

Engaging EFL students with literature: An Algerian perspective

Mohammed Kheladi^{a1}, Department of English, Tlemcen University 22, Rue Abi Ayed Abdelkrim Fg Pasteur B.P 119 13000, Tlemcen, Algeria. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6835-7362>

Suggested Citation:

Kheladi, M., (2020). Engaging EFL students with literature: An Algerian perspective. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. 10(2), 86-93. DOI: 10.18844/gjft.v%vi%i.4633

Received from August 15, 2019; revised from December 28, 2019; accepted from May 14, 2020 .
Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc Prof Dr. Ali Rahimi, Bangkok University, Thailand.
©2020 Birlesik Dunya Yenilik Arastırma ve Yayıncılık Merkezi. All rights reserved.

Abstract

The objective of the present paper is to argue for the necessity of engaging students with literature in the Algerian EFL context. It attempts to confirm the fact that the interface between language and literature is conducive to learning potentials for students at the different levels of language and literary studies. On this basis and in response to the inadequacies of the traditional transmissive approach to teaching literature in the Algerian context, which have been reported in the findings of many investigative studies, the paper suggests the shift towards a process-oriented approach to teaching literature that is fundamentally task- based. It also acknowledges the role of the reader response stance in sustaining students' engagement with literary texts by drawing on their own experiences and thinking skills in meaning making.

Keywords: Engagement; EFL Classroom; Literature; process approach; traditional approach; task- based; reader response;

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Mohammed Kheladi, Department of English, Tlemcen University 22, Rue Abi Ayed Abdelkrim Fg Pasteur B.P 119 13000, Tlemcen, Algeria
E-mail address: kheladi.mohammed@hotmail.com

1. Introduction

By way of introduction, it would seem important to point to the significance of literature in an EFL context and the benefit that would grow out of its teaching. In this respect, a myriad of reasons have been advanced by scholars and educationalists to justify the teaching of literature in the foreign language classroom. Lazar (2000) asserts that literature gives pleasure and purifies emotions. It has the power to spur thoughts, provoke intellectual productivity and deepen one's insights and experiences. A piece of literature be it prose, verse or a play has the potential to expose the reader to different places, time periods, beliefs and cultures (Kramersch, 1993).

Literature is also considered a motivating material thanks to its authenticity; it is therefore an invaluable source to enhance the students' linguistic abilities as it allows them to meet the various stylistic varieties of the target language (Collie & Slater, 1987). Yet, this multidimensional benefit cannot be gained without assisting the students to achieve a solid engagement with the literary text.

In the Algerian context, the predominant traditional teacher-centered approaches to teaching literature seem to contribute little to this goal. On this basis, and in an attempt to move away from old-fashioned teaching practices, the present paper suggests some strategies that basically aim at concretizing a smooth shift from an approach that is typically teacher-fronted towards an approach that facilitates students' engagement with literature.

2. The Significance of Engagement in English Language Education

It is of no avail to dispute the fact that students' engagement in learning is the gateway to higher academic achievement. In fact, it is quite impossible to think of success without ensuring higher levels of engagement. On the other hand, the lack of engagement is meant to be a source of immense difficulties that would hinder the effective conduct of learning events. In a brief yet cogent definition of engagement, Kuh (2001) posits that this influencing variable refers to "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities." (p. 7)

This conception brings de facto into play the role of teachers in attaining and maintaining engagement among students, particularly in an EFL context. Stated differently, the responsibility of assuring engagement does not only fall on the students' side, but equally on the instructors' side in terms of both the input being imparted and the applied teaching methodology.

In stressing the indisputable significance of engagement in achieving successful language learning, Carini, Kuh & Klein (2004) advance the idea that students' engagement is a pivotal predictor and a key premise of learning and personal development at large. Therefore, engagement according to them is conducive to critical and reflective thinking as it exhorts the students to practice, analyse, and synthesise matters from multiple perspectives. However, as asserted by Cutler (2007), in spite of the huge amounts of the literature and research on promoting students' engagement, class passivity among students at higher education institutions is regrettably still a striking phenomenon that has to be seriously addressed.

3. The Predominance of Transmissive Approaches to Teaching Literature in the Algerian EFL Context

According to Beach et al (2011) within the transmissive approach to teaching literature, the teacher acts as being the all-know master who imparts knowledge to students. This approach conceives learning in terms of acquiring facts and knowledge about literature. It focuses on what the teacher does in dispensing knowledge to the students' whose roles are, all too often, reduced to memorizing and rote learning. It also stresses the coverage of the different literary movements, historical backgrounds, factual information about canonical texts and the specificities of the different literary genres. In the words of Beach et al (2011) "the transmission model is reflected in literature curriculums in which the primary focus is on coverage of different literary periods,

historical backgrounds, and biographical information about authors, literary concepts, or genre characteristics.” (p.7)

The statement above is, to a larger extent, a convenient description of the practice of literature teaching in the Algerian EFL context, wherein the teacher is the epicenter of the learning process and the master of classroom activities, in the sense that s/he teaches, talks, and explains all the way. In simpler words, the teacher is seen as the custodian of knowledge. Owing to this, the students’ participation is at minimum, yet it might not be encouraged unless the teacher considers it appropriate for the flow and the purpose of the course. The predominance of such a traditional mode of teaching literature in the Algerian context has been reported in many investigative studies particularly at the graduate level (Bouhend, 2000; Kheladi, 2013; Guerroudj, 2015).

Bouhend (2000) and Kheladi (2013) have been much more concerned with investigating EFL students’ attitudes towards literature teaching methods at the graduate level. In their empirical studies, both researchers have clearly displayed the inadequacies and weaknesses of the applied teaching methods that were typically characterized as being teacher fronted and, therefore, failed to engage students with literature because of the heavy reliance on a unique modality of teaching, i.e. lecturing about literature. Teachers of literature, according to Kheladi (2013) tend to conceitedly impose their own interpretations of texts on students, leaving little space for them to form and back up their own literary judgments.

Worse still, both studies have reported the lack of motivation and enthusiasm among a considerable number of students to embrace advanced literary studies.

Guerroudj (2015) has also been concerned with investigating the practice of teaching literature in the Algerian context. Her study was mainly centered on the relevance and significance of teaching literature both as a subject and as a resource. In this respect, the researcher has come up with the conclusion that literature is not adequately exploited to ensure students’ engagement with the literary component of the English language. According to her, little is done with literature in the classroom as teachers continue to show a striking reluctance to transcend the informative approach of teaching that reduces the students’ active learning. Given such inadequacies, the researcher has recommended the shift towards a dialogic mode of teaching that champions the students’ voice in the classroom discourse. She has also emphasized on the necessity of implementing an integrated approach to teaching literature that enhances the students’ linguistic competence, connects them with other cultures and allows them to conceive the literary experience as a medium for self-expression.

It has been, therefore, made clear that within the traditional approach to teaching literature, the students become passive recipients of knowledge instead of being active participants in building it. This in turn hinders their creativity and impedes their critical thinking skills. Schön, (1983) argues that in a total contrast with the objectives of modern education, transmissive approaches generate a culture of learning that holds back self-directed learning, and, therefore, contributes little to empowering life-long learning skills.

In the same vein of thought, Parkinson & Thomas (2004) opine that teacher centeredness in literary studies is an important issue that must be seriously addressed. They also contend that it mainly stems from “the likely imbalance of knowledge and likely imbalance of power between teacher and learner” (p.12). In other words, the teachers’ monopolization of the course is due to teachers’ familiarity with the text and the environment in which it was produced as opposed to the students who usually lack literary knowledge and expertise to handle literature competently, especially in EFL settings.

In the Algerian context, however, one should not put the blame entirely on teachers because these latter, sometimes, find themselves compelled to recourse to such typically informative and unidirectional approaches so as to cover the “overloaded syllabi”. Indeed, teachers are bound to a syllabus that requires them to introduce the students to a survey of the literature of whole centuries in due time for the sake of preparing them for formal examinations.

Teaching literature for exam purposes is indeed a sample instance of the overall orientation of ELT in Algeria despite the latest reform in education which, theoretically at least, has accentuated the necessity of developing a student-centered pedagogy whose fundamental objective is to help the students acquire concrete skills and competencies that facilitate their learning and thinking.

4. Some Strategies for Change

In line with the objective of developing a student centred approach to teaching literature and therefore achieving a genuine engagement with it, the present paper puts forward a number of suggestions that will be outlined and discussed in what follows.

4.1. Process-Oriented Literature Teaching

As previously stated, the traditional transmissive approach to teaching literature tends to diminish the students’ participation and involvement. This does not reflect the relevance and the true value of literature in the foreign language classroom. Literature instead must capture and spur the interest of the students. This in turn cannot be attained unless the students strongly feel that what is being presented to them cater for their needs and meets their concerns.

The current literature teaching in most Algerian EFL classes is product –oriented, a teaching practice that is best expressed and succinctly summarised in the words of Littlewood(1986) when he posits that teaching literature as a product can be nothing but a setting wherein the teacher “translates passages and dictates notes” (p.177). This is ,however, not to entirely dismiss the role of the teacher as a source of knowledge ,but one has to point to the fact that the teacher’s role must not overshadow the students’ involvement in learning.

Therefore, the present research suggests the shift towards a process-oriented approach to teaching literature. The latter has recently gained ground in educational settings, not least in literature classrooms. The very assumption underlying such a teaching philosophy, according to Bolhuis (2003), is that learning is perceived as a multifaceted process wherein students’ interest is activated and their responses are endorsed and acknowledged. Bolhuis (2003) provides an insightful explanation of the core principles of a process-oriented teaching. She asserts that within such a teaching philosophy, the teacher’s task is to assist the students to gradually acquire the necessary competencies for regulating the multiple components in learning. This scaffolding paradigm goes in parallel with stimulating them to be actively involved in autonomous knowledge building, reflecting on this knowledge and even testing it. The next principle, according to her, is giving the affective aspect of learning its fair share of importance by paying special attention to the students’ emotional reactions. This principle is mainly founded on fostering the students’ levels of motivation and coping with the sources of their anxiety and apprehension. Last but not least, learning ought to be conceived as a social phenomenon within which the teacher’s role is to inculcate in the students and promote in them interpersonal and social skills, particularly collaborative skills.

Furthermore, a process approach teaching stresses the explicit evaluation of how things were carried out, spotting both strengths and weaknesses (Lin& Guey, 2004). This is indeed a forceful claim denoting the significance of feedback and assessment, particularly formative assessment that has been for long neglected in the Algerian EFL literature classroom owing to the predominant teach -to -the test assessment policy.

Moreover, within a process approach to literature teaching more attention is centred on the

language of the text, making students well aware of how meaning is conveyed and prompting them to exploit the literary text in advancing their language skills (Lazar, 2000). Hence, many classroom activities can be used in this area with various degrees of complexity. These include, for instance, linguistic analysis of the text, summarizing texts, comparing and contrasting texts, transferring texts to other genres, rewriting beginnings and ends of texts with alternative imagined scenarios, and performance activities (Parkinson & Thomas, 2004).

Involving students in such activities is likely to increase their motivation as they enjoy more autonomous roles in learning. This indeed challenges the traditional modes of learning within the product-oriented teaching that reduces their roles to passive listening and note taking. The dynamic nature of a process-oriented literature teaching, in short, aims at involving the students with the text and enabling them to develop their own perception of it. It targets to create a student-centred learning environment and equally the promotion of collaborative learning.

4.2. Task-based Literature Classroom

If a process approach to teaching literature is adopted, the need for learning by doing becomes de facto a sine qua non condition for attaining students' engagement. Learning by doing implies involving the students in tasks. Yet, before probing to the significance of a task based approach to teaching literature and the potential benefit that might arise from its implementation on pedagogical grounds; it seems wiser to define what a task is. A myriad of definitions has been suggested by Nunan (1988), Carter and Long (1991) and Willis (1996). We shall opt for the one suggested by Breen (1987), and which considers a task as:

Any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specific working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. 'Task' is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plan which has the overall purpose of facilitating language learning-from the simple or brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem solving or simulations and decision making. (p.23)

The quotation above clearly implies that tasks must be carefully planned with well defined objectives and which have the very potential to actively engage students in the process of learning. This is, in fact, another way of saying that the significance of devising tasks lies in their efficacy in removing the teacher's monopolization of the course (Nunan, 1988). The teacher instead is required to assume the roles of being an enabler and a facilitator, and hence, devolving the responsibility to the students to look after their learning. Stressing the importance of involving the students in task-based learning in the literature classroom; Lazar (2000) postulates that devising tasks assists foreign language students to advance their literary competence, a competence without which they cannot convert words on pages into literary meanings. The mastery of the peculiarities of the literary discourse, in her view, can significantly be improved through involving students in illustrative tasks.

Similarly, Khatib, Derakhshan & Rezaei (2011) endorse the pedagogical value of a task-based literature teaching, considering it as one of the most efficient tools to achieve what they referred to as "*whole literary engagement*" given its potential to involve the students linguistically, emotionally, intellectually, critically, creatively, and motivationally.

In a nutshell, engaging the students in well-devised tasks can serve a means to advance their linguistic and literary competencies besides bringing differentiation into the classroom. This latter term is used by educationalists to refer to employing different types of teaching methods to appeal to students with different aptitudes and learning styles (Tomlinson, 1999). Hence, working with literature instead of merely lecturing about it is likely to maximize its benefits.

4.2.1 Suggested task-based literature course plan

Taking into account the core components of a task-based course, the present research work suggests the following steps underlying a task-based literature course.

1. Course pre-requisites:

The students are prompted to read beforehand about the author's biography, the historical, social and cultural aspects of the studied literary tradition /era.

2. Pre-reading

The pre-reading stage is essentially set to involve the students in the theme of the literary text. In so doing, the teacher can recourse to the use of pictures ,videos or any other pedagogical support to brainstorm the topic of the text with the students and elicit from them primary responses.

3. Lower order thinking skills

This stage is the combination of two main rubrics:

(a) Vocabulary and allusion: Working on the linguistic level, the students are required to look up difficult words using their own dictionaries. Allusions which are all too often cultural references are to be provided by the teacher.

(b) Basic comprehension questions: Within this rubric, a set of questions are set to check the students overall understanding of the text. Therefore, the students skim through the text for the gist.

4. Higher order thinking skills

It is a stage wherein the students penetrate the text. It is mainly devoted to analysis questions and the literary aspects of the text. It is therefore divided into two rubrics:

a) Moral philosophical aspects: highlighting the predominant moral and philosophical dimensions of the text.

b) Stylistic features: identifying the prominent stylistic devices in the text and determining their effects on meaning.

5. Post- reading

The post reading phase includes three major points:

a) Personal response: it is a space wherein the students freely express their critical judgments of the text both orally and in writing. This activity also encourages the students to gauge the literary merits of the text within a given literary movement /tradition.

b) Reflection: the students focus on the literary devices used in the text. And if any element seems ambiguous, the teacher is supposed to further exemplify it through tasks.

c) Performance: This step is devoted to performance and dramatization activities. For instance, the students might be involved in reciting and reading poems aloud, besides acting out dramatic works.

5. Encouraging Reader Response

The quest for achieving a genuine engagement with literature seems to rests on developing and applying an adequate pedagogy that paves the way for the students to be independent readers. Seen from this perspective, it becomes essential to encourage and promote a reader response stance to reading literature.

Basically, the reader response and reception theories at large have noticeably marked the shift from the exclusive focus on the text as being ink on page, to use Rosenblatt's (1994) terms, without neglecting its importance of course, to an emphasis on the reader. Rosenblatt was among

the pioneering advocates of what is referred to as the “transactional” model of reading. She accordingly claims that the interaction between the reader and the text is equated with a transaction within which both the reader and the text affect each other.

In a rather deeper sense, during this transactional form of reading, the reader selects possible meanings from a set of assumptions and beliefs that are stored in what Rosenblatt (1994) called “our personal-experiential-linguistic reservoirs” (p.381). Stated differently, the selection process is, all too often, determined by some influential variables that envelop the attention, the physical and the emotional state of the reader. This latter assumes an active role in the process as s/he brings into the text his own experiences, characteristics, qualities and ideas that interact with the message embedded in the text to, ultimately, produce the meaning of the implied message. Commenting on the significance of respecting and encouraging the students’ individual responses to literature, Probst (1994) writes that:

If literature is to matter, however, if it is to become significant in the reader’s life, then those personal connections become hard to deny. Meaning lies in that shared ground where the reader and text meet it isn’t resident within the text, to be extracted like a nut from its shell. Rather, the meaning is created by readers as they bring the text to bear upon their own experience, and their own histories to bear upon the text. (p.38)

Obviously enough, the rationale for encouraging this model of reading in the Algerian EFL literature classroom stems from the belief that teachers must overcome the traditional practices that restrict the students’ active interaction with the text. It is also one of the most efficient strategies of inculcating in them critical reading and thinking. In short, students have to produce meaning themselves beyond the informed judgments usually provided by teachers and critics.

6. Implications for Further Research

The present research has stressed the necessity of the shift from the predominant product-oriented approach to literature teaching in the Algerian EFL literature classroom towards a process-oriented approach that acknowledges and reinforces the students’ active roles in learning. This is in fact a plea for developing a pedagogy that places the students in an active learning environment, which sustains their engagement with the literary text. On this basis, the research work with its findings and recommendations might well open new avenues for further research that would gauge the efficacy of a process-oriented approach to teaching literature. Hence, further empirical studies would focus on the significance of such a student-centered pedagogy in improving EFL students’ academic achievement and motivation as well. This orientation of thought also serves a point of interest in undergoing an in-depth exploration of the major difficulties that teachers of literature are likely to meet when such a teaching philosophy is put into practice.

7. Conclusion

The benefit of introducing literature in an EFL context is significant at different levels: linguistically, culturally and motivationally. Yet, this cannot be attained without developing an adequate teaching methodology that promotes students’ active engagement with the literary text. Regretfully, the teaching of literature in the Algerian context is, to a greater extent, still bound to the traditional practices that consider the teacher as being a custodian of knowledge whose primary role is to fill in up the students with factual information about the literary text. This does not mean, however, that background knowledge is not relevant or less important in approaching literature, but its presentation should not be carried out at the expense of the students’ active roles with the text in the classroom. In view of that, the present paper has focused on the necessity of developing an alternate approach to teaching literature, an approach that is process oriented and task based. The paper has also stressed the merit of a reader

response approach to reading literature as it grants the students much more independency in meaning making.

References

- Beach, R., Appleman, D., Hynds, S., Wilhelm, J., Fecho, B., & Simon, R. (2011). *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*. (2nded). Routledge.
- Bolhuis, S. (2003). Towards Process-oriented Teaching for Self- directed Lifelong Learning: a Multidimensional Perspective. *Learning and Instruction*, 13, 327-347.
- Bouhend, M. (2000). *Pedagogy of Literature: A Journey between Expectation and Frustration*. Magister Dissertation. University of Oran.
- Breen, M, P. (1987). *Learner Contributions to Task Design*. In C. N. Candlin and D. F. Murphy (Eds.). *Language Learning Tasks*. Englewood Cliffs, N: Prentice-Hall.
- Carini, R. M., Kuh, G. D., & Klein, S. P. (2004). Student Engagement and Student Learning: Testing the Linkages. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(1), 1-32.
- Carter, R. & Long, M.N. (1991). *Teaching Literature*. Harlow: Longman.
- Collie, J and Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge,UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cutler, A. (2007). Creeping Passivity. *Journal of College Science*, 3, 6–7
- Guerroudj, S. (2015). Literature in ELT and Global Age: *From Myth to Discourse*. Doctoral Thesis. University of Sidi Belabbes.
- Khatib, M., Derakhshan, A., & Rezaei, S. (2011). Why & Why Not Literature: A Task-Based Approach to Teaching Literature. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 1(1), 213-218.
- Kheladi, M. (2013). *Investigating EFL Learners' Attitudes towards Literature Teaching Methods: Case of 2nd year LMD Students at the University of Tlemcen*. Magister Dissertation. Tlemcen University.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kuh G.D. (2001). Assessing what really matters to student learning: Inside the National Survey of Student Engagement. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 33(3), 7–10.
- Lazar, G. (2000). *Literature and Language Teaching: A guide for Teachers and Trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lin, H. & Guey, C. (2004). *Reconstructing English Language Teaching in Taiwanese English Departments: An Interface between language and literature*. Retrieved on March 02, 2020 from <http://benz.nchu.edu.tw/~intergrams/intergrams/052-061/052-061-lin.pdf>
- Littlewood, W.T. (1986). *Literature in the School Foreign Language Course*. In Burmfit, C. and Carter, R.A. (eds) *Literature and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parkinson, B. and Thomas, H, R. (2004). *Teaching Literature in a Second Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Probst, R. E. (1994). Reader -Response Theory and the English Curriculum. *The English Journal*.83(3),37-44.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1994). *The Reader, the Text, the Poem. The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals think in Action*. Basic Books.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (1999). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Willis, J. (1996). *A Framework for Task-based Learning*. Harlow: Longman.