(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

# Students' opinions on the benefits of studying English literature at university

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## Abstract

Understanding how students view the foreign language (FL) program may be one of the most important steps in curriculum design and lesson planning. This study analyzed the aspect of students' perceptions of the benefits of literature instruction in EFL based on a single open-ended survey conducted with Dutch secondary school students (N = 635) from 15 different schools. This study also aimed to evaluate whether these perceptions differed in any way between the different schools. We paid attention and analyzed the students' policy against by means of the Comprehensive Approach to Foreign Language Literature Learning. The results show that most students see literature in a FL pre-dominantly as language teaching. Moreover, a comparison of the 15 schools showed students' perceptions regarding the benefits of the opportunity offered by the EFL literature varied across the schools. The article ends with some discussion of pedagogical issues and on how the student perspective might be studied on a small scale.

**Keywords:** Student perspective; FL literature education; Integrated language and literature curricula; Secondary education

## 1. Introduction

Educators, researchers, and teachers frequently talk about what goes on in classrooms around the world without asking students to participate. Incorporating the perspectives of those who have firsthand experience with the curriculum is especially beneficial when a portion of it is in transition, like when teaching foreign language (FL) literature. "What's the point of reading this novel in English?" was the seemingly straightforward query posed by a secondary school student. Addressed to the paper's original author, who served as the study's foundation. We looked into the advantages of literature in English as a foreign language (EFL) from the viewpoints of Dutch secondary school students, for whom this is a required component of their English language study, in response to this question.

With an emphasis on integrated language and literature programs, we begin with a brief overview of the resurgence of literature as a useful element in FL instruction. A discussion of the significance of researching student perspectives and the ways in which this has been done thus far in the field of FL education follows. The results of a study in which we examined the answers to a single open-ended question about the advantages of FL literature education are then presented. We conclude by discussing the theoretical and practical consequences of our findings.

## 2. Review of the literature

### 2.1. Integrated language and literature curricula

For many years, the notion that literature can be regarded as an integrated part of the FL curriculum has existed. For instance, literature was described as "an integral and revitalized part of foreign language education at every level" by Herr (1982) (205). Later, literature instruction's status in FL education changed from that of a "welcome guest" to that

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of an "unwelcome ghost" (Pulverness 2014), and then it returned to being seen as an important part of the FL curriculum (Paran 2008). The Modern Language Association further emphasized the idea of an integrated language and literature curriculum in 2007 by proposing a reform that would replace the language-literature divide with an integrated FL curriculum.

A growing number of papers, including those by Hoecherl-Alden (2006) and Barette, Paesani, and Vinall (2010), support the notion of integrated language and literature curricula, which is another effect of the notion that literature can be used as the actual content of FL classes. But according to Paesani and Allen's (2012) analysis of the blending of language and literary-cultural content, the barrier between language and content still persists (see also Paran 2008).

A comprehensive approach to learning foreign language literature has been developed as a result of our study into integrated FL curricula (Bloemert, Jansen & van de Grift 2016; Bloemert et al. 2016, in preparation). Each of the four techniques that make up this comprehensive model is operationalized in a number of distinct aspects (Figure 1). By conducting a series of consecutive Thinking Aloud Protocols with Dutch FL teacher trainers (also known as peer debriefing), EFL secondary school teachers, and secondary school students (also known as member-checking), Bloemert et al. (2016, in preparation) empirically validated the model's components.

The "study of literature" is connected to both the text and context methods (Maley 1989). While the context approach concentrates on things like the historical or cultural circumstances of literary writings, the text approach is more focused on things like literary terminology and setting. However, the use of literature as a resource is associated with the reader and language methods (Maley 1989). The language method concentrates on using literary texts to improve students' language skills, including speaking and reading, as well as their understanding of grammar and vocabulary, whereas the reader approach highlights the relationship between the reader and the text. The intersection of the four approaches would characterize a classroom where the instructor addresses each of these topics, combining an emphasis on the text and context information while empowering the students to decide relationships with the text, constantly making sure that language learning is supported. The outcome of this is what we have named the Comprehensive Approach, which we believe will likely promote excellent teaching and learning.
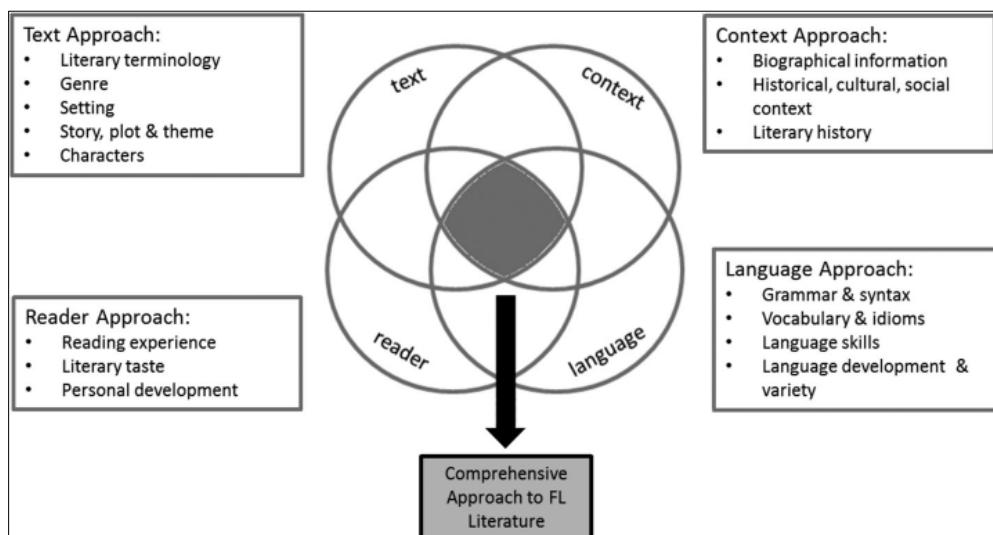


**Figure 1** Comprehensive approach to FL literature learning (Bloemert et al. in in preparation)

## 2.2. Students' perspectives on FL literature education

Teaching methods have an impact on how students learn, according to recent theories of education (Beausaert, Segers & Wiltink 2013). Many and Wiseman (1992) discovered that the substance of the students' written responses was greatly impacted by the various methods used to teach literature in the first language (L1). The way literature is taught has an impact on students' attitudes regarding the texts and subsequent texts they read, according to Tutaş (2006) in a FL context. Put another way, how teachers use a Comprehensive Approach or just a text approach, for instance, may affect how students engage with and learn from FL literature. The effectiveness of the educational environment is impacted by students' impressions of it, which in turn affect how much they learn (Brown 2009; Entwistle 1991). In fact, congruence occurs whenever a teacher's method of instruction aligns with a student's method of learning (Vermunt & Verloop 1999). Other situations call for the use of pre-existing teaching methods, which may not always be mutually

agreeable. According to Vermunt and Verloop (1999), "may be necessary to make students willing to change and to stimulate them to develop skills in the use of learning and thinking activities they are not inclined to use on their own" (270), this could result in "constructive frictions." In addition to fostering a climate of congruence and constructive conflict, knowing how students perceive FL literature may also assist teachers in devising a plan to reconcile potential discrepancies. Therefore, we believe that in order to maximize learning, a shift to an integrated language-literature curriculum should also consider the viewpoints of the students (see also Peiser & Jones 2013).

Few scholars, nevertheless, have examined students' viewpoints in the area of FL literature education. Martin and Laurie (1993), an early study in the setting of higher education, discovered that linguistic interest was the primary motivator for French language learners at an Australian university. On the other hand, Liaw (2001) discovered that her Taiwanese management students relished studying literature as part of a language course. Additionally, the majority of the students liked the short tales over the course book, and they became more comfortable reading English literary materials.

However, Paran (2008) cautions that we should exercise caution when interpreting the results of these investigations. The majority of the courses that were examined were either electives or included in a curriculum that the students voluntarily chose to complete for their degree at university. Furthermore, secondary schools are "the locus of most language learning in the world," not universities (Paran 2008: 490). This student body is comparatively big because EFL is required for the majority of secondary school pupils in the Netherlands, unlike other FLs like French or German, which are elective. Because of this high number, we think that this specific student body is very beneficial for curriculum design and educational research.

The opinions of secondary school students on EFL literature classes are partially clarified by two extensive studies. Students in five different Turkish secondary schools participated in a survey conducted by Akyel and Yalçin (1990). They showed that students' appreciation of the use of literature in EFL classrooms was correlated with their level of English language ability. With a more focused approach, Schmidt (2004) investigated the realities of Shakespeare-based EFL lessons in Germany and the potential link between students' interest in Shakespeare and the methods used to teach it. Despite not having a genuine interest in Shakespeare's writings, the majority of students stated that they accepted him as a required author for their EFL course.

Nevertheless, there are still very few of these studies, even though Paran (2008) calls for more "systematic enquiries into the views of the learners" (490). Our work aims to investigate this understudied field.

## 2.3. Research questions

Using adolescent viewpoints to inform EFL literature instruction was the main goal of this study. Furthermore, we wanted to know if students from different schools would have different perceptions because of the differences in EFL literature curricula in Dutch secondary education (Bloemert & van Veen acknowledged). Examining the variations among schools may point to a potential connection between the way literature is taught and how students view the subject. The following two research topics resulted from these goals: (1) How do EFL students in Dutch secondary schools see the advantages of EFL literature instruction, and (2) do students from various schools have different opinions?

## 2.4. Context of this study

The FL curricula in Dutch secondary school also reflect the evolving role of teaching FL literature as previously mentioned. FLs were made a required subject in Dutch schools in 1863, and only canonical works were studied and translated until 1968 (Wilhelm 2005). Literature was still required for the next thirty years (until 1998, when a more focus was placed on practical language abilities), but students were now expected to study FL literature on their own. As part of the 1998 educational reforms, students were required to read 13 FL literature core curriculum standards instead of the previous 12 works.

Crucially, it was contended that teaching FL literature in the target language could make it more difficult to have discussions about literary works. Despite reading the literary works in the original FL, L1 was adopted as the preferred language of instruction. Furthermore, teachers were prohibited from assessing literature and language proficiency together (Kwa-kernaak 2016).

Nine years after the educational reforms of 1998, the government introduced a revised version, which is still in use today: the required minimum remained three literary works but the core curriculum standards for FL literature were reduced from 13 to the following three: (1) the student can recognize and distinguish literary text types and can use literary terms when interpreting literary texts, (2) the student can give an overview of the main events of literary history

and can place the studied works in this historic perspective and (3) the student can report about his/her reading experiences of at least three literary works with clear arguments (Meijer & Fasoglio 2007).

When it comes to choosing texts, how many hours they want to spend teaching literature, and how they want to assess literature, Dutch FL teachers are completely free aside from these three requirements. The extent of this curricular freedom is reflected in the variation between learning trajectories in different schools (Bloemert & van Veen accepted). Notwithstanding the seeming gap between language and literature and the "uneasy position" that literature holds in Dutch secondary education (Bloemert et al. 2016), more and more literature lessons, resources, and assessments are once more, at least in part, in the FL, and FL teachers view the use of a FL in their classes as an indication of quality (Kordes & Gille 2013). We primarily focus on EFL in this study, even though the three main curriculum standards English, French, German, and Spanish apply to all FLs taught in Dutch secondary school. The results for elective languages might be different.

## 3. Methods

The ethics committee of the department gave its approval for this study, which was carried out at a research university

### 3.1. Participants

Through her professional network, the first author made contact with a number of secondary schools in the northern Netherlands between September 2014 and September 2015. The selection of schools was based on convenience sampling in which at least one of the EFL teachers was acquainted with the first author. The schools, which represented both small town and rural schools, were all situated in the four northern provinces of the Netherlands, and the student body had a comparatively low degree of cultural diversity. 635 students from 15 different schools and 28 different classes participated, all of whom were Year 5 pre-university students, ages 15 to 17. Despite the fact that participation in this study was entirely voluntary, every student provided cooperation.

### 3.2. Procedure

We asked the students one open-ended question: What do you believe are the benefits of EFL literature lessons? This was done in order to uncover authentic opinions, allow for spontaneity, and prevent bias in answer categories that could arise from providing ideal replies. Because we intended to get responses from a sizable sample of students from numerous schools in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' perspectives on this subject, we decided to employ this approach rather than conducting interviews. During regular class time, EFL teachers distributed a single open-ended survey, instructing all students to respond in bullet points. The kids have roughly ten minutes to complete this task.

### 3.3. Analyses

Several examples of the data we gathered are displayed in Table 2, along with the coding process (the questions we asked during the study and the code we assigned to the examples). Bloemert et al. (2016) prepared the Comprehensive Approach to Foreign Language Literature Learning, which we used to analyze the data. An independent rater coded the data after receiving training on the four Comprehensive Approach approaches and the 15 underlying elements (Figure 1), as well as how to recognize these approaches and elements in the data. The background of the instrument and its intended usage were explained to the independent rater at the beginning of the training.

Initially, we determined if the response was negative or positive in wording and if it could be categorized into one of the 15 aspects (the subcategories of the four approaches in Figure 1). When this wasn't the case, we looked to see if the response fit into any of the four methods. We then looked to see if the response had anything to do with English or English literature if this was also not the case.

**Table 1** Overview of 15 participating schools

| School | No. of classes participating | Total no. of students |
|--------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| A | 3 | 61 |
| B | 2 | 50 |
| C | 1 | 28 |

| D | 2 | 48 |
|---|---|-----|
| E | 1 | 21 |
| F | 3 | 75 |
| G | 1 | 16 |
| H | 4 | 88 |
| I | 2 | 45 |
| J | 1 | 19 |
| K | 2 | 51 |
| L | 2 | 50 |
| M | 2 | 23 |
| N | 1 | 31 |
| O | 1 | 29 |

**Table 2** Coding procedure including example student answers

| Step | Question | Example student answer | Code |
|------|----------|------------------------|------|
| 1 | Is the answer positively or negatively worded? | 'No complete lessons about strange facts regarding the author because nobody is interested and you will forget these in no time' | Negative |
| 2 | Does the answer fit into one of the 15 elements? | 'Getting ideas for reading new books' | Approach: Reader Approach Element: Developing literary reading taste |
| 3 | Does the answer fit into one of the approaches? | 'Knowledge of the English language' | Language approach |
| 4 | Is the answer related to English or English literature? | 'You can join a conversation about English books and appear very intelligent' | Yes |

To guarantee the accuracy of the coding, the first author coded a random sample of the data (20%, n = 127 students) after the independent rater had coded every response. Cohen's kappa score (.93), which demonstrated a high degree of agreement, was used to establish interrater reliability.

**Table 3** Overview of the 2361 answers of Dutch secondary school EFL students ($n = 635$)

| | 2361 | | Positive: 2218 (94%) | Negative: 137 (6%) | Total |
|---|------|---|----------------------|--------------------|-------|
| Four approaches | 1796 | Text | 78 | 2 | 80 (5%) |
| | | Context | 517 | 10 | 527 (29%) |

|  |  | Reader | 272 | 4 | 276 (15%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | Language | 909 | 4 | 913 (51%) |
| Related to English/literature | 559 |  | 442 | 117 |  |
| Not related to English/literature | 6 |  |  |  |  |

## 3.4. Findings

The percentage of all responses for each of the four methods is shown in Table 3. One of the four methods allowed us to code 1796 responses. The language strategy accounted for more than half of these responses (51%), followed by the context approach (29%), reader approach (15%), and text approach (5%). There were 559 responses in all, some of which were too generic to fall within one of the four categories but were nonetheless connected to English or English literature, such as "It adds depth to the English lessons." Just six responses, or 0.25 percent of the total, had nothing to do with English or English literature. Among these were the understandable statement, "I prefer mathematics," and the rather cryptic (and likely satirical) remark, 'beer'. It is important to note that, although though our single open-ended question, which asked students to list the advantages of studying EFL literature, was framed positively, 137 responses were written negatively, such as "Listening to boring stories." Some students did bring up particular components of the Comprehensive Approach, but they explained why they weren't seen as helpful. For example, "Literary history; I don't see the benefits of this." Dutch society does not benefit from it. If you are unaware of this, no one will hold you accountable. We would be better off investing our efforts in something that benefits society rather than studying literary history. We also determined how many methods each student mentioned at least once in order to determine how well the responses covered the various components of the Comprehensive Approach. The majority of students (44%) identified two approaches, followed by one strategy (33%) and three approaches (16%), as Table 4 demonstrates. Only one percent of the pupils mentioned all four strategies. When asked about the advantages of EFL literature lessons, most students identify various methods, with a significant minority of 17% mentioning solutions that fit into three or more approaches and 44% mentioning two approaches. An overview of the various method combinations is shown in Figure 3, which is organized by decreasing frequency.

Figure 3 shows how all approach combinations are represented in our data, albeit with a vast difference in number of students, varying between 2 and 160 students. This indicates not only the difference between what students believe are the benefits of EFL literature education, but also shows that some approach combinations are clearly dominant. The language/context approach com- bination features most prominently; the answers of 25% (n = 160) of the students fell into this com- bination, indicating that students regard the benefits of EFL literature in terms of language and context related elements. Furthermore, 56% (n = 335) of the students mentioned either the context approach or the language approach, or a combination of the two. At the other end of the spectrum, a total of 11.5% ($n$ = 73) of the students mentioned the combinations in which the text approach features which ranged between 0.3% ($n$ = 2) and 4% ($n$ = 27).

**Table 4** Number of approaches addressed by each student.

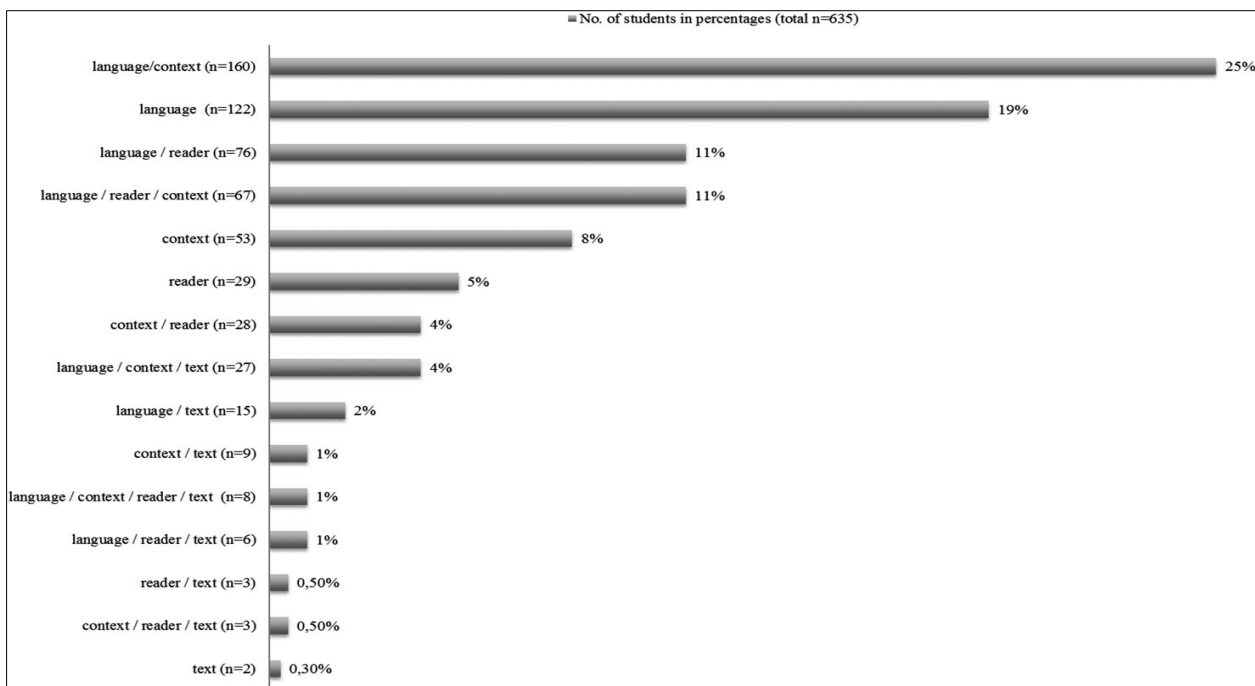| Number of approaches addressed by each student | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | None |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All students | n = 635 | 206 (33%) | 282 (44%) | 103 (16%) | 8 (1%) | 36 (6%) |

**Figure 2** Approach combinations for total number of students in percentages

In general, 74% (n = 472) of the students mentioned the language approach at least once, fool- lowed by 56% (n = 355) for the context approach, 33% (n = 211) for the reader approach, and 12% (n = 73) for the text approach. Table 5 presents a detailed overview of the elements within the four approaches as mentioned by the students. Most students mentioned more than one element. A large majority of the students (74%, n = 472) felt that the benefits of EFL literature lessons were language approach elements, especially 'English vocabulary and idioms' (44%, n= 279) and 'English language skills' (26%, n = 163). Over half of the students (56%, n = 355) mentioned context approach elements; the most frequent element mentioned in this approach was the 'Historical, cultural, and social context' element, mentioned by 47% (n = 298) of all students. A third of the students' mentioned reader approach elements; the most frequent element mentioned was 'Critical thinking skills and personal development', mentioned by 28% (n = 178) as a beneficial element in their EFL literature classes. The approach that was mentioned by the smallest number of students was the text approach (12%, n = 73). None of the students' answers related to the elements 'setting', 'characters' or 'personal reading experiences with literary texts. The elements connected to the core curriculum standards for FL literature were mentioned by a remarkably small number of students. Literary terminology (Standard 1) was mentioned by 2% of the students; literary text types (Standard 1) were mentioned by 1% (n = 5) of the students; English literary periods and history (Standard 2) by 7% (n = 46), and personal reading experiences with literary texts (Standard 3) was not mentioned by any of the students at all. This large discrepancy in the number of times these elements were mentioned and the number of times other elements were mentioned raises important questions for the classroom and is examined in the discussion section. In order to answer our second research question, whether there is a difference in perception between students from different schools, we compared how many students from each school mentioned the approaches at least once. Table 6 lists the schools according to the frequency with which each of the approaches was mentioned by the students. Ten of the 15 schools show a pattern where the order of approaches from most to least mentioned is: language, context, reader, and finally the text approach. For one-third of the schools, however, the order of approaches differs, although in each school the text approach came in fourth position.

**Table 5** Student answers organized according to the comprehensive approach

| | Element | No. of students (n = 635) | Student example |
|---|---|---|---|
| Language approach | Language approach general | 17 (28%) | You study the English language in a different way |
| | English grammar and syntax | 66 (10%) | You develop a 'feeling' for English syntax |
| | English vocabulary and idioms | 279 (44%) | I learn synonyms of words I already know |
| | English language skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing) | 163 (26%) | You improve your English language skills |
| | Historical development of the English language | 117 (18%) | You learn where the language comes from, how it came into existence and how it developed |
| Context approach | Context approach general | 24 (4%) | Knowing about the mindset of writers from that era |
| | Biographical information | 62 (10%) | You learn more about English authors and poets |
| | Historical, cultural, and social context | 298 (47%) | You learn about how people thought in different periods |
| | English Literary periods and history | 46 (7%) | You can place literary works in the right periods |
| | Reader approach general | 5 (1%) | Understanding what a certain story means for your life |
| Reader approach | Personal reading experiences with literary texts | 0 (0%) | – |
| | Developing literary reading taste | 41 (7%) | You read different kinds of texts, novels, literary periods, eras. This is how you can develop your own style and what you like |
| | Critical thinking skills and personal development | 178 (28%) | It gives you time and space to think about topics that you would not look for on your own initiative |
| Text approach | Text approach general | 45 (7%) | You get to know the classics |
| | Literary terminology | 12 (2%) | You understand metaphors better |
| | Literary text types | 5 (1%) | You learn different types of poetry |
| | Story, plot, and themes | 14 (2%) | You discover the meaning behind stories |
| | Setting (role of time and place) | 0 (0%) | – |
| | Characters | 0 (0%) | – |

The results presented in Table 6 suggest that there is quite a difference in the way the students from the 15 schools perceive the benefits of the EFL literature lessons. Even though for the majority of the schools the language and context approach were mentioned most often by most students, it is noteworthy that in one-third of the schools the combination of the most frequently mentioned approaches is different. Furthermore, each of the four approaches was mentioned in each school, with the exception of school G, yet the difference between schools can be considered substantial for all four approaches: text approach (0–21%), context approach (29–78%), reader approach (10– 63%) and the language approach (21–95%). If we compare schools D and I, for example, 82% of the students from school I mentioned the language approach whereas only 21% of the students from school D mentioned it. On the other hand, 65% of the students from school D mentioned the context approach, compared with only 29% of the students from school I. These differences suggest that students from these two schools view the benefits of EFL literature lessons considerably differently.

**Table 6** Division of approaches in percentages and the number of students per school who mentioned an approach at least once

| School | n = no. of students | Language (%) | Context (%) | Reader (%) | Text (%) |
|--------|---------------------|--------------|-------------|------------|----------|
| E | 21 | 95 | 43 | 10 | 10 |
| L | 50 | 94 | 48 | 26 | 6 |
| N | 31 | 94 | 42 | 19 | 19 |
| M | 23 | 93 | 78 | 35 | 9 |
| A | 61 | 84 | 74 | 20 | 16 |
| B | 50 | 84 | 72 | 32 | 14 |
| I | 45 | 82 | 29 | 24 | 7 |
| F | 75 | 76 | 47 | 32 | 17 |
| G | 16 | 69 | 50 | 31 | 0 |
| O | 29 | 66 | 62 | 38 | 10 |
| | | Language (%) | Reader (%) | Context (%) | Text (%) |
| J | 19 | 95 | 63 | 42 | 5 |
| H | 88 | 78 | 55 | 45 | 6 |
| | | Context (%) | Language (%) | Reader (%) | Text (%) |
| K | 51 | 73 | 61 | 37 | 16 |
| C | 28 | 71 | 36 | 32 | 21 |
| | | Context (%) | Reader (%) | Language (%) | Text (%) |
| D | 48 | 65 | 31 | 21 | 8 |

## 4. Discussion and classroom implications

In this study we asked 635 students in 15 secondary schools to write down the benefits of EFL literature education. The most important finding of our study is that the majority of the students see the EFL literature component through the lens of their language course; a total of 74% of the students mentioned the language approach as a beneficial component of EFL literature education. These findings support previous research such as Martin and Laurie's (1993) who showed that the students gen- early perceived the inclusion of literature in a pragmatic language learning way. Although these results are not surprising (the EFL literature component in Dutch secondary education is after all part of a language course), the fact that the students indicated that they recognize the contribution of literature to their language development underlines the notion of an integrated language and lit- erasure curriculum promulgated by, for example, the Comprehensive Approach.

This is supported by Dutch EFL teachers who value the use of the FL in the literature classroom (Kordes & Gille 2013) as well as different voices in the literature. Grabe (2009), in an overview of the research, suggests that meaningful FL reading, such as literature, is an important source for improving for example reading accuracy and reading rate. Lao and Krashen (2000), too, argue that reading FL literature exposes language learners to a wealth of language varieties and registers.

The second most beneficial approach according to this group of students was the context approach. Slightly more than half of the students (56%) mentioned the context approach at least once, and 47% of them focused on the 'historical, cultural, and social context' element. The high per- centage for this particular element could represent a desire that Martin and Laurie's (1993) students also expressed: a desire for 'relevant cultural content' (195). Since most literary works that are pre- scented to FL students are placed in a 'foreign' world where students learn about the historical, cultural, and social elements through fiction, poetry and drama, studying these works in the FL classroom could enhance the students' intercultural and critical cultural awareness (Byram 2014). One could even argue that being able to

contextualize a literary work through a language that is not your own, thereby possibly cultivating a sense of tolerance and understanding (Barrette et al. 2010; Bredella 2013; McKay 1982), might be a unique feature of FL literature education. The two approaches that were absent from the answers of the majority of the students were the reader approach (where 33% of students mentioned any of the elements) and the text approach (where only 12% of students mentioned any of the elements). The only element of these two approaches that was mentioned by a relatively large number of students (27%, which for one element is a large percentage) was 'critical thinking skills and personal development'. According to Barrette et al. (2010), studying literary texts in the FL classroom could enhance students' translingual and transcultural competence, precisely because they are confronted with stories and themes from other historical, cultural and social contexts. However, when students do not see how this diverse input in their language course could, for example, enhance their personal development (which is part of the reader approach; see Figure 1), or how FL literature can be studied from multiple approaches, this is a missed opportunity in the FL literary experience. The fact that the other elements of these two approaches were rarely mentioned or not mentioned at all might be because the stu- dents simply do not see these elements as beneficial for their EFL learning. Another possibility is that these elements are already covered by the literature lessons in their first language or in a different FL, with the result that students do not see the point of repeating this in the English literature lessons. Even though the majority of the students (61%) mentioned more than one approach, only 8 stu- dents (1%) provided us with answers that fell into all four approaches. In other words, this group of 635 secondary school students did not regard FL literature lessons in what we would call a compre- hensive way. Even though each of the four approaches assumes possible benefits for FL students, it is their reciprocal relationship that is particularly enriching in FL literature lessons (Bloemert et al. 2016). Therefore, when students, for example, see the FL literature lesson as beneficial only for their language development but their teachers approach the texts primarily through a text approach, one could understand the student question we quoted at the beginning of this paper about the actual point of reading literature in English.

The findings also show that there is variation in the way students from different schools perceive the benefits of this part of the language curriculum, in spite of the fact that each of the four approaches featured in all schools. Whereas, for example, in some schools the majority of students mention the language approach (e.g. school E with 95%), in school D this was merely 21% of the students. This suggests that within schools and perhaps even within classes, there is variation in how students perceive the EFL literature curriculum. Therefore, a Comprehensive Approach, where the teacher would teach literature through all four approaches, could create a teaching situation where there is congruence between the individual student and teacher perspectives and where con- strictive frictions are created when the teacher introduces approaches that the student initially did not regard as beneficial.

Taking into consideration that teaching approaches can have an effect on student learning (Many & Wiseman 1992; Tutaş 2006), the differences in students' responses at school level could be related to what students are actually being taught. One interpretation of the findings is that EFL literature in Dutch secondary education is taught primarily through a language approach followed by a context approach in some schools or through a context and reader approach in other schools, thereby reflecting the students' answers. However, it might also be the case that EFL literature is often taught through a text approach in combination with the context approach element 'English literary periods and history' and the reader approach element 'personal reading experiences with literary texts', since these are the elements that cover the three core curriculum standards for FL literature. In the latter case students might consider these elements simply not as beneficial and therefore these elements did not appear often in our data. However, our study does not allow us to draw conclusions with regard to direct relations between how the students are taught and how they perceive EFL lit- erasure education.

In spite of this, the difference in students' responses between different schools does call for future research that focuses on what is actually happening in these classrooms as well as an analysis of learning tasks. We believe that an analysis of these tasks might reveal that learning tasks can be 'very one-sided and more often reflect teachers' personal styles than students' needs' (Vermunt & Verloop 1999: 277). Locating a blind spot or finding out that certain approaches are over-represented can be very helpful in improving the quality of teaching (Vermunt & Verloop 1999). Despite the increasing body of information about student perceptions regarding various parts of the curriculum, more research is needed to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Being aware of the impact of the way literature is taught on how students perceive this com- ponent could help teachers in creating an effective situation of congruence as well as constructive friction (Vermunt & Verloop 1999). However, when a teaching approach has negative effects on student learning or when discrepancies between students' and teachers' perceptions are too large, this can create destructive frictions (Vermunt & Verloop 1999). Destructive frictions may also occur when students perceive the teaching and learning as irrelevant and do not feel this gap is bridgeable (Hattie & Yates 2014). If teachers in a school like school J, for example, (0% text approach) offered literature lessons primarily through a text approach, destructive frictions (Vermunt & Verloop 1999) could occur because students do not see the relevance of this type of EFL literature lessons (Hattie & Yates 2014).

One word of caution regarding the interpretation of our study is that although we made consider- able efforts to understand the students' point of view, we still were limited to our own ways of inter- prating their words due to the format of the students' responses. Because we asked the students a single open question, students were first of all constrained by their ability to articulate their ideas on the spot. Furthermore, our unit of analysis was fully dependent on whether or not students decided to elaborate their responses in detail. Due to this dependence on student willingness to participate, our data may not fully reflect the extent of the students' views about the benefits of EFL literature education. Another issue that should be raised here is the fact that we researched students' perspective with regard to EFL literature education. There is a possibility that students could have a different view of literature in other FLs. Therefore, we would suggest future research being conducted into this in the teaching of other FLs taught in secondary education. Future research could also investigate whether students have the same view of literature in English (a compulsory subject) and the other FL they are taking (as an elective).

Taken as a whole, our methodology did generate a substantial amount of rich data, and the results of this study provide important information about what learners think of EFL literary education, Infor- motion that can be used by teachers and curriculum designers when working on designing or enrich- Ing the literature component. Also, understanding how students perceive specific areas of the curriculum can provide teachers with invaluable information that could be useful to fit course content to specific student needs (Akyel & Yalçin 1990; Cook-Sather 2002; Pflaum & Bishop 2004).

## 5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate EFL literature teaching through the perspectives of a large group of secondary school students. The findings show that although there are consider- able differences between the perspectives of students in different schools, each of the four approaches of the Comprehensive Approach nevertheless featured in all but one of our 15 schools. Furthermore, the language approach featured as the most dominant approach. In other words, the students indicated that they primarily see the EFL literature component as a means of improving their language skills but they also, in varying degrees, indicate benefits related to the context, reader and text approach. Considering the impact a student's perspective has on how they learn, these findings have significant implications for the further implementation and development of integrated FL and literature curricula. If teachers want to create the desirable situ- action of congruence and constructive friction in their FL literature lessons, focusing on the language approach in combination with the context, reader and text approach appears to be the way forward. Understanding the range of student experiences within classes could contribute to effectively educating a wide variety of students (Pflaum & Bishop 2004; see also Zapata 2016), and there are different ways in which teachers can implement the findings from this study. This would most probably take the form of a small, localized research study in which teachers would: (1) find out what their students believe are the benefits of FL literature education, (2) compare the stu- dents' perspectives with the curriculum they are offered and (3) enrich existing programmers. Ways in which the student perspective can be researched within the classroom context are, for example: organizing focus groups where students discuss a particular part of the curriculum; organizing student presentations in which they explain what they would like to learn, how they would like to learn this and why; constructing a web quest where students research different ways of teaching literature and comment on them; or letting students design their perfect FL lit- erasure lesson. Gaining insight into how students perceive the benefits of a particular component of the curriculum can enhance current educational practice (Brown 2009) and 're-inform existing conversations about educational reform' (Cook-Sather 2002). This is especially valuable consider- ing the current position of FL literature education in its transition towards an integrated language and literature curriculum.

## Compliance with ethical standards

*Statement of ethical approval*

'In the current research work, there is no research on animals/humans by any author in the current research work'.

*Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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