

Reluctance and Withdrawal: Investigating Learner Disengagement with Extended Literary Works

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Abstract: This qualitative research examines the drivers of learner apathy and reading abandonment concerning extended literary works in higher education. Through semi-structured interviews with 16 purposively sampled undergraduates, the study identifies intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to literary engagement. Results indicate that learners frequently experience cognitive overload from text complexity and volume, highlighting schedule limitations, mental fatigue, and archaic vocabulary as primary obstacles. Extraneous factors, including disruptive environments and inadequate pedagogical scaffolding, further suppress participation. Moreover, many participants perceived a stark disconnect between classical narratives and contemporary realities, questioning the curriculum's real-world relevance. Despite these hurdles, students acknowledged the scholastic advantages of long-form reading, specifically for enhancing lexical proficiency and analytical reasoning. Emotional reactions fluctuated between exasperation and motivation, with positive engagement peaking when motifs were personally resonant or thoroughly analyzed in class. Ultimately, this paper bridges a gap in understanding the undergraduate experience with extensive reading assignments, offering actionable insights for developing more adaptable, relevant, and supportive pedagogical frameworks in literature instruction.

Keywords: Learner Disinterest; Reading Abandonment; Literary Pedagogy; Engagement Obstacles; Long-Form Reading

INTRODUCTION

Student disengagement and withdrawal from academic tasks—commonly defined as apathy and attrition—present critical challenges in higher education, particularly in cognitively demanding courses (Chipchase et al., 2017; Onishi, 2016; Shilbayeh & Abonamah, 2021). In literature classes, reading extensive texts is foundational, yet students increasingly view it as a stressful, “grudging act” (Mason & Warmington, 2024). This disconnect frequently culminates in superficial reading or complete avoidance, driven by an interaction of cognitive exhaustion, lack of motivation, and behavioral distraction (BYU, 2022; Morison & Cowley, 2017).

A primary catalyst for this disengagement is the ubiquity of digital distractions. Research demonstrates that media multitasking and excessive internet use diminish students' attention spans and impair the sustained focus required for deep literary comprehension (Giunchiglia et al., 2020; Pérez-Juárez et al., 2024; Rykard, 2020). Beyond environmental interruptions, intrinsic motivation and perceived relevance heavily influence reading persistence. Rooted in Self-Determination Theory, motivation thrives when instructional materials align with learners' personal and socio-cultural identities (Cekiso et al., 2025; Deci & Ryan, 1985). When texts feel disconnected from their realities, learners frequently experience reading fatigue (Lin, 2025).

To counter these barriers, pedagogical design plays a crucial role. Collaborative frameworks, such as literature circles, and supportive classroom discourse have proven highly effective in mitigating apathy and rebuilding reading persistence (Azizah et al., 2023; Barotas & Palma, 2023; Chavez et al., .

2023; Roberts et al., 2024). Interactive and purpose-driven instruction not only scaffolds comprehension but also reduces the emotional distance students feel toward lengthy texts (Casey, 2008; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2012).

Despite existing scholarship on motivation and digital distractions, few studies deeply investigate the specific emotional and cognitive barriers students face when engaging with long-form literary texts. This study directly addresses this gap by exploring learners' qualitative experiences and thoughtfully offering pedagogical insights to foster meaningful, sustained engagement in literature education

Methodology

Research Design

To investigate learners' attitudes, lived experiences, and affective reactions to lengthy reading assignments, this research utilized a qualitative descriptive framework. Such an approach is particularly suitable for capturing the complex, contextual nuances of why undergraduates withdraw from extensive literature—insights that quantitative metrics often fail to convey. Qualitative description yields direct, low-inference interpretations, making it highly valuable for formulating actionable strategies for curriculum designers and educators. Ultimately, this methodology aligns with the research objective of identifying both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers of reading fatigue, while maintaining adaptability and contextual fidelity throughout the investigation.

Population and Sampling

The study sample comprised 16 undergraduates attending a private higher education institution in the Philippines, all of whom were actively enrolled in literature courses. A purposive sampling technique—standard in qualitative methodologies for gathering information-rich cases—was implemented to select these participants. Inclusion parameters required students to: (1) be currently taking a tertiary-level literature class; (2) have prior exposure to at least one comprehensive literary work (e.g., a full narrative prose, epic, or novel) within their syllabus; (3) exhibit a willingness to articulate their personal reading habits and attitudes; and (4) demonstrate the capacity to communicate their reflections effectively in Filipino or English. This purposive selection guaranteed a diverse representation of academic standings, reading habits, and demographic backgrounds, thereby enabling a thorough examination of the cognitive and affective elements influencing reading engagement.

Instrument

Data collection relied primarily on a semi-structured interview protocol designed to extract detailed narratives regarding the participants' experiences with long literary texts. This adaptable format enabled the researcher to guide the conversation around central themes while retaining the freedom to explore emerging insights and ask probing follow-up questions.

To ensure content validity and age-appropriateness, the questions underwent rigorous evaluation by a qualitative research expert and two veteran literature professors. Furthermore, a pilot test involving two non-participating undergraduates was executed to verify the logical flow and clarity of the prompts, resulting in minor adjustments to improve coherence. The Table 1 below presents the instrument of this inquiry:

Table 1. Instrument of the study.

Objectives	Interview Questions	Participants
To investigate the underlying drivers that lead to learner disengagement and reading abandonment when tackling extended literary works.	What initial thoughts or reactions do you have when tasked with a lengthy literary reading? Which specific elements of extended narratives do you find most overwhelming or challenging? Could you describe any environmental distractions or classroom factors that negatively impact your reading focus?	Filipino College Students
To assess learners' affective reactions and their interpretations of the real-world applicability of comprehensive texts within literature courses.	To what extent do you feel these extensive texts connect to your personal life or overall academic journey? Describe any moments of frustration, tedium, or inspiration you have experienced while engaging with long texts. What triggered these emotional shifts?	

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to initiating data collection, institutional review board approval was officially granted. The researcher subsequently acquired informed consent from all subjects (and their legal guardians where applicable), explicitly outlining the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their unconditional right to withdraw.

Following this, private, face-to-face interviews were conducted on campus to ensure a distraction-free environment conducive to open dialogue. Each session lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. With the participants' explicit permission, dialogues were audio-recorded to guarantee transcription fidelity. To accommodate participants and encourage detailed responses, they were permitted to converse in either English or Filipino. The researcher simultaneously documented field notes detailing non-verbal behaviors and contextual nuances.

All audio files were subsequently transcribed verbatim. To maintain strict confidentiality, transcriptions were stripped of identifying information and assigned alphanumeric codes (e.g., P1, P2). The digital files were secured in encrypted folders. The entire interview phase was completed within a two-week timeframe to align with the students' academic schedules.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was deployed to systematically code, categorize, and interpret the qualitative data derived from the transcriptions and field notes. Applying Braun and Clarke's established six-phase methodology, the analytical process commenced with deep data immersion through repeated readings of the transcripts. The researcher then formulated initial codes capturing key concepts related to literary attrition and apathy. These preliminary codes were later aggregated into overarching themes, which were iteratively reviewed and refined to accurately capture the essence of the dataset.

To secure analytical rigor and validity, the researcher utilized member checking, presenting the drafted themes back to a subset of participants to verify that the findings genuinely reflected their intended meanings. An audit trail documenting all coding shifts and thematic evolutions was maintained to ensure methodological transparency.

Ethical Considerations

Strict adherence to ethical protocols for human subjects research was maintained throughout the investigation. Following institutional ethics board clearance, informed consent was prioritized, highlighting the voluntary parameters of the study and the participants' freedom of withdrawal. Anonymity was preserved through pseudonymous coding, and all research materials were locked in encrypted, password-protected storage. Furthermore, the interview protocol was intentionally crafted to be sensitive and non-invasive. Contingency plans were established to direct participants to institutional counseling services in the highly unlikely event that the reflection process induced psychological distress, prioritizing participant welfare at all stages.

Results

Research Objective 1: To explore the factors that contribute to student apathy or attrition when reading longer literary texts.

Cognitive Overload from Linguistic and Textual Complexity

Students frequently experience mental exhaustion and dread when confronting extensive literature. This resistance is primarily driven by dense formatting, archaic vocabulary, and distant historical contexts. The sheer volume of descriptive passages combined with linguistic hurdles creates a severe cognitive burden, slowing comprehension and often resulting in partial reading or outright task abandonment. When learners lack the background knowledge to contextualize the narrative, the resulting confusion further alienates them from the material.

"Encountering a massive text immediately triggers anxiety. I worry about my ability to decipher the archaic terminology, which often leads me to avoid the assignment entirely rather than struggle through it."

"The convoluted sentence structures and outdated vocabulary are incredibly intimidating. Having to constantly pause to decode the meaning makes the process tedious and draining, making me feel inadequate."

"Excessive descriptive passages without clear action cause me to lose momentum. It feels like a chore when nothing advances the plot for pages, prompting me to skip sections just to get it over with."

Time Constraints and the Pressure of Competing Priorities

A pervasive barrier to sustained reading is the friction between extensive assignments and learners' limited schedules. Participants reported that heavy academic workloads and personal commitments force them to prioritize immediate, functional tasks over time-consuming literary reading. This pressure extends directly into the classroom, where tight reading schedules compel students to rush. The resulting anxiety over ticking clocks transforms reading into a race for completion, actively preventing deep, immersive comprehension.

"With so many deliverables for other courses, dedicating hours to a single story feels impossible. I inevitably end up skimming the material at the last minute just to meet the deadline."

"Instructors often expect us to digest lengthy materials within a single period. The time limit turns reading into a stressful race, preventing any real appreciation or understanding of the narrative."

"Juggling extracurriculars and family duties leaves little room for deep reading. Navigating a novel feels like a luxury of time I simply do not possess right now."

Environmental Disruptions and Insufficient Pedagogical Support

Classroom dynamics significantly influence reading persistence. Students cited disruptive peers, ambient noise, and a lack of dedicated, quiet spaces as major deterrents to focus. Furthermore, the absence of instructional scaffolding or interactive support leaves learners feeling isolated when navigating challenging passages. This unsupportive atmosphere transforms reading into an exhausting, solitary endeavor. Without active guidance or a conducive environment, the intrinsic challenge of long texts easily converts into outright apathy.

"Trying to immerse myself in a narrative is nearly impossible when classmates are chatting. I constantly lose my train of thought and eventually just give up until the period ends."

"If instructors provided specific strategies for tackling dense sections or checked on our progress, I would be much more engaged. Without that guidance, trying to decipher the text alone is merely frustrating."

"The prolonged chapters drain my mental energy, particularly when the classroom is noisy and unaccommodating. It feels less like an educational experience and more like an endurance test."

Research Objective 2: To examine how students perceive the relevance and emotional response to extended reading materials in literature classes.

The Divide Between Classical Texts and Contemporary Lived Experiences

A recurrent sentiment among participants is the perceived irrelevance of traditional literature to their modern lives. Many students struggle to bridge the temporal and cultural gaps presented by older texts, questioning their practical utility. Because these narratives often fail to mirror current societal issues, technological advancements, or immediate personal challenges, learners view the assignments as mere academic hurdles. This perceived lack of real-world application directly suppresses their willingness to invest time in the reading.

"The narratives center on eras and societies so far removed from my own that finding a connection is difficult. I read them out of obligation, not because they offer me any practical insight for my life."

"While the prose might be artistic, it does not equip me for real-world issues. I would be far more invested if we tackled modern literature that reflects today's social landscapes and mental health struggles."

"Educators claim literature mirrors reality, but these specific works reflect a reality I do not recognize. The resulting disconnect makes it hard to care about the outcome of the story."

Affective Obstacles: Frustration, Tedium, and Disengagement

Extended reading frequently triggers negative emotional responses, primarily frustration and profound boredom. These affective barriers are activated by inaccessible language, archaic stylistic choices, and sluggish plot pacing. When learners cannot emotionally invest in the characters or are constantly halted by linguistic roadblocks, their reading experience degrades into a mechanical chore. This lack of an emotional hook eliminates intrinsic motivation, leaving students feeling drained rather than enriched.

"Tackling works like El Filibusterismo was intellectually exhausting. The phrasing was so dense that I spent more energy translating the vocabulary than actually enjoying the plot."

"Endless pages of exposition without meaningful character development completely extinguish my interest. I find myself merely scanning the text, hoping for a turning point that never seems to arrive."

"When the dialogue and dilemmas feel artificial and unrelatable, reading devolves into a tedious obligation. It generates boredom rather than curiosity, and the characters don't feel human to me."

Sparks of Motivation: Academic Utility and Thematic Resonance

Despite prevalent challenges, learners do recognize moments of profound value within extended texts. Participants acknowledged that navigating complex literature sharpens their analytical reasoning and expands their lexical proficiency, serving their broader educational goals. More importantly, when classroom discourse illuminates the relevance of underlying themes—such as systemic injustice, colonialism, or personal struggle—students experience a surge of motivation. Discovering this hidden depth transforms a difficult text into a rewarding intellectual victory.

"Initially, the reading felt like a burden, but once our professor unpacked its critique of social injustice, my perspective shifted. The underlying message suddenly made the effort worthwhile."

"Wrestling with elevated vocabulary is undeniably difficult, yet I recognize that it strengthens my critical thinking and academic writing capabilities, preparing me for higher-level college courses."

"The moment a historical text mirrored a modern reality like depression or colonialism, it clicked for me."

Successfully decoding that meaning provided a massive sense of accomplishment that motivated me to keep going."

Discussion

This study investigated the underlying drivers of student apathy and reading abandonment concerning extended literary texts, simultaneously evaluating how learners perceive the relevance and emotional impact of these assignments. The findings reveal a complex, interconnected web of cognitive, affective, and environmental factors that govern reading engagement. Rather than viewing disengagement as a mere lack of effort, the data suggests it is a symptom of systemic pedagogical challenges, including overloaded curricula, insufficient instructional scaffolding, and a disconnect between canonical texts and modern lived experiences.

A primary catalyst for reading attrition is the immediate cognitive and emotional resistance students experience when encountering lengthy, complex literature. Participants frequently reported feelings of dread and anxiety induced by the sheer volume of text, archaic vocabulary, and dense exposition. This observation aligns with Chavez et al. (2023), who demonstrated that complex textual discourse can feel deeply alienating when not intentionally inclusive. Furthermore, these findings corroborate the work of Mason and Warmington (2024), who noted that undergraduates often approach academic reading as a stressful, "grudging act" driven by obligation rather than intrinsic curiosity. When the cognitive demand of decoding unfamiliar language exceeds a student's processing capacity, behavioral engagement rapidly declines, leading to superficial reading or outright task avoidance (List et al., 2021).

This mental fatigue is significantly exacerbated by external pressures. Students consistently cited intense academic workloads and limited time as primary reasons for deprioritizing extended literature. This supports the findings of Pérez-Juárez et al. (2024), who highlighted that fragmented schedules and constant digital distractions make sustained reading increasingly difficult. When forced to balance multiple demands, lengthy reading assignments—especially those requiring deep, reflective thought—are often rushed or sidelined. This pressure is compounded by unsupportive classroom environments; students reported that ambient noise and disruptive peers shattered their focus, echoing Guthrie and Wigfield's (2012) assertion that environmental conditions heavily dictate reading persistence. Without collaborative support mechanisms, such as structured small-group reading or literature circles (Azizah et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2024), students are left feeling isolated, turning texts with rich literary potential into sources of profound stress.

Beyond cognitive and environmental hurdles, the perceived relevance of the text plays a critical role in student motivation. A pervasive theme was the stark divide between traditional literature and students' contemporary realities. Many participants struggled to find practical value in narratives set in distant historical contexts, viewing them merely as academic hurdles rather than tools for personal insight. This disconnect supports the arguments of Cekiso et al. (2025) and Barotas and Palma (2023), who emphasize that cultural familiarity and personal relevance are vital for sustaining reading motivation. When students cannot see their own lives reflected in the curriculum, the text becomes abstract, leading to profound boredom and disengagement (Casey, 2008).

Despite these substantial barriers, the study also revealed critical moments of resilience and motivation. Several students acknowledged that grappling with complex texts ultimately enhanced their analytical reasoning and lexical proficiency, recognizing the long-term academic utility of the assignments. More importantly, motivation surged when students discovered profound, relevant themes within the literature—such as systemic injustice, identity, or resilience. When classroom discourse successfully bridged the gap between the text and real-world issues, students experienced a shift from frustration to meaningful intellectual engagement. This transformative realization aligns with Lin (2025), highlighting that affective engagement and the recognition of thematic relevance can override initial linguistic fatigue.

Ultimately, these findings underscore the urgent need for literature educators to rethink instructional design. While extensive texts offer undeniable academic benefits, they must be paired with

culturally responsive content selection, collaborative reading strategies, and intentional scaffolding. By bridging the gap between linguistic complexity and student readiness, and by framing historical narratives within contemporary contexts, educators can transform long-form reading from an exhausting obligation into a profoundly enriching developmental experience.

Conclusions

This research transcends the identification of superficial reading obstacles to uncover a more profound underlying issue: learner withdrawal from extensive literature is not simply a byproduct of heavy workloads or personal distaste, but rather a symptom of unfulfilled emotional and instructional requirements. Although traditional works provide substantial intellectual and cultural benefits, they frequently fail to connect when enforced through inflexible, standardized frameworks that disregard the modern student's daily life. The results clearly indicate that personal connection and affective resonance are not peripheral add-ons, but fundamental prerequisites for cultivating reading motivation.

Crucially, this investigation disputes the traditional notion that scholarly rigor necessitates inaccessibility. Rather, it demands a pedagogical evolution—transitioning the experience of literature from a passive reception of information to the active construction of meaning. When learners are treated as collaborative architects of interpretation, bolstered by relevant cultural contexts and targeted academic scaffolding, their commitment to the material significantly intensifies.

Consequently, tertiary literature pedagogy requires a fundamental transformation. Extensive readings must be reimagined not as arbitrary scholastic barriers, but as catalysts for critical dialogue, social interaction, and self-reflection. By adopting learner-centric methodologies and validating the emotional components of the reading process, instructors can effectively convert student apathy into empowered agency. Ultimately, this research champions a highly responsive, humanized framework for literature education—one that equally honors the complexities of the written word and the distinct, contemporary voices of its readers.

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