

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN STUDYING LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

The study aims to survey what strategy works best in teaching literature to suit student's needs in understanding and appreciating literature. For many university teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), the study of literature is indispensable because it exposes students to meaningful contexts that are replete with descriptive language and interesting characters (Van, 2009). Teaching literature to learners requires creativity, innovativeness and resourcefulness. It is through literature that they enhance critical thinking skills in reading literary texts. With appropriate strategies in teaching literature, the students may appreciate how to empathize with literary texts they read.

This paper presents the twelve learning activities used that are interesting and effective in studying literature. It was found out that BSDC respondents described film viewing and critiquing as very interesting and effective. Biology students described group discussion, reflective essays and role-playing as very interesting and effective. Only teacher-student discussion appeared to be very interesting and very effective. Sociology students described concept mapping as very interesting and effective, teacher-student discussion were very interesting and very effective, listening to a lecture and graded oral recitation were interesting and very effective. Information Technology students assessed all learning activities as interesting and effective. When the researcher surveyed the responses of language teachers, she found that graded oral recitation is the least interesting but effective. Through this study, language teachers can create better learning activities that can be most interesting and most effective in studying literature.

**Keywords:** literature, learning activities, strategies, teaching.

## INTRODUCTION:

Teaching literature to learners requires creativity, innovativeness and resourcefulness. It is through literature that they enhance critical thinking skills in reading literary texts. With appropriate strategies in teaching literature, the students may appreciate how to empathize with literary texts they read. What an individual student needs to know and how teachers should guide that student toward making good inferences about a particular text is not always clear. One scenario that leads to apathy in studying literature is that teachers “fail to emphasize the importance and value of analytical reading of literature” (Senechal, 2011).

Teaching literature should reflect and cater to students’ need- socially, morally, or physically. Therefore when teachers teach, they always have to look into the nature of the students they have and examine the level of their students’ performance or ability. Literature teachers should know their subject matter, develop appropriate instructional materials and be conscious of students’ learning behavior. More so, they should have the reading and teaching interest, should be able to understand students’ abilities and limitations, and should have the ability to create students’ interest regardless of classroom atmosphere. Throughout the teaching process of developing students’ ability to learn literature, teachers have a very important role to play (Ahmad 2009). It is in their capacity as a teacher that they play an important role in cultivating the love and interest for literature in students. Their passion for the subject, which is naturally articulated and expressed through their methodologies and approaches, has the power to influence the students’ interest and perception of life. Needless to say, it is up to the teacher to create and promote a positive environment and learning attitude for the students to feel comfortable with literature learning and not to feel scared and intimidated by the complexity of the texts chosen.

For many university teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), the study of literature is indispensable because it exposes students to meaningful contexts that are replete with descriptive language and interesting characters (Van, 2009). Structuring lessons around the reading of literature introduces a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues, and prose. In addition to developing students’ English language skills, teaching literature also appeals to their imagination, develops cultural awareness, and encourages critical thinking about plots, themes, and characters. Most importantly, the activities that one can apply with literature lessons easily conform to the student-centered and interactive tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Unfortunately, many postgraduate EFL teacher-training courses focus mainly on language teaching methodology and offer little guidance on the analytical methods that are essential to interpreting literature and designing effective classroom activities. This article presents a basic review of six approaches to teaching literature and includes a discussion based on the author’s own experience as well as feedback from colleagues who are familiar with the different approaches. Although this discussion pertains to the university-level EFL context in Vietnam, it can be generalized to the wider global audience of instructors of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Gritter (2011) cites a series of suggestions for ways that teachers can use particular teaching methods to make in-class discussion of literature more exciting for their students. It is noted that such discussions can improve students’ literacy and help them to connect the texts that they are reading to themselves, other works, and the world. One suggestion is to allow students to discuss the assigned reading in small groups or to write their observations in a journal. Another suggestion lays out a series of rules to create an appropriate classroom environment that will foster discussion, including rules about eye contact, the placement of the students’ chairs, and classroom management practices. Another suggestion is to teach students how to ask engaging questions about the reading.

Johannessen (1992) presents four introductory activities designed to help students with their reading problems, motivate them to read, and help them turn their interpretations of literature into effective compositions. The paper presents samples for each of the four activities (“Opinionnaires,” Scenarios, Simulations, and Role Playing), discussions concerning implementation of the activity, and follow-up writing activities. The paper concludes that introductory activities can enliven literary study, help students learn how to interpret and write about literature, and help them become more independent learners.

McDiarmid (1995) has made publication reports on a study exploring how prospective English teachers

view literature and how they think literature is taught and learned. The study is based on an extensive interview protocol, the "Understanding Literature for Teaching Interview." The protocol consists principally of a series of tasks, such as developing sample lessons and tests, designed to elicit the students' views on literature (including evaluation of various texts as literature, discussion of a literary text or author, text analysis, and critical theory) and views on teaching (teaching text analysis and critical theory, text selection, assessing pupil knowledge and understanding, and teaching strategies and scenarios). In carrying out these tasks, prospective teachers draw on their knowledge and understanding of literature and of the teaching of literature. As well as being useful for collecting data on prospective teachers' knowledge and understandings, the tasks have pedagogical value, requiring students to confront fundamental issues about the nature of literary study, the nature of knowing in literature, and the teaching of literature (Alcantara, 2000).

What prompts the researchers to conduct this study is to widen the scope of techniques and use these techniques that would cater to the interest of the students. In literature, students appreciate more a literary piece if the learning activity used is appropriate to their preference whether the reading material is difficult or not. It is on these learning activities used that the course becomes interesting and fun for different types of learners. Thus, using the appropriate learning activities in teaching literature diminishes the impression that students have to read classical novels and participate in endless discussions. Further, when these activities are effectively performed the learners take the responsibility of their own learning, discover what is beyond their imagination and deepen their philosophy about life.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:**

This study greatly benefits language teachers and students. This study serves as a guide for English language teachers in planning interesting, effective and suitable literature lessons for their classes. For the students, they may enjoy studying literature by performing activities suited to their interest.

### **STUDY OBJECTIVES:**

This study aims to survey what strategy works best in teaching literature to suit student's needs in understanding and appreciating literature. Specifically, it seeks to identify:

- 1) what learning activities are the most interesting and most effective in studying literature based on the perception of the students; and,
- 2) what learning activities are most interesting and most effective in studying literature based on the perception of language teachers.

### **METHODOLOGY:**

The study uses a descriptive survey research. The researcher made use of a teacher-made survey questionnaire that contains the twelve learning activities such as concept mapping of a poem, short story, novel; film viewing and critiquing; group discussion about the selected text; discussion of a topic with a partner; reflective essays; role-playing; story telling using visual aids; teacher-student discussion; listening to a lecture; individual oral reporting; and, graded oral recitation in studying literature. The respondents are 10 BS DevCom students, 7 BS Biology students, 12 AB Sociology students and 172 BSIT students including 6 language teachers under College of Development Communication and Arts & Sciences.

To interpret the data, average mean and a modified Likert Scale were used to determine which learning strategies are most interesting and most effective.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:**

Language teachers, in order to make literature subjects interesting and effective must find ways to achieve optimum learning for the students through learning interactions. According to Collie and Slater (1987) cited by Rashid (2010), this interaction can be a source of enjoyment for the students. When

students enjoy what they do they are motivated to engage in the learning process.

The researcher conducted the study to survey the learning activities that stimulates meaningful interaction between the teachers and students. Based on the data gathered, the students of Development Communication perceive the learning activities as interesting except film viewing and critiquing with a description of very interesting or 4.10. This result may be attributed to frequent exposures of DevCom students in electronic instructional materials such as video-camera recorders, LCD projectors as well as recording of stage performances. The DevCom students also undergo workshops on photography as part of their curricular activities that allow them to become more inclined into visual and aesthetics.

For Biology students, there are eight learning activities that are found interesting to them. They are as follows: concept mapping, film viewing and critiquing, discussion of a topic with a partner, writing a poem, story telling using visual aids, listening to a lecture, individual oral reporting and graded oral recitation. The learning activities that are found very interesting to them are the following: reflective essays, group discussion about the selected text, role-playing, and teacher-student discussion. Reflective writing uses a personal experience to enhance self-awareness and professional growth. More than simple storytelling, reflective writing enables both the reader and writer to examine complex, ethically ambiguous, troubling, or inspiring situations to augment critical thinking skills and emotional awareness (Walling, 2013). Also, the nature of the course influences the learning habits of the Biology students. For instance, they have to work for an experiment and usually they work in groups. Analyzing experiment results done in groups encourages Biology students to feel at ease with their peers and discussion in a less formal tone makes them be more open to express their ideas.

The Sociology students, only two learning activities are found very interesting: concept mapping of a poem, short story, novel and teacher-student discussion. Concept maps provide a clear sequence of events and highlight the major points of the text. Tackling social issues and students' community involvement encourage them to appreciate discussion inside the classroom.

The Information Technology students showed a neutral response to the study. All learning activities are assessed as interesting. The researcher noted that these learning activities are commonly encountered during literature classes.

**Table 1. Learning activities used that are interesting in studying literature**

Learning Activities	Mean	BSDC	Mean	BSBIO	Mean	AB Socio	Mean	BSIT
1. Concept mapping of a poem, short story, novel	3.80	Interesting	3.43	Interesting	4.12	Very Interesting	3.45	Interesting
2. Film viewing and critiquing	4.10	Very Interesting	3.43	Interesting	3.75	Interesting	3.85	Interesting
3. Group discussion about the selected text	3.51	Interesting	4.0	Very Interesting	3.5	Interesting	3.45	Interesting
4. Discussion of a topic with a partner	3.78	Interesting	3.14	Interesting	3.5	Interesting	3.32	Interesting
5. Writing a poem	3.27	Interesting	3.0	Interesting	3.5	Interesting	3.28	Interesting
6. Reflective essays	3.42	Interesting	4.0	Very Interesting	3.75	Interesting	3.27	Interesting
7. Role –playing	3.68	Interesting	4.14	Very Interesting	3.75	Interesting	3.74	Interesting
8. Story telling using visual aids	3.19	Interesting	3.43	Interesting	3.62	Interesting	3.22	Interesting
9. Teacher-student discussion	3.60	Interesting	4.14	Very Interesting	4.0	Very Interesting	3.67	Interesting
10. Listening to a Lecture	3.60	Interesting	3.86	Interesting	3.87	Interesting	3.58	Interesting
11. Individual oral reporting	3.34	Interesting	3.0	Interesting	3.62	Interesting	3.0	Interesting
12. Graded oral recitation	3.41	Interesting	3.14	Interesting	3.87	Interesting	3.26	Interesting

Table 2 shows the results which learning activities used is effective in studying literature. Almost all of the learning activities are effective to DevCom students. The least effective learning activity to them is writing a poem. This activity requires creativity and deep thinking. This idea is not appealing to the students in studying literature because of their lack of ideas on the topic. The researcher believed that

limited vocabulary is another factor why students are not inclined to writing poems. The students have difficulty in translating their ideas from native tongue to second language due to linguistic factors (i.e., structure and meaning). Padak (2001) says some learners (and teachers) have negative memories of their previous encounters with poetry because too much emphasis was placed on “the poet’s intent” or on dissecting poems to determine their rhyme schemes or on memorizing definitions for literary terms like *personification* and *alliteration*. All other learning activities are considered effective by DevCom students.

Teacher-student discussion is a very effective learning activity to Biology students. Since the subject Biology is a content course, the students deemed it appropriate to have a student-teacher interaction. A student becomes an active learner in the class. Other learning activities are perceived as effective in studying literature.

To Sociology students, the very effective learning strategies are teacher-student discussion, listening to a lecture and graded oral recitation. Graded recitation may be very effective but not very interesting to the students. Perhaps, oral recitation requires immediacy to respond at the same time obliges the student to answer the question correctly. According to Cotton, questioning has a long and venerable history as an educational strategy. And indeed, the Socratic method of using questions and answers to challenge assumptions, expose contradictions, and lead to new knowledge and wisdom is an undeniably powerful teaching approach.

Information Technology students describe all the learning activities as effective. Based from the results, the students assessed each learning activity within the range of 3.0. This means that all learning activities are effective. The researcher observed that the students might be expecting of activities that require electronic instructional materials found to be most interesting and most effective. Other learning activities suggested by IT students include blogging and educational field trip.

**Table 2. Learning activities used that are effective in studying literature**

Learning Activities	Mean	BSDC	Mean	BSBIO	Mean	AB Socio	Mean	BSIT
1. Concept mapping of a poem, short story, novel	3.91	Effective	3.28	Effective	3.75	Effective	3.59	Effective
2. Film viewing and critiquing	3.86	Effective	3.0	Effective	3.87	Effective	3.85	Effective
3. Group discussion about the selected text	3.73	Effective	3.43	Effective	3.25	Effective	3.46	Effective
4. Discussion of a topic with a partner	3.61	Effective	3.28	Effective	3.37	Effective	3.37	Effective
5. Writing a poem	2.96	Least Effective	3.14	Effective	3.25	Effective	3.25	Effective
6. Reflective essays	3.28	Effective	3.28	Effective	3.62	Effective	3.19	Effective
7. Role –playing	3.81	Effective	3.14	Effective	3.87	Effective	3.63	Effective
8. Story telling using visual aids	3.36	Effective	3.71	Effective	3.62	Effective	3.44	Effective
9. Teacher-student discussion	3.80	Effective	4.0	Very Effective	4.12	Very Effective	3.67	Effective
10. Listening to a Lecture	3.87	Effective	3.86	Effective	4.12	Very Effective	3.62	Effective
11. Individual oral reporting	3.51	Effective	3.86	Effective	3.75	Effective	3.05	Effective
12. Graded oral recitation	3.48	Effective	3.71	Effective	4.0	Very Effective	3.34	Effective

Table 3 illustrates the learning activities that are very interesting and very effective as perceived by literature teachers. First, concept mapping gives the students a clear mind flow of the story because it is easier to determine the sequence of events. Concept mapping facilitates the learning process by allowing the instructor to identify missing or irrelevant concepts, trivial or incorrect linking phrases, etc. The concept map provides the basis for discussions between students and their instructors, to clarify relationships such as the one depicted, and generally to gain a better understanding of the subject matter (Cañas, 2003).

Second, student-teacher discussion is popular among teachers and learners for the purpose of brainstorming or listening to opinions. It is very important that in order to take place there must be exchange of ideas between the teacher and the students. This kind of interaction implies that the



students are curious to find answers and teachers find ways to make the discussion noteworthy.

Third is discussion of a topic with a partner. A student talks about his ideas with his peer. Together they analyze, analyze, review, clarify and sometimes correct each others' work. As Pierce (2009) cited, this can help to clarify and reinforce the reviewers' knowledge and understanding of the area and encourages the development of advanced critical thinking and higher-order cognitive skills (Topping, 1998; Gehringer et al., 2001).

Fourth is group discussion. Teachers encourage students to participate in groups. According to Loser, in initiating this activity, the teacher assigns problems to heterogeneous groups of five to seven students and facilitates collaboration to solve the problems. Members of the group will have different knowledge and skills to contribute, so the groups will tend to solve problems better than the individual members can on their own. In the process, students will learn knowledge, skills, and strategies from each other, especially if you have them discuss the processes they used.

Fourth, film viewing appeals to teachers as a form of entertainment. More than 90% of teachers (from inexperienced and experienced groups) liked to watch movies about the literary text read and enjoyed reading short stories and novels (Abdullah, 2007).

Fifth, role-playing is one way of expressing emotions of the students. Through this, they experience things that are new to them.

Finally, reflective essays stimulate students to express their personal experiences. Other topics that students compose denote description of characters, analyzing events, theme, and lesson learned. In the next sequence of activities, students begin to apply the skills they have learned to an independent writing situation (Johannesen, 1992).

As observed, these learning activities generate positive student response and a good springboard in understanding the literary texts.

Based on the study, the interesting and effective learning activities in studying literature are discussion of a topic with a partner, writing a poem, listening to a lecture, individual oral reporting. While these activities become routine activities among students, these are considered practicable in analyzing literary texts.

Language teachers perceive storytelling using visual aids as interesting and very effective. Because of its nature, teachers are enlightened with the students' creativity. On one hand, both teachers and students experience the pleasure of listening to personal stories, anecdotes, and unforgettable tales. This confirms what Sialongo (2010) says that Literature is a product of a particular culture that concretizes man's array of values, emotions, actions and ideas.

Learning is fun yet with exemption to graded oral recitation. This is found as least interesting but an effective learning activity. Language teachers know that students have a hard time expressing themselves in English and oftentimes students hesitate to respond to their teacher's questions during graded oral recitation. Still, graded oral recitation is an effective way of measuring the students' understanding of the literary text.

**Table 3: Teachers' perception on learning activities used in studying literature**

Learning Activities	Mean	Description	Mean	Description
1. Concept mapping of a poem, short story, novel	4.17	Very Interesting	4.0	Very Effective
2. Film viewing and critiquing	4.27	Very Interesting	4.0	Very Effective
3. Group discussion about the selected text	4.17	Very Interesting	4.0	Very Effective
4. Discussion of a topic with a partner	3.5	Interesting	3.5	Effective
5. Writing a poem	3.5	Interesting	3.5	Effective
6. Reflective essays	4.0	Very Interesting	4.0	Very Effective
7. Role –playing	4.67	Very Interesting	4.33	Very Effective
8. Story telling using visual aids	3.83	Interesting	4.17	Very Effective
9. Teacher-student discussion	4.17	Very Interesting	4.17	Very Effective
10. Listening to a Lecture	3.67	Interesting	3.67	Effective
11. Individual oral reporting	3.16	Interesting	3.0	Effective
12. Graded oral recitation	2.16	Least Interesting	3.5	Effective

The researcher did only a survey to find out the respondents' perception on the learning activities. She included a discussion based on her experience as a literature teacher. Informal discussions with her colleagues served as feedback in identifying instructional strategies that work best in teaching literature. One of her colleagues commented that a strategy can only be effective if the teacher and the students met the objectives and achieved the desired results. Even though the strategy used is effective based on the teachers' perception it may not guarantee that this will work well to the students. Agee (2000) stated that approaches to literature that are effective for some students may not be effective for others. Similarly, not all interesting activities are effective and not all effective activities are interesting. Though there are factors that limit the students' learning, language teachers are still a good source of motivating students to appreciate literature through a repertoire of learning activities.

### **FINDINGS:**

1. For BS DevCom students, film viewing and critiquing is perceived as very interesting. Most of the learning activities are effective except writing a poem.
2. For BS Bio students, group discussion, reflective essays, role-playing and teacher-student discussion are perceived as very interesting. Only teacher-student discussion appears to be very effective.
3. For AB Socio students, concept mapping and teacher-student discussion are described as very interesting. Teacher-student discussion, listening to a lecture and graded oral recitation are described as very effective.
4. For BSIT students, all of the learning activities are described as interesting and effective.
5. Students of different curricula have different preferred learning activities in studying literature.
6. Based on language teachers' and students' perception of the learning activities, concept mapping of a poem, short story, novel, film viewing and critiquing, group discussion about the selected text, reflective essays, role –playing are described as very interesting and very effective. Storytelling using visual aids is described as interesting yet very effective.
7. There are learning activities which are perceived very effective by the teachers but not very effective as perceived by the students such as concept mapping, film viewing and critiquing, group discussion about the selected text, reflective essays, role-playing and storytelling using visual aids.
8. There are no most interesting and most effective learning activities for students and teachers.
9. Teachers and students differ in some of their perceived interesting and effective learning activities.
10. Concept mapping, film viewing and critiquing, group discussion about the selected text, discussion of a topic with a partner, writing a poem, reflective essays, role-playing, storytelling using visual aids, teacher- student discussion, listening to a lecture, individual oral reporting are the interesting and effective learning activities perceived by the students and language teachers.

### **CONCLUSIONS:**

The study reaffirms that teaching and learning Literature is quite challenging and interesting not only for students but to the teachers of Literature as well. Teachers are committed to make students interested in learning the course. This function and responsibility of the teachers call for a reservoir of strategies, techniques and activities to make literature interesting and exciting for all students. The teachers have to remember that activities and strategies should be appropriate and effective to enhance meaningful and productive learning.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. The result of the study will be used as basis in the preparation of the course syllabus in literature.
2. Language teachers should use the effective learning activities in teaching literature to ensure a meaningful student learning.
3. Literature and Language teachers should include other learning activities in teaching literature such as learning log, literary group discussion, field trip, blogging, and portfolio making.

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