

**Attitudes of Arabic and Islamic Students to
English Literature Courses at the
University of Bahrain**

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**اتجاهات طلبة اللغة العربية والدراسات
الإسلامية نحو مقررات الأدب الإنجليزي في
جامعة البحرين**

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ملخص البحث

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى الوقوف على الأسباب التي من شأنها عدم تشجيع الطلبة على تكوين اتجاهات إيجابية بالنسبة للإقبال على دراسة الأدب الإنجليزية. كما هدفت أيضاً إلى إيضاح أهمية الأدب الإنجليزي في سبيل اكتساب اللغة الإنجليزية بطريقة أفضل.

وقد تبين أن من أسباب الصعوبات التي تواجه طلبة اللغة العربية والإسلاميات عند دراسة المقرر الإنجليزي ١٣٦ هي على النحو التالي:

- اللغة الإنجليزية
 - الكتاب المقرر دراسته
 - المدرس
- وأوضحت الدراسة أيضاً النقاط التالية:
- أهمية دور المدرس لجعل المقرر الإنجليزي ١٣٦ واضحاً وممتعاً.
 - يفضل أن يكون مدرس هذا المقرر ملماً باللغة العربية.
 - كون النصوص في المقرر الإنجليزي ١٣٦ مترجمة باللغة العربية تساعد في فهم الطلبة لها.

Attitudes of Arabic and Islamic Students to English Literature Courses at the University of Bahrain

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to highlight the causes that may discourage the students from having positive attitudes towards learning English literature. The study also aims at drawing students' attention to the importance of English literature for better English language learning.

The study showed that the difficulties that Arabic and Islamic students face when taking English 136 are the following:

- * The language
- * The textbook
- * The teacher

The study also showed that:

- * The teacher plays an important role for making English 136 interesting and clear;
- * It is preferred to have a teacher who speaks Arabic;
- * If English 136 contained translated extracts it could help the students in understanding the text; and
- * It is preferred that the course should not focus on one genre; the students should have access to poetry and fiction as well as drama.

Introduction

English language is one of the main subjects in Bahrain schools; students study English from the age of 10 until 18. (Ministry of Education, Proposed English Language Syllabus, 1988)

In order to join the College of Arts at the University of Bahrain, these students first have to pass 9 hours of English language preparatory courses (English 018 - 6 hours and English 019 - 3 hours).

The College of Arts comprises four main departments:

1. English (subsequently renamed Foreign Languages & Literatures);
2. Arabic and Islamic Studies;
3. General Studies;
4. Information and Public Relations.

In addition to their major courses, students in the Arabic and Islamic Studies Department have to complete four courses in English. Two of these are language courses- English 117 and English 118; one is a literature course - English 136; and one is a translation course - English 208. (University of Bahrain, 2001 Undergraduate Catalogue)

Importance of Literature

In relation to this study, the writer mainly refers to the areas relating to English Literature and its importance for Arabic and Islamic Students. According to Brumfit and Carter (1986), the importance of literature is to strengthen not only the students' linguistic ability but also their competence in literature. To fulfill this, students should be encouraged to have a positive attitude towards learning English literature. Maley (1990) draws our attention that there has been a remarkable revival of interest in literature as a resource for language learning. Maley adds that the importance of literature is visible through the recent publication of numerous books and articles on the subject of literature and language learning. He maintains that the ways in which literature is discussed now vary considerably from the past, particularly when it is being taught in the classroom. Literature is needed for a better reading whether extensive reading or intensive reading. Students should have the opportunity to read real literature and respond to it through discussion or writing. When reading litera-

ture extensively, students are motivated to live through various kinds of literature and see how plots, themes, characters and illustrations are inter-related. When reading, students explore relationships, link the text with their own past and experience and build on their previous reading. (Watson, 1988)

Watson adds that it is important to give students literature that impresses them and makes them feel that what they read is of value and has integrity. He states that some learners give less weight to English literature and may have no real concept of what constitutes literature. Some of them may have little or no motivation at all. Such learners need to gain some working sense of literature by understanding what literature is and what is its exact definition in order to establish the broader view of literature and how it functions linguistically.

Moody (1971) has stated that learning literature by non-native speakers of English is fundamentally learning the daily use of the language. Providing such knowledge is essential for such learners because they come from a distinctly non-English speaking background and may feel insecure about their ability to read and appreciate literature in English. Helping these learners to appreciate the nature of literature and command of its techniques can help to a large extent.

Definition of Literature

Wellek (1973) defines literature as the term that includes all writing of any pretence. In this century literature is limited to works which are solely imaginative in nature. So we can say that literature is the term that refers to critical essays as well as novels and plays. Its quality is the prose and the ideas that are written.

Literature reveals how beliefs are structured, how systems are valued and how stereotypes and conventions of societies are shaped. It shows how people live. Non-native literature catches the rhythm, the tempo, the feel and the colour of the culture (Kachru, 1988; Alter, 1988; Bouton, 1988).

Literature is valued in a number of countries around the world. No matter what language they speak students being familiar with literature related to their native language, makes learning English literature more interesting and easier to understand. This is because students can compare the target literature with the literature they are familiar with in their own language. This can apply to the students at Bahrain University in the Arabic and Islamic Studies Department who are Arabs and who are familiar with Arabic literature.

Literature exposes students to fresh and complex themes in the target language. It helps them gain access to the culture of the people who speak that language. It is also used for relaxation, enjoyment and fun; value and status; expanding language awareness; and it creates situations in which opinions and feelings can be talked about.

Examples of factors affecting learning English literature

When teaching literature, there are factors that may affect students' attitudes towards learning literature. One such factor is teaching literature across culture. Learners invariably interpret the language in the texts in the light of their own views of the world and their own cultural experience. To overcome this problem, the teacher may use a text written by an author of similar cultural background so that the themes are related to the learners' society. This can help students to understand more easily (Lazar, 1993).

It is also necessary to refer to a factor which significantly affects a student's attitude to learning literature. This factor is the approach applied in teaching literature. It is suggested that an approach, which encourages learners to use their existing schematic and linguistic resources, should be used. This will help them comprehend, interpret and respond to literary texts. What teachers need to do is to facilitate the processes and intervene primarily what is related to the teaching of skills needed rather than concentrate on what a text should mean. This requires textual warrant and the ability to substantiate responses to a text with evidence from it. Having this ability will encourage the learners to articulate their own responses to the text they read. This leads us to the application of an approach, which is based on language skills for teaching literature.

The Research Problem

The negative or positive attitudes in the Arabic and Islamic Department at Bahrain University can affect the proficiency of students in English. This study focuses on the needs of these students for English language and literature courses, and their responses to both English and Literature courses.

Aims of the Study

This study aims at discovering, whether students in the Arabic and Islamic Studies Department are interested in reading English literature and the reasons for their interest or indifference to it, whether linguistic cultural, religious, literary, textual, pedagogic or others. Furthermore, the study aims at finding which genre appeals most to them: fiction, drama or poetry. The study also aims to

compare responses of students who have graduated with current students' responses

The Sample of the Study

The sample of this study consists of 50 students randomly selected from the 100 students who took English 136 at the time of study during the first and second semesters of the year 1994 -1995 or who had previously completed it.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to students in the Arabic and Islamic Department at the University of Bahrain whose major is either Arabic or Islamic Studies and who are taking English 136. The study also focuses on the responses of some students who have already completed English 136.

Hypotheses

The study aims at testing the following:

1. Students in the Arabic and Islamic Studies Department have negative attitudes towards the literature course, Eng.136
2. Having negative attitudes towards studying literature can affect students' proficiency in learning English language.

Data Collection

The data for the study was collected from 50 subjects who were randomly selected from the 100 students who took Eng.136 in the first and second semesters of the year 1994-1995 and those who took it between 1988-1993

Validity of the Instruments

The questionnaire included objective questions of multiple-choice type followed where necessary, by open-ended questions. The questionnaire items were revised by the instructors of the literature courses at the University of Bahrain. The researcher made sure that the questionnaire items were related to the aims of the study and students could easily answer them.

Data Analysis

The hypotheses of this study have been tested using Arabic and Islamic students' responses to a questionnaire. For the analysis of the data, the researcher has

dealt with each item of the questionnaire separately in order to identify the subjects' positive or negative answers to each question. According to the information obtained from the subjects' responses, the researcher will state the findings.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of subjects' responses as to the value of Eng.136

	Freq.	%
Helpful	42	84
Not helpful	8	16

Table 1 shows that the majority of the participants, 84%, think that Eng.136 can help Arabic and Islamic students in their Arabic literature studies. However, only 16% thought otherwise.

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of subjects' responses to different functions or aspects of literature and its role in language learning

	Agree		Disagree		Don't know	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Learning English language quickly.	40	80	8	16	2	4
Acquiring new culture.	45	90	3	6	2	4
Making a comparative study between Arabic and English literature.	38	76	5	10	7	14
Learning literary terms and phrases.	50	100	-	-	-	-
Learning new trends and movements in literature.	38	76	9	18	3	6
Becoming familiar with new techniques in literature.	46	92	4	8	-	-
Building up a list of literary terms in English.	50	100	-	-	-	-

The responses of the students in Table 2 show that 80% think that literature helps in learning English language quickly; 90% in acquiring a new culture; 76% in making a comparative study between Arabic and English Literature; 100% in learning new trends and movements in literature; 76% in becoming familiar with new techniques in literature 92%; and 100% in building up a list of literature terms in English.

Table 3: Frequency and percentage of subjects' responses as to the importance of Eng136

	Freq.	%
Essential	27	54
Not essential	16	32
Don't know	7	14

Table 3 shows that the course is essential for the students majoring in Arabic and Islamic studies. More than half of the responses were positive. Thirty-two stated that the course is not essential, whereas 14% stated that they "didn't know".

Table 4: Frequencies and percentages of responses related to difficulties in Eng.136 for Arabic and Islamic Studies students

	Agree		Disagree		Don't know	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
The language	42	84	5	10	3	6
The text	25	50	15	30	10	20
The teacher	19	38	20	40	11	22

Table 4 shows the difficulties in English 136 for Arabic and Islamic students. Regarding the language, 84% mentioned that it is the main reason for the difficulty of the course. For the textbook, 50 % of the answers indicated that it caused difficulty and only 38% of the answers showed that the teacher is the source of difficulty for the students.

Table 5: Frequency and percentage of Responses Related to the Role of teacher who is teaching Eng.136

	Agree		Disagree		Don't know	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
	49	98	1	2	-	-

Table 5 shows that majority, 98%, stated that the role of the instructor is important in teaching English 136, whereas a very small minority, 2%, stated that his role is not important.

Table 6: Type of instructor preferred to teach Eng.136 as shown by Arabic and Islamic Studies students.

	Agree		Disagree		Don't know	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Arabic speakers	45	90	3	6	2	4
Non-Arabic speakers	7	14	28	56	15	30

Table 6 shows that the majority of the responses, 90%, showed that students prefer an instructor who speaks Arabic, whereas 6% preferred a non-Arabic speaker and 4% stated they “don’t know”

Table 7: Students’ preferences as to the incorporation of some extracts translated from Arabic in Eng.136

Agree		Disagree		Don't know	
Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
31	62	13	26	6	12

Table 7 shows that 62 % of the students suggested that it is preferable that English 136 contains some extracts translated from Arabic.

Table 8: Areas of literature that the Eng.136 should focus on

	Agree		Disagree		Don't know	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Poetry only	—	—	—	—	—	—
Fiction only	—	—	—	—	—	—
Drama only	—	—	—	—	—	—
All of the above	40	80	8	16	2	4

It is evident from the students’ responses (see table 8) that the majority agreed that English 136 should not focus on one particular genre.

Implications of the Results

The responses indicated that English 136 helps students to learn English quickly, acquire a new culture, make a comparative study between Arabic and English literature, learn literature terms and phrases, introduce them to new trends and movements in literature, familiarize themselves with new techniques in literature and build up a list of literature terms in English.

The study showed that the cause of the difficulties faced by the students when taking English 136 are:

- * The language
- * The textbook
- * The teacher

The study also showed that:

Arabic and Islamic Studies students believe that the teacher plays an important role for making English 136 interesting and clear. Regarding the instructor, they preferred the one who speaks Arabic. They also suggested if English 136 contained translated extracts it could help them in understanding the text. As far as the content of the course is concerned, the students preferred that it should not focus on one genre; they should have access to poetry and fiction as well as drama.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the investigator makes the following recommendations:

The researcher maintains that English 136 as a literature course is important and should be included in the programme studied by Arabic and Islamic Studies students. To fulfill the aims and objectives of the course successfully, the investigator suggests that: students' language level should be improved before taking English 136 and the literature studied should match the students' level and be of interest to them. Regarding the teacher, the researcher recommends that he should use techniques that make the literature clearer and more interesting and should be able to speak Arabic. He also recommends that English 136 should contain extracts translated from Arabic and the three genres of poetry, fiction or drama should be equally emphasized.

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APPENDIX

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please tick where applicable:

I took the course Engl. 136 between 1994 -1995

I took the course Engl. 136 between 1988 -1993

Now please answer the following questions:

1. Do you think learning literature helps Arabic and Islamic students?

Yes

No

If yes, why?

Is it because it helps in:

- Learning the English language quickly

Agree

disagree

don't know

- Acquiring a new culture

Agree

disagree

don't know

- Making a comparative study between Arabic and English literature

Agree

disagree

don't know

- Learning literary terms and phrases

Agree

disagree

don't know

- Learning new trends and movements in literature

Agree	disagree	don't know
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Becoming familiar with new techniques in literature

Agree	disagree	don't know
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Building up a list of literary terms in English

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	disagree	don't know

- English 136 (formerly 133) is essential to students majoring in Arabic and Islamic studies.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agree	disagree	don't know

- One of the difficulties in Eng.136 for Arabic and Islamic students is:

The Language	Agree	disagree	don't know
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The text	Agree	disagree	don't know
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The teacher	Agree	disagree	don't know
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- **The role of the instructor is important in teaching Eng. 136**

Agree	disagree	don't know
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- **It's preferable that the instructor of Engl 136 be:**

Arabic speaker	Agree	disagree	don't know
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Non -Arabic speaker	Agree	disagree	don't know
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- **It's preferable that Eng.136 contain some translated extracts from Arabic Literature**

Agree	disagree	don't know
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- **It's preferable that Eng.136 focuses on teaching**

poetry only	Agree	disagree	don't know
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

fiction only	Agree	disagree	don't know
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

drama only	Agree	disagree	don't know
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

All of the above	Agree	disagree	don't know
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>