

# English language teachers' literacy competence in literature

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## ABSTRACT

The study was carried out to describe English teachers' literacy competence in English literature which had a very important role in the teaching of English language through literature to strengthen character educational values. The study applied descriptive statistics in the forms of frequencies "to describe and summarize the data." In reporting the data, percentages were used (Leavy, 2017: 111). The respondents of the study consisted of fifteen English language teachers working for five senior high schools organizing special interest classes in languages. The techniques for collecting data were questionnaires and FGD (focus group discussion). The data were analyzed by using quantitative descriptive techniques consisting of central tendency and percentage analysis. The results of the study showed that all the teachers got between two and fourteen credits in literature from their undergraduate colleges. Their reading hours in literature after graduation did not show any regular base. This was particularly due to the fact that the portion of literature materials to be taught to the students was very limited. Thus, they thought that it was not necessitated to develop literary competence to support their teaching activities. However, all of them agreed that the teaching of literature to high school students was important and useful to improve their language skills as well as their character educational values.



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## 1. Introduction

The program for developing literacy in Indonesian schools is facilitated by the Guide book of School Literacy Program (Ditjendikdasmen, 2016) through "a 15 minutes activity to read non-academic books before the lessons begin" under the supervision of the school teachers. The meaning of school literacy within that guide book is the students' ability to access, comprehend, and use something ingeniously through several activities such as reading, observing, listening, writing, and/or speaking. Thus, the teachers should be involved directly in developing the school literacy culture and, thus, must show a good literacy competence.

The Minister of Education in Indonesia hopes that the students' character educational values can be developed through the character education development (*Penumbuhan Budi Pekerti*) which is regulated by the Minister of Education and Culture (Mendikbud, 2015) and is supported by the School Literacy Program (*Gerakan Literasi Sekolah*). In this program the teachers are supposed to assist and nurture the school's literacy culture. The main task of the teachers is to develop the literacy activities as an attempt to improve the educational quality in their schools. The decree of the Minister of National Education number 22 year 2006 about the National Standards of Education stated that the developmental activities in reading and writing culture is conducted in order to

nurture the reading habit to make the students comprehend various literary works and explore various kinds of written texts (Mendiknas, 2006). Thus, the teachers must possess appropriate literacy competence in guiding and assisting the students' literacy activities to support the development of character educational values as well as other curricular achievements both in the class and school levels.

The teachers' competency of English literary literacy has strategic values as it does not only give the additional value in the language learning process but also accommodates the teachers on implementing character education solidly. Teachers' literary literacy competence has an important role in the language learning process. Essentially, literacy is the ability on accessing, processing, understanding, and using the information intelligently for solving the problem by doing various activities namely reading, watching, observing, listening, writing, and speaking.

Literature has been incorporated in English language learning in several countries, such as in Malaysia. Literature has been integrated as the component in English language learning in primary, secondary and tertiary schools in Malaysia since 2000 (Noah, 2017; Omar, 2017; Mohammed, 2018). This incorporation aims to enhance the students' proficiency in the English Language through literary texts. In consequence, it contributes to personal development, character building also widens the students' perspective through reading other cultures and worldview (Omar, 2017).

Through its revised Curriculum 2013, Indonesia has also already been incorporating literature materials in English language learning. Still, for some experts, this is not an easy task to do among some English language teachers because for so many years since its independence in 1945, the teaching of English as a foreign language has been designed to deal with only linguistic competence. Therefore, to be able to enhance the use of literature in the language learning process, the teachers should look back to the years when they were teacher trainees in their undergraduate studies. This is the period in which they tried hard to be well-prepared and fully understand literature before delivering it to their students. This is a strong foundation for the English language teachers to develop literacy in literature before teaching their students' literacy in literature to strengthen the students' character educational values. However, so far, there has been no particular studies dealing with the teachers' literacy competence in English literature in Indonesia during the three consecutive periods: during their college studies, after their graduation, and whether they incorporate literature materials in their teaching activities. Therefore, such a study has its own base in coping with the latest policy of both teaching literature materials and strengthening character educational values through literacy programs at schools.

The problems to be answered in the study are as follows.

- 1.1. How did the English language teachers develop their competence in literary literacy when they were teachers training students?
- 1.2. How did the English language teachers develop their literary literacy after they graduated from colleges?
- 1.3. How did the English language teachers incorporate English literature materials into their teaching activities to strengthen certain character educational values among the students?

By focusing on all the three problems, this research was expected to contribute additional knowledge in terms of identification of how English language teachers developed their literacy competence in literature when they were students of teachers training faculties, what they did to improve their literacy in literature after their graduation, and whether they incorporate literature materials in their teaching activities to support the development of their students' character educational values.

The conceptual framework developed in this research is summarized in the notion that English language learning cannot be separated from English literature. Grammar-translation method (GTM), for instance, has deliberately incorporated selected literary works as its main materials and has been widely used as a teaching method across the globe, including Indonesia (Prasetyo, 2016). Moreover, using English literary texts within English language learning provides more opportunities for the strengthening of character educational values among the students.

The simplest definition of the word "literacy" is the ability of reading and writing (Hornby, 2010). This term is used in various perspectives, for example in association with sociocultural and

socio-political perspectives which resulted in multi-literacy perspectives (Botelho, Kerekes, Jang, & Peterson, 2014). In sociocultural perspective, culture is the central part of literacy. It is a series of social activities involving all citizens in daily life by focusing on message delivery and interaction among the members of a society. Thus, literacy covers various kinds of aspects: the ability in reading and writing, the ability in mathematics and foreign language acquisition which determine the success of both verbal and nonverbal communications.

In the reading literacy program framework of PISA 2015, it was mentioned that the reading ability had an important role as the basic skill for people to live their lives. As the number and variety of reading materials increased significantly, consequently, the students were expected to comprehend and utilize written texts more effectively. Reading literacy dynamically changes the society and culture beyond.

In the same manner, thus, literacy in literature can be defined as the ability to read and write literature, and the competence in reading literature can be defined as the skill in reading and understanding particular literary works which consist of various genres such as fiction, poetry and drama or play. On one hand, the literary work reading activity begins with the pre-reading activity up to reading the literary work as a whole. On the other hand, the writing of literature can be defined as “producing writing in the form of literary work” (Sari, 2016).

However, reading literary work is an activity which is more complicated than an ordinary reading activity which only involves one skill of a reading process. Literature reading activity involves more skills in order to gain the meanings of the literary works comprehensively. According to Baleiro (2011) one of the skills that is frequently involved in the process of reading literary works is how to interpret the literary works from various points of views. The interpretation is gained from the competence of reading literary works by writing the obtained meanings from the reading process comprehensively. Besides, the competence in reading literature involves the critical reading and text analysis of the literary work as well as telling it in a written form (Baleiro, 2011). In conclusion, the definition of the competence in literary literacy is beyond the ability in reading and writing a literary work.

In such a situation, English language learning is currently referred to as “language learning as a whole” (*pembelajaran bahasa sebagai keseluruhan*) which is a system of learning that correlates to each other and is designed on the basis of the students’ needs (Hawayan, qtd. in Iskandar, 2012). Brown (2000) explained that the concept of teaching was guiding and facilitating the students to study and develop the learning atmosphere. Thus, teaching is not only a medium to transfer knowledge but also involves various aspects of a learning process. Those aspects determine the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of English language.

Harmer (1998) stated that the ability in mastering a language naturally would be very tricky to be done in the classroom. However, there are several factors that can help the students to learn more effectively. Those factors are interaction, concept, and learning activity. Learning interaction in this context is related to how the teacher applies the approach by way of giving stimulus so that the students can be attracted. Whereas what the learning concept means is a learning that emphasizes on language and how the language is made. That whole factor refers to the exercise and learning activity which is especially designed for the students so that they can use the language being studied more actively and easily.

One of the learning activities in English language learning process is through the use of literary works (Prasetyo, 2016). Literature competency and language competency are two competencies that are related to each other. Brumfit (1986) stated that increasing literature competency in a learning activity in a foreign language learning process can bring a contribution not only for the language ability of the learner but also for the career development of the learner in the future.

Thus, it occupies the role of the teacher in each learning process. A teacher then carries vast responsibility since the students depend on his/her activities (Ada & Azizah, 2016). Consequently, a teacher should possess various competencies. The Laws Number 14 Year 2005 about Teachers and Lecturers stated that teachers must possess the four competencies: pedagogical, personality, professional, and social. By mastering those four competencies, it is expected that they are able to work professionally to enhance the educational quality. Among those four competencies, professional competency needs to be cultivated and developed systematically and continuously by

teachers, in this context is the English teacher. Competency itself is defined as a capability and/or ability (Botyazis, 2008). In particular competency is defined as knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, motivations and belief people need to be successful (Gupta, 1999; Ada & Azizah, 2016). In relations with the teachers becoming professional and competent, they have to sufficiently equip themselves with the subject content of teaching materials and understand the process of learning (Kavinda & Ye, 2015). Therefore, the teacher should commit to the acquisition of materials, their students' learning activities, as well as the character educational values they incorporate in their teaching activities and how to teach the values to the students.

## 2. Research Method

The participants of the research were all English language teachers of the senior high schools with language interest classes (*kelas peminatan bahasa*) in Yogyakarta Special Province. "Purposeful or convenience sampling" was applied in the study through which the selection of the research subjects was "based on their accessibility to the researcher" (Leavy, 2017). By so doing, they could be accessed conveniently as they represented particular characteristics the researcher wanted to study.

A quantitative approach was used in this research. The collected data were quantitative in nature (Creswell, 2014). They were in the forms of numbers and were collected by using questionnaires with 62 questions in 4 different clusters: how they developed literacy competence in literature during undergraduate studies, what they did to maintain such a competence after graduation, and the use of literature materials in English language learning to strengthen the character educational values among students. In order to triangulate the data collected from the questionnaires, focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized among the respondents in their schools.

The research applied descriptive statistics in which the number of frequencies or occurrences of a category were counted and were "generally reported in percentages" by using certain statistical applications (Leavy, 2017: 111).

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 1.1. Teachers' Literary Competence

#### 1) During Undergraduate Studies

The teachers' literary literacy competence in this research were observed from the total number of credit units of the English literature courses taken by the respondents during their undergraduate studies as they were contained in the curricula of English language education programs in which the respondents studied years ago.

All the respondents got their undergraduate degrees from English language education departments. Besides learning English language teaching and linguistic courses, they also took certain courses in English literature. The following pie chart elaborates the number of credit units of literary courses they were engaged in.

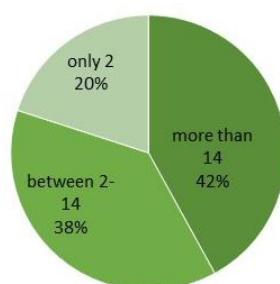
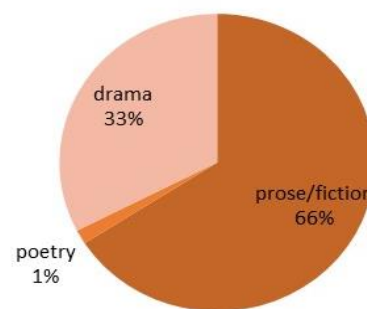


Fig.1. Number of Credit Units in Literary Courses

In the chart above, it is shown that all of the respondents (100%) participated in the literature subjects during their undergraduate studies although the number of credit units varied from two to more than fourteen (when they were asked “Could you tell me what do you mean by more than 14”, they said they forgot). Almost half of them (42% of the respondents) got more than 14 credit units, 38% got between 2-14% credit units, while 2% only got two to four semester credit units depending on the periods of their studies. The more recent they graduated, the more literature credit units they got. All the respondents (100%) asserted that their achievement in literary subjects was good (averaging 3 in a four-scale base). Furthermore, they also read a certain number of particular literary works as this was an obligatory assignment from their literature lecturers.

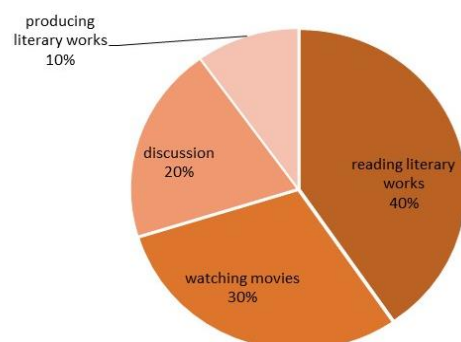
During their undergraduate studies, prose was one of literary works that most of the respondents (66%) loved to read and collect. Only a small portion of the respondents (1%) stated that they preferred poems. Drama was a literary genre that was read by 33% of the respondents. They also mentioned that they understood drama better than poems. The chart below shows their preferences in reading literary works during their undergraduate studies.



**Fig.2.** Preferences in Reading Literary Works

## 2) After Graduation

Almost all the respondents stated that while they were in their undergraduate programs, they were interested in literary works, especially novels (66%). Yet, they stated that they did not read any literary texts anymore after they graduated from their universities due to their various activities including those beyond teaching periods. From the FGD it was confirmed that the competence in literary literacy they developed when they were undergraduate students could not be utilized in their teaching activities due to the limited portion of literature materials in the teaching and learning of English language as regulated in the curriculum. However, they understood well the importance of literature materials in the acquisition of the foreign language. This is in line with what Baleiro (2011) said that one of the learning skills frequently functioning well in the process of reading was incorporating literary works into their reading materials.



**Fig.3.** Personal Efforts to Maintain Literary Competence

In the chart above, it is shown that after their graduation only 40% respondents tried to continue reading literary texts because they tried to incorporate literature materials into their lesson plans. Other 30% respondents watched movies adapted from literary works, and 20% respondents used literary works as a self-development medium by attending literary group discussions. Another fact



showed that some of the respondents (10%) were not only reading literary works to maintain their literary competence, but also writing short stories as personal hobbies. Such a writing activity helped them very much in improving the quality of their English language teaching processes both inside and outside classrooms.

In addition, more than half of the respondents (57%) assisted their students taking part in several local and regional championships including storytelling contests, speech contests, and debating competitions. Unfortunately, it was also revealed from the questionnaires that only 14% of the respondents had the ability to really understand poems well. However, they showed their enthusiasm in literary activities by collaborating with the students in doing extracurricular activities such as drama clubs which were very popular among the students for whom the respondents worked.

### 3.2. The Use of Literature in English Language Learning

The use of literature materials in English language teaching in Indonesia was very limited due to its small portion in the government-made syllabus. All the respondents (100%) of this research stated that literary materials could not be effectively used in the process of English language teaching. They also stated that the main obstacle was time management in using the literary works in English language teaching. The syllabus was designed to develop students' communicative competence accompanied with certain language focuses such as vocabulary and grammar. Yet, 42% of the respondents, under that kind of circumstance, tried to incorporate selected literary works in their lesson plans. So far, the most effective way to teach literary values was through drama clubs in their schools.

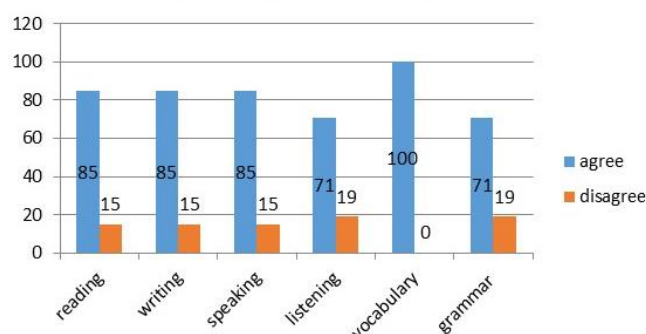


Fig.4. Integration of Literary Materials

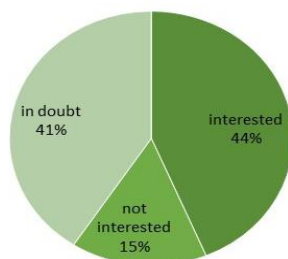
However, as shown in Figure 4, all the respondents (100%) said that literary works were useful media in English language teaching, especially in developing the students' English vocabulary mastery. Strong (1996) said that literature should be an important part in learning any language because it provides rich sources of language learning, especially reading. Literature can be used as a part of communicative lessons by providing appropriate contexts in order to improve the students' capability in reading. This will result in new knowledge from fictions and other literary texts. In an extensive reading program to provide new vocabulary exposure and grammatical perspectives, literary texts also provide a chance to explore various cultural and character educational values.

Furthermore, literary works can be used to help the students improve their writing and speaking skills. Hirvela (2001) argued that reading literary work is one of the best ways to inspire language learners to write. She emphasized that literature could stimulate the desire to learn language skills thoroughly.

Figure 4 shows 85% respondents were positive that literature could be used to improve such language skills like reading, writing, and speaking. In improving listening skill, only 71% of the respondents said that literature was a useful medium. Similarly, in improving grammar mastery among the students, 71% respondents stated that literature materials were suitable to be used as a learning medium.

The students' responses about the use of literature materials in their English learning activities are shown in the following chart. It shows that 44% of the respondents were certain that the students would be interested in the use of English literature materials. 41% respondents were in doubt about

this issue, and 16% respondents said that their students showed no interest in literature as materials of language learning.



**Fig.5.** Students' Responses Toward Literary Materials

From the FGD, it was revealed that the students were interested in certain stories or fictions as the materials of reading lessons, especially under the teachers' guidance in the discussion about the contents of the story. Fictions and other literary works could provide an authentic use of the language. This also could be treated as an alternative way in the learning process which could be more interesting and fun (Mohammed, 2018).

Using literature in foreign language learning will give the students experience about the values and culture from various places. Literature is one of the effective tools in teaching cultural values and the problems related to cross-cultural communications (Strong, 1996).

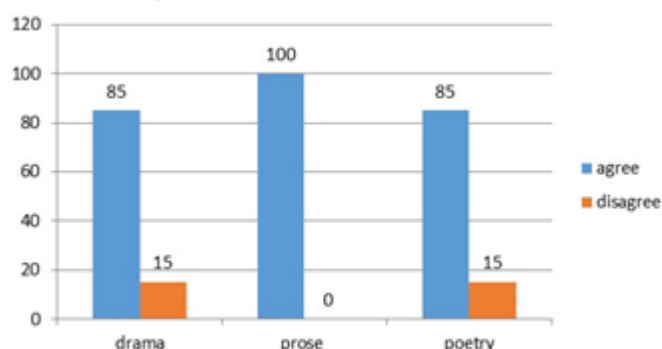
Leahy and Lo (1997) stated that there might be pros and cons about using literary materials in the teaching of English language. However, they also believed that using literature materials in a foreign language learning activity will stimulate the students to think and compare the cultural values with those in their own culture. Literature stimulates a discussion between the students and the teacher about the cultural values which are different from theirs. Through literature learning, the students would develop a sense of tolerance and understanding to deal with differences in their lives.

However, this research showed that 57% of the respondents had difficulties in finding English literature learning materials which fit the curriculum and syllabus. This was because the school libraries did not update their English literary work collections to facilitate the students' learning. Besides that, they also had to face a delicate situation in which time allocation is very limited in using literature materials in English language teaching since the main objective is to make students fluent speakers of that language (Paran, 2008).

Fortunately, the research findings showed that almost all of the respondents (85%) agreed that incorporating English literary materials in English language teaching supported the achievement of the KI 1 (religious values) and KI 2 (social values). Therefore, the frequency of English literature materials delivery in the learning process should be increased. English language learning should be incorporated with literature learning. Ihejirika (2014) stated that when literature and language are engaged, literature is the real form of language. In fact, literature should not be separated from language learning, especially in English language learning. An English language teacher could work as a literature teacher as well (Krishnasamy, 2015).

### 3.3. Using Literature for Students' Character Development

The findings of the research showed that 86% respondents had read the Indonesia law and regulations about the guidance for the students' character development program. They also believed that the strengthening of the students' characters could be integrated with the learning process. All the respondents assured that this could be done through English language teaching activities which incorporate certain literature materials. As shown in Figure 6, all of them agreed that prose was the literary work which contained more educational values than the other works. Likewise, 85% of them believed that drama and poetry could be used as learning materials which had a power to strengthen the students' character educational values.



**Fig.6.** Character Eduactional Values Content

Brumfit and Carter (1986) stated that improving the literary competency of foreign language learners could give a positive impact not only in developing the students' linguistic competence but also in supporting their character development. The insertion of literature in language learning is done not only to develop students' linguistic competence, but also to enhance the personal development of the students (Noah, 2017; Omar, 2017).

#### 4. Conclusion

The English teachers' literary literacy competence developed very well when they were undergraduate students. They got sufficient literary subjects and their achievements were good. They were prepared to be able to teach English language and incorporate literature materials in the lessons. However, after graduating from colleges and working as English language teachers, their literary competence was not utilized in their teaching activities due to the limited portion of literature contents in the curriculum. However, the study showed that the teachers, to some degree, possessed the literary literacy competence they might need for teaching literature materials to their students. What they need in the near future is to take part in a special workshop for designing English language instructions in which literature materials are incorporated to enhance particular character educational values among students.

By so doing, it is expected that the development of the students' character educational values can also be done through the school literacy program in particular by reading selected literary texts which are used in English learning materials in the classrooms. The teachers can utilize those literary texts within the teaching and learning processes because such literary texts can be used as appropriate media in advancing the students' character educational values (Omar, 2017).

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