towards the component, and their perspectives of their teachers’ teaching of the component. The questions in the questionnaire were of the Likert-scale type. Only one question-type was employed in the questionnaire to maintain the consistency in the tabulation of statistical data. A scale of 4-3-2-1 was used, with the numbers representing responses of ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘disagree’, and ‘strongly disagree’. Meanwhile, all the questions were structured in such a way whereby a higher total score obtained would reflect the respondent having perceptions that are in higher favour of the Literature component. The questionnaire was piloted to 5 current learners and 5 ex-learners to assess its validity before the actual distribution took place.

### **Interview**

The qualitative data, meanwhile, were obtained via interview, and these data were used to affirm and the findings from the questionnaire. The interview questions were prepared by the researcher under the guidance of his supervisor. Four current learners, four ex-learners, and four teachers were involved in the interview. The interviews provided avenue for the respondents to further express their thoughts in which the questionnaire may not have enabled them to do so, i.e. to allow them to decide what they want to say and how they wish to say it (Nunan, 1992). The interview was also utilized to support and obtain possible explanations to the results of the findings from the questionnaire.

### **Respondents Of The Study**

In this study, the respondents consisted of 50 undergraduates of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, and another 50 Form Five students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Skudai, Skudai, Johor. These two groups were selected to make up the ex-learners and current learners for this study.

The ex-learners in this study were 50 final-year undergraduates in the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia who sat for their examinations in the year 2001. This number is made up of 10 respondents from each of five different courses of study, namely Bachelor of Science with Education (TESL), Bachelor of Science with Education (Physics), Bachelor of Science with Education (Chemistry), Bachelor of Science with Education (Islamic Studies), and Bachelor of Science with Education (Civil Engineering). These respondents were in the first batch who studied the Literature component in upper-secondary since its inception.

As for the respondents representing current learners, 50 Form Five students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Skudai were selected from five classrooms of varying levels of proficiency, whereby 10 students were randomly picked from each class. This school was chosen because it is of non-selective intake type, whereby the students are of varying levels of proficiency, somewhat giving a closer representation of the general population of students.

Meanwhile, the interview sheets were given to four ex-learners and four current learners who were part of the respondents for the questionnaire, as well as to four English teachers who teach upper-secondary students. The researcher felt that this number of interviewees was sufficient for this research as this study does not cover a large scope of research areas, but is instead quite focused.

## **Discussion**

### **Teachers' Perspectives Towards The Literature Component**

Data obtained via interview provides some viewpoints of teachers. It was found that all four teachers interviewed opined that the texts in the Literature component are suitable for their students, although each of them had their own reasons. Among the reasons for their favour towards the texts noted are the moral/humanity values they convey, and that the level of language used is felt suitable for their students. The teachers also mentioned that while some students are indeed enthusiastic and interested in learning the Literature, there are also bound to be others who do not seem to be interested, more evidently the weaker students. This factor affects teachers' motivation in teaching the Literature component.

As to the question of whether their students appreciate Literature or study mainly for examination purposes, the responses were somewhat mixed. Two of the teachers felt that their students were more examination-focused when studying the component, while the other two teachers felt that to some degree, their students do appreciate the literary content.

Another common response from all the teachers can be observed in their views that the Literature component should remain in the syllabus. It is noted that having the Literature component remain in the syllabus as a compulsory element affords the opportunity for all Malaysian students to gain exposure to Literature. It is also mentioned that the Literature component can actually help students to score in the English paper of the SPM examinations. One teacher meanwhile suggested that the component be revised to make it more interesting, in order to enhance students' interest towards learning Literature.

### **Discussion On Learners' Perspectives Towards The Literature Component.**

Based on Figure 4.1.1, it can be seen that the respondents in the survey who were ex-learners generally showed a trend of having more positive opinions towards the Literature component than those who were current learners. This trend continues to be seen in Figure 4.1.2, and to quite a major extent, in Figure 4.1.3. These findings suggest that the ex-learners on the overall had relatively more positive perspectives towards the Literature component. While there might not be clear explanations to this trend, one possibility might be that being the first batch to study the Literature component since its inception, the ex-

learners may have been a bit more enthusiastic about learning it back then. Other possible factors may include the fact that these ex-learners had no prior exposure to the learning of Literature, unlike the current learners who had already been exposed to the Literature component in lower secondary. This could have somewhat affected learners' opinions towards the Literature component, in the sense that the ex-learners may have had some degree of keenness to learn what was then new to them, while the current learners might have expected more, or perhaps some were indifferent.

Moving on to the survey on learners' ability to understand the texts, a more paradoxical scenario appears. For reasons not clearly known, more ex-learners than current learners on the whole claimed to have better grasp of the texts, as seen in the statistics of their ratings given. It could be a minor likelihood that the current learners surveyed were still in the midst of familiarizing themselves with the upper-secondary Literature component texts at the time the survey was carried out. This possibility could be supported by Sell's argument (1995:5) that literary texts do not always need to be immediately and fully comprehensible.

As to how the component has influenced learners' perspectives towards the appreciation of Literature, the obvious distinctive finding between current and ex-learners is in how much they started to enjoy reading non-Malaysian English literary texts after studying the component. Once again, there are no clear explanations to this scenario. But perhaps, with the advantage of having had three years of prior exposure to the Literature component in lower secondary, the current learners by then may have built up greater interest in reading foreign literary texts. On the contrary, the ex-learners who only started studying the Literature component in upper-secondary may have had lesser fondness in this matter, considering the shorter time span in contrast to that of the current learners.

#### **Discussion On Learners' Attitudes Towards The Literature Component.**

Having positive opinions towards the texts and ability to understand them likely contributes to more positive attitudes towards the learning of the Literature component. This can generally be observed in the Figure 4.2 whereby the ex-learners once again displayed more positive attitudes towards the learning of the component, compared to the current learners. Nesamalar Chitravelu et. al (1995) states that to make the reading of literature an enjoyable experience, the student must be presented with texts which make sense to him; which suit his taste and which are varied and lively. The results show that the learners' attitudes towards the texts are consistent with their perspectives of the texts, in line with Nesamalar Chitravelu's statement.

#### **Discussion On Learners' Perspectives Towards Their Teachers' Teaching Of The Literature Component.**

Nesamalar Chitravelu (1995) advocates that the teacher plays a pivotal role in ensuring the success of literature in the language programme, and that any lack of interest on the part of the teacher can prevent the enjoyment of shared experience of Literature. However, based on Figure 4.3, the results suggest that learners' perspectives and attitudes towards the Literature component may not necessarily depend on how effectively they perceive their teachers' teaching of the component. One explanation which may shed some light on this matter can be seen in the statement by Sell (1995:6) that, it is the individual readers who make sense of the texts and evaluate them according to their own lights, rather than teachers setting up as arbiters of public taste. This statement appears to suggest that learners' appreciation of the texts is not necessarily affected by how much or well the teacher teaches, but has more to do on the part of the learners themselves. Williams, (1995:32) advocates that "one of the aims of any educational programme is to enable the learner to *continue learning independently*." Therefore, even though the ex-learners in this study had shown lower scores in rating of their teachers teaching, it does not necessarily imply that their teacher did not teach well, but instead they might have possessed this ability to learn independently.

Carter & Walker (1989) advocate that student-centered activities which aim to involve students with the text facilitates the development of their perceptions of it and to help them explore and express those perceptions. It could be that the ex-learners experienced more student-centered activities, which in turn led to their higher rating of their perspectives and attitudes towards the text, but lower rating of their teachers' teaching, which they might have unknowingly perceived as a lack in the teachers' role.

### **Discussion On Teachers' Perspectives Towards The Literature Component**

Among the problems pointed out by one of the teachers interviewed regarding the teaching of the component was the constraint of time. The teacher explained that during its inception in the year 2000, the problem was on "how much to teach/not teach" and "where to draw the line". At present, the problem still persists albeit in a slightly different dimension, which is how much time should be dedicated for the teaching of the component. The teacher notes that 5 periods per week are allocated for the subject of English in upper-secondary, and teachers need to "do everything" in these five periods, including English lessons and the Oral English Test. Lazar (1994:116) also points out this matter in that teachers need to complete the syllabus within a limited time, and in addition to that, students themselves frequently lack interest and motivation. As mentioned earlier in the findings, the lack of interest among some students which is often prevalent during Literature lessons can affect teachers' motivation to teach the component. This may possibly cause teachers to end up teaching *about* literature, instead of generating literary experience, as teachers may feel it a waste of time and unnecessary to teach Literature *itself*.

### **Conclusion**

This research surveyed current and ex-upper-secondary learners' perceptions towards the KBSM English Literature component. Primary data were collected via distribution of questionnaires to 50 current learners and 50 ex-learners. As initially mentioned in the introduction, this study purposed to find out learners' perceptions towards the KBSM English Literature component, their perceptions towards their teachers' teaching of the component, and also to investigate teachers' perspectives towards the Literature component.

A number of conclusions can be drawn based on the findings of this study:

1. This study has suggested that on the overall, ex-learners hold more positive perspectives and attitudes in favour of the component compared to the current learners.
2. The current learners' response on the overall showed a higher rating of satisfaction towards their teachers' teaching of the component.
3. Teachers are of the opinion that the component is relevant and should remain in the syllabus, but some minor revision to the component might make it better.

The results obtained in this study suggest that learners and teachers are generally in favour that the Literature component is relevant, and that learners appear to cope well in learning the component. However, these findings are only true to the respondents surveyed, and cannot be generalized to other learners throughout the country that were not part of this survey. It would be necessary for the same study to be conducted with other current and ex-learners to see if there are any similarities with their perceptions towards the component.

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