



# Linkages between literary response, aesthetic competence, and literary competence in the EFL classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Developing students' literacy skills and intercultural competence via literary works has become a key component of foreign language (FL) curricula at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in many countries. In FL classrooms, the use of textual literature can also sometimes be complemented by multimodal literature like graphic novels and picture books, which are useful in enhancing the ability of students to interpret, synthesize, and analyze information from multiple media simultaneously. This article reports the findings from an online questionnaire-based study involving 265 university students in France who were studying English as an FL alongside their degree programs. The study explored their reported literary reading response, literary competence when reading textual and multimodal literature, aesthetic competence, and the extent to which their aesthetic competence and literary response predicted their literary competence. The findings indicated that participants' literary response drew strongly from Story-Driven Reading while their literary competence was significantly lower for textual literature than for multimodal literature. Moreover, their literary competence was statistically significantly predicted by certain components of their literary response and, to some extent, their aesthetic competence.

## 1. Introduction

In Europe, foreign language teachers have been encouraged to place more emphasis on developing students' ability to engage in intercultural interactions with others with whom they do not share a first language, navigate multilingual and multicultural environments in which they need to process information in diverse languages, often multimodally, and apply their knowledge of foreign languages (FLs) across disciplines (Council of Europe, 2020; European Commission, 2018). Accomplishing these objectives can be challenging for teachers, who must select sufficiently interesting and suitable materials for students that also satisfy the requirements of whatever curriculum they follow. Traditionally, content selection entailed teachers deciding on which textbooks to use in their FL lessons (Ariew, 1982; Ornstein, 1994). And while some teachers have continued to rely on textbooks when teaching (Luukka, 2019), there has been a shift to incorporating materials not originally meant for use as a resource to learn FLs, that is, authentic texts, including literature (Bloemert, Paran, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2019; Calafato, 2018a;

Paesani, 2011). This shift has, to some extent, been precipitated by a realization that textbooks (and the approach to learning FLs that they represent), despite being a convenient and time-saving option for teachers, can contain stilted dialogue and contrived examples of language use, resulting in students learning a version of the target language that does not reflect real-world interactions; and even if literary content is provided, it is often outdated (Calafato, 2018b; Calafato & Gudim, 2022a; Chan, 2013).

The use of literature in FL education is predicated on the belief that, among other things, it increases students' immersion in the target language, boosts their creativity, critical thinking skills, vocabulary, and grammar knowledge, and enhances their pragmatic competence (Bloemert, Paran, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2019; Calafato & Paran, 2019; Yang, 2002; Hall, 2015). These beliefs are supported by organizations like the Modern Language Association (2007, p. 237), which calls for "a broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole", and the European Commission (2019), which lists knowledge of literary texts as a key component of the

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competences individuals should acquire. Studies have empirically demonstrated that the use of literature can increase students' overall reading enjoyment and augment their self-confidence, speaking skills, vocabulary knowledge, and ability to analyze and understand language form, function, and meaning (Calafato & Gudim, 2022b; Early & Marshall, 2008; Nguyen, 2016). Such findings notwithstanding, there remain certain gaps in our knowledge regarding the use of literature in the FL classroom. First, a majority of studies have prioritized teachers' and students' beliefs about the benefits of using literature in language teaching, what types of literature (purely textual for the most part) to include in lessons, and how to teach literary content (e.g., Bloemert, Paran, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2019; Bobkina, Romero, & Sastre-Merino, 2021; Calafato & Paran, 2019; Sirico, 2021), whereas few studies (not necessarily concerned with FL teaching) have investigated students' literary response (e.g., van Schooten et al., 2001), that is, how they engage literary texts *regardless* of form, plot, or the effectiveness of one or another pedagogical approach.

For FL teachers, understanding students' literary response would help them better comprehend how they experience literary reading and thereby devise ways to further develop their ability to work with authentic texts, especially literature, more comprehensively (irrespective of genre, form, or approach). This would be in line with the stronger emphasis on literature in the latest Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020), on which school and university curricula in Europe (and elsewhere) are fully or partly based. Second, few studies have investigated students' literary competence in an FL (e.g., Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018; Sauro & Sundmark, 2016; see Section 2.1.), whether via an exploration of their beliefs or through some form of assessment. To fully benefit from the use of literature and respond to it effectively, both students and teachers need to possess some level of literary competence (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019; Isenberg, 1990), including the ability to work with multimodal content, because literary content is not always purely textual (Calafato & Gudim, 2022b). Literary competence is also implicitly and explicitly referred to in the CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020), where literature is mentioned in relation to reading for leisure, literary response, and textual criticism and analysis. Third, the literature-in-language-education research field, as a whole, is somewhat limited in that studies have rarely looked at the influence of certain traits, habits, and abilities on students' engagement with literature in an FL; possible exceptions to this trend include students' reading enjoyment (Calafato & Paran, 2019) and language proficiency (Lewis III & Lewis, 2021).

For instance, given the aesthetic qualities of literature (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2018), students' capacity to benefit from it when learning FLs may derive, even if partially, from their aesthetic competence (Stamatopoulou, 2004), that is, the extent to which they can scrutinize things like art, music, and nature and produce a critical and emotional response to these beyond the merely informational and superficial. Studies indicate a positive correlation between aesthetic competence and implicit learning (Sarasso, et al., 2021), though little is known about the former's effects on learning FLs with help from literature. This study sought to contribute to research on literature in language education by exploring university students' literary response, literary competence in relation to both textual and multimodal literature, which has rarely been studied in terms of learning an FL (English in this study), and aesthetic competence. As a broad framework for our study, we drew on cognitive flexibility theory (CFT) (Spiro, Collins, Thota, & Feltovich, 2003) and transactional response theory (TRT) (Rosenblatt, 1985). According to CFT, learners should engage with the same content from multiple angles (e.g., concerning literature, in fully textual but also multimodal formats) to learn effectively, especially in complex and ill-structured contexts (e.g., when working with literature). TRT, meanwhile, emphasizes that reader *and* text play a vital role in creating meaning and that readers' stances when reading literature exist on a continuum from efferent (i.e., reading literature for information) to aesthetic (prioritizing individual

experiences and emotions when reading). These two theories allow for the study of learners' literary response alongside their literary and aesthetic competences, covering textual *and* multimodal texts, and emphasize the importance of developing *both* the efferent and aesthetic vis-à-vis literature (as required by most literary competence models; see Section 2.1.).

The study represents a departure from previous research, where the focus has overwhelmingly been on one's beliefs about the appropriateness of literature as a language resource rather than the competences and approaches individuals bring to bear on their literary experiences, regardless of literary form, genre, or teaching approach.

## 2. Literature in language education

As a term, literature can be used inclusively to define a broad variety of textual content, ranging from short stories to songs and hypertext (Luukka, 2019), or applied exclusively to written works of high value and renown like classic novels and plays (Paran, 2008). The new CEFR descriptors link literature to creative texts (Council of Europe, 2020) and do not explain the term, which allows for some flexibility in what one can consider literary when selecting works for use in the FL classroom. More significantly, the descriptors do not distinguish between language and literature pedagogy, and, instead, provide a basis for language teachers to use literature when implementing language tasks, as well as to assess students' interpretative, evaluative, and analytical skills vis-à-vis authentic texts (Paran et al., 2020). If one looks at studies on literature in language education, however, these have mostly conceptualized literature as signifying purely textual works, with less attention paid to the literary qualities of multimodal works like graphic novels, comics, and picture books (Calafato & Gudim, 2022b), which combine visual and textual elements, among other things. These latter are considered literary by some but not all writers (Baetens, 2008; Meskin, 2009) given doubts, for instance, about whether they contain enough text to qualify as literature. In this study, we adopt an inclusive definition of the term literature, covering both traditional forms of literature like novels and short stories, but also magazine and newspaper articles, as well as graphic novels, comics, and picture books. As such, literary texts are:

... works that function in more than one way simultaneously: a literary work both teaches us something... and draws attention to itself; it never diverts without persuading, nor persuades without diverting; if it is a work of fiction, it will always keep a certain documentary value, and if it is primarily a document, it will be a document that can be read for its own sake (Baetens, 2008, p. 79).

Concerning specifically multimodal literary texts, these not only "function in more than one way simultaneously", as is the case for all literary texts (Baetens, 2008, p. 79), but they also do so in a hybrid format, combining multiple media, for example, text, images, audio, and other elements. Basing their argument around dual coding theory (Sadoski & Paivio, 1994), several writers have suggested that multimodal literary texts like graphic novels can help students with learning retention and transfer when it comes to languages because of how they engage both the visual and verbal processing pathways of the brain (Calafato & Gudim, 2022b; Dallacqua, 2020; McClanahan & Nottingham, 2019; Sabbah, Masood, & Iranmanesh, 2013). Some have also claimed that multimodal literature should not be seen as a less challenging substitute for fully textual literature (e.g., McClanahan & Nottingham, 2019); rather, they observe that should students lack the competence to 'read' multimodal texts, they may find it difficult to fully comprehend the layers of meaning that these offer to their readers. Here, one can refer to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which states that there are several types of intelligences that individuals acquire throughout life, from the logical-mathematical and linguistic to the spatial and interpersonal (Gardner & Hatch, 1989), with it being asserted that students engage multiple intelligences, for example, the

interpersonal, linguistic, and spatial, when reading graphic novels (Lyga & Lyga, 2004).

The few studies (Calafato & Gudim, 2022b; Lewis III & Lewis, 2021; Sabbah et al., 2013) conducted on the use of multimodal texts like graphic novels as a resource in the FL classroom indicate that they can boost students' speaking skills, reading comprehension and enjoyment, and vocabulary uptake. Those that have compared students' engagement with textual and multimodal literary works in an FL are rarer still, having mostly focused on reading comprehension (e.g., Sabbah, Masood, & Iranmanesh, 2013; Wong, Miao, Cheng, & Yip, 2017), and report dissimilar findings. Sabbah et al. (2013) found that textual novels produced statistically significantly higher reading comprehension scores than graphic novels among participants. In addition, participants with a visual learning style outperformed those with a verbal learning style when using graphic novels. There were no statistically significant differences between participants when it came to reading the textual novel. Wong et al. (2017), meanwhile, looked at the cognitive styles (e.g., visual versus verbal) and reading comprehension performance of undergraduate students in relation to graphic novels and pure text in English. They discovered that graphic novels increased participants' interest in further reading and led to better reading comprehension performance. The researchers noted that these improvements were observed regardless of participants' cognitive styles or prior reading ability and experiences, suggesting that competences beyond reading ability could be influencing how effectively students engage multimodal versus textual literature.

### 2.1. Literary competence and response

Literary competence (or competences) can be defined as "the ability to draw meaning from a literary text by identifying the skills required for the analysis of the text, by applying them accordingly, and by being aware of what can be gained by applying these skills" (Paran et al., 2020, p. 327). Such a definition is flexible enough to be acceptable to most writers, though there are several different models when it comes to determining which skills comprise literary competence. For example, Spiro's (1991) model identifies six skills that include literary appreciation, empathy, contextual knowledge (e.g., the historical, cultural, and social background of the text), and knowledge of literary theory and criticism. Those proposed by Burwitz-Melzer (2007) and Diehr and Surkamp (2015), besides being specific to upper and lower secondary school contexts respectively, mention motivational, intercultural, aesthetic, cognitive and affective, and linguistic and discursive competences (see also the model by Torell, 2001). Then there is the literary competence model proposed by Alter and Ratheiser (2019), which covers empathic, aesthetic and stylistic, cultural and discursive, and interpretative competences. Unlike the other three models discussed above, the Alter and Ratheiser model accords more closely to the new CEFR descriptors and contains components that are more readily operationalized (e.g., no references to ambiguous concepts like motivational competence or general abilities like creativity and cognition).

At the same time, none of the aforementioned models appear to have been used in studies to assess the literary competence of students in an FL, either based on their use of textual or multimodal works, even if the Spiro (1991) and Alter and Ratheiser (2019) models provide concrete suggestions about how the various skills that make up literary competence can be assessed. This research gap persists despite the emphasis placed on literature and aspects of literary competence by organizations like the European Commission (2019), the Modern Language Association (2007), and the Council of Europe (2020). There are nevertheless a few exceptions to this dearth of research on literary competence vis-à-vis FL learning, for example, the studies conducted by van der Pol (2012), Qutub (2018), Ho (2000), Prasasti (2020), and Sauro and Sundmark (2016), though these have been mostly qualitative, strongly descriptive, and marked by a narrow focus (e.g., Prasasti, 2020), with it not always clear how the researchers assessed participants' literary competence. In

fact, Qutub's study appears to be the only one where the researcher developed a scoring rubric to measure various aspects of literary competence as part of an achievement test administered to 15 EFL students enrolled at a university in Saudi Arabia. While insightful, the study, much like the others mentioned above, involved a small participant sample, which makes it difficult to generalize the results. Moreover, Qutub's participants were exclusively female and all of them were majoring in English at university.

Beyond literary competence, and linked to it, is how students respond to literary texts, regardless of what form these take (e.g., novel, short stories, etc.), that is, their literary response. Literary response can be defined as "a more or less stable characteristic or trait reflecting the mental reactions of an individual" when reading literary texts (van Schooten et al., 2001, p. 3). The fact that it is seen as a trait that does not change from one literary work to another is supported by several studies, where participants' literary response did not change, regardless of the different genres or stories to which they were exposed (Bunbury, 1985; Purves, 1981). In terms of measuring literary response, Miall and Kuiken (1995) created the Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ), where they divided it into seven components: Concern with Author (e.g., interest in the author's biography, writing style, etc.), Empathy (i.e., willingness to identify with characters in a literary work), Imagery Vividness, Insight (i.e., understanding oneself through the text), Leisure Escape (i.e., reading for pleasure and as an absorbing activity), Rejecting Literary Values (i.e., seeing the reading of literature and its scholarly study as irrelevant tasks), and Story-Driven Reading (i.e., focus on plot, action, and conclusions). Studies have shown that literary response is affected by verbal intelligence and motivation (Hynds, 1985; Sweet et al., 1998), though it does not appear to be influenced by literary competence (Miall, 2006), even if studies that have explored the relationship between literary response and literary competence remain limited in number and were not conducted in an FL learning context.

### 2.2. Research questions

Given the focus on investigating FL teachers' and students' beliefs about the relevance of literature and appropriate approaches to using it as a language resource in much of the research on literature in language education, and the comparatively limited number of studies on other aspects of literature as a language resource, for example, the relationship between certain traits and one's ability to engage with literary works, be these multimodal or fully textual, and the competences one must develop to work with them, this study explored the following research questions as part of its focus:

1. What is the nature of participants' literary response and aesthetic competence?
2. How do participants assess their literary competence when reading textual versus multimodal literary works?
3. To what extent do their literary response and aesthetic competence predict their literary competence when reading textual and multimodal literary works?

In exploring these questions, we also examined the extent to which participants preferred reading textual literature to multimodal literature, their reasons for this preference, and whether it correlated with their literary competence assessments.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants

Two hundred and sixty-five university students participated in the study (164 males and 101 females). Participants were learning English as an FL alongside their degree programs at a French university. Ninety-four participants were studying Materials Science and Engineering, 71

were studying Information Technology, 70 were studying Law, 17 were studying Industrial Production Management, and 13 were studying Big Data Management and Analytics. Sampling was convenience-based, and participants were recruited via contacts among the English teaching staff at the university. Students, irrespective of their overall program, must take an FL, with this generally being English (students in France have at least six years of exposure to English before starting university). The courses that participants attended were all in General English and of comparable scope and content (i.e., the courses had similar requirements, assignments, goals, and study materials). In France, the teaching of FLs at the tertiary level is organized around the CEFR framework (Ministry of National Education, 2020), which, as already mentioned, now strongly emphasizes the need for students to be able to work with literature in a foreign language as part of their language education (Council of Europe, 2020). In this respect, informal discussions (to understand how English was taught) with the teaching staff that helped in recruiting participants for the study revealed that literary texts, both textual and multimodal, were a standard feature of the courses.

### 3.2. Data collection

We used an online questionnaire comprising open-ended questions and five-point Likert batteries to collect data for the project. The items numbered 117 in total, and the questionnaire was made available to participants in both English and French via a digital link (they could switch between the languages at any time when answering the questionnaire by clicking on a widget embedded on each page). Participants completed the questionnaire in one sitting and were allocated class time to do so. Teaching staff was present during the entire process to answer any questions students might have (we had already discussed the questionnaire with our contacts at the university so that they were familiar with its contents). Table 1 provides an overview of the questionnaire, its various sections, measures used, reliability statistics (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  and McDonald’s  $\omega$  via confirmatory factor analysis estimation), and sample items. To assess students’ literary response, we used the 68-item LRQ (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) in its entirety, which consists of seven components (for an explanation of each component, see Section 2.1.). Participants’ aesthetic competence was measured using a shortened version of the Aesthetic Experience Scale by Stamatopoulou

(2004), which was initially trialed with 652 Greek students but has subsequently been used in several studies involving varying participant samples.

Participants’ literary competence was measured using a 14-item literary competence assessment scale that was developed based on the Alter and Ratheiser (2019) literary competence model and the suggestions made by Paran et al. (2020) in support of it. The items were framed as reflective statements linked to two texts that participants were asked to read in the questionnaire, one being an extract from the textual version of *The Kite Runner* (by Khaled Hosseini) and the other an extract (a collection of panels in this case) from its graphic novel counterpart (both extracts were taken from the beginning of the story and covered the same chain of events). When doing the assessment, participants had to rate, among other things, the extent to which they noticed the use of literary devices, linguistic patterns, and other stylistic features in the texts, and whether they could relate to the characters. In all, the 14 items covered each of the four components that comprise the Alter and Ratheiser model, with participants using a 5-point scoring system per item for a maximum of 70 points per extract. Both extracts were only available in English since the study sought to measure their literary competence in the target language (and not in French). Participants had to complete the 14-item scale *per* extract, which meant that they obtained two literary competence scores (one each for the textual and multimodal extracts). There was also an open-ended question that asked participants to state which extract (i.e., the textual or multimodal one) they had enjoyed reading more and why.

### 3.3. Analysis and coding

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using JASP statistical software. Paired sample t-tests were conducted to ascertain whether there were statistically significant differences between the seven components that comprised participants’ literary response (as measured via the LRQ; for the full scale, see Miall & Kuiken, 1995), as well as between the literary competence scores they obtained for the textual and multimodal extracts. We also performed linear regression to determine the extent to which their aesthetic competence (as ascertained via the AES; see Stamatopoulou, 2004) and literary response predicted their literary competence scores. Effect size, in the form of the Hedge’s  $g$  statistic, and achieved power ( $1 - \beta$ ) are reported for results

**Table 1**  
Questionnaire overview.

| Section  | Measure | Type                | Components | Sources                 | Items   | Sample items  | $\alpha$ | $\omega$ |
|--|---------|---------------------|------------|-------------------------|---|---|----------|----------|
| Literary response                                      | LRQ     | 5-point Likert      | Insight    | Miall & Kuiken, 1995    | 13  | Reading literature makes me sensitive to aspects  | .83      | .83      |
|  |         |                     | Empathy    |                         | 8   | of my life that I usually ignore  | .82      | .83      |
|  |         |                     | IV         |                         | 9   | When I read fiction, I often think about myself as  | .85      | .85      |
|  |         |                     | LE         |                         | 11  | one of the people in the story  | .90      | .90      |
|  |         |                     | CA         |                         | 10  | I often see the places in stories I read as clearly as if   | .89      | .89      |
|  |         |                     | SDR        |                         | 8   | I were looking at a picture   | .78      | .79      |
|  |         |                     | RLV        |                         | 9   | While reading I completely forget what time it is   | .79      | .79      |
| Aesthetic competence                                   | AES     | 5-point Likert      | –          | Stamatopoulou, 2004     | 19  | In reading, I like to focus on what is distinctive about the author’s style                               | .85      | .86      |
|  |         |                     | –          |                         | 1 do not believe that literature is socially relevant |   |          |          |
| Literary competence                                    | LCA     | 5-point Likert      | Textual    | Alter & Ratheiser, 2019 | 14  | I appreciate a poem more when the form enhances its meaning   | .93      | .93      |
|  |         |                     | Multimodal |                         | 14  | When reading the textual extract, I felt the characters come alive  | .86      | .86      |
| Textual versus multimodal literary reading preferences | –       | Open-ended question | –          | –                       | 1   | Overall, which of the two extracts did you prefer reading? Why? Please provide as many reasons as you can | –        | –        |
| Sociobiographical information                          | –       | Open-ended question | Gender     | –                       | 1   | –   | –        | –        |

Note. LRQ = Literary Response Questionnaire; IV = Imagery Vividness; LE = Leisure Escape; CA = Concern with Author; SDR = Story-driven Reading; RLV = Rejecting Literary Values; AES = Aesthetic Experience Scale; LCA = Literary Competence Assessment



where possible. When interpreting effect size, we drew on Plonsky and Oswald (2014, p. 889), so that “values in the neighborhood of .40 should be considered small, .70 medium, and 1.00 large”.

The responses to the open-ended question, provided by 224 participants, were coded in Atlas.ti using the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). We thus read the responses, which were in English and French, multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the data. The responses in French were not translated into English. During the readings, initial codes were generated (in English) and then refined and/or merged with other codes during subsequent readings. We then cross-checked the codes created from reading each of the responses with those generated from all the other responses, leading to additional refinement and/or merges. The codes were then grouped under potential themes and subthemes, after which we examined these in relation to participants’ responses to ascertain the extent to which they covered all the important and relevant elements of the data. The themes and subthemes were subsequently named and finalized (see Fig. 1). Besides thematic analysis, the responses were also coded numerically for whether participants preferred the textual or multimodal extract (or did not express a preference for either extract). Finally, a Pearson’s correlation (point-biserial) test was conducted to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between participants’ literary competence scores and their preference for either the textual or multimodal extract (the nine participants who did not express a preference for either extract were excluded from the point-biserial test).

#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1. Literary response and aesthetic competence

Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics for participants’ literary response (via the LRQ). The data revealed that they were strongly oriented toward Story-Driven Reading of literary texts and placed some emphasis on Imagery Vividness (i.e., being able to imagine a literary world not only visually but also in terms of sounds, smells, and emotions) and Insight while showing notably less Concern with Author or Empathy for literary characters.

Paired sample t-test results (see Table 3) indicated that the Story-Driven Reading component of participants’ literary response was statistically significantly stronger than all other components. There were medium to large effect sizes. As for Imagery Vividness, the results indicated that this component was statistically significantly stronger than every other component other than Story-Driven Reading and Insight. There were small to medium effect sizes.

Meanwhile, participants’ aesthetic competence, tabulated via the AES, indicated that they possessed a moderate level overall ( $N = 262, M = 3.36, SD = .65$ ).

##### 4.2. Literary competence and the impact of literary response and aesthetic competence

Participants’ literary competence scores for the textual ( $N = 263, M$

**Table 2**  
Participants’ responses to the Literary Response Questionnaire.

| LRQ Component             | N   | M    | SD  |
|---------------------------|-----|------|-----|
| Insight                   | 264 | 3.30 | .65 |
| Empathy                   | 264 | 2.61 | .88 |
| Imagery Vividness         | 264 | 3.38 | .80 |
| Leisure Escape            | 264 | 2.98 | .92 |
| Concern with Author       | 264 | 2.74 | .86 |
| Story-Driven              | 264 | 3.96 | .65 |
| Rejecting Literary Values | 265 | 2.85 | .75 |

Note. LRQ = Literary Response Questionnaire

= 33.89,  $SD = 12.81$ ) and multimodal ( $N = 264, M = 40.77, SD = 10.29$ ) extracts revealed that they exhibited higher literary competence when reading the latter than the former (even if their literary competence scores were quite low overall). Paired sample t-test results showed that the differences between the two scores were statistically significant [ $6.94, 95\%CI(5.72, 8.16), t(262) = 11.21, p < .001, g = .69, 1 - \beta = 1.00$ ], with a medium effect size. Linear regression was performed to ascertain the extent to which participants’ literary response (via the seven components of the LRQ), their aesthetic competence (using the AES), and their literary competence scores for the textual extract predicted their literary competence scores for the multimodal extract. The data were evaluated to check for multicollinearity and autocorrelation by calculating the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and the Durban-Watson statistic. The results indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern (see Table 4) nor were the data autocorrelated ( $d = 1.98$ ). Likelihood-ratio test results indicated that the regression model significantly outperformed the null model [ $\chi^2(9, N = 258) = 29.43, Nagelkerke \rho^2 = .51, p < .001$ ]. As can be seen in Table 4, participants’ literary competence scores for the multimodal extract were statistically significantly and positively predicted by Imagery Vividness and inversely predicted by Leisure Escape. Participants’ aesthetic competence was similarly statistically significantly and positively predictive of their literary competence scores vis-à-vis the multimodal extract, as were their literary competence scores for the textual extract.

A second linear regression was conducted, this time using participants’ literary competence scores for the textual extract as the dependent variable. Here, too, multicollinearity was not a concern (see Table 5) and there was no autocorrelation ( $d = 1.88$ ) regarding the data. The regression model was also found to significantly outperform the null model [ $\chi^2(9, N = 258) = 22.78, Nagelkerke \rho^2 = .45, p < .001$ ].

The analysis indicated that participants’ Leisure Escape and literary competence scores for the multimodal extract were the only two elements that statistically significantly (and positively) predicted their literary competence scores for the textual extract.

##### 4.3. Preference for textual or multimodal literature

Participants were also asked, via an open-ended question, which of the two extracts they had enjoyed reading more. Of the 224 that responded, 156 participants said that they enjoyed reading the

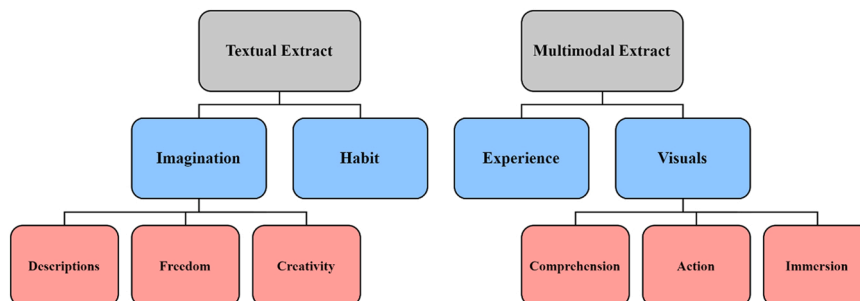


Fig. 1. Themes and subthemes identified during coding.

**Table 3**  
Paired sample t-test results for Story-Driven Reading and Imagery Vividness pairings.

| Story-Driven Reading paired with... | $D^-$ | 95% CI |      | $t$   | $df$ | $p$    | $g$  | $1 - \beta$ |
|-------------------------------------|-------|--------|------|-------|------|--------|------|-------------|
|                                     |       | LB     | UB   |       |      |        |      |             |
| Insight                             | .66   | .57    | .75  | 14.52 | 262  | < .001 | .89  | 1.00        |
| Empathy                             | 1.29  | 1.17   | 1.41 | 21.26 | 262  | < .001 | 1.31 | 1.00        |
| Imagery Vividness                   | .58   | .48    | .68  | 11.14 | 263  | < .001 | .68  | 1.00        |
| Leisure Escape                      | .98   | .86    | 1.10 | 16.54 | 263  | < .001 | 1.02 | 1.00        |
| Concern with Author                 | 1.22  | 1.10   | 1.34 | 19.73 | 263  | < .001 | 1.21 | 1.00        |
| Rejecting Literary Values           | 1.12  | .99    | 1.25 | 17.20 | 263  | < .001 | 1.06 | 1.00        |
| Imagery Vividness paired with...    | $D^-$ | 95% CI |      | $t$   | $df$ | $p$    | $g$  | $1 - \beta$ |
|                                     |       | LB     | UB   |       |      |        |      |             |
| Insight                             | .08   | -.01   | .16  | 1.72  | 262  | .087   | .11  | .43         |
| Empathy                             | .71   | .61    | .80  | 14.65 | 262  | < .001 | .90  | 1.00        |
| Leisure Escape                      | .40   | .30    | .50  | 7.55  | 263  | < .001 | .46  | 1.00        |
| Concern with Author                 | .64   | .52    | .76  | 10.49 | 263  | < .001 | .64  | 1.00        |
| Rejecting Literary Values           | .54   | .39    | .68  | 7.32  | 263  | < .001 | .45  | 1.00        |

Note.  $D^-$  = Mean Difference; LB = Lower Bound; UB = Upper Bound

**Table 4**  
Regression analysis model coefficients for predicting literary competence scores concerning the multimodal extract.

|                            | $B$   | $SD$ | $\beta$ | $t$   | $p$    | 95% CI |       | Collinearity |      |
|----------------------------|-------|------|---------|-------|--------|--------|-------|--------------|------|
|                            |       |      |         |       |        | LB     | UB    | Tolerance    | VIF  |
| (Constant)                 | 4.45  | 4.49 | –       | .99   | .322   | -4.39  | 13.30 | –            | –    |
| Insight*                   | 1.40  | 1.04 | .09     | 1.34  | .181   | -.66   | 3.46  | .44          | 2.28 |
| Empathy*                   | .40   | .71  | .03     | .56   | .574   | -1.00  | 1.80  | .52          | 1.91 |
| Imagery Vividness*         | 2.38  | .79  | .18     | 3.02  | .003   | .83    | 3.93  | .53          | 1.90 |
| Leisure Escape*            | -1.74 | .64  | -.16    | -2.73 | .007   | -3.00  | -.49  | .59          | 1.69 |
| Concern with Author*       | .43   | .67  | .04     | .64   | .525   | -.90   | 1.76  | .60          | 1.66 |
| Story-Driven Reading*      | .61   | .78  | .04     | .79   | .430   | -.92   | 2.15  | .81          | 1.23 |
| Rejecting Literary Values* | .22   | .67  | .02     | .32   | .748   | -1.11  | 1.54  | .83          | 1.20 |
| AES                        | 2.96  | .90  | .19     | 3.30  | .001   | 1.20   | 4.73  | .60          | 1.66 |
| TXT LCA                    | .40   | .04  | .50     | 9.94  | < .001 | .32    | .48   | .77          | 1.31 |

Note. LB = Lower Bound; UB = Upper Bound; AES = Aesthetic Experience Scale; TXT = Textual Extract; LCA = Literary Competence Assessment VIF = Variance Inflation Factor

\* From the Literary Response Questionnaire

**Table 5**  
Regression analysis model coefficients for predicting literary competence scores concerning the fully textual extract.

|                           | $B$   | $SD$ | $\beta$ | $t$   | $p$    | 95% CI |       | Collinearity |      |
|---------------------------|-------|------|---------|-------|--------|--------|-------|--------------|------|
|                           |       |      |         |       |        | LB     | UB    | Tolerance    | VIF  |
| (Constant)                | 1.73  | 5.97 | –       | .29   | .772   | -10.02 | 13.48 | –            | –    |
| Insight                   | -1.31 | 1.39 | -.07    | -.94  | .346   | -4.04  | 1.42  | .44          | 2.29 |
| Empathy                   | -.61  | .94  | -.04    | -.65  | .519   | -2.47  | 1.25  | .52          | 1.91 |
| Imagery Vividness         | 1.84  | 1.06 | .11     | 1.74  | .083   | -.24   | 3.91  | .51          | 1.95 |
| Leisure Escape            | 2.37  | .85  | .17     | 2.81  | .005   | .71    | 4.04  | .59          | 1.68 |
| Concern with Author       | 1.18  | .89  | .08     | 1.33  | .185   | -.57   | 2.94  | .61          | 1.65 |
| Story-Driven Reading      | -1.44 | 1.03 | -.07    | -1.40 | .163   | -3.46  | .59   | .82          | 1.22 |
| Rejecting Literary Values | -.45  | .89  | -.03    | -.51  | .611   | -2.21  | 1.30  | .83          | 1.20 |
| AES                       | -1.11 | 1.22 | -0.01   | -0.09 | .931   | -2.50  | 2.29  | .58          | 1.73 |
| MULT LCA                  | .71   | 0.07 | 0.57    | 9.94  | < .001 | .57    | .85   | .68          | 1.48 |

Note. LB = Lower Bound; UB = Upper Bound; AES = Aesthetic Experience Scale; MULT = Multimodal Extract; LCA = Literary Competence Assessment; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor

multimodal extract more than the textual one, 59 preferred the textual extract, and 9 responded that they leaned toward neither extract (41 participants did not respond to the question). Pearson’s (point-biserial) correlation test results (excluding those that expressed no preference) indicated that there was a statistically significant, positive, albeit very weak, correlation between participants’ preference for the textual extract and their literary competence scores for said extract ( $r = .30$ ,  $n = 214$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $1 - \beta = 1.00$ ). No statistically significant correlations were found between their preference for the multimodal extract and their literary competence in relation to it ( $r = -.09$ ,  $n = 214$ ,  $p = .192$ ,  $1 - \beta = .26$ ). In addition, 182 participants (from among the 224 participants that responded to the open-ended question) provided reasons for

their preference for one or the other extract. Here, of the nine that said that they had no preference, two said that they had difficulties reading in English overall, with one stating that they liked reading literature in French (*Aucun des deux, car j’ai beaucoup de mal à comprendre les textes en anglais. Mais je m’identifie beaucoup à des livres romantiques français*). Another participant from among the nine said that they could not identify with any of the characters (*Aucun des deux, je ne me suis pas identifié aux personnages*). Fig. 1 illustrates the themes that were identified as part of the coding process (excluding the nine that expressed no preference).

For the textual extract, the overarching themes were Imagination and Habit. The latter covered only two responses, in which participants

said that they were used to reading textual literary works (“...car c’est le genre de texte que je lis habituellement”) and not multimodal works like graphic novels, which they did not like reading (“...because I don’t like reading BD. I’m used to read novels instead”).

The rest of the participants that gave a reason for their preference for the textual extract ( $n = 51$ ) talked about using their imagination when reading literary texts without images. They touched on three subthemes in this respect, namely, the descriptive power of words to transport them to another time and place, the freedom to imagine the characters as they saw fit without the imposition of images, and the more creative use of language. Referring to the textual extract, one of the participants noted, “While the narrator was describing the scene I felt like I was creating the world as the author was describing it from the boy’s cleft lip to the tree overlooking the neighbors to the main character reminiscing as he was looking at that tree”. Another observed that they connected more with fully textual content than when there were images present “parce que je ressens plus de détails en lisant que en regardant les images”. Participants also talked about preferring not to have images imposed on them so that they could be free to imagine the setting and characters as they wished. One participant felt his imagination functioned correctly when reading purely textual works but not when reading graphic novels (“...car cela nous permet de visualiser à notre façon, alors qu’une BD c’est des images impose notre imagination ne peut pas fonctionner correctement”). The verb ‘imposer’ was frequently used by participants to describe how the multimodal extract forced them to imagine the story in a way that they did not want to. As for creativity, participants felt that because images were absent, the textual extract made more skillful and artistic use of language to capture their attention, which helped to make the story come alive.

One hundred and twenty-eight participants, out of the 156 that said they enjoyed reading the multimodal extract, gave reasons for their preference. Here, six participants said that they had prior experience reading graphic novels and enjoyed them. The rest ( $n = 122$ ) cited the combination of images and texts as leading to a greater sense of action (i. e., there was more happening on each page), immersion, and comprehension. Immersion, they explained, was enhanced by *not* being required to imagine the scene and characters, which is in contrast to the tendencies expressed by those participants who preferred the textual extract. For instance, one of the participants said that although the textual extract (the second text) was not difficult to visualize, they had been able to visualize the multimodal extract (the first text) better. They felt that the images freed up their mental resources so that they could fully concentrate on the story (“On a une meilleure vision de ce que l’auteur veut nous partager, il y a moins à imaginer et donc on peut se focaliser sûr le déroulement de l’histoire ainsi que les intentions des personnages ainsi que leurs expressions”). Here, the imposition of images was welcomed by participants because it led to a greater sense of immersion and comprehension. As one participant explained, “On nous impose une le physique des personnages, ce qui accentue les événements qui vont les concerner.” Another noted that the visuals allowed them to more intimately experience the setting (“...car j’arrivais à mieux me projeter dans le personnage principal et que je pouvais mieux vivre la scène”).

## 5. Discussion

In this study, we explored participants’ literary competence for textual and multimodal literature, their literary response and aesthetic competence, and the extent to which these latter two predicted the former. Regarding their literary competence, the findings indicated that participants assessed it to be weak overall for both the textual and multimodal literary extracts, although less so for the multimodal extract than for the textual one. The differences in the scores were statistically significant and had a medium effect size. Participants’ overall low literary competence is not entirely unexpected since there have been debates about whether such competence needs to be developed in those learning an FL (Byrnes & Kord, 2002; Edmondson, 1997), along with few

attempts to operationalize the assessment of literary competence (for some ideas about how teachers could do this, see Paran et al., 2020). At the policymaking level, however (at least in Europe, where this study was conducted), there has been a blurring of the language and literature divide when it comes to language education, as already pointed out, with the new CEFR descriptors, for example, explicitly emphasizing the need for language learners to be able to work with literature and creative texts at some level (Council of Europe, 2020; see also European Commission, 2018). The need to develop assessment tools that can systematically measure literary competence in an FL (for use by researchers, students, and teachers), then, has become much more pressing than was the case previously (and arguments about the relevance of developing literary competence rendered moot in the process).

Of note is that participants were asked to self-assess their literary competence, which has its own limitations in that participants might have provided assessments that either exaggerated or downplayed their actual abilities. These limitations notwithstanding, this study is one of the very few (e.g., Qutub, 2018) to have assessed the literary competence of students learning an FL systematically and quantitatively. In the French context, due to a lack of empirical research on the literary competence of students learning FLs, it is difficult to find data with which one could compare the findings from this study. On their own, however, the findings underscore the need for language teachers in France to help their students develop their literary competence further, both when working with fully textual *and* multimodal literary content. This could be accomplished by adopting the Alter and Ratheiser (2019) model and then implementing activities that systematically target each of its components (e.g., empathic, aesthetic, etc.; for suggestions, see Paran et al., 2020; Spiro, 1991). Among other things, such activities would allow students to engage more efficiently with linguacultural artifacts like literature in an FL and help them establish a deeper connection with the language as part of their lifelong learning, irrespective of how their careers in a particular field pan out.

As for the differences in literary competence scores for the multimodal and textual extracts, most participants were likely attuned to processing and responding to information multimodally, particularly visually. This finds support in their literary response, where Imagery Vividness was one of its statistically significantly strongest components (see Table 3). Participants’ preference for the textual or multimodal extract, meanwhile, only partly correlated with their literary competence assessment. That is, no statistically significant correlations were noted between their preference for the multimodal extract and their literary competence when reading it, whereas a statistically significant, albeit weak, correlation was observed between their preference for the textual extract and its accompanying literary competence assessment. The findings also revealed that, even with the content being the same (analogous extracts from *The Kite Runner*), there were statistically significant differences in the literary competence of the participants depending on text modality. In the study by Sabbah et al. (2013), where the researchers investigated differences in participants’ reading comprehension for textual and multimodal literary works, students who had a visual learning style outperformed those with a verbal learning style when it came to working with the latter text type. In this study, learning styles were not explored, though, as already stated, participants’ preferences for one or the other extract did not strongly (or even statistically significantly) correlate with their literary competence scores.

It is also worth mentioning that Sabbah et al. (2013) discovered that participants performed better overall with the textual novel than they did with the graphic novel, which is the opposite of what was observed in this study concerning participants’ literary competence (not reading comprehension). Furthermore, the findings from our study indicated that certain components of participants’ literary response were statistically significantly more pronounced than others. These components included Story-Driven Reading, Imagery Vividness, and Insight. Components like Empathy and Leisure Escape were not as prominent. The

findings show that, overall, literary reading produced a plot-focused, reflective, visual response in participants, something which was also partially apparent in their responses to the open-ended question regarding their preference for one or the other extract (see below) and in their literary competence scores, where they performed better overall with the multimodal extract. At the same time, the comparatively less importance they attached to components like Empathy and Leisure Escape raises several issues. First, empathy and reading for pleasure are important components of both the CEFR framework and literary competence (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019), with the former serving as the basis for foreign language curricula at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels in France (Ministry of National Education, 2020).

Participants' comparatively lower levels of Empathy and Leisure Escape suggest that their progress in learning English may fall short in certain areas, notably literacy, at least according to the latest CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020). These gaps could also make it difficult for them to attain more advanced overall proficiency in the language going forward. Moreover, the low scores they accorded to Leisure Escape indicate that participants did not do much reading for pleasure in the target language, something that was confirmed by at least one of the participants in their response to the open-ended question, where they said they faced difficulties reading in English but enjoyed doing so in French. EFL teachers can use such insights into students' literary response to focus on those components that require more development, especially since certain components were predictive of literary competence. Indeed, regression results revealed interesting dynamics between participants' literary competence scores, literary response, and aesthetic competence, with these dynamics changing notably based on whether the extract was textual or multimodal. For example, with the multimodal extract, participants' literary competence scores were statistically significantly and positively predicted by their aesthetic competence and Imagery Vividness and negatively predicted by Leisure Escape. Participants' literary competence concerning the textual extract, in contrast, was statistically significantly and positively predicted by Leisure Escape.

The findings obtained from conducting regression analysis are new and raise important questions. First, the positive influence of aesthetic competence on participants' literary competence scores, at least concerning the multimodal extract, provides insights into how literary competence may be further developed in students to work with multimodal literary works. EFL teachers could draw on these data to implement activities that develop a greater appreciation for art, music, and the like in their students or organize projects with teachers from subjects that contain aesthetic aspects. At the same time, developing students' aesthetic competence would have little effect on their literary competence when working with purely textual works, again underscoring how literary competence differs markedly depending on the format or modality of the work. Moreover, and just as interestingly, the Leisure Escape component of their literary response predicted participants' literary competence for each extract very differently, and it was the only literary response component to have any statistically significant bearing on both their literary competence scores. Previous studies have looked at literary response together with literary competence when studying students' reactions to foregrounding (albeit not in an FL learning context) (e.g., Miall, 2006), though the researchers mostly concentrated on foregrounding rather than on the dynamics between literary competence and literary response.

The responses participants provided to the open-ended questions could help explain why Leisure Escape was negatively predictive of participants' literary competence scores for the multimodal extract yet positively predictive of the scores for the textual extract. For instance, participants that preferred the textual extract mentioned not liking the feeling of visuals and images being imposed on them when reading the multimodal extract; instead, they wanted to be free to imagine the setting and characters as they saw fit. Their desire to fully rely on their imagination does intimate an inclination toward immersion and escape

when reading to the extent that it emphasizes their wish to fully engage their mental resources to recreate the text in their mind without any external visual assistance. In contrast, those who expressed a preference for the multimodal extract singled out how the images and visuals helped them to avoid imagining the characters and setting and focus more fully on the story. In other words, their sense of immersion was enhanced by *not* escaping into their own imagination when reading literature. Since this study is among the first to have explored the dynamics between literary competence and literary response in EFL learners, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these findings can be generalized to all such learners, though they highlight the complexity confronting language teachers tasked with developing their students' ability to work with literary texts.

## 6. Conclusion and implications

This study represents a distinct attempt at assessing the literary competence of students in an FL for both textual and multimodal works while also considering the influence of certain traits on this competence. As such, the findings hold several implications for FL researchers, language teachers, educational institutions, and policymakers, as well as for the literature-in-foreign-language-education research field in general. First, for researchers, they highlight the need for additional studies on students' literary competence in FLs, including the effects of certain traits on this competence; researchers, for example, can look at concrete and abstract thinking styles or creativity. In seeking to understand students' FL literacy competence, researchers could also explore which of its components their participants find to be the most challenging to develop or understand. They may also expand the scope of their studies to investigate the literary competence of language teachers and their beliefs about its relevance considering the more explicit emphasis placed on developing students' ability to work with literary and creative texts in the new CEFR descriptors. It is worth mentioning here that this study only explored participants' EFL literary competence. Future studies may look at other contexts, for instance, the literary competence of students learning in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) settings or even those learning multiple languages, as is the case now in many countries around the world.

Second, given the growing focus on developing students' ability to work with and process multimodal authentic content as part of FL education, researchers should move beyond conceptualizing literature as purely textual works as has been done, explicitly or implicitly, in most studies until now. This also means going further in one's studies than simply exploring what kind of literary forms (e.g., novels, short stories, poetry) students prefer and how they would like to be taught using these. More attention should be paid to how their literary competence can be developed further vis-à-vis textual *and* multimodal literature, which combines visual, textual, and even audio content. For teachers, the findings indicate that they will need to be attentive to how certain components of students' literary response interact with their literary competence, as well as how their aesthetic competence can be harnessed as a resource to boost such competence in some instances (e.g., when they work with multimodal literature). For instance, the fact that students show an interest in plot developments may be seen as a positive thing, though this aspect of their literary response might not be predictive of advanced literary competence. The findings also show that literary competence among EFL students at the tertiary level in France, at least based on this study, is quite low overall and requires further development if students are to be able to engage with authentic texts comprehensively.

Admittedly, participants were not majoring in English, which affects the import of the findings; however, students learn FLs for various reasons beyond necessarily wanting to obtain a degree in them (and this does not detract from ensuring that they have sufficient literary competence to work with literary and creative texts in the target language). Third, for educational institutions and policymakers, the



findings suggest that while the development of literary competence has been clearly emphasized in the latest CEFR descriptors, on which many language curricula in Europe and other regions are fully or partially based, there might be benefits in more explicitly integrating literary competence into course assessment, so that students are more systematically tested on both their linguistic and literary competence as a *requirement* of completing EFL courses. There is support for such an approach in the new CEFR descriptors, as well as in policy documents published by European government bodies and organizations (see [Section 1](#)), in which the lines between teaching language and literature have been blurred in support of greater synthesis. As for the research field, it is time, as already mentioned, to expand the focus to cover other aspects of the literary experience among learners of FLs rather than just their beliefs about literature and how it should be taught. Looking at the effects of traits, thinking styles, and even multilingualism on literary competence for both textual and multimodal works could take the field in new directions and provide more comprehensive insights.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

### Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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