

Exploring Causes of Low English Proficiency Among Burundian Undergraduates Despite Novel Teaching

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Abstract

English serves as a lingua franca, making high proficiency essential for effective communication across the world. Consequently, numerous studies have been carried out in EFL academic settings to identify and fight causes of low proficiency in English. However, the specific role of the novel in boosting language competence has received little attention or no attention at all, especially at a university in Burundi. Poor proficiency is evident among students in the English Section of Burundi Higher Institute of Education (ENS) and the English Department of the Institute of Applied Pedagogy (IPA, University of Burundi), despite frequent exposure to lectures on the novel in English. This study aimed to investigate how novels are actually used in these institutions, deduce the underlying causes of students' linguistic incompetence, and propose effective solutions to the research problem. A qualitative research design was employed. A semi-structured, face-to-face interview was conducted with 20 students (half of them from ENS, the other half from IPA) and five literature lecturers (three from ENS and two from IPA) during the academic year 2022-2023. The researcher transcribed textually the recorded voices of both categories of interviewees and analyzed the data using the "Weft QDA" computer software. Findings reveal that novels are taught for their thematic and literary messages, neglecting their potential to promote overall English language skills. These findings answered the research question: "How does the current teaching of the novel at the university in Burundi reflect a focus on English language proficiency vs. literary analysis?" So, the necessity to integrate language skills and the novel at ENS and IPA was expressed. Adopting this approach will significantly improve novel pedagogy and definitely help students overcome the issue of low proficiency in the English language.

Keywords: foreign language, overall proficiency, semi-standardized interview

1. Introduction

The English language is a lingua franca across the world (Seidllhofer, 2005 & Paradowski, 2011), prompting nations whose first language is not English to attach more importance to its teaching/learning (Kasap & Gülaçar, 2023). The overall proficiency in English becomes, therefore, a crucial requirement for more effectiveness in communication among people with different cultures on the global scale. Countries across the world show a major concern to promote this language ability among their students at different educational levels; Burundi does not make an exception. In 2007, the English language was introduced in Burundi primary schools, besides increasing its teaching hours in the secondary level of education. With 2011-2012, the Bachelor-Master-Doctorate (BMD) system began; university programs of English were reformed. The same programs got updates by 2019, and the research institutions, that is, the Burundi Higher Institute of Education (ENS) and the Institute of Applied Pedagogy (IPA), harmonized them. These reforms sought to step up the regional linguistic and communication challenges (Nizonkiza & Van de Poel, 2022). To achieve these goals, curriculum designers for the university in Burundi proposed linguistic and literature courses, including novels, as instructional materials.

Outstanding researchers advocate the use of literature generally and novels particularly to foster English proficiency in the EFL setting. Some of their facts are that basing language teaching/learning on literature provides language education with a context-rich immersion, which promotes students' language proficiency and cultural competence. As a result, students become able to communicate effectively in this global world (Hossain, 2024); proficiency in English is cultivated among EFL students through teaching literature appropriately (Carter, 1986); and literature, particularly novels, is crucial in boosting language proficiency in EFL classrooms when it is genuinely taught (Jenner, J. J. E. & Aruldhas, 2023).

However, proficiency in English is deficient within the English Section of Burundi Higher Institute of Education (ENS) and the English Department in the Institute of Applied Pedagogy (IPA, the University of Burundi), despite the frequent use of novels. Even lecturers, together with school principals who evaluate graduates from these institutions after their hire, worry so much that their overall proficiency in English is remarkably insufficient. This significant gap between the actual English language teaching at university in Burundi and the universal grand theories associating teaching literature, especially the novel, with English proficiency development necessitates an investigation for its deep explanation. The researcher attempts to address this mismatch and the problem by answering the following question: "How does the current teaching of the novel at the university in Burundi reflect a focus on English language proficiency vs. literary analysis?" The purpose of this research is to explore how the novel is taught at university in Burundi, deduce the underlying causes of the most preoccupying English language proficiency deficiency observed among students, and propose effective solutions.

2. Literature Review

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been the focus of many studies, especially those that examined how the English language is taught and learned in multilingual communities. Researchers always formulate pertinent recommendations concerning resources and teaching approaches to rely on so as to achieve proficiency in English, the language that is mostly sought after throughout the world. Teaching novels adequately, for instance, increases the word power, makes learners familiar with grammar, and hones pronunciation (Hussein Oda et al., 2009). Novels are powerful teaching resources in EFL classrooms: using them appropriately fosters communicative language teaching, cultural skills, and proficiency in the English language, besides enhancing thinking skills (WALSH,

2022). Teaching novels in EFL contexts enables students to experience the correlation among reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, unlike using textbooks (Wu, 2005). Apart from being a powerful booster of the four major language skills, the novel also enhances vocabulary, grammar, cultural, and thinking skills if it is used appropriately in EFL educational settings (Suoth et al., 2023). What these researchers say implies that developing proficiency in English among EFL students remains a possibility with novels if teachers and students use them appropriately.

Educational stakeholders for some countries fight the use of novels for language proficiency building. Research about Indonesian senior high schools, for example, disclosed that novels significantly foster linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding among EFL students despite a systemic focus on functional English (Afdhilah, E. O., & Agustina, 2025). Consequently, these researchers recommend a shift toward contextualized teaching adaptations, that is, a more inclusive literature-enriched English teaching, to bridge the gap between functional English and deep cultural literacy. Using literature, including novels, in EFL language classrooms for ends other than linguistic is overlooking the primary purpose of their introduction in modern EFL settings; that is, disregarding the students' need of English language skills (Kandel, R. K., & Bist, 2025), critical thinking skills, and cultural awareness (Mary, Nuemaihom & Intanoo, 2025). According to these researchers, literature/the novel boosts linguistic and cultural competencies among EFL students besides stimulating their interaction.

Actually, literature, including the novel, increases the students' vocabulary and builds their awareness of different writing tools and styles (Erdem, 2016). Research also revealed that teaching novels to university EFL students increases their word power and improves their reading comprehension and creative writing. In addition, the EFL students' exposure to novels develops the higher-order thinking skills that are highly required for academic writing (Kumar & Murzello, 2025). Through the novels' use of language in a special way, that is, inversion, pleonasm, metaphors, similes, figures of sound effects, figures expressing contrast, and mixed language registers, EFL students become the best knowers of the English language and culture (Lazar, 1993).

More current studies align with Lazar (op. cit.) through their revelation that literature is a well of linguistic devices that intervene in teaching basic English language skills to EFL learners (Benzoukh, 2022). Kumar, Murzello, Erden, Lazar, and Benzoukh (op. cit.) commonly imply that a novel reflects a good and thorough use of linguistic and cultural skills. They implicitly sensitize users of novels to emphasize both of these skills, which assures the rise of the reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Specifically, the previous skills are fostered through students' inferences from linguistic clues, their guessing of words' meanings from context, and their familiarity with functions of written language (Collie & Slater, 1987). The fact is that novels provide students with authentic, context-rich exposure to language skills, for instance, cultural skills, grammar, and a rich vocabulary, that nurture the reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking skills that linguistic courses and textbooks cannot foster fairly and completely. This fact finds advocacy from researchers who opine that literature/novels are powerful catalysts for EFL students' linguistic growth and engagement (Faraj, 2021); literature, especially novels, exposes EFL students to diverse writing styles from the sentential level up to the paragraph/discourse level, stimulates language learning, and enhances thinking skills (Qassem et al., 2020). Taken together, the previous findings imply that linguistics supplies the skeletal framework of English proficiency, whereas literature/novels serve as its vitality within EFL educational settings.

There is a further sense that an open reading of novels enhances the EFL students' listening and speaking skills (Hussein Oda, A. and Ja'afar Khaz 'al, 2009). This finding corresponds with another one suggesting that applying specific techniques such as literature circles, role-playing, or playing audio recordings of novels fosters EFL students' aural skills, including listening and

speaking skills (Suoth et al., 2023). The inference is that educators are invited to use novels in such a way that they provide EFL students with a rich linguistic input that enriches their oral outputs. To achieve it, teachers of English or their EFL students must shift from reading novels silently to reading them audibly/openly to their audience/classmates. Effective novel instruction requires students to listen to both full works and excerpts read aloud, whether by lecturers or via audio recordings, to ensure that pronunciation remains a core component of the learning process (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Practically, teaching a novel in EFL tertiary contexts must increase students' sensitivity to the reading skills (new words/expressions, diction), the writing skills (syntax, coherence, grammar, registers), and the speaking/listening skills (tone, pitch, inflection, rate, pause, step, key, and rhythm) contained in a selected novel.

The previous discussion finds support from numerous and most influential thinkers and researchers who posit that literature at large and the novel chiefly expand the linguistic knowledge and integrate the basic language skills rather than discriminating them (Noaman, 2013). In fact, integrating literature, especially the novel, in EFL language classes situates students at the center of language learning. This approach guarantees students' overall proficiency in English and hones their thinking skills (Hamane & Guetatlia, 2022). Therefore, the EFL students' exposure to lectures on novels makes them aware of how to organize ideas and lead effective discussions (Hussein Oda, A. and Ja'afar Khaz'al', 2009). The inference is that EFL literature lecturers should prioritize the novel's linguistic potential and consider the fusion of linguistic and literary skills. Practically, classroom instructions should naturally integrate literary content with language (Carter, 1986).

The previous studies demonstrate that the novel offers an ideal framework for networking the four language skills with literary skills, thus enabling the fair and concomitant growth of related proficiencies. Any lecture on novels must therefore be governed by the principles of the Integrative Approach, or it must follow the Integrated Model, which is effective in linking literary skills to language skills (Maley, 1990). The integrative approach is valuable to literature teaching not only in EFL settings but also in ESL ones. An investigation made in South African high schools, for instance, led to important findings that teaching literature through the lens of this approach excellently develops both linguistic and critical thinking skills among students since it places them at the center of learning, unlike other approaches to literature teaching (Zondi, 2025). Very recently, the integrative approach was experimented with in teaching the novel in this research area; scores indicated that this approach supports well the growth of the listening and speaking skills among students (Butoyi et al., 2025). So, the prediction that the integrative approach is a potentially powerful literature pedagogic tool (Savvidou, 2004) is accurate. Moreover, Butoyi's conclusion matches the fact that the integrative approach is the best of all the other literature teaching methods in fostering EFL students' proficiency in English (Divsar & Tahriri, 2009).

Except for Butoyi et al. (2025 op. cit.), the literature review for this study reveals that only issues including the impact of large class sizes (Bakanibona, 2022), inadequate teacher training (Ndayimirije and Bigawa, 2020), and irrelevant English programs (Nsengiyumva & Nakijoba, 2022) at the secondary school level in Burundi have already been addressed, which highlights the importance of this study at ENS and IPA. However, the literature review shows that the use of novels to foster overall proficiency in English in university EFL settings did not receive its due attention. Moreover, there is no research that has so far investigated causes of the lack of proficiency that is noticed in the English language among Burundian undergraduates. These literature gaps, together with the importance of the problem, emphasize this study's worthiness. The researcher set the plan below to approach the issue and fill in the gaps identified both locally and globally concerning teaching the novel to EFL university students.

3. Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to build an in-depth understanding of the underlying causes of low English proficiency in the research area, besides building confidence in its outcomes. Therefore, this section details the research design, describes the target population and sampling procedures, and specifies the research tools and the data analysis plan, including the utilization of the Weft QDA software.

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design focusing on in-depth exploration of experiences and perceptions about using the novel within two specific educational settings, ENS (English Section) and IPA (English Department). The design utilized a systematic approach to data collection and analysis to ensure the richness and validity of the findings.

3.2 Participants

This study used 20 students, that is, 10 students from each research institution (the academic year 2022-2023). The principles of free choice and data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; COBERN & ADAMS, 2020; Vasileiou et al., 2018) governed the selection of these student interviewees. Sophomores have been targeted since they have specific and relevant experience in using the novel in English. However, lecturer participants were selected using a convenience sampling. Outstanding researchers recommend this non-probability sampling technique based on ease of access to the research population (Golzar & Noor, 2022), although it can be subjected to biases and non-representativeness. This sampling technique suited this study since literature lecturers in this research area are few (only 8 literature lecturers, including the researcher and one of his PhD thesis supervisors), which even poses practical constraints: they move between institutions. So, three literature lecturers for ENS and two others for IPA were accessed and interviewed, whereas another was pursuing doctoral studies abroad; it was impossible to reach him. This proportion of 5/8 for the literature lecturers was considered representative enough. Moreover, their unbiased choice and use (not using his mentor in data gathering) would potentially lead to valid results and hence increase confidence in academic communities and among policymakers. The researcher further assured validity of data through a strategic design of semi-standardized interviews with open-ended items, which generated even unforeseen data and effectively filtered the eventual sample's limitations. These ethical research strategies designed to avoid pitfalls of biases in qualitative data gathering are advocated by Smith & Noble (2024) and the popular platform Enago Academy (2021).

3.3 Instruments

The researcher devised two semi-structured interview guides: one for student interviewees and another for their literature lecturer participants. A semi-structured interview is very popular in qualitative research. This type of interviewing deploys open-ended questions and uses an audio recorder, which enables participants to voice their experiences well and hence guarantees the validity of findings (Cresswell, 2012). An open-ended interview question does not constrain an interviewee's answers; it is ideal when you are unaware of response possibilities and want to explore options (Djamba & Neuman, 2002). Semi-structured interviews are flexible since they allow unforeseen answers thanks to their use of open-ended questions (Tod, 2006). This flexibility lies in how semi-standardized interviews facilitate the use of different levels of language besides allowing interviewers' highlights (Berg, 2009).

Before administering the interview, the researcher announced to participants protective measures for their rights. Actually, promising to maintain confidentiality about data encourages

interviewees to keep no secret from the data they are providing; this is an ethical measure aimed at increasing confidence in the research outcome. Then, the interview was conducted face-to-face, and it was a one-on-one interview in both categories of interviewees, which guaranteed the data completeness (Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, 2018). A one-to-one interview is very common in social research; it contributes to in-depth data collection (Coughlan, M., Cronin, P. & Ryan, 2009). A quiet room and an audio recorder were used, which further contributed to the completeness of data because respondents were focused during the interview. This interview was administered on the same date for both institutions and during successive morning hours to prevent any information exchange among contributors, which would negatively impact data.

3.4 Data Analysis

Recordings were next transcribed textually and analyzed using Weft QDA. This free and formalized analysis software is ideal in social sciences since it is very effective in analyzing texts such as field notes, course syllabi, and interview responses (Fenton, 2006 & Sinkovics R. R., 2008). Taking data from the spoken medium into the written one is just a step in the data analysis process. So, an accurate data transcription leads to success in data analysis and determines the degree of consistency, reliability, and stability of findings, which increases trust in the study of concern (Stuckey, 2014). Guided by Stuckey's opinions, the researcher used a denatured approach to transcribe and categorize the interview audio recordings. The resulting Word texts were converted to plain documents and imported into Weft QDA to be analyzed. Generating codes, also referred to as "categories," in Weft QDA followed a few steps. The researcher went to the "Categories pane" and clicked on "New." Next, he typed the code name, that is, the theme or category. Then, he created sub-codes by selecting each category and clicking again on "New" until he obtained a tree-like structure. To apply the codes (marking), the researcher selected segments of the plain texts (each text being titled according to the categories of interviewees: for example, "ESI 1" read "ENS Student Interviewee number one," "ELI 1" read "ENS Lecturer Interviewee number one," "ISI 1" read "IPA Student Interviewee number one," or "ILI 1" read "IPA Lecturer Interviewee number one") and clicked on "Mark." This marking operation establishes connections between data in texts and "Codes/Categories/Themes," assigns numbers to interviewees (for example [117-860] or [117-369]) and enables Weft QDA software to store these connections.

Therefore, the thematic analysis was deductive since the researcher started with a predefined framework: he created, first of all, themes/categories in Weft QDA and then located them in the imported plain texts containing raw data. After marking came the phase of "retrieving the marked data," where the researcher opened every Category or Code to verify the marking report. After the retrieval, marked data segments were directly copied and pasted on Word pages. Subsequently, the researcher analyzed and compared what different interviewees said about the same code/category/theme to deduce its meaning with regard to the research question. Finally, the researcher proceeded with a report of this study's findings, comparing them with the "grand theories" reviewed in this study and making statements to validate the accuracy of the data.

4. Results

Research findings appear below in tables. They have been categorized to make them easily understandable for a broad audience. Every chart combines refined data per category of respondents and across both of these research institutions, that is, ENS (the English Section) and IPA (the English Department).

Table 1: Findings from the interview with literature lecturers (ENS and IPA)

Interview Themes	Processed Answers
Theme 1: The actual state of students' overall proficiency in English	R1/ It is remarkably low among the majority and alarming in some cases. Indicators are, for instance, increased speaking errors, more difficulties in listening, inability to write effectively, and the lack of fluency in reading.
Theme 2: Awareness of students' needs and if lectures about novels seize those needs.	R2/ Students need language skills, cultural skills, and thinking skills. Primarily, novels help develop literary skills and thinking skills; they are not meant to teach the English language.
Theme 3: English language teaching resources relied on at university in Burundi	R3/ Students learn English through linguistic courses, such as Creative Writing, Listening Comprehension, Advanced Reading Skills, Oral Expression, and Grammar, to mention but a few.
Theme 4: The literature teaching approaches actually relied on to teach novels and the types of skills they foster	R4/ There are no specific approaches we use to teach literature. But there are individual lecturers' teaching strategies that foster sociological and literary skills.
Theme 5: The overall mood about teaching novels	R5/ We feel alright with novel teaching. There is, however, the need to harmonize literature-teaching maxims; some cause stress to lecturers and learners.
Theme 6: Views about novel teaching for reading, writing, speaking, and listening proficiency growth	R6/ There are no clear reasons for integrating literature and language if there are interrelated courses designed for that end.

Students were also interviewed to get a clear understanding of diverse perspectives and, more importantly, to cross-check data supplied by lecturers about each theme. Below is a chart of condensed data from the students' interview:

Table 2: Findings from student interviewees (ENS and IPA)

Themes	Processed Data
Theme 1: The actual state of students' overall proficiency in English	R1/ Students' level of English here is not enough. They commit many mistakes in speaking and in writing. Very often there is nonsense in what they write or say. Another thing is that students today do not like reading books, which keeps down reading skills. The listening skills are not strong for the majority; they get poor marks in listening comprehension courses.
Theme 2: Awareness of students' needs and if lectures about novels satisfy those needs.	R2/ Considering that we are EFL students, we mostly need English language skills. However, lectures about novels do not satisfy our language need; they rather meet our need for literary, sociological, and thinking skills.
Theme 3: English language teaching resources relied on at university in Burundi	R3/ English is mostly taught through branches of linguistics such as grammar, phonetics, and phonology, to mention but a few.
Theme 4: The literature teaching approaches actually relied on to teach novels and the types of skills they foster	R4/ The idea of literature-teaching approaches is completely new: they are not spoken of by our literature lecturers. However, teaching us novels improves our literary competence. We become aware of important terms about novels, namely plot, characterization, themes, conflicts, exposition, climax, denouement, and incidents. Vocabulary also develops among students who really read entire novels; they rarely finish them because of time constraints and laziness.
Theme 5: The overall mood about teaching novels	R5/ We really rejoice from novel-based lectures; we support their continuous use here at university.
Theme 6: Views about novel teaching for reading, writing, speaking, and listening proficiency growth	R6 / There may be no madness in using novels to develop the four language skills. Novels reflect the reading and writing skills. Students' classroom presentations about novels become occasions for honing the listening and speaking skills.

5. Discussion

The findings from lecturer interviewees (ENS and IPA) revealed that undergraduates' proficiency in the English language is low; the issue is topical (theme 1), as the following excerpts evidence: “Our undergraduates face a topical issue related to writing and speaking. When you are correcting their copies, you could interrogate if they are for grades 7, 8, or 9.” ELI2 [117-860]; “Their current English level is not satisfactory. The majority of graduates are still immature, which questions how they teach English once they are hired in secondary school.” ELI1 [117-369]; “Frankly speaking, the level of English is low among our students. Some of them fail even to answer the simplest questions in English.” ILI1 [120-416]. Student participants also confirmed that their proficiency level is low (theme 1): “I cannot say that the students' level of English here is enough as it was supposed to be. In speaking, for instance, they commit many mistakes, such as students of post-basic education level.” ESI1 [98-675]; “The level of English in students is low.” ESI2 [99-143]; “Speaking about the level of English in my section, I can say that students are not mature. So, the level is not good.” ESI10 [99-223]; “Concerning this question, I can say that our English level is not as high as it should be.” ISI2 [99-196]; “The way I see it, the level of English here in our department is low. Students need some interventions to improve their knowledge of English.” ISI9 [98-254]. This common agreement that the students' current proficiency level is inadequate implies that there is a significant gap in current pedagogical practices, including teaching the novel.

The lecturers' data about theme 2 mean that this staff is aware of the students' need for the language and cultural skills. They said, “As it is an English department, our EFL students mostly need to learn the language.” ILI1 [758-984]; “The writing skills are more important than any other language skill. But I hold that writing skills and reading skills complement each other; they are actually interconnected skills. So, students need both of them.” ELI2 [1588-1774]. However, they teach the novel to develop thinking, literary, and sociological competences. Here are illustrative voices: “There are preset goals, so I do not improvise. I do my best to foster students' literary competence.” ELI3 [708-1181]. “Lectures I conduct about novels foster the students' thinking and literary skills. I am sure I bring satisfaction to students.” ILI2 [419-600]. These voices disclosed the literature lecturers' shared beliefs that the novel is unfit for language growth; it is rather a literary tool. Student participants expressed their need for language skills and confirmed, like their lecturers, that the novel is only utilized for socialization and to convey literary messages (theme 2): “University EFL students mostly need speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills. In fact, people frequently speak after hearing.” ESI1 [1015-1149]; “I need to improve knowledge of language.” ESI7 [300-349]; “I want to travel around the world, and so I need listening, speaking, writing, and speaking skills.” ESI8 [387-515]; “In my opinion, we need linguistic and cultural skills. So, novels are not good to develop those skills.” ESI3 [901-1045]; “Yes, they teach us novels. But we students, we are lazy in the sense that we do not deal effectively with novel-based activities lecturers give us in class. So, our need for literary skills is not satisfied.” ISI1 [311-528]. Combined, findings about theme 2 answer the research question that inquired how the novel is employed in Burundian higher education (ENS and IPA). The novel is currently marginalized: it serves literary and sociological ends rather than being used to support proficiency building in English. Besides, these findings highlight the problem and warn about its persistence if no one takes action to stop it.

Related to the literature review (Afdhilah, E. O., & Agustina, 2025; Benzoukh, 2022; Brumfit and Carter, 1986; Collie and Slater, 1987; Erdem, 2016; Faraj, 2021; Hamane & Guetatlia, 2022; Hişmanoğlu, 2005; Kandel, R. K., & Bist, 2025; Lazar, 1993; Oda and Ja'afar Khaz'al, 2009; Qassem et al., 2020; Suoth et al., 2023; WALSH, 2022; Wu, 2005; Zondi, 2025), these findings newly confirm that at ENS (English Section) and in IPA (English Department), novels do not serve in teaching the English language. The researcher holds a strong conviction that in normal

teaching/learning conditions, there is no way that exploiting the novel from the linguistic perspective can leave Burundian students of the tertiary level incompetent users of the English language; this view is common to most of the researchers (op. cit.) in the EFL settings.

Going to theme 3, lecturer respondents attribute the students' issue of low proficiency in English to linguistic courses, which are currently failing. Some excerpts illustrating the previous point are the following: "For sure, they rely on linguistic courses, including grammar, phonetics, and phonology." ELI3 [1911-2055]; "To the best of my knowledge, teaching English in this section draws on different branches of linguistics." ELI1 [1155-1228]; "The students' competence in English is fostered through their exposure to English linguistics, listening comprehension, advanced reading skills, and so on." ILI2 [955-1065. Findings from students (theme 3) also relate shortcomings to linguistic courses incorporated in their academic curriculum, but not to the lack of novel integration. Student interviewees answered, "To teach us English, lecturers primarily depend on the courses of oral expression, academic writing skills, listening comprehension, and advanced reading skills." ESI7 [654-823]; "Courses that are drawn on to teach us English as a whole are essentially phonetics and phonology, general linguistics, and syntax." ESI9 [905-1042]; "I can mention oral expression, basic reading skills, listening comprehension, and grammar. Those are the courses they teach us, believing that they can develop our English as a whole." ISI2 [709-897]; "The main courses they depend on to teach us English are English phonetics and phonology." ISI8 [746-843]. This mentality to separate language from the novel drives this genre to the periphery of English education, and hence, it counters numerous researchers' findings that novels are prompt to language proficiency growth in EFL/ESL educational settings (Brumfit Ed., 1983; Collie and Slater, 1987; Duff, 1988; Brumfit and Carter Eds., 1986; Erdem, 2016; Oda and Ja'afar Khaz'al, 2009; WALSH, 2022).

The data about theme 4 (from both lecturer and student interviewees) reveal that lectures on the novel are not governed by principles of any specific literature teaching approach, let alone the Integrative Approach. There are individual lecturers' teaching strategies or maxims aimed at boosting literary skills and conveying messages. Here is what lecturers said about theme 4: "There is no clear approach to literature I follow while designing and implementing my lectures about literature globally and novels particularly. It is only a question of introducing the course and guiding learners about finding information from the text." ELI1 [2661-2925]; "There are approaches, of course, but the handicap I have found is that you cannot use any of them if they never got exposure to them through other courses that would teach those approaches and schools of criticism." ELI1 [3083-3305]; "Yes, there is one. First of all, a course is divided into parts, and you give books so that students read chapters matching the course's chapters, and then they come back in class for presentations and comments." ILI2 [1983-2197]. The students' voices about theme 4 are the following: "Teaching ways differ from lecturer to lecturer, as people have different talents. Methodologically, some literature lecturers begin telling about real-life events to pave the way to the course itself; others go immediately to the course." ESI1 [2583-2824]; "They prepare before coming to teach us, but I do not know the methods lecturers use." ESI4 [1794-1880]; "Yes, lecturers read novels and explain to us" ESI7 [1566-1618]; "Yes, one method that our lecturers applied, if I try to remember, they used many examples of novels when trying to explain to us. They gave us novels we had to read by ourselves." ISI1 [1892-2074]; "No, the idea of an approach to literature is new for me." ISI8 [1696-1758]. Such a superficial teaching fits with justifying Burundian undergraduates' inefficacy in using the English language as either an instructional or a sociological medium.

The lecturer interviewees' data in theme 5 express an appeal for harmonizing literature teaching maxims across ENS and IPA since they have common educational goals. Expressing their mood about the use of novels in their workplace, they said, "I feel happy when I am teaching

novels. They should have a due place in this English section of ENS.” ELI1 [4216-4548]; “Novels have no replacements. I am proud of their use in this section of English.” ELI3 [5402-5674]; “Novels are worthwhile in our English department. So, I would never think about replacing novels with other genres. Reading novels is exposure to life; once you read more, you understand life; nothing comes as a surprise to you in life.” ILI1 [3976-4192]; “Novels are very useful in our department, and therefore, any course using those materials should be given just more than thirty hours for each.” ILI2 [3146-3300]. Concerning student respondents, they expressed a strong devotion to the novel and advocated its maintenance in this research area (theme 5). Here are their responses to theme 5, which inquired about the interviewees’ overall mood about teaching novels: “I am for teaching novels. Though boring, when you read novels, you improve your thinking capacity.” ISI2 [3179-3286]; “I like well the use of novels in our department. Their use informs us about countries from which they were produced.” ISI9 [2463-2586]; “I do appreciate positively the use of novels. Novels portray our life today, and they can also help us experience reading.” ESI5 [3624-3751]; “I really like it. Novels inform us about what happens in countries where they were written.” ESI7 [2460-2558]; “I perceive well the use of novels. We get informed about literature as we read more and more novels.” ESI10 [2710-2817].

Although both categories of interviewees view the novel as essential (theme 6), reasons differ greatly. According to lecturer contributors, “You cannot teach those skills through novels without tackling a few theories about them. It is, however, nice to develop these skills through linguistic courses.” ELI1 [5192-5987]; “While the four language skills develop through related linguistic courses, novel teaching can rather be a good opportunity for linguistics to accomplish its mission.” ELI2 [6245-6623]; “Well, teaching novels barely develops the four language skills. The fact is that reading novels mobilizes those skills fostered through linguistic courses.” ELI3 [7527-7787]; “I said it already. Before I proceed, do not forget that today we are facing a very serious problem: our students pretend to read, but they do not actually read. If they were willing to, they would understand characterization and themes and be able to summarize novels.” ILI1 [4822-5764]; “Thank you so much for that question! You know that I am not a linguist, so I am talking about literature. I must keep singing for my cathedral.” ILI1 [6085-6395]. However, student interviewees came up with these views: “By reading novels, you learn new words, build your memory, and improve language skills.” ESI1 [4934-5792]; “Yes, it really makes sense to teach the four language skills through novels.” ESI2 [4229-4783]; “Yes, it makes sense. For example, exposure to novels increases our reading speed, diminishes mistakes that are likely to occur in writing, and, moreover, sharpens our listening abilities.” ESI7 [2946-3143]; “Yes, it makes sense, but developing reading skills through novels requires enough time for it. When you present what you derived from the novel, you are improving speaking skills. Then, the audience listens to your presentations and thus enhances listening skills.” ISI4 [3523-3791]; “Yes, those are the only skills we need here. Thus, someone can be telling a novel’s story, and students listen to it and consequently enhance their listening abilities. The language we experience through reading novels enables us to combat many writing mistakes.” ISI8 [3265-3534]. The lecturers’ pessimism that using the novel from its linguistic perspective is superfluous due to the existing language skills courses (theme 6) is opposed to the students’ optimism that the novel is a well of language, and hence, it can uplift the overall proficiency in English (theme 6). This opposition implies that literature lecturers are either unwilling or unable to satisfy their students’ desires of linguistic integration using the novel. In fact, these findings indirectly answer the research question: “How does the current teaching of the novel at the university in Burundi reflect a focus on English language proficiency vs. literary analysis?” The novel is not given its due place in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Burundian higher education.

Considered together, the research findings reveal significant counterclaims between how the novel is taught at the tertiary level in Burundi (an EFL context) and the global EFL scholarship (Collie & Slater, 1987; Lazar, Duff & Maley, 1990; 1993; Wu, 2005; Hussein Oda & Ja'afar Khaz'al", 2009; Noaman, 2013; Walsh, 2022; Butoyi et al., 2025). Instead of using the novel as a vehicle for overall language proficiency, literature lecturers and students of the English Section (ENS) and the English department (IPA) utilize it most exclusively to develop literary skills and to address sociological messages. Whereas the grand theories firmly support teaching literature to assure a complete integration of the four language skills and their network, results of this research reveal that at ENS and IPA (Burundi), language and literature are separated; teacher/student actors still associate developing proficiency in English with linguistic courses, proven unfit by this study. Even though the global standards center students into the teaching/learning process (advocacy of the integrative approach), interviewees disclosed the absence of specific literature teaching frameworks in the research area, let alone an integrated approach (lecturers are only governed by individual maxims). Last but not least, the counterclaim between the research findings and the grand theories is that literature lecturers consider novels as literary materials rather than springboards for English language skills. The findings align with the grand theories in the review at only one point, where student interviewees expressed desires for integrating language and literature despite their literature lecturers' pessimism.

Paired with recent scholarship, the research findings show that teaching novels/literature at the Burundian tertiary level is still marginalized by traditional/classical literature teaching principles. Novels are exploited for their literary/sociological messages instead of using them to bridge the gap to deep literacy, that is, to foster proficiency in English, as this is their primary mission (Afdhilah, E. O., & Agustina, 2025). The current studies' advocacy of novels' possibility to develop language and thinking skills (Kumar & Murzello, 2025; Suoth et al., 2023) aligns with the student interviewees' optimism and desires for linguistic integration. However, they directly contradict the literature lecturers' resistance to approaching novels from the linguistic perspective. Giving EFL students novel-based activities, including role-playing and reading aloud sections/novel excerpts, enhances pronunciation (Suoth et al., 2023) and (Butoyi et al., 2025). However, literature teaching at university in Burundi is not governed by principles, which justifies the undergraduates' incompetence in using the English language. Using the integrative approach in teaching the novel uplifts the EFL students' overall proficiency in English (Zondi, 2025 & Butoyi et al., 2025), but this research showed that this approach is totally absent in the English section of ENS and the English department for IPA, which makes graduates unable to compete in the East African Community and very often in the global world. So, the novelty is that this study underscores the opposition between the global trends in literature pedagogy (integrating literature and language) and Burundian literature teaching practices using novels only as literary tools, which is viewed as an outdated literature pedagogy.

Findings give a new insight that literature lecturers in the research area believe that literature and linguistics are mutually exclusive, which implies that the issue of low proficiency is likely to persist unless these lecturers change their mentality. Another perception is that of the strike between the categories of interviewees: for students, the novel is a source of language proficiency, while for their lecturers, there is no way that it can be used in teaching English. Students viewing more clearly than their lecturers, who were recruited on the basis of merit, having the highest diplomas and enormous teaching experiences, is ironic. To the researcher, this dissonance implies that these lecturers are unwilling to integrate the novel and language, maybe for reasons they did not want to tell. A topical takeaway is that if stakeholders (the Ministry of Education, curriculum designers, lecturers, and students) resist the adoption of the integrative approach in teaching

literature, particularly the novel, Burundian undergraduates will remain uncompetitive locally, regionally, and globally, either academically or in the English job markets.

The practical consequences of this study include a shift from using novels in English as literary or sociological artifacts to their utilization as living laboratories for language promotion among undergraduates of this research area. The findings encourage a more flexible mindset among the target population, and, as a result, the literature lecturers will stop their resistance that relegates proficiency in English to skill-based courses that are already failing, and they will use novels as dynamic linguistic tools. Extended to the broader EFL academic settings where the novel is marginalized, like in Burundi, the research findings promise to revitalize their curricula for English. Actually, integrating novels and language fills in gaps between theory and practice, ensuring that English is both mastered and lived by EFL students.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this study captured the atmosphere of students' English language proficiency, which is below the threshold within the English Section of ENS and the English Department of IPA, University of Burundi. Enlightened by literature around the topic and the researcher's experience with novels, a semi-standardized interview was devised and deployed to collect data that would explain the undergraduates' poor overall proficiency in English no matter how often they are taught novels. Interviewees included sophomores (2022-2023) fixed using the principle of data saturation and literature lecturers selected using a convenience sampling method. Accessing the research population was possible thanks to permission from relevant authorities. Data were collected in accordance with research ethics to increase trust in them. Data analysis used Weft QDA computer software. It was disclosed that novels are not used to develop the four language skills among Burundi students of the tertiary educational level. A shift has rather gone to using novels in socializing and improving thinking skills, as well as in promoting literary skills. These findings effectively address the research question and highlight the problem. Ultimately, by institutionalizing a research-driven synergy between literature and linguistics, Burundi can transform the novel from a static literary artifact into a dynamic engine for sustainable English language proficiency. The same findings can be positively impactful to the broader EFL academic settings that have long driven the novel to the periphery of English language teaching; they are catalysts for change of English curricula.

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