

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

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Abstract

For some EFL students, literature has been considered as a dull, irrelevant and unimportant subject; for others, it is held as a source of creativity. Recently, there has been strong demand to endorse and encourage literature teaching in the EFL classroom for its many benefits. The purpose of this paper is to shine the spotlight on the students' attitudes towards literature. It starts with the idea that many EFL learners—in this case, the Algerian students, at the University of Oran—hold mixed thoughts and feelings towards literature, and that most of these are negative. By making teachers aware of this fact they will strive to reverse those attitudes and turn them into positive ones, therefore restoring/recovering the place of literature in the language teaching classroom. Knowing the students' attitudes, which are part and parcel of their profiles, will help determine their Achilles' heel—their weakest spots that have made them change their attitudes. The paper starts by listing some of the well known benefits literature is to offer. It then provides the analysis and discussion of the data collected at the University of Oran 2: Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria, where the case study involves second year license students.

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

Introduction

By way of introduction, it is a fact that teaching literature, particularly, in the EFL context has its challenges. The latter arise because students are different—each with her/his own profile. Literature teachers usually make the mistake of choosing the content of the lesson without considering their students thoughts and wishes. By way of illustration, a teacher might assign her/his students to read a genre that students find too difficult, or simply that they don't like in the first place. Although there are loads of benefits in using literature, knowing not how to use it will make it hard, if not unpleasant, for the students. It becomes then crucial to start an analysis of their attitudes to understand how they think and feel with regard to literature. Just like the concept 'Needs Analysis' in ESP studies, the point is to understand students' needs and thoughts and feelings with regard to the subject matter. The following paper starts with a list of some of the benefits behind using literature in the EFL context. It follows with an investigation, carried out at the University of Oran, Algeria. The participants are twenty LMD second year students. They have been asked to answer and complete a questionnaire based on their attitudes, preferences and perceptions towards literature; the aim is to find possible solutions to cure the illness, which is, in this case, the

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

negative attitudes students have, and therefore changing the course of literature teaching.

1. The Benefits of Literature in the EFL Context:

1.1 Literature and Culture

By and large, literature is “*the capacity of groups to tell themselves and tell others about themselves*” (Lakhdar Barka, 2013, p. 1). Along these lines, it might be noticed that literature functions cross-culturally. Unlike those, including Lazar (1993), who perceive cross-cultural differences as obstacles that teachers should be aware of, others assert that literature is a window into culture. In fact, literature widens the students’ horizons and opens up their eyes to the happenings of a particular society. One of the advantages of using literature in the EFL context is then the transmission of culture¹ of the different people. A case in point, anyone who reads the Bronte’s—Emily and Charlotte Bronte—may learn about the social stratification of the nineteenth century. The one who reads Mark Twain’s works will definitely know about the regional dialect and the culture of nineteenth century America. (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009)

¹. Basically beliefs, ways of life and the artistic expressions a society has (Gonzalez & Borham, 2012, p. 105).

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students’
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

It is worth to state the fact that literature is one of the best ways to develop intercultural competence². Fernandez et al (2012, p. 219) wrote, “*Literature provides exposure to the culture of its speakers by examining universal human experience within the context of a particular setting and a consciousness of a particular people.*” Therefore, the literary texts may bring in loads of opportunities to enhance the critical reading skills that, in turn, promote an understanding of the culture (Fernandez et al, 2012).

1.2 Critical Thinking Skills in Literature

Critical thinking is defined as a clear and rational thinking about doing or believing in something. It is about undertaking reflective and independent thinking³ (Lau & Chan, 2018). Critical thinking is mistakenly considered as the process of accumulating information.

². “*The ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality*” (Byram et al, 2002, p. 10).

³. According to the philosopher and education reformer, John Dewey, “*Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence—a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors. The successive portion of the reflective thought grow out of one another and support one another; they do not come and go in a medley. Each phase is a step from something to something—technically speaking, it is a term of thought. Each term leaves a deposit which is utilized in the next term. The stream or flow becomes a train, chain, or thread*” (Dewey 1910, as cited in Maria Popova, 2014, para 2).

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

In fact, someone who thinks critically can infer/sieve out conclusions from facts that he knows, as well as using information to solve problems (Lau & Chan, 2018). Critical thinking is not about being argumentative and critical to other people (Joe Lau & Jonathan Chan, 2018). It is, however, a matter of examining, evaluating and rebuilding the quality of one's thinking (Popova, 2014). As far as literature is concerned, it is quite obvious that the latter is centered around themes which are timeless and universal, and since these themes evoke memories and elicit different opinions, they are thought of as the best way—and a short cut, so to speak—to promote critical reasoning skills. To put it simply, what makes these texts accessible to students for reflection is the fact that they are based on human experience (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009).

1.3 Rich Language Exposure

It is admittedly established that the fundamental distinction between the literary text and the non-literary one rests on the complex and idiosyncratic use of the language, and unless the literary devices⁴/tools, such as the metaphor, hyperbole, irony and so forth, are properly understood, the EFL students are unlikely to achieve full

⁴ They are the smallest units of meaning; also called as figures of speech. From a Discourse study perspective, they are called textual segments (Lakhder Barka, 2013, p. 1).

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

understanding and correct interpretation of the text (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). It is those elements of creativity that render the text more interesting and unique (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009). Hedgcock and Ferris (2009, p. 250) note that literature exposes the readers to the complexity and style of language. They reckon that literature yields a context in which the lexical items become easy to remember. They add that students become familiar with the syntactic structures and will be able to brunch out ideas when reading. Additionally, Elliot (1990) believes that the learner, when studying literature, he or she may run into words that help him or her express emotions. She also adds, "*Literature provides students with an incomparably rich source of authentic material over a wide range of registers*" (Elliot, 1990, p. 198). Literature is perceived to be an authentic material, because the language used in the real life context, such as timetables, newspapers, magazines and so forth, is usually found in the literary works, so if learners are exposed to such input, they will learn to cope with the language intended for the natives, such as colloquial language; eventually, they will get familiar with the linguistic forms and the communicative functions (Hismanoglu, 2003).

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

2. Methodology

The persons who are involved in this study are the second year LMD students, at the English Department, at the University of Oran. They are twenty students, seventeen female and three male aged between twenty and twenty-three years old. These students are to complete and answer the questionnaire based on their attitudes, preferences, and perceptions towards literature. In the process of collecting data, the researcher recognizes the importance and necessity of using one of the research instruments; in this case, the questionnaire. The latter is thought to be the right tool to obtain information concerning the students' attitudes towards literature.

2.1 Students' Questionnaire

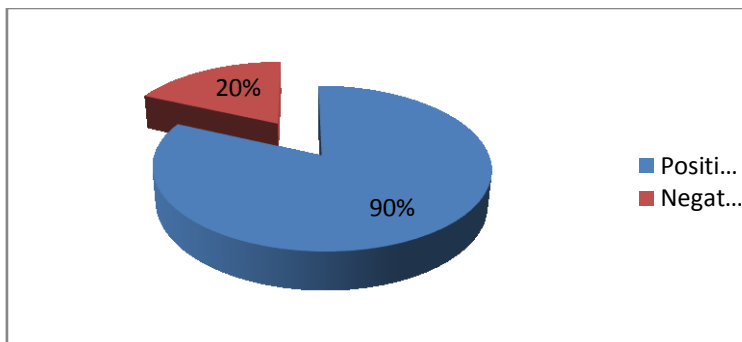
Item I: The Students' Attitudes towards Literature

Question1: Students' Attitudes towards the Act of Reading Literature

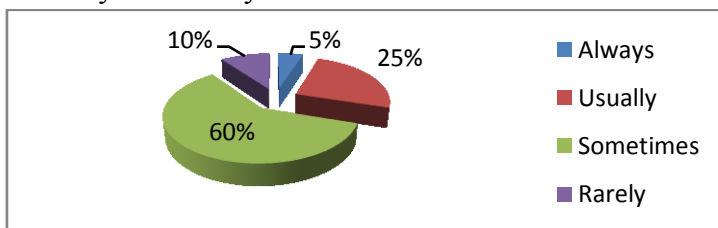
The very aim behind asking such question is to investigate the students' attitudes towards literature, particularly, the act of reading. Here, 90% of the students expressed their joy of reading literature, however, 20% of them revealed their lack of interest in reading literature.

Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature

Pie Chart 2.1: The Students' Attitudes towards the Act of Reading Literature



Question 2: The Frequency of Students' Literature Reading
The researcher asked this question to see how often students read literature. In this regard, only 5% claimed that they always read literature, i.e. they read on a daily basis. 25% of the students said that they usually read literature. A total of 60% stated that they read literature sometimes. 10% of the students, however, commented that they read rarely.

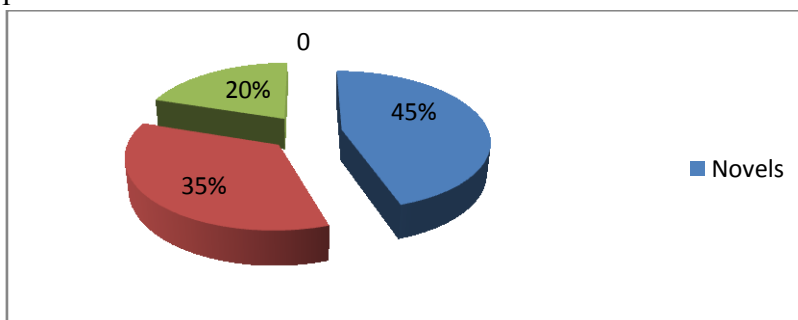


Pie Chart 2.2: The Frequency of Students' Literature Reading

Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature

Question 3: Students' Attitudes towards the Literary Genres

This question aims at revealing the students' attitudes towards the literary genres, in other words, students were asked to choose the genre which they prefer most. In this respect, 45% of students expressed their passion for Novels, and 35% of the former demonstrated that they like short-stories. Yet, only 20% of the students expressed their love for poems.



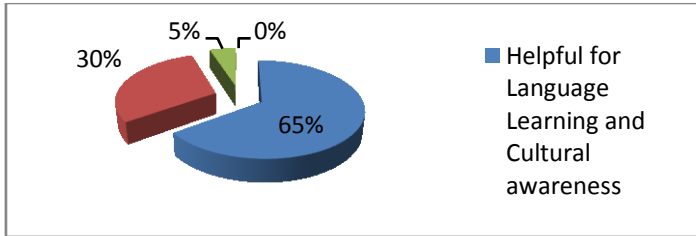
Pie Chart 2.3: Students' Attitudes towards the Literary Genres

Question 4: Students' Attitudes towards Learning Literature

The aim of this question is to know the students' motives behind learning literature. To put it differently, this question is to elicit from the students the attitudes they have towards the learning of literature. The findings show that a total of 65% of the students consider literature as helpful for language learning and cultural awareness. Another significant number of students representing 30% perceive literature as motivating and entertaining. Nevertheless, 5% of the students believe that

Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature

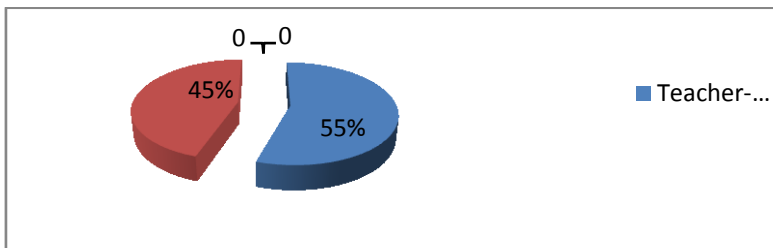
literature is difficult and useless, and nobody (0%) reports that literature is boring.



Pie Chart 2.4: Students' Attitudes towards Learning Literature
Item II: Attitudes towards Literature Teaching

Question 1: Students' View on the Way Literature is Taught

The researcher put forward this question in order to elicit from the students their view with regard to the way in which literature is taught; that is, students are to answer whether the way of teaching literature is student-centered or teacher-centered. A considerable number of students representing 55% agree upon the fact that literature courses are teacher-centered. However, the remaining students representing the total of 45% hold the view that literature courses are students-centered.

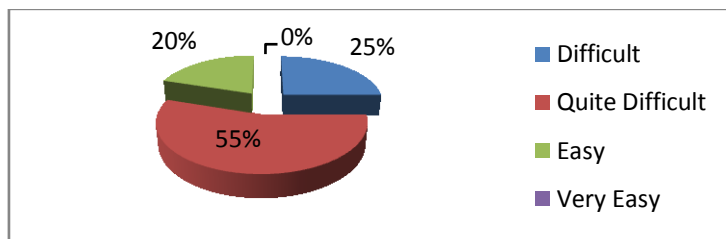


Pie Chart 2.5: Students' View on the Way Literature is Taught

Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature

Question 2: Students' Opinions Regarding the Text's Level of Difficulty

The rationale of this question is to collect opinions concerning the text's level of difficulty that students are dealing with. The findings are to show whether these texts fit the students' level or not. In this respect, a number of students representing 5% report that they are dealing with difficult texts. A considerable number of students representing 55%, as well, say that the texts are quite difficult for them. On the other hand, 20% of the students think that the texts are easy for them. No one (0%) claims that the texts are very easy.



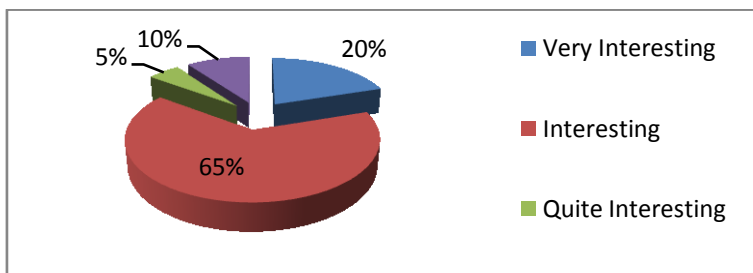
Pie Chart 2.6: Students' Opinions Regarding the Text's Level of Difficulty

Question 3: Students' Attitudes towards the Themes

This question is designed for investigating the students' attitudes towards the themes they are dealing with. Here, quite a few students representing 20% find the themes very interesting. A considerable number of students

Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature

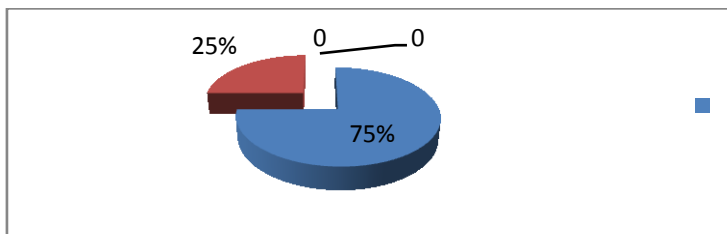
(65%) express a positive attitude stating that the themes are interesting. Only 5% of the students claim that the themes are quite interesting. And, 10% of the students comment that the themes are not interesting at all.



Pie Chart 2.7: Students' Attitudes towards the Themes

Question 4: Working in Groups

Here, the informants are asked whether they are allowed to work in groups or not. An overwhelming majority of students (75%) said that they are allowed to work in groups whereas 25% of the students stated that they are not allowed to be involved in groups.

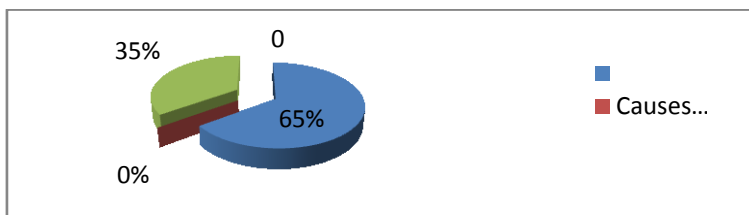


Pie Chart 2.8: Working in Groups

Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature

Question 5: Students' Attitudes towards Working in Groups

This question is addressed to students to investigate their attitudes towards working in groups. In this regard, a significant number of students representing 65% express a positive attitude saying that working in groups is useful and rewarding. No one (0%) report that working in groups causes confusion. Yet, 35% of students comment that working alone is better.



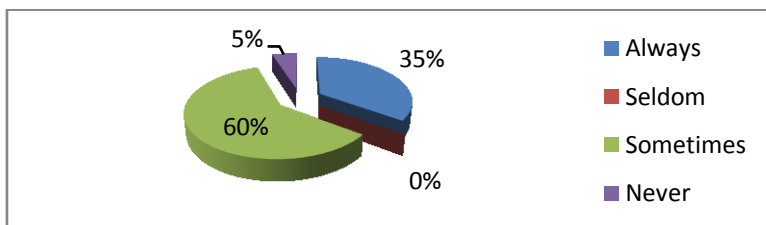
Pie Chart 2.9: Students' Attitudes towards Working in Groups

Question 6: Students' involvement in the text Interpretation

The very aim of this question is to know whether students are allowed to give their opinions and personal interpretations of the text. To put it simply, the results will show how often students are allowed to express their opinion about the text. In this respect, 35% of the students comment that they are always given the opportunity to express their opinions. However, nobody (0%) report that they are seldom given the chance to speak and opinion on. Another considerable number of

Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature

students representing 60% admit that they are sometimes allowed to express their opinions. But, only 5% of the students claim that they are never given the right to give their personal interpretation.



Pie Chart 2.10: Students' Involvement in the Text Interpretation

Item III: Suggestions

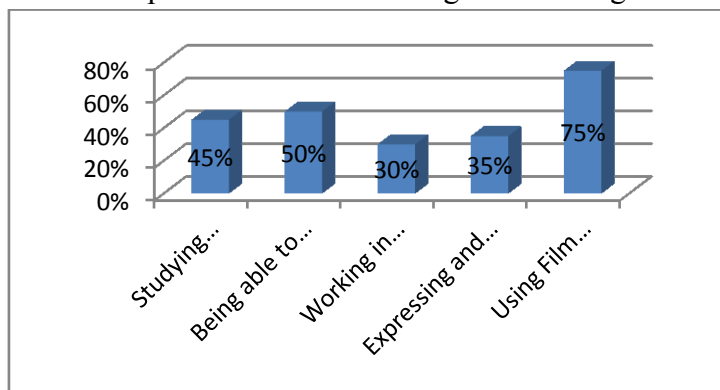
Question: Students' Suggestions for Improving Literature Teaching and Learning

Unlike the previous questions, this one has been designed on the basis that students may select up to three options, which ought to be taken into consideration for improving both literature teaching and learning. In fact, the researcher has provided five suggestions for the students. The latter are to select up to three options. This means that not all the students will opt for the same selections, because, in the first place, there are twenty students, and each one will, undoubtedly, choose different suggestions from those of the others. That is why, the researcher felt

Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature

necessary to present the information by means of a bar chart.

To begin with, a number of students representing 45% opt to suggest studying literature in classroom rather than amphitheatre. Another considerable number of students (50%) choose a different option, which is being able to select the text. Only 30% of the students recommend working in groups. Additionally, 35% of the students suggest expressing and sharing opinion on the text. And finally, an overwhelming majority of students (75%) recommend using film adaptation of the literary work in order to improve literature teaching and learning.



Bar Chart 3.1: Students' suggestions for improving Literature Teaching and Learning

2.2 Discussion of the Questionnaire Results

First of all, this study is based on the fact that students hold mixed attitudes towards literature, i.e. negative and

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

positive attitudes. In order to prove this, the findings, specifically, the students' answers to questions one and two prove that students have different attitudes towards literature. In fact, the students' responses to questions one and two revealed that a large number of students hold positive attitudes toward literature, rather, the reading of literature. However, others still hold negative attitudes. Surprisingly, the students' answers to the second question of the first item contradict with their answers of the first question. That is to say, in their answer to the first question, they demonstrate positive attitudes by claiming that they enjoy reading literature. Yet, their answers to the second question show that most of them don't read regularly. Probably, the reason behind such lack of interest in reading literature could be related to the fact that students don't know how to read--i.e. they don't know the reading strategies--or can't find the texts that suit their tastes and needs. Additionally, their answers to the question two of the second item show that students are dealing with difficult texts. Therefore, such texts run contrary to their needs, tastes, and expectations. In their answers to question three, still in the first item of the questionnaire, students have demonstrated that they like novels and short-stories more than the poems. This is due to the fact that poems arise as a difficult genre whereby language can't be easily dealt with and the interpretation becomes really hard for the EFL learners.

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

Furthermore, students have already showed different attitudes towards literature, particularly, the learning of literature. The majority find literature helpful for language learning and cultural awareness. Others perceive literature as motivating and entertaining. However, quite a few students think that literature is difficult and useless. Understandably, those students, surely, prefer to be engaged in courses like civilization or linguistics rather than literature. As far as the second item of the questionnaire is concerned, the latter is related to the way literature is taught. The findings show that many students have agreed upon the fact that literature teaching is teacher-centered. One way of proving this, is the students' responses to the sixth question of the second item. Here, students said that they are sometimes allowed to express their opinion on the text. This means that the teacher's only activity is lecturing; the teacher, then, does not give any spare moment or opportunity for the students to opinion on or express themselves. Moreover, the students' answers to the second question of the second item prove that the teacher is in control of the process of selecting text, i.e. the teacher is the one who selects the text to be studied, which is undoubtedly another form of teacher-centered policy. Still, according to these second year students, the text's level of difficulty that they are dealing with ranges from quite difficult to

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

difficult. Therefore, students should have the ball in their court; to feel free to select the text they like most.

On the credit side, students find the themes that they are dealing with interesting. Some go further to say that these themes are very interesting. Such positive attitude is explained by their responses to the third question of the second item. Nonetheless, few individuals find that the themes are not interesting at all. This could explain why such students hold negative attitudes towards literature. So unless these students find the themes they are looking for, they will not be satisfied with regard to literature.

When it comes to learning collaboratively, the majority of students said that they are allowed to work in groups. Further, students have responded to the fifth question with a positive attitude. Many of them, actually, believe that working in groups is useful and rewarding. Notwithstanding, few others prefer to work individually. This, also, implies the fact that such category of students doesn't want to be obliged to work in groups.

In the third item of the questionnaire, the researcher found it necessary to provide five suggestions or recommendations in order to come up with the idea of what works best in the EFL context. The majority of the students specify that they like using the film adaptation of the literary work, probably, because they find the act of watching a movie easier and less tiring than the act of reading. In addition, other students make clear that they

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

want to select the text by themselves, i.e. without the teacher's help. Moreover, a considerable number of students who answered the questionnaire point out that they prefer to study in classroom rather than the amphitheatre; probably, the reason is that the teacher does not give his full attention to the students when they are in the amphitheatre, since there are a lot of them. Students justified that when they are in the classroom, they become noticeable, and therefore, attention would be easily drawn to them.

Similarly, some of the second year LMD students want to be allowed to express their opinions on the text—to give their personal interpretation. Such need, which is expressed on their parts, could be explained by the fact that students are not given much attention, or the teacher does not consider their opinion; as a result, they become hesitant and quite afraid that they might say something wrong. Since the researcher had the students choose up to three selections in the final question of the last item. It should be mentioned, then, that at the top of the pile, students put using the film adaptation of the literary work, then, being able to select the text that they want, and finally, studying in classroom rather than the amphitheatre.

**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

Conclusion

Introducing literature to the EFL context is worth an endeavor. Despite the challenging facets of teaching that literature has, it still remains a useful and authentic material that an English teacher should never overlook. As a matter of fact, there are loads of benefits behind introducing literature to the EFL context—from the sophisticated and rich language one is to encounter, to honing the ability to think critically/creatively, to opening up and learning about the culture of the other. Although many students still do not recognize the value of literature, it is possible to change their beliefs and thoughts by raising awareness of the great deal of learning literature offers. Finally, conducting an investigation into the EFL students' attitudes towards literature paves the way for positive changes in the literature course, which can only be possible by introducing some new ways and/or strategies of teaching literature.

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**Teaching Literature in the Context of Algeria: EFL Students'
Attitudes and Perceptions towards Literature**

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