

THE THIRD AND FOURTH-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS FACTORS AFFECTING THEIR LEARNING OF AMERICAN AND BRITISH LITERATURE AT TRA VINH UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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Abstract – *The purpose of this study was to explore the third and fourth-year English majors' attitudes towards factors influencing their learning of American and British literature courses. The participants included 50 English majors at Tra Vinh University. The only instrument employed in this study was the questionnaire which focused on literature's genres, eras, themes, writing styles, class activities, and personal development and career aspirations. The results showed that the participants favored reading short stories, dramas, and films. Concerning eras, they tended to read stories written in the ancient-classical as well as contemporary eras. Concerning themes, they preferred stories about love, relationships, nature, and mystery. Regarding class activities, they hoped to participate in topic discussion, exercises, quizzes, role play, watching films, and playing games. The participants also recognized the benefits of reading literary texts as they could help to develop students' language and critical thinking skills, master diverse cultures, exhibit good characteristics, and show empathy towards others. Based on the findings, the authors suggest some recommendations that can assist teachers of American and British literature in improving their ways of teaching literature courses to students more effectively.*

Keywords: *genres and eras of literature, the third and fourth-year English majors, themes, writing styles.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has become a major subject for students in the social sciences and humanities. Literature brings numerous benefits to students in developing language skills, critical thinking, and morality. Svensson [1] asserts that literature plays a crucial role in shaping social norms, contributing to educational development, enhancing language skills, and boosting imagination and empathy. In addition, Pattiwael [2] affirms that literature helps students gain awareness of humanity. Through reading poems, short stories and plays, students can express their personal and societal roles in real life. Additionally, Altun [3] emphasizes that literature is essential for human cultural improvement.

According to the Decision 721/QĐ-ĐHTV dated February 7th, 2022, issued by Tra Vinh University [4], the English majors' curriculum at the School of Foreign Languages consists of five compulsory literature courses including British Literature 1 (03 credits), British Literature 2 (03 credits), American Literature (03 credits), and World Literature – (02 credits). There are also some optional literature courses such as Asian, Spanish, and Canadian Literature (02 credits each). Students must spend a significant amount of time on these courses. However, acquiring foreign literature is a challenge for the majority of English learners due to its various dimensions: writing styles, language use, plot, context, and messages that authors want to convey. Therefore, students need to master those aspects when taking literature courses. The researchers decided to conduct this study in order to explore the third and fourth-year English majors' attitudes related to factors influencing their learning of Amer-

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ican and British literature. From the findings collected, the researchers propose some suggestions for teachers to improve both their literature lessons and students' learning outcomes. The study aims to answer the two research questions below:

1. What are the third and fourth-year English majors' attitudes towards factors affecting their learning of American and British literature?

2. What suggestions can be made to help teachers improve teaching American and British literature courses?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many factors affecting students' learning of American and British literature. However, some major factors arising from elements in literary analysis, teachers, and learners will be discussed in this section.

A. Genres of literary works

Klarer [5] and Rainsford [6] classify literature into four categories: fiction, poetry, drama, and film.

First, fiction includes two main forms: novel and short story. Novel has been considered the most important form of prose fiction. It consists of picaresque, Bildungsroman (novel of education), epistolary, historical, satirical, utopian, science fiction, gothic, and detective novel. Short story is defined as a literary work which has a restriction of length. The most essential elements of a short story are plot, characters, narrative perspective, and setting.

Second, poetry is one of the oldest genres in the history of literature which can be divided into two main categories: (1) narrative poetry includes epic poem, romance, and ballad; (2) lyric poetry is shorter and focuses on a single event or idea.

Third, drama is the combination of verbal and non-verbal communication. Some major genres of drama are: (1) comedy, which has humorous themes to entertain the audience; (2) history plays, which illustrate a historical event; (3) heroic drama, which brings epic themes to the audience; (4) closet drama, which is more special

since it is created for the audience to read rather than to watch on stage.

Fourth, film is also regarded as a literary genre as it includes literary techniques, and can be seen as a 'performing art' because actors are used as the means of communication and expression.

Besides the above groups, Borges [7] suggests that essays and other prose literature including philosophy, history, journalism, and legal and scientific writings are also considered as literary works.

Earnshaw [8] claims that tragedy, comedy, satire, fantasy, film, and the like, may come to characterize a genre besides popular ones such as poetry, drama, or fiction.

B. Elements in literary analysis

Historical and social contexts

Griffith [9] states that the social environment comprising manners, customs, rituals, and moral values that govern the characters' society affects the interpretation of a literary work if it is presented in detail. Tandy et al. [10] express that cultural context is the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the society at a specific time affecting how people see and interact with the world through some aspects of daily life, such as education, religion, language, family, beliefs and customs. Historical context is the historical time when the text is produced or published. Both cultural and historical contexts have a significant impact on how texts are produced and received.

Plot and theme of the story

According to Griffith [9], the plot is the author's arrangement of events including conflicts and devices to engage readers, such as intense conflict, surprise, rising action, climax, and foreshadowing of later events. Themes are the central idea of the story but they are about life outside the work that can be drawn from the story.

Writing styles

Huemer [11] presents style as the signature of the author and an expression of the author's personality. Griffith [9] believes that literature expresses its expressiveness, as it is always an expression of the one who wrote it in terms of his personality, emotions, styles, tastes, and beliefs.

C. Pedagogical approaches

Htun [12] suggests that teachers should emphasize language-based activities rather than using the lecturing method when teaching literary works. By doing this, students not only get involved in activities but also practice their language skills better. As a result, teachers can improve their professional skills in making lesson plans.

Ghazali et al. [13] claim that teachers should use various activities during literature lessons to avoid boredom in class. Group discussion can be considered an effective activity because students express their opinions and reactions concerning the texts they have read. Besides, teachers' explanations and notes, followed by using audio-visual are also important strategies. Another significant point is that teachers should spend a lot of time discussing several literary elements such as the plot, characters, themes, setting, and moral values of the texts. Last but not least, teachers can recommend films or videos adapted from the original texts to assist students in understanding the plot better.

D. Personal development and career aspirations

Pattiwael [2] explored how learning literature through language activities and awareness of humanity helped students achieve language competence, communication, and intellectual and social skills. These factors enabled students to connect with the real world and raised their awareness of social contexts. As a result, students recognized that literature was relevant to the reality. In another aspect, understanding the moral values of literary works encouraged students to form good relationships with their teachers as well as others in society.

In terms of cultural competence, Tevdovska [14] emphasized that diverse and similar aspects of culture in literary works helped to build the intercultural competence of students. Hence, literary works can be considered a means to promote students' cultural understanding and their awareness of cultural diversity.

In previous studies, the authors have mentioned the factors related to genres, themes, writing styles, class activities, and benefits affecting students' learning foreign literature courses. This study aims to explore to what extent the above factors affect the third and fourth-year English majors at Tra Vinh University when they learn American and British literature courses. Besides, this study investigates other aspects that can affect their learning. Then, some recommendations are proposed to assist teachers and learners in improving the quality of teaching and learning of literature courses.

III. METHODOLOGY

Fifty English majors in the third and fourth years at Tra Vinh University were chosen randomly to participate in the current study. The reason for selecting these participants to complete the questionnaire is that they have completed British and American Literature courses. Students' experience when learning literary works enables them to express their opinions about factors affecting their learning of British and American Literature courses.

To answer the research questions of the current study, the researchers employed a questionnaire. It focuses on the participants' attitudes towards factors influencing their learning of British and American literature.

There are three sections in the questionnaire. Section 1 focuses on nature of literary works and section 2 presents pedagogical approaches. The questions in the two sections provide the participants with multiple options. Section 3 addresses personal development and career aspirations. The questions in this section were designed by using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire was adapted from Ghazali et al. [13] and Tevdovska [14]. The survey was conducted online at the end of the first semester of the 2023–2024 academic school year.

The data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed using SPSS version 25.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

The third and fourth-year English majors' attitudes towards factors affecting their learning American and British Literature courses.

Genres of literature works

Table 1: Frequencies of genres of literature works

Genres of literature works	Responses	
	N	Percent
Short story	34	27.2%
Novel	15	12.0%
Poetry	11	8.8%
Drama	17	13.6%
Fable	3	2.4%
Film	31	24.8%
Any genre	14	11.2%
Total	125	100.0%

Table 1 shows the genres of literature works chosen by the participants. The majority of respondents prefer short stories (27.2%), followed by films (24.8%). There are some reasons why the participants are in favor of short stories. The length of the stories is rather short. Therefore, it is easy for students to comprehend the plot and inner feelings of the characters. Besides short stories, students also show interest in films. Unlike written works, films showcase acting performances, sound effects, and music which motivate their curiosity and assist them in understanding the content better.

In comparison, dramas and novels reveal nearly similar percentages with 13.6% for the former and 12% for the latter. These two genres reflect the core values of literature in some aspects such as plot and language use. Due to the length and complex language used, novels and dramas appear to be more challenging for students to read and analyse.

Eras of literature work

Table 2 reveals the frequencies of eras of literature works. It can be seen that students tend to read literary works written in the ancient-classical era (26.9%) and contemporary era (25.4%). This inclination can be explained by

Table 2: Frequencies of eras of literature works

Eras of literature works	Responses	
	N	Percent
Ancient-classical era	18	26.9%
Medieval era	7	10.4%
Renaissance era	9	13.4%
Contemporary era	17	25.4%
Any era	16	23.9%
Total	67	100.0%

the fact that most students are eager to acquire information about history, traditions, and cultures that existed many years ago through literary works in the ancient-classical era. However, many students express a preference for literary works written in the contemporary era. The themes in this era reflect common aspects in modern life that are familiar to their viewpoints, attitudes, and behaviors towards people, society, and life. In comparison, 23.9% of the participants indicated an openness to reading literary works published in any era.

Themes of literary works

Table 3: Frequencies of themes of literary works

Themes of literary works	Responses	
	N	Percent
War	18	10.4%
Love	31	17.9%
Relationships	24	13.9%
Nature	22	12.7%
Identity and self-discovery	11	6.4%
Mystery	19	11.0%
Religion	7	4.0%
Loss and isolation	7	4.0%
Discrimination	6	3.5%
Any theme	2	1.2%
Total	173	100.0%

Table 3 indicates the frequencies of themes of literary works. The majority of participants prefer the theme of 'love' (17.9%). This theme delves into people's emotions and feelings, making it particularly appealing to a wide readership. Additionally, students also choose several other themes such as relationships (13.9%), nature (12.7%), and mystery (11.0%). These themes are also familiar to students and make it easy for them to grasp the plot and draw lessons from the literary works.

Writing styles of literary works

Table 4: Frequencies of writing styles of literary works

Writing styles of literary works	Responses	
	N	Percent
Minimalism	16	15.2%
Maximalism	11	10.5%
Romanticism	30	28.6%
Realism	20	19.0%
Stream of consciousness	12	11.4%
Satire	11	10.5%
Any writing style	5	4.8%
Total	105	100.0%

Table 4 reports the frequency of writing styles in literary works. Romanticism emerges as the top choice among the participants (28.6%). It is understandable that the preference for the theme of ‘love’ aligns with the romantic writing style. Similarly, 19% of the students lean towards a realistic writing style. That is influenced by their choice of stories set in the contemporary era. Undoubtedly, students also choose a minimalist writing style characterized by direct and concise language (15.2%), particularly in their enjoyment of short stories.

Class activities

Table 5: Frequencies of class activities

Class activities	Responses	
	N	Percent
Topic discussion	20	13.2%
Presentation	12	7.9%
Role play	22	14.5%
Exercises and quizzes	19	12.5%
Posters and diagrams	7	4.6%
Video clips	28	18.4%
Writing summary	7	4.6%
Writing reflections	4	2.6%
Games	28	18.4%
Any activity	5	3.3%
Total	152	100.0%

Table 5 shows the frequency of class activities. Notably, students exhibit a similar level of interest in making video clips and playing games, accounting for 28% each. These activities foster students’ interaction and collaboration, providing an engaging way to comprehend stories without boredom. Likewise, role-playing is also a favorite activity chosen by 14.5% of the participants since it offers them the chance to show their acting

skills after mastering the content of the stories. Additionally, some students express a liking for topic discussion or exercises and quizzes with 13.2% and 12.5%, respectively. These activities are commonly organized by teachers to facilitate a profound understanding of various story elements such as setting, characterization, plot, and themes.

Personal development and career aspirations

Table 6: Personal development and career aspirations

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learning literature helps to develop language skills.	4.26	.80
Learning literature helps to develop critical thinking skills.	4.24	.87
Learning literature teaches cultural diversity.	4.20	.81
Learning literature helps to build self-dependency in foreign language learning.	3.90	.91
Learning literature helps to perform good behaviors and characteristics.	4.10	.81
Learning literature helps to show sympathy and empathy to others.	4.16	.96
Overall mean	4.14	.68

By running the descriptive statistics for all the items related to personal development and career aspirations, the data shown in Table 6 indicates the overall mean score of personal development and career aspirations is high ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.68$). This suggests that personal development and career aspirations are important factors in enhancing their motivation for learning literature courses. The six items associated with these factors show high mean scores (ranging between 3.90 and 4.26). These literature courses contribute significantly to students’ well-grounded development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Specifically, students can cultivate language skills, critical thinking abilities, appreciation for cultural diversity, and self-dependency in foreign language learning. In addition, learners perform good behaviors and demonstrate sympathy and empathy towards others.

B. Discussion

The results indicate that students are in favor of the following genres: short story, drama, and film. This finding is in accordance with the one found by Tevdovska [14], who claimed that most language students prefer reading prose over poetry. Ghazali et al. [13] investigated that students enjoy reading stories since they are easy to read and not time-consuming. Additionally, the students also found dramas and films interesting and helpful. Similarly, Coşgun [15] explored that teachers also tended to choose short stories and dramas as their favorites when teaching literature to students.

In terms of the themes of literary works, the findings reveal that students show more interest in reading stories about love, relationships, nature, and mystery. This finding aligns with the results found by Ghazali et al. [13]. The participants in their study revealed that mysterious, adventurous, and romantic topics made literature texts enjoyable.

Writing styles are also a concern for most students when reading literary texts. The findings from the study show that some of the favorite writing styles among students are minimalism, romanticism, and realism. Ghazali et al. [13] also found that students favor a minimalist writing style due to their lower language levels.

Students also express their choice of activities in the literature classroom. Particularly, they are more likely to engage in activities such as topic discussion, role-playing, exercises and quizzes, video clips, and games. In comparison, Ghazali et al. [13] found out that the participants in their study preferred group work discussion, watching films or videos, and doing exercises.

Regarding eras of literary works, most students prefer reading stories from the ancient-classical and contemporary eras, while some students reported that they can read stories from any historical era. The researchers in the current study have not found this element in previous studies.

Other sources of motivation for learning literature are personal development and career aspirations. The participants report that reading literary texts brings them a number of benefits,

including developing language skills and critical thinking skills and teaching them cultural diversity. These literary works also help them to perform good behaviors and characteristics, as well as show empathy and sympathy towards others. These results are in accordance with those figured out by Altun [3]. He found out that students gained some advantages when learning literature, such as language development, cultural diversity, and personal growth. Tevdovska [14] also agreed that literary works provided students with cultural knowledge and intercultural experience. Besides, they encouraged students' language learning through authentic materials.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusion

This present study aimed to investigate the third and fourth-year English majors' attitudes towards factors affecting their learning of American and British literature in terms of genres, eras, themes, writing styles, class activities, personal development, and career aspirations. The results showed that the participants preferred reading short stories, dramas, and films. As for eras, they liked reading stories written in the ancient-classical, and contemporary eras. With regard to themes, they enjoyed reading stories about love, relationships, nature, and mystery. Concerning organized activities, they are expected to participate in topic discussion, exercises and quizzes, role play, watching films, and playing games. The participants also reported that reading literary texts was helpful since it could help develop students' language skills and critical thinking abilities. Besides, the participants mastered diverse cultures, performed good behaviors, and showed empathy to other people in society.

B. Recommendations

Based on the findings above, practical suggestions are proposed for teachers teaching American and British literature courses. Teachers

should focus more on literary works that suit students' interests related to genres and themes. Besides, they can recommend more literary works or films about their students' favorite genres and topics so that students can read or watch them in their free time to enhance their inspiration in learning literature. Secondly, when choosing literary works, teachers should pay attention to authors' writing styles to meet the different levels of students. As for activities in class, teachers should organize various tasks that can enhance the participation of the majority of students. When students are involved in the activities, they can comprehend the literary works profoundly.

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