

**SHS students' challenges in discerning literary themes and their ability
to perceive contemporary significance**

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ABSTRACT

This survey-correlational research study examined the level of challenges in discerning literary themes and the level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of senior high school students. Respondents were senior high school students at Balasan National High School, Balasan, Iloilo, during the school year 2025-2026. n=313 students were randomly selected to be part of this study. To gather the data, the researcher-made instruments were employed, including a 25-item multiple-choice test measuring challenges across five historical literary time periods and a 30-item 5-point Likert scale questionnaire to assess the perceived contemporary significance of literary themes. Statistical Tools used were mean, standard deviation, and Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, with a significance level $p < 0.05$. The findings of the study revealed that the level of challenges in discerning literary themes associated with reading texts fell within the "High" level in the general range, particularly due to archaic language and technical linguistic structures that clash with the digital-age attention span. Perceived contemporary significance was at a "High" level within the general range, viewing the literature as a "mirror of life" relevant to social justice, identity, and personal experiences. There was "no significant relationship" between the challenges students face and the contemporary significance assigned to literary themes, this suggest that a student's personal and aesthetic connection to a literary message is independent of their technical ability to decode complex texts.

Keywords: Literary themes, contemporary significance, senior high school students.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature education remains a fundamental component of the senior high school curriculum in the Philippines and in educational systems around the world because it develops learners' capacity to understand human experiences, social realities, and abstract ideas through texts. Beyond recalling plot details, students are expected to identify literary themes, construct thematic interpretations, and connect these insights to contemporary social, cultural, and personal concerns. The ability to discern literary themes is therefore central to meaningful

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literary engagement, as it enables learners to move from literal comprehension toward critical reflection and contextual application. However, both classroom observations and educational research suggest that many students struggle with this transition. Rather than formulating well developed thematic statements supported by textual evidence, learners often identify only broad topics or simply retell story events. Such difficulties limit the depth of literary understanding and reduce opportunities for students to connect literature to present day realities.

The challenge of thematic interpretation has been documented across various educational contexts. Research indicates that students who encounter difficulties in understanding literary themes often miss opportunities to apply literary insights to issues such as social justice, identity formation, cultural awareness, and civic engagement. Smith and Ramirez (2022) found that only 35 percent of secondary students were able to successfully connect a literary theme to a contemporary social issue during post unit assessments. Similarly, the Philippine Educational Assessment Network reported that fewer than 40 percent of senior high school students could adequately explain the relationship between literary texts and current social concerns when required to do so (PEAN, 2021). These findings highlight a persistent gap between literary comprehension and real-world application. In the Philippine setting, this concern is further complicated by contextual factors that affect literature instruction. Del Rosario (2022) observed that literature teachers frequently face challenges related to limited instructional time for close reading, reliance on information-based teaching methods, and students' insufficient background knowledge. Such conditions hinder the development of critical reading, interpretive skills, and appreciation of both traditional and contemporary literary works.

Existing scholarship emphasizes that successful thematic interpretation requires sophisticated cognitive processes involving inference making, abstraction, synthesis of textual evidence, and the integration of textual meaning with lived experiences (Appleman, 2017; Rosenblatt, 1994). Research also suggests that students become more engaged with literature and demonstrate stronger critical thinking skills when they are guided to connect literary themes to current issues involving identity, technology, social inequality, and environmental concerns (Christenbury, 2017). While these studies establish the educational value of thematic analysis, they also reveal an important gap. Limited research has examined the specific barriers encountered by senior high school students within the Philippine K to 12 educational system as they attempt to discern literary themes and appreciate their contemporary significance. Consequently, there remains a need to investigate how cognitive, pedagogical, and contextual factors influence students' literary understanding in local educational settings.

The significance of this concern has become even more pronounced in the context of what has been described as the post pandemic literacy gap. Following the global pandemic, learners have increasingly engaged with digital environments characterized by rapid information consumption, short form content, and instant access to summarized knowledge. The widespread use of generative artificial intelligence tools and platforms featuring brief video content has created a learning culture that often favors speed over depth. As a result, students may experience greater difficulty engaging with complex literary narratives that require sustained attention, prolonged reflection, inferential reasoning, and deep comprehension. The capacity to appreciate nuanced literary themes is therefore challenged by contemporary habits of information consumption, where literary texts can be condensed into brief summaries or reduced to simplified digital representations. This changing educational landscape underscores the relevance of examining whether students can still recognize the contemporary significance of literary themes despite technical linguistic difficulties and evolving reading practices.

The present study is grounded in several complementary theoretical perspectives that collectively explain how students construct literary meaning and connect texts to contemporary realities. Sociocultural theory, associated with Lev Vygotsky, views learning as a socially mediated process in which individuals build understanding through interaction, discussion, and the integration of prior knowledge with new experiences. Research demonstrates that constructivist approaches in reading instruction enhance critical thinking and reading competence compared to traditional teacher centered methods (Le & Nguyen, 2024). Within literature education, sociocultural theory suggests that students' ability to discern themes is influenced by their familiarity with literary conventions, cultural knowledge, and the instructional support available to them. Challenges emerge when learners encounter historical references, cultural contexts, or literary conventions that differ substantially from their own experiences. Such circumstances create learning barriers within the zone of proximal development and require targeted guidance to facilitate thematic understanding (Galanida & Ciruela, 2025). At the same time, literature functions as a cultural tool that enables learners to connect personal experiences with broader societal concerns, thereby reinforcing its contemporary relevance (Caliboso, 2025).

Reader response theory, developed by Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, further explains the process of literary interpretation by emphasizing that meaning emerges through the interaction between the reader and the text. According to this perspective, literary understanding is shaped by readers' experiences, cultural backgrounds, and present circumstances. Rosenblatt's distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading is particularly relevant to the present investigation. Efferent reading focuses on extracting information and understanding textual content, whereas aesthetic reading emphasizes personal engagement and the lived experience of reading. This distinction suggests that students may perceive strong contemporary relevance in literary themes even when they encounter technical challenges in comprehending complex language and literary structures. Consequently, difficulties in thematic interpretation do not necessarily eliminate the possibility of meaningful personal connections with literary works. Rather, students' interpretations are shaped by their generational experiences, digital literacy practices, and social realities, which influence how they construct meaning from texts.

Critical literacy theory, associated with Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, extends this understanding by positioning reading as a social and political act. This perspective emphasizes that literary analysis should enable learners to examine how texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge structures of power, identity, and social reality. Through the identification of themes related to justice, equality, identity, and transformation, students gain opportunities to critically analyze contemporary issues such as social media influence, cultural diversity, and youth empowerment. Consequently, difficulties in discerning literary themes may limit students' capacity to engage critically with both literary texts and the social world around them. Kaowiwattanakul (2021) notes that critical literacy approaches encourage learners to interpret, reflect upon, and respond to texts in personally meaningful ways, thereby promoting deeper engagement, critical reading skills, and higher order thinking. This perspective reinforces the educational importance of helping students overcome barriers to thematic understanding.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a coherent explanation for the relationship between challenges in discerning literary themes and the ability to perceive their contemporary significance. The study conceptualizes challenges in discerning literary themes as the independent variable and students' ability to perceive contemporary significance as the dependent variable. Theme identification is widely recognized as a cognitively demanding process requiring inferential reasoning, synthesis of textual evidence, and movement beyond

literal comprehension (Appleman, 2017; Beach et al., 2019). Reader response and constructivist perspectives suggest that meaningful interpretation depends upon the successful integration of textual cues and personal understanding. When students struggle to distinguish topics from themes, formulate thematic statements, or support interpretations with textual evidence, their engagement often remains at a superficial level (Rosenblatt, 1995; Mart, 2019). Such limitations reduce their capacity to contextualize literary insights within contemporary social realities. Empirical evidence supports this position, showing that students with weaker thematic comprehension also perform less effectively in tasks requiring the application of literary themes to modern concerns (Christenbury, 2017; Kaowiwattanakul, 2021).

At the same time, studies suggest that students who experience fewer difficulties in thematic interpretation are better able to explain how literary texts reflect, critique, or illuminate contemporary social conditions (Del Rosario, 2022; Le & Nguyen, 2024). This relationship highlights the importance of strengthening students' thematic comprehension not only to improve literary understanding but also to cultivate critical awareness and meaningful engagement with current societal issues. Given the persistent challenges reported in literature classrooms, the emerging realities of the post pandemic literacy environment, and the limited research focusing on senior high school learners in the Philippine context, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature by documenting the specific challenges students encounter in discerning literary themes and examining how these challenges influence their ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary works. Through this investigation, the study aims to generate insights that may inform curriculum development, instructional practices, and reading programs designed to foster deeper literary understanding and more meaningful engagement with literature among senior high school students.

Statement of the problem

This study aimed to find out the challenges in discerning literary themes and their ability to perceive the contemporary significance of SHS Students in Balasan National High School, Balasan, Iloilo, for the School Year 2025-2026.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of challenges in discerning literary themes of SHS students?
2. What is the level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes of SHS students?
3. Is there a significant relationship between the challenges in discerning literary themes and their ability to perceive the contemporary significance of SHS students in literary themes?

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to identify the challenges in discerning literary themes and the ability to perceive the contemporary significance of senior high school students at Balasan National High School, Balasan, Iloilo, for the school year 2025 to 2026. Specifically, the study examined the level of challenges in discerning literary themes, the level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes, and the significance of the relationship between challenges in discerning and contemporary significance.

The study employed a quantitative survey-correlational design. The descriptive component was used to provide a systematic account of the current status of participants' interpretive competence, difficulties, and challenges without manipulating any variables (Distance Learning Institute, 2024). The correlational component was used to determine the extent to which the level of interpretive competence is statistically related to the level of

difficulties in interpreting literary texts, without implying causal relationships among variables (Creswell, 2014; Merren, 2025). This design is appropriate because the research problems encompass both the level of challenges and the level of ability to perceive contemporary significance, as well as the testing of significant relationships among naturally occurring groups and constructs.

The participants of this investigation were three hundred thirteen (313) senior high school students enrolled in Grades 11 and 12 at Balasan National High School in Balasan, Iloilo, during the school year 2025 to 2026. The minimum sample size was determined using standard sample size computation for descriptive-correlational studies to ensure adequate statistical power. The total population of senior high school students at Balasan National High School was 1,657. When classified according to sex, a total of 811, or 48.94%, were male across Grades 11 and 12, while a total of 846, or 51.06%, were female across the same grade levels. Based on this population distribution, the sample size used in the research was 313 senior high school students.

The primary data-gathering instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire anchored on the study's theoretical-conceptual framework and operational definitions. It consisted of two types of instruments. The first was a 25-item multiple-choice test designed to measure the challenges in discerning literary themes across five distinct historical periods. Items were scored as 1 point for each correct answer and 0 points for each incorrect answer. To ensure content validity, the test was constructed following a Table of Specifications that aligned items with specific learning competencies: Ancient and Classical Literature at 12%, Medieval and Renaissance at 28%, Enlightenment and Romanticism at 20%, 19th Century Realism at 16%, and 20th Century and Contemporary Literature at 24%. This structured approach ensured that the test provided a comprehensive representation of world literature as mandated by the K to 12 English curriculum. The test was designed to distinguish difficulty in analyzing ancient and classical literature, medieval and renaissance literature, enlightenment and romanticism, 19th century realism and naturalism, and 20th century and contemporary literature.

The second instrument was a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire assessing the ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes. This instrument was categorized into indicators such as recognition of core thematic concepts, personal and societal relevance, and the application of themes to modern-day issues, and it further addressed dimensions including understanding of literary themes, analytical skills in theme identification, application to contemporary context, engagement and cultural appreciation, and challenges in theme discerning. Responses were gathered using a five-point Likert scale wherein 5 corresponded to Strongly Agree, 4 to Agree, 3 to Neutral, 2 to Disagree, and 1 to Strongly Disagree, which is an established format for quantifying attitudes and self-reported levels in educational research (McLeod, 2025; Del Siegle, 2015). To describe the level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes, results were interpreted using the following scale: a mean range of 4.21 to 5.00 was described as Very High, 3.41 to 4.20 as High, 2.61 to 3.40 as Moderate, 1.81 to 2.60 as Low, and 1.00 to 1.80 as Very Low.

The researcher's questionnaire was submitted for content validation to a panel of experts in their respective fields of specialization. Their suggestions were integrated into the final revision of the items to ensure clarity and appropriateness for senior high school students. For reliability testing, the questionnaire was administered to thirty (30) senior high school students from Estancia National High School in Estancia, Iloilo, who were not part of the main study. The results of the pre-administration were submitted to a statistician who performed computerized reliability testing. For the test instrument, item analysis using the index of difficulty, ranging from 0.20 to 0.80, and the index of discrimination, ranging from 0.20 to

1.00, was applied, along with factor analysis for construct validation, yielding 25 reliable items out of an original pool of 35. For the questionnaire, all 30 items were found to be reliable, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.936.

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured approval from the College Dean and obtained permission from the Public Schools Division Office and the school heads and principals of Balasan National High School. After approval was granted, coordination with school administrators and senior high school coordinators was conducted to schedule the administration of the questionnaires. The purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of responses, and the estimated time required to complete the questionnaire were explained to participants. Printed or online consent forms were distributed and collected before data gathering commenced.

The questionnaire was administered to senior high school classes at an agreed schedule. Clear written instructions on how to answer each section, covering the profile, the multiple-choice test, and the Likert-scale items, were provided to all participants. Students were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire, typically 20 to 30 minutes. They were instructed not to write their names on the questionnaire to ensure anonymity. Completed questionnaires were collected immediately after completion and checked for completeness. These procedures ensured that data were collected consistently, ethically, and in alignment with best practices in educational survey research (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Distance Learning Institute, 2024).

The data were analyzed using appropriate descriptive and inferential statistical techniques consistent with the research questions and hypotheses, with all statistical analyses carried out using SPSS. Frequency count and percentage distributions were used to determine the profile of the respondents across the relevant categories. Mean and standard deviation were used to describe the levels of interpretive competence, difficulties, and challenges when students were taken as a whole and when classified according to profile variables. Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability and internal consistency of the researcher-made instrument to ensure that the questionnaire items reliably measured the intended variables. Finally, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was computed to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between overall interpretive competence scores, including subscale scores where applicable, and overall difficulty scores, including subscale scores where applicable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This Results and Discussion section presents the findings of a descriptive-correlational study involving 313 senior high school students enrolled in Grades 11 and 12 at Balasan National High School, Balasan, Iloilo, during the school year 2025 to 2026. Data were gathered using a researcher-made questionnaire composed of two instruments: a 25-item multiple-choice test measuring the level of challenges in discerning literary themes across five historical periods, and a 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire assessing the level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes. The discussion is grounded entirely in the data gathered from respondents and is interpreted in direct relation to the three objectives of the study, which sought to determine the level of challenges in discerning literary themes, assess the level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes, and examine the significance of the relationship between these two variables. Descriptive statistics, specifically mean and standard deviation, were used to analyze the first two objectives, while the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was employed for the inferential analysis, with the significance level set at the 0.05 alpha level.

Level of challenges in discerning literary themes

The first objective of the study sought to determine the level of challenges that senior high school students at Balasan National High School face in discerning literary themes. Analysis of the 25-item multiple-choice test revealed that respondents obtained a mean score of 19.14 with a standard deviation of $SD = 4.59$. Using the established scoring interpretation wherein a score of 17.01 to 21.00 is described as High, the results indicate that SHS students demonstrate a level of thematic discernment that falls within the High range, yet one that is also accompanied by significant cognitive and linguistic impediments. The complete scoring scale used assigns the range of 21.01 to 25.00 as Very High, 17.01 to 21.00 as High, 13.01 to 17.00 as Moderate, 9.01 to 13.00 as Low, and 5.00 to 9.00 as Very Low.

The High mean score of 19.14 suggests that while students have developed sufficient interpretive competence to engage with literary texts at a meaningful level, they simultaneously encounter formidable challenges rooted in linguistic and cultural distance. This pattern points to what may be described as a proficiency-relevance gap, wherein the technical decoding of texts, particularly those characterized by archaic language, remains a significant obstacle, even as students are still able to reach an interpretive level. The standard deviation of $SD = 4.59$ further indicates notable variability in scores across the respondent group, suggesting that gaps in English proficiency and prior exposure to analytical reading remain consequential factors in how individual students navigate these challenges. Students who have had limited engagement with analytical or close-reading practices may find the demands of thematic analysis particularly taxing, especially when confronted with texts that rely heavily on figurative language, historical allusion, or cultural context that is far removed from their lived experiences.

These findings do not suggest that the texts being studied lack instructional value. Rather, they highlight the need for additional pedagogical support that enables students to bridge their digital-age thinking habits with the slower, more deliberate nature of classical literature. The tendency of canonical literary texts to foreground linguistic and cultural distances may inadvertently alienate students whose attention and engagement are increasingly shaped by the immediate and fragmented character of digital media. Abstract themes that appear to lack direct pragmatic application may further contribute to the sense that such texts are technically exhausting rather than intellectually rewarding. The mean score of 19.14 with a standard deviation of $SD = 4.59$ thus reflects both the achievement and the struggle that coexist in this learner population, underscoring that while a High level of challenge has been attained, the road to consistent and confident thematic interpretation is still marked by variability and instructional need.

These findings align with the research of Benonguil (2022) and Del Rosario (2024), both of whom identified that traditional teaching strategies and English proficiency levels often limit students' interpretive engagement with literary themes in Filipino secondary schools. The results also support the position advanced by Study.com, which asserts that proficiency in theme identification is essential for students to progress from surface-level topic recognition toward deep, authorial meaning-making. The High level obtained in this study thus reflects a cohort of learners who have managed to develop enough interpretive competence to engage meaningfully with literary texts despite the linguistic and cultural distances commonly associated with canonical works. However, the variability indexed by the standard deviation of $SD = 4.59$ signals that this competence is unevenly distributed and that targeted instructional interventions remain necessary to support students whose performance falls in the lower ranges of the High band.

Level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes

The second objective of the study sought to assess the level of ability of senior high school students to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes. The 30-item Likert-scale questionnaire yielded a mean score of 3.63 with a standard deviation of $SD = 0.45$. Based on the established Likert-scale interpretation wherein the range of 3.41 to 4.20 is described as High, the results indicate that SHS students demonstrate a High level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes. The complete scale used assigns the range of 4.21 to 5.00 as Very High, 3.41 to 4.20 as High, 2.61 to 3.40 as Moderate, 1.81 to 2.60 as Low, and 1.00 to 1.80 as Very Low. The low standard deviation of $SD = 0.45$ further indicates that responses are relatively consistent and exhibit low variability among participants, suggesting a broadly shared orientation toward the relevance of literary themes among the respondents.

The High mean of 3.63 indicates that students strongly agree that literary themes carry significance for their modern lives, societal issues, and personal experiences, and that the messages embedded in literature remain applicable to the present day. This finding suggests that SHS students at Balasan National High School do not regard literature as a static or irrelevant subject but instead perceive it as a living dialogue between the past and the present. The consistency of responses across the group, as reflected by the low standard deviation, reinforces the conclusion that this orientation toward contemporary relevance is widely shared rather than confined to a small subset of high-performing learners.

These results align with Reader-Response Theory, particularly the transactional perspective advanced by Louise Rosenblatt, which posits that meaning in literature is not located solely in the text but emerges through the active engagement of the reader with the text using their own life experiences and cultural heritage. The High level of ability to perceive contemporary significance observed in this study suggests that students are successfully undertaking this transactional process, drawing on their generational background and digital literacy to establish connections between classical literary themes and pressing contemporary issues such as social media influence, identity politics, and youth empowerment. This interpretation is further supported by Mallillin (2020), who argues that contemporary literature functions as a mirror of life, a tool for real-world application, and a medium for in-depth learning that illuminates societal strengths and weaknesses and helps readers navigate ongoing social change.

The particular context of Balasan National High School SHS students as digital natives may further account for their High level of contemporary relevance perception. Despite the technical challenges that canonical texts such as Shakespearean sonnets or classic Philippine epics may present, these students appear capable of looking beyond formal and linguistic difficulties to identify personal and societal relevance in the thematic content. Their familiarity with global issues mediated through digital platforms may enable them to draw parallels between classical themes such as justice or rebellion and the modern challenges they encounter in their own social environments. This capacity to find personal meaning even when surface-level decoding is difficult is a psychologically significant finding, as it indicates that students have successfully applied their distinct repertoire of experiences and cultural background to construct meaning from literary texts, affirming that literature remains a deeply relevant and personally resonant subject for this learner population.

Relationship between challenges in discerning literary themes and the ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes

The third objective of the study examined the significance of the relationship between the level of challenges in discerning literary themes and the level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes among SHS students at Balasan National High

School. Pearson r correlation analysis yielded a coefficient of $r = 0.021$ with a p -value of 0.709. Since the p -value of 0.709 is substantially greater than the 0.05 alpha level of significance, the relationship between the two variables is determined to be not significant, and accordingly, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between the challenges in discerning literary themes and the ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes is accepted.

This non-significant result constitutes a crucial and theoretically meaningful finding of the study. The coefficient of $r = 0.021$ indicates a negligible positive association between the two variables, confirming that the level of technical challenge students encounter in discerning literary themes does not meaningfully predict the degree to which they perceive those themes as relevant and significant to contemporary life. In other words, for senior high school students at Balasan National High School, technical difficulty and personal valuation of literary themes operate as independent cognitive constructs rather than as mutually contingent dimensions of literary engagement. A student's ability to correctly identify a literary theme on a test does not necessarily determine how much relevance or meaning that student assigns to the same theme in a modern context. Even students who face higher cognitive or linguistic barriers in technical thematic analysis may maintain a strong personal connection to the message of the literary work.

This finding reflects a pattern that may be described as a noted contradiction between two simultaneously High results: a High level of challenges in discerning literary themes indexed by a mean score of 19.14 ($SD = 4.59$) on one hand, and a High level of ability to perceive contemporary significance indexed by a mean score of 3.63 ($SD = 0.45$) on the other. The statistical independence of these two dimensions suggests that the post-pandemic literacy gap and the influence of digital media culture, which tends toward fragmented and immediate forms of engagement, have not diminished students' capacity to derive personal meaning from literature, even as the formal academic processes of decoding and thematic analysis have become comparatively more laborious. Students appear to maintain a strong desire for meaning and a genuine appreciation of the thematic significance of what they read, even when the tools of formal literary interpretation present challenges.

This finding offers a partial counterpoint to perspectives in the literature that posit a dialectical relationship between interpretive challenge and appreciation, wherein linguistic or cognitive barriers automatically impede a student's valuation of literary texts. However, it strongly resonates with the position of Probst (1987), who argued that students' intrinsic motivation and personal experiences can enable them to assign value to a literary theme even when formal technical analysis is difficult. The results also align closely with Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory, which treats technical decoding and aesthetic appreciation as distinct transactional processes. The data presented in this study demonstrate that even when students struggled with archaic language and the formal demands of thematic analysis, they successfully completed a transaction with the text, finding its messages significant to their modern lives. Aesthetic appreciation, in this context, is not blocked by technical difficulty but functions as a separate and independently sustained cognitive process.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are significant. The statistical independence of technical challenge and personal valuation suggests that the appropriate instructional response is not to reduce the complexity of texts assigned to students in order to lower the level of challenge. Rather, the findings advocate for a pedagogical shift from lowering standards toward enhancing the tools of interpretation. Educators at Balasan National High School should focus on providing students with more effective literary lenses and scaffolding tools that help them bridge the gap between the complex texts they already clearly

value as significant and the laborious academic processes involved in formally analyzing those texts. The data point to a student population that is both competent and deeply appreciative of literature but one that experiences its technical analysis and personal meaning-making as separate cognitive activities. The coexistence of a High level of challenge and a High level of perceived significance identifies a fertile ground for further instructional intervention, one in which increasing difficulty does not diminish relevance but instead calls for more deliberate and responsive pedagogical support.

The findings of this study collectively address all three research objectives and contribute meaningfully to the body of knowledge on literary engagement among Filipino senior high school learners. The level of challenges in discerning literary themes was found to be High, with a mean score of 19.14 (SD = 4.59), indicating that students possess meaningful interpretive competence but continue to encounter significant cognitive and linguistic difficulties, particularly with archaic and culturally distant texts. The level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes was similarly found to be High, with a mean score of 3.63 (SD = 0.45), reflecting a consistent and broadly shared orientation among respondents toward the relevance of literary themes in modern life. Crucially, the Pearson r correlation analysis revealed a non-significant relationship between these two variables ($r = 0.021$, $p = 0.709$), leading to the acceptance of the null hypothesis and confirming that technical challenge and personal valuation of literary significance operate as independent cognitive domains in this learner population. These findings challenge deficit-oriented assumptions about the relationship between interpretive difficulty and literary appreciation, and instead present a portrait of learners who are actively engaged with literature as personally meaningful even when formal analytical demands are high. The results underscore the importance of responsive, scaffolded literary instruction that honors both the complexity of canonical texts and the interpretive capacities that students already bring to their reading. These conclusions set the foundation for the recommendations and proposed instructional interventions presented in the subsequent chapter of this manuscript.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study reveal that senior high school students possess a complex relationship with literature characterized by both significant challenges and meaningful engagement. Although the respondents demonstrated a high level of challenges in discerning literary themes, this result should not be interpreted as an inability to understand literature. Rather, it points to the existence of a substantial proficiency relevance gap in which students retain the capacity to interpret abstract meanings and appreciate literary messages while encountering difficulties with the technical demands of textual analysis. These challenges are primarily associated with archaic language, complex linguistic structures, and the cognitive demands required for close reading and thematic interpretation. The findings further suggest that the contemporary digital environment, marked by rapid information consumption, shortened attention spans, and preference for easily digestible content, may contribute to cognitive fatigue when students engage with literary texts that require prolonged concentration and deeper analytical processing. Despite these obstacles, students continue to demonstrate the interpretive competence needed to bridge cultural and contextual distances embedded within literary works.

At the same time, the respondents exhibited a high level of ability to perceive the contemporary significance of literary themes, indicating that they consistently view literature as a meaningful reflection of life and society. The findings suggest that students are able to connect literary themes to issues involving social justice, politics, identity, and personal experiences, even when they encounter challenges in the technical aspects of literary analysis.

This demonstrates that students possess a strong inclination to seek meaning and relevance in what they read. While they may struggle with the procedural aspects of identifying and analyzing themes, they nevertheless recognize the value and significance of literary messages. Such findings affirm that literature continues to function as a powerful medium through which students interpret contemporary realities and make sense of ongoing social and personal transformations. The results further support the principles of Reader Response Theory, particularly Rosenblatt's concept of aesthetic engagement, by demonstrating that students actively engage in transactional reading experiences in which meaning emerges from the interaction between the text and their lived experiences. Their ability to perceive the relevance of literary themes despite linguistic and analytical barriers underscores the enduring importance of literature as a mirror of life and a vehicle for personal and social reflection.

Moreover, the study found no significant relationship between the challenges students experience in discerning literary themes and their ability to perceive the contemporary significance of those themes. This finding suggests that a student's personal appreciation of literary messages operates independently from the technical skills required for literary analysis. In other words, students who encounter difficulties in identifying themes, interpreting textual evidence, or decoding complex language can still develop profound personal connections with literary works when the themes resonate with their experiences and social realities. The absence of a significant relationship also indicates that challenges associated with efferent reading do not necessarily diminish students' capacity for meaningful aesthetic engagement with literature. Despite the influence of digital media consumption patterns and the continuing effects of the post pandemic literacy gap, students have retained their ability to derive value and meaning from complex narratives. However, the findings suggest that the formal academic process of literary analysis remains a distinct and more demanding cognitive task. Consequently, technical proficiency in literary interpretation and appreciation of literary significance should be regarded as separate but equally important dimensions of literary learning.

Taken together, these findings highlight important implications for literature instruction. Since students demonstrate strong appreciation for the contemporary relevance of literature despite experiencing substantial analytical challenges, instructional practices should not focus solely on simplifying literary texts. Instead, educators should continue developing strategies that connect abstract literary themes to contemporary issues, media experiences, and real-world concerns that are meaningful to students. The findings suggest that enhancing technical skills in thematic analysis will not automatically increase students' appreciation of literature, just as strong appreciation alone will not eliminate the difficulties associated with literary interpretation. Therefore, both dimensions should be addressed through intentional and balanced instructional approaches. Literature teachers may capitalize on students' existing interest in contemporary issues as entry points for engaging with complex texts while simultaneously strengthening analytical skills necessary for thematic interpretation. By treating literary appreciation and technical competence as complementary but distinct educational goals, educators can foster deeper literary understanding, strengthen critical thinking, and encourage more meaningful engagement with literature among senior high school students.

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