

Why Study 'Literature' in an Algerian University English Language Classroom? A Competence-based Analysis

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ملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى التأكيد على أهمية تعليم الأدب لطلبة أقسام اللغة الإنكليزية في الجامعات الجزائرية و يلقي الضوء على عدد من الكفاءات التي سيتسنى للطلبة اكتسابها بفضل المواد الأدبية و من أهمها: الكفاءات اللسانية و التواصلية، والتفكير النقدي و الوعي الثقافي. هذه الكفاءات الرئيسية صارت اليوم، في ظل الواقع الجديد امتسم بالتعدد و الانفتاح على المستوى المحلي و العالمي، ضرورة لأية تنمية فردية أو اجتماعية أو مهنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أهمية دراسة الأدب، الكفاءات الرئيسية، الكفاءات اللسانية و التواصلية، التفكير النقدي، الوعي الثقافي

Résumé:

Le présent article tend à souligner l'importance d'enseigner la littérature aux étudiants d'anglais au sein de l'université algérienne. Il met la lumière sur certaines des compétences qui peuvent être développées grâce aux modules littéraires à savoir : compétences linguistique et communicative, pensée critique, et compétence culturelle. Ces compétences clés sont aujourd'hui des éléments cruciaux pour le développement personnel, sociale, et professionnel.

Mots clefs: Importance d'étudier la littérature ; compétences clés ; compétences linguistique et communicative ; pensée critique ; conscience culturelle.

Abstract:

The present paper aims at highlighting the importance of studying literature in the Algerian English language classroom. It sheds light on some of the competences that can be developed through literary modules namely: communicative and linguistic competences, critical thinking,

and cultural awareness. These key competences are regarded today as crucial for the development of personal, social, and professional lives.

Keywords: The importance of studying literature; key competences; communicative and linguistic competences; critical thinking; cultural awareness.

Introduction:

Last year, while giving a talk during a conference, a colleague concluded her literary analysis by words that have been turning in my head since then: “well, literature is just about talking, so I have talked!” I felt quite uncomfortable when I heard that, not only because the teacher seemed to depart herself from the very views she has been supporting all along the time of her presentation, but more importantly, and, actually, more to the point of the present paper, because by the simple use of the word *just* she devalued the very discipline that defined a large part of the event. Obviously, one may understand that the colleague was not really willingly or consciously doing so. With time, I realized that part of the malaise I felt then came also from the fact that the teacher’s statement seemed to echo some of the comments that I often hear from our students. Literature and literary modules are, indeed, repeatedly associated with words and expressions such as “useless”, “waste of time”, “pointless”, “mere fun”, “with no application in real life”. Such negative views and perceptions may be devastating in classroom activities since they significantly contribute in decreasing students’ motivation and alertness. Actually, it is not easy to concentrate six, four or even two hours a week, when we do not understand why we should study the subject at the first place!

It becomes, thus, important, not to say compulsory, to articulate in a more constructed way the *whys* behind the teaching of literature in our English language classroomsⁱ. Providing students with a clearer idea about the different gains they may have by studying literature will certainly raise their motivation, and, thus, help them concentrate better. This will also positively contribute in creating a better atmosphere in the classroom.

The present article attempts to examine the question mainly by shedding light on the role that literary courses can play in developing students’ competencesⁱⁱ. Such an angle is tackled with the assumption that Algerian higher education today, as it needs to cope with the new

academic, social, and economic realities, at both national and international levels, and regarding the LMD reforms it adopted, should not only be knowledge-oriented, but should also aim at integrating competence-based trainings. In this perspective, and throughout the paper, the following definition will be adopted “competence is a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. Key competences are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment” (“Recommendation of the European Parliament”, 3). At the end of their curricula, students are, then, expected to acquire a certain number of competences that will help them confront the realities and complexities of their personal as well as professional lives. They are also expected to be able to use the acquired competences in a wide variety of contexts, and beyond the confines of the discipline that initially helped in their acquisition. The learning process should prepare students to integrate an increasingly globalized world where factors such as growing use of ICTs, vertiginous access to information, increasingly diversified societies, and identity malaises, are affecting societies and individuals alike.

Among the commonly highlighted key competences, the following can, actually, be developed and enhanced through literary modules thanks to the variety of activities they entail: linguistic and communicative competence, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. Even though the present research is not concerned with *how* to teach literature *per se*, it is worth highlighting that it is written on the basis that studying literature should be grounded on both theoretical and practical activities. In this regard, we assume that literary modules should encompass a variety of tasks mainly reading (both fictional and non-fictional documents), analysing, discussing, and writing. The choice of the texts to be studied as such depends, obviously, on a number of parameters including the speciality (if applicable), the level of the students/course, the objective of the course, the element (theme, style, technique, genre, etc.) to be scrutinized, etc.

1. Linguistic and Communicative Competences:

It goes without saying that for foreign language students learning the target language is the primary objective. Yet, learning how to use a language in an appropriate way, which also implies the mastery of its

subtleties, is a long and complex process that requires constant efforts and a wide range of activities. This becomes even more difficult if we consider that in Algeria the English language is the second foreign language to be learnt, and that it is not widely practiced outside classroomsⁱⁱⁱ. In this context, literary studies can be very valuable and can significantly contribute in the process of language acquisition. *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* points out: “[...] if we describe something as ‘literature’, as opposed to anything else, the term carries with it qualitative connotations which imply that the work in question has superior qualities, that is well above the ordinary run of written works” (472). The creative and aesthetic dimensions inherent in literary texts allow the reader/student to be in direct contact with a wide spectrum of possibilities when it comes, among other things, to language use. With the variety of literary genres, ranging from poems to plays, and with the different conceptions of literature that tremendously depend on elements such as movement, era, context and author’s (aesthetic) choices, literary texts offer a real diversity of English use. The latter can range from the formal to the informal, and from the plainest to the most complex styles, and, accordingly, constitute good samples of English language in use. In this regard, Widdowson (1975) has stressed that the study of literature is essentially a study of language and both are inseparable as they create “a sharp awareness of the communicated resources of the language being learnt” (qtd. In *Enhancing ESL Writing Creativity via a Literature Based Language Instruction*, 37). Studying Anglophone literary texts puts, thus, the learner in a direct contact with the English language in its different varieties. The more we enlarge the cultural and national area to which the examined texts belong, the more we get closer to the practiced *englishes* in different communities around the globe.

Furthermore, genres as varied as novels, short stories, plays, poems, and so on, constitute a real mine for idioms, figures of speech, proverbs, etc.; elements that make the flavour of any language. The more we read, the more we get acquainted with, we learn, and we internalize such expressions, and, accordingly, the more we develop the ability to employ them adequately. Equally important, literature and literary criticism are invaluable and abundant sources for vocabulary. The reading and analysis of literary texts allow the learner to get in touch with a myriad of terms that belong to different repertoires, jar-

gons and disciplines. Wilkins stresses the importance of such an aspect. As he points out: “While without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed” (110-111). Similarly, Wallace sustains that “not being able to find the words you need to express yourself is the most frustrating experience in speaking another language” (9). At another level, communicating about the studied works, which constitutes one of the essential activities of literary modules, is an excellent way of practicing a language. The variety of theories used to analyse the studied oeuvres enriches the students’ cultural background who find themselves introduced to a jargon borrowed from a variety of disciplines such as psychoanalysis, sociology, history, politics, linguistics, gender studies, etc. A good command of a wide range of vocabulary through their extensive in-context use certainly helps the learner communicate more efficiently inside and outside the classroom. Such activities also help them develop their ability to express in a more constructed way their ideas and views.

2. Cultural Awareness:

If acquiring grammar rules and possessing a rich vocabulary are crucial aspects in learning a foreign language, they are certainly not enough. Krasner writes: “Simple mastery of the linguistic forms of a language is not enough for learners to be considered competent in the target language” (qtd. in Jerrold Frank, p.10). As a matter of fact, students cannot be considered to have mastered a foreign language until they understand the cultural context(s) in which the target language is spoken. The cultural dimension should be regarded, then, as an integral part in a foreign language classroom, and what is better than literary texts to introduce students to such dimensions! Literary history teaches us that many novels, short stories, plays, etc. are said to have caught the spirit of their time. Examples of such works are legion. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Aye Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* (1968), Ahdaf Soueif’s *I Think of You* (2007) are all representative in this regard. Reading and analysing them offer invaluable experiences of travelling through time, space, and cultures. Moreover, the access that literary texts gives to the characters’ inner thoughts and psyche allows an identification that, very often, creates a feeling of sympathy that develops individual empathy and prevents readers from

conferring harsh judgements. This also allows a better understanding of the inner complexities of other societies, and, accordingly, a better comprehension of one's own. Beyond the linguistic dimension, the importance of such immersion in the Other's culture is crucial when it comes to the importance of raising students' cultural competency:

At the individual level, this means an examination of one's own attitude and values, and the acquisition of the values, knowledge, skills and attributes that will allow an individual to work appropriately in cross cultural situations.

Cultural competence mandates that organizations, programs and individuals must have the ability to:

- value diversity and similarities among all peoples;
 - understand and effectively respond to cultural differences;
 - engage in cultural self-assessment at the individual and organizational levels;
 - make adaptations to the delivery of services and enabling supports; and
- institutionalize cultural knowledge. (Georgetown University)

Thus, an appropriate selection, analysis, and discussion of literary texts can efficiently contribute in such process. For instance, the internal focalisation provided by some literary texts allows the reader-student to get a better understanding of how other communities and societies function. The insight they provide on different people's cultures, modes of life, contexts, etc. through the examination of a wide range of characters and feelings (love, hatred, fear, regret, jealousy, ambitious, etc.), and experiences (misery, richness, war, oppression, etc.), helps them realize the similarities and differences that may exist between their own community and other communities; ones that may initially seem remote. The secured atmosphere provided by the classroom fosters communication and allows open discussions of sensitive issues that can be really neither evoked, nor discussed elsewhere. Through years, positive reinforcement grounded on notions of dialogue, tolerance, and acceptance of otherness, may positively contribute in developing learners' cultural competence.

3. **Critical Thinking:**

The 21st century brought with it new challenges at both local and global levels. The large amount of information we receive everyday due to an increasing connectivity (social networks, ICTs, satellite channels, etc.) makes it more and more difficult to analyse and to assimilate. Furthermore, the different sources and views to which individuals and groups are exposed everyday, and the complex situations they have to face and cope with makes modern life increasingly challenging. In such a context, developing students' critical thinking becomes vital for their efficient integration in the social as well as the professional life.

Critical thinking can be defined as: "that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem - in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them" (Paul, 1). Literary analysis implies a certain number of activities that require great intellectual efforts. Reading, analysing, constructing a point of view, building an argumentation, and expressing ones opinion, among others, are all cognitive activities that can be developed through time and practice. In this regard, Howie writes, "Through all these cognitive processes, students who analyse what they read therefore will also start thinking critically of what they have read. They make judgements, be decisive, come to conclusions, synthesize information, organize, predict and apply knowledge" (qtd. In Muthusam, 37). The different activities deployed during a literary course can contribute, in a very efficient way, in developing students' critical thinking.

The use of different literary theories to analyse a work constitutes a good example in this regard. First, this allows apprehending the text-situation from completely different angles—an exercise that widens the scope of the learners. For instance, students come often to realize how spheres like the social, the political, the historical, etc. cannot be really dissociated, and how the individual and the communal affect each other. This also allows them to realize the complexity of certain situations that they considered at first as being simple and one-dimensional. Additionally, such exercise offers the possibility to think *outside the box*, and out of the confines of the usually adopted views. The debates and discussions that take place as part of the lectures of-

ten help students realize the limits of their 'traditional' and taken-for-granted views, and introduce them to other ways of apprehending issues. The "hotter" the issue is, the more efforts the students will deploy to defend their position; a situation that encourages them to *think* more about their own thinking, and to give a better structure to their ideas and thoughts.

Thus, literary texts, being subject to multiple possible interpretations, constitute excellent materials to develop critical thinking since they give the possibility for students to exercise their own imagination, analytical capacities, and readings. In addition, acquiring a certain capacity for analysing complex and multifaceted situations through different lenses, and observing how different characters may react in front of varied experiences, and how they manage to overcome difficulties, even if in the fictional world, are all elements that can contribute in developing such a key competence. Improving the quality of one's thinking is undeniably a competence that can be deployed later in different contexts, and outside the realm of classroom situations.

Conclusion:

If conceived and conveyed in a constructive way, literary modules can to a large extent help students acquire a great number of competences including, among others, linguistic and communicative competence, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. In present day local and global contexts, the acquisition of these competences have become crucial for individuals willing to integrate social life and to succeed in their professional career. Equally important, the combination of these competences, along with others, may lead to the creation of more open, responsible, and active citizens who are able to efficiently contribute in the construction of their society.

Consequently, teachers should be able to conceive and to articulate clearly the *whys* behind the inclusion of 'Literature' in an "English as a foreign language" training. Their own 'conviction' and awareness of the issue certainly helps ameliorate the global conception and construction of the courses since this can endow them, either explicitly or implicitly, with a global vision. In a similar line, we strongly recommend to devote at least a session at the beginning of the literature curricula, i.e. while students are still making their first steps

into the literary sphere, to set clearly the objectives of the courses and to raise students' knowledge and awareness about the benefits they can acquire from studying literature. Raising learners' awareness, and, hence, their motivation, will positively affect the learning process and, thus, contribute in improving the overall quality of education, which can be considered, in many regards, as the ultimate goal.

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ⁱ For further readings see *A Multi-disciplinary approach to teaching of literature* by Benzaoui F. and Miliiani M. which, through its different chapters, offers some interesting insights on the topic.

ⁱⁱ The adaptation of a competence based analysis does not aim to devalue the importance of literature as one of the highest forms of human expression, and which, accordingly, contributes in the enlightenment of the human mind.

ⁱⁱⁱ The role that mass media (through movies, shows, series, etc.) and new technologies (mainly social networks) play today in spreading the English language especially among Algerian youngsters is undeniable and requires an in-depth investigation.