

Beyond Traditional Transmissive Modes of Teaching: Promoting Literary Discussions in the Algerian EFL Classroom

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Abstract:

The present paper argues for the necessity of re-thinking literature teaching methodology in the Algerian EFL context. In fact, despite the importance attached to literary studies at the tertiary level particularly within the latest reform in education, the teaching of literature is regrettably still bound to traditional teacher fronted transmissive approaches that rely heavily on lecturing. Such approaches do not emphasise the students and their active role in constructing knowledge as they are always seen as empty vessels to be filled up with knowledge, and this in turn has increased passivity among them. In response to this unpromising situation and in line with the perspective of promoting a student-centred approach to teaching literature, the present study claims for the incorporation of literary discussions as an active learning strategy that allows the students to assume more participatory roles in analysing and interpreting literature. On this basis, two instructional strategies have been suggested to promote a discursive environment in the classroom. These are: literature circles and collaborative reasoning. Hopefully, such strategies will not only encourage the students to read literature, but equally will stimulate the students to talk about what they read, reformulate their ideas and consider the different perspectives of the literary text.

Key words: Literature, EFL Classroom, teacher centred approach, student-centred approach, lecturing, active learning, literary discussions, literature circles, collaborative reasoning.

INTRODUCTION

It is of no avail to dispute the fact literature has gained significant place in the field of language pedagogy since the 1980s. Indeed many educationalists and researchers such as (Brumfit and Carter 1986, Carter and Long 1991, Lazar1993) have acknowledged the outstanding role of literature as a source for linguistic development and cultural enrichment. However, the successful implementation of literature in the language classroom has always been a matter of skilled teaching that calls for the implementation of adequate methodologies that involve the students as active participants in making meaning rather than receiving ready made literary interpretations often supplied by teachers. The teaching of literature in the Algerian context has for long been deeply interwoven with a traditional teacher fronted approach despite the noticeable revival of literary studies within the latest reform in education. The process of teaching literature, as it will be evidenced within the present study, is still shaped by extended teacher-led presentations and lectures preparing the students for exams only. As such, this practice tends to neglect active learning strategies, not least literary discussions despite their boundless benefit in promoting self directed learning and enhancing the students' critical thinking and communicative skills.

THE RATIONALE FOR TEACHING LITERATURE IN AN EFL CONTEXT

Many reasons can be advanced in supporting the integration of literature in the EFL classroom:

- **Language wise**, the literary text is genuine and authentic and as such it provides meaningful and memorable contexts for language learning. Literature according to Parkinson and Thomas (2004) is a sample of excellent writing that

exposes the reader to various language forms and styles. Literature also helps advance all language skills because it envelops the richest variations of language. Collie and Slater(2000) provide an adequate summary of the importance of literature in language learning. They accordingly write that

Literature provides a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable. Reading a substantial and contextualized body of text, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language ... The extensive reading required in tackling a novel or long play develops the students' ability to make inferences from linguistic clues, and to deduce meaning from context.(p.7)

- **Culturally**, the literary text is one of the most efficient materials to get insights into the target culture. Its authenticity allows and facilitates depicting the various cultural norms and mores of the target community. Supporting the significant role of literature in introducing the target culture to the foreign language learner, Kramersch (1993) accordingly argues that literature and culture are intertwined. She therefore considers literature as an efficient vehicle through which

“students are given access to a world of attitudes and values, collective imaginings and historical frames of reference that constitute the memory of a people or a speech community.” (p.175).

Kramersch's view on the significance of literature in learning about the target culture is very similar to that of McKay (1986) who argues that despite the fact that literature is all too often conceived as imagination, it has much to do in enhancing the understanding of the foreign culture .This in turn will help the reader to overcome cultural differences to ultimately develop a sense of tolerance and understanding towards otherness.

- **Motivationally**, the value of literature in increasing the students' motivation lies in its power to generate personal involvement in them. Personal involvement or else empathy refers to the reader's close relationship with the author, the characters and the story line. Thanks to its artistic delight, the literary text spurs the interests of the reader; it evokes feelings and emotions and liberates his/her imagination (Elliot, 1990). It is in this sense that the reader is encouraged to follow the story line from beginning to end. A novel or a short story according to Lazar(1993) may be particularly gripping in that it involves the students in the suspense of unravelling the plot.

MODELS OF USING LITERATURE

The literature on the recognized approaches in using literature in the EFL classroom shows that these approaches have marked the shift from the exclusive focus on the teaching of literature for its own sake to exploiting it as a pedagogic source for language teaching. A myriad of approaches have been suggested for implementing literature in the EFL classroom. Lazar (1993) suggests the following models:

➤ **Literature as Content**

Lazar (1993) asserts that this model is the most traditional approach to teaching literature. She also opines that it is the most popular approach at the tertiary education wherein the students are supposed to have developed sufficient language abilities to handle literature as content with its philosophical and moral dimensions. This model lays emphasis on surveying the different literary movements with a particular focus on the social, political, and historical backgrounds of the literary texts. The literary text within this model is viewed as a product and used as a means to attain knowledge about the target culture. The students are also presented with the different

kinds of criticism relating to the text to achieve a fuller understanding of its multiple perspectives. However, this model tends to be more teacher-centered in the sense that the teacher provides the students by means of lecturing all what seems relevant to the study of the text such as biographical information about authors, historical and social settings..etc. Text selection within this model is also bound to the relevance of the text to the literary tradition in focus and it is always directed to canonical texts.

➤ **The Language Based Model**

The focus of this model is the language of the literary text. According to Lazar (1993) the language based model is useful in the process of integrating language and literature particularly in an EFL context. The study of the literary text is directed towards exposing the students to the various linguistic patterns : literal and figurative. The literary text can also be exploited in designing vocabulary and even grammatical activities. This way, the students will be granted the opportunity to advance their language skills. This model also makes frequent use of the stylistic analysis of the literary text that helps students in meaning construction, and therefore, becoming competent readers who are able to defend their literary interpretation by referring to the stylistic features of the text.

➤ **The Personal Enrichment Model**

The premise of this model is encouraging students to draw on their own experiences, feelings and emotions in reading literary texts. Compared with the above mentioned models, this model tends to be more student-centred in the sense that it maximises the students' personal engagement and pleasure in reading literature (Lazar,1993). This active engagement with the text will ,in turn, result in a memorable literary experience. The students within this model are expected to come up with their

own interpretations of texts instead of relying on those provided by the teacher or critics. Yet, to achieve such an active engagement with the text, the teacher is required to handle text selection with care, not only in terms of linguistic accessibility but also in terms of opting for interesting themes.

THEORIES OF TEACHING LITERATURE

Showalter (2003) argues that one of the most sensitive issues in teaching literature is the pedagogical practice that the teacher is to adopt to achieve the objectives of the course. In this context, she suggests three theories of teaching literature: subject centred theory, teacher centred theory and student-centred theory.

➤ Subject –centred Theory

This theory is in essence a transmissive model of learning within which the teacher becomes a depositor of knowledge to the students. It is a traditional ‘transmit and receive’ model of education within which the teacher, as an expert, is the depositor of knowledge to the fresh-faced students whose job is reduced to copy down factual information for an exercise-oriented assessment. The crux of this theory is what to be taught. Hence, it is crucial for teachers who choose to adopt this method to demonstrate the mastery of the subtleties of the content of the course. Teacher’s knowledge in the field is the hall mark of this theory. The major focus is coverage, not the acquisition of skills that the students are supposed to acquire.

➤ Teacher-Centered Theory

This theory considers teaching as a matter of performance. It fundamentally focuses on the teacher and what s/he is required to do in order to facilitate the learning process. Performance, therefore, is the crux of this theory since it outlooks the intellectual abilities of the teacher. Being the centre of this

teaching philosophy, the teacher is required to demonstrate outstanding abilities in terms of acting and speaking in addition to other related intellectual skills. However, the potential danger of applying this teaching theory is that emphasis will be on the performance of the teacher in the classroom, not on what the students are supposed to do to better their learning. This in turn will result into the teacher's monopolization of the course.

➤ **Student-Centered Theory**

Student-centered theory or active learning as being referred to by Showalter (2003) reflects the new orientation of modern education that tends to be more student-centred. In literature teaching this theory lays heavy emphasis on the student, not on the teacher. It stresses the process of learning for sake of maximizing active learning. As a pedagogical practice, active literature instruction is not simply reduced to providing the students with biographical accounts, dictating to them synopses of literary works or modeling a prototype literary analysis that students are to follow. Student centred theory rather requires the teacher to come down from the pedestal to help the students to acquire problem solving skills to confront the text directly within a collaborative and discursive environment. (Miller, 1999)

Discussion Method Vs Lecture Method

Classroom discussions can be easily be incorporated into courses because students are familiar with, and therefore, are likely to feel comfortable when engaged in. This interactive strategy basically involves the verbal exchange of ideas, opinions and views. The role of the teacher is to raise a topic or an issue with the intention to spur students' interest and increase their involvement. Discussions, unlike conversations, at their fullest sense, are not simply bull sessions (Hobbs, 1970); they are rather structured with well-defined objectives.

According to Harris (1997) passivity among students has become an undeniable truth in many higher education settings worldwide .He attributes this unhappy situation to many reasons among which the transmissive lecture-based courses which, according to him, do not match what would be desirable in terms of students' engagement and motivation. This implies that in a traditional unilateral teaching context, the students are rarely involved in an environment that would trigger creative thinking and active engagement. This is, however, not to claim that lectures are entirely useless and therefore to be abandoned, because as it is pointed out by Bonwell (1999)

The lecture is a time-honored teaching strategy that, at its best, allows enthusiastic instructors to communicate the intrinsic interest of subject matter and to synthesize information that students cannot receive elsewhere.(p542)

Yet, unlike formal lecturing, within a discursive classroom environment, the students are likely to acquire better thinking skills and clearer understanding of the course content. This is more likely to positively affect their attitudes towards the subject being learned. Through discussions, the students are required to define, explain apply and sometimes change their own ideas. This active process helps the students to develop new concepts and shape new learning experiences as they will be responsible for their own learning. In a sense, the "responsible" student is literally *"able to respond" by speech, writing, and action to his educational experience. Lectures limit this "responsibility"; discussion allows and encourages it.*" (Hobbs, 1970:249)

According to Adelabu and Matthias (2013) the discussion method is very appropriate to involve the students in polemical topics in English language and literature studies in the sense that discussions usually help remove the monotony and boredom in the classroom and encourage students to critically think about the issues being discussed. What is more,

discussion is an efficient tool to enhance the students' oral communicative skills. Naturally, during discussions the students are likely to give, receive and respond to information, and this is in fact a core component of an active learning environment (McKeachie & Svinicki 2006).

The Significance of Literary Discussion in an EFL Context

One of the most effective ways to promote the students' literary development is the incorporation of student-centered literature discussions. This is the idea of Showalter (2003) who argues that an effective literature teaching entails taking the literary text as a focus for discussion and analysis.

Literary discussions, according to Moss (2002), facilitate and reinforce intellectual inquiry that places the student in a better position to deeply explore human values, behaviours and interactions, and thus, developing an in-depth understanding of literature and human life at large. On their side, Gallavan and Kottler (2002) opine that with students-centred responses, the teacher can engage them in meaningful discussions that improve their comprehension and achievement.

Discussion also promotes the students' reasoning faculties and their communicative skills. Besides, it enhances collaborative thinking to attain a multiplicity of opinions, judgments and perspectives in the classroom. According to Alexander (2008) adapting a dialogic instruction stimulates and extends the students' thinking skills and advances their learning and understanding. He also argues that discussion is conducive to collaborative meaning construction as it encourages social interaction. Cazden (1988) also thinks that literary discussions with peers and teachers provide more opportunities for the students to explore meaning in a deeper sense, and therefore, creating new possibilities for multiple and genuine interpretations of the text.

From the psychological standpoint, student -centred discussions are likely to create and sustain a supportive learning environment .In line with this idea, Leal (1993) posits that *“when students realize that there is no pressure to construct a final correct form and no demand or expectation that they give “the right answer” the overall outcome of a peer discussion often includes many new insights.”* (p117)

The Role of the Reader Response

In praising and supporting the use of literature discussions in the classroom, researchers such as Langer (1995) and Daniels (2002), to name but a few, tend to acknowledge the role of the reader in building meaning, and this goes in conformity with the principles of the reader response approach to reading advocated by Rosenblatt (1978).The latter broke the path towards transactional models of reading literature. She considers the reading process as a “transaction”, not only an “interaction” between the reader and the text. In fact, transactional models of reading stress the importance of the participating reader in constructing meaning. They shift the exclusive focus on the text, without neglecting its significance of course, to an emphasis on the reader.

The text according to Rosenblatt (1995) cannot exist alone, nor does it constitute meaning or evoke feelings without a reader. Hence, reading is an interconnectedness between the reader and the text in the process of constructing meaning. The transaction existing between the reader and the text is fundamental in the sense that it makes reading a dynamic process; a process within which the reader affects the text and is affected by it too. Likewise, Iser (1980) argues that reading is a dynamic process within which the reader plays an active role in creating meaning while interacting with the text. He also thinks that the possible gaps in a text constitute an impetus for communication in reading because they potentially provide illuminating moments for the reader. Rosenblatt (1995) thinks

that during the transaction with the text, the reader will select possible meanings depending on his/her own experiences, past and present preoccupations, physical and emotional state. And because every single reader would bring his own experiences and characteristics to the text, meaning differs among different readers; it is not unique or duplicated. This would also signify that the reader can mold new experiences from the text. The same reader reading the same text on different occasions is likely to come up with different meanings depending on the variables that might come into play. In brief, reading literature within the reader response approach is not generic where only one interpretation is correct. This would lead us to raise what Rosenblatt referred to as “efferent” and “aesthetic” stance to reading. The aesthetic stance acknowledges the validity of the emotions and the judgments brought by the reader to the text. However, the efferent stance urges the reader to search immediately for the message of the text. Adapting only an efferent stance to reading is nothing but an overt statement that there is one correct interpretation of the text, and hence, neglecting the affective side of the reader.

English Literature Teaching In Algeria: State of the Art

Literature has for long been part of the English language education at the tertiary level in Algeria in the form of the study of some canonical texts from British and American literature and at times even from African literature. The literature syllabi theoretically at least aim at introducing the students to the different literary genres and movements. Yet, the very striking phenomenon is that within such literary surveys, teachers recourse to teaching excerpts only. Hence, very few literary works are read and studied as a full entity. This in turn has impeded the students to attain literary appreciation in its fullest sense. Teachers on the other hand often put the blame on the students for their reluctance to nudge themselves into extensive reading outside the classroom.

The density of the syllabi at the graduation level in particular in addition to the reduced time allotted to literary studies have always urged teachers to pseudo teaching: brewing a kind of a bird's eye view on the major literary genres and movements.

Because of the flexibility of the curriculum at the tertiary level, teachers are provided only by the general guidelines for each study area, and it is up to them, collectively or sometimes individually, to tailor the content of the courses, not least that of literature. This flexibility, seemingly, places the teacher of literature in a better position to opt for the most effective teaching methodology to attain the target objectives of the course.

Like many other countries in the world, Algeria has introduced reforms in education since 2005. These reforms have witnessed the implementation of a new system at the tertiary level: the LMD system (Licence, Master, Doctorat). The new system seeks to bring innovation and change to ELT. It encourages teachers to adjust their practices in compliance with the principles of modern education. In terms of the teaching practice, the system endorses the implementation of innovative methods that would cater for the students' needs and expectations. Yet, on the ground, it seems that literature teaching in particular has not witnessed too much novelty especially at the undergraduate level. In fact, traditional teacher fronted practices are to a larger extent still predominant despite some teachers' own individual efforts of modernize literary studies though the use of multimedia technologies.

The Predominance of Traditional Lecture Method and the Neglect of Literary Discussions

Despite the latest reforms in education at the tertiary level, the teaching of literature at most Algerian universities, not least at Tlemcen University is still bound to a traditional teacher - fronted approach that relies heavily on formal lecturing,

discarding classroom discussions despite their boundless benefit in enhancing the students' critical thinking skills and communicative abilities.

Such a traditional approach seems to be more concerned with teaching literature as a product rather than as a process that would involve the students as active participants in constructing knowledge rather than receive it passively. This is, in fact, the reason why teachers tend to spend much more time in preaching to their students factual knowledge about famous authors and the cultural and historical backgrounds surrounding the production of their publications. This typically informative approach tends to diminish the students' active relation with the text. Consequently, many students do not attend literature classes to exchange ideas or discuss critically with their peers what they have read; they rather come with the purpose of collecting ready-made notes provided by teachers or those of critics for the sake of exams only. The traditional practice of teaching literature, therefore, has impeded the students to work with literature as they are engaged in a very limited number of activities. The literary text is not exploited enough in the classroom as teachers continue to show a noticeable reluctance to involve students in active learning strategies, not least discussions. Teachers usually complain that literary discussions are time consuming or students may resist them because of their limited communicative skills. Yet, this is not a valid reason to stick to one unique mode of teaching; it is high time teachers brought novelty to their classrooms.

Strategies to Promote Literary Discussions in the EFL Classroom

In response to the traditional practice of teaching literature and in an attempt to bring innovation and change into the literature classroom, the researcher argues for the necessity of trying out different instructional methods that are very likely to enhance

students' motivation and interest in discussing, analyzing, and interpreting literature within a supportive environment. To this end, two strategies are suggested to promote literary discussions: Literature Circles and Collaborative Reasoning. Hopefully, These strategies will not only motivate the students to read literature, but will also stimulate them to talk about they read and reformulate their ideas and literary judgments with their peers.

➤ **Literature Circles**

It is a strategy that motivates the students to read literature and be involved in discussing and interpreting its important aspects. According to Daniels (2002)

Literature circles are small peer-led discussion groups, whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group –assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. (p.02)

Literature circles are often seen as an effective means to assess the students' own abilities and needs in reading and interpreting literature. Yet, what seems more beneficial in implementing this strategy is the great deal of autonomy that students are likely to enjoy when literature is their focus. The students within a literature circles settings are encouraged to independently raise relevant questions on the reading material, share their opinions with peers and formulate their own literary judgments. This is the idea of Shelton-strong (2012) who opines that literature circles is a students centred activity that fosters autonomy and provides opportunities for focused extensive reading tasks and purposeful collaborative discussions.

It is worth noting that literature circles have recently gained ground at different stages of education as they encourage the students to critically reflect on what they read.

Besides, the discursive aspect of this strategy helps them to deepen and reframe their ideas through constructive exchange with their peers. Within literature circles setting the role of the teacher becomes that of an observer whose role is restricted to monitoring and facilitating group discussions. Implementing literature circles according to Daniels (2002) necessitates assigning some discussion roles to the group members such as the connector, the questioner, the literary passage master, the illustrator, the summarizer and the travel tracer.

Adapting Literature Circles Roles in an EFL Context

Literature circles roles can be adapted according to students' abilities and the material being discussed. The overall objective is to create and sustain a supportive environment among the groups and inculcating in the students the enthusiasm for extensive reading. Below is an adapted model of literature circles roles in an EFL context:

- The discussion leader: s/he starts and maintains the interaction among the group through questions and invitations to take part.
- The researcher: s/he collects relevant background information about the author and the context of the text.
- The summarizer: s/he provides a summary of the reading material both orally and in writing.
- The vocabulary master: s/he chooses newly acquired words, phrases and expressions. S/he explains and contextualizes them.
- The literary luminary: s/he picks thought provoking and memorable passages to provide explanations and comments on them.
- The Character Captain: s/he describes the major characters and follows their actions throughout the story.

- The connector: s/he connects the plot, the characters and the theme with real life contexts or with other works by the same writer.

(Adapted from Daniels, 2002, p.103)

Collaborative Reasoning:

Being an approach that entails the students' active participation in discussing and interpreting literature, Collaborative Reasoning has significantly received due attention in the literature studies as it aims at improving students' reasoning and enhancing their critical thinking skills. Collaborative reasoning gathers the students in groups for a discussion "*in which they are expected to take positions on a "big question" raised by the story, present reasons and evidence for their positions, and challenge one another when they disagree.*"(Dong et al, 2008, p.401)

As stated in the quotation above, within a collaborative reasoning setting, the students are expected to take positions on the big questions relating to a given reading material. They have to support their positions with reasons and evidence referring to the text. They have also to listen, evaluate and respond to one another's arguments, challenging each other in case of disagreement. Yet, the ideal objective of collaborative reasoning is not to reach a consensus or to win a debate. The target is rather to work and think collaboratively to search for reasonable solutions and develop thoughtful opinions on the discussed topics (Zhang and Dorgherty Stahl, 2012)

Interestingly enough, collaborative reasoning allows and encourages the students to defend their positions with evidence from the text and/or to draw on their own experiences. It is in this sense that they become active participants in co-constructing arguments when challenging each other's views. Listening and examining each other's views, they may stick to their initial positions as they may change them throughout the flow of the discussion. Ideally, primary focus of the discussion

must be the in-depth exploration of the complexity of central issues in a literary text from multiple perspectives. This allows the students to develop highly desired skills in argumentation and critical thinking.

Because CR is a student-centred activity, it challenges the teacher's monopoly of discourse in the classroom; it rather gives the lead to the students to raise the most controversial aspects in a given literary work. Collaborative reasoning is also an opportunity to enhance the students' speaking skills because the focus on argumentation in discussing literature urges the students to develop their own language and communication skills to adequately express and defend their own positions. In fact, the various perspectives of literature is a crucial factor that might well stimulate the students to opt for adequate communicative strategies such as summarizing, clarifying and counter arguing.

For a clearer understanding of how collaborative reasoning functions, Chinn et al (2001) have suggested four parameters. They are as follows

- Reading Stance: The reading stance is primarily analytic and critical as the students refer to the text to defend their positions. But, it may also be aesthetic when they invoke their own experiences.
- Interpretive authority: this implies the full responsibility of the students for their own judgments and positions.
- Control over turns: The students are granted the freedom to talk at any point of time during the discussion. The teacher can retain control though posing questions for the sake of scaffolding only.
- Control over topic: This is an aspect that can involve both the students and the teacher.

Limitation of the Study

The present research is descriptive in nature; it is not designed to allow systematic generalizations regarding the teaching of literature in the Algerian EFL context. It has also been carried out to respond to the neglect of literary discussions at the graduation level in particular. Besides, it has focused only on two strategies for promoting literature discussions. There are indeed other strategies of equal importance that could be implemented such as: book clubs and grand conversations.

CONCLUSION

Integrating literature in the foreign language classroom has been emphasized by many scholars given its boundless benefit. Indeed, literature has the power to spur the students' thoughts, provoke their intellectual productivity and deepen their insights into the nature of reality. Equally important is the role of literature in enhancing the students' linguistic skills and enriching their cultural knowledge. Additionally, the aesthetic delight of literature has the potential to spur the interest in reading. This motivational effect is all too often conducive to pleasurable learning experience experiences. Regretfully, the teaching of literature in the Algerian context is still to a larger extent based on typically transmissive and informative approaches that do little to promote the students' active involvement with the text. In response to this, the researcher has made a plea for the significance of re-thinking literature teaching methodologies for the sake of achieving a smooth shift from an entirely teacher fronted approach to an approach that stresses the students' active interaction with the literary text through incorporating literary discussions. These latter have the very potential to train the students to think critically, enhance their communicative abilities and sustain life-long and self-directed learning, and it is within this course of thought that two strategies have been suggested: literature circles and

collaborative reasoning. Both strategies aim at reinforcing students' engagement with the literary text through discussing its most important aspects within a supportive and cooperative learning environment.

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