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Students' Attitudes About Factors Affecting English Literacy - A Case Study of Undergraduate Students at the University of Tetova

**Suzana Ejupi,
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Abstract

Generally speaking, the ability to read and write successfully and at the same time, to understand and communicate fluently in any language is considered a matter of literacy. When learning a foreign language, there are many factors that can affect a student's overall literacy. In terms of this, the purpose of this research is to explore the attitudes of undergraduate English language (EFL) students at the University of Tetova, their perceptions and experiences on factors that affect English literacy. As far as the theoretical part is concerned, this study will rely on other studies dealing with literacy in order to come up with the usual factors that influence the literacy of EFL students. The author initiated this research to provide a comprehensive insight of Albanian students' attitudes towards factors that influence English literacy. Qualitative research data were collected by administering a well-structured questionnaire to 64 students of English as a foreign language at different academic years. The data gathered reveals demographic information, learning factors, and their estimated impact on English literacy by undergraduate English language students. The final results suggest that students perceive the impact of different factors differently as far as English literacy is concerned, and some of these factors reflect positively or negatively on students' English literacy if used incorrectly.

Keywords: English language literacy, EFL, undergraduate students; students' attitude

Introduction

It is widely known that literacy represents a significant aspect when it comes to national development. In other words, functional literacy activates skills within us that build opportunities in terms of education and everyday life. Also, literacy is highly valued as it enables individuals to actively engage in wider community and global activities, including international conferences, research exchanges, and participation in businesses. Concretely, literacy contributes to personal development and is considered to be a key promoter when it comes to academic life. There are many ways to define literacy, and as a result, it is challenging and difficult to formulate a single definition. Literacy is considered a social concept or a complex idea that can have a different meaning in different areas, for different cultural communities. Considering this, literacy is a concept that can be changed and adapted according to the circumstances. In line with Abdulkarim (2022), literacy is often defined as the ability to read and write prose and other similar written materials, which contain a complex combination of linguistic and thinking activities and skills. Moreover, Wickert (1992) believes that the consensus on what literacy is and how we can measure it, it will not be accomplished. On the other hand, ACARA (2009) describes literacy as the ability to effectively read, write, speak, see, and listen in various situations and contexts. This complex concept encompasses various interests, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences, and also fulfills various purposes in various situations and contexts. In the 21st century, the literacy definition has been broadened to encompass a flexible and supportable mastery of a range of skills needed to provide creative and critical writings and be able to use modern communication technologies correctly and in accordance with language learning. However, in many cases, there is a lack of awareness among teachers regarding common factors that influence English literacy, especially in terms of recognizing the students' attitudes towards these factors. Also, there are not many studies regarding this topic at the local level. In other words, the majority of studies are foreign and produce results that are adaptable to native or foreign speakers coming from other countries, which might not be adjustable to our students' needs. In order to fulfill this gap and support teachers from North Macedonia become even more aware of all the factors that influence English literacy and how these factors are perceived by our students, it is necessary to conduct a study that will provide the teachers with additional data on how to deal with it.

Literature Review

Language and literacy development are two concepts that interrelate in terms of providing language proficiency or literacy skills. As stated by Miller (1974:3), language literacy is “the ability to use correspondences of visual shapes, to spoken sounds, in order to decode written materials, and to translate them into oral language”. According to Olson (1994), developing reading and writing skills means gaining control over a wider range of linguistic knowledge and increasing awareness of one’s own speech and writing, which includes understanding writing and the language being written. Based on Vygotsky (1962), language is a fundamental element of all learning processes, while Thomson (2017) is convinced that literacy skills are directly linked to academic achievements. Furthermore, Derewianka & Jones (2023) claim that language serves to express and connect thoughts, as well as to communicate with other people and write texts, while Knapp & Watkins (2005) state that language is processed and understood through texts that arise from social interactions, as well as it is a process that arises from situations created in society. Language is a complex social task that involves the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, signs, or codes to transmit, receive, and respond to information, which creates and shares meaning. Moreover, language is shaped by the culture in which it is used and incorporates segments that serve to transmit cultural values. At last, in terms of language importance, Emmitt et al. (2014:10) state that “... the function or purpose of language determines the type or form of language we use”.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) suggest that anyone learning a new foreign language has already picked up at least one language, no matter how old they are. In other words, if you already speak a native language, you can grasp or acquire a new language. Especially, the acquisition of a foreign language is directly realized when the native and foreign languages are similar to some degree at the phonological, morphological, and syntactical levels. So, if a learner speaks a native language, this will help and affect the way he or she learns the new language. Meanwhile, Pinter (2011) asserts that communication is crucial for learning a language, meaning that learners should seek chances to interact and pay attention to the structure of the language while doing so.

However, the impact of globalization, cultural diversity, English being considered essential internationally, and communication being required at every level of societal requests and needs, has made the acquisition of a foreign language highly crucial. In terms of this, learning a language is complicated among foreign students

because there are a lot of factors that influence language proficiency, whether positively or negatively. Some language experts categorize factors that influence or affect foreign language learning as internal and external. The following factors are introduced and discussed by authors such as Al-Ghamdi (2014), Thohir (2017), Minh (2019), Getie (2020), Weda et al (2018), and Amelia et al (2019). Accordingly, an internal factor is considered motivation, which relates to age, self-confidence, cultural sensitivity, aptitude, attitude, and intelligence of the FL learner. On the other hand, external factors are considered the social environment, the teacher, and the material content. In terms of social environment, experts refer to the school environment, peers, family conditions, and activities in the English program. Next, the teacher represents a cause that affects FLL among students because he or she provides clear instructions, an emotional relationship with students, learning strategies, teaching competence, and exposes his or her students to a native English teacher. Finally, material content also covers exiting topics, discussions, authentic textbooks and applied technology. All these factors present influential causes that directly or indirectly affect foreign language learning among students of the English language.

Previous Studies

According to Statista (2025), English is the most widely spoken language in the world, with over 1.5 billion users, while ICLS (2024) claims that English is the dominant language in the world of media, with an emphasis on online media, where 52% of websites are in English. As such, globally, English is studied as “either first, second, or foreign language” (Rohmah, 2005, p. 108).

El-Omari (2016) argues that there are factors that can affect positively or negatively the literacy of English language students. It is significant that we understand these factors and their connection to learning in order to recognize the possible issues and find solutions in accordance with that. In this regard, Ozfidan et al. (2014) and Nguyen (2019) mention environmental, cultural, personal, and classroom factors that affect language learning.

Moreover, there are many factors that can affect the attitudes of undergraduate students regarding English language literacy. Our research is directed towards undergraduate students of the English language; consequently, we are talking about advanced literacy, which Schleppegrell & Colombi (2005, p. 1) define as “secondary and postsecondary schooling”.

As stated by Phuong et al. (2019), factors affecting English skills can be divided into factors related to the student, the teacher, and the content of the material being taught. In terms of factors being related to the student, the author classifies learning autonomy as an aspect that belongs to the student. Even further, Myartawan et al. (2013) investigated the connection between student autonomy and English language proficiency. The participants were 120 students from a population of 171 English language undergraduate students of the Ganesha University of Education in Bali. Data analysis confirmed a strong and positive relationship between English proficiency and student autonomy. On the other hand, Ming et al. (2011) investigated motivation as one of the affecting factors related to learners. The study was conducted with 143 learners who were learning English as an EFL, and the results showed that student motivation is one of the largest and most influential factors affecting language learning. Similar results were also obtained by Goktepe (2014), in Çağ University, English Language Teaching Department, with 90 Turkish undergraduate university students of English language, confirming motivation as a strong influencing factor in language learning.

Regarding the strategies that a student uses during language learning, Hairus et al. (2017) in their research on learners' strategies found that strategies play an important role in the acquisition of language knowledge by a student, while Namwong (2012) concluded that students who use strategies achieve better language proficiency than students who do not use them. As for the factors related to the teacher, the language competence of the teacher stands very high on the scale. In their research with a small number of participants (24), Usman et al. (2016) came to the conclusion that the teacher's affective, cognitive and psychomotor competence play a role in raising the motivation for learning and achieving good language proficiency in students, while Aguilar and Rodríguez (2012) state the findings of their research with 746 upper-intermediate level English language students and 17 language teachers, came to the conclusion that hesitation and denial of teachers towards new methodologies and their weak language competences and questionable pedagogical skills have a negative effect on the student's achievements.

However, if we focus on methodology and strategies as affecting factors in learning English as a L2 language, Peacock & Ho (2003) provide us with a research where they investigated the correlation and language acquisition performance of 1006 English language students in eight different colleges in Hong Kong. The results of their study showed that metacognitive strategies increase the level of knowledge

and that the strategies were used more frequently by students with high levels of language proficiency.

When it comes to factors that relate to a context, we will mention the socio-economic background as a proven factor that affects language learning and language literacy. Kormos & Kiddle (2013) in their research with 740 secondary school students, established a direct link between socio-economic background and learning autonomy, interest, and motivation for learning English. Students with a better economic background were more motivated, while students from a worse economic background, due to weaker resources, weaker financial condition, and lack of access to newer IT technologies, were less motivated to learn the language. Khansir et al (2016) using their research of 230 high school students in Iran came to the same conclusions, that students of better social status are at an advantage in terms of financial support, accessibility to learning materials and communication with the outside world, which establishes a strong correlation between social status and different opportunities to learn English as a second language.

Regarding the influence of input, output and interaction, Zhang (2009) established a positive and direct link between the role of the above-mentioned actions in the development of speaking proficiency using his research with 15 young students, while Zhu (2019) raises questions in his work on the effects of input and output, listing both positive and negative effects that they may have on language acquisition. He emphasizes that input and output are valued as two important aspects in language acquisition. Furthermore, Zhang (2017) conducted his study with 94 students of ESL/EFL students divided into three groups, where one group studied in the USA while the other two studied in China. The analyzed results showed that the group that studied abroad had significantly better results in writing in English, which shows that the environment and direct contact with the target language have a positive effect on achieving better results. In his article, Zhang (2023) points out that a positive and supportive environment can only have a positive effect on language learning. Also, Lodhi et al. (2019) claim that infrastructure, modern equipment, and the school environment have a positive effect on foreign language learning achievements. As per Nguyen et al. (2014), teaching materials have a significant impact on teaching the English language and activities related to language learning. Finally, Mathew and Alidmat's (2013) research results proved that audiovisual materials in teaching improve language achievements, improve understanding of learning fields, and make learning more successful, non-monotonous, and pleasant.

Research Methodology

This research focuses on students' attitudes towards factors influencing English literacy, i.e., students' perceptions of factors influencing English literacy. In order to assess students' attitudes towards factors influencing English literacy, a questionnaire was used with the aim of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. Specifically, the questionnaire was designed by the authors of this research with the intend to capture the most common factors that influence English literacy in one sheet, but by refereeing to authors such as; Al-Ghamdi (2014), Thohir (2017), Minh (2019), Getie (2020), Weda et, al (2018) and Amelia et, al (2019), who have clearly introduced and discussed these factors in other circumstances. Besides being based on their work, some other factors have been generated by all the researchers mentioned above, in terms of the previous studies.

The aim of this research is to answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors that affect English language literacy?
2. What is the students' attitude about factors affecting English literacy?
3. According to student perceptions, which factors can have a positive and which factors can have a negative effect on English literacy?

The data collector was a students' questionnaire which was administered to a sample of 64 EFL students, age 18 to 23, 40 of them females and 24 males, 10 F and 6 M from each academic year, all of them undergraduate students (I – IV academic year) of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Philology at University of Tetova. The participants were exposed to intensive teaching of the English language in accordance with the curriculum of the Ministry of Education and have different levels of academic achievement and knowledge, as a result of being in different study years. The number of students of distinct academic years of study is approximately the same, with the aim of finding out how different age groups experience different impact factors on English literacy. The students' questionnaire was of a close ended type divided into three segments: demographic information, attitudes toward nine students – related, teacher – related and content – related factors that affect English language literacy, and students' estimated positive or negative impact of each factor individually on them, as students of English language and literature. The offered answers were graded as low, medium, and high, with the additional positive/negative graph included.

Results

The collected data were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed using descriptive and statistical methods, with results expressed in numbers or both numbers and percentages, in order to determine students' attitudes towards factors that influence English literacy. In the following pages there are tables and graphs with the results accompanied by comments.

Table 1.

Participants divided by gender and academic year as EFL students

Academic year N = 64							
I		II		III		IV	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
5	6	6	10	6	12	7	12
7.8%	9.3%	9.3	15,6%	9.3%	18.7%	10.9%	18.7%

Table number 1 reveals demographic data and presents a summary of participating students sorted by academic year and gender, presented in numbers and percentages. As you can see the number of female participants is higher than male participants in terms of each academic year because the majority of students that study English language and literature at University of Tetova are females.

Table 2.

Students' attitudes about factors affecting English literacy presented in numbers

		Academic year N = 64							
		I N = 11		II N = 16		III N = 18		IV N = 19	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
		5	6	6	10	6	12	7	12
1. Learning autonomy	Low	1	2	1	2	/	3	4	4
	Medium	2	2	2	4	3	5	/	4
	High	2	2	3	6	3	4	3	4
2. Motivation	Low	2	1	/	2	2	3	2	3
	Medium	2	2	3	3	/	2	2	5
	High	1	3	3	5	4	7	3	4

		Academic year N = 64							
		I N = 11		II N = 16		III N = 18		IV N = 19	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
		5	6	6	10	6	12	7	12
3. Learners' strategies	Low	1	/	/	2	2	3	2	4
	Medium	2	1	3	4	2	3	/	5
	High	2	5	3	4	2	6	5	3
4. Teachers' language skills	Low	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
	Medium	1	1	2	4	2	4	2	2
	High	4	5	4	6	4	8	5	10
5. Teaching methodology and strategies	Low	1	/	/	2	/	/	/	/
	Medium	2	1	3	4	2	3	2	5
	High	2	5	3	4	4	9	5	7
6. Socio-economics background	Low	/	/	1	3	1	2	2	2
	Medium	2	1	2	3	/	2	2	3
	High	3	5	3	4	4	8	3	7
7. Input, output and interaction	Low	/	2	/	/	/	/	/	/
	Medium	/	1	2	4	1	3	3	2
	High	5	3	4	6	5	9	4	10
8. Teaching environment	Low	1	2	1	3	1	2	2	2
	Medium	1	2	2	3	2	3	3	2
	High	3	4	3	4	3	7	2	8
9. Teaching materials	Low	/	2	2	2	1	4	3	/
	Medium	2	2	2	3	2	4	1	6
	High	3	4	2	5	3	4	3	6

Table 2 presents students' attitude in numbers when it comes to factors affecting English literacy. Students that study in different academic years share diverse attitudes in terms of various factors affecting English literacy.

Firstly, 83.3% of female students of the 1st academic year, as highly affecting factors of English literacy rated learners' strategies, teachers' language skills, teaching methodology and strategies and socio-economics background. Whereas 80% of male students rated teachers' language skills and 100% of male students rated input, output, and interaction as highly affecting factors in English literacy.

As far as the 60% of female students' attitude of the 2nd academic year is concerned, the following factors, such as learning autonomy, teachers' language skills, input, output, and interaction, are rated as highly affecting factors in English literacy. Further, 50% of female students believe that teaching materials is considered a highly important affecting factor in English literacy. As for male students, 75% of them rated teachers' language skills, input, output, and interaction as highly affecting factors of English literacy.

Regarding the female students of the 3rd academic year, the most affecting factors of English literacy are input, output and interaction rated by 75% female students, followed by teachers' language skills and socio - economics background rated by 66.6% of female students, and teaching environment rated by 53.3% of female students. On the other hand, 83.3 % of male students rated input, output, and interaction as highly affecting factors in English literacy, whereas 66.6% of male students considered motivation, teaching methodology and strategies, teachers' language skills, and socio-economic factors as highly affecting factors.

Lastly, the female students of the 4th academic year rated the following factors as highly affecting in English literacy, such as: teachers' language skills by 83.3% of female students, teaching environment by 66.6%, teaching methodology and strategies, and socio-economic background by 58.3%. Then again, 71.4% of male students consider learners' strategies, teachers' language skills, and teaching methodology and strategies as highly affecting factors in English literacy.

Figure 1.

1st academic year students' perceptions on factors that have positively or negatively affected their English literacy

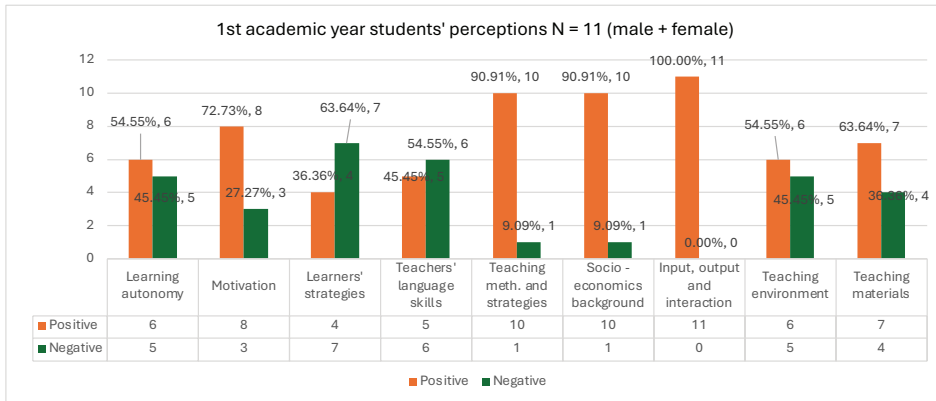
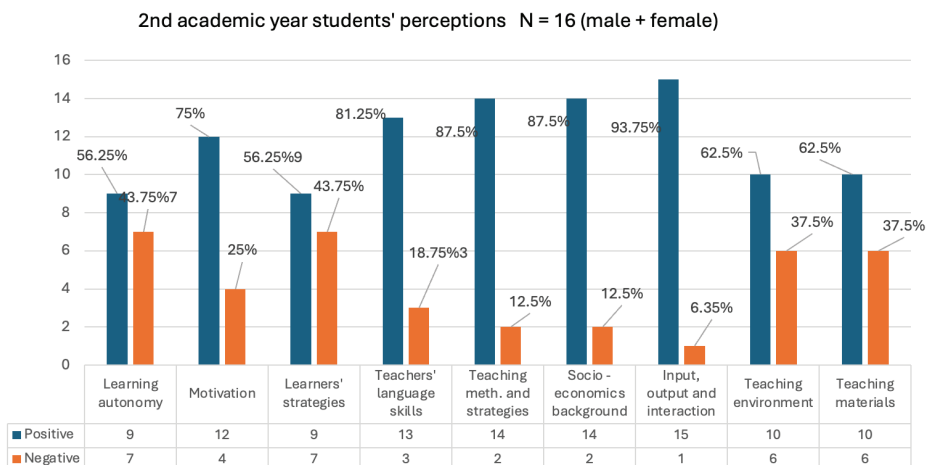


Figure 1 presents the personal perception of 1st year students on factors affecting their English literacy. It is obvious that motivation with 72.73%, teaching methodology and strategies, socio-economics background with 90.91% and input, output and interaction with 100 % are perceived as positively affecting English literacy whereas factors such as: learners' strategies with 63.64% and teachers' language skills with 54.55% are perceived as negatively affecting English literacy.

Figure 2.

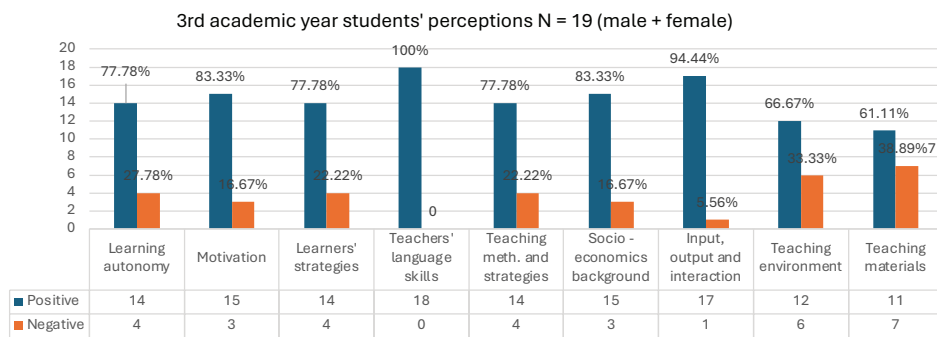
2nd academic year students' perceptions on factors that have positively or negatively affected their English literacy



According to 2nd academic year students' perceptions on factors that have positively or negatively affected their English literacy, Figure 2 shows that teachers' language skills with 81.25%, teaching methodology and strategies with 87.5%, socio-economics background with 87.5% and input, output and interaction with 93.75% are considered as factors that have positively affected their English literacy, whereas learning autonomy with 43.75%, teaching environment and teaching materials with 37.5% are perceived as negatively affecting factors.

Figure 3.

3rd academic year students' perceptions on factors that have positively or negatively affected their English literacy

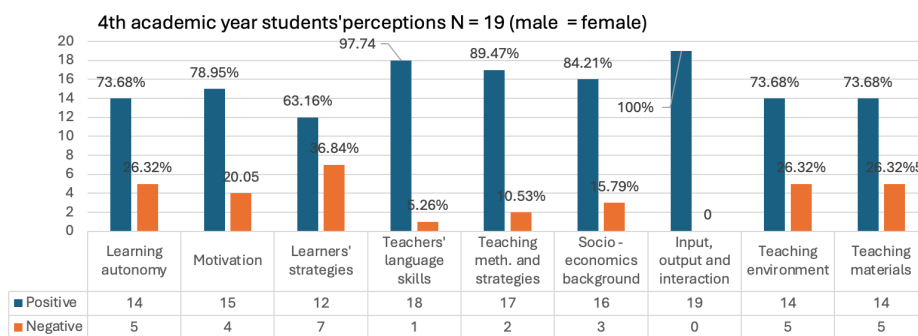


Based on the 3rd year students' perceptions, we can say that teachers' language skills with 100%, input, output and interaction with 94.44%, and motivation with 83.33% are measured as factors that positively affect English literacy, while teaching materials with 33.33% and teaching environment with 38.89% are measured as negatively affecting factors.

As for the 4th year students' perceptions, it is obvious that input, output and interaction with 100%, followed by teachers' language skills with 97.74%, teaching methodology and strategies with 89.47% and socio - economics backgrounds with 84.21% are perceived as factors that positively affect English literacy, whereas learners' strategies with 36.8%, learners' autonomy, teaching materials and teaching environment with 26.32%, are perceived as negatively affecting factors.

Figure 4.

4th academic year students' perceptions on factors that have positively or negatively affected their English literacy



Discussion

Regarding the results, we can say that there are many factors affecting English literacy, and most of the foreign students recognize them as such. Concretely, we have discussed nine of the most common factors that affect English literacy. According to students' attitudes at the University of Tetova, factors that highly affect English literacy are as follows: teacher's language skills, learner's strategies, teaching methodology and strategies, socio-economic background, and input, output, and interaction. Some of these factors might have a positive effect, while some others have a negative effect on English literacy, especially if they are not recognized or implemented correctly. Indeed, in this study, it has been shown that students' perceptions were different regarding various affecting factors, and different factors were experienced differently by students. So, the students' perception of which factors affect English literacy positively are teaching methodology and strategies, input, output, and interaction, socio-economic background, and teachers' language skills. On the other hand, students' perceptions of factors that negatively affect English literacy are the teaching environment, teaching material, learners' strategies, and learning autonomy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the idea that student's environment is individual and every student is unique in one way or another, we can never know with certainty how these factors elaborated above affect each student individually. However, there are studies that prove that proper teaching, good socio-economic background, elevated teachers' language skills, implementing motivation, planning an adequate teaching and learning process, and applying mutual interaction and adequate teaching materials can be positively affecting factors in English literacy.

Limitations of the Study and Further Recommendations

The actual study has some limitations because it does not present or reflect the overall situation of the students at the national level when it comes to their attitudes towards English literacy. Considering the fact that there were only 64 students considered for this research and all coming from the same University, it shows that we do not have enough information to come up with undeniable conclusions in terms of all the factors that influence English literacy, whether positive or negative. Especially, we cannot apply these results in situations where circumstances differ and students come from different backgrounds.

However, teachers who teach English as a foreign language can benefit from this research in terms of identifying most of the factors that influence English literacy. Furthermore, we recommend that teachers initiate a task in the classroom where students will be asked to reflect upon factors that positively or negatively influence their learning, so they can gather enough information about students' attitudes and be able to approach them properly during the learning and teaching process. Since most of the students rated 'teachers' language skills' as one of the factors that truly affects their literacy, it is preferable for teachers who struggle professionally to attend trainings that further develop their teaching skills and increase their language knowledge.

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