

Original Article

Teaching Literature in the 21st Century: Awareness of English Teachers in Public Secondary Schools during the MATATAG Curriculum Implementation

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study examined how 12 public secondary English teachers in Davao Oriental understand and enact literature instruction under the MATATAG Curriculum. Thematic analysis revealed that teachers' awareness centers on aligning curriculum expectations with 21st-century skills like critical thinking and empathy. In practice, they act as active curriculum interpreters rather than passive implementers, employing student-centered strategies, self-developed resources, and technology to bridge the gap between policy and classroom reality. However, the findings underscore a critical need for sustained systemic support, specifically through specialized professional development, accessible instructional materials, and institutional backing. Ultimately, the study argues that the success of curriculum reform depends on empowering teachers' professional judgment and creativity. Strengthening these support structures is essential for translating the goals of the MATATAG framework into high-quality, meaningful literature instruction in public secondary schools.

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1. Introduction

Literature teaching in secondary school occupies a distinctive position in the English curriculum because it asks teachers to do more than transmit content. In literature classes, teachers help students interpret language, examine values, confront

ambiguity, and connect texts to social life. That task becomes more demanding during periods of curriculum reform, when teachers must reconcile new policy expectations with classroom realities, student readiness, and the uneven conditions of public schooling. In many contexts, curriculum change increases the pressure on teachers to align lessons, assessments, and documentation with new standards while still preserving the interpretive and humanizing character of literary study. As Du Plessis and Letshwene (2020) observed, teachers often confront reform under conditions shaped by resource shortages, workload demands, and institutional constraints, all of which influence instructional quality.

In the Philippine context, the MATATAG Curriculum has introduced renewed expectations regarding coherence, foundational learning, and instructional alignment. For English teachers, these changes are especially consequential in literature instruction, where curriculum interpretation, text selection, classroom dialogue, and assessment design require a high level of professional judgment. Teachers must understand what the curriculum expects, translate competencies into teachable and meaningful lessons, and respond to learners whose reading levels, language abilities, and cultural backgrounds vary considerably. Research on curriculum change has shown that teachers' perceptions of reform and their opportunities for professional learning strongly shape how reforms are enacted in practice, not simply whether they are formally adopted (Ali et al., 2023).

The international literature also suggests that pressures associated with reform frequently intersect with teacher workload, emotional strain, and instructional adaptation. Excessive workload and work intensification can narrow the time teachers have for lesson design, assessment, and reflective planning, particularly when new policies demand both compliance and innovation (Creagh et al., 2025). In English and literature classrooms, such pressures may be even more visible because effective instruction depends on sustained preparation, close reading, and dialogic teaching rather than routine content delivery alone. Difficulties in designing authentic assessment can further complicate implementation, especially when teachers are expected to align literary interpretation with competency-based performance standards (Aziz et al., 2020).

At the same time, literature teaching remains educationally significant because it supports critical thinking, communication, empathy, and cultural understanding. When teachers frame literature as relevant to students' lives and social worlds, they create conditions for engagement, belonging, and deeper intellectual participation. Student engagement is not simply a matter of attention; it emerges from a balance between meaningful tasks, relational support, and accessible modes of participation (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). In culturally and academically diverse classrooms, teachers therefore need the pedagogical flexibility to scaffold interpretation, adjust texts and activities, and help students see themselves and others in what they read.

These demands position teachers as active interpreters of policy rather than passive recipients of reform. A sense-making perspective helps explain why curriculum implementation varies across classrooms: teachers interpret official

expectations through prior experience, institutional context, and professional values. At the same time, teacher identity matters because curriculum reform can alter how educators understand their role as facilitators of literary inquiry, cultural mediation, and student development. Beauchamp and Thomas (2011) argued that professional identity is dynamic and shaped by context, while the stress and coping literature suggests that teachers' appraisal of change affects both their emotional response and their adaptive strategies (Ben-Zur, 2020). Together, these perspectives underscore that reform is experienced cognitively, professionally, and affectively.

Despite the importance of these issues, studies of literature instruction during curriculum change often emphasize policy, content, or broad pedagogical trends while paying less attention to teachers' lived experience as they interpret reform in specific local settings. The present study addresses that gap by examining English teachers in public secondary schools in Caraga North District, Division of Davao Oriental, during the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum. It focuses on three related concerns: teachers' awareness of literature instruction under the new curriculum, the classroom practices they developed in response to reform demands, and the support they considered necessary for effective implementation. By foregrounding teachers' voices, the study seeks to contribute a contextually grounded account of what curriculum reform looks like from the standpoint of those who carry it into the classroom each day.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the lived experience of English teachers who taught literature during the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum in public secondary schools. A phenomenological approach was appropriate because the inquiry sought not to measure prevalence or test causal relationships, but to understand how teachers interpreted curriculum expectations, enacted instruction, and made sense of the supports and constraints surrounding their work. The design assumed that knowledge about curriculum implementation is embedded in lived experience and that meaning emerges through participants' accounts of what they encountered in practice.

The study was conducted in public secondary schools in Caraga North District, Division of Davao Oriental. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required that participants be licensed English teachers assigned to public secondary schools in the district, have at least three full years of experience teaching literature, and be actively engaged in the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum during the current or most recent school year. Twelve teachers met these criteria and consented to participate. Their selection allowed the study to gather information-rich narratives from educators with sustained professional involvement in literature instruction rather than peripheral familiarity with the reform.

Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview guide was designed to elicit participants' reflections on curriculum expectations, instructional decisions, student needs, classroom practices, professional challenges, and required supports. Open-ended questioning allowed the interviews to remain focused on the study purpose while also creating room for participants to articulate experiences in their own terms and sequence. Interviews were conducted in a respectful and confidential setting. Where participants naturally shifted into Filipino or Cebuano, their statements were retained for analysis and then translated into English for manuscript reporting.

The analysis followed thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). The researcher first immersed in the transcripts through repeated reading, then generated initial codes, clustered related codes into candidate themes, reviewed the coherence of those themes across the dataset, refined their conceptual boundaries, and produced a final thematic account responsive to the research purpose. This process allowed the study to move from individual narratives to patterned meanings without losing sensitivity to context. The final analytic structure consisted of three major domains: teachers' awareness of literature teaching under MATATAG, their implementation practices, and their identified support needs. Within each domain, three themes were developed from recurring statements and convergent patterns across the interviews.

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study relied on documentation of analytic decisions, repeated engagement with the interview data, and careful alignment between the reported themes and the evidentiary quotations used to support them. The phenomenological orientation also required reflexive awareness on the part of the researcher so that interpretation remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than imposed by prior assumptions. The study observed core ethical safeguards, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the use of pseudonymized participant codes. These procedures supported the production of a credible and ethically grounded account of how English teachers experienced literature instruction during a period of curricular transition.

3. Results

3.1 Awareness of Literature Teaching under the MATATAG Curriculum

Theme 1: Knowledge of Curriculum Expectations

Teachers showed clear awareness that literature teaching under MATATAG required close attention to competencies, intended learning outcomes, and the alignment of classroom activities with official standards. Their accounts suggest that curriculum awareness functioned not only as compliance, but as a practical guide for planning, questioning, and shaping literary interpretation in class. They mentioned:

"I make sure that each lesson I prepare addresses the competencies stated in the MATATAG guide. I always check if my objectives match the curriculum expectations." (P2)

"The curriculum emphasizes critical thinking, so I focus on questions that challenge students to interpret texts beyond surface meaning." (P4)

"I feel more conscious now of what outcomes I need to achieve in teaching literature, unlike before." (P5)

"It is really difficult because I really have to follow what the curriculum says so that my lesson plans will be correct." (P8)

Theme 2: Recognition of Student Needs and Diversity

Participants consistently described literature teaching as an act of adjustment to learners' interests, reading levels, language proficiency, and social background. This awareness shaped text selection, scaffolding, and the effort to make literary discussion accessible and meaningful across heterogeneous classrooms. They stated:

"I always consider my students' interests and reading levels when choosing literary texts." (P1)

"Some students struggle with English, so I provide additional examples and explanations to help them understand the poems or stories." (P4)

"Knowing the learners' backgrounds helps me relate literature to their experiences, making lessons more meaningful." (P6)

"I also consider the students' level so that they can really understand the texts." (P9)

Theme 3: Appreciation of Literature's Relevance in the 21st Century

Teachers framed literature as more than a curriculum requirement. They saw it as a medium for developing critical thought, communication, values formation, empathy, and historical or cultural understanding, which positioned literary study as relevant to life beyond school. They verbalized:

"Teaching literature helps students think critically and express themselves clearly, which is important beyond the classroom." (P3)

"I see literature as a way to connect students with our culture and history while developing their analytical skills." (P5)

"It is fulfilling to know that what we do in class can shape how students view society and their roles in it." (P7)

"It can have a big impact on students because they learn values and critical thinking." (P10)

3.2 Implementation Practices in Literature Instruction

Theme 1: Self-Initiated Resource Development

A dominant pattern across the interviews was teachers' production of their own instructional materials to compensate for gaps in available resources. These self-developed reading guides, handouts, visual aids, and tailored activities allowed teachers to localize instruction and respond to students' immediate learning needs. They mentioned:

"I usually prepare my own reading guides and worksheets to make sure the students understand the lesson objectives." (P1)

"Sometimes I develop creative activities and handouts to make literary analysis more interactive and fun." (P3)

"Preparing my own materials allows me to adjust lessons based on my students' needs and interests." (P7)

"I really have to make my own materials because the school does not have complete resources." (P12)

Theme 2: Student-Centered Teaching Strategies

Participants described literature classrooms that relied on discussion, collaborative work, student interpretation, and oral sharing rather than teacher-dominated explanation alone. In these accounts, student-centered instruction was closely tied to motivation, ownership of meaning, and deeper engagement with texts. They verbalized:

"I use group activities where students discuss the themes and characters, then share their insights with the class." (P3)

"I encourage students to lead discussions and present their analyses, making them active participants in learning." (P5)

"Student-centered strategies help learners feel ownership of their interpretations, increasing motivation and engagement." (P6)

"It is better when they themselves share their ideas instead of me doing all the teaching." (P9)

Theme 3: Integration of Technology and Interdisciplinary Approaches

Teachers also reported deliberate efforts to connect literature with multimedia resources and with other subject areas such as history and social studies. These practices were used to concretize abstract literary concepts, support varied reading abilities, and situate texts within broader social and cultural contexts. They stated:

"I show videos, slides, and online literary resources to make abstract concepts more concrete." (P4)

"Integrating history or social studies into literature lessons helps students see the broader context of the texts." (P8)

"Technology allows me to create interactive and visual learning experiences, even for students with varying reading abilities." (P9)

"I use YouTube and PowerPoint so the students can understand the story more easily." (P11)

3.3 Support Needs for Effective Literature Instruction

Theme 1: Access to Instructional Materials and Resources

Teachers repeatedly identified the lack of complete and updated teaching resources as a major barrier to literature instruction under MATATAG. They emphasized the need for textbooks, annotated texts, reference materials, multimedia supplements, and classroom-ready activities that would reduce preparation burden while improving lesson quality. They mentioned:

"Having updated textbooks and teaching guides would make lesson preparation much easier and more efficient." (P2)

"I need more annotated texts and reference materials to provide deeper analysis for students." (P5)

"Access to supplementary resources like literary videos, story collections, and interactive exercises is essential for engaging lessons." (P6)

"It is very difficult to teach when there are no clear and complete reading materials." (P8)

Theme 2: Professional Development and Training

Participants expressed a strong need for literature-specific professional learning rather than broad English seminars alone. They wanted workshops on teaching poetry, prose, and drama, as well as guidance on authentic assessment and the interpretation of complex texts within the curriculum's competency framework. They verbalized:

"Workshops focusing on teaching literature effectively, including poetry, drama, and prose, would be very helpful." (P1)

"I hope for training that helps us design authentic assessments aligned with curriculum competencies." (P4)

"Continuous professional development would enhance our strategies and classroom practices, especially for interpreting complex texts." (P6)

"We really need seminars that focus on literature and not only on general English." (P9)

Theme 3: Institutional and Emotional Support

A third support theme concerned the broader school environment. Teachers asked for administrative backing, time for planning, reduced paperwork, opportunities for peer collaboration, and recognition of their efforts, indicating that effective literature teaching depends on emotional as well as material conditions of work. They stated:

"Support from administrators, like providing time for planning and reducing unnecessary paperwork, would help us focus on teaching." (P1)

"I need opportunities to collaborate with peers, share best practices, and learn from each other's experiences." (P3)

"Acknowledgment and recognition from the school boost morale and motivate us to continue improving our literature lessons." (P8)

"It is better when there is support from the principal and fellow teachers so the work does not become too difficult." (P12)

4. Discussion

The findings show that English teachers approached MATATAG not merely as a set of directives to be followed but as a framework that required interpretation, judgment, and adaptation. Their emphasis on lesson alignment, competencies, and intended outcomes suggests that awareness of curriculum expectations is central to how literature instruction is organized in practice. This pattern is consistent with work showing that clear understanding of curricular aims strengthens planning and instructional coherence, as teachers are better able to align objectives, tasks, and assessment with the intended learning trajectory (Hristov et al., 2023). In a similar vein, Hatch and Clark (2021) argued that deliberate lesson planning is shaped by how teachers read curriculum goals and translate them into concrete instructional choices. The present study extends that insight to literature instruction under MATATAG, where alignment appears to operate alongside interpretive teaching rather than in opposition to it.

At the same time, the data suggest that curriculum awareness is filtered through sensitivity to learners. Teachers did not talk about standards in abstract terms; instead, they repeatedly connected instructional decisions to student interests, reading levels,

language limitations, and social background. That finding indicates that curriculum implementation in literature teaching is relational and differentiated. It echoes research showing that recognition of learner diversity enables more responsive text selection, scaffolding, and inclusive participation (Seo & Richard, 2021). The participants' accounts also converge with arguments that differentiation is necessary when teachers work with mixed-ability classes and must adjust content and support without losing sight of shared objectives (Goyibova et al., 2025). In this study, such recognition was not peripheral. It was a core feature of professional awareness.

Teachers' appreciation of literature's relevance in the 21st century further clarifies why they continued to invest effort in the subject despite structural constraints. Participants saw literature as a means of developing analytical thinking, communicative expression, values, empathy, and cultural awareness. This orientation matters because it situates literature within broader educational purposes rather than treating it as an ornamental part of the English syllabus. The finding aligns with literature that connects literary study to critical engagement, reflective judgment, and personal as well as social meaning-making (Baddane & Ennam, 2024). It also supports the view that classroom belonging and identity validation influence engagement, especially when students encounter texts and discussions that resonate with their own worlds and histories (Buckley et al., 2023).

The second analytic domain reveals that teachers responded to reform through a high degree of instructional agency. Their routine creation of reading guides, worksheets, annotated texts, and adapted activities suggests that resource gaps were addressed through self-initiated labor. This practice can be read as evidence of professional creativity, but it also signals the insufficiency of system-provided materials. The dual nature of this finding is important. On one hand, teachers showed resilience and pedagogical initiative. On the other hand, the need to continually generate materials may increase preparation burden and reinforce inequities between classrooms with differing levels of support. The broader literature on teacher workload is useful here: work intensification often shifts hidden labor onto teachers, reducing the time available for reflection and increasing stress even when visible classroom performance remains strong (Creagh et al., 2025). The participants' narratives therefore point both to adaptability and to structural underprovision.

The prominence of student-centered strategies in the findings indicates that participants understood literature learning as dialogic and interpretive. Group activities, discussion, peer sharing, and student-led analysis were used not simply as methods of classroom management but as ways of producing engagement and ownership of meaning. This result is consistent with recent work on student-centered instruction, which shows that active participation and student voice strengthen analytical thinking, confidence, and sustained engagement with complex material (Shaki & Shakil, 2024; Guo et al., 2024). In literature classrooms, such practices are especially relevant because textual meaning is rarely exhausted by a single explanation. The participants' practices suggest that MATATAG implementation, at

least in this setting, did not eliminate space for dialogic pedagogy. Instead, many teachers used that space to make literary interpretation more participatory.

Technology integration and interdisciplinary teaching appeared in the data as strategies of access rather than novelty for its own sake. Teachers used videos, slides, online resources, and contextual links to history or social studies to help students grasp abstract concepts and to situate texts more meaningfully. This supports arguments that technology can enhance engagement when it is tied to pedagogical purpose rather than used as a superficial add-on (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). The findings also resonate with scholarship suggesting that cross-disciplinary framing can deepen understanding by linking literary themes to wider historical, cultural, and civic questions (Huang et al., 2025). In classrooms where reading ability varies, such multimodal and interdisciplinary supports may be particularly valuable because they widen the pathways through which students can enter a text.

The support themes identified by participants make clear that effective curriculum implementation cannot be reduced to teacher commitment alone. Teachers asked for complete and updated instructional materials, literature-specific professional development, and stronger institutional as well as emotional backing. These requests are highly coherent with research on curriculum change, which shows that teachers' willingness to adapt does not remove the need for structured support, resource provision, and sustained opportunities for professional learning (Ali et al., 2023). Their emphasis on assessment-focused and literature-specific training also reinforces concerns that broad professional development often leaves subject-specific needs insufficiently addressed. In the context of a competency-based reform, the ability to design authentic literary assessment is not peripheral but foundational to instructional quality (Aziz et al., 2020).

Institutional and emotional support emerged as equally important. Participants wanted less unnecessary paperwork, more planning time, collegial exchange, and recognition from school leaders. These are not minor welfare concerns. They are conditions that shape whether teachers can sustain the intellectual and affective work required by literature teaching. Research has repeatedly linked administrative support and professional collaboration to teacher morale, efficacy, and persistence (Kilag et al., 2023; Simper et al., 2022). Likewise, studies of teacher well-being indicate that chronic job stress without adequate emotional recovery undermines motivation and instructional energy over time (Aulén et al., 2022). The present findings therefore suggest that literature instruction under MATATAG depends on a school ecology that protects teachers' time, values their expertise, and treats collaboration as part of instructional infrastructure rather than an optional add-on.

Viewed as a whole, the study portrays teachers as active curriculum sense-makers whose work is shaped by the interaction of policy expectations, student diversity, instructional creativity, and institutional conditions. Their narratives support a view of reform implementation that is deeply human and context-bound. Teachers interpreted standards, adjusted to learner realities, generated resources, and sustained literature's relevance through daily acts of professional judgment. This is consistent

with scholarship on teacher identity and coping, which shows that reform is experienced not only as technical change but also as a negotiation of professional selfhood, commitment, and resilience (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011; Ben-Zur, 2020). For curriculum reform to achieve its intended effects in literature education, policy must therefore recognize that teachers do not merely deliver the curriculum. They remake it in the classroom through interpretive labor that requires trust, resources, and sustained support.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that literature instruction under the MATATAG Curriculum is shaped by a dynamic interplay among teacher awareness, enacted pedagogy, and institutional support. English teachers in the study demonstrated strong awareness of curriculum expectations, careful attention to learner diversity, and a sustained belief in literature's role in developing critical, cultural, and ethical understanding. In practice, they responded to reform through self-developed materials, student-centered instruction, and the strategic use of technology and interdisciplinary links. At the same time, they made clear that effective implementation requires more than individual initiative. Updated instructional resources, literature-focused professional development, and supportive school conditions remain essential. The findings therefore suggest that the success of curriculum reform in literature education depends on whether systems can support the interpretive, relational, and creative labor teachers already perform. Strengthening that support is necessary if MATATAG is to advance not only curricular alignment, but also rich and meaningful literary learning in public secondary schools.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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