Investigating the Use of Learner-Centered Methods in Teaching Literature in Algerian Higher Education: The Case of Djillali Liabes University Sidi Bel Abbes

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Abstract
This paper reports on a research study that aimed to investigate the literature teaching approaches used by English Department faculty at higher education in Djillali Liabes University in Sidi Bel Abbes. More specifically, this study focuses on the use of learner-centered techniques and methods. For this purpose, a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods was utilized to collect data from the sample population. Results revealed that regardless of the shift in educational methods, teachers are still skeptical to use them in literature classes for they lack confidence about students’ capacities. Moreover, it has been advised that an extensive use of learner-centered activity would encourage students become more autonomous.

Keywords: Student-centered Approach; Teaching Literature; Learner’s autonomy; Paradigm shift, Collaborative Learning
1. Introduction

There exists in the field of literature teaching various approaches; however, we can state four of them namely,

a) The language-based approach. Which reduces the text to its linguistic features, such as dissecting it for literal and figurative language? Therefore, the subject of literature is only a means to teach linguistic aspects. (Carter & Long, 1991).

b) The culture-based approach. This sheds light on the social, historical, political and literary contexts of the text. Focus is the interpretation of the text, which is mostly teacher-centered.

c) The personal growth approach. Which blends a focus on language with a focus on context and textual meaning or interpretation. Students here are encourage to express their opinions and develop their own interpretations of the text.

d) The integrated approach. It utilizes strategies used in stylistic analysis, exploring texts, literary and non-literary, from the perspective of style and its relationship to content and form.

Furthermore, recent pedagogies are shifting the focus on student-centered instruction instead of teacher-centered one in classroom and curricula design, where the main focus is on what, how, where and when to teach certain subjects in regard to learners’ choices and capacities. The concept of ‘Paradigm shift gained much attention after a 1995 article by Change Journal entitled “From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education”. Both authors, Robert Barr and John Tagg developed a deep analysis of the old teaching methods and called it the ‘Instruction Paradigm’. In such a paradigm, they argue that the main goal is to provide instruction to students through lectures which place the teacher at the centre of the process. Hence, learning doesn’t seem as a priority and it is mainly the student’s responsibility.

The need for change that the teacher promotes drives people in the education field to step out from narrow visions to universalism, from prejudice to understanding and celebrating uniqueness and individualism; also to step into a technologically united world. However, this change imposes huge responsibilities on teachers and faculty members in order to mould the minds of these new generations.

Even though, teachers in the Algerian university are willing to undergo the changes promoted by the new reforms and to cope with the new teaching methods; they are still used to be the only decision makers in the learning process and they cannot rely on their students’ choices and preferences of materials. Teachers are confident about their capacities in tackling any topic regarding literature whether in terms of form or content; however, they are less confident when it comes to handing over control to students to manage information in class.

The real issue is not about whether student-centeredness is used in the literature classroom; however, it is more about whether it is used in its full sense or not. One cannot deny that Algerian teachers mostly aspire to become better teachers and to use international modern methods and standards. The matter of discussion in this work is whether Algerian literature classrooms are finally and radically shifting their ways toward student-centered approaches; or is it still a dream far from fulfilling?
2. Methodology
The main tool used for this study is a questionnaire administered to the third year students to collect their views about the literature teaching in their department and to which extent their teachers are learner-centered. The questionnaire is formal containing ten different questions ranging from closed to open-ended. In addition, an interview tool-of about fifteen questions- was used with the literature teachers at the department to compare the findings and collect views about the teachers’ practices. Teachers were met privately for this purpose at their own convenience.

3. Participants
The sample in this study included eighty Algerian students from Djillali Liabes University majoring in English Arts. They were in their third academic year and to obtain a bachelor’s degree by the end of the year. The participants were exposed to literature as a yearly taught module at the Department of English. The number of literature courses they were exposed to exceeded fifteen sessions taught by the same instructor. Both males and females students volunteered to participate in the study. As for the teachers, seven full-time teachers were included in the study. All of the participants have at least a master’s degree in Literature or Literature teaching fields. They mostly taught the subject for more than five years to different levels.

4. Findings
4.1 The Student's Questionnaire
The student’s questionnaire was mainly a combination of open, closed and open-ended questions where students were invited to comment on some answers for more clarification. It did not take more than ten minutes to complete for most of the students.

Question 01: While teaching a novel or a short story, how the teacher begins his class?
When asked this question, students were asked to tick choice boxes with yes/no according to the given propositions. Thus, forty students (50%) answered with a lengthy introduction presenting the author’s biography and a summary of the critic’s opinions. Twenty five of them (31%) answered with asking students to give details about the writer and read the passages. Eventually, fifteen of them (19%) confessed that teachers start the class straight away.
Question 04: Encouraging Students’ Interpretations
Students when asked about whether their teacher allows them the freedom to give their own interpretation about the literary piece, twenty eight students (35%) answered with Yes. Meanwhile, thirty three of them (41%) answered with sometimes and nineteen of them (24%) answered with No.

Students have mixed views on whether their teacher allows them freedom of interpretation or not. As an attempt to protect his good image, they tend to give neutral answers. Teachers apparently, give a fair amount of interest to students’ interpretations even though they admitted to be given information directly when faced with difficult passages which are puzzling.

Question 05: Cooperative Learning
When asked about whether the teacher makes them work in pairs or in groups; twelve students (15%) answered with yes. Meanwhile, forty five of them (56%) answered with sometimes and
twenty three (29%) answered with never. Students’ answers validate teachers’ responses when it comes to assigning collaborative tasks. Students admitted being involved in pair or group activity occasionally.

Figure 3. Pair and Group work tasks

Question 08: The Teacher’s Methodology
When asked about their attitudes towards the teacher’s methodology, twenty five students (31%) admitted to like it very much. Meanwhile, thirty eight of them (48%) said they barely like it and seventeen of them (21%) said that they did not like it at all.

Figure 4. Students’ Attitudes towards the Teacher’s Methodology

4.2 The Teacher’s Interview Findings
When asked about student-centeredness as a teaching approach, most of the teachers admitted being familiar with the term as referring to didactics of teaching literature. However, they argued being literature specialists and being of less familiarity of what this approach may stand for. As for scaffolding and coaching as teaching roles linked to the learner-centered approach, the majority of teachers admitted their ignorance of these terms may refer to. They regard them as
technical terms related not specifically to literature but to didactics which is far from their field of expertise.

Moreover, when asked about learner-centered teacher characteristics, most respondents gave general teacher characteristics such as being a resource, a guide, a motivator…etc. One of the respondents went further to explain how a literature teacher needs to be a one man show and seduce his learners by being the star of his own show in every session. The teachers focused more on their image in class and how students’ perceive them. They encouraged teachers to portray the model of an intellectual who is competent and in command of his subject matter.

At another level, regarding students’ involvement in class; most teachers complained about students not being equipped enough for student-centeredness use in class. They argued that their students’ competencies are of poor quality and they lack guidance. Moreover, they admitted students’ reliance on them at more than 50% rate. Surprisingly, one respondent said that his students rely completely on him with minor exceptions. In terms of material selection, respondents clearly explained how they opt for language readability, text’s length, culturally and morally acceptable and sometimes contemporary books that are easy to find online. Teachers argued selecting stories with themes close to students’ reality and avoiding the ones related to philosophy and taboos.

However, teachers were skeptical in stating that they allow students interfere in adapting content to their own. In fact, they were clear about how they select texts for their students and referring to students’ choices as childish and inappropriate. Instead, one of them encourages his students to have their own reading logs with their own material selections where they can read, write and discuss them whenever possible. Most of the teachers confessed teaching a book for more than one year. As far as encouraging students’ creative writing, most teachers admitted collecting poems from their students (mostly girls) at the end of the year. However, these poems are not considered in the learning process. In terms of classroom activities, teachers argued using presentations most of the time. However, one teacher confessed encouraging his students to form unsupervised book clubs and having reading logs.

Finally, most teachers asked about assessment admitted relying on the final examination where they have a chance to evaluate students’ linguistic skills as well as content and knowledge. Furthermore, they recommended portfolio use as an assessment tool even though it is very demanding and hard to evaluate.

5. Conclusion
As can be seen from the findings, literature teachers confirmed the researcher’s assumptions about holding positive views in what concerns the student-centered approach to teaching. However, these teachers failed in demonstrating a deep knowledge about it in the real case. They failed in defining it, linking teacher’s roles to it nor advising proper activities that could promote it in class.
Students also confirmed their lack of responsibility towards their learning process linking it to their lack of involvement in the classroom. Students referred to being dominated by the teacher’s high command of the subject and lack of faith in their level and capacities. Consequently, they passively accepted these attitudes and judged themselves being unfit for sharing decision making or helping selecting material. Whereas, for assessing learning, teachers confessed being teacher-centered in this area and reported using the final examination as the main way to assessing their learners. From their side, students confessed being limited by such assessment ways and admitted their willingness to make change.

Using student-centered methods, literature classes can serve better educational objectives and achieve more autonomy for students. Such methods create a chance for teachers to hand over responsibility to their students in what concerns their learning process. As for students, they will have more opportunities to direct and regulate their learning as well as to become more autonomous and self-reliant.

References