Teachers' perceptions and concerns about implementing active learning in teaching EFL literature. A case study at Tlemcen University, Algeria

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Abstract

One of the major features of literature teaching in Algeria is the use of teacher-centred instructional approaches based on unidirectional lecturing and extended presentations. The paper examines teachers' perceptions of and their concerns in implementing complex active learning strategies in their classrooms. The research is a case study conducted at the Department of English at Tlemcen University, Algeria. A qualitative approach was adopted in the analysis of the data collected through a structured interview held with three teachers. The findings revealed that despite the teachers' recognition of the crucial role of active learning strategies in sustaining students' engagement with the literature, they are still reluctant to introduce them into their teaching owing to a host of personal reasons and other background and contextual challenges. In response to this, the paper suggests the urgent reconsideration of the applied literature teaching methodology, stressing the role of teacher development to make active learning a successful approach in the classroom.

Keywords: Active learning, literature teaching, teachers 'perceptions, traditional approaches, teacher development.

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1. Introduction

Modern education stresses the need to engage students in a learning environment that enables them to be active agents in solving problems, making decisions, communicating ideas effectively and collaborating with others (Showalter, 2003). These prevailing characteristics stem from the idea that 'knowing of knowledge' is no longer sufficient to attain higher educational standards within a globalised era characterised by its increasingly complex challenges and rapid evolution in the different walks of life. On this basis, optimising life-long learning has become a sine qua non for achieving successful education. This orientation of thought in turn imposes the fact that students must be granted the fullest opportunities to develop their abilities, improve their character and enhance their critical thinking skills. Theoretically at least, such pressing requirements have become an integral part of Algeria's higher education system, particularly within the latest reform launched by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research since 2005. Indeed, the curricula currently in use are characterised by unprecedented flexibility in terms of both content and form to offer teachers the opportunity to develop their students' skills and competencies alongside knowledge and understanding. This is another way of saying that teachers are called on to re-mould their instructional practices to account for the recent trends in education that are inexorably marking the shift from typical teacher fronted approaches that favour – on pedagogical grounds – extended lecturing to student-centred approaches that privilege active learning. This shift towards active learning is believed to make the learning process more relevant and motivating; it equally targets making teaching more innovative and interactive. Within this course of thought, and as part of investigating the teaching of literature in the Algerian EFL context, the present study attempts to respond to the following research questions:

− How do EFL literature teachers at the Department of English at Tlemcen University perceive implementing complex active learning strategies in their classrooms?
− What are the major barriers that may impede this process?

2. Research objectives

The major objectives of the present research are:

− To raise teachers' awareness of the significance of active learning in teaching EFL literature.
− To locate the major sources of the hindrances that might impede implementing complex active learning strategies, and therefore, encourage teachers to cope with them effectively.

3. Literature review

3.1. Active learning: meaning and pedagogical significance

The concept of 'active learning' was first introduced in the literature by Bonwell and Eisen (1991) to denote any strategy or technique that is likely to involve the students, engage them in the learning process and most importantly holds them responsible for their learning. Active learning is a pedagogical practice that stresses the engagement of students in class activities to analyse, synthesise and evaluate knowledge instead of simply listening to instructors and taking notes within the traditional lecture method (Prince, 2004). The dynamic aspect of active learning is conducive to making the students accountable for their learning and hence enjoying more autonomy within it. Meyers and Jones (1993, p. 6) claimed that 'active learning involves providing opportunities for students to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read, and reflect on the content, ideas, issues, and concerns of an academic subject'.

Active learning emphasises the students and their participatory roles in building up knowledge. It places them at the core of the learning process and assists them in becoming autonomous, motivated and enthusiastic by relating what they already know with what is newly introduced to them (Prince,

2004). Active learning is typically effective because within it, students develop a culture of learning by doing as they become increasingly involved. The efficacy of active learning also lies in its power to cater to the different learning styles as opposed to the traditional unilateral lecture method (Wankat, 2002). Because active learning is based on the principles of constructivism (Piaget, 1977), it targets to transcend passive modes of learning, and hence, placing the students in challenging learning situations through which they can develop higher-order thinking skills (Bonwell & Eisen, 1991). Active learning settings are meant to grant the students the opportunity to participate, reflect and talk about what they are learning. In so doing, they are likely to improve their learning. Active learning also reinforces working with and listening to others, and as such, it provides the possibility to gain immediate feedback and (re) adjustment of thought (Ndebele & Maphosa, 2013).

3.2. Complex active learning strategies

Active learning is, as previously stated, an active process in which learners are truly engaged in learning, rather than passively absorbing lectures. Activation can be achieved through a variety of activities suggested by many researchers (Eison, 2010; Faust & Paulson, 1998; Lantis, Kille & Krain, 2010; Prince, 2004). Yet, for the purpose of the present study, the focus will be on some complex active learning strategies suggested by Bonwell and Eisen (1991). These strategies are indeed more relevant for the teaching of literature.

4. Discussion

Classroom discussion as an active learning strategy involves the verbal exchange among students. Therefore, being a student-centred activity, the discussion is likely to arouse student's interest in evoking the different perspectives of the discussed topics. According to Leal (1993), the easiness of incorporating discussions in teaching, especially in the literature classroom, is conducive to creating a comfortable learning environment that sustains students' engagement and motivation in expressing their ideas and opinions away from the pressure to construct and provide 'correct answers'. Within a discursive setting, the teacher's role is reduced to that of a facilitator whose role is to monitor the discussion to attain the target goals of the course (Garside, 1996). The interactive aspect of the discussion is significant in enhancing the students' critical thinking skills while comparing, adjusting, and evaluating and even changing their ideas. Involving the students in discussing polemical issues serves as an efficient means to exhort the students to defend their positions and relate the discussed material with their own real-life experiences (Bligh, 2000). In giving and responding to information, their communicative skills (paraphrasing, arguing, summarising) are likely to be improved.

5. Visual-based learning

Bonwell and Eison (1991) endorse the use of media technologies, such as films and videos and consider them a valuable tool for promoting active learning and attaining educational objectives. Likewise, Pun (2014) praises the role of multimedia technologies in creating favourable contexts for reforming and modernising English language studies by improving learning activities and teaching initiatives. Another prompt for the incorporation of such technologies is their motivational effect on students' learning. Their implementation is likely to empower students' responses to and attitudes towards teaching inputs. This claim stems from the interactive aspect of visual-based learning. In other terms, media has the very potential to trigger the students' interest and attention through well-planned activities, such as class discussions or analytical essay writing.

6. Problem-solving activities

In its very essence, a problem-solving approach to teaching challenges the traditional transmissive modes of education that consider the students as passive receptors of knowledge. It originates from

the belief that learning must be an active constructive process within which students are encouraged to assume active roles. This is another way of saying that problem-solving pedagogy stimulates and exhorts the students to search for and build up knowledge. Commenting on the crux of this pedagogy Hung (2011, p. 531) rightly posits that 'Problem-driven instruction could motivate students to learn the subject due to the human nature of curiosity and taking on challenges'. Problem-solving activities are of capital importance in creating an active learning environment thanks to their significant impact on students' inquisitiveness and motivation. They encourage them to attain knowledge and self-development as they gather information, organise it, make the best use of it to confidently solve problems (Kingsland, 1996).

7. Cooperative learning (CL)

The theory and practice of CL for short, underline that learner can learn from each other when engaged in well-structured tasks. Stated differently, the premise of using CL, according to Johnson and Johnson (1999), is to organise the classroom to help students work together to carry out a common task. In doing so, the students enhance each other's learning skills and develop other social skills such as communication and decision making. Johnson, Roger and Smith (1991, p. 3) referred to CL as being 'working together to accomplish shared goals. When engaged in cooperative activities, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial for themselves and to all other members of the group'. Creating a CL setting, therefore, entails the active participation of heterogeneous members in terms of interaction and negotiation when engaged in tasks. Each group member, therefore, is required to both learn from and contribute to others' work. Indeed, CL is not simply putting students in unstructured activities, but rather, in its truest sense, CL heavily depends on carefully planned tasks with well-defined objectives.

8. Role play and simulation activities

Advocates of role play in the foreign language classroom stress the high degree of authenticity these activities are likely to produce (Carter, 1993). Role playing, therefore, is a technique that engages the students with the study material allowing them to interact efficiently with their peers in fulfilling their specified roles; a process within which the students are likely to develop their interpersonal skills. Students' engagement comes to be a reality as they show eagerness to respond to the material (text) from their perspectives. As such, this activity enhances their creativity; it requires them to opt for particular skills and theories to better account for both the situation and the purpose (Barsky, 1995). The power of using role playing in the classroom lies in the immediacy of experience when the students put themselves into others' shoes. This activity triggers their affective as well as cognitive faculties. It enables them to demonstrate their understanding of the material as they closely interact with its content. Role play enhances the students' communicative skills owing to the fact that their close interaction with the material ranges from at least reading it aloud to more complex tasks, i.e. adopting roles in it. This is indeed what promotes role plays activities to be an ideal space for genuine and creative use of language. It is also an opportunity for the students to measure their language development (Salisbury, 1970).

9. Methods and Materials

9.1. Research context

As stated earlier, the recent reform in education in Algeria has sought to bring innovation and change to English language teaching. The introduced LMD System (henceforth: Licence, Master and Doctorate) encourages teachers and researchers to adjust their practices to comply with the principles of modern education. In terms of teaching practices, the system strongly endorses the use of innovative methods that would cater to the students' needs and expectations. As such, it

acknowledges and sustains any kind of initiatives made by teachers to improve academic standards to mindfully face the challenges of the current globalised era with its multiple implications. However, on the ground, it seems that English language teaching in general and literature teaching, in particular, have witnessed little novelty, particularly in undergraduate studies. To capture this idea, one has to point to the fact that in terms of content, the so-called classical syllabi are still prevailing, and therefore, little change has been made to keep pace with the latest in different subjects, not least literature. As for teaching practices, traditional teacher-fronted methods are, to a greater extent, still predominant reflecting the recurrent norm: Stated objectives versus Classroom practices (Kheladi, 2017).

9.2. Participants

The participants within the present research are three teachers of literature at the Department of English at Tlemcen University, Algeria. The researcher opted for those teachers as they are at present in charge of teaching literature at the undergraduate level. In this respect, it is worth noting that the Department is currently facing a shortage of literature teachers vis-a-vis the huge number of enrolled students. Indeed, the number of literature teachers is limited compared to that of their colleagues dealing with other subjects. Yet, the Department has recently initiated doctoral projects to cope with this situation.

9.3. Instruments

The present study has made use of the structured interview. Within this type of interview, the questions and their order are structured in advance. Berg (1993, p. 69) posits that 'The standardized interview uses a formally structured schedule of interview questions. The interviewers are required to ask subjects to respond to each question'. In other terms, the questions are asked to all respondents following the same wording, sequence and ideally and preferably with the same tone. The strength of the structured interview, therefore, lies essentially in the researcher's control over the topic and the format of the interview. This, in turn, allows the researcher to easily code and analyse data. The interview within this study is structurally divided into three main rubrics. (1) Teachers' profiles and experiences in teaching literature. (2) The practice of teaching literature, i.e., How teachers usually introduce literature to their students. (3) Teachers' conceptions of implementing active learning in the literature classroom and the challenges they face in so doing. For the sake of anonymity, the researcher referred to the interviewed teachers as T1, T2, and T3.

9.4. Data analysis method

The findings of the study were qualitatively analysed and interpreted with reference to the claims, views and assumptions of authorities on the teaching of literature. In this respect, Dornyei (2007) argued that the value of a qualitative analysis lies in its practicality in achieving an understanding of the situation under investigation from the researcher's own interpretation of data.

9.5. Research findings

Question 1: How long have you been teaching literature?

Responding to this question, (T1) admitted that s/he is a novice in teaching literature: an experience of 2 years. As for (T2) and (T3), their experiences vary from 10 to 15 years.

Question 2: How would you qualify literature teaching in an EFL context?

All the respondents reckoned that even though literature teaching is a wonderful journey, it is challenging and effort-demanding. This point was strongly emphasised by (T1) who went further to qualify the job as being hard.

Question 3: What are the main objectives you intend to achieve in teaching literature?

The three respondents seemed to have, to some extent, the same objectives. They thought that through reading and studying literature, their students will have the opportunity to improve their language proficiency, enrich their cultural knowledge of the target culture (British and American) and, vividly, experience the joy literature provides.

Question 4: Which literature teaching model do you adopt? Why?

Answering this question, (T1) did not hesitate to, directly, state that s/he adopts the cultural model, while (T2) and (T3) argued that sometimes they find themselves using a mixture of models. They referred to this as an integrated model. As for the second half of the question, (T1) justified the use of the cultural model on the basis that one should know about famous authors, genres and literary movements in British and American literature. The other two respondents said that an integrated model is conducive to achieving greater benefit for EFL students linguistically, culturally and even motivationally.

Question 5: What techniques do you use in delivering your courses?

Even though the three respondents pointed that they do their utmost to urge the students to actively participate in literature courses, usually through questions and answers around the text and the context in which it was first produced, they did not hide that the predominant technique is merely informative; i.e., lecturing about literature.

Question 6: Are you familiar with the concept of active learning?

The informants as a whole shared to a larger extent the same conception of the concept. They intuitively associated it with engaging students in active roles in the classroom. They argued that involving the students in active learning entails the shift from a teacher-led classroom towards more student-centred teaching methods. T3 insisted on the active interactive aspect of this type of learning and considered it as a supporting teaching technique besides lecturing.

Question 7: Are you familiar with some active learning strategies that can be integrated into teaching literature?

T1 responded that active learning in literature teaching could be attained through interactive lectures and group work activities. Yet, s/he insisted on the fact that irrespective of terms, active learning strategies must be student-centred. T2 and T3 listed some active learning strategies which can be implemented in the literature classroom. Their list includes CL, debates and discussions, simulations and role plays.

Question 8: Discussion, visual-based learning, problem-solving activities, CL, and role play activities are some among many other active learning strategies. Do you implement them in your classroom? Why?

The interviewed teachers acknowledged the fact that these active learning strategies are rarely introduced in the literature classroom. As for the discussion, all teachers appeared to be well aware of its indisputable importance in enhancing the students' critical thinking. Yet, as was emphasised by T3, it is quite difficult to take place in a setting where the teacher is supposed to cover an overloaded syllabus that entails introducing the students to the literature of centuries for the sake of preparing them to formal examinations. T1 and T2 argued that discussions cannot be held regularly in a classroom where only a few students show genuine enthusiasm for reading complete literary works.

Shifting to visual-based learning, teachers asserted that the benefit of using videos, films and movies needs no argumentation, but the lack of facilities and the skills to manipulate this technology make it hard to be used on the ground. T3 asserted that implementing film in teaching literature requires adequate preparation to involve students in meaningful and challenging activities that would spur the students' interest in setting a comparative stance between textual elements and the

screened materials. T1 said that s/he had the opportunity to use film adaptations in teaching fiction and s/he and his/her students enjoyed this novelty in teaching literature.

Problem-solving learning, according to teachers, constitutes the essence of a literature course given its significance in fostering the students' critical thinking skills. Yet, what was deduced from teachers' responses does not reflect a consistent methodology in concretising a problem-solving teaching context as all of them reduced this invaluable teaching strategy to questions and answers on plots and characters.

Role play and simulation activities, on the other hand, are not too much favoured by the interviewed teachers, and here again they justified this neglect based on being more concerned with informing students about literature. T2 and T3 were more explicit in making this point clear saying that their students' lack of a solid literary background all too often urges them to adopt an informative form of teaching. Therefore, little time is left out for performance and dramatisation activities.

CL, though praised by teachers, it is hardly ever introduced as it was the case for T1 and T3, who confessed that they have never used it in in-class activities because it is, according to them, time consuming. T2, however, reported that s/he has made use of CL in literary assignments outside the classroom.

Question 9: What makes it difficult for teachers of literature to use active learning strategies?

In response to this question, the three interviewed teachers mentioned the following reasons:

− Lack of experience among teachers to implement complex active learning strategies.
− The fear of taking risks in trying out new instructional methods besides traditional lectures.
− Preparing courses based on active learning strategies requires more time, resources and planning.
− Students themselves may resist active learning strategies as they are accustomed to unidirectional lecturing.
− Classroom management issues.

10. Discussion and interpretation

The interview held with the three teachers was significant in addressing the major concerns of the present study. Their responses were so informative that many issues related to the teaching of literature had been evoked and enlightened.

The preliminary part of the interview was centred on teachers' profiles as well as their training and experience in teaching literature. It was revealed that their relationship with literature varies from 3 to 20 years. Though this fact may carry a lot in terms of teaching practice and performance particularly for those who are still quite novice in the field, it is natural as long as they commit themselves to professional development. The lack of adequate preparation among novice teachers, however, is likely to put them in enormous challenges. This is the reason why all teachers pointed to the fact that teaching literature to non-native students is all too often a painful experience. Yet, one might assert that the challenge which teachers must take up is how to bring their students closer to the study of this subject despite all the hindrances they may encounter. It is in this way that teachers are expected to show their originality, commitment, brilliance, charisma and intellectuality (Showalter, 2003).

In the second part of the interview, the focus was directed towards the practice of teaching literature aiming at uncovering how literature is being introduced to the students. In this respect, it was revealed that the objectives of teaching literature are still intertwined with an informative practice that fundamentally seeks to expose the students to the history and development of various literary movements. The emphasis on this pedagogy is likely to distance teachers from perceiving literature teaching as a process of transferring skills and competencies to their students. The practice as reported by teachers is quasi teacher-centered which heavily relies on lecturing reflecting a traditional model of teaching which tends to overemphasise depositing knowledge to the students at

the cost of what happens in their minds. Little attention is therefore directed to the students' interaction with the text. It was overtly claimed and admitted by teachers that little is done with literature in the classroom. Unavoidably, because of the heavy reliance on lecturing as an inherent practice; teachers find little time to engage their students in varied activities.

The last and focal item in the interview sought to draw a picture of teachers' perceptions of active learning in the literature classroom and the sources of the challenges they may encounter in using active learning strategies. In this respect, it was depicted that despite teachers' recognition and acknowledgement of the boundless merits of integrating active learning in their teaching, particularly discussions, visual-based learning, problem-solving activities, role play and CL, they seemed –in practice- still reluctant to bring change into their classrooms. Classroom discussions and debates are still neglected though they are the key to settling a dialogic mode of teaching in a setting that aims at enhancing the students' thinking and communicative skills (Showalter, 2003).

Besides, classroom discussions involving literature circles or collaborative reasoning, for instance, enable the students to express their responses in dealing with literature. The responsive stance is likely to enhance students' aesthetic taste to come up with their literary judgments and interpretations (Daniels, 2002). The neglect of discussions and debates is another way of saying that teachers are still favouring monologic shapes of teaching within which little is done to sustain students' voices in classroom discourse.

The introduction of media is also still at a minimum despite its significant impact on the students' motivation and engagement in learning. Teachers need to bear in mind that film and literature have become intertwined allies in modern literary studies. Recently, films and movies, as teaching materials, are widely used in the foreign language classroom. They are so useful that teachers worldwide use them as an efficient tool to convey content and raise students' interest and motivation in learning literature. Thanks to them, the students are invited to re-interpret and reconstruct prior knowledge in the light of the newly acquired. This is the reason why educationalists tend to accentuate the fact that maximising the productivity of using media in the classroom heavily depends on how ably it is used. This is another way of saying that within an active learning context, literature teachers ought to transform this experience from showing to using to guarantee students' engagement with the screened materials. This practical stance ideally stems from outlining clear learning objectives, which in turn, involve planning meaningful and challenging activities (Vetrie, 2004).

Problem-solving activities are quasi non -existent, and are, therefore, reduced to verbal questions revolving around the major points of plots and characters in the text. It is quite unacceptable, one might dare to say, that the study of literature is to be limited to traditional close-ended questions such as who is the major character in the story? Or what happened in it? Such questions are likely to increase students' passivity rather than involving them. It is deplorable that teachers do little to invest in the stylistic aspect of literature to devise problem-solving activities relating to the linguistic choices of authors; activities that would encourage and enable students to decipher the meaning and the way it is conveyed.

CL and simulation activities are not too much favoured by teachers in spite of their significance in creating a dynamic and supportive learning environment in dealing with literature. As pointed by teachers, the students are not involved in structured CL tasks. They are seldom engaged in traditional group work that cannot generate a cooperative effect (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). The impact of teaching literature as a product is quite obvious from teachers' responses; their significant concern is rather attached to covering the contents of the prescribed syllabi to prepare students for formal examinations. Unfortunately, this uncritical pedagogy is not likely to foster students' learning and thinking.

All in all, active learning strategies which have the very potential to shift the focus from teachers to the students and their active engagement with the material are hardly ever implemented. The primary

reasons for this reluctance to divorce traditional teaching, according to teachers, were the lack of experience in implementing active strategies that stems from inadequate training besides the fear and uncertainty to try out new teaching methods that students would resist. Pedagogically speaking, this is nothing but an overt expression of teachers' resistance to change and development. Teachers also pointed to some contextual and background constraints, most notably time constraints and large classes.

11. Limitations

The findings of the present study are to be considered in light of two major limitations. The former relates to the limited number of the interviewed teachers. Hence, further studies would be carried out on a larger scale. The latter concerns the focus on specific types of active learning strategies that were considered relevant to the teaching of literature; there are indeed other active learning strategies that could be implemented.

12. Conclusion

Given the multi-dimensional benefit of active learning, the present study has been accordingly undergone to measure the extent of implementing active learning in the literature classroom at the Department of English at Tlemcen University, Algeria. The data collected through the interview with teachers has provided an enlightening picture of the pedagogical practices adopted by teachers. Those practices seem to be interwoven with a traditional approach that neglects to a larger extent active learning strategies. It is a big paradox that teachers are well aware of the significance of active learning in empowering students' engagement with literature while their teaching styles are all too often bound to unidirectional lecturing. Teachers have complained that those strategies are time consuming or their students may resist them. Yet, this does not seem to be a valid reason for privileging transmissive ways of teaching over active learning.

It is high time teachers stopped teaching literature using a unique mode; it is about time they brought novelty to their practices to meet their students' needs and expectations. Teachers need to recall the irrefutable fact that learning is in its very essence a constant process of discovery that must ideally accentuate the role of the student, not that of the teacher. On this basis, it recommended that teachers implement active learning strategies and strive to build up a supportive and safe learning environment that encourages and motivates the students to participate in a variety of learning activities. This in turn requires the reconsideration of literature teaching objectives, and therefore, concretising a balance between declarative knowledge, i.e., knowledge about things and procedural knowledge, i.e., knowledge about how to do things. The latter form of knowledge supports the use of active learning as it entails learning by doing. That said, teachers ought to act as reflective practitioners to continue to grow in their abilities to assist students in learning. Their success in transforming themselves into creators of active learning environments in the literature classroom heavily depends on questioning their teaching styles and practices, spotting both strengths and weaknesses.

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