



## Research Article

# A Case Study on Students' Identity Perceptions Using Literary Sources in Reading Courses

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### Abstract

Literary works are conventional materials used in reading lessons because of their accessibility and ease of use. Regarding that situation, the purpose of this study is to gather the prep class students' perceptions about literary works as course materials and examine the data by taking into consideration the national identity and class distinction. In this case study, Jane Austen's two novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* are discussed in reading lessons in prep classes. At the end of this process, 36 students are asked to complete an unstructured form to express their thoughts on these books. As the results show, half of the students state that choosing literary sources make them aware of author's intentions, and the contextual factors such as the political, social, and historical background of the text. Students generally read novels, but they do not give importance to reading these novels in English or reading literary sources which will be a preliminary preparation for their department.



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## Introduction

Reading which is defined by Cheng (2012) as the bringing back process of the orthographic, semantic and phonological information hidden by the writer is one of the most important of four language skills in ELT (English Language Teaching) courses and being able to learn and use the reading skill is only possible with a qualified reading education (Tavsanlı & Kaldırım, 2017). Arranging materials for reading courses is one of the challenging processes in this education. So, it should be bear in mind that there is a strong relationship between the reader and the material. Selecting the right material plays a vital role in the process of language education because an ideal ELT classroom consists of many different students who have various interests. For that reason, it is one of the primary duties of the instructors to choose suitable materials for the students to take their attention into lessons. Many authors and critics claim that literary texts are products that reflect different

aspects of society, thus choosing literary sources as reading material in ELT classrooms can meet this need.

By taking into consideration the material needs of ELT classes and literary sources ability to fulfill this requirement, this study will elaborate on the literature prep class student's thoughts on selecting literary sources as the course materials and focus on the data by giving importance to some concepts such as western values, identity problems, and class distinctions embedded in the society. It also tries to understand student capacity to comment on literary concepts.

Our research questions were developed as:

1. What kind of materials do the students read outside the school? Do these materials convey any information about the target culture?
2. What do students think about the use of literary materials in ELT classes?
3. Are the students aware of the concepts that mention western values in above-mentioned novels?
4. Are the students able to comment on the social events of those days such as class distinction, gender differences, and male dominance?
5. How do students evaluate these novels by giving importance on their national identity?

#### *Literature Review*

Reading is not only a process of finding the hidden message of the writer. It needs the activation of various micro and macro skills according to a definite goal. Because of this reason, teaching reading in ELT courses is a challenging process. On the authority of Roozafzai (2012) "It is now generally believed that a range of reader with text factors affect the reading process to a considerable extent. So, teachers of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) need to be aware of the important role of teaching materials" (p.7).

Being able to select the correct type of material has not only cognitive but also affective influences on the students. Material choice is a critical step in language education because as mentioned in Uyaniker (2017) students in the countries such as Turkey has a very limited chance of finding materials for FL (Foreign Language) input. The motivation which is a significant character in the psychological side of the teaching process can be enhanced or lowered with the course materials. For example; Kaya, Han, and Aybirdi (2015) who used

ninety-five volunteered participants and a questionnaire in their studies found out that using authentic materials has positive effects on the quality of the language education courses. One of the reasons of authentic materials' positive impacts on the course quality is the classical reading materials' influence of being boring in the long term. Hence, reading teachers try to use authentic materials such as newspaper or magazine articles. These materials are also easy to find thanks to the technology and the Internet but many of them are not favourable to use in the classrooms and some educators think that entertainment ability of the technology and the Internet hinders learners by surpassing the educational role (Akarsu & Darıyemez, 2014). This requires language teachers to find more desirable and accessible materials for the reading courses.

Language is inseparable from its culture. Learning a language and being able to use it like native speakers do necessitates the learning of the target culture. Within this context, Keshavarzi (2012) thinks that "Literature is culture; that is, it is not to say that literature deals with culture, but it should be expressed that literature is the culture of the people using that language" (p.554). Literature includes the lifestyle, family relations, histories, and epic of the target culture. Using literary sources in the courses helps students to understand target culture and how native speakers speak or behave in different situations. In addition to their effects on the increase of comprehension and motivation, literary sources have positive effects on the understanding of the system of the language and how to use this method correctly. Keshavarzi (2012) mentioned 4 benefits of using literary sources in the reading courses as developing the language, increasing the cultural knowledge which is also desired by the students as mentioned in Rodliyah, Imperiani, and Amalia (2014) who examined the students' ideas about the materials in the target and local culture and found that students have positive attitude both for types of materials whether they include the target or local culture, helping the acquisition of the language, and helping to focus on the meaning.

This study will give importance to the examination of the use of literary sources regarding nationalism which is an ideology about national consciousness, ethical or linguistic identity or just a cultural phenomenon based on the language, sentiments, and symbolism (Aksakal, 2015; Uzer, 2016). Examination of the students' ideas by focusing on their nationalist views is important because Turkish students' points of views can show differences when their nationalist character is examined. Kaysili and Acar-Erdol (2014) point out that Turkish youth gives importance to national values while taking decisions about the

social venue, shopping centre, or wedding. The people who give importance to the national values for the previous decisions can also evaluate the course materials according to those values. Since people's choices can be affected by nationalism which started to increase in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Similarly, Turkish people are heavily under the influence of this nationalistic view. According to Uzer (2016), the reasons for the birth of Turkish nationalism are independence movements of Greeks, Serbs, Albanians, and Arabs in the Ottoman period, historical and linguistic studies in the Europe and Ottoman Empire, and the immigration of highly educated Turks from certain countries. The nationalism which was increased in the later period of the Ottoman Empire has an important effect on the people's choices in their social and academic life. It is thought that this nationalistic view should also be examined in the material selections of the L2 learners.

Believing the importance of material choice in the reading courses and the possible effects of nationalism on this choice, we tried to examine prep-class students' ideas about using literary sources in the reading courses by using five research questions.

## Method

### *Research Design*

Case study research design which is used for an in-depth examination of the particular people or groups is used in this study. It was aimed to find out the attitudes, behaviours, and ideas of the students who preferred literary sources as course material in their reading lessons. The writer used this method to be able to figure out students' ideas and reaction after a month reading course with literary sources.

### *Participants*

36 volunteered participants who are from different parts of Turkey and study in the prep-classes of Recep Tayyip Erdogan University English Language and Literature Department attended this study. Although they study in the same department, being from different regions of the country and having divergent personalities make these participants create a heterogeneous group. Participants were chosen by using convenience sampling method which is explained in Creswell (2007) as a method used by the teachers who study with the students in his/her school. The number of the participants is enough for this study because Creswell (2012) expresses that the participants can range from 1 to 40 in a qualitative

study. Besides, Patton (1990) reveals that number of the participants is not significant in a qualitative study. All volunteered participants are continuing their education at the University; therefore, all required permissions were gathered from the institution in addition to participants themselves.

#### *Instrument*

An unstructured interview is used to collect and record qualitative data from the students. "An open-ended response to a question allows the participant to create the options for responding" (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). Participants were not forced to give positive responses. This interview form was developed by the researchers by examining the research questions and previous studies on this subject.

#### *Procedure*

After finding the participants and gathering the required permissions, Jane Austen's two novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* were discussed in reading lessons from 27<sup>th</sup> of February to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 and from 27<sup>th</sup> of December to 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2018 as course materials in prep classes. Students also discussed different books in addition to the books mentioned above. Students' ideas were gathered with an interview that includes open-ended questions. In addition to these interviews, students were examined, and some notes were taken during the courses. Lessons were not recorded in order not to make students change their behaviours.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data were analysed manually because of the reasons for not having a vast amount of data and the desire of being close to the collected information. Creswell's (2005) qualitative data analysis processes such as organizing data, transcribing it, coding it into themes and relating ideas were used. Observation notes were added to these descriptions, and these descriptions were tried to be used to answer the research questions.

## Findings

Participants were asked to give details about what kinds of books do they read outside the school and how often do they read books that explain target culture in order to answer the research question one which is “what kinds of materials do the students read outside the school and do these materials convey any information about the target culture?”. It was revealed from the collected data that students mostly read novels outside the school environment. Apart from the novels, students prefer reading philosophical books, poems, books about psychology and personal development, books related to the society, essays, research articles, religious sources, comic books, short stories, magazines, newspapers, and scientific articles. Novels which are mostly read by the students show differences as participants read different kinds such as realistic novel; attempts to give the effect of realism, a picaresque novel; related with the hero’s adventure, bildungsroman; concern with the development of the protagonists, and science fiction; deals with the imaginative world. However, some of the students read novels which are valuable, and only one student reads novels in English. It can be expressed that students do not give importance to reading literary sources or novels in English contrary to their high frequency of novel reading. Therefore, it is beneficial to use literary sources in the ELT courses of English language and literature department prep class students’ language courses to give them a chance of reading mentioned sources in English. Using literary sources in these courses will help students to develop their capacity to understand authentic texts and find out the correct use of a linguistic feature of the target language. Besides, they will learn much about the target culture which takes their interest and initiates the autonomous learning. In this regard, these results overlap with Tasneen (2010) who asserts that both teachers and students think using literature in the classroom is a gain for ELT learners.

It is also clear that students generally do not read materials related to target culture; however, Shanahan (1998) expresses that cultural information implements exposure to real language that a foreign language learner lacks and this can be done by using literary sources in their courses. 36.1 percent of the students mentioned that they very rarely read materials related to the target culture. 27.7 percent rarely, 19.4 percent never, 2.7 percent sometimes, 5.5 percent generally, and 8.3 percent mostly read materials related to the target culture. Reasons for not reading about different cultures show dissimilarities according to various participants. For example; participant 11 tries to find information about target culture from

the Internet instead of reading the book, however, Participant 5 reads books related to the Turkish and Muslim culture with the aim of understanding his/her culture in the best way so, s/he rarely reads books about target culture. Using literary sources in ELT classes of the English Language and Literature Department prep class students' Language courses is also beneficial to teach them target culture because they do not read to learn this culture by themselves despite being students of a department which necessitates the understanding of the schemata related to that culture. Regarding the fact that most of the curriculum consists of the literature and culture lessons, learning the target culture will help them a lot during their education at the undergraduate program.

Another research question which tried to find out students' ideas related to the use of literary sources in ELT classes revealed that most of the students mention positive thoughts about this use. Students expressed the benefits of using literary sources in ELT classes as helping to create a curious, beneficial, amusing, and excellent classroom atmosphere, bringing different viewpoints, making students feel special, providing awareness, creating a sense of belonging, and developing vocabulary capacity and cultural knowledge. Students especially gave importance to the literary sources ability to create an amusing, curious, and beneficial atmosphere. For instance, Participant 1 expressed that "being able to understand the books and their ability to affect us make us feel amusing and good." This participant was supported by participants 7, 6, and 5, who also mentioned literary sources ability to create interesting and good classroom atmospheres.

Participant 2 touched a different point by expressing literary sources assistance in the process of bringing new viewpoints. That participant directly mentioned that "reading literary sources in ELT classes provides us with a different viewpoint while examining social events. We have a chance of comparing what we have learned in the course to the real-world events. We start to examine the events more consciously." Besides, the student starts to foster empathy to the events that take place around the world. Since the literature itself is a storytelling process, the target audience will begin to hear more and know better the other identities, conflicts and the places which are historically and geographically remote to them.

Although some of the participants such as participants 4, 13, and 14 who expressed that feelings about this use can show differences according to the novel, participants 12 and 36 who expressed that they feel nothing, and participants 23, 26, and 30 who think that using literary sources in the ELT courses is boring do not have positive feelings about this activity,

most of the students find it beneficial to use literary sources in the ELT classes. Because of this reason, it can be expressed that using literary sources in ELT classes will help both teachers and students. Students will enjoy the process and develop their vocabulary capacity and cultural knowledge while teachers will use materials which are not only easy to reach but also authentic and beneficial.

Contrary to the benefits of literary sources and students' desire to use them in ELT classes, most of the participants expressed that they want to read Turkish versions of English novels in their free times. The reasons they mentioned for this desire are being able to read more quickly and to understand the novels better. However, students who desire to read the original books think that reading the Turkish translation is not the same as there is always a meaning loss and the process does not give the same feeling. But if they are not fluent in English, they can meet with an obstacle such as missing some of the realities that are hidden in the text. So it will be vital to steer students and select the best available books for them.

Research question three tries to unfold whether students are aware of the concepts that mention western values in the novels or not. Analysis of the related data revealed that most of the students are aware of the concepts about western society. Students mentioned that they have found the concepts such as racism, religious discrimination, western nationalism, colonialism, and class distinctions during the process of reading. Students' inferences are right and supported by the study of Yavuz (2012) in which the writer mentions that Jane Austen believes the power of land owners. Participant 1 expressed that "They all have concepts which are related to western nationalism. Especially, racism and religious discrimination are at the forefront of adventure books such as *Lord Jim* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* is also an example of these discriminations." By teaching and showing them such concepts, student will be able to compare and contrast their culture and the target culture. So they will have a better understanding of the novels, and they will have a chance of preventing the cultural assimilation.

Participants 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, and 18 also touch the racism. Participant 3 explains this subject by contacting the "white-skin" or "white-man" concepts which are generally mentioned in the passage. This participant was also supported by the Participant 11 who mentioned "nearly all of the novels we read include white and black concepts which point the western nationalism. The situation in which white people do not think that black people are not equal to them and think that they are all slaves is highly expressed in these novels."



Colonialism and class distinction are other concepts mentioned in these novels. Participant 2 thinks that *Robinson Crusoe* and *Lord Jim* are related to colonialism. These concepts are both related to Western Nationalism. Students believe that one of the most important features of English literature is to show that Western Society is more valuable than the others. They think white people especially English people are superior. But by concentrating more on these novels, they will understand that some nations have a slight inferiority complex and literature will help them to understand it better. Hanley (2016) supports the thoughts and feelings of those participants through stating “racial prejudice, in the form of the assumed superiority of white Europeans over Black Africans, was high in an early 19<sup>th</sup> Century” (p.104).

Participants can comment on class distinction and females’ situation in the society. Females’ situation in the society is the most mentioned subject by the students. They think that women did not get the value they deserved. They were behaved like slaves and were not able to get the inheritance that they deserve. Participant 2 explains this situation as “Novels explained the women of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women behaved these days differently.” Adultery was often explained in the novels. Women chose rich husbands because they do not have any right to get the legacy they deserve. They need money to continue their life, and they try to find this money by hunting a wealthy husband. There is also a class distinction, and people generally marry a man /woman from the same class. Participant 4 also supported Participant 2 by explaining that women were worthless and their only aim was to find a wealthy husband to save their lives and live a luxurious life.

Research question 5 tried to find out the relationship of students’ national identities and using literary sources as reading materials. Nearly half of the students expressed that literary sources explain them that western nationalism in a right way by mentioning the superiority of the white people. On the other hand, other students said the benefits of these novels by helping them to understand the social and political lives of these days. This understanding is helpful for them to evaluate people of those times or examine the society from a different point.

In the interview, another question was asked to the students to understand whether they had a chance to compare the western nationalism or social discrimination with their own culture. Most of the students made this comparison, and they have contrary ideas about western nationalism. They think racism or class distinction was quite a few in those days and

that situation had terrible effects on people's lives. Breaking the class distinction is not possible, and people in lower classes are impoverished. These situations shaped the society of those days. People tried to be able to live according to those situations and women's struggle to find a wealthy husband is a result of those class distinction and gender differences. They were annoyed especially by the status of the women in the society. They said that when compared with those times of the Ottoman Empire, the position of the woman was better in our country. Racism, class distinction, and gender discrimination levels were lower than it was in western societies.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Using literary sources is not only a solution for the teachers' material finding problems in ELT reading courses but is also beneficial for the learners and this study tried to reveal the effectiveness and positive influences of using literary sources in ELT reading courses. In order to realise this aim, participants' reading material choices were tried to be found out. It is clear that participants do not read literary sources and they do not desire to read any novel in their target language although most of them read novels outside the school. However, students who joined this study need to read literary sources in English because they will study on these sources in their departments. It can be expressed that using literary sources in prep class students' reading courses will help those students to find a way to understand them. Prep class reading courses will be a start for those students' academic studies.

Another positive effect of using literary sources in prep class students' reading courses is to develop their ability to provide cultural information. Language should be acquired with its culture. Acquiring the target culture of any language will help the learner to understand and use it in a better way. Ghosh (2002) supports this study by mentioning the benefits of using literary sources in ELT classes as developing students' intercultural awareness. Using literary sources in reading classes will both help learners to understand the target culture and how this culture was developed. Students will be able to understand the semantic relation of the words and phrases. Class distinction, colonialism, and gender differences which students mentioned in their interviews are main concepts that are related to the English culture of those days. Learning these concepts will be helpful for the

participants during analysing and commenting on the England and English people in that century.

This study also made it clear that students like reading these sources in their courses. The participants do not want to read short stories which are generally the same. Literary sources provide them with the real language, and this makes the language classrooms more joyful. Therefore, it is thought that using literary sources is not dull or challenging process if the correct levels were chosen. Students who took part in this study not only enjoyed the process but also benefited from it. Literary sources provide cultural, semantic, and grammatical knowledge, give students a chance of reading the novels in English, help teachers to find authentic materials, and constitute a lively classroom atmosphere.

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