



***CHALLENGES IN TEACHING LITERATURE TO ENGLISH
EDUCATION STUDENTS: MATERIAL SELECTION AND
APPROACHES***

Masulah

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya

Email Correspondence: masulah@fkip.um-surabaya.ac.id

Abstract



This paper analyzes the challenges of teaching literature in Indonesia's English Education Departments, focusing on material selection and teaching approaches. Future teachers often struggle with linguistic barriers, cultural disconnects, and traditional methods. Through document analysis, this study identifies these obstacles and proposes that a reflective, student-centered pedagogy is key. This entails choosing diverse, appropriate materials, like Young Adult, multicultural, and canonical texts, and shifting from objective-based instruction to interactive, reader-response models. These adaptations aim to boost engagement, bridge cultural gaps, and align university teaching with secondary school curriculum requirements.

Keywords: EFL, English Education Students, Literature Teaching, Material Selection, Teaching Approaches

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of literature, a staple component within English Education Departments worldwide, occupies a complex and often contested space. In the Indonesian context, where English is a foreign language, this complexity is heightened. Literature courses are mandated in the Sarjana (bachelor's) degree curriculum for future English teachers, positioning these students as crucial conduits for literary appreciation and analysis in secondary schools. However, research dedicated to the pedagogical dimensions of literature teaching in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings remains surprisingly limited. As noted by Basthomi (2003), even comprehensive handbooks on teaching research have historically overlooked this niche, and student theses in English departments often favor literary analysis over investigations into teaching methodologies.

Despite this relative academic neglect, literature is championed for its multifaceted

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benefits in EFL learning. Scholars advocate for its use to promote authenticity, motivation, cultural and intercultural awareness, intensive reading practice, and the development of critical thinking skills (Karasik & Pomortseva, 2015; Mambu, 2014). Conversely, significant objections highlight inherent difficulties: syntactic and lexical complexity, phonological and semantic challenges, cultural barriers, and the daunting task of appropriate material selection (Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011). A primary shortfall, as identified by Collie and Slater (1987), often lies in pedagogical approach—a reliance on traditional, teacher-centered methods that prioritize the transmission of predetermined interpretations over student engagement and personal meaning-making.

This tension between potential benefit and practical challenge places students and instructors in English Education Departments in a uniquely demanding position. These students must not only grapple with sophisticated literary texts and criticism in a foreign language but also prepare to translate this competence into effective classroom practice for their future students. Therefore, a focused investigation into the specific challenges they face is imperative. This paper aims to contribute to this needed discourse by analyzing the dual core challenges of material selection and teaching approaches in literature courses within Indonesian English Education Departments. It will explore current issues, theoretical perspectives, and propose reflective strategies for educators to better equip future English teachers.

Despite the growing recognition of literature's pedagogical value, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how literature is actually taught within English Education Departments, particularly in EFL contexts such as Indonesia. Previous research tends to emphasize the theoretical benefits of literary texts or focuses on textual analysis rather than classroom practice. Moreover, studies that address challenges in teaching literature often treat material selection and teaching approaches separately, without investigating how these two factors interact in shaping students' learning experiences and professional preparation as future teachers. There is also a lack of research that centers on the perspectives and academic realities of English Education students, who are positioned both as learners of literature and as prospective instructors. Consequently, empirical and reflective accounts that integrate curricular demands, pedagogical strategies, and contextual constraints remain limited. This gap underscores the need for a focused inquiry into how material selection and

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teaching approaches jointly affect the effectiveness of literature instruction in Indonesian English Education Departments.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on a comprehensive document analysis. The primary objective is to synthesize existing scholarly discourse, theoretical frameworks, and relevant curricular guidelines to construct a detailed analysis of the challenges in literature pedagogy. The research was conceptually situated within the English Education Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya, considering its academic context and objectives in the year 2025, reflecting the ongoing and evolving nature of these pedagogical issues.

The data for this analytical study were drawn from two main sources: (1) Academic Literature: A wide range of scholarly books, journal articles, and conference proceedings were reviewed. Key areas of focus included: theories of literature teaching (e.g., personal growth model, reader-response theory), studies on material selection criteria (e.g., canonical vs. contemporary, multicultural texts), analyses of teaching approaches in EFL literature classrooms, and research specific to the Indonesian educational context. (2) Policy Documents: Official Indonesian government curriculum regulations (Permendikbud) for Senior High School (SMA/SMK) and Junior High School (SMP) levels were examined. Specifically, documents outlining basic competencies (Kompetensi Dasar/KD) for English subjects were analyzed to identify the prescribed place, objectives, and genres of literature within the secondary school syllabus that future graduates are expected to teach.

The analytical process involved several stages. First, relevant documents were systematically identified and gathered. Second, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring challenges, arguments, and proposed solutions related to material selection and teaching methodologies. Third, the findings from the academic literature were juxtaposed with the requirements outlined in the national curriculum to identify gaps and alignments between university-level instruction and school-level expectations. This method allows for a theoretical and policy-informed discussion that outlines the landscape of challenges and proposes grounded, context-aware recommendations for educators in English Education Departments.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

The analysis reveals a multifaceted set of challenges confronting both instructors and students in literature courses within English Education Departments. These challenges are deeply intertwined, but for clarity, they are discussed under two primary themes: the selection of appropriate instructional materials and the adoption of effective teaching approaches.

Challenges in Material Selection

Selecting suitable literary texts is a primary and persistent difficulty. Collie and Slater (1987) rightly argue that suitability is ultimately relative to the specific learner group, depending on their needs, interests, cultural background, and language proficiency. The key is choosing works that stimulate personal involvement and positive reactions. Our discussion identifies three major sub-challenges within material selection.

Meeting Global and Multicultural Demands.

The 21st-century educational landscape demands skills for global citizenship. Wagner (2008) emphasizes adaptability in diverse cultural contexts as a survival skill. Consequently, there is a growing imperative to move beyond a narrow Anglo-American literary canon. Incorporating multicultural and postcolonial literary texts (e.g., from Africa, India, or Southeast Asia) into the curriculum can introduce students to a wider spectrum of worldviews and varieties of English (Beach et al., 2011; Díaz-Pérez et al., 2013). This aligns with recommendations from conferences like the First Literary Study Conference at Sanata Darma University, which advocated for the inclusion of Southeast Asian literatures in English (Day, 2007). Such texts not only foster intercultural awareness but also help students develop a critical understanding of global power dynamics and histories. The challenge for the teacher is to navigate this expansive, "borderless" literary field (Kalia, 2021) and select texts that are both globally relevant and pedagogically accessible.

Addressing Learner Age and Maturity

University students, particularly in their early years, are often in a transitional "young adult" phase. Imposing dense, classic texts prematurely can lead to disengagement. An effective alternative is Young Adult (YA) Literature. Designed for readers aged roughly 14-21, YA literature deals with themes of identity, responsibility, and social relationships that

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resonate strongly with this age group (Prameswari, 2014). These texts are often character-driven, which fosters empathy—a core response to literature as suggested by Koopman (2017). YA literature can serve as a vital bridge, building confidence and reading stamina, and creating a "literary storage" in students' minds that can later connect to more complex classic works. The challenge lies in legitimizing YA literature within the academic setting and skillfully using it as a scaffold toward canonical texts.

Negotiating the Value of Canonical Works.

Despite the push for contemporary and multicultural texts, canonical works retain significant value. They represent cultural heritage, contain enduring philosophical questions, and provide a common reference point in literary studies. The challenge is not whether to teach them, but how. Beach et al. (2011) cautions that the canon should be taught critically, with an understanding that it is a constructed entity. Teachers must prepare students to engage with canonical works not as repositories of fixed, authoritative meaning, but as sites for dialogue. For instance, teaching Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* can launch discussions on societal norms, sin, and punishment across time. However, the linguistic difficulty of many classics poses a real barrier. Strategies like using simplified versions, watching film adaptations, or focusing on key excerpts can help negotiate this challenge, preserving the text's intellectual value while managing linguistic complexity.

Discussion

Challenges in Teaching Approaches

The pedagogical methods employed in literature classrooms are often a greater obstacle than the materials themselves. A prevalent and problematic approach is the traditional, objective, or teacher-centered model.

The Dominance and Drawbacks of the Objective Approach

Informed by objective criticism (Abrams, 1999), this approach treats the literary text as a self-contained artifact with a single, discoverable "correct" meaning, often tied to authorial intent or established criticism. The teacher's role is to impart information about the author, historical context, and literary devices, guiding students toward this pre-determined interpretation. Research indicates this approach is still widespread. Chambers and Marshal (2006) noted its strong emphasis in British universities, while Basthomi (2003) and Jegede (2010) observed similar practices in Indonesian and Nigerian classrooms, respectively. The

consequences are detrimental. This model deprives students of agency, stifles personal connection, and can make literature feel irrelevant. When students are not allowed to explore their own responses or connect the text to their lives and contemporary issues, motivation plummets. Learning becomes a passive reception of facts rather than an active, meaningful experience.

Towards Student-Centered and Responsive Approaches

To overcome the limitations of the objective approach, literature pedagogy must embrace more dialogic and student-centered models.

Reader-Response Theory: Championed by Louise Rosenblatt, this theory posits that meaning is created in the transaction between the reader and the text. The reader's personal experiences, background knowledge, and emotions are essential to interpretation (Bellour, 2012). Applying this in the classroom means prioritizing students' initial reactions, encouraging multiple interpretations, and validating personal connections. Activities like journaling, small-group discussions, and personal reflection essays become central. Nafisah's (2014) study in an Indonesian context supports this, finding that students interpreted texts more easily when the settings and themes were closer to their own background knowledge.

The Personal Growth Model: This approach, related to reader-response, focuses on literature as a tool for personal and emotional development. Lazar (1993) describes it as an approach where learners engage with the literary experience in relation to their own real lives. The goal shifts from purely linguistic or analytical mastery to reflection, empathy, and self-understanding. This is particularly powerful when using YA or multicultural literature that directly engages with identity and social issues.

Dialogic Teaching: Delanoy (2005) advocates for a model where classroom discourse is a genuine dialogue. The teacher acts as a facilitator rather than an authority, inviting students to become active explorers of the text. This involves posing open-ended questions, debating ethical dilemmas within the text, and connecting literary themes to broader social and political contexts relevant to the students' world.

Adopting these approaches represents a significant shift. It requires teachers to be less concerned with covering a fixed body of knowledge and more focused on fostering a dynamic process of inquiry and response. This can be challenging in cultures with more

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hierarchical educational traditions, but it is essential for making literature learning engaging and meaningful for future teachers.

Alignment with Secondary School Curriculum

An added layer of consideration for English Education Departments is the need to align their teaching with the literature components of the Indonesian secondary school curriculum. Analysis of the *Kurikulum 2013* basic competencies (*KD*) reveals that literature is present from Junior to Senior High School. Students are expected to analyze the social function, structure, and linguistic elements of narrative texts like fables, folklore, legends, short stories, and even popular novels, and to "capture the meaning" of these texts.

This syllabus has two major implications for university-level teaching:

Genre Familiarity

Future teachers must be proficient in analyzing and teaching the specific genres listed (e.g., narrative, short story). This argues for including these genres in university courses, not just sophisticated novels or poetry.

Pedagogical Focus

The school curriculum's emphasis on "social function" and "meaning" aligns more with a contextual and reader-oriented approach than a purely formalist, objective one. Therefore, university pedagogy must model how to teach for meaning and social relevance, not just for literary analysis. The challenges of material selection and teaching approach at the university level directly impact how well graduates can fulfill these school-level competencies.

CONCLUSION

Teaching literature in English Education Departments presents significant challenges that directly affect the preparation of future EFL teachers. This paper has highlighted material selection and teaching approaches as the central, interconnected issues. Effective literature instruction requires reflective material choices that balance multicultural relevance, learner readiness, and critical engagement with canonical texts through a diverse range of literary works. Equally important is a shift from traditional, teacher-centered models toward student-centered approaches that promote personal engagement, meaning-making, and dialogic learning. Aligning university-level literature teaching with the

demands of secondary school curricula is essential to producing competent and motivated future teachers. Through thoughtful material selection and innovative pedagogy, literature educators can transform these challenges into meaningful opportunities for professional and educational growth.

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