Investigating the Decrease in Literature Reading Habits among Students of English as a Foreign Language
The case of 3rd-year LMD students at Skikda University

Imen LOUCIF[1] iD

[1]Université 20 Aout 1955, Skikda, Algeria

Abstract

This paper investigates the decrease in literature reading habits among third-year LMD students at Skikda University. It aims to identify the main factors underlying this decrease and provide guidelines for promoting literature reading. A questionnaire was administered to third-year LMD students to address the paper's questions. The discussion of the results revealed that students' daily activities, such as watching television and using the internet, jeopardize their reading habits. Additionally, a lack of motivation and ineffective teaching methods for literature contribute to the decline. Moreover, the paper highlights other contributing factors, as perceived by students. Ultimately, this study concludes with recommendations and suggestions that aim to cultivate lifelong readers and lovers of literature.

Keywords: EFL students, literary competence, literature, reading, reading habits

ملخص

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى التحقيق في انخفاض عادات مطالعة الأدب لدى طلبة السنة الثالثة LMD في جامعة سكيكدة، كما ترمي إلى تحديد العوامل الرئيسية الكامنة وراء هذا الانخفاض، واقتراح بعض الإرشادات لتعزيز مطالعة الأدب. وقد تم جمع البيانات من خلال استبيان وُزِّع على طلبة السنة الثالثة LMD في الأدب الإنجليزي بجامعة سكيكدة. أظهرت مناقشة النتائج أن الأنشطة اليومية للطلبة، مثل مشاهدة التلفاز واستخدام الإنترنت، تؤثر سلبًا على عاداتهم القرائية. كما أن افتقارهم إلى الدافعية، إلى جانب أساليب تدريس الأدب غير الفعالة، يُعد من العوامل الرئيسية في هذا الانخفاض، بالإضافة إلى عوامل أخرى أشار إليها الطلبة، والتي سلطت هذه الورقة الضوء عليها. وفي الختام، تتضمن هذه الدراسة بعض التوصيات والمقترحات التي قد تُسهم في تنمية قرّاء محبين للأدب مدى الحياة.

كلمات مفتاحية : أدب، مطالعة، عادات المطالعة ، طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، كفاءة أدبية

Introduction

The ability to read and write is highly valued in today's society. Literacy acquisition has been widely promoted, and governments have invested significantly in teaching reading skills to children and adults.

Unfortunately, Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary provides a word unfamiliar to many: "Aliteracy," which means "*the quality or state of being able to read but uninterested in doing so*". The reading act in this way is only associated with specific activities, done in limited times, and robbed of any possible pleasure. This phenomenon has a firm hold on third-year LMD students of English at Skikda University. It has become a growing concern, as it even affects their interaction with literature, since reading literature is a key aspect of dealing with it. For them, literature is immensely underestimated. It is often considered a chore and is frequently skipped. Given what is noticeable at Skikda University, reading literature has become increasingly endangered, if not a dying habit.

Additionally, while previous studies have examined general reading habits among EFL students, few have focused on the specific decline in literature reading habits in Algerian higher education. Moreover, most available studies have focused on either early education or reading in general, not on literary reading in an EFL context.

Thus, this paper is particularly significant because of the limited research on illiteracy among Algerian EFL students. It serves as a reminder of the importance of reading and literature in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as both enhance EFL students' linguistic and cultural abilities. It also aims to raise awareness about the dramatic decrease in literature reading habits among Algerian students and encourage every educated person to take a stand against this cultural issue. Moreover, identifying the underlying factors of this decline can facilitate overcoming it and effectively instill a love for literature reading among EFL students.

The paper seeks to answer the following questions:
1- Why are EFL students' literature reading habits on the decline?
2- Who is responsible for this decrease?
3- Is it too late to instill lifelong reading habits in literature among our students?

Literature Review

Defining Reading

Reading can broadly be defined as the oral articulation of written symbols. However, its definition has undergone different developments over time. Thomas and Loring (1979) explain that *reading* is not merely decoding written symbols; it is a communicative and interactive process between the reader and the author, where the reader deciphers and constructs meanings from the author's written messages (as cited in Harris & Sipay, 1990). According to Schoenbach (1999), reading is viewed as a complex problem-solving activity that engages ideas, memories, and knowledge evoked by words and sentences in texts to construct a sense of them. Furthermore, Kern (2000) briefly defines reading as an active, constructive, and meaning-making process. In these lights, *reading* is not merely the decoding of text through recognizing words and reproducing messages; it is a complex process in which readers construct meaning using various strategies and prior knowledge.

The Importance of Reading

Reading is the foundation of all learning. It plays a vital role in cognitive development and academic success. It is scientifically proven that reading enhances memory and maintains learning capacity. It also develops concentration, interpretation, and analysis. Consequently, it cultivates critical thinking. Moreover, it builds vocabulary and enhances the writing style. Besides, Ngoboka (2011) notes that reading increases understanding and cultural sensitivity (as cited in UNESCO, 2011). In his study of science students' achievements, Worthy (2002) highlights that students who spend more time on pleasure reading also achieve higher academic performance. He cites the correlation between pleasure reading and educational achievements as follows:

> We know that students who exhibit more favorable attitudes toward reading tend to achieve at higher levels (Gottfried, 1990; Nagy et al., 2000; Worrell et al., 2007). We also know that outstanding high school writers are more likely to be dedicated readers with a genuine pleasure in reading, both within and outside the school curriculum (Applebee, 1978). We know that college students with grades of 90% and above report spending more time reading for pleasure (Chen, 2007). …, and students identified as academically "gifted" read as many as four times as many books as those read by students with average ability. (Terman & Lima, 1926, p. 568)

In sum, reading should be understood not only as a linguistic skill but also as a gateway to cultural awareness, empathy, and critical thought.

The Place of Reading in the EFL Classroom

Because of its importance as a communicative and learning tool in both L1 and L2 contexts, reading is a skill that must be taught. Generally, learners of English should first learn to read, so that they can read to enhance their learning. In other words, reading is a necessary tool for language acquisition. Indeed, reading enables learners to master additional skills and perform better in various courses.

In Algeria, students of English departments have studied the English language for at least nine years. The majority of students belong to literary streams, while some belong to scientific or technical streams. Educators divide reading into intensive and extensive courses. However, intensive reading has become the dominant mode of teaching reading in language classrooms, especially at intermediate levels. However, research shows that "intensive reading alone will not help learners develop their reading fluency, a crucial skill that mature readers acquire only after repeated exposure to massive quantities of written text" (Renandya, 2007, p.135). In addition, according to Bentayeb (2010), reading modules often focus on idioms and culture, neglecting the communicative aspect, and reading comprehension courses are limited in scope.

Defining Literature

Defining literature can be very elusive. Throughout history, there have been various attempts to do that. Huck (1979), for instance, emphasizes the relationship between the imagination and the linguistic aspects. He defines literature as "the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language" (p.4). Linguistically speaking, Birch (1989) adds, "Literature is considered to be the expression of language at its fullest use" (p.2). Townsend (1990) defines literature as:

All works of imagination which are transmitted primarily using the written word or spoken narrative, which are novels, stories, and poetry, with the addition of those works of non-fiction which, by their quality of style or insight, may be said to offer an experience of a literary nature. (as cited in NGUGI, 2011, p.60)

The "experience of a literary nature″ can be an equivalent of Brumfit and Carter's (1986) question: "How is it that some texts are read as literary and others are not?" They explain that a text is read as literature when we transcend its original function. For instance, Edward Gibbon's The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire and Winston Churchill's The Gathering Storm are read as literature, rather than as history books. Conversely, a work can start as literature and come to be read as factual material. Furthermore, in his attempt to answer "What is Literature?″, Meyer (1997), working from a prototype approach to word meaning, suggests that literary works:

- are written texts
- are marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, and meter
- are in a literary genre (poetry, prose fiction, or drama)
- are read aesthetically
- are intended by the author to be read aesthetically
- contain many weak implicatures (are deliberately somewhat open in interpretation). (p.4)

In other words, literature is marked by aesthetic intent, genre adherence, careful use of language, and openness to interpretation.

The Place of Literature in the EFL Context

In an EFL class, students can approach literature in two distinct ways. Carter and Long (1991) distinguish between the study of literature and its use as a resource. The study of literature means, "reading literature with an academic, institutionalized setting for purposes of obtaining qualifications in literary studies… it involves a considerable baggage of critical concepts, literary conventions and metalanguage" (Li, 1998, p.3). However, the use of literature as a resource means encouraging the student's "greater sensitivity and self-awareness and greater understanding of the world around us" (p.3).

The importance of literature in EFL classes stems from the fact that it represents an authentic sample of the target language. There is considerable evidence that highlights the usefulness of literature in language learning, as it offers a genuine and meaningful context for language acquisition. It can promote various language skills, including vocabulary knowledge, grammar, writing style, and critical thinking (Brumfit & Carter, 1986). Likewise, Collie and Slater (1987) emphasize its value in cultural enrichment and language immersion. Besides, EFL students deserve to discover that "English can be a beautiful language," not just a "practical and utilitarian" one (McConochie, 1982, p.232). In addition, Ghedeir and Naoua (2021) emphasize that literature promotes empathy, intercultural awareness, and holistic language development, making it a valuable component of the EFL classroom. Moreover, Ouhiba (2022) found that literature promotes critical thinking among Algerian students, mainly when used to stimulate higher-order thinking through analysis, interpretation, and synthesis. Benzoukh (2022) also demonstrated that students improve writing fluency and style when literary texts are used for creative, scaffolded activities such as paraphrasing or rewriting from a character's perspective.

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Nevertheless, some scholars agree that teaching literature is challenging, especially in a second-language or foreign-language context. Linguists such as Savvidou (2004) argue that literature should be excluded from the EFL curriculum because of its structural complexity, lack of conformity to standard grammatical rules, and remote cultural perspective. Similarly, Allami (2018) examined literature instruction in Algeria, showing that students' dislike stems more from outdated content and rigid instruction than from literature itself.

To conclude, we can say that the pros and cons of incorporating literature in a foreign language classroom stem from its linguistic and cultural richness. Its successful integration depends on both teacher enthusiasm and student engagement. Ultimately, whether it is approached as a subject or as content, "something useful can be gleaned from the study of literature", as Widdowson (1975, p.83) points out.

Methods and Materials

A survey method was employed to investigate the factors contributing to the decline in students' reading habits of literature. Participants completed a questionnaire comprising both open-ended and closed-ended questions.

Participants

A random sample of 30 third-year LMD students from the English Department at Skikda University participated in the study during the second semester. They were selected due to their two years of prior experience with English literature and adequate language proficiency.

Research Instruments

A questionnaire was administered to a sample of 30 students (third-year LMD students of English at Skikda University). It included 18 items, with six open-ended and 12 multiple-choice questions. It assessed students' reading habits, preferences, and attitudes toward literature. Students were randomly chosen.

Research Procedures

The questionnaire was distributed and explained to participants, who were encouraged to respond honestly. After distributing the questionnaire, students received equal instructions on how to answer; however, some students required additional clarification. It took them 30 to 45 minutes to finish and submit their answers. Data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Results

To simplify the layout of the obtained data, we divided the results into the following sections: general reading habits, preferred reading materials, daily activities, challenges in reading literature, reading motivation, awareness of literature's benefits, and perception of the educational system.

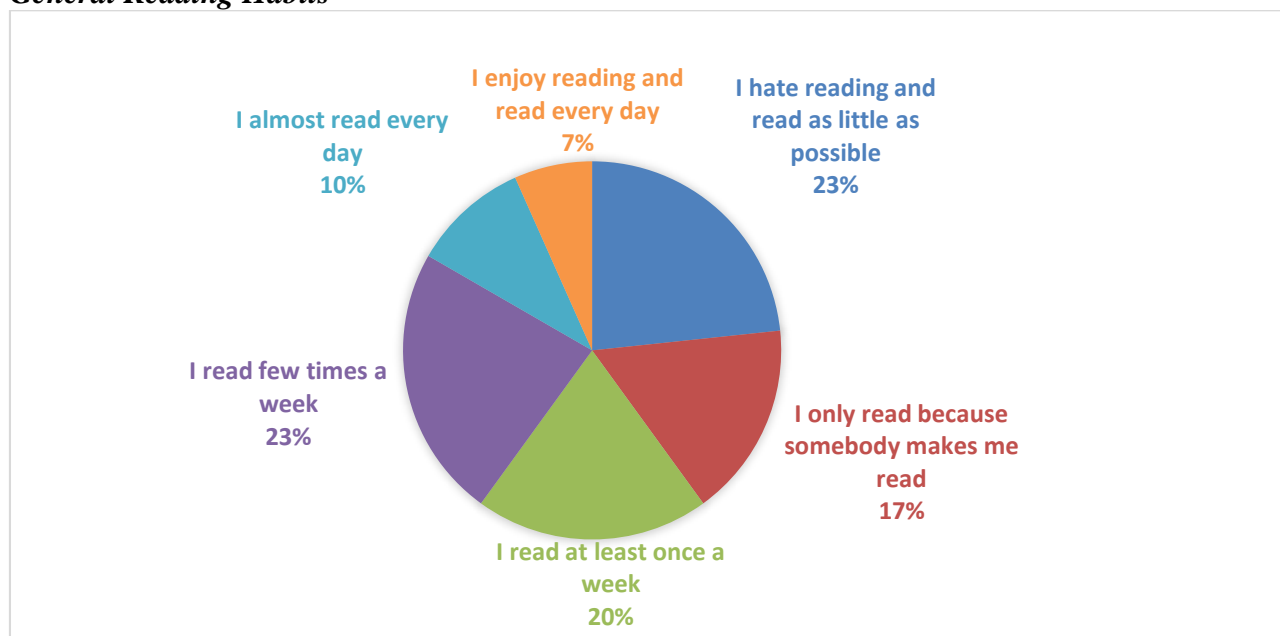## General Reading Habits

Figure 1. Students' attitudes towards reading in general

The findings indicate a noticeable lack of interest in reading among the participants. Only 6.67% of the students reported enjoying reading and said they read daily. 10% stated that they read almost every day, and 23.33% reported reading a few times a week. Conversely, 23.33% expressed a strong dislike for reading, 16.67% admitted they read only when they were obliged, and 20% read just once a week. These results indicate a general lack of reading motivation.
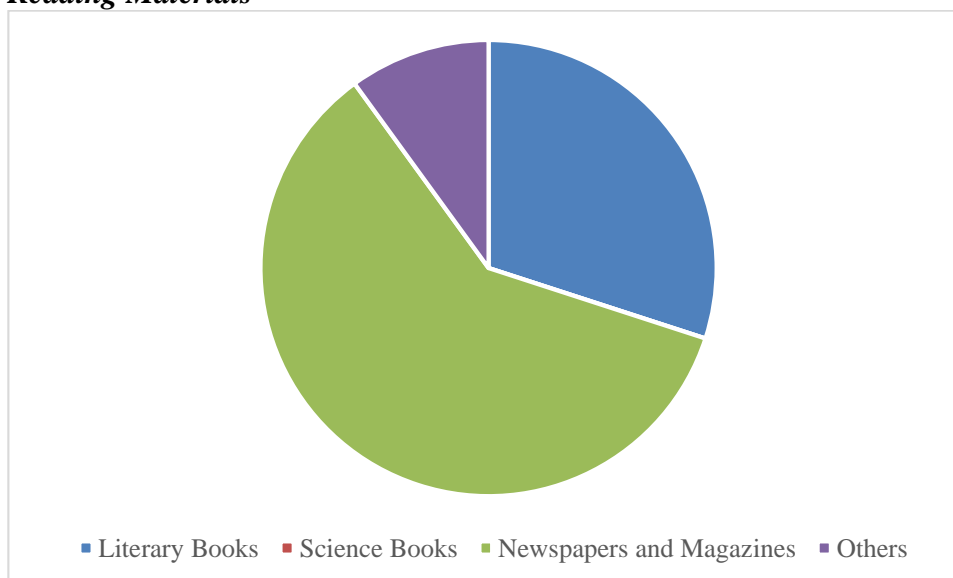
Preferred Reading Materials

Figure 2. Preferred reading materials

When asked about their preferred reading materials, 60% of the students preferred reading newspapers and magazines, whereas only 30% favoured literary books. Science books accounted for 16.67% of preferences, and 10% mentioned other genres, including religious texts. These preferences suggest that literary texts are less appealing to students than more accessible or topical materials.
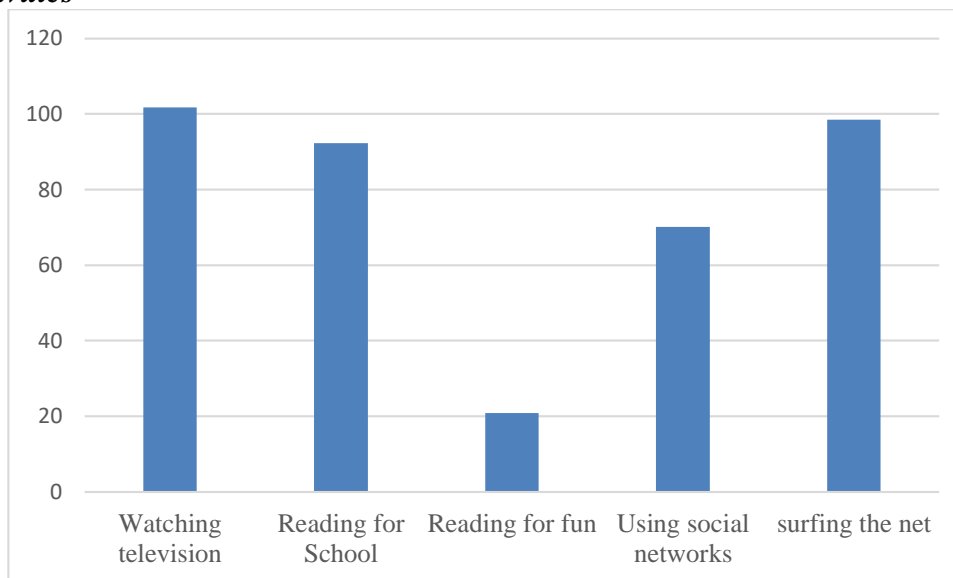
Daily Activities

Figure 3. Average time spent on daily activities (min/day)

The analysis of daily activities also suggests a limited role for literature in students' lives. Students spent an average of 102 minutes per day watching television and a combined total of 168.66 minutes surfing the net and using social media. Reading for academic purposes took up 93 minutes per day, and reading for enjoyment was the least popular activity, with only 21 minutes a day on average. Fourteen out of the thirty students admitted to not reading for pleasure at all.

These statistics show that the   internet and entertainment activities take up students' habits, marginalizing pleasure reading.
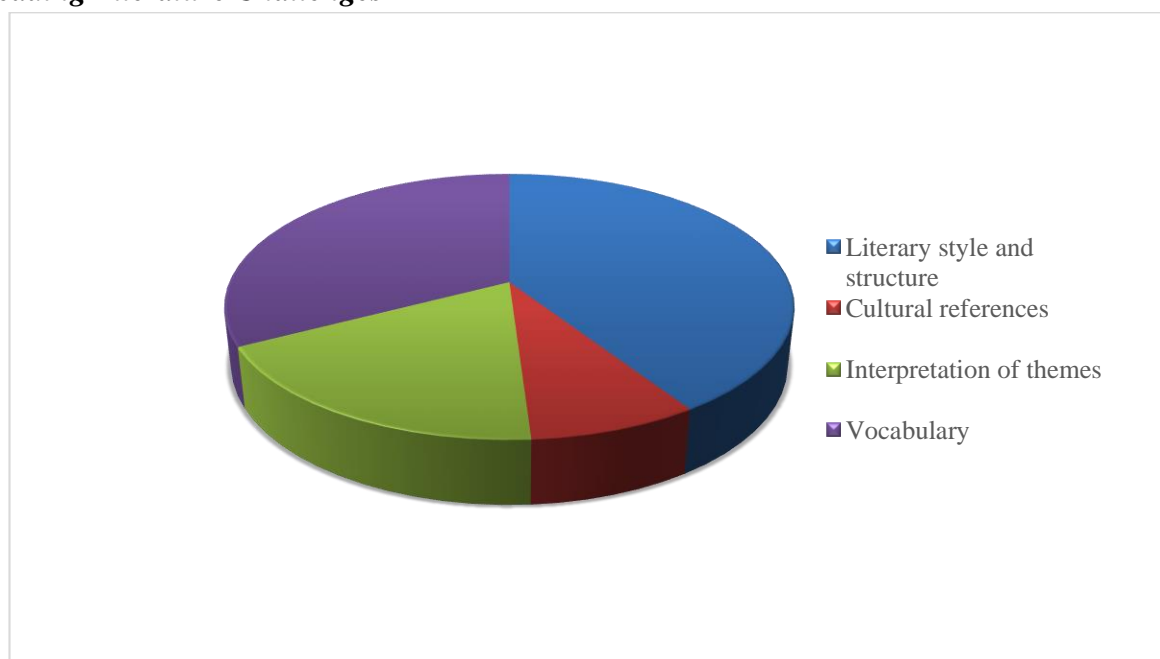
Reading Literature Challenges

Figure 4. Challenges in reading literature

To determine why students do not like reading English literature, the following question was asked: "Which aspect of reading English literature gives you the most trouble?" Students identified several barriers to engaging with literary texts. Literary style and structure were the

most commonly cited difficulties, as reported by 66.67% of respondents. Vocabulary challenges were mentioned by 53.33%, while 30% struggled with theme interpretation. Only 13.33% cited cultural references as challenging. This suggests that linguistic and structural aspects of literature are more significant deterrents than cultural unfamiliarity, primarily due to a lack of literary competence.
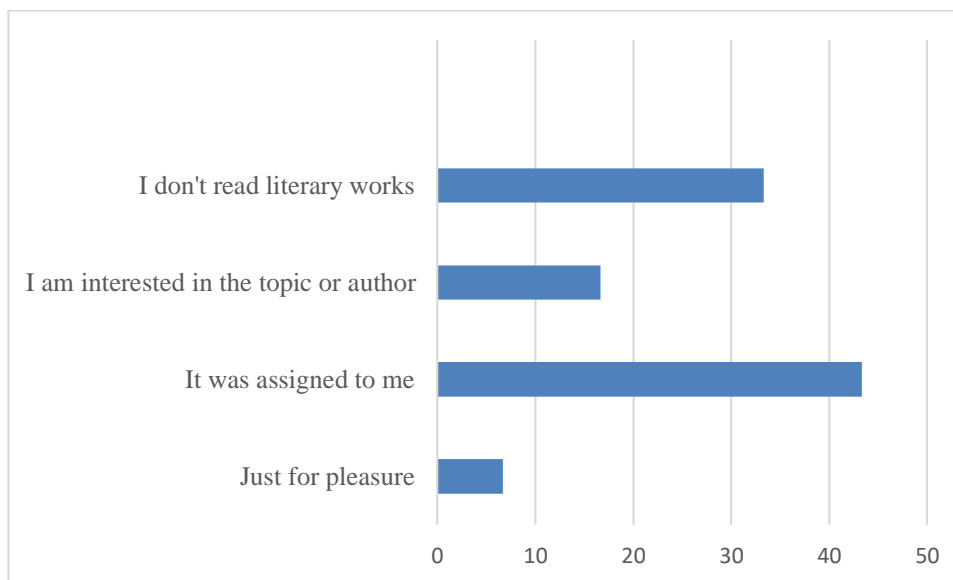
Reading Motivation

Figure 5. Motivation for reading literature

When asked why they read literary texts, 43.33% of students stated it was only because the material was assigned in class. Only 6.67% read for personal enjoyment, and 16.67% were motivated by interest in the topic or author. Alarmingly, 33.33% of participants reported not reading literature at all. These findings highlight a lack of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to engage with literary works.

Awareness of Literature's Benefits

Despite limited engagement, all students acknowledged that reading English literature helped improve language skills, especially vocabulary. Two students saw its impact on writing style, one on its contribution to reading and speaking skills, and another two on its contribution to cultural consciousness and critical thinking. These responses suggest that students' understanding of literature's value remains superficial and restricted.

Perception of the Educational System

The following question was asked: "Do you think that the Algerian educational system (from primary to secondary school) is effective in creating a reading-oriented generation?" to assess the effectiveness of the Algerian educational system in instilling a love of reading in our students. All participants agreed that the Algerian educational system failed to foster a passion for reading. Common reasons included the use of unengaging syllabi, students' over-reliance on the internet, and teachers' acceptance of this, as well as the reduction of reading activities in language classes across Arabic, French, and English. Many students also emphasized the exam-oriented nature of the system, which limits their exposure to reading beyond textbook content.

Beyond the main findings, students identified other contributing factors:
• Lack of interactive teaching styles and classroom activities.

• Poor access to libraries and reading materials.
• High prices of books and restricted choice.
• Overcrowded timetables that provide little time for pleasure reading.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the decline in literature reading habits among third-year LMD students of English at Skikda University, addressing three key questions.

First, the results indicate that the decline in literature reading is primarily due to a lack of motivation, limited exposure, and difficulty in understanding literary texts. Only 6.67% of students reported reading for personal enjoyment. The significant challenges mentioned were the complex literary style (66.67%), unfamiliar vocabulary (53.33%), and thematic difficulty (30%). Similarly, Ghedeir and Naoua (2021) also identified linguistic complexity as a major demotivator for EFL learners, a finding that mirrors our participants' reports of struggling with style and vocabulary. These findings align with Savvidou (2004), who questioned the place of literature in EFL due to its structural complexity and remote cultural context. The linguistic and structural challenges identified by students in this study affirm Savvidou's critique. However, cultural unfamiliarity was less of an issue (only 13.33%), likely because students had at least two years of literature coursework. In addition, the results align with Bentayeb's (2010) findings, which critique the narrow scope of reading modules in Algerian universities, noting their neglect of communicative and critical engagement with texts. The students in this study confirmed that their academic exposure to literature was primarily exam-oriented and lacked engagement in pleasurable reading.

Second, the decline cannot be attributed solely to students. Students overwhelmingly cited the Algerian educational system as ineffective in fostering a love for reading. All respondents agreed that reading was not promoted from primary to secondary education. This observation aligns with Worthy's (2002) emphasis that reading habits are shaped early and that sustained exposure and positive attitudes toward reading are crucial to academic success. Worthy specifically found that pleasure reading is correlated with better academic performance.

Finally, despite the students' limited reading engagement, the findings offer hope. All participants acknowledged that reading literature improves language proficiency, especially vocabulary, with some also citing benefits to writing, cultural knowledge, and critical thinking. These results resonate with previous research in the region. For instance, Al Tai and Al Nabhani (2012) noted that poetry can boost language skills when paired with performance or dramatization, helping to reduce fear and disengagement in the classroom. Benzoukh (2022) found that literature-based tasks, particularly those encouraging creative and oral expression, promote fluency in both written and spoken language. Furthermore, Ouhiba (2022) emphasized that critical thinking is best developed when students engage meaningfully with literature and are encouraged to interpret, evaluate, and critique texts. Participants' awareness suggests a recognition of literature's value, which can be built upon. Besides, according to Kern (2000) and Schoenbach (1999), reading is a meaning-making activity that connects to prior knowledge and personal experience. If educators adapt their methods to make literature more engaging through interactive teaching, guided reading, and relatable content, students may develop intrinsic motivation. The distinction made by Carter and Long (1991) between the study of literature and its use as a resource is critical here. While the academic study of literature may

feel burdensome, using literature as a means to enhance personal understanding and sensitivity can reframe its relevance to students' lives.

Recommendations and Suggestions

Based on our findings regarding the literature reading habits, interests, and attitudes of third-year LMD students, we recommend the following.

- English departments should consider scheduling a reading comprehension module. This module will enhance students' reading abilities and improve their reading strategies.
- Motivated teachers can produce motivated learners. Therefore, Literature teachers should be more enthusiastic about this module and attempt different methods that can sincerely appeal to their students. Students themselves suggested using technology to adapt some literary works into movies, which they found more meaningful and relevant to their experiences.
- Implementing literary circles proved to be an effective method in instilling a love for reading among EFL students. Literary circles are small, temporary discussion groups of students who have chosen to read the same work of literature. Their essence can facilitate EFL students' use of English in various real-life communication contexts, and most importantly, they can promote and enhance reading comprehension, motivation, and interests. Moreover, they can internalize regular reading habits that may last for a lifetime.
- Extensive reading programmes are also an effective method for promoting good literature reading habits. Therefore, every English department should consider implementing such programs.

Conclusion

This study reveals a critical decline in literature reading habits among third-year EFL students at Skikda University. The results highlight the concerning phenomenon of aliteracy, which is driven by both personal lack of interest and shortcomings in the educational system. Digital distractions, the complexity of literary texts, lack of motivation and creativity in literature classes, and the educational system's failure to promote pleasure reading all contribute to this issue. Our findings also show that students aspire to more interesting reading materials and more motivating and modern teaching methods.

By identifying those challenges and reflecting upon their causes, this study plays a vital role in Algerian EFL educational research. It urges the integration of more interactive, student-centred literary curricula, extensive reading practices, teacher training programmes, and better access to reading materials to promote literature not as a chore but rather as an inspiring linguistic and cultural experience among our EFL students.

About the Author
Imen LOUCIF holds a doctorate in English Language, Civilization, and Literature. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of Letters and Foreign Languages, University of 20 Août 1955, Skikda, Algeria. She brings eleven years of teaching experience in secondary education to her role. Her research interests include cultural studies, reading practices, and teaching methodologies. She is a firm believer in the power of reading to broaden perspectives and foster critical thinking. https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9572-0865

AI Statement

This document has benefited from the application of AI-driven tools, including Grammarly, to refine its linguistic aspects. These tools were utilised to correct grammar and spelling and

improve the overall writing style. It is acknowledged that the use of these technologies may introduce specific AI-generated linguistic patterns. However, the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented remain the sole work of the authors.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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