Re-thinking the Practice of Teaching Literature to Enhance EFL Students' Civic Skills: An Algerian Perspective

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Abstract
Besides the undisputable role of literature in teaching civic virtues through exposing students to characters and themes that accurately exemplify and truly represent civility, teaching literature can serve a means to inculcate in students various civic skills, such as conflict resolution, leadership, negotiation of meaning and constructive criticism. Yet, to attain such skills, teachers need to reshape their teaching practices to be in conformity with the principles of modern education that champion active learning methodologies. The present paper argues for the necessity of rethinking the traditional teacher-centered methods in teaching English literature in the Algerian context as they tend to reduce students' active participatory roles in learning. In response to this, a number of suggestions have accordingly been put forward to enable students reach more independency in dealing with literature. This orientation of thought stems from the belief that active learning is conducive to active citizenship.

Key words: Active learning, civic virtues, civic skills, literature teaching, teacher-centered methods.

Introduction

The noticeable revival of literary studies since the 1980s has marked the integration of literature in foreign language curricula worldwide (Carter, 1993). Yet, integrating literature in an EFL context entails the careful exploitation and the sensitive handling of the literary text to put the students in a better position to benefit from it linguistically, culturally and motivationally. In the same vein of thought, it is hard to deny the fact that literature, as an educating material, plays a significant role in teaching students civic virtues and noble values as it often exposes them to universal characters and themes that exemplify and represent civility. Teaching literature is equally considered an efficient means to inculcate civic skills in students, such as conflict resolution, leadership, negotiation of meaning and constructive criticism. However, in order for teachers to enable students acquire such skills; their teaching practices have to be reshaped to concretize an active learning methodology. This is another way of saying   that teachers need to rethink the traditional instructional modes that usually consider the student as "Tabula Rasa" to be filled up with factual knowledge about literary productions. In response to some inadequacies of teaching EFL literature in the Algerian context, the present paper suggests alternate strategies that encourage students reach independency in dealing with literary texts. These suggestions stem from the belief that active learning is conducive to active citizenship.

Literature as a Resource for Teaching Civic Virtues

In addition to its significant role in language learning and cultural understanding, literature can also contribute to the students' civic readiness due to the fact that narratives, be them fictional or historical, are very likely to introduce and expose them to universal characters and themes that truly represent civility and good citizenship. In fact, literature according to Lazar (1993) has the power to educate the whole person. It elevates and transforms experience, and functions as a continuing criticism of values. The aesthetic delight of literature also serves to purify emotions and morals, and illumine the intellect. That is why, it is considered as an important part of education (Diyanni, 2002).In emphasizing the role of literature in providing the students with the richest and the most efficient contexts for moral awareness and behaviour, Bohlin (2005) accordingly writes:

> The study of literature provides students with an occasion for focused moral reflection and dialogue, an occasion to examine what informs the moral compass guiding fictional lives. Adolescents need a constructive context within which to talk about the lives of others – how they sorted out conflicting desires and learned (or failed to learn) to make their actions consistent with their ideals. (p.27)

Furthermore, literary productions all too often mirror the social, economic and political issues in societies. The author sees these issues from within an idiosyncratic angle, and therefore, attempts to present them to his/her readers. This knowledge can in turn help improve society. Needless to recall, civics sets the target of building the character of an ideal citizenship by stressing good morals and noble values, and this can be achieved through literature. The didactic aspect of literature is significantly efficient in inculcating these teachings in young readers in an implicit manner (Prasanth, 2004).

By the same token, Quigley (2000) praises the crucial role of literature in setting and reinforcing civics learning in educational institutions. He also discusses the benefit that might arise from introducing students to stories that exemplify civic virtues (courage, tolerance, patriotism, integrity, respect...etc) emphasizing the role of the teacher in selecting the most appropriate works conducive to the fullest understanding of morality in civic life.

More to this point, Stotsky (1992) insightfully discusses the merits of literature in inculcating in young learners civic virtues and values. She first draws attention to the role of a national (American) literature in enriching their historical knowledge as well as raising their awareness of the nation's cultural identity. In this very specific context, Stotsky referred to some outstanding American literary works such as Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays which ,according to her, have much to play in attaining an understanding not only of America's political and social values, but also its civic identity.

On the other hand, Stocky (1992) insists on extending the exposure of students to literature to include works on other people and from other corners. She firmly thinks that such "foreign works" in spite of their distinct cultural perspectives and loads, in comparison with the local ones, can help students understand the universality of humans' desire for freedom and justice worldwide. In making this point and to be illustrative enough, she referred to the works of Chinua Achebe and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Teaching Literature: Teaching Civic Skills

Besides its role in teaching civic virtues, teaching literature can serve a means to promote students' civic skills (Stosky, 1992). Yet it seems wiser to wonder what the term "civic skills" refers to. Civic skills have been approached differently among civic educators. According to Kirlin (2003) civic skills refer to a set of individual abilities that are essential for an effective and sufficient participation in civic life. These include communicative skills, critical thinking and interpretation skills, monitoring skills, organizational skills, group discussion skills and cooperative skills at large. Kirlin (2003) accordingly writes that "Civic skills do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of a larger set of ideas about what is believed to be necessary for citizens to be engaged in public life. (p.3)

Preparing students to be civically engaged requires teaching them new knowledge and skills such as problem solving and thinking critically to initiate social actions in community settings. This is the idea of Battistonni (2002) as cited in Welch (2007) who identifies a number of specific skills that are deemed necessary for students to be engaged citizens. These include the following:

- ✓ Critical thinking skills
- ✓ Communication skills
- ✓ Problem solving skills
- ✓ Civic imagination and creativity
- ✓ Collective action
- ✓ Organizational analysis

While civic skills can be acquired at several organizational environments, they are all too often connected to and associated with civic courses offered at educational settings. Yet, beyond restricting the acquisition of civic skills within a standalone course with rigid boundaries, the point worth being raised in this context is the contribution of EFL teaching in promoting such skills because the importance of civic education and citizenship expands beyond a separate well-defined course, and therefore, it can take place in any class across curricula. In this respect, Burchett Gauna and Paul (2016) rightly posit that "preparing students to actively take part in the world around them is not merely the goal of one class; it is the overarching goal of school community."(pp.19-20)

It is within this vein of thought that the role of teaching EFL literature in promoting students' civic skills and civic engagement should be explored. In line with the necessary skills for ensuring civic engagement, it seems that literature is in a better position to respond to and fulfill these requirements. This would deliberately lead us to recall that literature can serve a source for:

  ➢ **Linguistic development:** since it provides the students with genuine and perfect examples of writing and expressive varieties.(Collie & Slater,2000)
  ➢ **Mental training:** reading literature improves the theory of mind. It urges and motivates the reader to unveil ambiguities and incompleteness of characters and plots. (Kidd & Castano,2013)
  ➢ **Open to interpretation:** Because of its various layers of meaning, literature is open to interpretation. The figurative aspect in literature adds impetus to perceiving it differently. Being a material open to interpretation also enhances the students' critical thinking skills. (Lazar,1993)

  ➢ **Communicative drive:** taking literature as a source of discussion improves students' communicative skills (paraphrasing, summarizing, arguing..etc) (Showalter,2003)

  ➢ **Tolerance and understanding**: getting insight into another culture through reading literature promotes the sense of tolerance and accepting otherness.(Kramsch,1993)

  ➢ **Cooperative effect:** involving the students in reading and analyzing the same book serves a useful task to enhance their cooperative skills (Daniels, 2002).

Active Learning and Civic Engagement
According to Quigley (2000) the acquisition of civic skills necessitates involving the students in an active learning environment. By the same token, Colby et al (2003) assert that promoting civic engagement in classrooms is ideally founded on some principles that include: active learning, learning as a social process, contextualized learning, reflective practice and the ability to represent an idea in more than one modality. The remarkable emphasis on active learning in attaining civic engagement goes in parallel with the recent trends in modern education, which has been primarily concerned with making students responsible for their own learning. This direction of thought has been driven by the strong desire to achieve a sustainable, self directed and life-long learning. To this end, active learning seems and yet has proven to be, despite the constraints that might impede its implementation, an adequate approach to move from the traditional ways of instruction which

stress the role of the teacher and the knowledge s/he delivers at the expense of the role of students in constructing knowledge.

Broadly speaking, active learning refers to some strategies and techniques that extend the role of student beyond simply listening to a lecture. Hence, the student is required to be engaged in learning through discovery, processing, applying as well as evaluating input. This basic idea about the essence of active learning is expressed by Felder and Brent (2009) who posit that active learning denotes "anything course-related that all students in a class session are called up on to do other than simply watching, listening and taking notes." (p.2)

By the same token, and in a more detailed manner, Faust and Paulson (1998) highlight the dynamic nature of active learning. They therefore associate it with

> Any learning activity engaged in by students in a classroom other than listening passively to an instructor's lecture. …. this includes everything from listening practices that help students absorb what they hear, to writing exercises in which students react to lecture material, to complex group exercises in which students apply course material to "real life" situations and/or new problems. (p.4)

 In brief, because the crux of active learning is, par excellence, student-centredness,it caters for the different learning styles, addresses students' needs and most importantly exhorts the teacher to come down from the pedestal to assume the role of a facilitator who strives to create a supporting and autonomous learning environment.

Active Learning VS Passive Learning

Passive learning is deeply interwoven with traditional approaches of education that consider the teacher as the only source of knowledge. It is characterized by the limited personal involvement, and as such, it is not self –reinforcing. Passive students do little to contribute to learning; their roles are typically minor, and because of this, they "tend to become disinterested, non-motivated and nonresponsive, and ineffectual" (Petress, 2008, p. 566). The issue of students' passivity at higher education institutions, in particular, has recently become a serious concern for many educationalists (Bonwell& Eison, 1991). Though this phenomenon might be attributed to many reasons, the motivational drive seems to be at the core of it. Commenting on this issue, Hariss (1997) posits that "many university students are passive learners; their prime concern is to pass or get a good mark which will ultimately contribute towards their opportunities for further study or employment."(p.13)

On the other hand, the controversial issue to be raised here regarding active and passive learning is that both concepts are sometimes misperceived and misused, in the sense that many of us would argue that students may learn in a passive fashion and that learning, by definition, implies a type of activity. Clarifying this confusion, Ryan and Marten (1989) in cogent words write that:

> Students learn both passively and actively. Passive learning takes place when students take on the role of "receptacles of knowledge"; that is, they do not directly participate

in the learning process... Active learning is more likely to take place when students are doing something besides listening.(p.20)

Active learning, as opposed to passive learning, stimulates the student to think about and consider the teacher as being a resource, a guide, an enabler and a facilitator for further endeavours and higher challenges. Active students usually assume dynamic and energetic roles in forging their education. They tend to show the full readiness to invest in what is learned by discussing it, working with it, explaining it, transforming and even testing it. To sum up this point, Petress (2008) as cited in Kheladi (2017, p.56) provides the major characteristics of active and passive learners.

Active learner
- Asks stimulating questions
- Challenges ideas.
- Follows up what has been learned with personal extension: supplementary independent reading, extended projects etc…
- Connects what is being learned with what previously learned for better application of input.
- Cooperates with peers: s/he shares views and exchanges findings with them.
- Demonstrates an enthusiastic attitude towards learning.
- Stimulates others.

Passive learner
- Lacks motivation and enthusiasm
- Faces problems of retention.
- Does not ask probing and challenging questions.
- Fails to apply what has been learned.
- Even though s/he is bright, s/he tends to acquire a reputation as not so smart learner.
- Is not always sought out for their views or insights on what they know.
- Does not easily accept cooperation with others.

Literature Teaching in the Algerian Context: State of the Art
Similar to many other EFL contexts, the teaching of literature in most Algerian universities is regretfully still traditional in nature in the sense that teachers depend heavily on lecturing and extended presentations. Within such modality of instruction, students rarely penetrate underlying meanings of literature as their roles are all too often reduced to memorizing and rote learning. In fact, many literature courses are turned into the mere transposition of teachers' own interpretations of texts leaving little space for students to seek and evidence meaning by themselves.

Yet, one has to draw attention to the fact that such a traditional practice often stems from the status of literature itself within the curriculum, particularly at the graduate studies. Literature, in comparison with other language- oriented subjects, is to some extent unfocused. Indeed, besides the limited time allotted to literary studies, the curriculum in its very essence is a survey of the major literary genres and movements. This is the reason why teachers find themselves in many cases urged to adopt a typically informative approach. However, this obsession with coverage rather than with developing in students the necessary competencies of how literature should be read and understood tends to prevent students from appreciating literature.

Moreover, such a traditional practice of literature teaching has had undesirable effects on students' literary competence. Many literature courses tend to direct the students' attention and interest towards contexts, backgrounds, history and sometimes to criticism principally led by the teacher, leaving little space for the vital foundation for appreciating literature, i.e. language. This focus on the extrinsic analysis of the literary text, one might say, is the hall mark of many literature graduate classrooms nationwide. Teachers usually rely on the use of excerpts particularly from novels and assign students the task of extensive reading and because sometimes they do not, reflexive teaching, to use Showalter's (2003) term, automatically takes place . Very few works are entirely studied in the classroom. This is not to devaluate entirely what Palmer (1998) and Showalter (2003) referred to as teaching from the "microsom". But one has to recall the fact that excerpts often lose the excellence of style, and therefore, reducing the benefit of literature. (Cook, 1986)

Teachers on the other hand, often put the blame on students for showing a striking reluctance in nudging themselves into extensive reading. This reluctance, however, is further increased by the selected texts. Indeed, the focus of the syllabus is entirely centered on the study of canonical works and seldom involves modern and non-native literature except for advanced literary studies within which students encounter other kinds of literature, particularly postcolonial texts. Another undeniable fact is that regardless of the approach being implemented in teaching EFL literature, the text is not sufficiently exploited in the classroom so as to involve students in an active learning environment, though most teachers seem to be well aware about the significance of active learning in achieving engagement with literature among students. Their common arguments, in this respect, stem from the assumption that such learning strategies are characteristically hard to apply. Implementing active learning strategies according to many of them is a real challenge especially for those dealing with large classes. In such settings, they are more frequently encountered with the fear to lose control over their classes despite the fact the teacher are supposed to be adequately trained to opt for efficient classroom management techniques that ensure the desirable flow of the course for a supportive learning environment. Another source of anxiety for teachers in applying active learning grows out from the endless obsession with coverage. This is another way of saying that active learning strategies are time consuming, and this in turn urges teachers to leave out some scheduled items or/and deal with others sketchily. Yet, teachers have to account for the fact that covering the syllabus must not be attained at the cost of students' active engagement. The neglect of active learning is also the result of some teachers'reluctance and resistance of change. Many of them would feel comfortable when sticking to the traditional modes of teaching because of their uncertainties of what the new teaching techniques would bring out to them. Consequently and inevitably this will lead them to act as custodians of knowledge, sometimes underestimating their students' abilities (Kheladi, 2017).

Towards An Active Learning Literature Classroom
In response to the different inadequacies and the traditional instructional methods of teaching literature, the present research outlines some recommendations and suggestions which hopefully will contribute to the promotion of active learning in the Algerian EFL literature classroom.

Text Selection: Towards Familiar Themes
The first step towards achieving an active learning environment concerns the text itself. Ensuring

engagement with literature necessitates opting for familiar themes that prompt the students to interact and transact with literary texts. However, familiarity, in this context, is not seen in generic terms because, as argued by Brock (1990), familiarity with the values, themes and issues portrayed in literary texts can significantly affect the students' comprehension and appreciation of literature more than concrete elements like background, place or time. Therefore, opting for universal themes such as courage, integrity, love, patriotism and sacrifice allows students to "view literature as an experience that enriches their lives" (Ali, 1994, p.289) .Stated differently, if literature is to matter, the text has to be chosen in relation to the real life-worlds of the students. This way literature will succeed in addressing directly their emotions; meeting their interests, catering for their needs and concerns. And as such it helps them grow as responsible citizens.

Exploiting Literature

It is quite paradoxical that many Algerian EFL literature teachers extensively argue for the boundless merits of literature in the foreign language classroom while their teaching practices, in many instances, reflect little interaction between their students and the literary text. Worse still, many of them would go further to draw a rigid distinction between the study of literature as content and the use of literature as a resource for language learning. Unfortunately, this clear cut divide is often conducive to reducing the benefit of the literature. On this basis, the need for exploiting the literary text becomes de facto a sine qua none condition for attaining an active learning environment. Authorities on literature teaching such as Lazar (1993), Carter and Long (1991) and Parkinson and Thomas (2000) have acknowledged the significance of working with literature. Their suggestions, in this very specific context, include multiple activities that teachers might bring into their classrooms some of which are traditional while others are innovative. Yet, what seems to account much is that these activities ought to be student-centered, carried out both individually or cooperatively. Methodologically speaking, within such activities, literary texts might be manipulated, rewritten from a different point of view, compared, summarized, transformed to other genres and even performed. (Kheladi, 2017)

Liberating Students' Thoughts and Emotions: A Reader Response Stance

If an effective literary reading in the EFL classroom is to take place, it is strongly advisable to develop an adequate pedagogy that might assume a place for the teacher to enable the students reach independency in reading, interpreting ,and hence, appreciating literature. It is believed that this could be achieved if a reader response approach is encouraged. The reader response theory in literature has shifted the exclusive focus on the text to an emphasis on the reader. The very assumption underlying this transactional model of reading is that meaning is built between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1994, Probst, 1994,). Rosenblatt (1994) argues that the transaction process is determined by a number of variables including: the attention, the physical and the emotional state of the reader. In a deeper sense, within a transactional reading, the reader brings to the text personality traits, past events, present preoccupations which make his relationship with the text distinct and unique. The reader response approach develops in the students the ability to create meaning themselves beyond those provided and sometimes imposed by the teacher, critics, and their peers and even by the text itself. This is in fact another way of prompting the students, as independent individuals, to echo freely their own opinions and judgments by bearing upon their personal life experience.

Literary Discussions: A Step forward towards Dialogic Teaching

As stated above the transactional reading in the literature classroom is of capital importance. Yet, it might well be supplemented and further elaborated through more open confrontations with the opinions suggested by teachers and peers. This is the reason why literary discussions must be encouraged and the role of the students to take part in them must be praised and sustained. Ideally, teaching literature turns to be effective when it stimulates contemplation and synthesis by thinking over new concepts, posing sound and critical questions, raising relevant hypotheses and drawing convincing conclusions. To this end, literary discussions can offer the students the widest opportunity to develop and share their own interpretations of texts, to deepen their and others' understanding and to argue against readymade and/or previously established judgments (Clark, 2009). Introducing literary discussions is a means to move away from and transcend the predominant monologic modes of teaching within which the teacher is the "all know master" who arrogantly takes over the flow of talking in depositing knowledge, leaving little space for students' interaction and participation. Conversely, dialogic instruction, which stems from Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogic discourse, challenges the idea that meaning is authoritative and fixed. Dialogic instruction tends to favour and sustain the students' active participation in classroom discourse. It champions their voices in discussing and interpreting texts collaboratively with the teacher. Therefore, "by making their classroom interaction more dialogic, teachers can engage students in a collaborative deliberation of complex questions and support the development of students' thinking." (Reznitskaya, 2012, p.446).The dialogic mode of teaching is a step forward in preparing students to be engaged in civic activities. Through discussions, students acquire the communicative and interpersonal social skills to express and defend their own opinions as well as to reflect soundly on those suggested by others.

Cooperative Learning

The premise of cooperative learning, as an active learning strategy, is that students are engaged in working together towards a common goal (Carter, 1993). This in turn makes cooperative learning more structured and more organized than traditional group works. Creating a cooperative learning environment in the classroom necessitates the active involvement of heterogeneous group members in tasks. In so doing, each member is required to learn from and contribute to others' learning. Teachers, therefore, must strive to concretize the essential components of (CL) which, according to Jonson et al (1993), are:

(1) Positive interdependence: The student in the group must embrace the belief that his/her success is connected to and dependent on the success of his/her peers and vice –versa.
(**2) Face-to-face interaction:** The students are required to promote interaction in the group by explaining to each other how to solve problems, discuss concepts and, equally, teach their knowledge to each other.
(3) Personal accountability: Students learn together so that they can, in a later stage, perform better as individuals. They should be made aware of the fact that though they are working together towards a common objective, each member is responsible for his/her own contribution. Calling randomly on individual students to present their group's work is a common procedure to check personal accountability.

(4) Interpersonal and social skills: Besides linguistic skills, students learn interpersonal skills such as attentive listening to others, providing useful explanation, giving directives and acting as coordinators.

(**5) Group processing:** A common procedure for group processing is to ask each group to list things the group have well done and things that should further be improved.

The benefit of cooperative learning in the literature classroom would be boundless when critically implemented. The structured cooperative activities, within which the groups are provided with well-defined guidelines regarding the task and what ought to be achieved by the end of the course, have the very potential to improve students' academic achievements and promote in them effective skills, such as negotiation of meaning, problem solving, critical thinking and efficient communicative strategies. In this respect, Slavin (1991) posits that implementing cooperative learning in the classroom will result "in improvements both in the achievement of students and in the quality of their interpersonal relationships" (p.71). Obviously enough, such qualities are necessary in both school and extra school settings.

Conclusion

The present paper has praised the role of literature in promoting civic engagement. Introducing literature to students and inciting them to explore deeply its universal themes and characters is conducive to inculcating civic values in them. In addition to this, it has been made clear that in order to improve students' civic readiness, it is crucial to reconsider both the teaching materials and the practiced methodologies. It is within this vein of thought that the present research has brought into play the claim of many civic educationalists in stressing the significance of active learning in enhancing students' civic skills. Active learning requires the students to do more than simply listening to a lecture and taking notes. It rather urges them to be fully engaged in a process of discovery, processing, applying and evaluating input. Regretfullly, and the literature teaching practice in most Algerian EFL settings is still interwoven with old fashioned teacher-centred approaches that rather instill passivity in students. Active learning is seen as a requisite for active citizenship. That is why the present paper has presented some recommendations and suggestions to help concretize an active learning environment in the literature classroom. The text has to be carefully chosen to motivate students seeking further and deeper knowledge. The teaching practice on the other hand has to be aligned with a student centred approach that allows the move from "banking" to "dialogue".

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