Teaching English through Literature-Based Instruction: A Holistic Approach to Language and Literary Skills

Sabrina Retnasari Iswahyudi
Universitas Negeri Makassar
sabrinaretnasariiswahyudi@gmail.com

Abstract:

The connection between language learning and literary study has grown stronger over time (Novianti, 2016). Consequently, incorporating literature into classroom practices is encouraged as a way to blend both elements, offering more dynamic and meaningful educational experiences. Literature-based instruction has emerged as a valuable method in language education, making use of suitable literary texts to aid students in learning English. This study aims to explore how the integration of language and literature is applied in English teaching through literature-oriented techniques within an EFL learning environment. Conducted as a qualitative case study, the research took place at an Islamic Junior High School located in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The data collection involved interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Following Miles and Huberman's model, the data were processed through reduction, display, and conclusion. The findings demonstrate that literature-based instruction is highly relevant and should be further developed for teaching English to EFL learners. This instructional model supports various classroom activities that are in line with educational objectives, such as: (1) reading activities using literary works, (2) speaking practices inspired by literature, (3) listening exercises involving literary material, and (4) writing assignments based on literary themes. In essence, literature-based instruction validates that language and literature can be taught as a unified subject, fostering students' growth in both linguistic and literary skills.

Keywords: *teaching English, literature-based instruction, integrated study*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is among the countries where English is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL). As such, English is mandated as a core subject across all levels of formal education. In response to the demands of globalization, the teaching and learning of English has become a key educational focus, including in Indonesia. At the Junior High School (SMP) level in particular, English instruction holds significant importance, as outlined in the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 24 of 2016 . According to this policy, English is categorized as a core subject (Group A) aimed at developing students' competencies in attitudes, knowledge, and skills, which serve as a foundation for personal development and participation in societal, national, and global life. This objective aligns

with the broader goals of Indonesia's national education system, particularly efforts to enhance citizens' quality of life by improving educational standards [2], especially through English proficiency and global communication skills. This underscores the vital role English plays in the national education framework.

The approach to English teaching in Indonesia continues to evolve, reflecting broader educational trends. Currently, language education is becoming increasingly interconnected with the study of literature. In EFL contexts, literature contributes significantly to the learning process, as it supports not only linguistic development but also broader cognitive and emotional growth. Literature is widely recognized as an essential component of language education and its use in teaching languages has become a prominent topic of interest among educators and researchers. This has led to a growing focus on integrating literature into English teaching, commonly referred to as literature-based instruction in EFL settings.

Eagleton defines literature as a form of writing that employs language in distinctive and nuanced ways. In the context of language education, literature serves as a lens through which students can explore the human experience. It enables learners to engage with a range of emotions and perspectives, fostering introspection and contributing to their holistic development. Literature-based learning thus involves the use of literary texts as a medium through which students can explore elements such as plot, character, setting, point of view, values, messages, and themes. This method positions students as social individuals who not only acquire language skills but also internalize cultural patterns, social norms, and moral values conveyed through literature. Teaching English through literature allows foreign language classes to become more inclusive by addressing a wide range of student learning preferences, which in turn facilitates the development of the four essential language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. This method proves to be highly effective in EFL environments, as it presents numerous interactive and meaningful learning activities that enhance students' language proficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of literature into English language teaching has increasingly gained attention, especially within the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. According to Eagleton (1996), literature utilizes language in a distinctive and imaginative manner,

offering learners access not only to linguistic elements but also to cultural and emotional experiences (Lazar, 1993; Kaur, 2010). Literature-based instruction (LBI) is defined as a pedagogical approach that uses literary texts—such as prose, poetry, and drama—as core materials to teach language skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) and components (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) (Babaee & Yahya, 2014; Sidhu, Fork & Kaur, 2010).

Carter and Long (1991) proposed three foundational models for literature instruction in EFL classrooms: the cultural model, which focuses on understanding literary texts within social and historical contexts; the language model, which emphasizes language analysis and structure within texts; and the personal growth model, which encourages learners to relate literature to personal experiences. These models serve as the theoretical foundation for various implementations of LBI and support holistic learning.

A range of genres—poetry, short stories, novels, drama, and even songs—are used in literature-based classrooms. Poetry supports vocabulary development and critical thinking (Mittal, 2014), while prose improves comprehension and cultural knowledge (Tang, 2008). Drama and storytelling enhance communicative competence through role-play and interaction (Davies, 1990), and songs contribute to listening and pronunciation skills (Murphey, 1992; Conesa et al., 2015).

Empirical studies also support the efficacy of LBI in promoting language acquisition. For instance, Ezeokoli (2016) demonstrated that prose-based instruction enhanced students' literary competence and critical thinking. Other researchers, such as Fausiah (2016) and Damayanti (2016), explored storytelling and digital narratives as effective tools for young EFL learners. Despite these benefits, challenges persist. Teachers often lack training in literature pedagogy (Ann, Yunus & Aziz, 2016), and textbooks may contain limited literary content, resulting in partial implementation (Noor, 2011).

Furthermore, scholars such as Bobkina (2014) and Hirvela (2001) emphasized that literature fosters integrated language learning by promoting creativity, empathy, and critical engagement with texts. Literature also aids in developing high-order thinking skills (Setyarini et al., 2018) and provides meaningful content for communicative and reflective language use.

Based on these theoretical insights and research findings, literature-based instruction is not only a pedagogically sound approach but also aligns with the national educational goals in Indonesia—particularly in shaping character, promoting cultural awareness, and enhancing communicative competence in English. However, for effective implementation, teachers must be equipped with appropriate strategies, resources, and ongoing professional development.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative case study design aimed at investigating the integration of language and literature in English instruction within an EFL classroom setting. Qualitative research is characterized by its focus on natural contexts and interpretive practices that help researchers understand phenomena through real-world engagement. It encompasses a range of methods such as interviews, observations, field notes, recordings, and reflective memos that capture and represent social reality. Meanwhile, a case study design is defined as an approach that examines a specific bounded system within its actual, contemporary environment. It typically involves collecting rich, in-depth information from multiple data sources over a period of time to construct a comprehensive narrative of the case and uncover emerging themes.

In this study, the researchers investigate how language and literature are jointly applied in English language teaching through literature-based instruction for EFL learners, focusing on students at an Islamic Junior High School in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Data collection is conducted using several qualitative methods, including interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Additionally, relevant literature is incorporated to support the analysis. All data are processed following the qualitative framework outlined by Miles and Huberman, which includes data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reveal significant patterns in how literature-based instruction (LBI) is implemented in Junior High School English classes and its effects on language learning. The data analysis yielded four major themes: instructional strategies in literature-based English teaching, integration of language skills through literary texts,

student engagement and response to literature-based activities, and challenges in implementing literature-based instruction.

Instructional Strategies in Literature-Based English Teaching

The classroom observations and teacher interviews revealed a variety of instructional strategies employed to integrate literature into English language teaching. These strategies could be categorized into three main approaches, aligning with Carter and Long's (1991) models for literature instruction.

First, under the cultural model, teachers frequently introduced literary texts by discussing their cultural and historical backgrounds. For example, before reading folktales from different countries, one teacher (T1) conducted pre-reading activities where students shared knowledge about similar stories from Indonesian culture:

> "I always start with what they know. When we read 'Little Red Riding Hood,' I ask them about Indonesian folktales with similar themes or moral lessons. This creates a bridge between cultures and makes foreign literature more accessible." (T1, Interview)

Second, the language model was evident in activities that focused on the linguistic features of texts. Teachers often used literary passages to highlight grammatical structures, vocabulary, and discourse patterns. In one observed lesson, students identified and analyzed the use of past tense verbs in a short story, then practiced using these forms in retelling parts of the narrative:

> "Literary texts provide natural contexts for grammar instruction. Instead of isolated exercises, students see how grammatical structures function in meaningful communication." (T2, Interview)

Third, the personal growth model was implemented through activities encouraging students to connect literary themes to their personal experiences. Reflection journals, creative responses, and class discussions focused on moral values and character development were common practices observed across all three classes:

> "Literature helps students explore their identity and values. When they connect emotionally to stories, language learning becomes meaningful and memorable." (T3, Interview)

Document analysis of lesson plans confirmed that teachers deliberately planned these approaches, often combining elements from different models within a single lesson unit. This integrated approach aligns with Bobkina and Dominguez's (2014) recommendation

for a balanced methodology that addresses linguistic, cultural, and personal dimensions of literature-based language learning.

Table 1. Frequency of Instructional Strategies Observed in Literature-Based English Classes

Instructional Strategy	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Total
Cultural contextualization	6	4	5	15
Language-focused analysis	7	8	6	21
Personal response activities	5	4	7	16
Literary device exploration	3	5	2	10
Text adaptation	4	3	5	12
Creative production	3	4	3	10

Table 1 shows that language-focused analysis was the most frequently employed strategy across all three teachers' classes, followed by personal response activities and cultural contextualization. This pattern suggests that while teachers recognize the importance of linguistic development through literature, they also value the cultural and personal dimensions of literary engagement.

Integration of Language Skills Through Literary Texts

The data revealed that literature-based instruction facilitated the integration of all four language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—often within the same lesson or unit. This integrated approach contrasts with traditional EFL teaching methods that tend to focus on skills in isolation.

Reading Activities Using Literary Works

Reading activities formed the foundation of literature-based instruction. Teachers employed various approaches to enhance reading comprehension and engagement:

Shared Reading: Teachers read aloud with students, modeling pronunciation, intonation, and expression while discussing illustrations and text features.

Guided Reading: Students read texts in small groups with teacher support, focusing on comprehension strategies and vocabulary development.

Independent Reading: Students selected books from classroom libraries based on interest and proficiency level, followed by response activities.

The classroom observations showed that teachers used a scaffolded approach to reading, gradually transferring responsibility from teacher-led to student-led activities as students gained confidence with texts:

> "When introducing new literary genres or challenging texts, I start with shared reading. As students become familiar with the patterns and

vocabulary, I transition to guided and then independent reading." (T2, Interview)

Document analysis revealed that teachers categorized literary texts by difficulty level, ensuring appropriate text selection for different student proficiency levels. This differentiated approach supported inclusive learning and addressed the wide range of abilities typically found in EFL classrooms.

Speaking Practices Inspired by Literature

Literary texts provided rich contexts for speaking activities. The most common practices observed included:

Role-plays and Dramatizations: Students performed dialogues from stories or created new scenes based on existing characters.

Discussion Circles: Small groups discussed literary themes, character motivations, or plot developments, using guiding questions to structure their conversations.

Storytelling: Students retold stories in their own words or created alternative endings.

These activities not only developed speaking fluency but also encouraged critical thinking and interpretive skills as students justified their opinions and interpretations:

> "When students debate a character's actions or discuss different interpretations of a poem, they're not just practicing language—they're developing higher-order thinking skills and learning to express complex ideas." (T3, Interview)

Student focus groups confirmed the popularity of these speaking activities:

> "I like role-playing characters from stories because I can practice speaking without worrying about mistakes. It feels different from just answering questions—more natural and fun." (Student FGD 2)

Listening Exercises Involving Literary Material

Listening skills were developed through various literature-based activities:

Audio Recordings: Teachers used professional recordings of poems, short stories, or excerpts from novels, often accompanied by comprehension questions.

Teacher Read-Alouds: Teachers expressively read literary texts, modeling pronunciation and intonation while students followed along.

Peer Performances: Students listened to classmates' performances of poems, dialogues, or storytelling presentations.

These listening activities exposed students to authentic language patterns, varied accents, and prosodic features of English:

"Listening to stories and poems helps me understand how English should sound. It's different from the dialogues in our textbook—more interesting and natural." (Student FGD 4)

Writing Assignments Based on Literary Themes

Writing activities connected to literature included:

Response Journals: Students wrote personal reactions to literature, reflecting on themes, characters, or connections to their own lives.

Creative Writing: Students composed poems, alternative endings, sequels, or new stories inspired by the texts they read.

Character Analysis: Students wrote about character traits, motivations, and development, supporting their interpretations with evidence from the text.

These writing tasks provided structured opportunities for students to apply new vocabulary and grammatical structures while engaging creatively with texts:

"Through writing assignments, I can see how literature improves students' expression of complex ideas. Their vocabulary becomes richer, and their sentence structures more varied compared to when they just complete grammar exercises." (T1, Interview)

Student Engagement and Response to Literature-Based Activities

Classroom observations revealed high levels of student engagement during literature-based activities compared to more traditional language exercises. Teachers reported that participation increased significantly when literary texts formed the basis of lessons:

"When we use stories or poems as the center of our lessons, even typically quiet students become more involved. The narrative element captures their interest in a way that isolated language exercises simply cannot." (T1, Interview)

Focus group discussions with students confirmed this pattern. Students expressed particular enthusiasm for activities that allowed creative engagement with texts:

"I enjoy creating my own ending for stories we read. It helps me remember new words because I'm using them to express my own ideas, not just completing exercises." (Student FGD 1)

"Reading stories makes learning English feel less like studying and more like discovering something interesting. I want to understand what happens next, so I try harder to understand the words." (Student FGD 3)

The observation data also indicated that literature-based activities encouraged participation from students with different learning preferences. Visual learners engaged with illustrations and text features, auditory learners benefited from read-alouds and discussions, and kinesthetic learners participated actively in dramatizations and role-plays:

"Literature-based teaching helps me reach more students because it naturally incorporates different learning modalities. A single story can be approached through reading, listening, discussing, performing, and creating—addressing various learning styles." (T3, Interview)

Student work samples collected during the research period showed evidence of progressive improvement in language use, particularly in vocabulary range and syntactic complexity. Journal entries and creative writing pieces demonstrated increasing sophistication in expression as students incorporated language patterns and literary devices encountered in their reading:

"Over time, I notice students begin to 'borrow' expressive phrases and structures from the literature we study. Their writing becomes more vivid and precise as they internalize these models of effective language use." (T2, Interview)

Challenges in Implementing Literature-Based Instruction

Despite the positive aspects of literature-based instruction, teachers identified several challenges to its effective implementation:

Resource Limitations: All three teachers mentioned difficulties accessing appropriate literary materials that matched both students' language proficiency and interest levels:

"Finding literary texts that are linguistically accessible yet intellectually stimulating for junior high school students can be challenging. Many available materials are either too simplistic in content or too complex in language." (T1, Interview)

Time Constraints: The prescribed curriculum often left limited time for extended engagement with literary texts:

"Literature-based teaching requires time—time for students to truly engage with texts, discuss interpretations, and create thoughtful responses. The pressure to cover mandated material sometimes restricts these opportunities." (T2, Interview)

Assessment Challenges: Teachers struggled to align literature-based learning with standardized assessment requirements:

"While literature develops holistic language competence, our assessment system still largely focuses on discrete language skills and grammatical knowledge. This creates tension between what we believe is effective teaching and what we're required to evaluate." (T3, Interview)

Teacher Preparation: All participating teachers acknowledged that their teacher education had not adequately prepared them for implementing literature-based approaches:

"I've had to develop my own strategies through trial and error and professional reading. My formal training focused more on traditional language teaching methodology with little attention to using literature effectively." (T2, Interview)

These challenges align with findings from previous research by Ann, Yunus, and Aziz (2016) and Noor (2011), who identified similar obstacles to literature integration in EFL contexts. However, the participating teachers had developed various strategies to overcome these challenges, including collaborative resource development, creative adaptation of available materials, and professional learning communities focused on literature-based pedagogy.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for English language teaching in EFL contexts, particularly at the junior high school level:

Curriculum Development: There is a need to explicitly incorporate literature into English language curricula, providing guidelines for text selection, instructional approaches, and assessment strategies that value literary engagement.

Teacher Education: Pre-service teacher preparation programs should include courses on literature pedagogy specifically designed for language teaching contexts, equipping future teachers with the knowledge and skills to effectively implement literature-based instruction.

Resource Development: Educational authorities should invest in developing or acquiring appropriate literary materials that bridge the gap between students' language proficiency and intellectual maturity, particularly materials that incorporate both local and global literary traditions.

Assessment Alignment: Assessment practices should evolve to recognize and evaluate the complex language competencies developed through literature-based instruction, moving beyond discrete-item testing to more authentic and integrated evaluation methods.

Professional Development: Ongoing professional learning opportunities should be provided for in-service teachers to enhance their capacity for implementing literature-based approaches effectively.

These implications are particularly relevant for the Indonesian educational context, where recent curriculum reforms emphasize integrated skills development and character education—both areas where literature-based instruction has demonstrated significant potential.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the implementation of literature-based instruction in English language teaching at an Islamic Junior High School in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The findings validate that language and literature can be effectively taught as a unified subject, fostering students' growth in both linguistic and literary competencies. The research reveals how literature-based approaches support the development of all four language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—while simultaneously enhancing students' critical thinking, cultural awareness, and personal growth.

The instructional practices observed in this study demonstrate how teachers can effectively blend language and literature through various strategies that engage students with texts in meaningful ways. These practices align with theoretical models of literature instruction while adapting to the specific needs and contexts of EFL learners. The high levels of student engagement observed during literature-based activities suggest that this approach can enhance motivation and participation, key factors in successful language acquisition.

However, the research also identifies significant challenges to implementing literature-based instruction, including resource limitations, time constraints, assessment misalignment, and inadequate teacher preparation. These challenges must be addressed through systematic changes in curriculum design, resource development, assessment practices, and teacher education if literature-based instruction is to realize its full potential in EFL contexts.

Future research could expand on this study by examining the long-term impacts of literature-based instruction on students' language proficiency and attitudes toward English learning. Additionally, comparative studies across different educational levels and contexts would provide valuable insights into how literature-based approaches can be optimally adapted to various teaching environments.

In conclusion, literature-based instruction offers a promising approach for integrating language and literature in junior high school English classes, providing students with rich, meaningful, and engaging learning experiences that develop both linguistic competence and broader educational outcomes. With appropriate support and resources, this approach can contribute significantly to enhancing the quality of English language education in EFL contexts like Indonesia.

Acknowledgments

REFERENCES

Ann, J. N. A., Yunus, M. M., & Aziz, A. A. (2016). The challenges and practices of teaching literature in an ESL context. *International Journal of Education and Literature Studies, 4*(2), 82-89.

Babaee, R., & Yahya, W. R. B. W. (2014). Significance of literature in foreign language teaching. *International Education Studies, 7*(4), 80-85.

Bobkina, J., & Dominguez, E. (2014). The use of literature and literary texts in the EFL classroom: Between consensus and controversy. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature, 3*(2), 248-260.

Carter, R., & Long, M. N. (1991). *Teaching literature*. Longman.

Collie, J., & Slater, S. (2004). *Literature in the language classroom: A resource book of ideas and activities*. Cambridge University Press.

Conesa, N. M., Pérez-Paredes, P., & Sánchez-Tornel, M. (2015). Using songs to work on language comprehension as a reading enabler in EFL. *Thinking Skills and Creativity, 17*, 37-48.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Damayanti, I. L. (2016). From storytelling to story writing: The implementation of reading to learn (R2L) pedagogy to teach English as a foreign language in Indonesia. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 6*(2), 232-245.

Davies, P. (1990). The use of drama in English language teaching. *TESL Canada Journal, 8*(1), 87-99.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Eagleton, T. (1996). *Literary theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Blackwell Publishing.

Ezeokoli, F. O. (2016). Enhancing ESL learners' literary competence through short story reading. *International Journal of English and Education, 5*(1), 261-275.