



EXPLORING THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE IN A UNIVERSITY EFL DEPARTMENT IN BENIN

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of literature is of paramount importance at a university level EFL department in so far as literature exposes students to authentic language and is likely to improve their language skills. This article seeks to find out strategies used to teach literature, determine the challenges confronting the teaching of literature and identify how literature teaching can be improved. The findings revealed that most respondents do not develop a syllabus for their course. In addition, teachers give an overview of the novels to be studied and ask the students to prepare and give presentations on such novels. Difficulties identified are related to the accessibility of the prescribed novels, learners' poor linguistic, reading, and literary competences and the fact that students do not always have the prescribed novels. It has been suggested that the teaching of literature could be improved through literature teacher professional development and the organization of literary competitions to encourage students to read.

Keywords: *Teaching of Literature, EFL Department, University, Benin.*

Citation:

APA Iwikotan, E.K., Séguédemè, A.H. & Kpohoué, F. (2017) Exploring The Teaching of Literature in a University EFL Department in Benin. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 4(4), 85-94.

MLA Iwikotan, Etienne K., Alexis H. Séguédemè, and Ferdinand Kpohoué. "Exploring The Teaching of Literature in a University EFL Department in Benin." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.4, no.4, 2017, pp.85-94.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The key factor for promotion of teachers in higher learning institutions is research. For that reasons, teachers tend to focus heavily on their research activities, sometimes to the detriment of teaching effectiveness. Besides, even though the literature on the teaching of literature abounds (Carter and Long, 1991 for example), there is limited empirical research on the teaching of literature in EFL contexts in higher education as rightly pointed out by Yimwilai (2005). However, literature remains a key subject in EFL/ESL departments across the globe for the mere reason that it cuts across many other subjects. It can easily be used to integrate the teaching of all four language skills. Consequently, if literature teachers apply appropriate instructional procedures, they can have a very positive impact on language learning by their students.

Literature can play a critical role in the learning or acquisition of a second or foreign language because literary texts “contextualize and socialize language items and lead naturally to the use of actual words and expressions” (Bataineh, 2014, p. 139). This implies that by reading literature, students will learn many things about the language spontaneously. In other words, literature can develop students’ pragmatic knowledge of the language in which it is written. Even in this era of communicative language teaching, literature still holds an important place even though diehards of the CLT believe that it should be discarded (Padurean, 2015). However, in a foreign language context, it may not be easy for students to reap these benefits of literature, unless they are appropriately trained. That is the reason why it is relevant to look into the ways in which literature instruction is handled in a real-life situation.

Given the aforementioned role that literature can play in language learning, this paper investigates the practice of literature teaching in an EFL department of a higher learning institution in Benin. More specifically, through this research work, we intend to: (a) Find out strategies used to teach literature in the EFL department (b) Determine the challenges confronting the teaching of literature and (c) Identify measures to be implemented for better literature instruction in the department. In other

words, we intend to answer the following three questions through this research: (1) How is literature taught at the EFL department? (2) What are the challenges confronting the teaching of literature and (3) How can the teaching of literature be improved in the department?

In order to address all three questions adequately, it is important to examine the rationale for using literature in teaching English a foreign language, the criteria for selecting literary texts for study, and approaches to the teaching of literature.

1.1 REASONS FOR USING LITERATURE TO TEACH EFL

It is difficult to separate literature from language teaching and learning because literature is written in a given language. During the grammar translation period, literary texts in the target language were selected as examples of cogent writing, to illustrate grammatical rules and practice translation into the learners’ mother tongue or first language (Duff and Maley, 1990; Rahimi, 2014). But even in today’s post-method era (Brown, 2007), literature is still widely used to teach EFL. According to Bataineh (2014), the teaching of literature has positive effects on EFL students’ pragmatic competence which has to do with “knowledge of social, cultural, and discourse conventions which have to be followed in various situations” (p.137). Literature is then a medium that enables to familiarize with contextualized language use.

Literature is also considered as an interesting source of authentic materials which are deemed critical for the present communicative language theories (Rahimi, 2014; Bataineh, 2014). For instance, drama can foster students’ understanding of verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication in English as rightly pointed out by Bataineh (2014). In addition, the use of literary texts enables to boost learner motivation, pragmatic and sociolinguistic, grammatical and vocabulary knowledge, and critical thinking, among others (Khatib et al, 2011; Rahimi, 2014; Van, 2009). More importantly, the use of literature enables to develop reading in English language learners. In fact, according to McKay (2014), “because of the pleasure it can bring, [literature] is a productive way to encourage students to read extensively on their own” (p.499). Literature, as it appears, enables to encourage not only extensive



reading but also independent reading. If teachers can succeed in developing such reading habits in their learners, the latter stand a chance to master the language because of the implicit acquisition of vocabulary and grammar that goes along with reading (Rahimi, 2014; Armstrong, 2015; Ghouti and Mohamed, 2014).

From a different perspective, reading well-selected pieces of literature can strengthen student's writing skill. According to Ghouti and Mohammed (2014), through literature reading, students "learn about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of structure, and the different ways of connecting ideas, which develop and increase their own writing skills" (p. 118). By discovering what various categories of sentences are written to convey, how sentences are connected together to make a paragraph or a longer text, students learn to write better implicitly or explicitly. They improve their writing skills implicitly because reading a novel or a short story is like embarking onto a long journey which transforms the reader's way of thinking, mainly through the unfolding of the plot. The explicit improvement stems from the fact that a good reader poses from time to time in the course of the reading when he comes across a beautifully written sentence or a cogent chain of reasoning not only to admire the beauty of the passage but also to study how words and ideas have been put together to achieve the beauty or cogency.

In addition to the development of writing skills, another important reason for teaching literature in an EFL context is the improvement of cultural awareness. In fact, not only does literature enable students to understand and be aware of the culture portrayed in the piece being read, but it also gives them the opportunity to examine their own culture (Armstrong, 2015; Ghouti and Mohammed, 2014). However, the teaching of cultural awareness should not be used to promote a given culture, but "to help learners to see their culture in relation to others to promote cross-cultural understanding" (McKay, 2014, p. 499). There is no doubt that the contact with other cultures leads learners to reflect on their own culture to see how it compares or contrasts with the culture discovered in the reading. Through these reflections, learners can have a clear

understanding of the foreign culture as well as their own culture. Without the promotion of this comparison, the teaching of literature becomes an instrument of cultural imperialism, overtly or covertly.

From the foregoing, it appears that literature can significantly contribute to the EFL learning. Therefore, how can literature be taught to improve EFL learning?

1.2 APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

Literature can be taught in different ways provided it enables the learners to acquire the language through the different activities they perform in the teaching and learning process. Carter and Long (1991) suggested three models for teaching literature: the language model, the personal growth model and the cultural model. The language model focuses on the language used in a literary text. It helps students to improve their knowledge of the target language in as much as they work on grammar, lexical and discourse categories (Yimwilai, 2015; Padurean, 2015). According to Van (2009), this model enables to develop the four language skills in learners because they perform activities such as end of story writing, vocabulary building, jigsaw readings, and discussion. However, we contend that this model is to be used sparingly and for specific purposes at the university level literature instruction where students have to read short stories, novels and plays that are quite long. It is rather adapted to the secondary school level where students work on much shorter texts in some countries now-a-days.

The personal growth model, on the other hand, enables learners to engage with the reading of literary texts so as to grow as individuals (Carter and Long, 1991). This is a learner-centered model in which students are encouraged to draw from their "personal intellectual and emotional experiences" (Yimwilai, 2015, p. 15) to understand the text and to express their feelings on the literary text they are reading. That is what enables them to grow intellectually and emotionally. As for the cultural model, "It requires the students [to] explore and interpret the social, political, literary and historical context of a specific text" (Yimwilai, 2015, p. 15). In this model, a literary text is not studied in the vacuum, but rather in relation with the context in



which it was written. A literary text portrays both the culture and ideologies of the country in which it was set (Padurean, 2015). For that reason, it would be difficult to have a deep understanding of such a literary text without any knowledge of those ideologies and culture.

Each of these models has its merits and demerits. Therefore, an approach to literature teaching that integrates the language, personal growth, and cultural models will enable teachers to vary their instructional delivery practices and impact more students in their classrooms. Apart from these three models, there are other methods that can be used to teach literature. McKay (2014) suggested that literary texts can be used to teach the four language skills. While the mere fact of selecting a novel or any other literary text and making it a required text for a literature course provides the opportunity for extensive reading, it is worth emphasizing how speaking and writing can be reinforced through the teaching of literature. Even though drama cannot be equated with everyday conversation (Simpson, 1997); it can be taught in such a way as to show students the rules that govern conversations. For instance, the teacher can give students the list of characters in a play, the title and the setting and ask them to guess the plot and the theme of the play (Fish, 1989; McKay, 2014). After that, students can be given a small excerpt of the play out of order without the names of the characters and ask to reorder the excerpt and guess the names that have been deleted.

In the same way as the teaching of plays can be used to develop the speaking skill, the teaching of poetry can also be used to encourage low proficiency students to write. According to McKay (2014), the language of poetry is "less restricted by the grammatical and lexical constraints of other types of literary and written discourse" (p. 496). This statement is debatable in so far as not all poems are accessible from a linguistic perspective. Nonetheless, if poems are well-selected and well-studied, the teacher can get students to write their own poems. Strategies for teaching poems include deleting words and ask students to find out the deleted words. Furthermore, to write their own poems, students can be asked to draw shapes and write words associated

with those shapes and then use some of these words to write poems as suggested by Duff and Maley (1989).

Besides, literature teaching in an EFL context is different from literature teaching in a native context for two reasons. Students in EFL contexts often lack semantic and cultural knowledge to adequately tackle alien literature. As a consequence, to begin the study of a novel for instance, the teacher needs to provide learners with background information about the culture in which the novel is set in order to minimize the diversity of interpretations (Zhen, 2012). But the teacher can go beyond that cultural introduction.

In teaching literature, teachers can use critical pedagogy in as much as it can enable to unveil the relationship between the language used in a literary work and social power and ideology. In fact, the goal of critical pedagogy is to use education to bring about social change and justice and to empower people, mainly those in underprivileged layers of society. The focus on aesthetics often shifts attention from the power relations and politics hidden behind literary texts. According to Luke et al. (1994), authors express their views of the social world in their works. By using critical pedagogy, teachers can encourage learners to explore how social and political factors shape language use in general and literary language in particular (Van, 2009; Cummins, 2000). Through interaction with students, teachers can transform the latter's lives by drawing their attention to discriminatory behavior or all sorts of power relations often subtly embedded in literature through language use so as to challenge and change those social evils (Rahimi, 2014; Van, 2009).

No matter how well-inspired the instructional approaches may be, literature teaching cannot be successful if the work(s) to be studied are not carefully selected.

1.3 CRITERIA FOR SELECTING LITERARY WORKS

A lot of criteria can be applied to select literary works to study. One of the most important criteria is accessibility. Accessibility is to be construed not only as affordability or availability of the literary works but equally as intellectual accessibility. According to Van (2009), the text should be selected in adequacy with the needs and language proficiency



of the learners. It therefore follows that texts with difficult vocabulary and syntax as well as complex political, historical and social references that are completely different from learners' realities are to be avoided. In the same vein, McKay (2014) posits that for students to enjoy reading a literary text, it should be accessible to them linguistically and conceptually and have themes that are of interest to the learners. However, we content that the language of the texts to be studied should be slightly above the level of the students so that they feel some challenge while reading the text.

On the other hand, Khatib et al. (2011) recommend the selection of texts that do not harm the moral integrity of the learners. For that reason, teachers are advised to select multicultural works in order to avoid "the linguistic imperialism, self-marginalization, self-alienation, cultural colonization and hegemony" (Rahimi, 2014, p. 7) that is likely to result from mono-cultural works. However, the study of such texts is not to be excluded completely insofar as they can serve to draw students' attention to the way in which the writer places his culture on top of other cultures with a view to denouncing or decrying what is contained in such texts.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research endeavor is a case study that uses a qualitative approach for the most. A 12-item questionnaire was administered to 5 literature teachers in the EFL department investigated. The questionnaire includes close and open dichotomous as well as multiple choices items (Cohen et al, 2007). The items in the questionnaire cover issues such as teaching experience, literary work selection, instructional procedures, to mention but a few.

Furthermore, all 5 teachers completed and returned the questionnaire administered to them, which means a response rate of 100 percent. The data were analyzed manually and reported mostly with phrases and sentences from the respondents in that such sentences and phrases are more "direct and illuminative" (Cohen et al., 2007 p462) and enable to have a clearer understanding of the issues surrounding literature teaching in an EFL context. However, even though the usual data reduction and coding procedures were followed, we also used the "negative case analysis" by looking closely at

statements that do not fit identified patterns (Caudle, 2004). By using the negative case analysis, relevant isolated ideas have been flagged.

3. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

In order to elicit most of the issues surrounding the teaching of literature in the investigated EFL department, we looked into instructional delivery, the difficulties related to literature instruction and what can be done to improve the teaching of literature.

3.1 THE CURRENT SITUATION OF LITERATURE TEACHING IN THE EFL DEPARTMENT

Literature has been taught for many years in the department. Three different types of literature are taught including African literature, American Literature, and British literature. The teaching experiences of respondents are 5, 7, 9, 16, and over 30 years respectively. Those respondents include 3 American literature teachers and 2 British literature teachers. Apart from the fact that each literary work should fall within the African, American or British literature realms, a number of criteria were used for selecting.

The first criterion used is the level of the students who are going to read such works because according to some respondents, the literary works are selected "Depending on the level of students" or depending on "The level of English used". For another one, only "Novels with accessible English" are selected for study. The year of publication, the famousness of the author, students' needs in terms of literary culture, number of pages, the topics tackled in the work, and availability are some other criteria that were mentioned by the respondents. For instance, a respondent stated that one of the selection criteria is that "Novels should be available with an acceptable number of pages". The need for students to know famous authors sometimes guide the selection of the novels as indicated in the following statements: "Great authors to be known".

Besides, one of the respondents made it clear that novels are also selected "Taking into account the current social, political or environmental problems people are facing during the period". As it appears, the topicality of the novels is also a selection criterion. The novels or novellas selected using the aforementioned criteria are replaced every year,



every 2 or 3 years according to the respondents. As for the number of novels studied per course per semester, all 5 respondents stated that it is only one.

The data collected shed some light on literature instructional procedures. Concerning the syllabus design, 2 respondents stated that they do not design any syllabus, whereas 3 stated that they design a syllabus. Among the 3 that reported they design a syllabus for their course, 2 declined to provide a copy of one of their syllabi while the only one who stated that he was ready to provide a copy returned the questionnaire without the syllabus. In view of these facts, it is not clear whether the respondents design a syllabus for their literature courses.

With regard to instructional delivery, the study of a novel starts with an overview presented by the teacher. According to one respondent, the overview focuses on "the main themes, the main characters, and the summary of the novel". However, the following comments made by one of the respondents provide a clear description of instructional procedures followed: "After the overview by myself, the rest of the study is in the form of oral presentations. I assist students for comprehension and misinterpretation." As it can be seen from this statement, the study of the novel is not limited to the overview often given by the teacher. The overview is followed by the organization of students into groups to prepare and give presentations on the novel. The presentations can be chapters of the novel or on topics developed in the novel. In the cases where the presentation is on chapters of the novel, it focuses on the structure of each chapter, characterization and topics dealt with in the chapters as indicated by two of the respondents.

Given that teacher development can have a positive effect on teaching, professional development has also been investigated. Only two out of the five respondents stated that they had attended a seminar on literature teaching once. Topics discussed during the training seminars include "Henry James: the writer of two countries" and "under the volcano: Plural reading". Those two respondents did not provide any other details on the

training and as a consequence, it difficult to have a clear idea of the content of the seminars. On the other hand, none of the respondents belongs to a literature teaching association.

If teachers do not undergo professional development on a regular basis and are not members of professional associations, this may account for some of the stumbling blocks confronting them in literature teaching.

3.2 DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING LITERATURE

Teachers are confronted with many difficulties in the teaching of literature. Those difficulties can be classified into many categories. First of all, respondents reported that most students are not interested in reading novels and some others find literature even boring. In some cases, the accessibility of the books is a problem. As one respondent put it, students do not read because novels "are not available and sometimes, teachers or students are obliged to order the books in Ghana and Nigeria". It follows from this situation that the cost of the novels is higher and some students may not be able to afford them, which leads to "Non possession of the novels by students" or a situation where "Students do not always have their novels". But the problems related to the teaching of literature in the EFL department investigated are not limited to reluctance to read or inaccessibility of the prescribed novels.

Students' low level in English and poor reading skills can also constitute a stumbling block to literature teaching as this respondent plainly put it: "Students don't understand English". One of the respondents mentioned "low level of students, low reading speed and inappropriate reading skills" as one of the difficulties he is confronting with in literature instruction. Beyond all that, lack of literary knowledge can hinder understanding of a novel or literary work by students as rightly pointed out by the following respondents: "Difficulty in understanding the context, the style, the author own way of depicting reality, and the choice of characters". It is true that many of the problems stated by the respondents can be resolved if the overview given is detailed enough. The issue of knowledge of the context in which a literary piece, mainly a novel, is set is pivotal for understanding that



piece or novel. This is all the more the case since one of the respondents warned that "Lack of good knowledge of American civilization can create a huge havoc in learning American literature". This statement is also true for African and British literatures.

Finally, one respondent stated that sometimes, rooms are not available for lessons. This implies that teachers may not be able to cover what they have planned to teach because lack of classrooms may prevent them from meeting their students on a regular basis.

From the exploration of the literature teaching procedures and the professional development practices, and the difficulties encountered by teachers in the teaching of literature, it appears that there are some areas of improvement.

3.3 IMPROVING THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

For the betterment of literature teaching in the EFL department investigated, respondents made some suggestions which for the most, are in line with the challenges identified. Professional development has been underscored. One of the respondents suggested that "it would be nice to set up in the department some literature teaching workshop" whereas another one stated that "The department could organize training on literature teaching". While these two respondents emphasized capacity building in literature teaching, other respondents encouraged teachers to improve their knowledge in African, American and British civilizations for better understanding of literature. For one of the respondents, "Lecturers should get involved in grasping a good knowledge of civilization (African, American, British). This can definitely help them in teaching literature". This suggestion addresses the three types of literature taught in the department. Having an idea of how the African, American and British societies are organized and their history would be helpful to teachers in understanding the literature they teach. The same respondent also suggested "the creation of a literature teaching society". While this idea is helpful in promoting the teaching of literature, it will be difficult to implement given the limited number of literature teachers in the department. However, the longest journey always starts with the first step. Pushing the idea with an active

membership drive in the sub-region can lead to the establishment of such a society in West Africa with country chapters.

Some of the suggestions also target learners. A respondent recommended the organization of conferences to sensitize students on the importance of literature. A second respondent suggested that students should be encouraged to read extensively and to visit libraries on a regular basis. Another important suggestion bears on the "organization of competitions to give prizes to good students in literature". In the same vein, it has been suggested to organize reading clubs that would take into account novels, novellas, plays and poetry and to teach learners how to use the library. Of paramount importance is the recommendation that teachers should make sure that novels or other literary texts are available before prescribing them.

What do the above findings inspire with regard to literature teaching?

4. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Teaching English as a foreign language in an EFL department is a daunting task in that most graduates often find themselves in the teaching profession. As a consequence, the training must be rigorous if the country is to have good English language teachers. Literature is one of the key subjects in such a department since it exposes learners to authentic language. If well-instructed, it stands a chance of boosting students' oral and written commands of the English language. In the department under scientific inquiry, evidence shows that teachers do not often design a syllabus for their literature courses. According to Tyler (1969), a syllabus is the way in which "learning experiences [are] organized for effective instruction" (p. 83). Therefore, the effectiveness of literature teaching and any course depends, to a certain extent, on the development of a syllabus which outlines clearly the objectives of the course, the teachers' expectation of the students, grading policies to mention a few. As a consequence, literature teaching in the department may not be as effective as it could be if syllabi were developed.

Besides, all the respondents stated that they study one novel per semester. Literature classes are supposed to be intensive reading classes and as a



consequence, the number of novels studied is very limited in as much as exposure to literature enriches vocabulary and syntax knowledge in students as suggested by Yimwilai (2015). Therefore, the more students read, the better their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and their mastery of the language in general.

Concerning literature instructions, there seems to be a classical procedure in place. The procedure starts with an overview of the novel or literary work given by the teacher, which is followed by preparation and presentation of exposés by the students. By proceeding in this way, the teachers would minimize the risks or misinterpretation as suggested by Zhen (2012). This procedure also fits within the personal growth in which students bring to bear their personal experiences in the deciphering of a literary piece (Carter and Long, 1991. Yimwilai, 2015). The advantage of the teaching method used is that it enables to integrate three of the four language skills. Not only do students read the novels, but they also write and give presentations which enable them to hone their writing and oral communication skills. However, care should be taken to avoid a situation where only one student writes the presentation and the others come just to read it. But the personal growth model used will yield better results if it is combined with the language model which would give the teacher the opportunity to ponder over some key passage with the learners with a special attention to the way in which language has been used.

Further, as mentioned earlier, one of the respondents stated that students have "Difficulty in understanding the context, the style, the author's own way of depicting reality, and the choice of characters". There seems to be a contradiction in this statement because all the respondents stated that they provide students with an overview of the novel by way of introduction to their courses. If the overview was appropriately designed, it would enable to avoid such difficulties. Viewed from a different perspective, such difficulties might result from students' lack of literary competence which is defined as "the mastery of the roles and norms of the literary discourse" (Padurean, 2015, p. 195). Apart from the overview, teachers will help their students

by teaching them literary language and study techniques.

Despite the advantage highlighted above, the instructional procedures seem to lack diversity. For instance, teachers can summarize the beginning of the novel and ask students to imagine the entire plot of the novel before they start reading it and ask students to compare their guesses with the actual story in the novel (Van, 2009). This will motivate students to read faster to find out if they guessed rightly. And if students are requested to write down their guesses, this activity will have a positive effect on their writing skills.

The data also reveal that the teaching of EFL literature in the department does not always go smoothly. The first difficulties stem from the status of Benin as a French-speaking country where English is neither the first nor the second or the official language of the students. Documents written in English are not readily available in the country. That is the reason why students and teachers have to order books in Nigeria or in Ghana. As for the difficulties in reading and understanding the prescribed novels, they are at two levels. First of all, the novels prescribed may not be accessible to students from a linguistic and conceptual perspective (McKay, 2014) even though one respondent stated that the language level should be checked before making the novel a required text for a course as stated earlier. But assuming that the novels are selected taking into account the level of the students, difficulties arise from the fact that some of the students majored in science and have a poor level in English as well as they are not used to reading extensively. Furthermore, some of the students enroll in English because they do not know in what other subject to major. Consequently, they are not particularly motivated and are likely to find difficulties everywhere.

In the light of the difficulties identified, one of the major suggestions made is teacher professional development. However, as Iwikotan and Dossou (2017) found in an investigation on secondary school teachers' professional development practices, most of the respondents rely on the department to provide capacity building. And this is due to the fact that they do not belong to any literature teaching



professional organization. Most professional organizations in the literature teaching area would organize annual conferences during which instructional issues are discussed (Crandall and Miller, 2014).

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to find out strategies used to teach literature, the challenges associated with the teaching of literature and what can be done to better the teaching of literature in the department. Typically, teachers provide students with an overview of the novels/novellas to be studied and then divide the students into groups to prepare and give presentations either on chapters of the books or on topics developed in such books. Key criteria used to select the books include accessibility, students' language proficiency to mention but some of them. However, it is worth noting that only one novel is studied per semester, which is too limited because of the potential that literature holds to develop language students' language proficiency.

The difficulties mentioned by most of the respondents include the fact that, Benin being a French-speaking country, novels are not easily accessible. It has also been reported that students have a poor knowledge of the English language, which prevent them from understanding the novels. However, this lack of understanding is also due to poor reading skills and poor literary competence. In some cases, the overview provided by the teachers by way of introduction to the study of a novel is not comprehensive.

To address the above difficulties, all five respondents advocated for professional development. Nonetheless, all of them rely on the department to provide teacher development. Another solution worth mentioned is the establishment of a literature teaching association. As far as learners' difficulties are concerned, the respondents suggested the organization of reading clubs and reading competitions with rewards to the winning students.

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