

Teaching Literature to Young Children: Examining Teachers' View and Challenges

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i10/26765>

Published Date: 26 October 2025

Abstract

This paper examined English language teachers' perceptions and challenges in teaching literature within Malaysian primary schools. It sought to determine teachers' views on literature teaching, the challenges they face, and if there is any relationships between these and teachers' background variables. A quantitative design was employed using a structured questionnaire distributed to English teachers across several schools in one district in Malaysia. Descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted to examine teachers' attitudes, perceived challenges, and demographic influences. Findings indicated that most teachers held moderately positive attitudes toward teaching literature. However, they also reported constraints such as students' low proficiency level and limited time. No significant association was found between teachers' background variables and their attitudes in teaching literature. The study highlights the need for continuous professional development and stronger institutional support to promote effective integration of literature within Malaysia's evolving language curriculum.

Keywords: Teaching Literature, Views, Challenges, Young Students, Malaysia

Introduction

Literature has been reintegrated into the Malaysian education framework since 2000, with the main aim of enhancing language proficiency and developing skills for a future workforce set to achieve one of the country's main goals, that is to be a developed nation. Literature is recognized as being able to help develop holistic, well-rounded learners in academic, social and emotional domains, which is the key pillar of education in Malaysia. The initiative of reintroducing literature into the Malaysian curriculum started in secondary schools where literary texts were seen as an aid to language learning as well as critical thinking and was included as a component of the English subject. Its implementation was viewed as successful, which later led the Ministry of Education to extend the initiative to primary schools.

Children's Contemporary Literature was established in 2004 for students in Year 4 to Year 6. Among its goals was the development of a life-long habit of reading, comprehension skills, vocabulary expansion, cultural awareness, and general language skills development

(Mohamed & Rosli, 2007). Through this component, students were introduced to local poems, short stories, rhymes, and folk tales which were chosen by the Ministry of Education. In 2011, KSSR (Primary School Standard-based Curriculum) was implemented where literature was included as part of the subject, instead of a separate component. Students at lower primary (Year 1–3) read rhymes, songs, simple stories while those at upper primary (Year 4–6) were exposed to fables, folktales, simple novels or known “class readers.” It focused less on examination and more on providing exposure to English and instilling the pleasure of reading and incorporating moral values and encouraging imagination (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2011).

In 2017, KSSR syllabus was revised to enhance HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills), creativity, and 21st-century learning. As a result, teaching literature was viewed as a way to encourage critical thinking, drama, role play and creative responses. Although students were still not assessed, more structured learning outcomes were set and students read longer texts such as novels and storybooks at upper primary. From 2018 onwards until today, the English subject was aligned to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) and literature was adapted to A1 and A2 accordingly. Besides local literary texts, imported CEFR-aligned “class readers” (e.g., storybooks graded by CEFR level) were also introduced (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). The current CEFR aligned literature focuses on communicative competence and not just rote learning. Lessons are conducted to include activities like storytelling, drama, group discussions, creative writing. The latest change also aims to promote global exposure and intercultural understanding (Ilhavenil et al,2021)

The main motivation for the study was to understand how ongoing syllabus reforms, particularly the CEFR-aligned English curriculum and its shifting role for literature shape teachers’ views, readiness, and classroom practices, and how these changes affect literature instruction for young learners. It highlights the need to examine not only perceived benefits of integrating literature into the language curriculum but also the practical challenges teachers face amid frequent policy shifts, time constraints, and variable training. As there are limited studies on teaching literature to young children, especially in the Malaysian context, results from this study can help inform teachers and curriculum developers on ways to improve the current situation. Therefore, with relevance to the purpose of this research, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- a) what are teachers’ views on teaching literature?
- b) what are the challenges faced by teachers in teaching literature?
- c) are these perceptions and challenges related to the teachers’ background variables?

Teachers’ Perceptions on Teaching Literature

Perceptions towards teaching literature in Malaysian primary schools have generated much discussion, especially with the latest change to align the curriculum to CEFR, which integrates literature as a part of the English subject. Critics urged caution and research before proceeding. Educational professionals support this view, pointing to challenges such as teacher expertise, the availability of non-optionist teachers, and the effectiveness of the KPLI programs (postgraduate teaching certification (Rahim & Vethamani,2023). Other problems include the gap between policy intent and classroom reality; many teachers lack both pedagogical training and confidence to teach literature in English. In addition, non-optionist teachers - those not trained in literature or English face bigger challenges as they are usually

assigned to teach based on staff shortages rather than choice or qualification (Kaur & Yahya, 2022; Pandian and Ramiah, 2019).

Paramjit and Zhi (2022) found that the majority of teachers perceived the implementation of CEFR-aligned English curriculum positively although many also indicated that they confronted many challenges related to its implementation. Studies emphasizes how important teacher readiness and confidence are in integrating literature into the classroom. Yunus & Aziz (2020) found that most teachers agreed that literature is valuable in enhancing students' language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and critical thinking but also often felt underprepared or unsupported in its implementation. Their attitudes were shaped by both enthusiasm for literature's potential and frustrations with the challenges faced like time constraints and unsuitable teaching materials. In addition, students' low proficiency level leads to frustration for both teachers and students, thus reducing motivation to engage in literature (Ukat and Halim,2022).

Perceptions and attitudes are influenced by personal engagement and prior experience; teachers who were personally enthusiastic about reading literature tended to prepare more engaging, student-centered lessons (Nor & Tan, 2021; Lee & Subramaniam, 2021). Teachers with prior exposure to literature teaching held more positive attitudes, while those new to it felt anxious and underprepared. It is argued that teachers' impressions of literature shape their teaching methods, and professional development in literature pedagogy is therefore essential for teacher confidence and teaching proficiency. Ahmad & Abu Bakar (2022) reported that teachers who participated in continuing professional development reported more positive attitudes toward teaching literature as it can enhance their confidence, pedagogical knowledge and motivation as they are exposed to new methods and resources. In short, teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward literature could also be shaped by training, readiness to embrace policy changes and personal literary experience (Rahim & Azman, 2023).

Challenges in Teaching Literature

A common problem faced in teaching literature at primary level is the lack of proficiency and motivation among students, particularly in rural areas. Literature texts, often written in more complex or figurative language, feel inaccessible and too challenging for many students and are more suitable for higher proficiency students (Sanub & Yunus(2017; Naser & Aziz(2017)). As a result, teachers often switch to Bahasa Melayu or local dialects to teach literature, which defeats the main purpose of integrating literature, that is to improve English language skills. Their low proficiency levels tend to make students concentrate on basic reading and thus prevent them from engaging in complex literary themes and narratives (Mohd Sofi Ali, 2003). This makes literature lessons tedious and teachers may be reluctant to let students explore literature in class because it will take up precious instructional time, especially when faced with time constraint and overcrowded classrooms (Ukat & Ismail,2022).

Recent studies show that many teachers lack the pedagogical training and confidence to teach literature in English classes (Pandian & Ramiah,2019; Rahim & Vethamani,2023).This is partly due to the many changes that has affected literature; from being a component of English in 2004 to being fully integrated in English and aligned to CEFR in 2018 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017). Teachers are not given sufficient training after changes in syllabus or policy

and they often struggle in choosing suitable teaching strategies and integrating literature within the new CEFR-aligned curriculum. This leads to a discrepancy between policy intentions and actual classroom experience and delivery (Yahya,2017). Although some teachers study literature in university, the majority is not familiar with the instructional approaches suitable for integrating literature in English (Ukat and Halim,2022).

The qualifications and proficiency of primary school teachers are another barrier in teaching literature at primary level. Research by Ganakumaran et al (2003) show that while most secondary school teachers have degrees, many have little formal training in literature instruction. That trend probably extends to primary education, where many teachers have no background to engage students with literary texts effectively. Additionally, the problem of non-optionist teachers—those without formal qualifications in English or literature—persists. These educators are often assigned to teach English due to a shortage of staff, rather than their expertise (Kaur & Yahya, 2022). Their lack of specialization may impede the effective delivery of literary content, especially when combined with limited training opportunities. This problem could be worse as it was reported that nearly 60% of English teachers failed the Cambridge Placement Test (The Star, 26 September, 2012)

Methodology

This research used a questionnaire consisting of two parts; the first section focused on gathering demographic information including gender, school location, years of experience, age and education level as well as whether they were optionists (trained to teach English) or non-optionists (not trained to teach English). In the second section, a seven-point Likert scale measured the teachers' perceptions and the challenges that they face. A pilot study showed that the questionnaire had a high Cronbach alpha of 0.97. 110 primary school teachers from the same district selected through cluster sampling were involved in this study. The data was analysed using SPSS 25 for mean, frequency and percentage. ANOVA, t-tests and correlation analysis were conducted to find out whether variables like gender, age, being optionists and education level had any effects on the teachers' attitudes and the challenges faced by them.

Results and Discussion

Perceptions of Teachers

The teachers were mostly women (82%) and were trained to teach English, i.e. optionists (83.6%). About a third are new to teaching with less than five years' experience (36.4%). Of these, most respondents are degree (41.3%) and diploma holders (28.4%).

When analysing the mean results, the average score indicates the general tendency of responses. For instance, a mean close to **1.00** suggests strong disagreement, while a mean near **7.00** reflects strong agreement. Mid-range values (around **4.00**) imply neutrality or uncertainty. The table below illustrates how the mean scores are interpreted across the 7-point scale:

Table 1

Interpretation of Mean Scores Using a 7-Point Likert Scale

Scale Point	Interpretation	Mean Range
1	Strongly Disagree – Very Negative Perception	1.00 – 1.49
2	Disagree – Negative Perception	1.50 – 2.49
3	Moderately Disagree – Slightly Negative	2.50 – 3.49
4	Neutral/Undecided	3.50 – 4.49
5	Moderately Agree – Slightly Positive	4.50 – 5.49
6	Agree – Positive Perception	5.50 – 6.49
7	Strongly Agree – Very Positive Perception	6.50 – 7.00

In general, teachers demonstrated moderately positive attitudes towards teaching literature to young learners. They expressed confidence that literary texts could be used to instill reading habits and motivate students (mean = 4.8), which is consistent with Yunus, Hashim, and Suliman's (2022) findings that literature encourages reading interest and cultural appreciation. Teachers also agreed that the decision to introduce literature at the primary level was a good one (mean = 4.75) and that literature can assist in developing well-rounded individuals (mean = 4.73), a view similarly noted by Rahim and Vethamani (2023). In terms of self-efficacy, they believed they had the proficiency and language skills to teach literature (mean = 4.52), echoing Pandian and Ramiah's (2019) observation that Malaysian teachers generally feel capable of teaching literature despite systemic constraints. Furthermore, teachers rated the texts as engaging and relevant (mean = 4.47) and relatively appropriate for Malaysian pupils (mean = 4.41), which aligns with Radzi and Yunus's (2023) review that identified the chosen texts as broadly suitable for classroom use, though sometimes challenging for weaker learners. However, teachers were only neutral when asked if their students had sufficient literacy competence to engage with literature (mean = 4.01), indicating a lack of confidence in students' language readiness. This concern mirrors Mahalingam, Yunus, and Hashim's (2021) study, which highlighted student proficiency—particularly in rural schools—as a persistent barrier to effective literature teaching.

Table 2

Item frequencies and percentages regarding teachers' views on literature at primary level

	Strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly agree 7	Mean
Introducing literature at primary level is a good idea	(6.4%)	(2.7%)	(8.2%)	(25.5%)	(20.9%)	(21.8%)	(14.5%)	4.75
Literature can improve students' English	(5.5%)	(2.7%)	(9.1%)	(20.9%)	(24.5%)	(21.8%)	(15.5%)	4.84
Literature can instill reading habit	(4.6%)	(6.4%)	(6.4%)	(16.5%)	(25.8%)	(22.9%)	(17.4%)	4.91
Literature can help develop all rounded students	(4.7%)	(2.8%)	(4.7%)	(24.3%)	(35.5%)	(22.4%)	(5.4%)	4.72
Texts chosen are appropriate and interesting	(0.9%)	(6.4%)	(12.7%)	(28.2%)	(31.8%)	(16.4%)	(3.6%)	4.47
Current texts are suitable for students' level of English	(0.9%)	(5.6%)	(15%)	(29.4%)	(31.8%)	(15%)	(2.8%)	4.41
Students can relate to the topics in the texts	(0.9%)	(6.4%)	(12.7%)	(28.2%)	(31.8%)	(16.4%)	(3.6%)	4.47
I am able to adapt to the syllabus changes	(0.9%)	(3.6%)	(10%)	(24.5%)	(30.9%)	(20.9%)	(9.1%)	4.8
I am proficient enough to effectively deliver literature lessons.	(2.8%)	(4.6%)	(12.8%)	(22.9%)	(37.7%)	(14.7%)	(5.5%)	4.53

Analysis using Anova and t-test showed that there was no significant difference between teachers' perceptions and their gender, whether they are English optionists or not and their positions as head of department or head of English panel. Their perceptions also did not differ according to their teaching experience or education level.

Table 3

Mean perception between optionists and non-optionists

Optionists/non-optionists	N	Mean
Yes	92	4.6025
No	18	4.6556
Total	110	4.6112

Challenges

The implementation of literature in primary schools seemed manageable for teachers. The major obstacle for teachers was the lack of time, which based on the classification of means in Table 1 can be considered as neutral or undecided. Teachers stated that they didn't have

sufficient time to teach literature during English (mean 3.9) or to get ready for literature lessons (3.91). Similar issues have been mentioned in recent studies, where heavy teaching loads and focusing on tests indicated that literature is not a priority (Nasir, Yunus, & Suliman, 2021; Muthusamy & Said, 2022). This is followed by the huge number of students in each class (mean 4.0). Overcrowded classrooms lead to less opportunity to discuss and engage with the texts creatively, which are necessary for students to appreciate literature (Othman & Shah, 2020). Student proficiency posed another significant barrier ($M = 4.01$), as many teachers expressed doubts about learners' linguistic readiness. This challenge has been echoed by Lee (2020) and Raman and Kaur (2021), who found that limited language skills undermine students' ability to engage with English literary texts. In contrast, teacher-related challenges were moderate. While confidence in language proficiency ($M = 4.52$) was relatively high, some teachers still reported uncertainties, consistent with Hashim and Syed's (2021) study that linguistic competence influences confidence in literature teaching. Similarly, coping with curriculum changes ($M = 4.8$) was not perceived as a major issue, though syllabus reforms continue to require substantial adjustment (Abdullah & Tan, 2021).

Table 4

Frequencies and percentages for the items on challenges faced by teachers

	Strongly disagree 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly agree 7	Mean
I can cope with changes in the English syllabus	(0.9%)	(3.6%)	(10%)	(24.5%)	(30.9%)	(20.9%)	(9.1%)	4.8
I am confident in my language level to teach literature	(2.8%)	(4.6%)	(12.8%)	(22.9%)	(36.7%)	(14.7%)	(5.5%)	4.52
Students are proficient enough to learn literature	(1.9%)	(5.7%)	(21.9%)	(40%)	(21%)	(9.5%)		4.01
Class size is not a problem	(4.5%)	(8.2%)	(22.7%)	(27.3%)	(25.5%)	(8.2%)	(3.6%)	4.0
I have enough time to teach literature during English	(6.5%)	(16.7%)	(16.7%)	(24.1%)	(20.4%)	(8.3%)	(7.4%)	3.9
I have enough time to prepare for literature	(6.4%)	(12.7%)	(17.3%)	(32.7%)	(16.4%)	(7.3%)	(7.3%)	3.91
I can use books and the internet to help with literature lessons	(0.9%)	(9.2%)	(16.5%)	(23.9%)	(30.3%)	(13.8%)	(5.5%)	4.37

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward the teaching of literature, viewing it as an essential tool for enhancing students' language proficiency, cultural awareness, and critical thinking skills. However, despite their positive outlook, teachers continue to face notable challenges, including insufficient instructional time, limited resources, and a lack of specialized training in literature pedagogy. These issues have been consistently echoed in recent research on the teaching of literature within Malaysian classrooms (Lee & Subramaniam, 2021; Nor & Tan, 2021; Yunus et al., 2022). The current result also revealed that teachers' background variables—particularly their teaching

experience and exposure to literature-related courses—do not significantly influence their confidence and approach to teaching literature. This supports previous findings that teacher preparedness and continuous professional development are key determinants of effective literature instruction (Ganapathy et al., 2020; Hashim & Yunus, 2021).

To strengthen the implementation of literature in English language education, it is crucial for policymakers and educational institutions to provide systematic support, including well-structured professional training, adequate teaching materials, and curriculum designs that allow sufficient time for literary engagement. Encouraging collaboration among teachers through communities of practice may also foster innovative approaches to literature teaching (Abdul Rahman & Hashim, 2023). Ultimately, addressing these systemic and pedagogical challenges will enable teachers to more effectively integrate literature into language teaching, thereby enriching students' linguistic and cultural learning experiences.

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