An Exploratory Study on Students' Perceptions of the 12th Grade Literature and Composition Course: The Proposition of Personalized Learning Strategies

Dr. Housseine Bachiri
ELA Teacher, ESL Practitioner, and Researcher in Applied Linguistics.

"Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart," Salman Rushdie (1989).

ABSTRACT: This study aspires to theoretically and practically explore students' perceptions of the 12th Grade Literature and Composition course in a personalized manner. The objective behind conducting this research is not to generate statistics, but rather to grant a well-grounded and research-based perspective on how students perceive and interact with the aforementioned course. This has ipso facto risen the researcher's interest to thoroughly investigate and demystify, with unremitting ardor and devotion, the root causes of students' dislike of literature. The data gathered by means of direct and non-participant observation, along with serving as a curriculum designer, teacher and evaluator, the researcher was able to establish an unobtrusive and unbiased research environment. The findings consistently show lack of students' engagement and participation in the 12th Grade Literature and Composition Course. The personalized learning strategies proposed by the researcher were merely able to increase students' thinking skills (The Means-Ends Diagram and Graphic Organizers). Nevertheless, they slightly motivated them to interact with literary texts. This is most probably due to the fact that the majority of students view the aforementioned course more as a graduation requirement, and not as a gateway to proficiency and scholarship.

KEYWORDS: Literature, Instructional strategies, Instruction, ELA, Literacy skills, Thinking skills. Means-Ends Diagram, Graphic organizers

1. INTRODUCTION

It has taken me nearly 5 months of profound reflection and contemplation, continuous practice, and constant reading of a multitude of materials, printed and online, ranging from educational research, pedagogy to psychology to be eventually able to write this paper. I was thus engaged heart and soul. In a nutshell, teaching literature to high school students is arduous in the most comprehensive sense of the term. It requires unlearning of one's classroom expectations (punctuality, perseverance, diligence, competition among students, active class participation, etc.) and learning and relearning a great deal of information and regulations pertinent to Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Needless to say, customizing engaging and differentiated instructional strategies in order to serve students' multiple intelligences is a constant pedagogical necessity.

This state of perplexity and dilemma is fundamentally by virtue of a variety of structural factors varying from students' behavior, intrinsic motivation to a low performance in literacy skills (reading and writing). I must say that I never thought about my journey as irksome, but rather I have continually sought to arrive at great mastery and pedantry with breathless keenness. I was frankly told by students on multiple occasions that "I don't like to read", "I don't understand", "Why are we doing this?", "Are we reading the whole play?", "I don't have time to read", "I don't wanna do this", "I just want to graduate", "I only want to do assignments for graduation", and so forth. As a teacher, I was filled with constant bewilderment and discombobulation. I naively remind myself that I am an ELA teacher and my students are expected to read literary texts, yet they do not like to read. Above all my course is a graduation requirement. I asked myself a myriad of epistemological and ontological questions: What Am I going to do? From where to start? How can I change the status quo of my class? Will I be successful in my job? Should I continue? How can I help my students? Am I doing the right thing? In actuality, I was fighting an uphill battle, and the above-mentioned questions were exhausting me, mainly at the beginning of the school year. It was tantamount to doing scuba diving without an oxygen tank. However, I started my teaching journey with steady, strategic and brave attempts. After presenting and explaining classroom rules and expectations on

An Exploratory Study on Students' Perceptions of the 12th Grade Literature and Composition Course: The Proposition of Personalized Learning Strategies

the first day, I gave a PowerPoint presentation on the importance of reading and writing on the following day. I had to ask students many questions related to the aforementioned topic. As time went by, I was calling on students to participate in class discussions, despite complete absence of initiative combined oftentimes with half-hearted participation. I have tried to practically change their opinions and attitudes about reading. I always tell students we need to read in order to understand what is being written? We have to do it... There is no other way...Yet, it is true what Showalter said "Teaching literature in the twenty-first century will demand more flexibility" (2003, p. 37). In my belief, social media plays an integral part in this reading disequilibrium. It is an enormous distraction in learning.

Interestingly enough, the majority of students haven't developed a reading stamina. They would almost always stop reading after the first or second page, which is clearly indicative of their weakness in the reading skill. Their reading exposure is still embryonic. In the same manner, I remember students were very surprised when I shared with them the fact that we have to read the author's biography in order to understand the historical era in which the literary work was created. The author's social upbringing, life career and the time when they were born are all major factors that directly or indirectly influence the author's tone, word choice and literary genre, including themes and characters. It is very crucial for students to be familiar with the author's biography, it is an inseparable element of the literary work, to be able to assimilate overall ideas of the author/poet. For example, Shelley's *Frankenstein* was set in the 18th century, and in my perspective, students must be acquainted with the main events that happened back then (Romanticism and Industrial Revolution). They undeniably fueled and inspired Shelley's creativity. In effect, a large part of the 1700s is unequivocally expressed in *Frankenstein.*

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I was in charge of teaching the 12th Grade Literature and Composition Course (Beowulf, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and Shelly's *Frankenstein*) for the current academic year (2023-2024). All my classes were heterogeneous. Students were grouped in a remediation program called STAGE (Students & Teachers Achieving Graduation Expectations). This educational program is heavily premised upon Tier 2 intervention. A plethora of schools have largely embraced a Positive Behavioral Interventions and supports (PBIS) framework across the globe to combat new educational challenges, mitigate undesired effects and meet expectations. Waukegan High School is of no exception.

Early on in semester **1**, before I was introduced to my students, I designed a needs assessment. The impetus behind such an assessment is to painstakingly detect areas of weakness and ferret out learning predilections, and at the same time diagnose the current learning situation of students. Such an assessment was conducted with every group of students I was in charge of. It was both diagnostic and instructional. The needs assessment included 3 components (content, classroom management style and assessment). As a teacher, it was extremely striking from the data I gathered that the majority of students were not interested in reading literary works in class. For classroom management style and assessment, students were more in favor of a less formal class setting with infrequent formative and summative assessments. This filled me with plenty of wonder and intrigue. I had to start as soon as possible to unfold the mysteries of my journey.

My first 3 weeks of instruction were completely packed with zeal and rigor. I always made sure to do a great amount of research and practice before embarking on teaching any class session. My classroom board frequently encompassed much information (Learning target, references, vocabulary, themes, etc.) and pre-reading activities, such as vocabulary items, pictures, videos, stories, and so forth. The more I brought content to class (reading-based materials), the more I realized that students were not interested in reading. I tried every possible way to make reading more interesting, enjoyable, and relatable through individualization and differentiation strategies. However, I was not able to reach the results I was intending. To my bad luck, as time went by, I discovered that students were not equipped with axiomatic reading skills (bottom-up approach, top-down approach, annotating, note-taking, paraphrasing, summarizing, intensive reading, extensive reading, etc.). All these reading mechanisms were new to them. I had to introduce and teach basic notions related to reading.

As a matter of fact, it took me awhile to readjust and imbibe customary learning habits of students. In return, I was resistant and insistent on the fundamentals of reading where focus is the main priority followed by rich and generous annotations that will eventually simplify and break down convoluted concepts, ideologies, and themes. In fact, students' understanding of literature was vulnerable and limited. They haven't developed yet cognitive processes to deal with literary works. The majority of students are passive readers. That is to say, they simply look at the material given to them without making mental efforts to scan, or at least highlight important ideas and/or information. The tragedy of this reading habit is that students are not capable of verbalizing content or voicing their opinions about the reading material. They either look confused or uninterested to participate in class discussions and debates. One must know that reading requires self-discipline. It is a purposeful mental activity. For students to make a quantum leap in the ELA class and feed their hankerings, they should determine a minimum number of pages to read daily, and it should also be crystalized in the curriculum, instruction and assessment. Ramsden believes that "learning in educational institutions should be about changing the ways in which learners understand, or experience, or conceptualize the world around them" (2003, p. 21).

An Exploratory Study on Students' Perceptions of the 12th Grade Literature and Composition Course: The Proposition of Personalized Learning Strategies

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Being the cornerstone of education, reading and writing are fundamentally core to the development of metacognitive skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving (Mokharti & Richard 2002). Likewise, it is noteworthy to mention that even native speakers of English are sometimes in a state of limbo as they have demonstrated a weak reading and writing performance. According to Ferguson, Perez-Llantada, & Plo "academic writing, or academic literacy, is not part of the native speaker's inheritance: it is acquired rather through lengthy formal education and is far from a universal skill" (2011, p. 42).

There have been a few systematic literature reviews that deal with instructional approaches to teach literature and the constraints teachers encounter (Affendi & Aziz 2020; Hashim & Abd Talib 2019; Fikray & Habil 2022; Omar 2017; Regmi 2021; Ukat & Ismail 2022). The information-based approach, language-based approach, personal response approach, paraphrastic approach, and moral-philosophical approach. These approaches can be used in a wide range of contexts depending on the type of the curriculum and the learning target determined in each class session.

One can suggest that the information-based approach (Affendi & Aziz 2020) and the personal-response approach (Omar 2017) can be considered the most effective approaches in teaching literature because the former enables students to gain ample literary knowledge. In doing so, students' understanding of the subject matter gradually increases and expands, while the latter it connects students' personal emotions and experiences in order to stimulate and entice them
to read.

In fact, in an increasingly globalized world where there is ubiquitous saturation of information and inscription, reading has undoubtedly become a fundamental skill. One cannot be successful unless they are able to read and decipher the meanings around them, be it verbal, written or visual. Reading literature is not solely about the literary work itself. It is more about how students use the knowledge they gain and use it for personal or intellectual purposes. In the same vein, it is more about how they make meanings pertinent to them, and how to communicate their emotions with others. Literature can de facto offer students extraordinary opportunities to learn more about issues (social, historical, cultural, economic, artistic), such as the Holocaust, violence, racism, colonization, addiction, love, greed, adultery, and so forth. One should know that students who read more are more likely to achieve social status and economic success in the future. Learning about historical events through reading novels, for example, is one of the easiest and most interesting forms of learning, and certainly some may prefer biographies, autobiographies or even historical novels. *In How to Study a Novel*, Peck believes that "the easiest novel to read and study is the one that presents a seemingly realistic picture of ordinary life but there are many novels where the oddity, opacity or exaggeration of the writings is what most strikes the reader" (1995, p. 61).

No matter what genre students prefer to read, the objective is to continue to read about the world around them. Students need to understand that reading literature is empowering as they can analyze literary works, which can gradually bolster and enrich their reading pace and analytical skills. Reading short stories, novels, poems, or plays can offer students room to think and contemplate about themes, symbols, characters, and most importantly plot development, which can oftentimes be mind-blowing. Voltaire once said, "reading enlightens the mind". It does indeed in a lot of ways. Bazerman confirms "in education, reading and writing creative texts were seen as important to students' emotional and social development, addressing their experience and the experiences of others, learning about other cultures and times, and clarifying students' values and identities" (2023, p. 12).

If the literary text incorporates an educational material, it automatically grants a rich learning opportunity aimed at bringing about intentional changes in the behavior of students in all mental, psychological, social and cognitive aspects, for it seeks to contribute to the improvement of language correctness and accuracy. With the heroic roles that literature presents to students in all its genres, along with the experiences of authors, students are exposed to great values, ideals, and qualities that can eventually inspire them.

In addition to the linguistic growth of student, a literary text helps students understand human nature at a large scale. Conversely, a well-known researcher, such as Bazerman argues that "ELA had traditionally focused on the particulars of language correctness along with literary and cultural traditions" (2023, p. 11). It is largely true because students still face morphological and syntactic problems either with reading or writing. Therefore, most ELA teachers emphasize language over meaning of the literary text (The Language-Based Approach).

4. PROPOSITION OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING STRATEGIES IN TEACHING LITERATURE
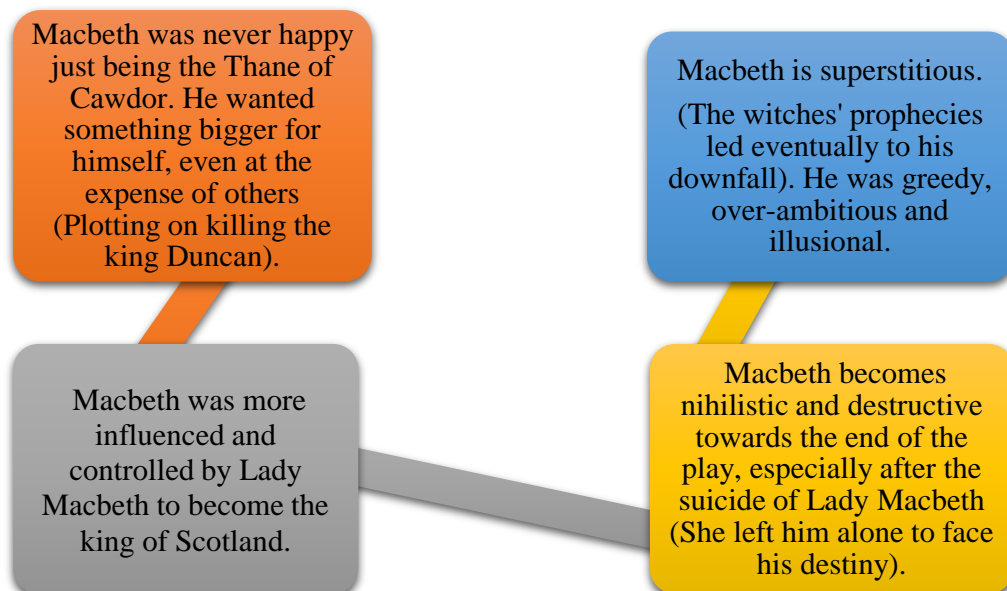### 4.1 The Use of Means-Ends Diagram in Reading

The Means-Ends Diagram or Analysis is a systematic and an organized identification of means aimed at fulfilling objectives (Mairal 2015). It works through two main processes: **1)** problem analysis (critical thinking), and 2) finding solutions (problem solving). Such a diagram is used in business, psychology, science, engineering, education, decision making, policy recommendation(s), and so forth. In literature, students can brainstorm and provide as many reasons as they can to potentially ferret out the root causes of the problem related to characters, themes, symbols, ideologies, plot, etc. Similarly, they can ask questions whose answers are not potentially in the literary text (critical thinking). They can do so either through deductive, general to specific, or inductive reasoning, specific to general. Students will eventually come up with possible solutions to the problem they work on.

An Exploratory Study on Students' Perceptions of the 12th Grade Literature and Composition Course: The Proposition of Personalized Learning Strategies
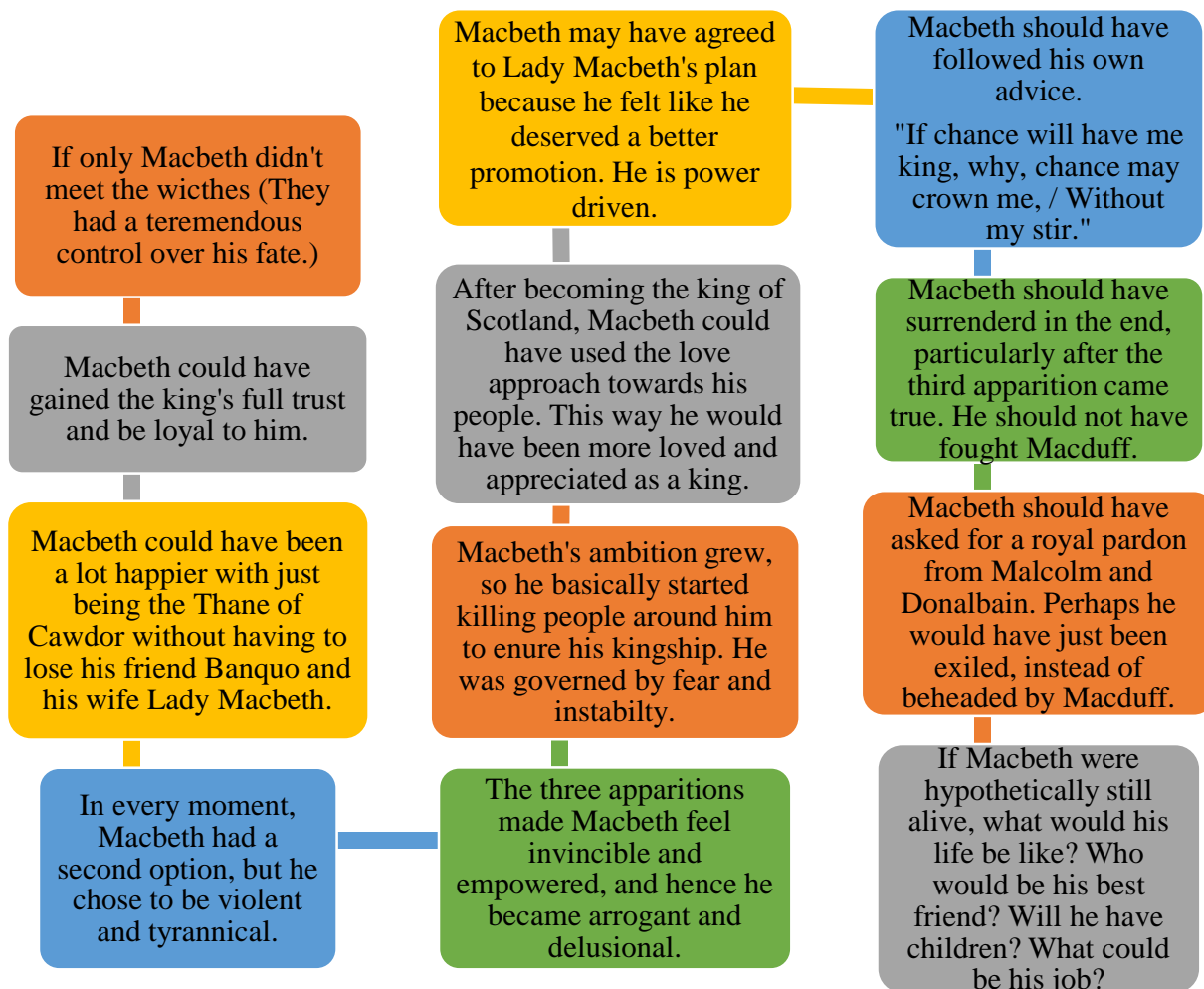
Example:

As mentioned previously, the Means-Ends Diagram can be used in a variety of domains and disciplines: The example below is based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and it illustrates how the Means-Ends Diagram operates in terms of critical thinking and problem solving. This activity may change the dynamics of one's class. Students will feel motivated to work on it, especially if it is done in pairs and/or groups.

4.12 Problem Analysis: (Shakespeare's *Macbeth*)

Macbeth was never happy just being the Thane of Cawdor. He wanted something bigger for himself, even at the expense of others (Plotting on killing the king Duncan).

Macbeth is superstitious.
(The witches' prophecies led eventually to his downfall). He was greedy, over-ambitious and illusional.

Macbeth was more influenced and controlled by Lady Macbeth to become the king of Scotland.

Macbeth becomes nihilistic and destructive towards the end of the play, especially after the suicide of Lady Macbeth (She left him alone to face his destiny).

4.1.3 Problem Solving: (Shakespeare's *Macbeth*)

If only Macbeth didn't meet the wicthes (They had a teremendous control over his fate.)

Macbeth may have agreed to Lady Macbeth's plan because he felt like he deserved a better promotion. He is power driven.

Macbeth should have followed his own advice.
"If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir."

Macbeth could have gained the king's full trust and be loyal to him.

After becoming the king of Scotland, Macbeth could have used the love approach towards his people. This way he would have been more loved and appreciated as a king.

Macbeth should have surrenderd in the end, particularly after the third apparition came true. He should not have fought Macduff.

Macbeth could have been a lot happier with just being the Thane of Cawdor without having to lose his friend Banquo and his wife Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth's ambition grew, so he basically started killing people around him to enure his kingship. He was governed by fear and instabilty.

Macbeth should have asked for a royal pardon from Malcolm and Donalbain. Perhaps he would have just been exiled, instead of beheaded by Macduff.

In every moment, Macbeth had a second option, but he chose to be violent and tyrannical.

The three apparitions made Macbeth feel invincible and empowered, and hence he became arrogant and delusional.

If Macbeth were hypothetically still alive, what would his life be like? Who would be his best friend? Will he have children? What could be his job?

An Exploratory Study on Students' Perceptions of the 12th Grade Literature and Composition Course: The Proposition of Personalized Learning Strategies

4.2 The Application of a Graphic Organizer literary texts

A graphic organizer is a teaching/learning method that is used to organize and taxonomize information and ideas in a presentational and systematic fashion. The purpose is to be easy to assimilate and process. As a matter of fact, by incorporating texts and visuals, graphic organizers can clearly demonstrate, trace and chronicle relationships and connections between concepts, terms, and facts. In addition, graphic organizers can be used to increase and fuel students' cognitive skills (Drapeau 1998). Thinking is innate, nobody can disagree with that, yet there are a lot of students who haven't fully developed thinking skills. Therefore, graphic organizers can tremendously help students retain information from texts of whatever nature. Moreover, if the teacher is more acquainted with thinking skills strategies in teaching literature, it can unquestionably provide them with a vast repertoire of activities to use with any unit or lesson (Johnson 2000).

4.3 Types of Graphic organizers

The chart below portrays the four main categories of graphic organizers. Although there might potentially be different variations or types, these categories are cyclical organizers, conceptual organizers, sequential organizers and hierarchical organizers.
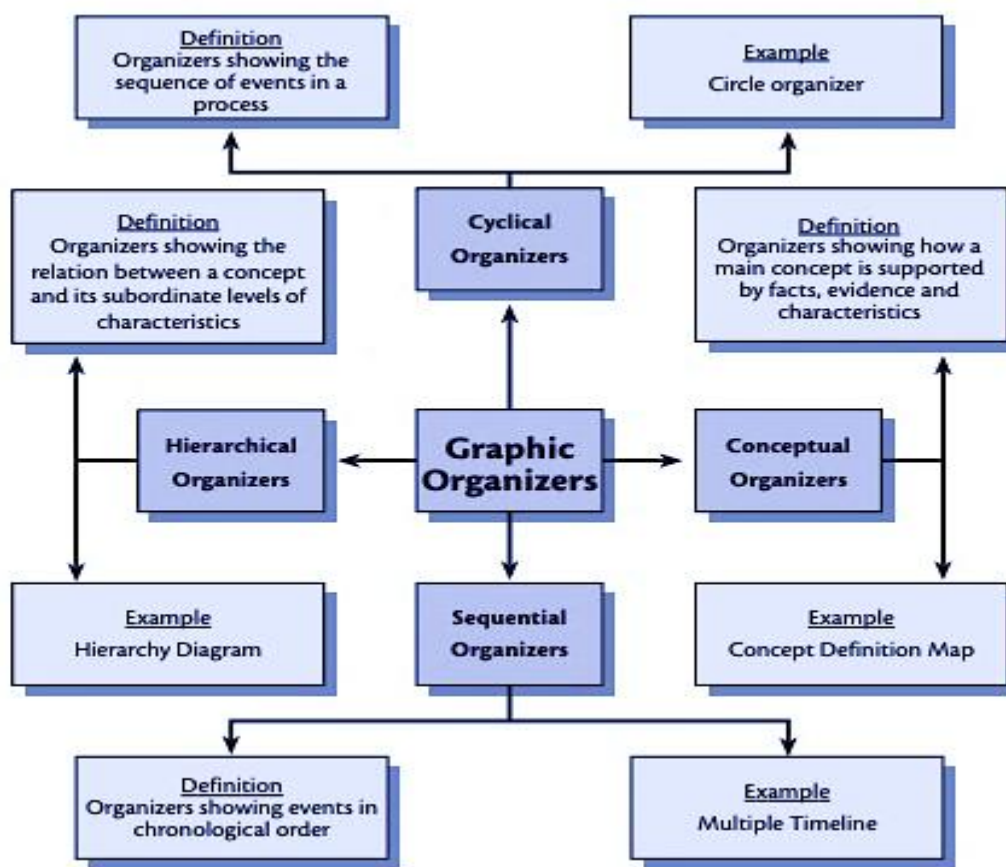
The Use of Graphic Organizers to Enhance Thinking Skills (2001)

4.3.1 A Personalized Graphic Organizer

The following graphic organizer is one of the examples the researcher uses with his students in the ELA class. The impetus behind its use is to help students read meaningfully, strategically and purposefully. Students have to look for the elements listed below. Once They complete their task, the think-pair-share strategy is used where students share with one another, and then with the whole group what they have accomplished. This strategy has proven to be effective, engaging, and hence leads to rich class participation. More importantly, if the teacher encourages the use of graphic organizers, it will de facto create "a continuum that comprises the interaction methods (group communication through interaction methods):

-Methods focused on producing ideas and problem solving (creative problems-solving),

-Methods based on group debate,

-Methods centered on observing the interaction within groups,

-Methods to optimize the relationships among groups" (Pânișoară, 2004, p. 277).

An Exploratory Study on Students' Perceptions of the 12th Grade Literature and Composition Course: The Proposition of Personalized Learning Strategies

4.3.1.1 Structural representation
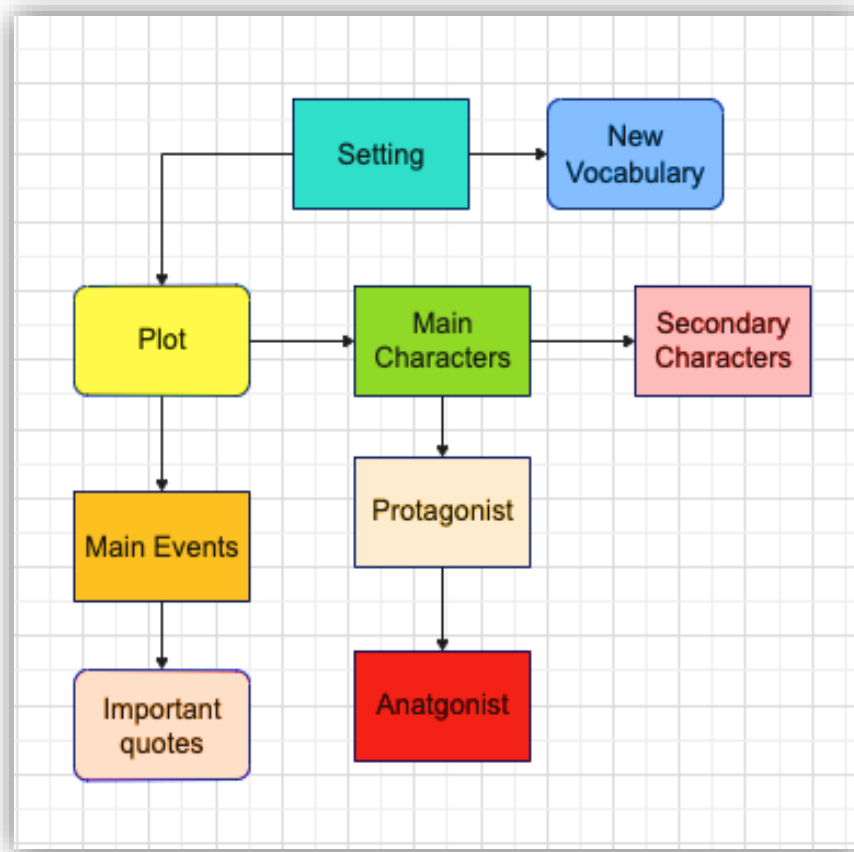
4.3.1.2 Graphic Representation (The assignment layout)

Setting
-

Main Characters
-
-
-

New Vocabulary			
1-	3-	5-	7-
2-	4-	6-	8-

Main Ideas
-
-
-
-

Important quotes
-
-
-
-

An Exploratory Study on Students' Perceptions of the 12th Grade Literature and Composition Course: The Proposition of Personalized Learning Strategies

5. CONCLUSION

Through the present investigation of students' perceptions towards the 12th Grade Literature and Composition course, the researcher was able to demonstrate and discuss the main reasons behind students' lack of engagement and participation with the aforementioned course. Poor reading skills, lack of intrinsic motivation and half-hearted participation were all variables that directly influenced students' academic performance. The instrument used, in this study, was direct and non-participant observation. The proposed personalized learning strategies contributed, to some extent, to raising students' awareness of thinking skills (The Means-Ends Diagram and Graphic Organizers), and thus encouraged them to work on in-class assignments (Both formative summative). However, they did not encourage them to read literary texts for their own sake.

With the growing debate over students' engagement with the 12th Grade Literature and Composition course, more empirical research, I believe, must to be carried out in order to examine and pinpoint the structural factors behind students' dislike or rather lack of engagement with the previously mentioned course, and simultaneously come up with more progressive, hybrid and context-based teaching models and curricula that will ultimately be conducive to students' academic growth and success.

REFERENCES

1) Affendi, F. R., & Aziz, A. A. (2020). Systematic Review: The Challenges and Approaches in The Teaching of English Literature in Enhancing English Proficiency. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 9(1), 318–336.
2) Bazerman, C. (2023). Longtime Writing Teacher; Latecomer to ELA. Leaders in English Language Arts Education Research. Brill Publisher.
3) Drapeau, P. (1998). Great Teaching with Graphic Organizers: Lessons and Fun-shaped Templates That Motivate Kids of all Learning Styles. New York: Scholastic Professional Books, pp.4-10.
4) Ferguson, G., Perez-Llantada, C., & Plo, R. (2011). English as an international language of scientific publication: A study of attitudes. World Englishes, 30, 41–59.
5) Fikray, M, F., & Habil, H. (2022). The Implementation of Literature Teaching Approaches in the ESL Classroom:A Systematic Review. *LSP International Journal*, 9(1), 149–165.
6) Hashim, H., & Abd Talib, M. A. (2019). The Learning of English Literature in Malaysia: A Review of Literature. *Religación. Revista De Ciencias Sociales Y Humanidades*, 4 (17), 68–74.
7) Hong Kong Curriculum Development Institute. (2001). The Use of Graphic Organizers to Enhance Thinking Skills in the Learning of Economics. Education Department.
8) Johnson, A.P. (2000). Up and Out: Using Creative and Critical Thinking Skills to Enhance Learning. Massachusetts, Allan & Bacon, pp.10-15.
9) Mairal, D. (2015). Gestión de la #PRL: identificar los medios para resolver un problema. Prevención Integral.
10) Mokhtari, K., & Richard, C. (2002). Assessing students' metacognitive awareness of reading strategies. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(2), 249-259.
11) Omar, Y. (2017). The Inclusion of Literature Components in Malaysian English Papers: The Challenges and Pros in Teaching and Learning. *Al-Ta Lim Journal*, 24(3), 174–186.
12) Panisoara, O., I. (2004). *Comunicarea eficientă, Editura Polirom*, Iaşi, pp. 94-111.
13) Peck, J. (1995). Coping with different kinds of novel. In: How to Study a Novel. How to Study Literature. Palgrave, London.
14) Ramsden, P. (2003). Learning to Teach in Higher Education.2nd ed, Routledge Falmer.
15) Showalter, E. (2003). Teaching Literature. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publication.
16) Ukat, J. A., & Ismail, H. H. (2022). Teaching Literature in Malaysian English Classrooms: A Review on its Challenges and Opportunities. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business & Social Sciences*, 12(January 2023),1991–2004.