

# **STUDENTS' PREFERENCE FOR LITERARY TEXTS AND LITERATURE LEARNING IN THE MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Since 2015, the English syllabus has been aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference in the Malaysian curriculum with new textbooks utilised in the classroom, more emphasis is given to the new textbooks instead of the current literary textbooks. Besides, the literature component is no longer tested in the public examination as the new format of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination does not test it anymore. The aim of this study is to find out the students' preferences towards the literary texts they studied and their perceptions of learning literature during secondary school. The methodology of this study was a survey design that involved a purposive sampling of 80 students from an institute of teacher education in Malaysia. This study collected quantitative data through a survey questionnaire which was analysed in descriptive statistics. The findings show that the students had positive perceptions towards the literary texts and literature lessons in secondary school. They showed a preference towards texts that are interesting, easy to understand language and bring relevance to their life. The implications are on text selection in Malaysian secondary schools by curriculum planners to sustain students' interest in reading.*

*Keywords: Perceptions, literature, literary texts, secondary school*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language in schools. Since 2000, literature was introduced into the English Language syllabus in schools with the aim to improve the students' proficiency. The teaching and learning of literature had been given more focus and attention as it was made compulsory and formally tested in the public examination of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). The literary textbooks were prescribed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the students had to study various genres such as poems, short stories, graphic novels and novels. However, the pressure of examination loomed over students and teachers that affected the teaching and learning literature turned out to be exam-oriented and resulted in a washback effect (Nair, et. al., 2012).

Since 2015, the English syllabus has been aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in the Malaysian curriculum with new textbooks utilised in the classroom, more emphasis was given to the new CEFR textbooks instead of the current literary textbooks. Besides, the new SPM examination in 2021 does not test the literature component anymore. Literature has become less important and this might be neglected in teaching and learning. The aim of this study is to find out the students' preferences towards the literary texts they studied and their perceptions of learning literature during secondary school.

## 2.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions for this study are:

- i. What are the students' preferred literary texts for learning literature in secondary school?
- ii. What are the students' perceptions towards the literature texts during secondary school?
- iii. What are the students' perceptions towards literature learning during secondary school?

## 3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

As a result of globalisation and rapid advances in information and communication technology (ICT), there has been a change in priorities towards English. Although English remains as the second language in Malaysia, it is becoming more significant as it is the language used internationally. Since the introduction of literature in the English syllabus, it is believed that promoting the interest in learning English Language through the teaching of literature is considered to improve the proficiency of the students in the target language.

Rosli and Jayakaran (1994) suggest the use of three models in teaching literature. The cultural model exposes the students to understand different cultures and ideologies in relation to their own. Students can witness life through the eyes of different characters in a way that gives insight into the people and events that shaped the culture. The language model provides students with a better understanding of the universal nature of language. Students learn examples of similes, metaphors, symbols, and figurative language that make them think about similar constructions in their native language that helps them understand their own language better. The personal growth model encourages the students to express their opinions, and feelings by connecting the culture and language to their personal growth in a meaningful way.

Daskalovska and Dimova (2012) suggest that reading authentic literary texts outside the classroom is highly desirable for foreign language learners because it increases the exposure to the target language, reveals unusual and unexpected uses of the language, stimulates language acquisition and provides a motivating and enjoyable way of learning the language. In a second language context reading authentic texts is one of the best options for language improvement. Therefore, offering learners opportunities to develop the necessary reading skills will equip them for autonomous learning, offer a real context, transmit the target language culture and prepare students to read outside the classroom.

Under the new English syllabus that is aligned with the CEFR, the Literature in Action (LiA) aspect mainly focuses on the literature component of the Standards-Based Curriculum for Secondary Schools (SBELC/ KSSM). The purpose of LiA is to inculcate reading habits and enhance thinking skills among the students. It also provides students opportunities to explore their creativity and potential thus allowing them to participate actively and express themselves without much reservation (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2020).

LiA involves the use of literary texts of different genres namely: poetry, short stories, graphics novels, and novels. Since the introduction of the literature component, MOE prescribed the literary texts for each level (Form 1 to Form 5) in the secondary school. The current literary texts are the third cycle of literature component since 2015. The texts for

graphic novels and novels are divided according to the three zones of states in the country. Table 1 shows the literary texts that the students are currently studying in the secondary school.

**Table 1.** The literary texts prescribed for Form 1 to Form 5 in the secondary school since 2015

Form	Genre	Text
One	Poems	“Sad I Ams” by Trevor Millum “News Break” by Max Fatchen
	Short Story	“Fairs’ Fair” by Narinder Dhami
	Graphic	“King Arthur” retold by Janet Hardy-Gould (Zone 1)
	Novels	“20,000 Leagues Under the Sea” by Jules Verne (Zone 2) “The Swiss Family Robinson” by Johann David Wyss (Zone 3)
Two	Poems	“What is Red” by Mary O’Neil “My Hero” by Wilson Hall
	Short Story	“Cheat!” by Allan Baillie
Three	Poems	“Poisoned Talk” by Raymond Wilson “The Day the Bulldozers Came” by David Orme
	Novels	“Moby Dick” by Herman Melville (Zone 1) “We Didn't Mean to go to Sea” by Arthur Ransome (Zone 2) “The Elephant Man” by Tim Vicary (Zone 3)
Four	Poems	“A Living Paragraph” by Jackie Kay “The Charge of Light Brigade” by Tennyson
	Short Stories	“Tanjung Rhu” by Minfong Ho “Leaving” by M G Vassanj
Five	Poems	“A Poison Tree” by William Blake “What Has Happened to Lulu?” by Charles Causley
	Novels	“Captain Nobody” by Dean Pitchford (Zone 1) “Dear Mr. Kilmer” by Anne Schraff (Zone 2) “Sing to the Dawn” by Minfong Ho (Zone 3)

(Zone 1: Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, Sabah, Sarawak, W.P. Labuan

Zone 2: Kelantan, Kedah, Perlis, Perak, Pulau Pinang

Zone 3: Selangor, W.P. Kuala Lumpur, W.P. Putrajaya, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka)

Table 1 shows that all the literary texts are not written by local writers, the students are exposed to foreign cultures when reading those texts. Reading foreign texts might pose a challenge to the students as the writer is from a different background, students need to be aware of the cultural norms in the author’s world to be able to identify language deviance and its significance (Robert, 1995). This would lead to misinterpretation whereby students tend to interpret the meaning based on their own culture, which might result in inappropriate cultural representation (Ganakumaran, 2003).

Besides the influence of different cultures, the students' interest in reading literary texts should be taken into consideration. Studies conducted on the first cycle of literary texts revealed that the students showed little interest towards reading the prescribed texts (Subramanian & Vethamani, 2004). Then, the literary texts in the second cycle also did not match students' interests, reading competence and were not culturally compatible (Sidhu, 2003). Thus, it is the purpose of this study to find out the students' preference of literary texts in the third cycle of literature component.

Learning literature in English is not easy (Chacko, 2007). This means that having to learn literature in English may seem to be difficult as it deals with the language and also the content of the lesson. Learning literature may serve as a challenge to the students especially if the student lacks in terms of language repertoire. Teachers should create fun and interesting literature learning (Yunus & Suliman, 2014) in the classroom. However, most teachers in Malaysia in particular, lack ideas on making literature lessons meaningful. As some English teachers are not trained to teach literature, they find difficulties in applying the best approach and method to teach the lesson. A study conducted by Aziz and Nasharudin (2010) revealed that teachers do not know the best approach to teach literature in order for students to gain both language and appreciation of the literature itself. Thus, it is important for teachers to know students' perceptions towards literature learning.

Perception is one of the important psychological aspects because we know about the kinds of phenomena which exist in our environment (Rizky, 2015). Different people have different perceptions and they could be positive or negative. Students' perceptions are their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings towards a person, situation, an event. According to Rizky (2015), students' perception is the process of their preferential treatment toward information they received from an object, in this study are the literary texts and literature learning. It is interesting to note that Othman et al. (2015) found that the majority of students had positive perceptions towards literary text, literature lesson and ESL teachers despite some challenges that they faced when learning literature. Thus, this study aims to find out the students' perceptions of learning literature in the classroom.

## **4.0 METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a survey. According to Issac and Michael (1997), survey research is used "to answer questions that have been raised, to solve problems that have been posed or observed, to assess needs and set goals, to determine whether or not specific objectives have been met, to establish baselines against future comparisons can be made, to analyse trends across time, and generally, to describe what exists, what amount, and in what context" (p. 136).

### **4.1 INSTRUMENTATION**

The instrument utilised for this study was a survey questionnaire that was divided into four sections:

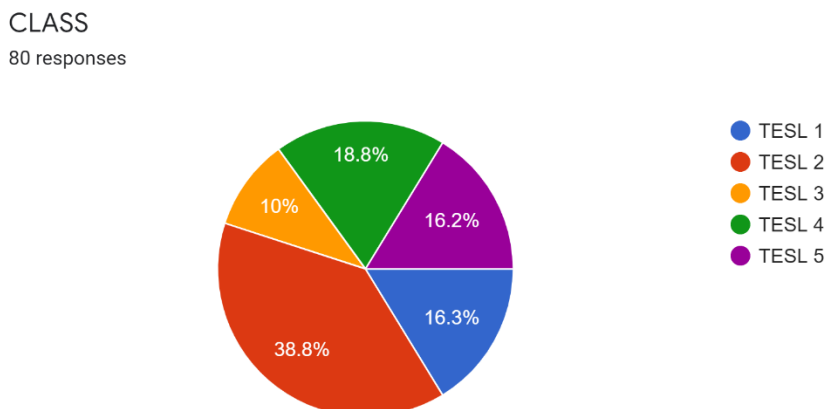
1. Class information
2. Students' preferred literary texts for the secondary school
3. Students' perceptions of learning literature during the secondary school
4. Students' recommendation for future literary text in the secondary school

Section 1 contained only one item in the students' class from TESL 1 to TESL 5. Section 2 contained the list of literary texts and students were required to select their most preferred texts and give reasons for their choice. Section 3 contained the items related to the students' experience in learning literature during secondary school and they were required to express their views using a five-point Likert scale. This section is adapted from the questionnaire by Othman et al. (2015). Section 4 consisted of an open-ended question that required students to give their recommendations for literary texts. The questionnaire was formulated in a Google Form, the link was distributed to the students and they were requested to answer the online questionnaire.

## 4.2 SAMPLE

The study involved a purposive sampling of a group of 114 students who took the course "Literary Studies in English" (TSLB1124) in an institute of teacher education in Malaysia. They just graduated from the secondary school and enrolled in a Bachelor's Degree of Education (PPISMP) Preparation Programme in the option of Teaching English as a Secondary Language (TESL). The students were placed in five different classes during the one-year preparation programme.

Before the course began, the researchers distributed the Google Form link to find out their preference for literary texts and perceptions of learning literature in secondary school. There were 80 students who answered the questionnaire. The response rate was 70.2% and it was considered a rather high response rate. Figure 1 shows the percentage of the PPISMP students who answered the online survey. It shows that the majority of the respondents was from TESL 2 which was 38.8%, followed by TESL 4 (18.8%), TESL 1 (16.3%), TESL 5 (16.2%) while the least was from TESL 3 (10%).



**Figure 1.** Respondents from each class

## 4.3. DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

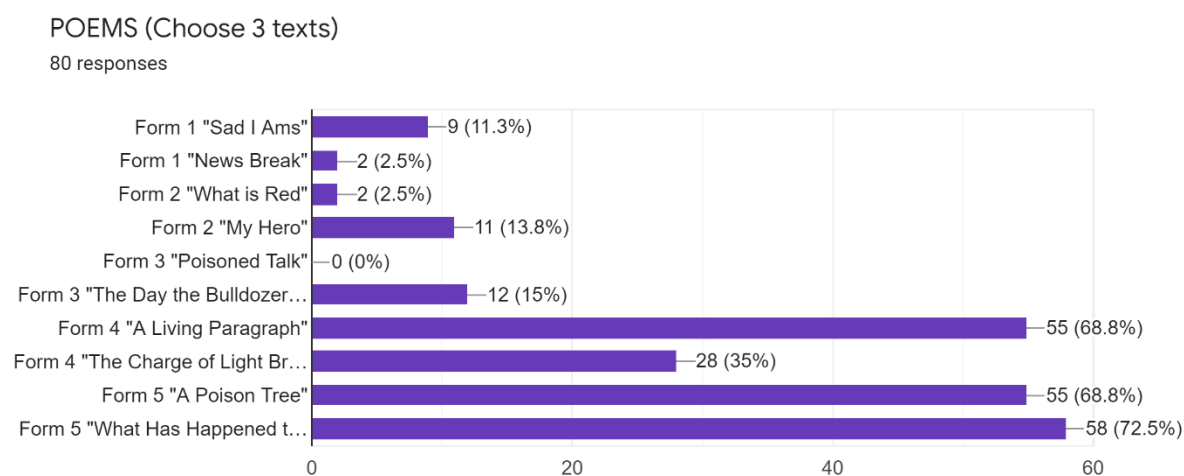
After the researchers received the online responses through Google Form, the results of the questionnaires were downloaded as Excel spreadsheets. The data collected were analysed based on the frequency, percentages and means of the items.

## 5.0 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results and findings of this study are divided into three parts as follows:

### 5.1. Students' preferred literary texts for the secondary school

There are four genres for the literary texts in secondary school, namely: poems, graphic novels, short stories and novels. Figure 2 shows the students' preference in literary texts for poems. 72.5% chose 'What has happened to Lulu?' whereas 55.8% of the respondents chose 'A Poison Tree' and 'A living Paragraph'. 35% of the respondents chose 'The Charge of Light Brigade'. About 12 respondents (15%) liked 'The day the Bulldozer'. 13.8% of the respondents chose 'My Hero'. Only 9 (11.35) students liked 'Sad I Ams' whereas only 2 respondents chose 'News Break' and 'What is Red'. Apparently, no respondents like 'Poisoned Talk'.



**Figure 2.** Students' preferred poems

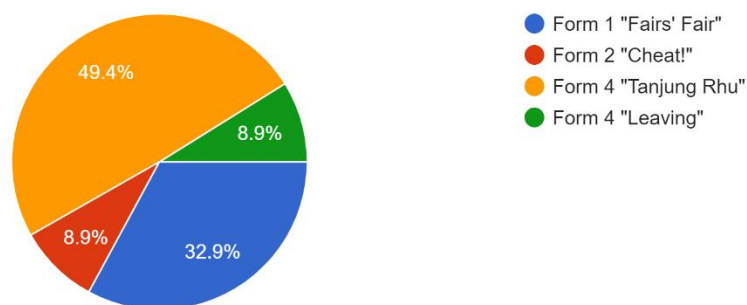
These are some of the reasons given by the students regarding the selection of the poems.

- All of the poems are very emotional and I really like them.
- Those are more understandable than other poems.
- The poems are closely related to life experience and can be seen in the present.
- I chose "My Hero" because it tells us about dad and it is kind of funny. "Living Photograph" tells us about the relationship between a grandchild and her nanny. I also chose "What has happened to Lulu" because the poem tells us about the life and freedom of a little girl.
- The poems are easy to understand.

Figure 3 shows the students' preference in literary texts for short stories, 49.4% respondents preferred 'Tanjung Rhu' as their choice, 32.9% preferred 'Leaving', only 8.9% respondents preferred 'Fair's Fair' and 8.9% chose 'Cheat' as their choice.

### SHORT STORIES (Choose 1 text)

79 responses



**Figure 3.** Students' preferred short stories

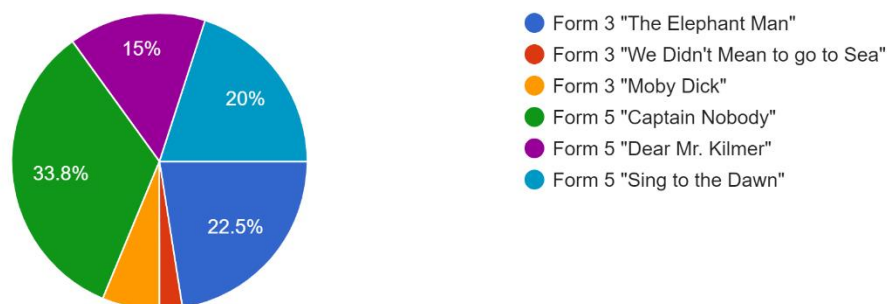
These are some of the reasons from the students regarding the selection of the short stories.

- Sad but meaningful.
- The story is related to the students these days.
- The storyline is so entertaining to learn.
- "Tanjung Rhu" is very interesting as it is a story that makes me realise that the most important thing in our life is not money but our family, especially our parents.
- The short stories are like a comic. So, it's really interesting for me to read it.
- Interesting plot.
- The storyline of the short story is simple.
- It was heart-warming.

Figure 4 shows the students' preference in literary texts for novels, the majority chose 'Captain Nobody' which is about 33.8%. whereas about 22.5% chose 'The Elephant Man' as their choice. About 20% chose 'Sing to the Dawn' novel as their choice too and only 15% of the respondents chose 'Dear Mr. Kilmer'. Apparently, no one chose 'We Didn't Mean to go to Sea' and 'Moby Dick' novels as their choice.

### NOVELS (Choose 1 text)

80 responses



#### Figure 4. Students' preferred novels

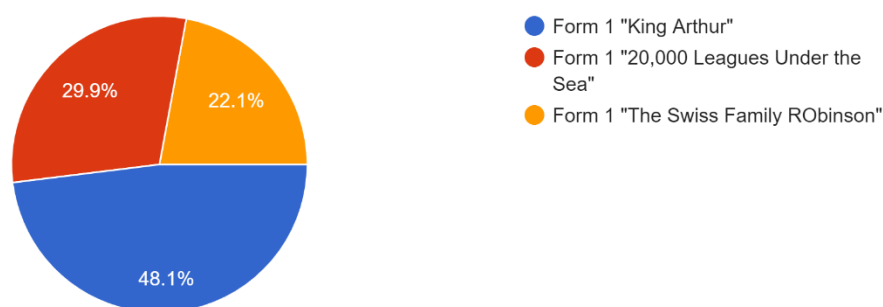
These are some of the comments from the students regarding the selection of the short stories.

- I like the usage of words and vocabulary in it.
- It encourages writing poems.
- Interesting.
- There are many lessons that I learnt from that novel.
- Amazing plot and very interesting.
- I studied the novel the most when I was in high school.
- Because it is about a girl's perseverance to continue her studies despite opposition from her father

Figure 5 shows the students' preference in literary texts for graphic novels, the majority of the respondents chose 'King Arthur', 48.1% whereas 29.9% opted for '20,000 Leagues Under the Sea' and 22.1% preferred 'The Swiss Family Robinson' as their choice.

GRAPHIC NOVELS (Choose 1 text)

77 responses



#### Figure 5. Students' preferred graphic novels

These are some of the comments from the students regarding the selection of the graphic novels.

- It is very interesting.
- I love the family theme.
- It stimulates the students' imagination.
- Interesting.
- I enjoy learning "The Swiss Family Robinson" as the graphic of the novel is eye-catching and the novel is not that boring.
- I really love it as it was my first ever approach to literature.
- The storyline of the graphic novel is very interesting.

### 5.2. Students' perceptions of learning literature during the secondary school

Table 2 shows students’ perceptions of learning literature during secondary school, the students generally agree with the statements, and the mean is ranging from 3.8 – 4.3.

**Table 2.** Students’ perceptions of learning literature during the secondary school

No.	Questions	Mean
<b><u>A. Students’ perceptions on literary texts</u></b>		
1	I like the texts chosen for the literature component.	4.16
2	I like reading the texts for the literature component.	4.14
3	I am able to understand the language used in the literary texts.	3.88
4	I like literature that emphasises and instils me with good moral values.	4.29
5	I have improved my English language skills by learning the chosen literature text.	4.11
<b>OVERALL MEAN</b>		<b>4.12</b>
<b><u>B. Students’ perceptions on literature learning</u></b>		
6	Literature learning is enjoyable in the classroom.	4.19
7	Literature learning helps me to develop my English language skills	4.15
8	Literature learning motivates me to read and inculcate reading habits.	4.05
9	I participate actively during literature learning.	3.90
10	Literature learning provides me knowledge and skills to answer the literature section in my SPM examination.	4.26
11	Literature learning exposes me to good sentence structures and mechanics of writing that can help me to improve my writing skill.	4.10
<b>OVERALL MEAN</b>		<b>4.11</b>

Table 2 shows the overall mean of students’ perceptions on literary texts was 4.12 while the students’ perceptions on literature lessons was 4.11. This indicates that they had positive perceptions on learning literature during secondary school.

### 5.3. Students’ recommendation for future literary text in the secondary school

Below were the recommendations provided by the students for choosing the next cycle of literary text to be studied in secondary school.

- Novel.
- Interesting and easy for students to understand.
- Exposure to the real world.
- “The Charge of the Light Brigade”, poem by Alfred Tennyson.
- The one that is fun and easy to learn and understand.
- Something fictional or fantasy. This kind of story can attract students’ interest.
- Short stories

Overall, the students had positive perceptions towards the learning of literature. This is supported by Othman et al. (2015) that the majority of students had positive perceptions towards literary text and literature lessons. Though the texts are written by foreign writers, they still found them interesting, (as shown in the comments on the poem “My Hero” and the short

story “Tanjung Rhu”); relevant to their life (as shown in the comments on the poems “Living Photograph” and “What has happened to Lulu”) and with interesting illustration (as seen in the graphic novel “The Swiss Family Robinson”). Based on the reasons provided by the students, they preferred texts that are interesting, relate to their life and use language that is easy to understand. As for the recommendations, they also gave the same reasons for the selection of next cycle of literary texts. They would like to continue studying the genres of novel, poem and short stories which are the genres they are currently studying.

## 6.0 DISCUSSION

Literature could foster reading habits among the students. The students agreed that literature learning motivated them to read and inculcate reading habits (Mean = 4.05). When students identify with the characters in the story, it facilitates feelings of appreciation towards literature and this helps them build a love of reading (Sivapalan et al., 2017). The students also agreed that literature could improve their English language skills by learning the chosen literature text (Mean = 4.11). This was supported by Nair et al. (2012) and Yee et al. (2017) found that when the students were exposed to the targeted language in an authentic environment, they learnt English gradually and this could improve their English.

Literature is not only learnt for its culture and language, it could also help students to increase their academic performance. Most students agreed that literature lesson provides them knowledge and skills to answer the literature section in the SPM examination (Mean = 4.26). However, in the new English syllabus, the literature component is no longer tested in the public examination. This might cause its loss of importance in the English lesson. Teachers and students might have different attitudes towards the teaching and learning of literature. Teachers might focus on teaching the four language skills to improve the students’ CEFR level in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Meanwhile, students might be reluctant to read the literary texts as the shift of focus is now on the language skills, not on the literature component.

Educational standards and their accompanying tests certainly encourage students to access, analyse, and evaluate literature (Shelton & Brooks, 2019). Simultaneously, the English syllabus outlined for secondary school literature component is to improve students’ English proficiency through reading poems, stories, and novels. However, the standard document in the curriculum does not suggest that students should read an entire book. The result is what Greene (2018) referred to as a “fracturing of literature” (p. 2). Sacks (2019) emphasised that standardised testing has fostered a “movement pushing for reading shorter texts, including articles, poems, and excerpts of novels, thus minimising the use of whole books” (p. 4). Santoro (2018) laments that teachers were demoralised in teaching literature in a creative way, as it would be in direct conflict with administrators’ expectations and government requirements. Therefore, teachers need to embrace the new English syllabus with an open heart. Though the literature component is not tested any more, this provides opportunities for teachers to be creative and to inspire students, thus enabling students to enjoy learning literature in a fun and meaningful way.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

The findings show that the students had positive perceptions towards the literature learning and they preferred studying texts that are interesting, use easy-to-understand language and show relevance to their life. The findings have significant implications to text selection in Malaysian secondary schools by curriculum planners to sustain students’ interest in reading.

The limitation of this study is that it utilises only an instrument of the survey questionnaire. It is suggested to include qualitative instruments such as interviews or reflective journals to obtain more in-depth views and opinions from the students. It is also recommended for future research to conduct experimental or quasi-experimental research to find out the students' understanding of the literary texts through various strategies in the teaching and learning of literature.

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