



Challenges Faced by English Department Students at the University of Zawia in Understanding Mandatory Novels: A Classroom Observation Study

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التحديات التي يواجهها طلبة قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الزاوية في فهم الروايات
المقررة: دراسة قائمة على الملاحظة الصفية

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Abstract:

This study investigates the challenges faced by English Department students at the University of Zawia in understanding four mandatory novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *A Passage to India*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. The study adopts a qualitative classroom-observation approach based on the teacher-researcher's observations during the teaching of these novels to different groups of students between 2021 and 2025. The observations focused on four main areas: linguistic difficulties, comprehension and plot, cultural and historical context, and literary analysis. The findings indicate that students experienced difficulties with unfamiliar and figurative vocabulary, lengthy and complex passages, following the sequence of events, and distinguishing characters and their relationships. Students also demonstrated limited cultural and historical background knowledge, particularly in relation to the colonial context of *A Passage to India*. In addition, a recurring difficulty was the tendency to retell the plot rather than engage in deeper literary analysis of themes, symbolism, characterization, structure, and literary techniques. The study concludes that students' difficulties in understanding novels extend beyond language proficiency and involve interconnected linguistic, contextual, comprehension, and analytical challenges. The findings highlight the need for appropriate linguistic and contextual preparation and systematic guidance to help EFL students move from basic comprehension to independent literary interpretation.

Keywords: EFL students; literary texts; novel; classroom observation; literary analysis; University of Zawia; English literature.

المخلص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في التحديات التي يواجهها طلبة قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الزاوية في فهم أربع روايات مقررة، وهي: *كبرياء وتحامل* (*Pride and Prejudice*)، *والشيخ والبحر* (*The Old Man and the Sea*)، *ورحلة إلى الهند* (*A Passage to India*)، وقصة مدينتين (*A Tale of Two Cities*). تعتمد الدراسة منهجاً نوعياً قائماً على

الملاحظة الصفية، استنادًا إلى ملاحظات الباحثة، التي تعمل أيضًا استاذة، أثناء تدريس هذه الروايات لمجموعات مختلفة من الطلبة خلال الفترة الممتدة من عام 2021 إلى عام 2025. ورَكَزَت الملاحظات على أربع مجالات رئيسية، هي: الصعوبات اللغوية، وفهم النص والأحداث، والسياق الثقافي والتاريخي، والتحليل الأدبي. تشير النتائج إلى أن الطلبة واجهوا صعوبات في فهم المفردات غير المألوفة والتعبيرات المجازية، والمقاطع النصية الطويلة والمعقدة، ومتابعة تسلسل الأحداث، والتمييز بين الشخصيات وفهم العلاقات فيما بينها. كما أظهر الطلبة محدودية في معرفتهم بالخلفيات الثقافية والتاريخية، ولا سيما فيما يتعلق بالسياق الاستعماري في رواية رحلة إلى الهند. إضافة إلى ذلك، تمثلت إحدى الصعوبات المتكررة في ميل الطلبة إلى إعادة سرد أحداث الرواية بدلًا من الانخراط في تحليل أدبي أعمق يتناول الموضوعات الرئيسية، والرمزية، وبناء الشخصيات، والبنية السردية، والأساليب الأدبية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلبة في فهم الروايات تتجاوز حدود الكفاءة اللغوية، إذ تشمل مجموعة من التحديات المترابطة المتعلقة باللغة، والسياق، والفهم والتحليل. وتؤكد النتائج الحاجة إلى توفير إعداد لغوي وسياقي مناسب، إلى جانب تقديم توجيه منهجي ومنظم، لمساعدة طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية على الانتقال من الفهم الأساسي للنصوص إلى التفسير الأدبي المستقل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية؛ النصوص الأدبية؛ الرواية؛ الملاحظة الصفية؛ التحليل الأدبي؛ جامعة الزاوية؛ الأدب الإنجليزي.

Introduction:

The novel occupies an important position in English literature curricula at the university level. Through the study of novels, students are expected not only to develop their reading skills but also to engage with literary language, cultural contexts, historical events, characters, themes, narrative techniques, and different forms of literary expression. However, reading a literary work in its original language can be challenging for students who study English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly when the texts contain unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, culturally specific references, and historical contexts that differ from those of the learners. For English Department students, understanding a novel involves more than following the sequence of events. Students are required to move from basic comprehension to literary interpretation and critical analysis. They may need to identify themes and symbols, understand characterization, recognize narrative techniques, interpret significant events, and support their interpretations with textual evidence. Consequently, difficulties in vocabulary and reading comprehension may affect students' ability to engage with the literary aspects of a novel. In addition, students may rely on word-for-word translation, summaries, or other simplified sources rather than reading and interpreting the original text independently.

These challenges may become particularly evident when students study novels written in different historical periods and cultural contexts. The mandatory novels examined in the present study, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster, and *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, represent different literary styles, historical settings, narrative structures, and cultural contexts. For example, students reading *Pride and Prejudice* may encounter difficulties related to formal language, social class, marriage, and the social conventions of nineteenth-century England. Similarly, *A Tale of Two Cities* requires an understanding of the historical and social context surrounding the French Revolution, in addition to dealing with complex narrative structures and characterization. *A Passage to India* presents cultural and historical issues associated with British colonial India, while *The Old Man and the Sea*, despite its relatively straightforward language and narrative, may require students to interpret symbolism, themes, and the deeper significance of the protagonist's struggle.

In the context of the University of Zawia, identifying these difficulties is particularly important because classroom interaction provides an opportunity to observe how students actually respond to mandatory literary texts. Students' difficulties may not always be fully revealed through examinations or questionnaires. Classroom observation can provide direct evidence of students' reading behavior, participation, comprehension, responses to literary questions, difficulties with vocabulary and cultural references, and ability to move from retelling a story to analyzing its literary elements. Observing students during actual literature classes can therefore contribute to a more accurate understanding of the challenges they experience while studying the prescribed novels.

Accordingly, the present study investigates the challenges faced by English Department students at the University of Zawia in understanding the four mandatory novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *A Passage to India*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. The study adopts a classroom observation approach to identify and examine the linguistic, cultural and historical, structural and literary, reading-related, and academic difficulties that emerge during classroom engagement with these texts. By focusing on students' observable responses and learning behaviors, the study seeks to provide a clearer picture of the difficulties involved in studying mandatory novels and to suggest teaching

strategies that may help students develop more effective ways of reading, understanding, and analyzing literary texts.

Research Problem:

English Department students may face various difficulties when studying mandatory novels, including linguistic challenges, limited understanding of cultural and historical contexts, problems with following plot and characterization, and difficulties moving from basic comprehension to literary analysis. These challenges may be particularly evident when students encounter novels that differ in language, historical period, cultural context, and narrative style, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *A Passage to India*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Drawing on the researcher's teaching experience with these novels across different groups and stages of teaching at the University of Zawia, this study uses classroom observation to identify recurring difficulties in students' responses, participation, reading behaviors, and literary analysis. It also seeks to highlight practical strategies that may help students engage more effectively with mandatory literary texts.

Research Objectives:

This study aims to:

1. Identify the main difficulties English Department students at the University of Zawia demonstrate when studying the four mandatory novels.
2. Examine linguistic, cultural, historical, structural, and literary difficulties observed during classroom teaching.
3. Identify recurring difficulties across different groups of students and the four novels taught by the researcher at different stages of her teaching experience.
4. Suggest practical teaching strategies to help students understand and analyze mandatory literary texts more effectively.

Research Questions:

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main difficulties English Department students at the University of Zawia demonstrate when studying the four mandatory novels?
2. What linguistic, cultural, historical, structural, and literary difficulties are most commonly observed during classroom teaching?
3. What difficulties recur across different groups of students and across the four novels?
4. What teaching strategies can help students overcome these difficulties and improve their understanding and analysis of the novels?

Literature Review:

The study of literature plays an important role in English language and literature programs, as literary texts provide learners with opportunities to engage with language, culture, history, and different forms of human experience. Among these texts, the novel offers rich and complex material through which students can develop both linguistic and literary understanding. However, the interpretation of literary works may present particular challenges for EFL learners because meaning is often shaped by language, cultural context, historical background, and literary techniques. This section reviews relevant perspectives on the nature of the novel and literary texts, the difficulties associated with reading literature in EFL contexts, and the characteristics of the four novels examined in the present study.

The Novel and Literary Texts:

The novel is a major form of literary expression and is generally understood as an extended fictional narrative written in prose. Unlike shorter literary forms, a novel provides considerable space for the development of characters, events, settings, conflicts, themes, and relationships. Literary texts, however, are not designed simply to communicate information. They often use language in creative and indirect ways, requiring readers to interpret meanings, recognize patterns, and connect textual details with broader ideas. In the language classroom, therefore, reading literature involves both understanding the language of the text and interpreting its literary and cultural meanings (Lazar, 1993; Maley, 2001). Literary texts can be particularly challenging for EFL learners because they may contain unfamiliar vocabulary, complex syntax, figurative language, ambiguity, implicit meanings, and culturally specific references. Readers may also need background knowledge of the historical and social circumstances in which a text was produced. Lazar (1993) points out that literary texts and their cultures are closely connected, and readers inevitably interpret texts through the perspectives and cultural experiences they already possess. Similarly, Paran (2008) emphasizes that learners' responses to literature are influenced by the approaches and tasks used in the classroom. Thus, understanding a literary text requires more than linguistic competence; it also requires interpretive, cultural, and critical reading skills. Recent research on EFL literary reading similarly reports difficulties involving vocabulary, grammar, figurative language, unfamiliar topics, and the construction of meaning from implicit textual relationships (Nishihara, 2024; Belarbi, 2025).

Difficulties in Reading Literary Texts in EFL Contexts:

The difficulty of literary reading becomes more evident when learners encounter texts whose language and cultural context are distant from their own. Students may concentrate on individual words and sentences and consequently lose the overall meaning of the text. They may also find it difficult to distinguish between literal and figurative meanings or to move from understanding events to interpreting themes, symbols, characterization, and narrative techniques. Research in EFL contexts has identified language proficiency, difficult vocabulary, unfamiliar cultural references, complex ideas, and the amount of literary material as important challenges for students studying English literature. For example, Alshammari, Ahmed, and Abu Shouk (2020) reported that Saudi undergraduate EFL students experienced difficulties related to the language of literary texts, unfamiliar ideas and cultural experiences, and the large amount of material required in literature courses. Belarbi (2025) similarly found that EFL students experienced difficulties in understanding the relationship between a literary work, its historical period, and its themes, as well as in interpreting figurative language.

These difficulties are especially relevant to university students studying novels as mandatory rather than optional texts. Unlike independent reading, mandatory literary courses require students to engage with texts regardless of their familiarity with the language, culture, period, or literary style. The teacher therefore has to help students negotiate both the linguistic demands of the text and its literary and cultural dimensions. The nature of the classroom tasks and the teacher's approach can consequently influence how students respond to and understand literature (Paran, 2008; Lazar, 1993).

Challenges Faced by EFL Students in Understanding Novels:

EFL students may encounter a range of challenges when reading and interpreting novels in English. These challenges are not limited to language proficiency but may also involve comprehension, cultural knowledge, reading practices, and literary interpretation. Research on the teaching and learning of literature has highlighted the interconnected nature of these difficulties and the importance of considering both linguistic and interpretive aspects of literary reading (Lazar, 1993; Paran, 2008).

Linguistic difficulties may arise from unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, formal or historically distant language, and figurative expressions. Such difficulties can interfere with students' overall comprehension and may encourage them to rely on word-for-word translation rather than reading for meaning. Research with university EFL learners has similarly identified vocabulary, grammar, and figurative language as significant sources of difficulty in reading literary texts (Nishihara, 2024; Belarbi, 2025).

Comprehension and plot difficulties involve problems following the sequence of events, identifying important details, distinguishing major events from minor ones, and understanding the development of plot and characters. Literary narratives may require readers to connect events and infer relationships that are not always stated explicitly, which can be demanding for EFL learners (Nishihara, 2024).

Cultural and historical difficulties may occur when students lack sufficient background knowledge about the social, cultural, and historical contexts represented in a novel. Such knowledge can be important for understanding characters, conflicts, events, and underlying meanings. Lazar (1993) emphasizes the close relationship between literary texts and the cultural contexts in which they are produced, while studies in EFL contexts have reported students' difficulties in relating literary works to their historical and cultural settings (Belarbi, 2025).

Reading and classroom difficulties may be reflected in students' reading practices and classroom responses. These may include excessive dependence on translation or ready-made summaries, limited participation in discussion, difficulty responding to questions, and reluctance to develop independent interpretations. The role of classroom practices in shaping students' engagement with literature has been emphasized in research on literature teaching, particularly the importance of appropriate tasks and interaction in supporting literary reading (Paran, 2008).

Literary analysis difficulties concern students' ability to move beyond understanding and retelling the story to interpreting its literary meanings. Students may find it difficult to identify and explain themes, symbolism, characterization, irony, and other literary techniques or to support their interpretations with textual evidence. Previous research indicates that EFL learners may understand the surface meaning of literary texts while experiencing greater difficulty with implicit meanings, figurative language, and interpretation (Nishihara, 2024; Belarbi, 2025).

These five areas provide the conceptual framework for examining the difficulties observed in the present study. They also informed the development of the classroom observation checklist used to examine students' engagement with the four mandatory novels.

The Selected Novels:

The four novels examined in the present study represent different periods, styles, settings, and cultural contexts, and therefore provide students with different types of interpretive challenges. *Pride*

and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, published in 1813, presents the social world of early nineteenth-century England, where marriage, social class, reputation, and economic position strongly influence personal relationships. Understanding the novel therefore requires students to interpret not only its language and irony but also the social conventions underlying the characters' decisions. Studies of the novel have particularly emphasized Austen's treatment of marriage and social class as central aspects of its meaning.

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway, published in 1952, may appear linguistically more accessible because of Hemingway's relatively concise prose. Nevertheless, its apparent simplicity can conceal considerable symbolic and thematic depth. The story of Santiago's struggle with the marlin can be read at a literal level as a fishing experience, but it also raises questions concerning perseverance, pride, dignity, defeat, and humanity's relationship with nature. Recent literary analyses have highlighted the relationship between Hemingway's minimalist style, symbolism, and the deeper meanings of the novella (Iqbal, Zaheer, & Baig, 2024; Wajdi et al., 2024). Consequently, students may understand the basic plot while experiencing difficulty moving toward symbolic and thematic interpretation.

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, published in 1924, introduces another major challenge: the relationship between literature and colonial history. The novel is set in British India and explores relationships between British and Indian characters within a colonial society. Understanding the tensions among the characters therefore requires some awareness of colonial power relations, cultural difference, and the historical context of British rule in India. Such contextual knowledge may not be immediately available to EFL students and may affect their interpretation of the characters and events. Finally, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) combines historical events with a complex fictional narrative set mainly in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. Its historical setting, large cast of characters, shifting events, and themes of sacrifice, violence, oppression, and resurrection can create several difficulties for readers. The novel draws substantially on the historical circumstances of the French Revolution, including the fall of the Bastille and the Reign of Terror. Consequently, students may need both historical background and careful attention to narrative structure in order to understand the relationship between individual characters and the larger historical events (Stanford University, n.d.).

Research Gap:

Previous research has established that EFL learners may encounter linguistic, cultural, historical, and interpretive difficulties when studying literary texts. Research has also examined students' perceptions of literature and teachers' approaches to teaching literary works. However, fewer studies have focused on how such difficulties actually emerge during classroom interaction, particularly through systematic observation of students' responses while mandatory novels are being taught. This gap is particularly relevant in the Libyan university context. The present study therefore draws on the researcher's teaching experience with different groups of English Department students at the University of Zawia between 2021 and 2025. By focusing on classroom observation of four mandatory novels, the study seeks to complement previous research by examining students' observable difficulties rather than relying exclusively on their reported perceptions.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative classroom observation approach to investigate the difficulties English Department students encounter when studying mandatory novels at the University of Zawia. The researcher also served as the course instructor and observed students during the teaching and discussion of the four novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *A Passage to India*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. The novels were taught to different groups of students at different stages of the researcher's teaching experience. Data were drawn from the researcher's systematic classroom observations of students' responses, participation, reading behaviors, comprehension, and difficulties during classroom activities and discussions. The observations focused on five main areas: linguistic difficulties; cultural and historical understanding; plot, structure, and characterization; reading strategies; and literary analysis. The observation notes were examined thematically to identify recurring patterns of difficulty across different groups and novels. Simple descriptive counts and percentages may also be used, where appropriate, to indicate the frequency with which particular difficulties were observed. Students' identities were kept anonymous throughout the study.

Participants:

The study involved four groups of English Department students at the University of Zawia, ranging from the fifth to the eighth semester. Each group consisted of approximately 15–22 students. The researcher taught the four mandatory novels to different groups at different stages of her teaching experience between 2021 and 2025. As both teacher and researcher, she observed students' responses, participation, reading behaviors, and difficulties during classroom instruction and discussion. Students' identities were kept anonymous.

Observation Checklist:

A structured classroom observation checklist, supplemented by field notes, was used to record students' difficulties during the teaching of the novels. **The checklist focused on five main areas:**

- **Linguistic difficulties:** unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentences, and difficulties understanding literary language.
- **Comprehension and plot:** difficulties following events, identifying important details, and understanding plot development.
- **Cultural and historical context:** difficulties understanding social, cultural, and historical references.
- **Reading and classroom behavior:** word-for-word translation, reliance on summaries, participation, and responses to questions.
- **Literary analysis:** difficulties identifying and interpreting themes, symbols, characterization, and other literary techniques.

The observations and field notes were reviewed to identify recurring difficulties across the different groups and novels.

Data Analysis:

The observation notes and field records were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns in students' difficulties. The observed difficulties were organized into four main categories: linguistic, comprehension and plot, cultural and historical, and literary analysis. Simple frequencies and percentages were used, where appropriate, to indicate how often particular difficulties occurred across the observed groups. The qualitative notes were then used to illustrate and interpret these patterns in the context of the four mandatory novels.

Observation Procedure:

The observation was conducted during regular literature classes in which the researcher served as both the teacher and researcher. The observations covered four groups of English Department students, ranging from the fifth to the eighth semester, during the teaching of the four mandatory novels at different stages between 2021 and 2025. A structured observation checklist was developed based on the main challenges identified in the literature and was used to record students' difficulties in five areas: linguistic difficulties, comprehension and plot, cultural and historical context, reading and classroom behavior, and literary analysis. During the classes, the researcher followed the normal teaching procedures and observed students' spontaneous responses, questions, participation, reading behaviors, and responses to comprehension and literary-analysis questions. Brief field notes were recorded to document specific examples of difficulties and students' reactions to the texts. Immediately after each class, the researcher reviewed the checklist and expanded the field notes while the classroom events were still fresh. The observations were subsequently organized according to the five dimensions of the checklist, and recurring patterns across the different groups and novels were identified. Where appropriate, simple frequencies and percentages were used to indicate the occurrence of particular difficulties, while the field notes were analyzed thematically to provide contextual explanations of the observed patterns.

Dimension 1: Linguistic Difficulties:

Based on observation, the main pattern is difficulty with vocabulary, particularly figurative/literary vocabulary, together with students' perception that the texts are lengthy.

Table (1): Dimension 1 results

Observation Item	Frequency	Field Notes / Examples
Students struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary.	3	Students frequently struggled with unfamiliar vocabulary, particularly vocabulary used in figurative or literary contexts.
Students have difficulty understanding complex or lengthy sentences.	2	Students sometimes required additional explanation when encountering lengthy or syntactically complex sentences.
Students ask for the meaning or translation of words/expressions repeatedly.	3	Students repeatedly asked for the meanings or Arabic equivalents of unfamiliar words and expressions.
Students have difficulty understanding figurative or literary language.	3	Figurative language was particularly challenging, and students often required explanation before they could interpret its intended meaning.

Linguistic difficulties were among the most noticeable challenges observed during the teaching of the mandatory novels. Students frequently struggled with unfamiliar vocabulary, particularly words and expressions used in figurative or literary contexts. They often asked for meanings or translations before they could continue reading or participate in discussion. Difficulties were also observed when students encountered lengthy or syntactically complex passages. In addition to vocabulary-related problems, students occasionally expressed concern about the length of the texts, which appeared to affect their willingness to engage with the reading. These observations suggest that students' difficulties were related not only to individual vocabulary items but also to the linguistic and stylistic demands of literary texts.

Dimension 2, Comprehension and Plot:

The observation gives us a clear novel-specific finding: the difficulties were particularly noticeable in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Passage to India*, especially with event sequence and character identification.

Table (2): dimation2 results

Observation Item	Frequency	Field Notes / Examples
Students have difficulty following the sequence of events.	3	Students experienced difficulty following the sequence of events, particularly in <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> and <i>A Passage to India</i> .
Students confuse important and minor events.	2	Some students had difficulty distinguishing central events from less important details.
Students confuse characters or their relationships.	3	Students confused characters and their relationships, particularly while studying <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> and <i>A Passage to India</i> .
Students have difficulty explaining the development of the plot.	2	Some students required

The observations revealed difficulties in following the sequence of events and identifying relationships among characters. These difficulties were particularly noticeable during the teaching of *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Passage to India*. Students sometimes became confused about the order of events and had difficulty connecting individual events to the overall development of the plot. They also confused characters and their relationships, which affected their understanding of important events and conflicts. These difficulties suggest that the complexity of the narrative structure and the number of characters can create additional challenges for EFL students when reading and discussing novels.

Dimension 3 Cultural and Historical Context:

the observation gives us a clear novel-specific finding: the difficulties were particularly noticeable in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Passage to India*, especially with event sequence and character identification.

Table (3): dimension C results

Observation Item	Frequency	Field Notes / Examples
Students have difficulty understanding cultural references.	3	Students showed limited attention to the social and cultural values presented in the novels.
Students lack background knowledge needed to understand historical events or contexts.	3	Students demonstrated limited background knowledge of the historical contexts underlying the novels, particularly British colonial rule in India.
Students ask for explanations of social customs, values, or practices presented in the novel.	3	Students required explanations of social and cultural values and practices presented in the texts.
Students have difficulty relating historical or cultural context to characters and events.	0	-

Cultural and historical difficulties were also evident in the classroom observations. Students showed limited attention to the social and cultural values presented in the novels and often required additional explanation of unfamiliar social practices and cultural references. They also demonstrated limited background knowledge of the historical contexts necessary for understanding the texts. This was particularly noticeable in *A Passage to India*, where students had limited knowledge of the historical

context of British colonial rule in India. The observations suggest that insufficient cultural and historical background may restrict students' ability to engage fully with the events and ideas presented in the novels.

Dimension 4 Literary Analysis

This is a particularly rich dimension because the notes contain specific classroom examples, especially from *A Passage to India* and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Table (4): dimension 4 results

Observation Item	Frequency	Field Notes / Examples
Students have difficulty identifying major themes.	3	Students experienced difficulty identifying and explaining some of the major themes in the novels.
Students have difficulty interpreting symbols or figurative meanings.	3	Students had difficulty interpreting symbols and references to symbolic meanings in the novels.
Students have difficulty analyzing characterization and character development.	3	Students found it difficult to move beyond describing characters to analyzing their development and significance.
Students tend to retell the story rather than analyze it.	3	Students frequently focused on retelling the plot or historical events rather than analyzing literary features.
Students have difficulty identifying literary techniques.	3	Students

Literary analysis represented another significant challenge observed among the students. Students often experienced difficulty identifying and interpreting major themes, symbols, and figurative meanings in the novels. They also tended to focus on what happened in the story rather than analyzing how and why the author presented events, characters, and ideas in particular ways. This difficulty was particularly evident in *A Passage to India*. Students found the episode in the Marabar Caves difficult to interpret and had problems understanding its ambiguity and its significance to the development of the novel. They also required guidance in recognizing the significance of the novel's three-part structure, *Mosque*, *Caves*, and *Temple*, and its relationship to the novel's broader thematic concerns. A similar pattern was observed with *A Tale of Two Cities*. Students frequently confused the retelling of the plot and historical events with literary analysis. Although they were familiar with well-known elements such as the opening description and Sydney Carton's sacrifice, this familiarity did not necessarily lead to deeper analysis. Students often required guidance to discuss aspects such as narrative structure, tone, prose style, characterization, and the significance of particular literary techniques. Overall, the observations indicate that students could often recall events and characters but experienced greater difficulty moving from story comprehension to literary interpretation and analysis. This distinction was particularly important in classroom discussions, where students' responses tended to remain at the level of plot summary unless the teacher provided additional questions or guidance.

Findings and Discussion:

The classroom observations revealed four main areas of difficulty among the students: linguistic difficulties, comprehension and plot difficulties, cultural and historical difficulties, and literary analysis difficulties. These findings are broadly consistent with previous research indicating that difficulties in reading literary texts among EFL learners extend beyond vocabulary and grammar to include cultural understanding, interpretation, and the construction of meaning from literary texts (Lazar, 1993; Paran, 2008; Nishihara, 2024).

1. **Linguistic Difficulties:** Linguistic difficulties were among the most noticeable challenges observed during the teaching of the mandatory novels. Students frequently struggled with unfamiliar vocabulary, particularly words and expressions used in figurative or literary contexts. They often asked for meanings or translations before they could continue reading or participate in discussion. Difficulties were also observed when students encountered lengthy or syntactically complex passages. In addition, students sometimes complained about the length of the texts, which appeared to affect their willingness to engage with the reading. These observations are consistent with previous research showing that vocabulary, grammar, figurative language, and unfamiliar linguistic structures can create significant difficulties for EFL learners reading literary texts. Nishihara (2024), for example, found that university EFL students experienced difficulties related to vocabulary, grammar, figurative language, and the construction of meaning from literary narratives.

Similarly, Belarbi (2025) reported difficulties among EFL students in interpreting figurative language and understanding literary texts. The present observations therefore support the view that linguistic difficulty can constitute an important barrier to students' engagement with literary texts.

2. **Comprehension and Plot Difficulties:** The observations also revealed difficulties in following the sequence of events and understanding relationships among characters. These problems were particularly noticeable during the teaching of *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Passage to India*. Students sometimes became confused about the order of events and had difficulty connecting individual events to the overall development of the plot. They also confused characters and their relationships, which affected their understanding of important events and conflicts. Such difficulties are consistent with the nature of literary narrative reading, in which readers are required to construct relationships among events, characters, and textual details. Nishihara (2024) notes that EFL learners may experience difficulty constructing meaning when relationships within literary narratives are not directly stated. The present observations further suggest that difficulties with plot comprehension may become more noticeable when students encounter novels containing several characters, historical events, or complex relationships.
3. **Cultural and Historical Difficulties:** Cultural and historical understanding represented another recurring challenge. Students often showed limited attention to the social and cultural values presented in the novels and required additional explanations of unfamiliar social practices and cultural references. They also demonstrated limited background knowledge of the historical contexts necessary for understanding the texts. This was particularly evident in *A Passage to India*, where students had limited knowledge of the historical context of British colonial rule in India. This finding supports Lazar's (1993) argument that literary texts are closely connected to the cultural contexts in which they are produced and that learners' interpretation can be affected by their familiarity with those contexts. Similar difficulties have been reported in EFL literature classrooms, where students may struggle to relate literary works to their historical and cultural settings (Belarbi, 2025). The present observations suggest that limited contextual knowledge can make it difficult for students to move beyond the surface events of a novel and understand the social and historical meanings underlying them.
4. **Literary Analysis Difficulties:** Literary analysis was another significant challenge observed across the classes. Students often experienced difficulty identifying and interpreting themes, symbols, and figurative meanings. They also tended to focus on what happened in the story rather than analyzing how and why the author presented events, characters, and ideas in particular ways. This finding corresponds with previous research suggesting that EFL learners may understand the surface meaning of literary texts while experiencing greater difficulty with implicit meanings, figurative language, and interpretation (Nishihara, 2024; Belarbi, 2025). Paran (2008) also emphasizes the importance of classroom approaches and activities that help learners engage with literature beyond basic comprehension. The difficulty was particularly evident in *A Passage to India*. Students found the events surrounding the Marabar Caves difficult to interpret and required guidance in understanding their significance and ambiguity. They also needed support in recognizing the significance of the novel's three-part structure, *Mosque, Caves, and Temple*, and its relationship to the novel's broader thematic concerns. A similar pattern was observed with *A Tale of Two Cities*. Students frequently confused the retelling of the plot and historical events with literary analysis. Although some students were familiar with well-known elements such as the opening and Sydney Carton's sacrifice, this familiarity did not necessarily result in deeper interpretation. Students required further guidance to discuss narrative structure, tone, prose style, characterization, and literary techniques.
5. **Overall Discussion:** Taken together, the observations indicate that students' difficulties extended beyond language proficiency. The findings support previous research showing that literary reading in an EFL context involves linguistic, cultural, contextual, and interpretive demands (Lazar, 1993; Paran, 2008). Linguistic problems could affect comprehension, while limited cultural and historical knowledge could make it more difficult to understand characters, events, and themes. A recurring pattern across the observations was the tendency to remain at the level of what happens in the novel rather than moving toward how and why the novel creates meaning. This distinction was especially apparent in students' responses to questions about themes, symbolism, characterization, and literary techniques. The findings therefore suggest that students may benefit from teaching approaches that combine language support with cultural preparation, guided reading, and explicit instruction in literary analysis.

Conclusion:

This study examined the challenges faced by English Department students at the University of Zawia in understanding four mandatory novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *A Passage to*

India, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Based on classroom observations conducted across different groups and stages of the researcher's teaching experience between 2021 and 2025, the findings revealed that students' difficulties extended beyond vocabulary and language proficiency. The main challenges involved linguistic difficulties, problems following plot and characters, limited cultural and historical background, and difficulties moving from basic comprehension to literary analysis. Students were often able to recall events from the novels but experienced greater difficulty interpreting themes, symbols, characterization, and literary techniques. The observations also showed that the nature of the difficulty varied according to the linguistic, cultural, historical, and structural characteristics of the novels. The findings highlight the importance of providing students with appropriate linguistic and contextual support while teaching literary texts. More importantly, students need systematic guidance in moving from understanding what happens in a novel to interpreting how and why the writer constructs meaning. Classroom-based observation can therefore provide valuable insight into the difficulties students experience and can help teachers develop more responsive approaches to teaching mandatory literary texts.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings of the study, **the following recommendations are suggested:**

1. Provide pre-reading support. Teachers should introduce essential historical, cultural, and social background before students begin reading a novel, particularly when the text is set in an unfamiliar historical or cultural context.
2. Support students with difficult language. Key vocabulary, figurative expressions, and complex passages should be introduced and explained without requiring students to translate every word of the text.
3. Use plot and character mapping. Timelines, character maps, and simple visual organizers can help students follow events, understand relationships among characters, and distinguish major events from minor details.
4. Develop literary analysis skills gradually. Teachers should explicitly guide students from plot comprehension to analysis by using questions that encourage them to examine themes, symbolism, characterization, narrative structure, and literary techniques.
5. Encourage direct engagement with the original text. Students should be encouraged to use summaries and other secondary materials only as supplementary resources rather than substitutes for reading the original novel.
6. Use guided classroom discussion. Questions and activities should encourage students to explain and support their interpretations with evidence from the text rather than simply retelling the story.

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Appendix:

No.	Observation Item	3	2	1	0	Field Notes / Examples
A. Linguistic Difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary. Students have difficulty understanding complex or lengthy sentences. Students ask for the meaning or translation of words/expressions repeatedly. Students have difficulty understanding figurative or literary language. 	/				My student struggle in understanding vocabulary specifically those of figurative language. The also complain about the length of the texts.
B. Comprehension and Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students have difficulty following the sequence of events. Students confuse important and minor events. Students confuse characters or their relationships. Students have difficulty explaining the development of the plot. 	/	2			For novels tales of two cities and a passage to India the student face problems in understating the sequence of the events and confused between the characters
C. Cultural and Historical Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students have difficulty understanding cultural references. Students lack background knowledge needed to understand historical events or contexts. Students ask for explanations of social customs, values, or practices presented in the novel. Students have difficulty relating historical or cultural context to characters and events. 	3			0	The students in all these novels didn't pay attentions to social and cultural values. They don't have background about historical events especially the British occupation of India
D. Literary Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students can identify major themes in the novel. Students have difficulty interpreting symbols or figurative meanings. Students have difficulty analyzing characterization and character development. Students tend to retell the story rather than analyze it. Students have difficulty identifying literary techniques. 	3				<p>The students have difficulties in analyzing main plots and in figuring out the references o symbols and some themes used in these novels. In the novel passage to India the climax in the Marabar Caves, where Adela Quested hallucinates or misinterprets an echo as an assault by Dr. Aziz, is a common source of confusion</p> <p>The novel is strictly structured into three sections representing the three seasons of India and three distinct religious frameworks: Mosque (Islam), Caves (Christianity/Existentialism), and Temple (Hinduism).</p> <p>In tales of two cities students often confuse retelling the plot or historical events with actual literary analysis of structure, tone, and prose style.</p> <p>False Familiarity: Because the famous opening ("It was the best of times...") and Sydney Carton's sacrifice are well-known, students often assume the book is simple and write superficial essay</p>