

Exploring Literature Teaching Challenges Among Secondary Level School Teachers in a Rural Area of an English as a Second Language (L2) Country

Vilmar A. Del Rosario

Nueva Vizcaya State University, Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines

Author Email: viladelrosario@nvsu.edu.ph

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Abstract. This study aimed to address the need for more research in literature teaching, especially in an English as a Second Language (L2) context, and to consider often overlooked micro-geographical areas to improve education quality. Supporting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number four, this qualitative research explored the challenges faced by L2 public secondary school literature teachers (n=30) in Southern Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained, and confidentiality and anonymity ensured. The study found that teachers faced challenges such as low English proficiency among students, negative student attitudes, limited instructional time, and insufficient resources and materials. These findings suggest the need for significant changes in education to enhance language education in L2 countries, provide activities to improve students' attitudes towards literature, allocate adequate time for reading, and supply necessary learning materials and resources. Future research could involve a larger sample of literature teachers and compare the challenges of teaching literature in L1 and L2 contexts, as well as in urban and rural areas.

Keywords: Literature teaching; Secondary level; Rural area; English as a second language.

1.0 Introduction

Teachers are the primary pillars that attract students to the field of literature. They consider themselves responsible for making their students love literary pieces to gain knowledge. Presently, literature serves as a significant grammatical stimulus for learners and a beneficial source of enthusiasm in second language courses (Baca et al., 2010). In numerous ways, literature education aids in developing students' English proficiency. Concentrating on a text's linguistic characteristics and structures may enhance one's language abilities. An enhanced understanding of culture can result from exploring societal issues through the lens of a distinct culture (Yimwailai, 2015).

Under the K-12 curriculum of the Philippines for junior high school, teachers are required to teach Philippine literature, Afro-Asian literature, Anglo-American literature, and World literature to grades 7-10, respectively. While in senior high school, 21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World is taught to grade 11 students. As mandated by the "Basic Education Program of 2013," Republic Act No. 10533 stipulates that the Department of Education (DepEd) is obligated to adhere to a curriculum that integrates a variety of pedagogical approaches, including constructivist, inquiry-based, reflective, collaborative, differentiated, and integrative methods. Therefore, it is imperative to expose the difficulties that the teachers are encountering to devise more effective strategies to resolve them and achieve the department's objectives regarding the English curriculum.

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As teachers embark on delivering quality literature teaching, they continue facing challenges in teaching. While society as a whole is recovering, the pandemic is still influencing students' schooling. Closing schools due to the pandemic causes learning deficits beyond the crisis period. It resulted in an immeasurable loss of education.

Ugwu (2022) revealed some problems associated with effective literature education. These include an unfavorable learning environment, an alarming textbook shortage, limited language ability, misunderstandings about the importance of reading, a demanding workload, and a lack of parental support. Some schools lack literature instructors.

In the context of L2 countries such as the Philippines, for instance, empirical observations, especially in public schools, show that students and teachers sometimes complain about the lack of classrooms and textbooks. Considering the variety of languages in L2 countries, the use of English may also pose difficulty in learning literature written in English. This is evident from the findings of various studies about the connection of language and literature learning. Students may need help understanding the language used in the materials they were studying (Isa & Mahmud, 2012; Ghazali et al., 2009; Mustakim et al., 2014; Sanub & Yunus, 2017; Vethamani & Nair, 2009). According to two studies by Ghazali et al. (2009) and Vethamani and Nair (2009), students liked reading and studying short tales since they were brief and the author's language was easy to understand. On the other hand, students detested learning poetry since the language is so complex that they find it uninteresting (Isa & Mahmud, 2012; Ghazali et al., 2009).

Additionally, Ling and Eng (2016) contended that teaching low-proficiency learners would be challenging because they needed help understanding the concepts in the literary text. They also observed that students' lack of English proficiency impacted instructors' capacity to engage in more linguistic activities in class. Reading literature for enjoyment was difficult since learners needed help understanding the material. It prevented learners from speaking out and sharing their ideas and opinions. In addition, they claimed that learners would not learn if they showed little enthusiasm for learning. They also discovered that 37.5 percent of teacher respondents considered it challenging to teach literature because they needed to cover all of the literary components within a specific teaching time frame.

Teachers encounter challenges in completing cognitive tasks that require active participation from students when they remain passive recipients of input (Awang et al., 2010). Teachers who are less innovative and engaging may also render students passive and incapable of critical thought (Hwang & Embi, 2007). Furthermore, Adeyemi's (2012) research on the difficulty of teaching and studying English literature in an L2 setting indicated that instructors needed help with their students' writing. The research also claimed that reading is a crucial aspect that improves writing while growing literacy abilities. Students can only produce decent sentences or paragraphs if they read infrequently. According to Muhammad et al. (2016), many students need help to get a sufficient and reliable source of knowledge.

The reviewed literature points to a deeper problem in literature classrooms that requires further investigation, particularly in the L2 context. A little study has yet to be published on the lenses of L2 junior and senior high literature teachers in the Philippines. Likewise, it is also essential to consider micro-geographical areas, limiting generalizability, like in the provinces of the Philippines (Castillo, 2023; Castillo, 2024). Narrowing down the lenses into the challenges in teaching literature, particularly in the schools situated in the provinces, could enhance curriculum and instruction at the national level and, later on, in the context of other L2 countries where literature is also important.

Furthermore, as a support to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4, this research was aimed to help improve the quality of education by unveiling challenges of L2 teachers in public secondary schools in Southern Nueva Vizcaya. Although the study was conducted in three categorized as large schools in the Philippines, the findings and the implications could be of significance, particularly to other L2 countries teaching literature and English subjects in general.

2.0 Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research (Creswel, 2014). Qualitative research entails gathering and evaluating non-numerical data to comprehend concepts, views, or experiences. It has a variety of methods, but the focus is on keeping rich meaning when interpreting data (Bhandari, 2020). This design was vital in understanding the challenges teachers encountered in teaching literature among L2 learners.

The participants were the thirty (30) L2 public secondary school teachers of Southern Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. They were purposively taken as participants based on the inclusion criteria set: (1) L2 teacher in a public secondary school; (2) must be a permanent L2 teacher under the Department of Education (DepEd); (3) must be teaching literature during academic year 2021-2022; (4) must be teaching in a large school category under DepEd; and (5) must be willing to participate. The locale was chosen since few studies have been conducted considering rural areas, particularly provinces and towns away from the cities/capital.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants. Three research experts and three English major teachers validated the interview questions. The interview questions in the guide targeted the challenges the teachers encountered in their teaching of literature. In gathering pertinent data, the researcher sought permission to perform the study by filing a formal request letter to the Office of Schools Division Superintendent of Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. After the University and the SDO office had checked the ethical side of the methods and processes, the ethical clearance and the permit to conduct were released. The researcher personally conducted the semi-structured interview. The research's purpose, aims, and significance were explained to the participants before the interview proper. They were asked to sign the informed consent. Their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses were guaranteed. They were also encouraged to be truthful in their responses to ensure the study's results and conclusions were reliable and valid.

The data gathered were subjected to thematic data analysis using the framework of Braun and Clarke (2022). The responses about the challenges were initially coded; preliminary themes were made from the codes. After all the codes were themed, the themes were defined and refined to better operationally describe the challenges the participants faced based on the environment or context where the study was conducted. Focus Group Discussions were also conducted to crystallize the data gathered and ensure that the data interpretations were reliable. Peer member checking was done, and clinical investigators were involved in validating the coding and the theming process to establish the trustworthiness of the findings and interpretation.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The data show that the respondents faced numerous challenges in teaching literature. Generally, their responses were themed into low English language proficiency, negative attitude of students, short time frame, and lack of materials and resources.

Theme 1: Low English Language Proficiency

This theme appeared to be most frequent in the participants' answers since some students are believed to be not proficient yet in using and understanding the English language, making it a factor in the success of literature teaching-learning.

Participant 1: *"The level of English ability of the students is not high. Students are hesitant to speak or write in English."*

Participant 4: *"Focusing on the linguistic features of a text for me is challenging since students are not too capable yet in using the English language."*

Participant 16: *"As a Grade 7 teacher, I consider very challenging is to teach the students who lack vocabulary and English usage."*

Participant 26: *"Students with low English proficiency do not have the complex skills needed to read literary texts, and as a teacher, it is very challenging to teach these students."*

Participant 30: *"Some of the students choose not to participate if not given the chance to express themselves in their local dialects, and that's a challenge to me on how I will engage them."*

The participants' remarks suggest that low English language proficiency hinders quality literature teaching and learning. One specific challenge under this theme is the lack of vocabulary or complexity of the linguistic features.

The lack of vocabulary may imply difficulty understanding the words in the literary text. If the words or linguistic features are too complex for the students, teachers may find it difficult to teach the literary text, regardless of the genre. Moreover, because the students have a low proficiency in the English language, they become hesitant in speaking and writing. This may hinder them from participating in class discussions and in activities about the text read.

Another challenge is the production of language during activities or recitations. In literature teaching-learning, it is essential to process the guide questions to enhance the student's understanding of the text read. However, in the context of the participants, since in the earlier years of education (from K-3) in the Philippines, the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction, the students become more comfortable using their mother tongue or the local dialects. In addition, though English is used as L2, the language at home is Tagalog, and the parents use other dialects.

Language proficiency in L2 is a challenge since literature has one common carrier: language. Students need help understanding the language to ensure comprehension of the text. Hence, there is a need for L2 countries such as the Philippines to consider crafting long-term plans to transform education in terms of language development among students in their earlier stages of schooling. While using the mother tongue or dialect enhances understanding and delivery of lessons, it is essential to note that English is a universal language and must be developed, not just taught through practice and application, especially in formal education. The failure to develop students' ability to use the language may hinder the delivery of quality education (SDG 4), particularly the success of the literature teaching-learning process.

This discovery substantiated the assertions made by Ling and Eng (2016) that instructing students with low proficiency levels could prove challenging due to their inability to comprehend the terminology used in literary works. Students' inadequate English proficiency also impeded instructors' ability to engage in more excellent linguistic activity in the classroom. It was unthinkable for learners to read literary works for amusement due to their inability to comprehend the text. This discouraged learners from expressing their opinions and speaking up. Shoulder-challenged learners found certain textbooks' language challenging to comprehend, according to an additional finding by Mustakim et al. (2014) that corroborates the study's results.

Theme 2: Negative Attitude of Students

This theme refers to the students' perceptions toward a literary text, their interest in literature, and their teaching and learning of literature, which result in great challenges among L2 teachers. The students' behavior is a factor contributing to understanding the literary text taught by the participants.

Participant 2: *"Students are sometimes passive during the discussion. They show a little interest."*

Participant 3: *"Students are afraid to commit mistakes."*

Participant 6: *"What's challenging for me is how to sustain the love of students in reading and learning literature. They are not interested sometimes."*

Participant 8: *"The length is even more what they expected. This leads to loss of interest to continue learning,"*

Participant 10: *"They have low interest towards literature and that a challenge for me as a teacher."*

Participant 16: *"They don't listen sometimes because the literary text is not interesting to them. That makes it a challenge on my part as their literature teacher."*

Participant 19: *"Students also have anxiety in answering question in front of group because they don't want to be embarrassed, and they don't have guts to answer."*

Participant 26: *"They hate listening to literary texts especially those are longer that would really kill the time."*

Another theme uncovered is the students' negative attitude. This hampers interactive teaching and learning of literature, and students' ideas are not expressed. Since students are passive, it is also challenging for the participants to maintain their attention. Another specific challenge the participants faced was the students' low interest in reading and reading material. This was because the material being read to/by the learners was not their area of interest, and the vocabulary was not familiar to them. With the students' less motivation to read and learn literature, the participants faced difficulty in conducting the planned activities for the day, as reflected in their Daily Lesson Log (DDL).

In addition, the participants believed that the students' anxiety also made delivering literature instruction difficult. Effective instruction is achieved when teachers and students participate in the discussion and activities. The higher the students' anxiety in expressing their ideas, the greater the challenge for the participants to involve students in the teaching and learning process. The problem of students' attitudes may create a less welcoming environment for questions and concerns and can make students focus on rote learning and memorization of literature content rather than sense-making and critical thinking. Thus, teachers need to develop students' interest in studying literature and encourage students to participate in the teaching-learning process. This implies the need to provide hands-on and interactive activities, considering the aim of the Philippine K-12 curriculum towards constructive, interactive, student-centered, and Outcomes-Based Education.

According to Ling and Eng (2016), students would only acquire knowledge if they were interested in learning. Teachers encounter challenges in completing cognitive tasks that require active participation from students when they remain passive recipients of input (Awang et al., 2010). Teachers who are less innovative and engaging may also render students passive and incapable of critical thought (Hwang & Embi, 2007). Furthermore, it has been found through numerous studies that students hold an unfavorable view of the texts utilized in literature classes (Isa & Mahmud, 2012; Ghazali et al., 2009; Naser & Aziz, 2017). Students found reading texts to be an unpleasant experience, according to Ghazali et al. (2009), because the subjects and topics were tedious, and the plot needed to be more relatable to them. The students perceived the writings as monotonous, making the narrative and characters excessively intricate to grasp.

Theme 3: Short Time Frame

The participants also disclosed this category as one of the challenges, albeit less frequently. The specific challenges to this included time constraints, the number of competencies to cover, and activities like small group discussions and role-playing.

Participant 10: *"What's challenging in literature teaching is the time."*

Participant 12: *"It takes time to elicit information because they lack vocabulary to express their answers."*

Participant 17: *"Because we have a lot of competencies to cover, teaching literature and activities like small group discussions, role playing, etc. are really posing great difficulty."*

Participant 25: *"In the JHS, the time to finish a lit lesson is also a challenge. We have a lot of competencies to cover targeting the different areas of English."*

Participant 27: *"We have limited time to teach our students the text so the objective must be attained immediately. Asking them to perform tasks like drama and role plays take a lot of time and preparation."*

The participants also found time challenging since they had to complete all of the week's competencies as outlined in the DepEd's Curriculum Guide (CG). Some of the activities, such as writing and role plays, needed much time in terms of preparation and execution. As a result, teachers need to emphasize time management to finish all the activities in the literature lesson and cover all the competencies charted for each week. Henceforth, there is a need to consider studying the arrangement of competencies as plotted in the CG.

According to a study by Ling and Eng (2016), 37.5 percent of teacher-respondents perceived the requirement to cover all literary components within a teaching schedule as a challenging aspect of literature instruction. Teachers may find that employing inquiring and prompting strategies effectively elicits responses from students, particularly those who have difficulty expressing themselves in their second language (L2). Divsar (2014) corroborated this, noting that educators, due to time and effort constraints, were hesitant to implement language-based approaches when instructing literature.

Theme 4: Limited Resources

The students' responses disclosed this category. Based on the participants' responses, the specific challenges are a need for gadgets, slow internet connectivity, and a lack of books and reference materials.

Participant 3: *"Not all can attend lecture sessions because they lack gadgets."*

Participant 5: *"Some students don't have a strong internet access making it difficult for them to reach out their classmates."*

Participant 13: *"Limited access to technologies,"*

Participant 27: *"There is a limited number of books that we can use in class."*

Participant 29: *"Aside from the books given, it is hard to find other reference books available for free."*

While teachers are expected to integrate ICT into the classroom, the reality could be very different. There are students who cannot afford and have no access to the internet and technology, let alone unfinished activities and unattended class discussions. Without addressing this concern, there is a risk of creating a generation ill-prepared for digital use. Hence, there is a call to emphasize the need of students for technology and internet accessibility in order to participate well in the lectures and activities asked in literature class.

It was discovered by Sivapalan and Ahman (2010) and Yunus and Suliman (2014) that integrating technology into literary classes had positive effects. Given that students like using technology for learning, these two studies recommend that professors use it in literary classes. Thus, educators need to remain current on current trends and develop technology-infused instructional practices to engage and cater to the tech-savvy youth (Hussin, 2018).

Participants also needed help due to the absence of books and reference resources. Teachers find it challenging to provide learners with resources, especially when considering the materials' copyright issues when duplicated. Ugwu's (2022) findings about the scarcity of textbooks were consistent. Although DepEd receives the most significant funding from the Philippine government, a strategic plan is still required to develop books with high-quality and relevant information that students may learn.

4.0 Conclusion

This study adds new information to the literature teaching and learning process in the context of rural schools in the Philippines. This study presents the challenges in literature teaching among L2 secondary level teachers, including low language proficiency, negative attitude of students, short time frame, and lack of resources and materials. The findings imply the need to recognize quality education in rural areas and how it must be transformed. As an L2 country, there is still a need to give attention to how language education may be delivered to achieve maximum student potential in terms of language use. Improving students' language proficiency would entail improving reading, understanding, and macro-skills. In addition, the findings also imply the need for innovative, interactive, and engaging activities. This will allow maximum participation, which will result in authentic and meaningful learning.

Further, while there is a shortage of time in the delivery of literature instruction, other studies may be conducted, especially on the plotting and time allocation of competencies stated in the CG. Lastly, in the context of the Philippines, since the highest budgetary allocation is given to DepEd, the department may find solutions to maximize the production of learning resources and books for students to use. They may also propose projects or studies focusing on strategic intervention materials that would help researchers and teachers.

Future research may be able to overcome some of the limitations of this study's methodology. Given that English teachers comprise the largest percentage of literature teachers, the study's emphasis may have justified the decision to examine this group of teachers in large schools. However, it is recommended that future investigations consider integrating a larger stakeholder base to have a deeper understanding of literature teaching-learning in the Philippine setting. Lastly, additional researchers can think about carrying out the same study with an emphasis on contrasting the difficulties associated with teaching and learning literature in L1 and L2 nations and cities and provinces.

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The author conducted the research, analyzed the findings, and finalized the article.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

No potential conflict of interest

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