

Learners' views of literature in EFL education from curricular and assessment perspectives

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Literature has been gaining growing attention in second language (L2)/foreign language (FL) education globally. In a number of places such as Hong Kong, literature has recently been given greater emphasis in the L2/FL curricula. This article reports part of a large-scale study examining learners' views of two English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) modules on literary genres recently incorporated in the EFL curriculum, namely short stories (ShS) and poems and songs (P&S), from a curricular and assessment perspective. A total of 1190 secondary school students in Hong Kong completed a questionnaire, yielding quantitative and qualitative data; the 2347 comments collected explained their perceptions from multiple angles. Overall, the participants held positive views of the ShS module being incorporated in the curriculum, but only neutral views of the P&S module. When considering assessment, the respondents demonstrated ambivalence towards the modules; they were mostly against these genres being examined and if unexamined, they were generally not interested in studying them.

Keywords: Literature; EFL/L2/FL curriculum; learners' perceptions; assessment

Introduction

The role of literature in foreign language teaching and learning (FLTL) has undergone major upheavals over recent decades. Although different accounts exist of these historical changes (e.g. Carter, 2007; Hall, 2015; Paran, 2006), it is nevertheless the case that “[I]t is only relatively recently that [literature] has regained a degree of recognition as one of the approaches competing for our pedagogical attention” (Maley, 2012, p. 299). A concomitant development has been a widening of the concept of literature and literary texts to encompass both canonical literature as ‘L’iterature (with a capital ‘L’), and ‘l’iterature (with a small ‘l’), defined as texts “whose imaginative content will stimulate reaction and response in the receiver” (McRae 1991, p. vii), ranging from fantasy and young adult novels to fairy tales and song lyrics.

The recognition of literature as part of L2/FL curricula that Maley (2012) talks about is evident across the globe, with literature gaining an important role in the ESL/EFL curricula of countries such as the Netherlands (Bloemert, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2016), Germany (Ahrens, 2012) and Malaysia (Sidhu, Chan & Kaur, 2010), as well as in international qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program (Duncan & Paran 2017, 2018). Possibly the most important statement regarding the role of literature in FLTL is the inclusion of three specific literature related scales in the recent companion volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): Reading as a leisure activity, Expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature), and Analysis and criticism of creative texts (including literature) (Council of Europe, 2018).

There are a few major reasons for the worldwide recognition of the significance of literature in L2/FL curricula. Aside from its use to facilitate general language proficiency development such as reading, writing and speaking as demonstrated in studies such as Kuze (2015) and Shelton-Strong (2012), literature is in particular conducive to developing learners’ language awareness and sensitivity, which are an important aspect in L2/FL learning (e.g. Chan, 1999). In addition, the use of literature can promote learners’ confidence, enjoyment, and motivation (e.g. Chan, 1999; Kuze, 2015; Shelton-Strong, 2012). Perhaps the most salient argument is the close link between literature and learners’ emotions and whole-person development, areas which have gained wide currency in language education in recent decades. Scholars have argued against merely focusing on instrumentality in L2/FL learning (i.e. learning an L2/FL merely as a tool), and for more focus on humanistic education such as appreciation, emotional engagement, self-understanding, and generic skills, e.g. thinking skills and creativity (e.g. McRae, 1991; Sivasubramaniam, 2006). Such a reconceptualization of L2/FL education which emphasizes learners themselves

welcomes and warrants the use of literature in FLTL.

Despite the growing popularity of literature in FLTL, there have only been a relatively small number of empirical research studies in this area to date (Hall, 2015; Paran, 2008). In particular, little is known regarding secondary-level learners' views about literature (Bloemert, Paran, Jansen & van de Grift 2019; Tsang, Paran & Lau, 2020). The present paper, part of a larger study of the attitudes of Hong Kong students towards literature in language learning, approaches this area from a specific curriculum and assessment related angle, examining learners' views of the use of two literary genres incorporated in the latest senior secondary EFL curriculum in Hong Kong.

Examining learners' views in (language) education is crucial for a number of reasons. In this epoch of learner-centeredness in education, learners' views should be taken into account in material and syllabus design (e.g. Spratt, 1999; Wolf, 2013). One reason is that learners' perceptions have been shown to affect their learning approaches and experiences (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008; Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005). However, learners' voices are often neglected, as aptly described by Ng (2004, p.80):

“...unlike any other contemporary institution, the student is always a blind spot in changes in the educational arena. This blind spot arises because the key person who can in fact reflect on how the whole system is functioning, is the one person who has no voice in the system, and no power to provide meaningful feedback that can produce change. Their opinions are discounted. They are treated as kids in a system run by adults for their benefit.”

One counter-argument could be that educators are best placed to make decisions about what learners need and want, rendering learners' views unimportant. However, studies have demonstrated repeatedly the existence of discrepancies between educators' and learners' opinions (Spratt, 1999; Wolf, 2013). These differences in views may lead to learners' disillusionment (Brown, 2009), negatively impacting on their learning. Possibly the most compelling reason of all is that learners' views have been substantiated as a significant factor accounting for the variance in learning outcomes beyond student characteristics (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008; Van Petegem, Aelterman, Rosseel & Creemers, 2007). In light of the value of understanding learners' views in language education, it is important to examine their views of initiatives in curriculum reform as in the present study.

Literature in EFL Teaching in Hong Kong

The new senior secondary (NSS) EFL curriculum in Hong Kong was introduced in

2009. It is the official guide provided by the Education Bureau for use in secondary schools in Hong Kong (CDC & HKEAA, 2014). This curriculum contains information related to learning targets and objectives that EFL teachers in Hong Kong are expected to aim at. Thus, of various definitions of the term *curriculum* (e.g. see Wallace, 2015), in this paper, the NSS EFL curriculum can be understood as “the content and specifications” of the course *the English language* at the course level and “the programme of learning applying to all pupils” in Hong Kong at the national level (Wallace, 2015, n.p.).

In this curriculum, literature (implemented in the form of ‘Language Arts’ in the curriculum guides; see below) has been accorded an unprecedented status— for the first time in Hong Kong history, it is now compulsory for all senior secondary students. Literature was already included in earlier curricula, specifically, in the 1983 syllabus¹ (Curriculum Development Committee, 1983) but it was very often neglected or downplayed, mainly because it was not tested in public examinations and because of its non-mandatory status in the syllabus. It is notable that only in the present NSS curriculum, more than 30 years after being first incorporated in syllabus documents, did literature receive such an important position and attention in the syllabus to the extent of being included in the formal public examination, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE). The present curriculum also stipulates that each school should teach at least one literature component², from a choice of four: *learning English through* (1) *drama* (2) *poems and songs* (3) *popular culture* (4) *short stories*. (Note that poems and songs are included in the same module). For this study, the modules on Short Stories (ShS) and Poems and Songs (P&S) were chosen for investigation because the two other modules are not as focused on literary texts as these two. In the Popular Culture module, some suggested target text-types in the curricular guide by CDC and HKEAA (2014) are commercials and reviews, thus taking an even wider approach than McRae’s (1991) definition of literature with a small ‘l’. In the Drama module, no suggested texts are given in the curricular guide and from the experience of the first author, in practice the module may not deal with plays but might focus on role plays with scripts similar to what learners may do in sessions devoted to oral communication. Importantly, schools and teachers have a large degree of freedom in terms of choosing texts and constructing specific learning activities.

Although the Language Arts modules are compulsory, the alignment between literature in the curriculum and the assessment in the HKDSE is rather weak. In this public examination, there are four papers, namely *reading, writing, listening and*

¹ ‘Syllabus’ was the term used by the Curriculum Development Committee (1983) and it was synonymous with ‘curriculum’.

² There are also four other non-literature components, yielding a total of eight modules.

integrated skills, and *speaking* (CDC and HKEAA, 2014). According to HKEAA (2017), the only paper where literature definitely appears is the two-hour writing paper, in which there are two parts. The first part includes one question in which candidates write a short text (e.g. a letter or a newspaper article), and is not connected to literature. In the second part, candidates choose one of eight questions, each of which is based on one of the eight Language Arts modules. For the literature based modules, learners might be asked to write a review of a play, or comment on a short unseen poem. However, learners have the option of choosing to answer one of the four non-literature based questions in this part, which means that literature is not compulsorily assessed (see HKEAA (n.d.) for a sample writing paper).

Learners' perceptions of literature in L2 education

One of the issues raised by the global move to reinstate literature into foreign and second language teaching discussed above is understanding learners' views of such curricular reforms. Overall, the research we present in this section suggests that learners have a positive view of the use of literature in their L2 studies. Some of the published research consists of small scale enquiries in which teachers researched their own practice; in most of these cases, learners find the introduction of literary texts pleasurable and engaging, leading to language improvement (Diaz-Santos 2000; Yang 2002). In a secondary school context, Richings and Nishimuro (2017) report on a two-year project using literature, suggesting that their students enjoyed the varied activities associated with using literature in the classroom and by the end of the project they enjoyed reading and literature more than they had enjoyed these activities at the beginning of the project.

Large scale studies report similar findings. Davis et al. (1992) and Harlow and Muyskens (1994) examined learners who took French or Spanish as an FL at university. Davis et al. (1992) found that the 175 participants had generally very positive views of literature (e.g. "personally rewarding", p. 322). Harlow and Muyskens (1994) also found that literature reading was rated quite important in FLTL (mean score=3.61/5 with 5 being extremely important) by the 1373 respondents. In secondary education settings, Schmidt (in preparation) examined 417 secondary-school learners' views of studying Shakespeare in EFL classrooms in Germany. Despite the linguistic difficulty, the learners thought these were relevant for them and four-fifths of them found it completely acceptable to make Shakespeare's works mandatory in EFL education. Bloemert et al (2019) found that when EFL learners in the Netherlands were asked about the benefits of literature in their EFL studies, 74% saw this component as contributing to their language development, and 56% mentioned benefits in terms of learning about the context of the literary text such as

literary history, historical background, and biographical information.

In terms of a focus on assessment within the larger field of literature in language learning and teaching, there is no research that has looked at learners' views of assessment. Publications in this specific area focus on building models of literary understanding that will feed into assessment (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019; Paran, Spöttl, Ratheiser & Eberharter, 2020) and on the issues that face testers in this area and that arise from test construction (Paran, 2010; Spiro, 1991). The learners' voice is absent from the research in this field.

A number of issues emerge from this survey of the literature. One is that much of the research has been carried out with tertiary-level students. Many of the studies are small scale, and what students are reacting to is often one specific way of teaching or using literature. In many cases students have, directly or indirectly, chosen to study literature – either as part of their teaching degree (Tehan et. al., 2015) or because it is part of a higher level English class at their school (Schmidt, in preparation). In the study reported here, we respond to calls (e.g. Duncan & Paran, 2018, as described above) to research secondary school settings, and avoid issues to do with a specific programme or teacher through accessing the views of secondary school learners from over 40 different schools in Hong Kong, and moving away from a focus on a small number of classes and teachers (see also Tsang, Paran & Lau, 2020). Large-scale studies on learner views are of special value as their views are highly unlikely to be unanimous. Learner perception can be considered “a collective phenomenon”; because of this, their perception “can be mobilized on some particular issue and directed towards some kind of action” (Ng, 2004, p.80). Therefore, studies of large sample sizes reflect learners' collective views more comprehensively and accurately, yielding stronger implications for educators and researchers.

Given the dearth of previous relevant research, this study is exploratory and primarily qualitative in nature. Our research question, in line with the points made above, was:

What are learners' general views of literature in EFL from a curricular and assessment perspective?

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 1225 EFL secondary 4-6 (i.e. Grade 10-12) learners in Hong Kong, including students who had graduated within the previous 6 months. Participants were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling. After screening for completeness and conscientiousness (e.g. questionnaires where participants had chosen the neutral option for all items were discarded), we had a total

of 1190 valid questionnaires. These participants ($M_{age}=16.86$, $SD=1.39$; males=495, females=691; four did not state their gender) came from at least 40 different secondary schools (some participants did not provide their school information). All participants confirmed that they had had experience studying either the ShS ($n=625$) or the P&S ($n=565$) module before they filled in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire

Two sets of identical questionnaires were constructed, differing only in the focus of enquiry: one for ShS and another for P&S. The items relevant here are the three items on participants' views of curriculum and assessment. As there are no previous scales measuring these constructs, these three items were constructed based on conversations between the first author and his secondary- and tertiary-level students who had taken the ShS/P&S modules in secondary school. The two authors then deliberated on the formulation and phrasing of the actual items, which were broad in scope and exploratory in nature. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and provide reason(s) for their views, meaning that both quantitative and qualitative data were collected for each of the three statements. When providing reasons, they could write in either Chinese (their L1) or English (L2), whichever they were comfortable with. Both types of data are presented here, but our main focus is on the qualitative data, the elaboration the participants provided after indicating their level of agreement. These three items were piloted with 30 participants and based on their comments, we fine-tuned the items (e.g. changing the wording for greater clarity). The finalized items are presented in Figure 1.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1) Overall, it is good that this module has been included in the New Senior Secondary English curriculum.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Reason(s): _____ _____				
2) The module should be examined in the HKDSE.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Reason(s): _____ _____				
3) I would study the module even if it is not included in the HKDSE.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
	Reason(s): _____ _____				

Figure 1. The questionnaire items focusing on curriculum and assessment

Item 1 examined learners' overall views of incorporating the modules in the curriculum. The general (and possibly vague) adjective 'good' was chosen as it fitted the exploratory nature of this study by giving respondents the latitude to express their opinions more freely. Items 2 and 3 examined learners' views from an assessment angle. Item 3, in particular, situates the modules between curriculum (as an elective module) and assessment (to be included or not in assessment).

The paper-and-pencil questionnaires were distributed to the participants by administrators who were also present to provide guidance and clarifications to respondents. For example, the administrators explained what 'the module' referred to and encouraged them to write more than one reason for their choices (in Chinese or English) in addition to showing their level of agreement.

Analyses

The quantitative data were entered and analyzed in SPSS (Version 24). To address the research question, descriptive statistics (e.g. means and SDs) were conducted. As there were two different modules, ShS and P&S, we also conducted independent samples t-tests to compare the two. All items were answered by sufficient respondents (621-622 out of 625 participants in ShS and 562-563 out of 565 participants in P&S) to enable these comparisons to be conducted without considering issues of missing data.

The qualitative data (i.e. respondents' elaborations on their views) were first inputted verbatim into Excel; a total of 2347 responses were collected for the three items. The initial step in analyzing these data was forming three sub-groups for each item, according to whether the data were reasons for agreement (i.e. participants having chosen 'agree' or 'strongly agree'; hereinafter referred to as the 'agree group'), neutrality (i.e. participants having chosen the 'neutral' option'; hereinafter referred to as the 'neutral' group), or disagreement (i.e. participants having chosen 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'; hereinafter referred to as the 'disagree' group). Table 1 presents an overview of the number of comments in each group.

Importantly, all students, including those who ticked neutral in any of the items, were encouraged to write reasons for their agreement or disagreement or for their undecided position; however, not many students who indicated a neutral choice provided detailed explanations for it and they usually only wrote one reason. The second step in the analysis was then to categorise the reasons provided by the neutral group either as showing agreement (e.g. "to learn more English from story" (Participant #332)) or negative, showing disagreement (e.g. "Not so useful" (#397)). These were then analyzed together with the elaborations in the two other groups – agreement and disagreement. There were, however, genuinely neutral answers such as

“it’s normal” (#S535) and these were left in the neutral group. Each comment was thus classified as belonging to one of the three groups only.

Table 1. Qualitative data categorized into agree, disagree and neutral groups

Module	Group	[1] Incorporation of the modules in the NSS curriculum	[2] Examination of the modules	[3] Studying the modules even if not examined
ShS	Agree	217	93	113
	Disagree	59	179	150
	Neutral	77	87	74
	Sub- Total	353	359	337
P&S	Agree	188	42	100
	Disagree	174	342	237
	Neutral	74	52	89
	Sub- Total	436	436	426
	TOTAL	789	795	763

The third stage of the analysis was to develop a coding scheme for the qualitative data. We adopted a data-driven thematic analytic approach (Boyatzis, 1998), drafting codes based on immersion in the data by reading and re-reading them (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The preliminary codes were iteratively questioned, compared and checked against the entire dataset (Patton, 1990). At the final stage, themes emerged based on collating the codes and all these themes were reviewed again (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Noting the potential drawbacks of subjectivity in categorizing and interpreting qualitative data, two coders with postgraduate qualifications and experience in coding data were recruited. Each was given a random and different set of data of around 400 comments. They were first asked to immerse themselves in the data. They were then given the coding scheme and the themes and codes were explained. They then coded the data, and Cohen’s Kappa was calculated for the level of agreement between them and the first author. The inter-coder reliability for coder A and the first author was 0.75, $p < .001$; for coder B inter-coder reliability was 0.79, $p < .001$. Both of these are regarded as very good reliability (Bryman, 2012).

Although the three items tapped into different aspects of respondents’ perceptions, the comments overall could be categorized into four major overlapping

themes, namely, (1) instrumental aspects (e.g. usefulness), (2) psychological aspects (e.g. general attitudes), (3) curricular and pedagogical aspects (e.g. atmosphere in the classroom), and (4) assessment aspects (e.g. fairness). In addition, there were two other categories: (5) multiple aspects (a category created especially for the neutral-group comments with two or more ideas) and (6) other and vague comments (i.e. unclear or irrelevant comments). The findings reported below are structured according to these themes. Due to the similarity of (5) to (1-4) and the non-informative nature of (6), we will focus mostly on themes (1)-(4), the primary themes emerging from the comments.

Results

Quantitative findings

As Table 2 shows, students generally held a mildly positive view towards the incorporation of the ShS module in the new curriculum; however, the general view towards the P&S module was only neutral. In addition, learners' views were neutral to negative on the whole about including the modules in the HKDSE examination (item 2). The same neutral to negative attitude also applied to item 3 (whether the students would study the module even if it were not included in public examinations). From an assessment perspective (i.e. items 2 and 3), learners' perceptions were especially negative towards P&S: both modes = 1 (237/563 in item 2 and 158/562 in item 3), and both medians = 2. As Table 2 shows, the means and medians in ShS were all higher than the corresponding scores in P&S, showing that the ShS module were more favourably viewed. The differences between the two modules are statistically highly significant, with $p < 0.001$ for all three items, with medium effect sizes (d from 0.4 to 0.68).

Table 2. Respondents' opinions of the ShS /P&S modules from curricular and assessment perspectives

	Short Stories				Poems and Songs				<i>p</i>	<i>t(df)</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>Mode</i>			
1) Overall, it is good that this module has been included in the New Senior Secondary English curriculum.	622	3.41 (0.83)	4	4	563	2.98 (1.18)	3	4	<.001	7.10 (1002.58)	0.42
2) The module should be examined in the HKDSE.	621	2.75 (1.06)	3	3	563	2.01 (1.11)	2	1	<.001	11.76 (1182)	0.68
3) I would study the module even if it is not included in the HKDSE.	622	2.88 (1.02)	3	3	562	2.45 (1.21)	2	1	<.001	6.49 (1103.28)	0.40

Qualitative findings

Item 1: Participants' views of incorporating the modules in NSS Curriculum

The explanations given by the respondents in item 1 (whether it was good or not to incorporate the ShS /P&S modules in the new curriculum) could generally be classified into three major themes: instrumental, psychological, and curricular and pedagogical aspects.

Instrumental aspects: Approximately one third of the positive comments (80 out of 217) from participants taking the ShS module touched upon the instrumental perspective. Generally, they mentioned the gains in overall English proficiency, vocabulary, writing, reading, speaking, thinking, creativity, and culture and world knowledge. In contrast, only around one-fifth (40 out of 188) of the comments by P&S respondents were related to this perspective. They thought that P&S increased overall English proficiency, vocabulary and expressions, creativity, and cultural and world knowledge. Notably, they did not mention the skills development (writing, reading, and speaking) that was mentioned in the positive comments on the ShS module. Some learners also indicated their gains in English literature from studying P&S: “advanced my English literary knowledge³” (#P344) and “literary appreciation in English” (#P437). This aspect was absent from the participants' elaborations in the ShS module. Of the negative comments from respondents who were against including ShS in the curriculum, a quarter (15 out of 59) referred to the genre's low instrumental value, its perceived uselessness in English enhancement and its limited scope in use, with comments such as “... short stories just for read” (#S1) and “I think short story just improve my creativity” (#S25). This was also the case for the disagree group in P&S where close to a quarter of the comments (43 out of 174) were on the perceived uselessness and impracticality of the module such as “old-fashioned” (#P261) and “We never use poems practically” (#P352).

Psychological aspects: Another common group of explanations in both modules was related to whether the module was or was not perceived to be interesting and motivating. In ShS, the ‘agree’ group (80 out of 217) praised the module for its interest from different angles – e.g. “Short stories are more interesting” (#S20), “it can enhance my interest learning English” (#S24) and “it is more interesting than the other module” (#S28). Conversely, the most common reason listed by the ‘disagree’ group was that the module is “boring” (e.g. #S28; a total of 14 out of 59). Some also commented on its difficulty and their dislike towards ShS as in “I don't like short stories!” (#S58). Similar positive (82 out of 188) and negative (46 out of 174) comments were received for the P&S module, with a special focus on the difficulty

³ Note that while misspellings have been corrected, other language errors are left intact in direct quotations.

associated with the genre. It is worth mentioning that in the agree group of P&S, 22 learners focused on the entertaining and relaxing effect songs had on them – for instance, “some pleasure time in tough learning period” (#P501) and “reduce stress” (#P350).

Curricular and pedagogical aspects: within this far smaller category, the ‘agree’ groups (28 out of 217 in ShS; 32 out of 188 in P&S) commented on the positive effect this module had on ELT and general education. They were happy that it offered a different way to learn English (this is especially the case for those in P&S where 12 learners commended the wider exposure to the variety of English) and more opportunities to read English. Nine participants commented on higher pedagogical effectiveness such as the better learning atmosphere ShS lessons had and the higher degree of interactivity of these lessons compared to general EFL lessons. For the ‘disagree’ group in ShS, on materials, the negative comments pointed to the poor choices of short stories or lack of resources in supporting the teaching of ShS. A few specifically highlighted it was a problem stemming from their schools rather than the modules per se; for instance, #P6 wrote that “our school is not able to choose appropriate short stories, yielding no benefits for our learning”. From curricular perspectives, the two major types of comments that emerged from the participants were the inappropriateness of placing this module in senior forms (e.g. “not kindergarten” (#S75)) and the added burden in the already demanding curriculum. As for P&S, there were 13 negative remarks associated with the module’s roles in curriculum and assessment. For instance, participants commented that it was barely examined (e.g. “the module is almost useless....HKDSE [examination] barely [tests this].” (#P3)), and that it did not belong in the regular English curriculum (e.g. “poems should belong to the literature lessons” (#P183)). A thought-provoking comment given by #P279 was “even foreigners don’t learn Chinese poems!”, challenging why they as L1 Chinese speakers should learn L2 poems.

Other comments: Many of the neutral comments were largely vague such as “Not special usage” (#P369), “it depends” (#S7) and “it is not perfect at all” (#S26). The more informative comments collected from both P&S and ShS groups were usually explanations for why the modules were viewed both positively and negatively such as “learn more but not useful” (#S2). There were 32 comments revolving around lack of time and increased burden despite the gain. In P&S, an interesting recurring point in 13 of the comments from the participants was that they enjoy songs, but not poems.

Item 2: Participants’ views of examining the modules

Item 2 asked the participants to consider whether the modules should be examined in

the public examination. Three major themes of positive comments were identified: instrumentality, psychology, and assessment.

Instrumental aspects: A small number of participants commented on the instrumental value of assessing ShS and P&S in the public examination. In ShS, 28 participants agreed that the module was worth examining because it could assess learners' general English proficiency (e.g. vocabulary and writing) and creativity. Five respondents also commented on assessing aesthetic appreciation or reflective skills. The same applied to the P&S module (n = 15) but with an additional area of assessment of cultural knowledge. However, many more participants provided reasons against examining these modules from instrumental aspects. As many as 80 in ShS and 114 in P&S thought that examining the modules was useless, meaningless and impractical (e.g. "it is not useful in the future", #P332; "stories are no use for work", #S76).

Psychological aspects: In both modules, a few of the positive elaborations (20 in ShS and 8 in P&S) were about the modules being easy. For instance, a participant commenting on P&S wrote that "poems are easier than grammar." (#P351); a participant commenting on ShS expressed a similar sentiment, saying that it "can let students get higher mark" (#S10). Only 10 participants in total also commented that the modules were interesting and should therefore be examined. In the disagree group, however, many comments (67 in ShS and 136 in P&S) were related to feelings of pressure, dislike, difficulty, boredom, uselessness, and impracticality towards the modules and therefore, the participants did not think they should be examined.

Assessment aspects: A shared concern among the respondents in both modules was the issue of difficulty in assessment (21 comments), such as "it is quite difficult to judge if one's opinion to poem is correct or not" (#P153), "hard to find/create a meter to measure the result" (#S10), and "it is very difficult to assess how 'good' a story is as different people have different preferences" (#S39). Another related issue is fairness (13 comments), with comments such as "not every student has the ability of writing a story" (#S63) and "people are all having different feelings on the same poem if it is examined in the exam, students must be think exactly the same as the model answer" (#P447). Other participants treated these modules as "leisure category" (#P119) and "entertainment" (e.g. # P53 & # P541), hence unsuitable for assessment.

Item 3: Participants' views of studying the modules if unassessed

The last item required learners to indicate whether they would study the modules if they were not examined.

Instrumental aspects: Results were similar to the responses in the previous items. Seventy-eight participants thought that it would help improve their overall English

proficiency (e.g. vocabulary and writing), general knowledge, cultural knowledge, literary knowledge (e.g. “learn figurative language” (#S34)), literary appreciation, and personal development (e.g. “it’s also enriching to the soul” (#P310)). In the disagree group, 46 comments were related to the participants’ perceptions of the low value of these modules for their future or in society in general. For instance, in P&S, # P352 wrote “HK is a competitive society, why wasting time on this part?” and #P326 wrote “no use for our future”; in ShS, “can’t learn something which help me find job or learn knowledge” (#S1).

Psychological aspects: The reasons for participants’ willingness to study the modules even if they were not examined echoed the reasons reported above for items 1 and 2. To summarize, the respondents who were in favour of the modules regarded them as fun, interesting, fascinating, entertaining. Altogether, 94 respondents simply stated their personal liking, for instance, “I just love poetry” (#P411) and “Love to read stories” (#S19). A small number of the positive comments (eight in total) suggested that if there were no assessment, learning would become more enjoyable. Rather than being purely instrumental, some of the positive comments unveil the willing-to-learn, ever-learning, learning-as-a-reward attitudes of some participants (e.g. # P442 wrote “know more does no bad to life”). However, there were also a large number of comments from the disagree group. Apart from dislike and boredom (53 comments), another category found in both modules was learners’ perceptions of their poor English and difficulty of the module (e.g. “I have words that I don’t know the meaning in every line” (#S43)), totaling 35 comments.

Assessment aspects: A total of 160 comments collected in both modules were related to an assessment-oriented attitude. The respondents thought that studying them was purposeless (98 of the 160 comments) – “Do you think anyone will learn if it is not included?” (#P41), “no examinations, no studies” (#P267), and “only is it in DSE will I learn it” (#S28).

Some neutral comments in this group are worth noting. Overall, this group of participants was open to taking these modules even if they were not assessed, provided that some conditions were met. The conditions suggested were time – “I would study the module if I have leisure time” (#S11), level of interest – “I will study it if it is interesting” (#S15), teachers – “Teachers ok, I will” (#S70), level of difficulty – “see if the module is easy, if it is, I will study for sure.” (#P119), needs – “I’ll have to see if my university courses need it or not” (#P514). For P&S, a number of these neutral participants (n = 25) stated explicitly that they preferred songs to poems (e.g. “Songs only but not poems study” (#P49)), but no one preferred poems to songs.

Summary of findings

In general, in response to the question regarding the incorporation of the modules in the new curriculum, the participants' views of the ShS module were positive while the views of those who had taken P&S were mixed (see Table 1 and Results). However, when the participants considered assessment as a factor, most disagreed with the suggestion that these modules should be examined. More interestingly, most participants indicated having no intention of studying ShS or P&S if they were not examined, even though they viewed ShS rather favourably. Across all three items, learners' views reflected four primary angles: Instrumentality (e.g. gains in language proficiency), psychology (e.g. levels of interest), curriculum/pedagogy (e.g. exposure to different genres in English) and assessment (e.g. feasibility). In other words, from the inductive analysis of the qualitative findings, these four aspects were the areas learners considered when asked to express their views of these two modules with a focus on curriculum and assessment.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined EFL learners' views of the P&S and ShS modules from curricular and assessment perspectives. Our findings corroborate those from previous studies (e.g. Harlow & Muyskens, 1994; Martin & Laurie, 1993), which indicate that learners in general accept studying L2 literature, and which suggest that learners believe that everything related to L2 should be studied (e.g. all means of 3 or above in all FL-related items such as culture, vocabulary, translating, and reading literature in Harlow & Muyskens, 1994, p. 144) as each aspect is important or useful in one way or the other. Literature does not then stand out in any kind of way in these previous studies, and in this study, too, the view of the P&S module was quite clearly neutral, and the view of the ShS module only slightly above neutral (though significantly different from learners' views of P&S). When assessment is considered, however, many participants in this study become more guarded in their support for the modules. The reasons which participants put forward for this concerned the lack of the need to assess an area which was meant to be for interest and entertainment, and the difficulty of setting standards in literature. From these, one might have concluded that the learners would want to study literature even if it were unassessed; however, the final questionnaire item *I would study the module even if it is not included in public examinations* unveiled a more complicated sentiment. Those responding to the ShS questionnaire were not certain, on the whole, whether they would have taken ShS if it were not assessed, and the vast majority of the participants who had taken the P&S module would not consider taking it if it were not assessed, even though most of these respondents agreed that it was good that P&S was included in the new curriculum. It seems therefore that the respondents in P&S only desire to retain the P&S module in

theory, but not to realize learning it in actual fact.

Instrumentality is important in a context where learners are under immense pressure to perform well. The heavy pressure for them to succeed in high-stakes examinations is one highly likely reason why most of learners' perceptions can be linked to assessment and instrumentality. For instance, given that many of the participants were still senior secondary-level students, who would be sitting the HKDSE, it is understandable why they thought they had no extra time to study areas that are non-assessed.

Learners' examination-oriented attitude, as discussed, and the strong effect of washback found in many studies (e.g. Duncan & Paran 2017, 2018; Ferman, 2004) are not novel topics; however, the fact that the learners were more willing to study ShS than P&S when both were unassessed is noteworthy. This difference in willingness was statistically significant with a small to medium effect size (see Table 2). Two possible reasons for this could be the greater familiarity with short stories and the greater perceived instrumentality (i.e. as a tool for language improvement; see Tsang, Paran & Lau 2020) the ShS module offers. The negative attitude towards poetry does, however, chime with the findings of other studies, such as Xerri (2013).

Our findings and discussion have a number of implications for language teachers and educators, some of which go to the heart of the reason for looking at learners' views. For educators responsible for curriculum and assessment design, our study clearly shows that learners may not be motivated to study either module if unassessed, even though their attitudes towards the two modules are neutral to positive. As we pointed out in our introduction, the literature modules in the curriculum appear in the HKDSE, but learners can choose to write about a non-literature module. This weakens the role of literature in the curriculum, and places it in a type of no-man's land. The examination orientation of learners in the Hong Kong context (e.g. Qian, 2008) is not an element that can be easily changed. Therefore, if there is a curricular commitment to the Language Arts modules, and if there is a belief in the importance of Language Arts in the curriculum, we would suggest making the literature assessment compulsory; this would send a strong signal to teachers and learners about the importance of this area. Another possible way forward would be to make the modules compulsory in a school-based format, rather than as parts of a high-stakes public examination. Akin to requirement courses at the tertiary level, secondary-level L2 learners would need to take these modules and complete coursework satisfactorily (pass or fail rather than with grades to lower learners' pressure). These suggestions seem especially appropriate in contexts where "what is examined [and compulsory] becomes what is taught" (Choi, 1999, p. 412).

However, this is only part of the story, and the implications for teachers and

teaching are equally important. For example, in this study, one of the reasons given by learners for their negative views of the ShS and P&S modules was the poor choices of texts the teachers selected, and the uninteresting teaching of the Language Arts module. Although these teachers may have good reasons for choosing the texts, the difference in views between teachers and learners, combined with ignoring the learners' views, may lead to problems with teaching and learning (Spratt, 1999) such as lowered motivation (Elisha-Primo, Sandler, Goldfrad, Ferenz & Perpignan, 2010).

The overall finding that learners tend to be more willing to study ShS than P&S is also noteworthy for teachers. The overall negative views of P&S found in this study such as impracticality, uselessness, difficulty, boredom and dislike need to be addressed explicitly in class. For example, teachers may make connections between studying poetry and everyday life by raising learners' awareness of the ubiquity of poetic language (e.g. advertisements; slogans). Teachers may also select 'easier' poems as a starting point and give more thoughts to their lesson plans so that studying poetry does not equal mundane reading-between-the-line exercises.

In the Hong Kong context, there is evidence that teachers do not feel confident in choosing literary texts and teaching them within the LA modules (Cheung, 2019). Indeed, Cheung and Hennebry-Leung (2020) report that the teacher in their study saw literature from an examination oriented perspective as well: her teaching practices reflected the influence of exams in nine of the 10 lessons the researchers observed. We would suggest that in the context of modules whose relevance to examination is not apparent to the learners, it is doubly important to ensure that teachers are committed to teaching it and that they are appropriately trained to do so (see, for example, Duncan & Paran 2017, 2018). They may need to convey the value of studying these modules in L2 more explicitly in class.

Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of our study, further studies are warranted. Based on the themes identified, questionnaire surveys can be designed to examine the extent to which different factors influence learners' views. Further studies can also explore further by collecting more learner background variables (e.g. the kinds of school they attend; English proficiency) and examining the relationships between these variables and the learners' views. The present study only employed questionnaires; to obtain more in-depth views from the learners, future studies could use follow-up interviews with respondents. Finally, similar studies should be conducted in other contexts, enabling cross-cultural comparison and in turn, casting more light on how literature in L2/FL curriculum can best be implemented with learners from different backgrounds.

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