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DOI: 10.2478/seeur-2025-0060

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF LITERARY TEXTS ON STUDENTS' LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perspectives of Albanian Language and Literature teachers (ALLT) and English as a Foreign Language teachers (EFLT) in North Macedonia regarding the pedagogical value of literary texts in language development. A purposive sample of 30 teachers (15 ALLT, 15 EFLT) completed an adapted 29-item Literature Teaching Questionnaire (Rushidi-Rexhepi et al., 2025) encompassing four dimensions: Linguistic Fit, Text Relevance, Teacher Practice, and Student Outcomes. Independent-sample t-tests and effect size analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the groups across all subscales, with effect sizes ranging from $|d| = 0.06$ to 0.29 , indicating small practical differences. Both groups strongly endorsed literature's role in enhancing vocabulary, supporting critical thinking, fostering intercultural awareness, and increasing learner motivation. Minor variations emerged, with EFLT placing slightly greater emphasis on linguistic accessibility and ALLT valuing literary quality and aesthetic engagement more highly. The findings suggest a shared pedagogical orientation towards literature's linguistic, cognitive, and affective benefits, underscoring the potential for curriculum design and teacher training initiatives that integrate literature across language teaching contexts.

Keywords: literature teaching, language development, teacher beliefs, linguistic fit

INTRODUCTION

Literary texts offer authentic, linguistically rich content that fosters students' language development across reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills (Sun, 2023; Wasti, 2016; Cheung & Hennebry-Leung, 2023). The engagement with novels, poems, and plays, enhances lexical depth, syntactic awareness, and figurative language comprehension, thereby promoting deeper processing and expressive fluency (Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Kubokawa, 2023; Rosenblatt, 2018). The contextual and emotional richness of literature also increases motivation and retention in language learners (Paran et al., 2021; Wimmer et al., 2024).

Beyond linguistic outcomes, literature cultivates intercultural competence by exposing students to diverse perspectives, enhancing their ability to interpret and respond to varied cultural norms (Schrijvers et al., 2017; Archer, 2023). This aligns with Byram's (2021) framework of intercultural communicative competence, which underscores the importance of literature in developing globally responsive communication. In multilingual classrooms, literary texts facilitate inclusive dialogue, empathy, and cultural sensitivity (Yu, 2017). Cognitive advantages are equally substantiated, as literature-based activities are shown to foster higher-order thinking skills and promote linguistic creativity (Li, 2019).

Despite this growing consensus, limited empirical research compares how different teacher groups, particularly Albanian Language and Literature versus EFL instructors, perceive literature's role in language development. Addressing this gap, the current study aims to examine whether these two teacher populations differ in their beliefs about the linguistic and pedagogical value of literary texts in North Macedonia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of literature into language education has long been recognized for its potential to develop core linguistic competences. Research demonstrates that literary texts provide authentic input that enhances lexical acquisition and syntactic awareness (Caro & Mendinueta, 2017). Studies highlight that exposure to diverse genres strengthens vocabulary retention, with different text types facilitating distinct learning pathways (Graham et al., 2024). Moreover, literary language promotes morphological and syntactic knowledge, supporting learners' reading comprehension (Gottardo et al., 2018).

Teachers consistently report that literature enables targeted development of language skills, particularly in grammar and vocabulary (Duncan & Paran, 2017). This aligns with Lazar's (2015) language-based approach, which situates literary texts as linguistic resources rather than solely cultural artefacts. Empirical evidence also shows that dialogic engagement with texts fosters expressive language growth, especially in young learners acquiring English as a second language (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014). Similarly, dialogic reading strategies enhance emergent literacy by scaffolding learners' comprehension and production (Huennekens & Xu, 2016).

Beyond discrete linguistic skills, literature promotes higher order thinking and cognitive flexibility. Engaging with narrative complexity develops interpretive and critical abilities essential for language learning (Deane, 2020). Literature's figurative and symbolic dimensions further stimulate creativity and linguistic innovation (Alfonso-Benlliure & Mínguez-López, 2022). Recent findings confirm that reading fiction can increase cognitive openness and creative problem-solving, underscoring the cognitive benefits of literary engagement (Wimmer et al., 2024).

Teachers' practices also reflect this orientation toward cognitive gains. Sun (2023) observes that secondary EFL instructors in China use literature to enrich students' reading repertoires and strengthen academic literacy. Similarly, Gabrielsen et al. (2019) document that teachers across contexts employ literary texts not only to improve language skills but also to cultivate interpretive depth and analytical thinking. These findings collectively suggest that literature occupies a dual role: enhancing linguistic competence while fostering broader cognitive development. Thus, literature establishes a robust link between literary engagement and linguistic-cognitive growth. The evidence shows that literature functions as a bridge between language form and intellectual development, equipping learners with both communicative precision and critical literacy.

While linguistic benefits remain central, literature's value also lies in its affective and cultural dimensions. Reading imaginative texts can motivate learners by fostering enjoyment, engagement, and curiosity, which are critical for sustained language learning (Günbay, 2021). Motivation is closely linked to positive emotions, and research highlights that literary encounters often elicit empathy and deeper involvement in classroom tasks (Levine et al., 2021). Such affective gains can also stimulate creativity and critical thinking, both essential for comprehensive language competence (Alfonso-Benlliure & Mínguez-López, 2022).

From a cultural perspective, literature offers learners opportunities to explore diverse worldviews and challenge cultural stereotypes. Engaging with global literary texts can broaden students' perspectives and foster intercultural sensitivity, preparing them for communication across cultural boundaries (Kim, 2022). This is echoed by Byram (2021), who stresses literature's role in cultivating intercultural communicative competence as an integral part of language education. In addition, Schrijvers et al. (2017) demonstrate how literature encourages learners to reflect on personal and social identities, promoting awareness of both self and others.

Pedagogically, literature serves as a resource for critical literacy and deeper learning. Studies show that integrating literary texts can help students interrogate social issues and question established norms, enabling a richer, dialogic classroom experience (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016). Teachers who employ literary texts as tools for critical reflection not only enhance linguistic outcomes but also support learners in becoming more autonomous thinkers (Borsheim-Black et al., 2014). Similarly, Sun (2025) illustrates how challenging youth literature can enact critical intercultural pedagogy, particularly in EFL teacher preparation.

Literature's pedagogical value is reinforced by findings that highlight its capacity to integrate language skills holistically. Literary texts naturally combine reading, writing, speaking, and listening practices within meaningful contexts, enabling learners to develop linguistic and interpretive abilities simultaneously (Tsang & Paran, 2021). As a result, literature occupies a unique position at the intersection of language development, cultural engagement, and affective growth, offering multidimensional benefits that extend beyond conventional linguistic instruction.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedure

This study involved a purposive sample of 30 teachers from primary and secondary schools in North Macedonia, comprising equal numbers of Albanian Language and Literature teachers ($n = 15$) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers ($n = 15$). Participants were recruited through professional networks and completed an online questionnaire anonymously. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and no incentives were provided.

Instrument

Data were collected using the 29-item Literature Teaching Questionnaire, adapted from Duncan and Paran (2017) and piloted in Rushidi-Rexhepi et al. (2025), which was designed to capture teachers' views on the role of literature in students' language development. The instrument included four subscales: *Linguistic Fit*, *Text Relevance*, *Teacher Practice*, and *Student Outcomes*. Items were measured on a six-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). Previous reliability analyses confirmed good internal consistency for the overall scale ($\alpha = .878$), as well as for each subscale: Student Outcomes ($\alpha = .772$), Text Relevance ($\alpha = .736$), Linguistic Fit ($\alpha = .730$), and Teacher Practice ($\alpha = .728$).

Data Analysis

For the purposes of this article, data were analyzed to compare responses between two independent groups: Albanian Language and Literature teachers and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for each item and subscale. To assess statistical differences between the groups, independent samples t-tests were performed. The assumption of normality was tested using the Shapiro–Wilk test. All analyses were conducted using SPSS with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

This section presents the descriptive and inferential findings comparing Albanian Language and Literature teachers (ALLT) and English as a Foreign Language teachers (EFLT) across the four dimensions of the Literature Teaching Questionnaire: Linguistic Fit, Text Relevance, Teacher Practice, and Student Outcomes, followed by the overall scale results.

Linguistic Fit

Table 1 shows the mean ratings and standard deviations for each item within the Linguistic Fit subscale. Both groups rated all items above the scale midpoint, indicating generally strong agreement on the importance of aligning literary texts with students' linguistic abilities. The highest mean for ALLT was observed for "The literary text should support the development of specific language skills" ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 0.41$), suggesting a strong focus on skills-based outcomes. For EFLT, the highest ratings were for "The vocabulary of the literary text should be within the linguistic ability of my students" ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.64$) and "The grammar of the literary text should be within the linguistic ability of my students" ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.74$).

Notable group differences in raw means emerged for vocabulary and grammar accessibility, with EFLT scoring about one full point higher than ALLT on these items, while ALLT scored higher on the importance of grammar learning from literary texts. This pattern may reflect EFL teachers' heightened emphasis on ensuring comprehensibility and linguistic accessibility in a second-language context. However, as shown in Table 5, the overall subscale difference was small ($d = -0.29$) and not statistically significant ($p = .430$).

Table 1. Item-level descriptive statistics for the Linguistic Fit subscale by teacher group

<i>Linguistic Fit</i>	ALLT (N=15)		EFLT (N=15)	
	M	SD	M	SD

Students should be able to learn some new grammar from the literary text.	5.07	1.033	4.40	1.724
The vocabulary of the literary text should be within the linguistic ability of my students.	4.53	1.552	5.53	.640
The language of the literary text should reflect current usage.	4.67	1.718	5.07	.961
The literary text should lend itself to teaching a particular language point.	5.07	1.335	5.07	.961
The grammar of the literary text should be within the linguistic ability of my students.	4.60	1.724	5.53	.743
Overall, the literary text should be well within the linguistic ability of my students.	5.20	1.207	5.53	.640
For each genre, shorter texts work better than longer texts.	5.00	1.195	5.27	.799
The literary text should challenge my students from a language point of view.	5.13	.990	5.00	1.069
The literary text should support the development of specific language skills (e.g., reading, writing, grammar, speaking).	5.80	.414	5.40	.737

Note: ALLT – Albanian Language and Literature Teachers; EFLT – EFL Teachers

Source: Own Research

Text Relevance

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the Text Relevance subscale. Both teacher groups expressed high agreement on most items, with mean scores above 5.00 in nearly all cases. The highest rating for ALLT was for “The themes of the text should be age-appropriate” ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 0.59$), which was also the top item for EFLT ($M = 5.93$, $SD = 0.26$), indicating strong consensus on the importance of thematic suitability. EFLT reported higher means for “The literary text should offer opportunities for cultural comparison” ($M = 5.33$ vs. 4.73) and “The content of the text should support the development of students’ critical thinking” ($M = 5.53$ vs. 5.33).

Table 2. Item-level descriptive statistics for the Text Relevance subscale by teacher group

<i>Text Relevance</i>	ALL (N=15)		EFL (N=15)	
	M	SD	M	SD
The themes of the text should be age appropriate.	5.73	.594	5.93	.258
The content of the text should support the development of students’ critical thinking.	5.33	.976	5.53	1.302
The literary text should offer opportunities for cultural comparison.	4.73	1.534	5.33	1.291
The content of the text should be suitable for classroom discussion.	5.53	.640	5.60	.737
The literary text should be relevant to my students’ lives	4.93	.884	5.07	1.223
The literary text should explore global or social issues.	5.20	.862	5.13	1.125
The literary text should be of high literary quality.	5.27	1.223	4.73	1.387
The literary text should offer aesthetic or emotional value.	5.53	.834	4.93	1.033
The literary text should represent the diversity of national and world literature.	5.73	.594	5.20	.862

Source: Own Research

In contrast, ALLT assigned higher ratings to “The literary text should be of high literary quality” ($M = 5.27$ vs. 4.73) and “The literary text should offer aesthetic or emotional value” ($M = 5.53$ vs. 4.93), suggesting a slightly stronger orientation toward literary artistry. These differences, however, were minor overall, with the subscale’s effect size being small ($d = -0.13$) and the t-test result not statistically significant ($p = .715$; see Table 5).

Teacher Practice

As presented in Table 3, mean scores on the Teacher Practice subscale were moderately high for both groups, though slightly lower than those observed for Linguistic Fit and Text Relevance. The highest-rated item for ALLT was “I enjoy teaching literature in my subject area” ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.92$), closely followed by “I feel confident in teaching complex literary texts” ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 0.78$). For EFLT, enjoyment also ranked highly ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 0.83$), but lower ratings were given to integration into the syllabus ($M = 4.20$) and available time ($M = 4.13$).

Both groups reported similar perceptions of lacking sufficient training or guidance ($M = 3.20$ for each), indicating a shared professional development need. The overall difference in Teacher Practice between groups was small ($d = 0.21$) and non-significant ($p = .562$), suggesting broadly comparable self-reported teaching practices related to literature.

Table 3. Item-level descriptive statistics for the Teacher Practice subscale by teacher group

<i>Teacher Practice</i>	ALL (N=15)		EFL (N=15)	
	M	SD	M	SD
I find it easy to integrate literary texts into my syllabus.	4.87	1.125	4.20	1.207
The time available is sufficient to explore literary texts in depth.	4.07	1.486	4.13	1.302
I enjoy teaching literature in my subject area.	5.53	.915	5.47	.834
I feel confident in teaching complex literary texts.	5.20	.775	4.93	.884
I often lack sufficient training or guidance on how to teach literary texts.	3.20	1.821	3.20	1.699

Source: Own Research

Student Outcomes

Table 4 shows that both groups rated the impact of literature on student outcomes positively, with most means exceeding 5.00. For ALLT, the highest endorsement was for “Teaching literature improves students’ vocabulary” ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 0.82$), while EFLT rated “Literary texts help me address multiple language skills” highest ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 0.56$). Both groups strongly agreed that literature supports creative language use, develops intercultural awareness, and increases motivation to learn the language.

Although minor mean differences were observed, such as EFLT rating skill integration slightly higher and ALLT giving more emphasis to vocabulary gains, these did not translate into significant subscale-level differences ($d = -0.16$, $p = .671$; see Table 5).

Table 4. Item-level descriptive statistics for the Student Outcomes subscale by teacher group

<i>Student Outcomes</i>	ALL (N=15)		EFL (N=15)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Teaching literature improves students’ vocabulary.	5.67	.816	5.13	.990
Teaching literature supports students’ creative language use.	5.20	1.146	5.60	.910
Literary texts help me address multiple language skills (reading, writing, speaking).	5.53	.743	5.80	.561
Teaching literature helps students develop intercultural awareness.	5.07	1.438	5.27	1.100
Students should be able to learn new vocabulary from the literary text.	5.53	.640	5.73	.458
Literary texts increase student motivation to learn the language.	5.20	.862	5.27	.961

Source: Own Research

Overall Comparison

Table 5 presents the overall subscale means, t-test results, and effect sizes. Across all four factors (Linguistic Fit, Text Relevance, Teacher Practice, and Student Outcomes) no

statistically significant differences emerged between Albanian Language and Literature teachers and EFL teachers. Effect sizes were consistently small (ranging from $|d| = 0.06$ to 0.29), indicating a high degree of similarity in perceptions between the two groups. This overall convergence suggests that, regardless of disciplinary background, teachers share common beliefs about the role of literary texts in language development, their relevance, and their pedagogical application.

Table 5. Group comparison of subscale means, t-test results, and effect sizes (Cohen's d)

Subscale	ALL (N=15)		EFL (N=15)		t	p	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Linguistic Fit	5.01	.806	5.20	.468	-.800	.430	-0.29
Text Relevance	5.25	.560	5.33	.703	-.369	.715	-0.13
Teacher Practice	4.57	.968	4.39	.761	.587	.562	0.21
Student Outcomes	5.37	.568	5.47	.702	-.429	.671	-0.16
Literature Teaching Questionnaire	5.11	.605	5.14	.435	-.155	.878	-0.06

Source: Own Research

Effect size analysis using Cohen's d indicated that the differences between Albanian Language and Literature teachers and EFL teachers were small across all factors. Specifically, small effects were observed for Linguistic Fit ($d = -0.29$), Text Relevance ($d = -0.13$), Teacher Practice ($d = 0.21$), and Student Outcomes ($d = -0.16$), as well as for the overall Literature Teaching Questionnaire ($d = -0.06$). According to Cohen (1988, as cited in Gignac & Szodorai, 2016), these values suggest that the differences between the two teaching groups were minimal in practical terms, despite potential statistical significance.

DISCUSSION

The present study reveals that both Albanian Language and Literature teachers (ALLT) and EFL teachers (EFLT) hold similarly positive beliefs about the role of literary texts in language development, supporting both linguistic growth and affective-cognitive engagement. This finding aligns with broader evidence suggesting educators generally recognize literature's potential for fostering vocabulary, critical thinking, and intercultural awareness (Paran, 2008). Higher ratings on vocabulary and skills alignment echoes Lazar's (2015) language-based approach, where literature serves primarily as rich linguistic input.

The minor emphasis by ALLT on aesthetic and literary quality reflects what McKay (2014) describes as a dual appreciation for both form and function in literary pedagogy. Similarly, Cheung and Hennebry-Leung (2023) emphasize the role of emotional and cultural dimensions in shaping teacher cognition about literary integration, which seems mirrored in ALLT's slightly higher valuation of literary richness. The negligible group differences align with Duncan and Paran's (2017) assertion that even within diverse instructional contexts, beliefs about literature's educational value tend to converge. Their high-school - context research observed language-awareness as a common priority - consistent with EFLT's emphasis on accessible vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, Duncan and Paran (2018) document concerns about texts being linguistically or conceptually challenging; such concerns may explain EFLT's stronger focus on accessibility.

Notably, despite teacher enthusiasm, practical obstacles remain. Studies by Calafato and Paran (2019) highlight that younger teachers, especially those less experienced with literature, may include it less frequently, and anxiety about student comprehension may limit usage. While our data didn't show strong disparities, the moderate mean scores in "Teacher Practice" suggest there may still be institutional or confidence-based barriers - echoing reports of limited time and training in other contexts (Calafato & Paran, 2019).

The consistency across groups suggests a shared recognition, across linguistic contexts, that literature promotes not only language proficiency but also motivation and intercultural competence - findings corroborated by Hanauer's (2003, 2012, 2015) research on creative poetry writing and its affective benefits in EFL. The study confirms that, although teachers differ in their teaching specialization, their beliefs about literature's pedagogical benefits remain robust and comparable. The challenge now lies less in changing beliefs and more in translating those beliefs into sustained classroom practice through supportive institutional frameworks and targeted teacher development.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Albanian Language and Literature teachers and EFL teachers in North Macedonia share similarly strong beliefs regarding the pedagogical benefits of literature in language development. Despite differences in instructional focus and language of teaching, both groups recognize literature's capacity to enhance linguistic skills, foster critical thinking, and promote learner engagement. The findings further affirm the value of integrating literature into language teaching across diverse educational contexts. Such alignment in perspectives suggests a stable foundation for curriculum development and teacher training initiatives aimed at strengthening literature-based pedagogy.

Limitations and recommendations

The study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data. Furthermore, the sample is restricted to Albanian teachers in North Macedonia, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to other ethnic groups, regions, or educational contexts. Future research should consider expanding the sample to include teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds and investigate the impact and role of literary texts from different languages on students' language and linguistic development.

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