Addressing bullying in EFL classrooms through English literature

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Abstract. This study explores the use of English literature as a pedagogical tool to address bullying issues in EFL classrooms. The research focuses on how literary texts, specifically the movie Wonder, can enhance students' awareness of bullying and promote empathy and positive attitudes among learners. A qualitative descriptive method was employed involving 30 secondary school students. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. The findings reveal that students developed a better understanding of bullying, increased emotional awareness, and positive responses toward the use of literature in English learning. The study suggests that English literature can serve as an effective medium for both language development and character education in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Bullying; EFL Classrooms; English Literature; Wonder; Moral Education

1 Introduction

Bullying remains a serious issue in educational settings around the world, particularly during adolescence, a period marked by emotional sensitivity, identity formation, and strong peer influence. According to a study published in BMC Public Health (2025), it describes bullying as "A persistent behavior of intentional, aggressive behavior against a victim, characterized by a perceived or real power imbalance"(de Oliveira et al., 2025). Many students experience various forms of bullying such as verbal abuse, social exclusion, and physical harassment, which can negatively affect their academic performance, mental health, and social development. Especially in their sensitive stage of their life, which is adolescence. Adolescents with lower emotional intelligence and low social skills tend to struggle more with anger control, and this will impact their academic performance and relationships negatively (Omumu, 2024). Therefore, schools are expected not only to develop students' academic abilities but also to cultivate moral values, empathy, and respectful behaviour among learners.

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In English as a Foreign Language (EFL)classrooms, character education is often separated from language instruction. Traditional English teaching frequently focuses on grammar, vocabulary, and examination preparation, while social and emotional learning receives less attention. This separation creates a gap where students may develop linguistic competence but lack awareness of important social issues such as bullying, tolerance, and respect. As a result, innovative teaching approaches are needed to integrate language learning with moral and social education.

Literature has long been recognized as a powerful pedagogical tool that can help learners understand real-life situations, develop empathy, and reflect on human values. Stories, novels, and films provide meaningful contexts that allow students to emotionally connect with characters and situations. Literature in EFL situations introduces students to global viewpoints, social conduct, and ethical quandaries in addition to improving vocabulary and grammar (Widiastuti & Syamsi, 2023). When literature is used in EFL classrooms, it not only improves language skills but also encourages critical thinking and emotional engagement. One such literary work that addresses bullying in a sensitive and realistic way is the novel and movie Wonder by R.J. Palacio.

Several studies have highlighted the benefits of literature and film in EFL learning. For example, previous research has shown that literary texts can improve students' language skills, critical thinking, and classroom engagement. Other studies have examined the role of literature in promoting empathy and moral values among learners. However, most of these studies primarily focus on linguistic development or general character education rather than specifically addressing bullying awareness. Furthermore, research investigating the use of Wonder as a pedagogical tool to address bullying issues in EFL classrooms remains limited, particularly in the context of secondary education in developing countries. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how Wonder can be used to enhance students' understanding of bullying and promote empathy in an EFL learning environment. Based on this gap, this study aims to explore the use of English literature, specifically the movie Wonder, to address bullying issues in EFL classrooms. This research focuses on investigating students' perceptions, awareness, and attitudes toward bullying after engaging with the movie, as well as examining the effectiveness of literature-based learning in promoting both language development and character education.

2 Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the use of English literature in addressing bullying issues in EFL classrooms. This approach was selected because it allows the researcher to describe students' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward bullying in a natural learning context. The study focused on understanding how the movie Wonder influenced students' awareness, empathy, and classroom behavior.

The participants of this research were 30 secondary school students enrolled in an EFL class at an Indonesian school (Aqobah International School) during the academic year 2024/2025. The students were selected purposively because they had participated in learning activities that involved watching and discussing the movie Wonder. The learning process included viewing selected scenes from the movie, followed by guided classroom discussions and reflection activities.

Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire was administered to all participants to gather information about students' understanding of bullying, empathy development, and perceptions of using literature in English learning. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students who were selected from the

participants to obtain deeper insights into their personal reflections and experiences related to bullying after engaging with the movie. The interview participants were chosen based on their willingness to participate and their ability to provide detailed responses regarding the learning activities.

The data analysis was conducted descriptively. Questionnaire responses were analyzed using percentage analysis to identify general trends in students' responses. Meanwhile, the interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, the interview responses were transcribed and read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Second, important statements and recurring ideas related to bullying awareness, empathy, and students' learning experiences were identified and coded. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader themes. Finally, the themes were reviewed and interpreted to understand students' perceptions of using Wonder in addressing bullying issues in the EFL classroom. The use of questionnaire and interview data also enabled triangulation, which enhanced the credibility of the findings.

3 Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study by integrating the results obtained from the questionnaire and interviews. The analysis focuses on students' understanding of bullying, empathy development, awareness of real-life situations, and their responses toward the use of English literature, particularly the film Wonder, in the EFL classroom.

Based on the questionnaire results, the majority of students showed positive responses toward the use of English literature as a medium to address bullying issues. Most students selected Agree and Strongly Agree in Sections B, C, and D, indicating that they experienced meaningful learning outcomes after engaging with the film Wonder. In Section B, which examined students' understanding of bullying, positive responses (Agree and Strongly Agree) ranged from 83.3% to 93.3% across the questionnaire items. Similarly, in Section C, which focused on empathy and emotional awareness, positive responses ranged from 86.7% to 96.7%. In Section D, which explored students' awareness of bullying in real-life contexts, between 80% and 93.3% of participants selected Agree or Strongly Agree. These findings suggest that students experienced meaningful learning outcomes after engaging with the film Wonder, particularly in terms of understanding bullying, developing empathy, and recognizing bullying situations in their school environment. The results suggest that students were able to develop a clearer understanding of bullying, including its different forms such as verbal bullying, social exclusion, and emotional harm. This indicates that the use of narrative-based learning materials helped students recognize bullying not only as a general concept but also as a real and relatable issue within their school environment.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that students demonstrated a significant increase in empathy and emotional awareness. Through the story and characters presented in Wonder, students were able to understand the feelings and experiences of bullying victims more deeply. Many students reported that they felt emotionally connected to the main character and were able to imagine themselves in similar situations. This emotional engagement encouraged students to reflect on their own behavior and attitudes toward others. Such findings highlight the importance of literature in promoting affective learning, where students are not only cognitively engaged but also emotionally involved in the learning process.

The open-ended responses from Section E provided deeper insights into students' reflections. Many students expressed that the film taught them the importance of kindness, respect, and acceptance of differences. Some students admitted that they had previously underestimated the impact of bullying and became more aware of how their words or actions

could hurt others. Others mentioned that they felt motivated to become better individuals and to treat their peers more positively. These responses indicate that the learning experience extended beyond academic understanding and contributed to students' moral development.

The interview findings further supported the questionnaire results and provided more detailed explanations of students' experiences. Students explained that the film helped them recognize bullying situations that often occur in their own school environment. They also emphasized that the emotional scenes in Wonder made them realize the seriousness of bullying and its long-term impact on victims. In addition, students expressed positive attitudes toward the use of films in English learning, stating that the lessons were more interesting, engaging, and easier to understand compared to traditional teaching methods.

Table 1. Summary of Findings from Questionnaire and Interview

Data Source	Section	Key Findings	Interpretation
Questionnaire	Section B (Understanding of Bullying)	Most students chose Agree and Strongly Agree	Students showed improved understanding of bullying concepts after learning through Wonder.
	Section C (Empathy and Emotional Awareness)	Dominant Responses were Agree and Strongly Agree	The film increased students' empathy and emotional sensitivity toward bullying victims.
	Section D (Awareness of Real-life Bullying)	High agreement percentages	Students became more aware of bullying behaviors occurring in their school environment
	Section E	Students reflected on moral values and personal behavior	Open-ended responses showed deeper moral reflection and self-awareness related to bullying.
Interview	Theme 1: Understanding of Bullying	Students explained types and impacts of bullying	Interview data confirmed the questionnaire findings.
	Theme 2: Empathy and Emotional Awareness	Students expressed emotional connection to characters	Emotional engagement strengthened moral learning outcomes
	Theme 3: School Content Awareness	Students linked the story to real school situations	Wonder helped students recognize bullying in real life.
	Theme 4: Learning Experience	Students enjoyed learning English through film	Using Wonder created a positive and engaging EFL classroom atmosphere.
	Theme 5: Behavioral Intention	Students were motivated to speak up against bullying	The movie encouraged positive attitude changes and moral responsibility.

These findings can be interpreted through several theoretical perspectives. First, narrative learning theory suggests that stories allow learners to understand complex social issues through meaningful and contextualized experiences. In this study, Wonder functioned as a narrative tool that enabled students to engage with bullying issues in a deeper and more personal way. Second, reader-response theory explains how students construct meaning through their interaction with literary texts. The emotional connection between students and the characters in the film played a crucial role in shaping their empathy and understanding.

Moreover, the findings are consistent with previous studies which highlight the effectiveness of literature-based learning in EFL contexts. Research has shown that literary texts and films can enhance students' engagement, motivation, and critical thinking skills while also addressing social and moral issues (Sun, 2023). This study supports those findings by demonstrating that English literature can serve a dual purpose: improving language learning and promoting character education.

Another important aspect of this study is the integration of moral values into English learning. The results show that students were not only learning the language but also developing important social values such as empathy, respect, and awareness of others' feelings (Hassan et al., 2023). This suggests that EFL classrooms can be used as a platform for holistic education, where language skills and moral development are taught simultaneously.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the use of English literature, particularly the film Wonder, is effective in addressing bullying issues in EFL classrooms. The combination of questionnaire and interview data demonstrates that students experienced cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes after participating in the learning activities. Therefore, literature-based instruction can be considered a valuable and meaningful approach in promoting both language learning and social awareness among students.

Table 1 presents a combined summary of findings from the questionnaire and interview data. The results indicate that students showed improved understanding of bullying, increased empathy, and greater awareness of real-life bullying issues. The interview findings further supported the questionnaire results and revealed positive attitudinal changes among students.

4 Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the use of English literature, particularly the film Wonder, in addressing bullying issues in EFL classrooms. Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the integration of literature into English learning provides meaningful benefits for both language development and character education.

The results showed that students developed a better understanding of bullying, including its forms and impacts, after engaging with the film. In addition, students demonstrated increased empathy and emotional awareness, as they were able to relate to the experiences of the characters and reflect on their own behavior. The learning process also raised students' awareness of real-life bullying situations and encouraged more positive attitudes toward their peers.

Furthermore, the use of Wonder created a more engaging and enjoyable learning environment. Students responded positively to the use of film in the classroom, which helped them understand the lesson more easily while also increasing their motivation to participate. These findings indicate that literature-based learning can effectively combine language instruction with moral and social education.

Overall, this study confirms that English literature can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms. It not only supports students' linguistic development but also promotes empathy, awareness, and positive behavioral change. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to incorporate literary works with strong moral values into their teaching practices to create more meaningful and holistic learning experiences.

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