



Optionist and Non-Optionist Teachers' Use of Strategies for Teaching English Literature: Is There a Common Ground?

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this qualitative study were to discover the strategies employed by optionist and non-optionist teachers in teaching English literature and to determine whether there is any common ground in their use of the strategies. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with four English teachers—two optionist and two non-optionist—who had been teaching secondary school English for more than ten years. Ten (10) themes on instructional strategies emerged from the interview data, highlighting the teachers' use of student-centred learning activities such as brainstorming, role playing and group work, dictionary use, repetition, code-switching and extensive questioning. The non-optionist teachers appear to rely quite frequently on getting students to understand literary texts through the use of dictionaries and alternating between English and the students' mother tongue, while the optionist teachers prefer to opt for strategies that demand students to be more independent in learning. The findings found considerable common ground between the optionist and non-optionist teachers despite their dissimilar training and qualifications. Interestingly, both groups of teachers believed in active student-centred strategies to stimulate students' interest in English literature and to empower highly proficient students towards more independent learning of the subject. The findings pave the way for a more in-depth investigation into how the Ministry of Education can help non-optionist teachers to improve their use of English literature teaching strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is taught as a second language in every Malaysian school and is one of the compulsory subjects in both the primary and secondary school curricula. As for literature, it is a component of the English language curriculum that is taught in Malaysian schools. The traditional understanding of literature is that it is a form of human expression encapsulated in vast body of written works (Rexroth, 1998) covering multiple different genres such as fiction (e.g., short stories, novels, folktales, science fiction and dramas) and non-fiction (e.g., biographies, autobiographies, letters, memoirs, diaries and historical accounts), as well as poems, folklore and urban legends.

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It has been a great concern that there is a large number of students who are still not able to master the language despite 11 years of learning English in school (Abdullah & Sidek, 2021; Uri & Aziz, 2018). Thus, the incorporation of the literature component into the English language curriculum for Malaysian students since 2000 shows that the government is looking seriously into the problem of students' language proficiency by means of enhancing the reading culture and development of moral values among them through literature appreciation.

Fundamentally, in terms of English language teaching, the Ministry of Education is assigning English teachers into two different categories, based on their academic qualification: the optionist and non-optionist English teachers. Despite this, both still play significant roles in ensuring the students' mastery in English lessons, including the literature component. However, there were concerns about the strategies employed by them in the classroom, which may not be based on sound theoretical and pedagogical knowledge of how English literature should be taught (Tan & Ariffin, 2022; Prathiba & Yunus, 2019). From the point of view of teacher training and teacher quality, non-optionist English teachers are claimed to be not as capable in the language as the optionist English teachers since their exposure to English language components such as grammar, phonetics and most importantly, literature components in English is substantially lesser (Tan & Ariffin, 2022; Abdullah & Sidek, 2021; Sukri & Yunus, 2018). Non-optionist teachers' lack of knowledge in the methods and strategies properly suited for teaching English literature has created a concern that it may prevent the aims of the Literature Component in English from being achieved. Hence, there is a need to explore and examine the instructional methods and strategies used by non-optionist teachers in teaching the English literature component and compare them with the practices of optionist teachers.

The objectives of this study were to discover the strategies employed by optionist and non-optionist teachers in teaching English literature and to determine whether there is any common ground in their use of strategies. These objectives were meant to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the strategies used by optionist and non-optionist English teachers to teach English literature meaningfully to students?
2. What is the common ground in their use of strategies for teaching English literature?

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate and compare the instructional strategies used by optionist and non-optionist English teachers in teaching the English literature component in Malaysian schools, with the goal of identifying common practices and providing insights to enhance teacher training and classroom instruction, thereby enhancing students' language proficiency. The findings of this study are hoped to provide valuable information to the Ministry of Education to examine the instructional discrepancies, if any, between optionist and non-optionist teachers, and act upon them accordingly to pave the way for a better teaching of the literature component in English. This will indirectly benefit the students as the teachers would then be able to contribute effectively to their needs in the English language classroom.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Why Teach Literature in the Malaysian English Classroom?*

Many researchers and practitioners of ELT had discussed and outlined the reasons why literature must be taught to students. Linguists, for instance, pointed out the intricate connection between reading and evaluating literary works with the language itself (Violetta-Irene, 2015). Literature also assists in the development of language proficiency in language learning. Suliman and Yunus (2014) claimed that literature is capable of improving students' language proficiency. Muthusamy et al. (2017) stated that the teaching and learning of literature in Malaysia is fast becoming a recognized force in acquiring language proficiency. Learning literature indirectly assists in developing English language mastery. Learners will

be introduced to new words and poetic devices that are rarely uttered in daily conversations besides being able to explore different settings portrayed in literary texts. These are some of the beautiful elements gained by learning literature.

According to Nesamalar et. al. (2005), teachers can bring about language development in students by using literature as a model of language use, as well as a stimulus and context for language-based activities. When a model of language is used, it shows how vocabulary, grammar and patterns of discourse may be used effectively in various forms of writing to convey a message that appeals to the senses and arouses a response. The reason for this claim was mentioned by Ganakumaran (2003, as cited in Hwang & Embi, 2007) as the reading of literary texts involves the development of complex skills and tools of inquiry and these skills and tools may be interpreted to include the gathering of information related to an issue or problem, an analysis of persona values as they relate to the issue or problem, reflecting upon various options for solution, and selecting and applying the most appropriate option.

2.2 Strategies in Teaching Literature

In teaching English literature, there are a lot of strategies that can be employed by the teacher. These strategies are very important to ensure efficient teaching and a meaningful learning experience because teachers need to cater to the diversity of students' proficiency (Lee et al., 2023; Yusof et al., 2020; Juango, 2018). Literature can be very dry, especially when the students are not particularly inclined towards the language and towards reading. Therefore, it is imperative that the strategies teachers use to teach English literature must be meaningful and enjoyable for the students. Velayutham and Yunus (2019, as cited in Hashim & Abd Talib, 2019) mentioned that teachers need to deliver their literature lessons in a way that they are not only enjoyable but also meaningful to the students. Not to mention, cognitive and compensation strategies also contribute significantly to supporting teaching and learning sessions in English classrooms (Sani & Ismail, 2021).

In choosing a good strategy to teach literature, it is better for the teacher to be student-centred and consider students' prior knowledge and experience in studying literary materials. Student-centred strategies will better allow the students to relate to their previous knowledge, as well as to navigate their literature learning the best way possible (Wintersparv, 2021). Active learning strategies make students become more motivated and increase their interest in learning the subject. For instance, a qualitative study conducted by Singh et al. (2020) demonstrated how the usage of student-centred activities impacted the ESL students in developing higher-order thinking skills in English literature. Both Lee et al. (2023) and Sheikh et. al (2019) claimed that activities such as role plays and group work will reduce students' level of anxiety in learning, besides boosting their motivation to learn.

Sometimes, the use of visuals in teaching literature can also assist students' comprehension of literary content. In a study conducted by Shabiralyani et. al (2015), it was proven that the use of visual aids in teaching positively impacted students' understanding of the text. In another research by Huseyin and Efecioglu (2015), which studied the role of graphic novels in English language teaching, it was revealed that there was a significant difference in achievement between the control group and experimental group. It was found that graphics not only aided students' learning of the target language in general, but they also shaped their actual use of the language. A study conducted by Wirawan (2019) showed that teachers favoured the repetition strategy to be used in their classrooms. The study showed that students who learned English literature with the repetition strategy obtained better results compared to another group of students who did not use repetition in their learning. It was concluded in the study that the repetition strategy employed by teachers in their teaching of literature had an influence on the ability of the students to absorb the lessons discussed in class, and the findings were in line with Lee et al. (2023).

According to Novianti and Said (2021), code-switching in the teaching and learning of a second language facilitated learning. It was also said that code-switching is usually done spontaneously

according to some situations that need instant understanding. A study by Hmeadat (2021) revealed that there were positive impacts of using limited code-switching in a second language classroom.

2.3 Optionist and Non-Optionist Teachers in Teaching English Literature in Malaysia

In Malaysian secondary schools, English teachers are commonly categorized as optionist or non-optionist based on their academic qualifications and specialisation. Optionist teachers are formally trained in the English language, often with a focus on literature, while non-optionist teachers usually come from other subject backgrounds but are assigned to teach English due to staffing needs. This categorisation affects their confidence, content knowledge, and pedagogical approaches in literature instruction (Abdullah & Sidek, 2021). Literature in the English curriculum is not only intended to improve language proficiency but also to enhance students' critical thinking and cultural understanding. However, the effectiveness of literature teaching heavily relies on the teacher's content mastery and ability to engage students meaningfully with texts.

Recent studies have indicated that non-optionist teachers often faced challenges in delivering the literature component effectively. Their limited exposure to literary theory and pedagogical strategies can lead to more surface-level instruction, typically involving translation, dictionary use, and guided reading (Tan & Ariffin, 2022). In contrast, optionist teachers tend to integrate a broader range of student-centred strategies, including literary analysis, peer discussion, and reflective writing, aimed at developing deeper literary appreciation (Yusof et al., 2020). Despite these differences, both groups play critical roles in ensuring students' engagement with literature, particularly in classrooms with mixed proficiency levels. Mohammed et al. (2021) in their research noted that both optionist and non-optionist teachers faced difficulties, particularly in adapting teaching materials and methods to meet the standard. This underscored the importance of examining how each group's approaches to literature instruction.

Although differences in training exist, recent research has found growing overlaps in teaching strategies between both teacher groups. Shared practices such as role play, group work, and questioning techniques reflect a shift towards more interactive, student-focused classrooms (Lee et al.). Teachers across both categories recognise the importance of adapting to students' needs, especially in fostering interest and motivation in literature lessons. This convergence of practice suggests that, with targeted professional development, non-optionist teachers can be further supported to enhance their instructional methods. Thus, examining these strategies provides valuable insights for improving literature pedagogy across the board.

To sum up, this study aimed to find out how optionist and non-optionist English teachers teach literature in Malaysian schools, compare their teaching methods, and identify what they have in common. The goal was to help improve how literature is taught in schools, allowing students to learn English better, and this matter has also been highlighted in a review by Ukat and Hanita (2022).

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This research applied the qualitative method, and interviews were conducted to collect data from four English teachers - two optionist and two non-optionist, to answer the research questions. The interviews were done after the participants were chosen via purposive sampling. The criteria exercised in choosing the participants were: (1) they must be optionist or non-optionist English teachers; (2) they were teaching English Literature in secondary schools; and (3) they must have had at least 10 years of teaching experience.

3.2 Participants

The participants involved in the interviews were four English teachers from a government secondary school located in Jerantut, Pahang. Three of the participants were females and one was male. Two of the female teachers were English optionist teachers, while the third female participant was a non-optionist teacher. They were all Malay Muslim teachers who had been teaching English for more than 10 years. Based on these criteria, a total of four English teachers—two optionist and two non-optionist—were chosen for the one-on-one interview sessions. For the purpose of data analysis and reporting the results, the optionist English teachers were referred to as OTC1 and OTC2, while their non-optionist counterparts were referred to as NTC3 and NTC4.

3.2 Instrument

Based on the research questions and previous works on English literature teaching strategies, a total of 15 questions were developed and asked during each interview. These questions were reviewed and validated by experts before they were used during the interview session. Minor adjustments were made in terms of the words used in the questions to ensure clarity so that the objectives of the research could be achieved. The table below shows the finalised questions involved.

Table 1. Interview Questions

No	Questions
1.	How well has your college/university prepared you for the teaching profession?
2.	How do you motivate students to learn literature?
3.	How do you begin teaching literature in each class?
4.	What skill do you focus most on in teaching literature?
5.	How would you identify the special needs of your students?
6.	How do you assess your students on literature?
7.	In your opinion, what is the best strategy in teaching literature?
8.	How many strategies do you usually use in a literature lesson?
9.	What techniques do you use to keep students actively involved during a literature lesson?
10.	Describe the literature teaching strategies that you find most effective.
11.	What is unique about your strategies in teaching literature?
12.	How do you use different teaching strategies to best fulfil the learning needs of all students?
13.	What do you think of strategies that only focus on certain skills like reading?
14.	If the students do not understand your teaching, what would you do?
15.	Do you think that the condition of the classroom affects teaching and learning?

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Before the interview, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their willingness to be part of it. Upon their agreement, all four participants were interviewed separately, outside the classroom and according to their flexible time via appointment. The interview session took between one hour thirty minutes to two hours for each participant and was recorded on the researcher's audio-recorder and later on transcribed verbatim before being analysed using thematic analysis.

4. FINDING & DISCUSSION

4.1 Literature Teaching Strategies Used by Optionist and Non-Optionist English Teachers

Derived from the interview data, 10 themes were identified as accurately representing the teacher's use of literature teaching strategies, responding to the first research question. The themes are listed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes on Teaching Strategy Use Acquired Based on the Interviews

Research Question 1	Themes
<i>What are the strategies used by optionist and non-optionist English teachers to teach English literature meaningfully to students?</i>	1. Varied Student-Centred Learning Activities
	2. Group Work as a Peer Support System
	3. Independent Learning (High achievers)
	4. Dictionary Use
	5. Meaning & Enjoyment (Meaningful Learning)
	6. Emphasis on Fundamental Language Skills
	7. Repetition
	8. Code-switching
	9. Use of Questions
	10. Use of Visuals

4.1.1 Varied Student-Centred Learning Activities

Two key points emerged from the discussion. First, teachers believe that literature lessons should include a variety of activities. The first optionist teacher, OTC1, uses engaging activities like puzzles, riddles, and brainstorming to capture students' interest. She also uses "word explosion," where students create new words from a given word, to start lessons.

"Basically, I will start with variety of activities. I always give them puzzles, riddles. Sometimes when I'm out of idea, we just do brainstorming like giving them a word..."
(OTC1)

"...then we do like word explosion to get into the topic first." (OTC1)

Second, activities should be student-centred rather than teacher-centred. The second optionist teacher, OTC2, emphasizes that literature activities should involve students actively. She uses physical activities like jumping and dancing to help students visualise the content and make learning more enjoyable.

"...The best approach is student-centred. Make them involved using physical activities..."
(OTC2)

OTC2 also starts poetry lessons with fun activities to boost students' interest and create a lively classroom atmosphere.

"As for poems I like to do activities before I begin my teaching..." (OTC2)

"Students will get involved in the fun activities which arouse their interest in learning the poems or drama." (OTC2)

In contrast, non-optionist teacher NTC3 believes that brainstorming is only effective with engaged students and is challenging with less active students.

"For the good classes maybe literature can be taught through brainstorming..." (NTC3)

NTC3 uses brainstorming to encourage students to share their ideas, making them feel valued and active in the learning process.

"They can voice out what it is about. Then I asked them to do brainstorming..."
(NTC3)

Non-optionist teacher NTC4 prefers role-playing as a way to teach literature, where students act out stories or poems. He believes this method is student-centred and allows for self-expression, aligning with OTC2's view on student-focused learning.

"In my opinion, the best approach in teaching literature is by role play[ing]this approach is more...student-centred..." (NTC4)

NTC4 and OTC2 agree that physical activities, including role play, help students express themselves and incorporate elements like culture and traditions into their learning.

"...[students must] do activities which need physical movements like role play." (NTC4)

4.1.2 Group Work as a Peer-Support System

Three participants—OTC1, OTC2, and NTC3—believe that group work makes teaching and learning English literature more enjoyable. They think students learn better through group activities and discussions with peers. OTC1 keeps students engaged by having them work in groups, which helps them express themselves and respond to tasks more effectively.

"...keep my students actively involved during my lesson, first of all I like to ask them to do group activity." (OTC1)

OTC2 notes that group activities help students discuss literary texts and give passive students a chance to gain confidence and share their opinions.

"I use the group activities so they have to discuss with their friends..." (OTC2)

Similarly, NTC3, a non-optionist teacher, views group work as the best strategy for teaching literature. She believes lively group activities help students learn better by encouraging them to support each other.

"The best approach in teaching literature in my opinion is through group work." (NTC3)

"I think it is better to do lively activities in groups..." (NTC3)

The teachers recognise that literature can be intimidating, especially when taught in English, which is not the students' first language. They use group work to create a supportive and safe environment that makes learning easier for students.

4.1.3 Independent Learning for High Achievers

Both optionist teachers, OTC1 and OTC2, believe students should explore literary texts beyond the syllabus. They do not suggest neglecting the syllabus but recommend letting students choose texts they enjoy. OTC1 mentions showing students examples of good literature to spark their interest.

"...show them few examples of good reading materials and talk about novels, short stories and the poems." (OTC1)

"...literature is their authentic material so I always motivate them to use or to read something that is not their text in school." (OTC2)

OTC2 encourages students to read additional literary texts in their free time and choose texts they like. She believes this helps students develop a love for reading and enjoy studying literature. She also emphasizes that students should not read only for exams but should enjoy the literary texts.

"...to read any novel that that they like and surely the literature texts in the syllabus during their leisure..." (OTC2)

"...[students should] not read for examination[s] only." (OTC2)

OTC1 also finds the Internet to be a valuable resource for English literature, occasionally sharing online information with her students. She believes it helps high-achieving students learn independently and *understand the texts better*.

"Sometimes, I give them information from the internet..." (OTC1)

"As for high achiever, they can learn independently. Sometimes I can just give them the link and they will surf the internet themselves." (OTC1)

Similarly, NTC4, a non-optionist, agrees that high-achieving students should learn independently, since they have the ability to do so.

"...make them learn by themselves..." (NTC4)

Regarding homework, OTC1 stresses the importance of learning English literature. She provides many exercises to high-achieving students to enhance their critical thinking and understanding of texts. OTC1 also ensures that students receive enough information and guidance so that the exercises are manageable and not stressful.

"For high achievers, I really have to give a lot of exercises so that they can really practice their critical thinking." (OTC1)

"...I will give extra exercise and information..." (OTC1)

4.1.4 Dictionary Use

The two non-optionist English teachers frequently emphasise the importance of using dictionaries in their classes. NTC3 stated that it is mandatory for students to bring their dictionaries to every English literature class. Dictionaries help students understand the meaning of words in literary texts, which improves their comprehension.

"...they cannot miss their dictionary." (NTC3)

"It's compulsory." (NTC3)

NTC4 agrees, saying that dictionaries are essential for improving vocabulary and understanding the material. He ensures that students use dictionaries in class to grasp words and their contexts better.

"...in each class I teach, [using a] dictionary is compulsory." (NTC4)

"They lack [the] vocabulary [needed] so I asked them to bring a dictionary and use it in the class." (NTC4)

However, the optionist teachers do not consider dictionary use as a key strategy in the literature classroom.

4.1.5 Finding Meaning and Enjoyment in Literature Texts

In teaching English literature, it is important to make lessons meaningful to meet the goals of including literature in the curriculum. OTC1 emphasizes that literature lessons should be both enjoyable and informative. She believes that discussions should not only focus on the meaning of the text but also make learning engaging.

"...to really discuss with them the fun in learning literature." (OTC1)

OTC1 also highlights the need for students to understand the context of the literary text, including the author's background, settings, plot, and vocabulary. This helps students enjoy literature more. She

encourages students to express their ideas and even role-play stories to deepen their understanding, which can also improve their exam performance.

"...to let them understand the message of literary text..." (OTC1)

"...give their own opinions while analyzing the structures, the sentence patterns, the vocabulary and we have to really ask them to act or to do role play so that they really know and understand each topic." (OTC1)

NTC3, a non-optionist, agrees that understanding the text, including words and the story's synopsis, is key to making lessons meaningful. Knowing the meaning of words helps students fully grasp the text's message.

"...to understand the words and the synopsis of the story." (NTC3)

"...they have to know the meaning of the words." (NTC3)

NTC4 also supports this, noting that students need to understand the text well, starting with word meanings. He allows students to depend on him for word meanings to keep them motivated and improve their understanding.

"...[students would] depend on me a lot especially in knowing the meaning of the words." (NTC4)

Each teacher has their own approach to making literature meaningful. OTC2 requires students to read the text before class, which helps them engage more in discussions. NTC3 takes a detailed approach with low-achieving students, introducing texts word by word and discussing what they know to build understanding gradually.

"As for novel, they have to read it before coming to the class." (OTC2)

"...for the low level [students], we have to go word by word in introducing the topic and ask what they can tell about the topic." (NTC3)

NTC4 shares the background of the text with students before starting lessons, believing that this approach makes students more interested and prevents them from losing motivation by understanding the context. This ensures that learning literature is meaningful rather than just for passing exams.

"...[I] share the background of the text before with the students." (NTC4)

4.1.6 Emphasis on the Fundamental Language Skills

In an English literature classroom, OTC2 believes that speaking skills should be emphasized. She states that students need more opportunities to speak during lessons to improve their pronunciation and confidence in using the language.

"I think the [skill that should receive] the most focus...is speaking." (OTC2)

NTC4 agrees but emphasizes listening skills. He explains that good listening is essential for understanding literature, as students often read and recite in class. Attentive listening helps students focus and better understand the texts.

"In class I focus more on listening skill of the students..." (NTC4)

"Listening skill is very useful when we read literature texts such as stanzas and lines in front of the class." (NTC4)

4.1.7 Repetition

All teachers, both optionist and non-optionist, use repetition as a teaching strategy. OTC1 says she repeats and re-explains content individually to students who have trouble understanding the texts because not all students learn the same way.

"...go to this particular student and explain in detail." (OTC1)

OTC2 agrees that students need different strategies to learn English literature. Some may not understand the information the first time and need repetition to grasp the lesson. So, using varied strategies is crucial for enhancing student learning.

"...drill them by using different strategies because some students need to be taught repetitively." (OTC2)

Non-optionist teachers NTC3 and NTC4 also use repetition. NTC3 repeats her lessons until students understand, and NTC4 changes his teaching approach if students have trouble understanding.

"...repeat my teaching until they get the lesson." (NTC3)

"I will repeat my teaching and change my approach if needed." (NTC4)

Overall, repetition is a common strategy among both optionist and non-optionist teachers to help students understand literature lessons.

4.1.8 Code Switching

NCT4 sometimes uses Bahasa Melayu in his English literature lessons to help students understand better, as different explanations are needed.

"...use Bahasa Melayu to explain more about the text and in each class...explain using different ways." (NTC4)

NTC3 agrees with this approach, saying she also switches to Bahasa Melayu when students struggle in understanding English texts. She explains that continuing in English would be pointless if students do not understand, so she uses Bahasa Melayu to save time.

"Sometimes when the students got confused and cannot understand the text, I had to use Bahasa Melayu a bit so that we can save time" (NTC3)

OTC1 also uses code-switching when necessary, especially for students who are low-achieving or have low proficiency. However, she avoids this with higher-achieving students because they prefer more challenging learning.

"I code-switch to BM with the low achievers to make them understand better, but not with the good students because they do not like that kind of spoon feeding way [of learning]." (OTC1)

4.1.9 Use of Questions

Teachers use questions to spark students' interest and encourage them to share their thoughts on the literature being studied. OTC1 frequently asks questions in class and invites students to respond and share their views, creating a more interactive learning environment.

"...questioning students can be done first so that they can respond appropriately and provide their point of view." (OTC1)

OTC2 asks questions based on the text, ensuring her students actively seek answers. This approach keeps students engaged and participating in lessons. She makes sure they answer questions and complete classroom exercises.

"...they involve in the activities. Make them answer the questions and do their exercises." (OTC2)

NTC3 expects students to respond to her questions. She introduces the lesson topic and asks relevant questions to develop the topic through student responses. She uses WH questions (what, why, who, where) to stimulate student ideas.

"...state the topic and ask question." (NTC3)

"...we have to ask WH questions one by one." (NTC3)

NTC4 starts his English literature lessons with easy questions to capture students' attention and get them involved. He requires students to answer all questions, keeping them attentive and engaged during the lesson.

"...a set induction where I ask easy questions to get the student's attention..." (NTC4)

"...set a rule which make it compulsory to them to answer when I ask them questions in class." (NTC4)

4.1.10 Use of Visuals to Keep Students Motivated

OTC1 explains how she engages her students in English literature lessons, especially the low achievers, by making learning fun with visual aids like pictures.

"...for the low achieving students, I always provide them with pictures, power point slides to show so they can really get clear picture of what they are learning." (OTC1)

NTC4 agrees with using pictures to teach literature, saying it helps students grasp the messages and visualise important events, making the lessons more interesting and improving their understanding.

"...use pictures to describe the literature text..." (NTC4)

4.2 Similarities and Differences in the Strategies Used

Both optionist and non-optionist English teachers agree that there are no fixed strategies for teaching English literature. Instead, strategies should be varied, suited to students' ability levels, and interesting to keep them engaged. Table 3 shows the similarities and differences in the preferred strategies of the two groups of teachers.

Table 3. Strategies Used in Teaching English Literature

STRATEGIES	OPTIONIST TEACHERS		NON-OPTIONIST TEACHERS	
	OTC1	OTC2	NTC3	NTC4
1. Varied Student-Centred Learning Activities	√	√	√	√
2. Group Work as a Peer Support System	√	√	√	X
3. Independent Learning for High Achievers	√	√	X	√
4. Dictionary Use	X	X	√	√
5. Meaning & Enjoyment	√	√	√	√
6. Emphasis on Fundamental Language Learning	X	√	X	√
7. Repetition	√	√	√	√
8. Code-switching	√	X	√	√
9. Use of Questions	√	√	√	√
10. Use of Visuals	√	X	X	√

4.3 What are the strategies used by optionist and non-optionist English teachers to teach English literature meaningfully to students?

Interviews with English teachers revealed several preferred literature teaching strategies. Teachers agreed that strategies should vary with students' English proficiency and favoured student-centred approaches to encourage active participation. Student-centred activities like role-playing help students to be more active and expressive in English literature lessons. This method boosts their motivation and interest (Lee et al., 2023; Sheikh et al., 2019). It also creates a fun and meaningful learning environment. Sheikh et al. (2019) recommended using active learning methods, such as role plays and pair work, in teaching English literature.

Another helpful strategy is assigning group tasks. Group work provides peer support, helping students learn better. It reduces intimidation and creates a safe, supportive environment, making literature lessons more meaningful. Lee et al. (2023) and Sheikh et al. (2019) also noted that group work reduces anxiety and boosts confidence, encouraging even passive students to share their opinions.

For high achievers, teachers provided extra opportunities for independent learning. This approach lets these students learn at their own pace and dive deeply into extensive learning outside the classroom. It also fits well with high achievers' preference for structured, detailed programs and activities. Othman et al. (2015) found that excellent students performed significantly better in literature when given more independence. Therefore, teachers can support them by offering excellent examples of high-quality literary texts as helpful guidance (Yusof et al., 2020).

Another common strategy was using dictionaries. Both English teachers stressed the importance of having and using a dictionary during literature lessons. Knowing the meanings of words helps students understand the text better and expands their vocabulary. Tan and Ariffin (2022) and Othman et al. (2015) found that many students struggled to understand literal and figurative meanings, highlighting the need for dictionary use. Kaya (2014) found that dictionary use was common among English teachers, and Wolter (2015) confirmed it was helpful for learning English materials.

All participants agreed that literature lessons should be taught in ways that make them meaningful and enjoyable. This was supported by Hashim and Abu Talib (2019). Teachers play a key role in making literature engaging by choosing texts that interest students (Wintersparv, 2021; Arafah, 2018). This approach helps students learn from literature in a practical way and makes the lessons more interactive and engaging.

The next strategy focuses on basic language skills in learning literature. Muhammed (2013) mentioned that literature helps develop skills like reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In this study, speaking and listening were highlighted as important because literature classes often involve reciting texts. Improving these skills helps students to be more expressive in literature. Arias Rodriguez (2017) also found that using short stories in class improved students' reading and listening skills.

Repetition is a strategy mentioned in the interviews. Both types of English teachers said they repeat their lessons until students understand the material. This helps the students to grasp the meaning of the text (Lee et al., 2023; Hashim & Abu Talib, 2019; Ramlan, 2015; Wirawan, 2019). However, some argued that repetition can make students lose interest due to its passive nature (Hashim and Abu Talib, 2019; Ramlan, 2015). Despite this, Lee et al. (2023) and Wirawan (2019) found that teachers who used repetition saw better results from their students.

Three out of four participants said code-switching is a helpful strategy for teaching English literature. It adjusts explanations based on students' skills and the classroom setting. When done well, code-switching can keep students' attention. For example, using the students' first language to explain texts in detail was mentioned. Studies by Novianti and Said (2021) and Hmeadat (2021) supported this strategy, showing that code-switching aids second language learning. Chen and Maarof (2017) found most teachers

agree it is useful, especially for struggling students, and Bhatti et al. (2018) also confirmed its effectiveness in teaching literature.

Using questions was another strategy mentioned by the participants. It helps teachers achieve their lesson goals by encouraging students to find important information about literary texts on their own. Asking questions and inviting students to share their views foster two-way communication. Othman et al. (2015) say that if teachers can answer students' questions, it shows their expertise and builds trust. Lee et al. (2023) and Dos et al. (2016) also found that questions boost students' interest and attention in literature. In another study conducted by Singh et al. (2020), questioning techniques that were used by the teachers in class gave positive impacts in triggering students with higher-order thinking skills, thus helping them in improving their English proficiency level.

The last strategy mentioned was using visuals in teaching literature. Both an optionist and a non-optionist English teacher used pictures and graphics to help students understand literary texts better. This agrees with Shabiralyani et al. (2015), who found that visuals improve classroom learning, and Huseyin and Efecioglu (2015), who showed that graphics play a key role in learning English literature.

4.4 What is the common ground in the teachers' use of strategies for teaching English literature?

Both optionist and non-optionist teachers have the same idea that literature teaching strategies should be varied and student-centred, and they translated this idea into classroom practice by employing several different physical and cognitive activities, such as role playing, brainstorming, and solving puzzles and riddles. These activities aim to stimulate students' interest in literature and to help them find meaning in the learning of it. According to Wintersparv (2021), it can help to navigate the student's literature learning the best way possible. These kinds of activities too can be a catalyst in boosting the students' motivation to learn as well as reducing their stress (Lee et al., 2023; Sheikh et al., 2019).

Another consensus among participants is that strategies used in teaching English literature must provide meaningful and enjoyable experiences. According to Lee et al. (2023) as well as Hashim and Abu Talib (2019), this approach makes the lesson more enjoyable and fruitful for the students. During the interviews, most participants mentioned that it is very crucial to choose the most suitable literary texts that fit the students' interests. In other related studies, Wintersparv (2021) and Arafah (2018) found that aligning texts with students' interests increases their enjoyment and motivation, thus leading to more meaningful learning.

Additionally, all participants reported using repetition and questions in their classes. Repetition is used when students are facing difficulties in understanding the literary text because it helps the students to better understand challenging literary texts, as proven in Wirawan's (2019) research and supported by Lee et al. (2023). On the other hand, the use of questions is agreed to be important for triggering learning, provoking curiosity, and maintaining students' attention.

5. CONCLUSION

This study revealed how literature is taught in secondary school English classes. Both optionist and non-optionist English teachers share common ground despite their different backgrounds. It highlighted that teachers face various challenges, like students' language proficiency and the exam-focused culture in Malaysian schools, which influence their teaching strategies. Ergo, there is also the need for support in the form of training, sharing sessions and targeted support groups for English teachers to help them deliver their lesson better. Ultimately, the research aimed to help Malaysian English teachers enhance their literature teaching methods.

5.1 Suggestion for Future Research

Future research should consider student perspectives to see if they align with teachers' responses, as well as classroom observation to ensure better consistency and validity of the results. Other important factors to consider are also classroom conditions, student backgrounds, and school locations, as these can also influence teaching strategies for English literature. In summary, it is hoped that this study could help other teachers in teaching English literature by improvising and improving their teaching strategies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors confirm that this research was carried out without any personal gain, commercial or financial conflicts. They declare there are no conflicting interests throughout the research.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors confirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Mohamad Iqbal Afham Mohd Afandi initiated the study and collected the required data. Nurul Jannah Ahmad Ghulamuddin prepared the literature review and the interpretation of results while Nurhazwani Abd Halim worked on the methodology part as well as the conclusion.

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