Perceptions of English as a Foreign Language Students on Exposure to Literary Theories

Percepciones del estudiantado de inglés como lengua extranjera sobre la exposición a las teorías literarias

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ABSTRACT:

The present exploratory study examined the perception of third and fourth-year English literature students on exposure to literary theories. A total of 26 students from the B.A. in English taking the literature electives participated in this study. The data collection instrument used in this investigation was a survey, wich sought to elicit the levels of familiarity and preference that students had regarding literary theories. It also included an open-ended section for students to further elaborate on their views. Main results showed that participants were relatively more knowledgeable about some critical literary theories (e.g., Feminism, Historicism, and New Criticism) than others (e.g., Marxism and Psychoanalysis). Also, other findings suggest that participants could have a biased preference for the critical literary theories they already know about, which might deter them from learning from other critical approaches. These results may support the claim that the current prioritization of certain critical literary theories over others in the literature electives limits students' knowledge of the area of literary studies. In addition, participants provided alternative strategies they believe can enhance their comprehension of critical literary theories in future literature electives. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Perceptions, English as a Foreign Language Learners, EFL, Literature, Electives, Literary Theories, Preferences.

RESUMEN:

El presente estudio exploratorio examinó la percepción de las personas estudiantes de literatura inglesa de tercer y cuarto año sobre la exposición a las teorías literarias. En este estudio participaron un total de 26 estudiantes de la Licenciatura en inglés que cursaban las optativas de literatura. El instrumento de recolección de datos utilizado en esta investigación fue una encuesta, la cual buscaba sondear los niveles de familiaridad y preferencia de las personas estudiantes en relación a las teorías literarias. Además, el mismo tenía una sección de respuesta abierta para que el estudiantado elaborara más sobre sus opiniones. Los principales resultados mostraron que los participantes tenían relativamente más conocimientos sobre algunas teorías literarias críticas (p. ej., feminismo, historicismo, nueva crítica) que otras (p. ej., marxismo y psicoanálisis). Además, otros hallazgos sugieren que el estudiantado podría tener una preferencia sesgada por las teorías literarias críticas que ya conocen, lo que podría disuadirlos de aprender de otros enfoques críticos. Estos resultados pueden apoyar la afirmación de que la actual priorización de ciertas teorías literarias críticas sobre otras en las optativas de literatura limita el conocimiento de los estudiantes en el área de estudios literarios. Además, las personas estudiantes proporcionaron estrategias alternativas que creen que pueden mejorar su comprensión de las teorías literarias críticas en futuras materias optativas de literatura. Se discuten las implicaciones teóricas y prácticas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Percepciones, Estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera, Literatura, Asignaturas optativas, Teorías literarias, Preferencias.

INTRODUCTION

The instruction of critical literary theories in literature courses can complement the education of university students in various aspects. Either working as an introduction to specific analytical frameworks and the particular reading practices paired with them (Felski, 2008) or as a point of entry into a critical perspective toward social life in general (Leonardo, 2004), the study of critical theories enriches the formation of students interested in literary studies. Likewise, previous research has argued that the same tenets can also apply to the education of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students (Anjanillah et al., 2021; Huh, 2016; Ko, & Wang, 2013). That is, it could be said that this

intersection between critical theory and the area of EFL teaching complements students' understanding of the formal aspects of language.

Most investigations on the subject have explored practical alternatives for implementing said critical approaches in the classroom from the instructors' perspective (Monsour, 2016; Paul, 2018; Sullivan, 2002), and others have inquired about students' reception of pedagogical methods aligned with the principles of critical literacy (Leonardo, 2004; Weng, 2023). However, previous work seems to overlook students' perceptions regarding the myriad of critical theories that exist when exposed to them, even less those of EFL students.

With this void in mind, particularly in the Costa Rican context, the general objective of this exploratory study is to examine the perception of students of the B.A in English (namely third- and fourth-year learners) at the University of Costa Rica on critical theories in the literature electives. The specific objectives aim, on the one hand, at identifying the degree of reported exposure to critical theories and on the other hand, at analyzing learners' preferred theories in future literature electives. To this end, the present report will first lay out the nature of the field along with the research questions, describe the methodology, display the findings, and interpret the results together with its theoretical and/or pedagogical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Theory Within the Area of Literary Criticism

Some scholars may claim that reading always comes paired with a particular philosophical or political stance, even if only tacitly (White, 1980); other experts advocate for the possibility of reading with a neutral and objective eye (North, 2013). Regardless of these opposing claims, the fact is that reading is a practice subjected to multiple theorizations by different schools of thought. This reality may have a higher preponderance within literary criticism, for diverse critical methods spawning from distinct intellectual traditions have informed the practice of literary critics throughout the years. For Felski (2008), the plurality of critical methods within the field originates from theoretical groundings beyond the mere inquiry of literature and deals with topics ranging from history and politics to identity, gender, and even the nature of being. This author extols the interpretative possibilities that different theoretical approaches can provide when dealing with literary texts; however, other texts advocate for a renewal of the tradition of critique aimed at emphasizing an affective reading instead of judgmental, negative scrutiny over works of literature (Anker, & Felski, 2017). In that sense, power structures, uses of language, and philosophical implications—among other features—can be unveiled and analyzed depending on the methodological approach of choice, thus enriching the field of literary criticism.

Indeed, theory is essential for literary studies. Its value is undeniable given that "the literary exegesis essentially involves: analyzing, understanding, making associations, organizing ideas, and drawing conclusions" (Besbes, 2019, p. 22). In other words, the tools granted by different theories fashion specific modes of critical reading by providing an array of concepts that confront and interpret the text. However, to claim that the role of literary theories—critical theories henceforth—is one of simple assistance would be an understatement. For instance, Lanzendörfer and Nilges (2020) point out that critical theories purport not only to uncover ideological positions or to explore hidden truths within the text because they are also committed to a reading of the world and its systems shaped by

sociopolitical, material, and historical conditions. Clearly, the merit of critical theories lies in questioning the basic, extra-literary conditions that explain the contents of a work of literature. Against this background, eliciting the views of those exposed to them is called for.

Instruction of Critical Theories in Literature Courses

Besides its methodological value, critical theories can motivate students to engage with and learn from literary texts. For example, Sullivan (2002) advocates for using the concept of *reception moment* as part of an approach supposed to introduce literary criticism in the classroom. This implies that there is a contingent nature in the interpretation of any literary work, where different individuals at different moments may have contrasting receptions of the same novel and where that reality does not diminish one reading over the other. Following this, critical theories also serve as a complement to courses on written composition. For instance, according to Smolova (2004), a composition classroom is an environment where the student is supposed to develop their voice and the skills necessary to fashion sound arguments on paper. In fact, the author further suggests that critical theories are a means to that end. Interestingly, this indicates that the inclusion of literary frameworks in the classroom could provide students with both the analytical tools necessary to advance their critiques and the capacity to challenge the premises of others' interpretations.

Another venue for exploration is the correlation between critical theories and critical pedagogies because of their shared spirit. In that sense, different studies (Paul, 2018; Taylor, & Hikida, 2020) have investigated critical pedagogies' capacity for fostering students' perspectives toward many issues that define modern societies (e.g., racism, inequality, and oppression). These authors claim that critical pedagogy resorts to a more horizontal relation between professor and student. This approach favors the students' vital experiences in the learning process and encourages the dialogue and critique of specific issues. Furthermore, in line with the core values of critical pedagogy, Leonardo (2004) posits critical pedagogy as an essential part of education "that values debate, openness to different ideas, and commitment to democratic processes" (p. 14). What the author is saying is that the spirit of critique (and of the critical theories that emerge from this ideal) rejects the notion of authoritarian and unquestionable figures of power that determine, for instance, a canonical interpretation of a work of literature. In that sense, everything can be scrutinized, and everyone can share their insights about anything in class. These ideas align with Monsour's (2016) study about the role of critical theories in high school English classes. This author advocates for the study of multiple critical theories, ranging from Marxism and Post-Colonialism to Feminism and Psychoanalysis, in order to promote the students' engagement with works of literature. With this in mind, there is a clear need to delve into students' perceptions at other levels other than high school—especially EFL students with a great deal of exposure to literature courses.

Instruction of Critical Theories for EFL Learners

Due to the (largely unexplored) population that this study employs, there is a clear need to explore the perceived benefits and drawbacks that the instruction of critical theories may present to EFL learners. As Huh (2016) indicates, the linguistic limitations that EFL learners have with English

can be an obstacle to a critical pedagogical approach. Nevertheless, this author revealed possible alternatives for integrating critical literary practices. To illustrate, Huh identified vocabulary development, key terms translation, and brainstorming with pedagogical resources as strategies that can initiate an active dialogue between students and professors regarding a text. Moreover, the same author points out that students profited from the professor's guidance during sessions. This observation contradicts previous assertions about empowering students to initiate a discussion based on their experiences (Leonardo, 2004). Despite this inconsistency with the theory, Huh's inquiry into these learning environments proves that critical pedagogical practices are compatible with the EFL classroom. In another case, Weng (2023) stresses how important it is for EFL teachers "to work closely with researchers to design lessons that meet local students' needs in culturally and pedagogically accepted ways" (p. 203). This highlights the need to promote in-class discussions addressing, for instance, the effects of patriarchal structures in Costa Rican society according to a specific literary text that deals with that topic. However, as Weng (2023) mentions, such topic adaptations would require careful research that accounts for students' contexts. Both studies provide strategies for implementing critical pedagogical practices in the EFL classroom despite the linguistic challenges that such EFL students may encounter—hence, the relevance of the present exploratory investigation.

Other studies have focused on the attitudes and skills of EFL students regarding the instruction of critical theories. To illustrate, Anjanillah et al. (2021), elaborated on a qualitative study that analyzed EFL students' perceptions of their learning process with the English language. According to this study, one of the main variables distinguishing the participants was their knowledge of Post-Structuralism since that theory is critical of rigid meanings and structures. Nevertheless, the students that did not know about post-structuralism knew about literary theories equally appropriate for the elaboration of critiques. In general terms, they communicated critical stances in relation to topics such as the relationship between Neoliberalism and EFL students' identities or the effect that learning English as a second language would have on their native language and culture. This study shows the direct effects that the instruction of critical theories, such as Post-structuralism, can have on the arguments of EFL students. In that same vein, Ko, & Wang (2023), also conducted a qualitative study where they inquired about the critical literacy practices of EFL students. The overall English proficiency level varied among participants, yet all participants had taken part in a critical literacy-oriented reading class and were able to display their ability to elaborate a critical response in relation to a gender-related article. This suggests that the EFL learners' proficiency levels may not necessarily hinder their capacity to develop critical literacy practices.

Current Approach at the School of Modern Languages of the University of Costa Rica

The literature electives of the BA in English emphasize some approaches to literary studies over others. As an illustration, the course LM-1245 Literature of Mystery and Suspense surveys the stylistic conventions, motifs, and historiography of literary subgenres such as mystery, gothic, or horror. This third-year course grants an in-depth view of these genres but leaves aside the treatment of critical theories. Therefore, the students enrolled in this course employ a reader-response approach to analyze works of literature in this course. Other courses like LM-1247 Children's Literature and

LM-1368 Literature and Women apply the same strategy. On the other hand, a fourth-year course like LM-1475 Comparative Literature relies more on the study of critical theories. Accordingly, some literature electives emphasize specific features of literary genres and certain critical approaches (e.g., genres like Literature for Children and/or approaches like Feminism) while upper-level courses accentuate the study of literary theory. Nonetheless, to what extent this learner type is aware of this exposure (to potentially benefit from it) is unknown.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This exploratory study aims at examining the perception of third and fourth-year students who have taken the literature electives on their exposure to and preference for literary theories. Specifically, this investigation is based on the subjective value that students might adhere to the instruction of critical theories rather than the pedagogical approaches that professors can apply in the classroom. As such, it has theoretical and practical relevance given the scarcity of investigations on EFL students' perspectives in general and critical theories in literature courses in particular. The following research questions (RQ) guided this investigation:

RQ1. What is EFL learners' reported degree of exposure to literary theories?

RQ2. What level of exposure to literary theories would EFL learners prefer in future literary electives?

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Setting

The data collection process took place in the Faculty of Letters of the University of Costa Rica, specifically in the School of Modern Languages. The study required students of the B.A. in English either in their third or fourth year of the program. Moreover, participants were students of the literature electives. This selective criterion was purposive (Onwuegbuzie, & Teddlie, 2003). With that in mind, 26 students aged 55 to 22 participated in the study ($m = 26.61$). Female participation ($n = 19$) took preponderance over non-binary ($n = 1$) and male participation ($n = 6$), and 19 participants were in their fourth year, while 7 participants were in their third year. Finally, the number of participants enrolled in each literature elective is as follows: Children's Literature ($n = 19$), Directed Literature ($n = 12$), Literature of Mystery and Suspense ($n = 21$), Literature and Woman ($n = 12$), Literature and Cinema ($n = 12$), and Comparative Literature ($n = 2$).

Materials

The data collection instrument for this study was a survey, which consisted of four sections to elicit the participants' perceptions on the subject of interest (see Appendix). Specifically, Part 1 elicited both the sample demographics and their consent to participate in this investigation. Part 2 gave learners a multiple-choice matrix for choosing their degree of familiarity with literary theories in the literature electives. Drawing on Monsour, (2016), the options provided were New Criticism, Psychoanalysis, Deconstructionism, Feminism, Historicism, Post-Colonialism, Queer Theory, and

Marxism. Using a matrix with the same options as in Part 2, Part 3 probed participants' degree of preference in future literature electives. Part 4 provided participants with open-ended questions, which allowed them to further elaborate on their views. The survey was first piloted with a group of fourth year learners taking a course on research methods, who gave their input on both content and form. Based on their feedback, minor format-based changes were implemented. As for participants' consent to participate, none refused. Therefore, no survey was discarded in the research process.

Design and Procedures

The gathering data process extended over a period of two weeks. Professors from The School of Modern Languages, either currently teaching upper-level literature electives or third and fourth-year courses, contributed to the data collection process either by allowing the researchers to visit their class or by sharing the data collection tool with their students. When allowed to visit a class, participants were informed of the purpose of the investigation, the anonymity of their answers, and the benefits (e.g., contributing to research) as well as the risks (e.g., short time investment) of participating in the investigation. The medium for distributing the survey was Google Forms, which took approximately 10 minutes to fill out. In the few cases the instrument was not administered on site, said information was provided in written form as part of the introductory email message sent to students.

Data Analysis

All data were treated anonymously. For the quantitative data, responses from the scale items were transferred to an excel sheet and collapsed by research question. Then, for the qualitative data analysis, the researchers employed Onwuegbuzie, & Teddlie's (2003) approach to quantify the qualitative data obtained from the fourth section of the instrument. This implied transferring the answers to a Word document, grouping responses by overarching categories, identifying recurrent themes, and then reducing that to numeric information. It is important to emphasize that data reduction should retain the richness of participant responses while facilitating analysis, which yielded three main reported contributions of literary theories to the instruction of the literature electives and five suggested strategies for the study of literary theories (see section titled Qualitative Results).

RESULTS

This section will show the results of this study successively: learners' perceived degree of exposure to critical theories in the literature electives (RQ1) and their degree of preference for the instruction of critical theories in future literature electives (RQ2).

Quantitative Data
Reported Degree of Exposure to Critical Theories

Regarding their degree of exposure to critical theories, participants had to choose from a multiple-choice matrix the category that better represented their knowledge of each one of the available critical approaches. Table 1 illustrates the participants' varying grades of exposure to those

theories in the literature electives. As can be observed, nearly half of the participants were fairly exposed to New Criticism ($n = 10$) and Post-Colonialism ($n = 11$). Also, while Feminism ($n = 14$) and Historicism ($n = 10$) are the theories which participants have a more thorough knowledge of, Marxism ($n = 16$) is the least known critical theory. It is also worth pointing out that the remaining theories' values in the different scales do not go beyond eight (i.e., less than a third of the surveyed population).

Table 1.
Degree of Exposure to Critical Theories in the Literature Electives

	Not exposed At All	Somewhat exposed	Neutral	Fairly exposed	Thoroughly exposed
New criticism	5	4	5	10	2
Psychoanalysis	5	5	5	7	4
Deconstructionism	9	6	4	4	3
Historicism	1	5	2	8	10
Post-colonialism	4	4	3	11	4
Queer theory	8	7	5	2	4
Marxism	16	5	4	0	1
Feminism	3	2	0	7	14

Note. $N = 26$

Source: Elaborated by authors.

Degrees of Preference for the Instruction of Critical Theories in Future Literature Electives

Table 2 shows the participants' degree of preference for the instruction of the same critical theories in future literature electives. As can be seen, nearly half of the participants have a very strong inclination toward Historicism ($n = 10$), Queer Theory ($n = 10$), and Feminism ($n = 11$). In other words, they are more willing to learn about these critical theories than others. On the other hand, Marxism ($n = 7$) and Deconstructionism ($n = 7$) are the less preferred critical theories. However, the lack of preference for Deconstructionism contrasts with others' strong inclination for it ($n = 9$). This disparity exposes the participants' opposed opinions regarding this particular critical theory.

Table 2.
Preferred Degree of Instruction of Critical Theories in Future Literature Electives

	No preference	Slightly prefer	Prefer	Strongly prefer	Very strongly prefer

| New criticism	4	5	7	4	6
Psychoanalysis	6	4	5	5	6
Deconstructionism	7	5	3	9	2
Historicism	2	3	2	9	10
Post-colonialism	3	5	4	9	5
Queer theory	2	4	4	6	10
Marxism	7	9	6	2	2
Feminism	3	3	3	6	11

Note. $N = 26$

Source: Elaborated by authors.

Qualitative Data

Figure 1 displays the quantified qualitative data obtained from the participants' answers to one of the two open-ended questions, which inquired about the contribution of literary theories to the instruction of the literature electives (see Appendix A). In line with these qualitative data, most participants elaborated on the link between the instruction of literary theories and improved analytical skills ($n = 10$) and general knowledge ($n = 7$). Their verbatim written comments pointed at different aspects. Specifically, their remarks highlighted the value of having an array of different theories for the analysis of a literary text: "It allows us to look at readings from distinct angles" (Participant E, May 31, 2023), and of learning diverse and enriching theoretical perspectives: "the courses also teach us about history and that is a crucial part of our education" (Participant B, May 31, 2023).

Figure 1.
Contribution of Literary Theories to the Instruction of the Literature Electives
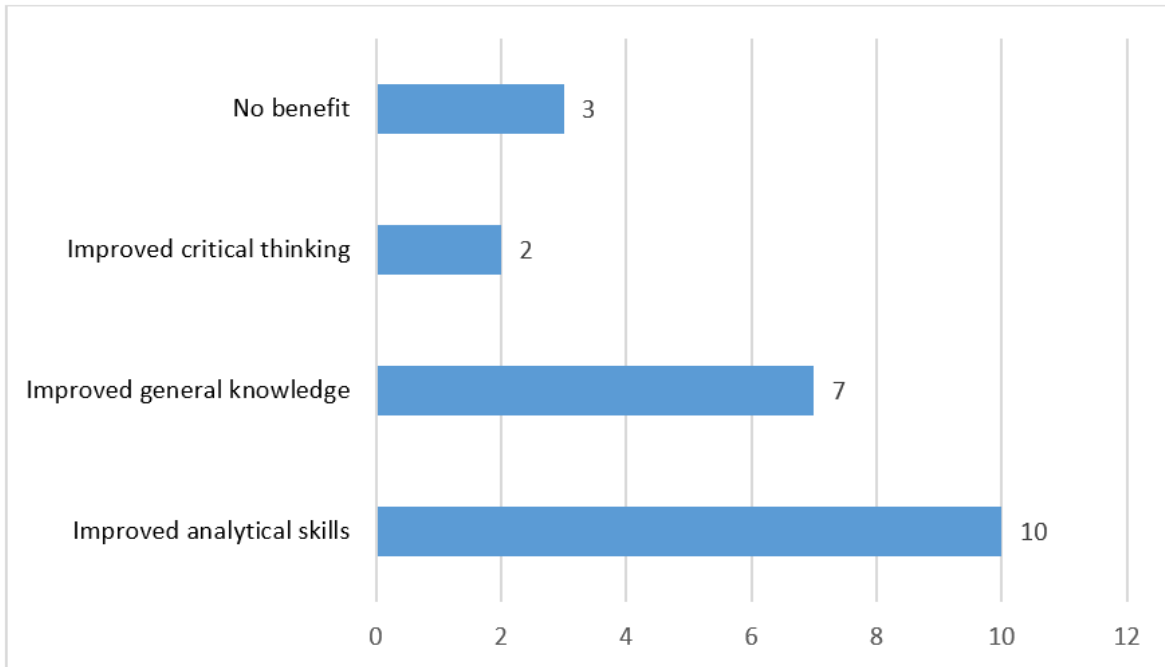
Note. N = 21

Source: Elaborated by authors

As for the pedagogical approach toward the subject matter, Figure 2 presents the strategies for the study of literary theories that participants proposed in response to the second open-ended question. Extracted from their answers, Figure 2 reveals that most participants described theory-based readings ($n = 6$) and guided analyses ($n = 5$) as the most effective approaches. For instance, one participant wrote that "the best way to teach literary theory is by showing how it's applied in literary texts directly" (Participant B, May 31, 2023). However, other written answers advocated for a more active role of the students: "allowing students to choose sometimes the approach from which they want to analyze a reading rather than determining it" (Participant A, May 31, 2023).

Figure 2.
Strategies for the Study of Literary Theories
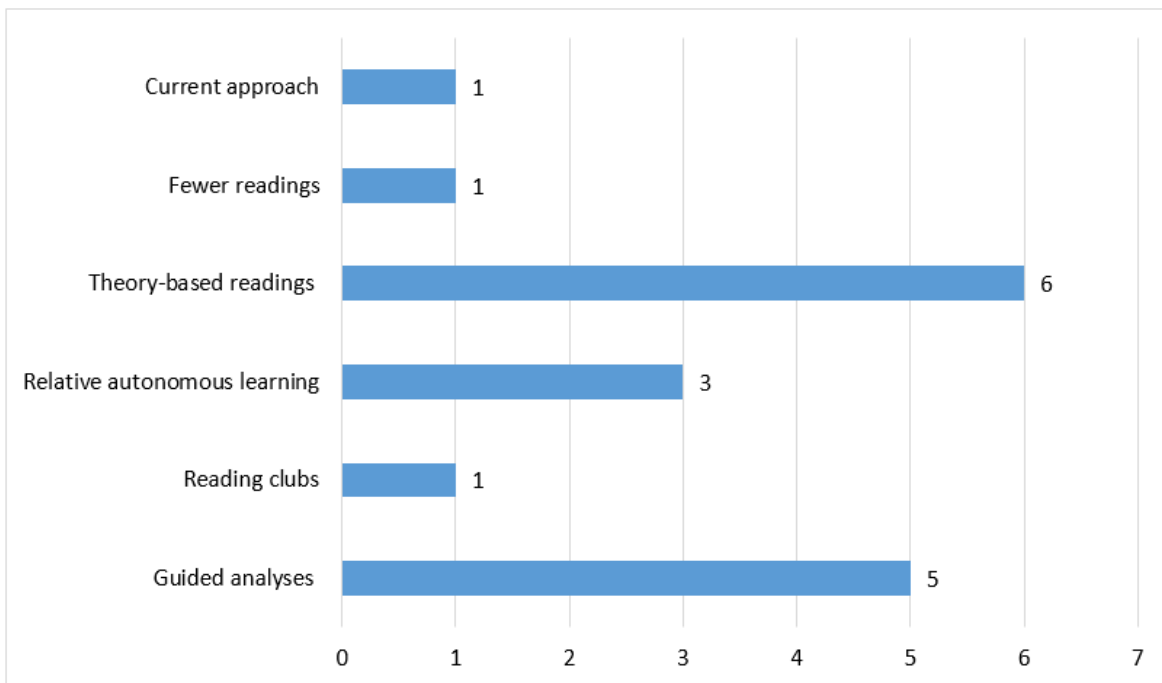
Note. N = 17
Source: Elaborated by authors

DISCUSSION

This section will interpret the results obtained in light of their theoretical and practical implications.

Reported Degree of Exposure to Critical Theories

Regarding the views of third and fourth-year students of the BA in English on their past exposure to critical theories in the literature electives (RQ1), participants seem to be relatively more knowledgeable about some critical theories than others. Critical approaches (such as New Criticism and Historicism) are fairly known only for a little more than a third of the surveyed population. The participants' reported familiarity with these critical approaches may be due to the formalist framework and historiographical component integrated into the syllabi of all mandatory and elective literature courses. In that sense, the fact that one of the literary electives is dedicated to Feminism could explain participants' marked degree of familiarity with this critical theory. On the contrary, the other four critical theories (i.e., Psychoanalysis, Queer Theory, Marxism, and Deconstructionism) are relatively foreign to the participants. It is possible, therefore, that most literature electives scarcely review such critical approaches. This observation may apply more for theoretical frameworks such as Queer Theory and Marxism, given that participants do not know much about them, especially concerning the latter, since more than half of participants ($n = 16$) reported not being exposed to this theory.

Therefore, an issue that emerges from these findings is that the reported emphasis of some critical theories in the literature electives and the marginalization of others could prevent possible connections between academic inquiry and real-life aspects that other approaches could enable. This may partially overshadow the contributions that interdisciplinary collaboration elicits in literary studies and diminish, as a result, the richness and possibilities of literary criticism as a whole. For instance, a Marxist approach—which puts forth concepts like reification, ideology, and class—combined with poststructuralist concerns can elicit productive, politically committed reading practices that tie literature with social issues (Cogle, 2020). Furthermore, Psychoanalysis as a theoretical framework brings attention to the points of dialogue that have existed between scientific research and literary productions (Alanazi, 2023). Certainly, other critical methods omitted in this discussion can offer creative frames of reference for literary analysis. In that sense and applied to the context of this investigation, addressing neglected critical approaches could enhance EFL learners' ability to implement the formal aspects of the English language to formulate compelling, critical arguments that revolve around both their social context and the discussion of literature. Consequently, instructors of the literature electives could consider including more thorough introductions to those theoretical approaches in their classes. This reform would present students with a more productive perspective on the area of literary studies as an interdisciplinary academic field, which could in turn allow them to make informed decisions on the possibilities that each theoretical framework grants for analyzing works of literature.

Reported Degree of Preference for the Instruction of Literary Theories in Literature Electives

Concerning the preference for the instruction of literary theories in the literature electives (RQ2), participants communicated a marked affinity for nearly all the same critical theories they knew the most. For instance, two of the most favored critical approaches were Historicism ($n = 10$) and Feminism ($n = 11$). Interestingly, the theories that participants knew less about (such as Marxism, Psychoanalysis, and Deconstructionism) are not as preferred. This observation may support the hypothesis that participants might have a biased preference for the critical theories they have studied more in past literature courses. Queer Theory stands as an exception to this hypothesis because it is one of the critical approaches that scored high in the category *Very Strongly Prefer* ($n = 10$) and low in the category *No Preference* ($n = 2$). The participants' inclination toward this theoretical framework might correspond to external factors that go beyond the scope of the program's literature courses. An implication of these results is the possibility that the current prioritization of some critical theories over others in the contents of the literature electives may negatively affect the students' perception of other less studied critical frameworks, thus creating an attitude of prejudice toward specific critical theories without reasonable arguments. Nonetheless, it also seems reasonable to emphasize that EFL students should not uncritically embrace the main tenets of all proposed critical theories. On the contrary, they should evaluate the implications deriving from the reading practices that each method proposes and with the support of sound arguments, point out the flaws they may identify in each one. However, if students are not exposed to those critical theories, they may not be able to engage in serious discussions about the myriad of critical approaches and understand the underlying reasons behind their varying degrees of relevance.

Benefits of the Instruction of Critical Theories and Strategies for its Study

Concerning the answers to the optional open-ended questions, participants listed various benefits of the instruction of critical theories in the literature electives and proposed strategies to improve the current teaching practices implemented in those courses. For the former, participants listed improved analytical skills and enhanced critical thinking skills as benefits resulting from the instruction of critical theories. The participants' opinions agree with previously cited studies that describe the correlation between the instruction of critical approaches to literature and an improvement in critical literacy practices (Anjanillah et al., 2021; Ko, & Wang, 2013; Smolova, 2004). This further elucidates the significant role of critical theories as part of the syllabi of literature courses. Furthermore, regarding suggested strategies for the study of critical theories proposed by the participants, the implementation of guided analyses of works of literature appeared to be one of the most frequent answers. The preference for that method contrasts with approaches commonly associated with the instruction of critical theories such as critical pedagogy (Paul, 2018; Leonardo, 2004; Taylor, & Hikida, 2020), which is a pedagogical framework that advocates for a horizontal relationship between professor and students. In that sense, only three students proposed autonomous learning as a strategy for learning about critical theories. This insight might imply that students are not very open to being part of pedagogical approaches that defy the traditional, hierarchical ones.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Caution should be exercised in the interpretation of the findings. For example, however insightful, the descriptive results in the present study could have been enriched by broadening the scope of the investigation to measure the actual impact of exposure to literary theories, allowing the use of inferential statistics as a result. To this end, future studies might also want to expand the research timeline and obtain a larger sample size, which would also render firmer conclusions.

Once these methodological variables are addressed, future empirical efforts would also do well in exploring the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies for teaching critical literary theories. Such efforts may include not only conducting a follow-up study to assess the impact of expanding exposure to various critical theories on student preferences but also further probing learners' rationale behind their preference for and/or reactions to critical literary theories.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the perception that third and fourth year EFL learners have on critical theory in the context of the literature electives. Notwithstanding its limitations, the present study constitutes a useful springboard as far as research on literary theories and learners' perceptions is concerned. Specifically, a number of contributions can be pointed out. First, from a theoretical standpoint, since previous empirical work has focused more on pedagogical strategies for implementing critical literacy practices (e.g., the establishment of horizontal, non-hierarchical

relations between professors and students or the instruction of theory adapted to students' socioeconomic and cultural context and students' responses to said strategies), the findings in this study fill a gap in current knowledge on the potential relationship between the instruction of critical theories and the EFL classroom. That is, if there is indeed a link between the contents of a given course and students' inclinations toward particular critical approaches—as this study suggests, future work might want to delve deeper into this line of inquiry.

Second, from a pedagogical perspective, the insights drawn from this study shed further light on the potential role that the instruction of critical theories could play in the education of EFL students, especially in literature courses where those themes are particularly befitting. Concretely, as discussed above, the study of literature mediated by exposure to critical theories elucidates the varied extra-literal factors that may permeate the production and reception of this cultural manifestation, contributing in turn to stimulating and novel interpretations of works of literature. This interdisciplinary character is at the heart of literary studies as an academic field. Therefore, pedagogical strategies toward the study of literature can only benefit from appropriating these critical approaches. What is more, this intersection could permit students to grasp what they can do in terms of analysis regarding literature.

Finally, from a practical point of view, this investigation provides novel descriptive evidence of how the curriculum design of literature courses can influence EFL students' perspectives on the scope of literary studies. With this in mind, stakeholders might want to consider curriculum reforms that integrate a more inclusive treatment of overlooked critical approaches and that foster productive guidance from instructors and active participation in class debates from students (as suggested in answers from the open-ended questions). Even though a thoroughgoing revision of courses focused on critical theories may prove challenging at an undergraduate level, decision-makers could start by redefining existing elective courses in order to offer a comprehensive survey of critical approaches. Such a change would not only expose students to the richly nuanced contributions of the large array of literary theories but also further enrich their understanding, criticism, and enjoyment of literature.

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