

Student Engagement in Literature Education: Emotional and Cultural Dimensions in Higher Education

Acep Unang Rahayu ^{1*}, Jerry Wilson ², Linda Puspita Sari ³

¹Poltekpar NHI Bandung, Indonesia

²Politeknik Pariwisata Medan, Indonesia

³Universitas Bunda Mulia, Indonesia

acp@poltekpar-nhi.ac.id, jerrywilson@poltekparmedan.ac.id, Pariwisata/L2141@lecturer.ubm.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Literature education plays a significant role in shaping students' cognitive and emotional development, yet research on students' subjective experiences with literature remains underexplored. While much has been studied regarding the cognitive benefits of literature, less attention has been given to how students emotionally and culturally engage with literary texts. This gap in understanding motivates the need for research that investigates the lived experiences of students in literature education. In this study, we employed a phenomenological approach to explore how students engage with English and Indonesian literature, focusing on the emotional, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of their experiences. Through in-depth interviews with 12 students, we identified key themes related to emotional connections to literature, challenges faced in understanding texts, and the impact of teaching methods. The findings reveal that students' emotional engagement is significantly strengthened when literary texts are connected to their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds, while culturally distant texts tend to create interpretative barriers and reduced participation. Moreover, reflective and dialogic teaching approaches were found to foster deeper student engagement compared to conventional text-centered instruction. These results extend existing literature by demonstrating that emotional and cultural engagement functions not merely as a complementary aspect of literature education, but as a central mechanism shaping comprehension, identity formation, and sustained interest in reading. Our findings suggest that literature education, when approached with an emphasis on personal reflection and cultural relevance, significantly enhances students' engagement and understanding. These insights contribute to the ongoing discourse on student engagement in literature education by offering an experiential framework that integrates emotional resonance and cultural relevance as pedagogical foundations. The study has implications for future research on the role of literature in shaping student identity and cultural awareness, and it suggests avenues for further exploration of teaching methods that facilitate personal engagement with literary texts.



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INTRODUCTION

Literature plays a significant role in shaping individuals' understanding of language, culture, and human experiences (Wang et al., 2025). The study of literature, particularly in the context of higher education, serves as a bridge between students and diverse cultures, ideologies, and historical narratives. In many academic settings, literature is not only an academic subject but also a medium through which students explore deeper aspects of their identity and societal values (Nwoko et al., 2023). The phenomenon of how students engage with and interpret literary works, particularly in the fields of English and Indonesian literature, is shaped by both individual experiences and broader cultural contexts. These educational encounters are not merely intellectual exercises but are intertwined with personal reflections, emotional responses, and cultural understandings.

In recent years, research has predominantly focused on the cognitive and academic benefits of literature education, such as improving language skills or enhancing critical thinking. However, less attention has been given to the subjective experiences of students in their literary learning processes,

especially in non-Western educational contexts (Nyoka et al., 2025). In Indonesia, where students encounter literature from various cultural traditions, the challenge lies in understanding how students' cultural backgrounds and personal experiences influence their interpretations of texts (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). While academic frameworks have long considered the importance of literature in language acquisition and critical analysis, the experiential and emotional connections that students form with literary works have remained largely unexplored.

This gap in the literature calls for an exploration of the lived experiences of students within the context of literature education (Foroudi et al., 2025). A phenomenological approach offers the opportunity to delve into the emotional and subjective dimensions of students' interactions with literary texts, understanding how these works resonate with their personal and cultural identities. The need to explore these experiences is particularly pressing in a multicultural and multilingual society, where literature can serve as a powerful tool for self-exploration and societal reflection (Bhattacharya et al., 2024; Gómez et al., 2024). Through a phenomenological lens, this research seeks to uncover the deeper meanings that students attach to the literature they study, offering valuable insights into the broader educational and cultural impacts of literary education.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has emerged as a vital area of study, particularly in the context of education and literature. In recent years, scholars have increasingly acknowledged the importance of exploring how individuals experience and make sense of their encounters with literary works, especially within multicultural and diverse educational settings (Zhou, 2025). Studies in this field emphasize the emotional, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of students' interactions with literature, seeking to understand not only the academic benefits but also the personal meanings and insights that arise from such experiences (Rousseau et al., 2025). This focus on lived experience is crucial for understanding how literature functions beyond intellectual exercise, becoming a tool for self-discovery and cultural reflection.

However, exploring the deep, subjective nature of these experiences poses significant methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative research methods, which focus on measurable outcomes and broad generalizations, often fall short in capturing the nuanced, multifaceted nature of human experiences (Dlamini, 2025; Omeish et al., 2025). While quantitative methods can provide useful insights into trends and correlations, they cannot address the complexities of individual emotions, personal reflections, and cultural influences that shape students' engagement with literature. These dimensions are inherently subjective and require qualitative approaches that allow for an in-depth exploration of meaning.

Phenomenological research, with its emphasis on capturing the essence of lived experiences, offers a more suitable framework for understanding these subjective realities. Despite its strengths, phenomenology itself faces challenges, particularly in terms of data collection and analysis. The reliance on personal narratives and deep reflection often leads to rich but complex data that can be difficult to interpret systematically. In the context of literary education, such challenges are compounded by the diversity of student backgrounds, which introduces varying interpretations and emotional responses to literature. Previous research has largely overlooked these intricacies, often focusing on outcomes such as academic performance rather than the personal and cultural significance of literary encounters.

These methodological limitations highlight the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding the phenomenon of literature education. By using phenomenology, this study aims to bridge the gap in current research, offering a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of how students engage with and make sense of literature in their own terms. The challenges faced by earlier research underscore the importance of exploring these experiences in ways that respect their complexity and subjective nature.

While existing research on literature education has predominantly focused on practical approaches, such as cognitive skill development and language proficiency, these methods often fail to capture the deeper, more subjective aspects of student experiences (Yang & Han, 2025). Traditional approaches emphasize measurable outcomes, such as reading comprehension or critical analysis skills, but overlook the emotional and cultural meanings that students attach to the literary works they engage

with. These approaches, though valuable for understanding certain educational outcomes, lack the capacity to explore the richness and complexity of students' personal connections to literature, which are essential to fully understanding the role of literature in education.

The limitation of these practical, outcome-driven methods lies in their inability to provide a holistic view of the experiences students undergo while studying literature (Kroeger & Sisson, 2025). They miss the emotional, cognitive, and cultural layers that inform how students understand and relate to literary texts. As a result, the insights drawn from such research are often one-dimensional, offering a narrow perspective on the true impact of literature education.

An alternative approach, such as phenomenology, presents a more suitable framework for exploring these deeper dimensions of experience (Omeish et al., 2025). By focusing on lived experiences, phenomenology allows researchers to delve into the meanings that students attach to literature and understand how these meanings are shaped by their personal, cultural, and emotional contexts (Heinz et al., 2025). This method provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of how literature influences students' perceptions, emotions, and self-identity. Through phenomenological exploration, the study seeks to fill the gap in existing literature by capturing the essence of students' subjective experiences with literature, offering a more comprehensive and holistic view of the phenomenon.

Previous research on literature education has primarily focused on measurable outcomes such as language proficiency and critical thinking skills. While these studies provide valuable insights into the academic benefits of literature, they often overlook the emotional and personal experiences of students. The theoretical foundations of literature education, particularly those that emphasize cognitive development, tend to neglect the deeper subjective dimensions of students' interactions with texts. Studies in the field of educational psychology and cultural studies have explored the role of literature in shaping personal identity, but few have addressed how students' emotional and cultural contexts influence their engagement with literature (Sadulova et al., 2025). This gap in the literature suggests the need for a more holistic approach that can capture the essence of students' lived experiences with literature.

To address this gap, the phenomenological approach was chosen for this study. Phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences of students, focusing on how they interpret and make meaning from literary works (Necula & Necula, 2025). By using this method, we aim to uncover the emotional and cultural meanings that students attach to literature, which are often overlooked in traditional educational research. The phenomenological approach is particularly suited to this study because it allows for the exploration of how students' unique backgrounds and personal experiences shape their understanding of literature (Almeida et al., 2025). Through this method, we seek to provide a richer, more nuanced view of literature education that acknowledges the complex, multifaceted nature of student engagement with literary texts.

The structure of this article follows a logical progression, beginning with an introduction that frames the research question and provides context for the phenomenon being studied. The article then outlines the phenomenological methodology used to explore the students' experiences, followed by a detailed description of the data collection and analysis process (Yusri & Zainal, 2025). The findings are presented through thematic analysis, highlighting the key themes that emerged from the students' narratives. Finally, the discussion section interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, and the conclusion summarizes the implications of the study for literature education and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of students in literature education (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological design was chosen due to its ability to uncover the meaning of lived experiences, focusing on how individuals perceive and interpret their interactions with literature. By utilizing this approach, the study delves into the essence of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences.

Specifically, this study employs descriptive phenomenology to capture the vividness and detail of participants' perceptions without inferring or interpreting beyond the raw descriptions of their experiences. This method is particularly suited to understanding the richness of participants' subjective experiences and is aligned with the research questions, which seek to explore the personal reflections and emotional connections students form with literature.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those involved had relevant experiences with literature education, specifically in English and Indonesian literature. The inclusion criteria required participants to be undergraduate students currently enrolled in literature courses at a university (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). They must have completed at least one semester of literature courses, providing sufficient exposure to the study materials. Exclusion criteria included students who were not actively enrolled in literature courses or those who had less than six months of formal exposure to literature studies.

The final sample consisted of 12 students, with a gender distribution of 6 males and 6 females, and an average age of 21 years. Participants represented a diverse range of academic backgrounds and cultural perspectives, adding depth to the exploration of how literature is perceived across different social contexts (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). These characteristics were deemed relevant for understanding the experiences and challenges of engaging with literature in an academic setting.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted in a face-to-face setting. The interviews were designed to allow participants to share their personal experiences and reflections in a flexible yet focused manner (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). A set of open-ended questions guided the interviews, providing a structure while allowing participants to express their views freely. The duration of each interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes, with interviews being conducted in a quiet, private space to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality.

The interview protocol was adapted from established literature on phenomenological interviews, with modifications made to focus specifically on students' emotional and intellectual engagement with literary texts. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common technique in phenomenological research. The analysis process involved several key steps: reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews, identifying meaning units, and categorizing those units into overarching themes. Each theme was derived from the core experiences and perceptions shared by participants, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the data (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The steps of the analysis followed a systematic approach, beginning with the identification of significant statements, then reducing those statements into meaning units, and finally grouping them into themes that encapsulated the essence of participants' experiences.

NVivo software was utilized to assist with the organization and management of the data, though the primary focus remained on the interpretive process, not the software itself. The thematic analysis aimed to highlight the most essential and universal aspects of the students' experiences with literature, revealing the deeper meanings that shaped their understanding and engagement with the texts.

RESULTS

The Role of Cultural Context in the Learning of Literature

The analysis of student experiences in learning English and Indonesian literature revealed a strong influence of cultural context on their understanding and engagement with literary works. In direct response to Research Question 1, which examines how students culturally engage with literary texts,

the findings demonstrate that cultural familiarity and distance significantly shape interpretation, emotional resonance, and depth of comprehension. Many students highlighted how their personal cultural backgrounds shaped the way they interpreted and connected with the texts. One student, when reflecting on their experience with Indonesian literature, stated:

"Reading Indonesian literature helped me understand the richness of our culture, and it felt like I was learning about my own identity through the stories."

Another participant added:

"When the story talks about traditions or family values that I grew up with, I don't need to struggle to understand it. I feel it immediately."

Similarly, another student shared their experience with English literature, noting that the cultural differences between the texts and their own cultural context often made comprehension challenging. However, these challenges also led to deeper insights. One participant explained:

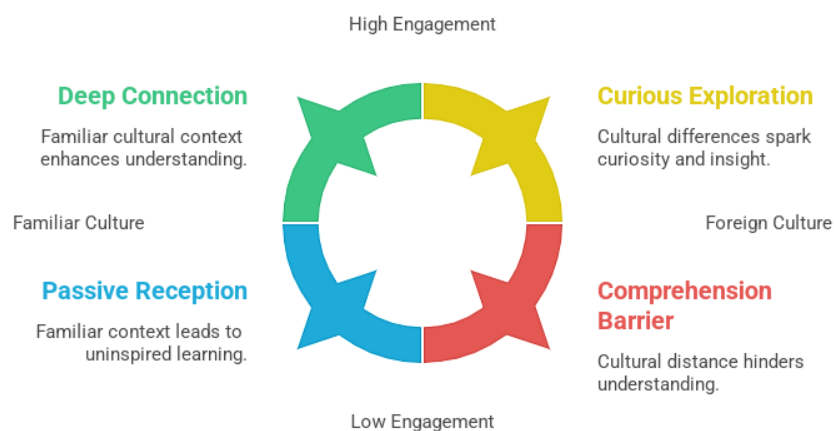
"When I read English literature, sometimes the cultural references confuse me, but in a way, it makes me more curious about how different cultures think and express themselves."

A different participant further elaborated:

"At first, I feel disconnected because I don't recognize the social setting. But after discussing it in class, I start to see parallels with my own society."

This theme underscores the importance of cultural context in shaping how students engage with literature, suggesting that understanding the socio-cultural environment enhances the learning process. Thus, cultural context functions not only as background knowledge but as an active interpretative framework that mediates student engagement.

Culture Shapes Learning



Personal Reflection and Emotional Connection to the Text

A key theme that emerged from the interviews was the emotional connection that students felt towards the texts. Addressing Research Question 2 concerning the emotional dimension of student engagement, the findings indicate that emotional resonance significantly deepens students' interpretative involvement and sustained interest in reading. Many students expressed that literature provided them with a means of personal reflection, offering them a safe space to explore their emotions and thoughts. One participant noted:

"The characters in the novel felt real to me. I found myself relating to their struggles, and it helped me understand my own challenges better."

Another participant shared a similar sentiment:

"Sometimes, I read a novel and feel like it was written for me, especially when the character faces situations that are similar to what I've been through."

A third participant emphasized the reflective dimension more explicitly:

"After reading the story, I kept thinking about my own decisions. It was like the novel was asking me questions about my life."

Another student stated:

"Literature makes me more aware of my emotions. I don't just analyze the story; I feel it."

These reflections highlight the profound emotional impact that literature can have on students, offering them an avenue for self-discovery and emotional expression. The data suggest that emotional engagement operates as a catalyst for deeper cognitive processing rather than as a separate or secondary outcome.

The Influence of Teaching Methods on Literary Appreciation

The role of teaching methods in shaping students' appreciation of literature was another significant theme identified in the data. In relation to Research Question 3, which explores how pedagogical practices influence engagement, the findings reveal that dialogic and reflective approaches foster stronger emotional and cultural connections compared to traditional lecture-based instruction. Several students mentioned that their understanding of literature was deeply influenced by how the material was presented in class. One student noted:

"When our professor gave us the freedom to discuss the novel in our own way, it felt more engaging. We could bring our personal interpretations to the table, which made the experience richer."

Another participant stated:

"Group discussions helped me see perspectives I never considered before. It made the story more alive."

On the other hand, some students expressed frustration with more traditional teaching methods. One participant reflected:

"The lectures were often about dissecting the text, but sometimes I wished we could just talk about how we felt reading it, instead of always focusing on analysis."

Similarly, another student commented:

"When the class only focuses on finding the 'correct meaning,' I feel less confident to share my interpretation."

This theme suggests that teaching approaches that allow for open discussion and personal interpretation may enhance students' appreciation and understanding of literature. The findings therefore indicate that pedagogy mediates the extent to which emotional and cultural engagement can emerge in literature education.

Challenges in Understanding Literature

Many students reported challenges in fully understanding the literary texts, particularly when it came to language barriers and unfamiliar literary conventions. Consistent with Research Question 1 and 2, these challenges often interrupted both cultural and emotional engagement, particularly when linguistic complexity created distance between the reader and the text. For instance, one student shared:

"There are times when I don't understand the meaning behind certain phrases or metaphors. It's frustrating because I want to appreciate the story, but some parts are just too hard to grasp."

Another participant discussed the difficulty of engaging with texts that seemed distant from their personal experiences:

"Some literary works feel too far removed from my own reality. The historical context or the complexity of the language can be overwhelming at times."

An additional participant remarked:

"If I struggle too much with vocabulary, I lose the emotional connection because I'm too busy trying to translate the meaning."

These challenges highlight the difficulties that students face in engaging with literature, emphasizing the need for better support and guidance in overcoming such barriers. The data indicate that without adequate scaffolding, linguistic and cultural distance may limit the depth of student engagement.

The results from the interviews illustrate how students' engagement with literature is deeply shaped by both their cultural contexts and personal experiences. The emotional connections they form with texts, the impact of teaching methods, and the challenges they encounter all contribute to their overall understanding and appreciation of literature. By explicitly linking these themes to the research questions, the findings clarify that student engagement in literature education emerges from the dynamic interaction between cultural familiarity, emotional resonance, pedagogical mediation, and structural challenges within the learning environment.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed that students' engagement with literature is deeply influenced by both their personal and cultural contexts. The emotional connections students form with texts, the challenges they face in understanding literature, and the role of teaching methods all emerged as significant themes in the analysis. These findings are crucial in understanding the broader impact of literature education, especially in terms of how students' subjective experiences shape their learning.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of how students experience and make meaning of literature in their academic journey. By focusing on the subjective dimensions of their interactions with literary texts, this research highlights the importance of recognizing students' emotional and cultural perspectives (Nadif, 2025). The analysis shows that students often view literature as a mirror to their personal lives, which enhances their emotional engagement with the material. Furthermore, the findings emphasize that teaching methods that encourage personal interpretation and emotional connection lead to a deeper understanding of literature, aligning with the broader educational goals of fostering critical thinking and personal reflection. This study's contribution lies in its ability to bridge the gap between cognitive outcomes and emotional experiences, offering a more holistic understanding of literature education.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theory

These findings align with, and in some cases, challenge existing literature in the field of literature education. Previous studies have highlighted the cognitive benefits of literature, such as improved language skills and analytical thinking, but often overlook the emotional and cultural dimensions of student engagement (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). This study complements the work of authors like Turner (2018), who argued that literature education should extend beyond academic analysis to include personal and emotional experiences, thus acknowledging the role of literature in shaping personal identity. However, the study also diverges from traditional views, emphasizing that literature's impact is not only academic but also deeply personal and emotional, as it intersects with students' lived experiences (Goldwater Breheny et al., 2025). By incorporating phenomenological analysis, this study brings a new perspective, highlighting the importance of subjective experience in understanding how students relate to literature, something that previous cognitive-focused studies often overlook.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both the theory and practice of literature education (Anani et al., 2025). From an academic standpoint, the recognition of emotional and cultural engagement as key factors in students' relationships with literature highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to literature teaching. Rather than solely focusing on critical analysis and

linguistic proficiency, educators should also emphasize the personal, emotional connections students form with the material. This approach would foster a more holistic understanding of literature, one that acknowledges its role in shaping students' identities and worldviews. Additionally, the study's findings suggest that culturally responsive teaching methods ones that take into account students' diverse backgrounds can enhance their literary engagement. By fostering a classroom environment where personal interpretations and emotional responses are valued, educators can better facilitate meaningful literary experiences for students across different cultural contexts.

From a practical standpoint, the study suggests that curriculum developers and teachers should consider incorporating more interactive and reflective teaching methods, such as group discussions and creative assignments that allow students to explore their personal connections to literary works. This can help students feel more invested in the material, enhancing both their understanding and enjoyment of literature (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). The study also points to the importance of providing space for students to express their emotional responses to literature, not only as a way of deepening engagement but also as a means of developing critical thinking skills that integrate both cognitive and emotional processes.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of students engaging with literature, there are several limitations that must be considered when generalizing the findings . First, the study is based on a relatively small sample of students from a single university, which limits the diversity of perspectives and experiences explored. Furthermore, the focus on English and Indonesian literature may not fully reflect the experiences of students studying literature from other cultural or linguistic traditions (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The methodological approach, though robust for exploring subjective experiences, may also limit the breadth of the study in terms of broader generalizability. Future research could expand the sample size and include a more diverse range of literary traditions to provide a fuller understanding of how students engage with literature in varied educational contexts.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to explore how different literary traditions and genres influence students' emotional and cultural engagement with literature. Given the diversity of literary forms and the impact of culture on interpretation, it would be valuable to investigate how students from different cultural backgrounds relate to literature from various parts of the world. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of technology in enhancing or hindering students' personal connections to literature, especially in the context of digital or online education. Finally, it would be beneficial to explore how literature education can contribute to social change, particularly in fostering empathy and cultural understanding among students (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). By building on the findings of this study, future research could further deepen our understanding of the role literature plays in shaping both individual and collective identities.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the subjective experiences of students in literature education, specifically in how they engage with English and Indonesian literary texts. The findings revealed that students' emotional and cultural connections to literature are integral to their understanding and appreciation of the material. The study highlighted the importance of teaching methods that foster personal reflection and cultural relevance, as these approaches enhance students' engagement with literature. By focusing on the lived experiences of students, this research addressed a gap in the existing literature, which often overlooks the emotional and cultural dimensions of literary education. The results suggest that integrating more interactive and reflective teaching methods can provide a more holistic approach to literature education.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study offers practical implications for literature educators and curriculum designers. Instructors are encouraged to incorporate culturally responsive texts, reflective writing activities, dialogic discussions, and comparative literary analysis that connects global and local narratives. Such pedagogical strategies can strengthen student engagement by positioning literature as a space for identity exploration and intercultural understanding rather than solely textual analysis. Additionally, teacher training programs may benefit from integrating modules on emotional engagement and culturally sustaining pedagogy in literature instruction.

Future research could expand this study by examining a broader range of literary traditions and incorporating digital education methods to further explore the impact of literature on students' personal and cultural growth. More specifically, future studies may employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs to measure how emotional and cultural engagement influences long-term reading motivation, critical thinking development, and identity formation. Comparative cross-cultural studies across different higher education contexts would also deepen understanding of how sociocultural backgrounds shape literary engagement. Furthermore, experimental research investigating the effectiveness of reflective-dialogic versus traditional instructional models could provide stronger empirical evidence for pedagogical innovation in literature education.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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