

An Investigation of Literature Teaching Methodologies at a Higher Educational Institution in Oman

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research study that aimed to investigate literature teaching approaches used by English Department faculty at a higher educational institution in Oman. The results revealed four different profiles of literature instruction. Most preferred by students was a profile that used a combination of methods or an integrated approach, a finding echoing previous research findings (Wang, 2009; Divsar & Tahriri, 2009).

Keywords: Literature, teaching methods, approaches, models, interpretation, advantages of literature teaching, profiles

Introduction

It has been argued that using literature in the EFL/ESL context has many advantages. Quite obviously, it engages learners emotionally, morally and intellectually, and carries in its language multiple communication means, of which imagery, allegory, symbolism, metaphor and narrative are only a few. It not only models the very finest examples of English usage but, such is its diversity in terms of accessibility, it can also motivate, encourage and guide students at all levels of communicative competence and achievement (Langer, 1990; Lazar, 1993; Al-Mahrooqi & Sultana, 2008; Al-Mahrooqi & Tuzlukova, 2010).

Furthermore, as a verbal art found in all human societies, and as the fullest possible record of mankind's values, survival struggles and achievements, literature is indispensable for teaching target language culture, providing as it does an endless store of authentic material. Despite modern skepticism, there are, after all, universal elements in human experience about which literature can offer unrivalled teaching. And in an age when education's erotics have yielded largely to its hermaneutics, can any other kind of texts (oral or written) give learners greater pleasure when engaging with them?

With its endless capturing of diverse viewpoints, literature can also teach learners critical independence - how to discern the true from the false, how to examine one's own values and beliefs alongside those of others. Indeed, says Schaferman (1991), it teaches them how to think instead of what to think. For her part, Judith Langer (1990) states that while learners are reading literature they might well go beyond the particular situation, associating with it their own experiences or those of people they know, thus encouraging creativity and the imaginative identification on which human harmony crucially depends.

However, to bring about all these benefits in the language classroom, the literature teacher has to be equipped with interactive skills and methodologies that utilize learners' experiences and prior knowledge and usher them into a new world of

fantasy where they learn about the real world vicariously. It is unfortunate though that not all instructors are equipped or prepared to teach literature interactively, and an approach lacking interaction can be counterproductive as it can lead to negative attitudes towards English and towards literature (Al-Mahrooqi, 2003). It is, therefore, important to explore the teaching methodology issue thoroughly, sensitively and from diverse perspectives. However, there is a dearth of research in this area, especially research that investigates “student views on literature teaching methodology in advanced-level tertiary EFL settings (Fogal, 2010, para.5). The present study aims to fill that gap by way of investigating literature teaching methodology at Sultan Qaboos University from a student perspective.

Background

A radical shift has taken place in English Studies over the past fifty years. From a situation in which literature provided the discipline’s core and non-native speakers learnt the language through literary study and a scattering of language drills, the contemporary scene shows literature, now pushed to the margins (Qiping & Shubo, 2002), desperate to prove it has any use for the language learner at all (Poon, 2010). This arises in part from the extraordinary growth in recent decades of theoretical and applied linguistics. Applied linguists, and practitioners who advocate a communicative approach, fail to see the value of literature as a tool that can foster communication and introduce learners to such discourse types as the expressive (e.g. letters), the transactional (e.g. advertising), and the poetic (i.e. poetry, short stories, novels and drama) (Kinneavy, 1971). They view literature as inaccessible and complex (Divsar & Tahriiri, 2009; Picken, 2005; Or, 1995) and maybe detrimental to language learning (Akyel & Yalcin, 1990).

This view could be the result of a number of factors, chief among which is teaching methodology. Evidence shows that many literature teachers still cling to traditional teacher-centered approaches which do not appeal to learners. This has been found to be true especially in ESL/EFL contexts (Fogal, 2010) at a time when the pragmatic use of English is espoused to suit the ‘practical’ needs of the job market and society at large in this era of globalization (Qiping & Shubo, 2002).

Literature Teaching Methods

Different literature teaching methodologies exist in the field. However, there are four main approaches. These are:

- The language-based approach. This takes a reductive approach to literature by focusing on deconstructing the literary text into its linguistic features, such as dissecting it for literal and figurative language. Hence, literature is only used as a means to teach discrete language aspects. Unfortunately, research has shown that this is the most popular approach in the EFL/ESL classroom (Carter & Long, 1991).
- The culture-based approach. This emphasizes the text, exploring its social, historical, political and literary context. Focus is on text interpretation, which is a teacher-centered and not a student-centered task. New criticism is an example of such an approach.
- The personal growth approach. This contains characteristics from the above two approaches as it blends a focus on language with a focus on context and textual meaning or interpretation. In this model, learners are encouraged to

participate and to express their feelings and opinions and to draw associations between the text's characters and events and their own lives (ibid). Thus, it develops learners' ideas and leads to their personal growth. Hence, its very name. Reader response exemplifies such an approach (Rosenblatt, 1980, 1982, 1985a, 1985b, 1995, 1994).

- The integrated approach. Divsar and Tahriri (2009) describe this as “a linguistic approach which utilizes some of the strategies used in stylistic analysis, exploring texts, literary and non-literary, from the perspective of style and its relationship to content and form (p. 108). They go on to say that this approach analyses in detail the stylistic features of a text to show what it means and “how it suggests what it means” (p. 108). They mention three types of considerations observed by teachers using this approach: linguistic considerations, cultural considerations and communicative considerations. In this way the integrated approach marries literature to communication and so makes texts and lessons interactive, practical and communicative.

The Status of Literature Teaching in the L1, L2 and FL Classroom

Though gaining momentum, using interactive approaches in the literature classroom is still not the norm. In fact, research indicates that the application of reader response theories within the ESL/EFL context is sadly lacking. ESL/EFL learners could benefit enormously from reader response approaches because they are in alignment with communicative approach principles and student-centered methodologies, which all place emphasis on the learner and his/her experiences.

Research on teacher practices and their own theories of reading has found that these have changed little since the 1960s (Applebee, 1989, 1992). Literature teachers continue to focus on the close reading of authentic literary pieces, believing that they are organic wholes (Ibid). They also tend to focus on how various aspects of texts, including characters, settings, theme, plot and aspects of language, fit together to form the big picture of the story or work. About such practices, Leila Christenbury (2000) writes:

Many teachers reared in New Criticism in undergraduate or graduate training learned to love the close reading of poetry and prose. In this reading we adhered to a consideration of literature as a relatively isolated object to be discussed and analyzed - almost as one would turn a hard object such as a diamond and consider it from all points of view. The diamond itself would not be altered by the turning and handling; it would retain its entire integrity as an object. Thus, New Criticism, as defined in John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book of the same name, was literature without the influence of the reader, the historical context, or the personal history of the author (p. 48).

In an attempt to study teacher theories and their effect on practice, Zancanella (cited in Beach, 1993) studied five junior high school teachers' theories of reading. The study found that teachers' own theories influence their methods of teaching. To illustrate this, one of the five teachers studied held that understanding literature involves treating the text as a constructed object and so focused students' attention on

understanding the literary techniques or elements constituting the constructed object. For him the text is a puzzle to be solved, a mystery to be unraveled by unfolding all the layers of the text's elements. Therefore, his instruction was based on asking students questions about the different elements of the work and asking them for evidence to support their answers. Sometimes, he would adjust or extend the answer to fit the right interpretation.

Among the five teachers in Zancanella's study, there was one who believed in the value of readers' vicarious participation and involvement in the world of the text. She felt it important to make students knowledgeable about how other people think and feel, including, of course, characters in a story. Thus, she encouraged her students to talk about their own experiences with texts and their own life experiences. Thus, this teacher was reader-centered rather than text-centered, which was apparent in her practice.

Similar findings were reported by Newell, MacAdams and Spears-Burton (1987; cited in Beach, 1993). In their study, they analyzed three high school teachers' theories of literature instruction. They found that these teachers' ways were markedly different and were a reflection of their beliefs about the role of literature. The teacher whose theoretical stance emphasized imparting knowledge about literature was text-centered and employed formal analysis of the text. By contrast, the two teachers who asserted that they believed in using literature to write about experience were more likely to focus on student responses and to emphasize the expression of personal responses.

One reason that teachers' practices tend to be traditional and uninformed by new developments in the field of teaching literature is that often theories are not translated into practice soon after they appear. The process takes time and effort. Literature teachers thus need to explore new possibilities for improving ways of teaching. One useful text that shows how reader response theories can be implemented is *Reader Response in the Secondary and College Classroom* edited by Nicolas J. Karolides (2000). Because it is important for teachers to be aware of how their own beliefs about reading and their own theories about it affect and shape their practice, they may find it useful to make explicit the response theories underlying how they themselves respond to texts.

As is the case with English as a first language teachers (L1), a number of ESL teachers, if not the majority, have focused on the interpretation of the information present in the literary texts. ESL students are usually convinced that their interpretations are not good or at least not adequate and that the teacher's interpretation is the one omniscient one. Usually, ESL teachers are the ones who guide students to such a conclusion because, even in their attempts to involve students in the discussions of the text, they lead them to their personal interpretation of it. Such a practice on the part of the teacher implies to the students that what they feel or think about a work of literature is inferior in quality to that of the teacher.

The product of such an emphasis on interpretation is that students learn that interpretation is the major way of interaction with the text. Associations that learners draw with events or characters and people in their own lives are downplayed in the act of forming meaning through the reading transaction (Scalone, 1998). According to Duke (1982), teachers frequently tend to emphasize the efferent stance on reading. Their concern lies with the recall of information presented in the text. For them, there is only a single correct interpretation and that is the one residing inside the text. Graham and Probst (1982) cite Scholes' description of a literature teacher at work saying:

In the name of improved interpretation, reading was turned into a mystery and the literature classroom into a chapel where the priestly instructor...astounded the faithful with miracles of interpretation (p. 31).

In the EFL/ESL field, research has focused on eliciting student opinions about a certain methodology (Matsuura, Chiba & Hilderbrandt, 2001; Wang, 2009) or on comparing one methodology and another, or several methodologies that employed different activities (Green, 1993; Fogal, 2010). Findings show that methods that engage the learners' culture and background knowledge and consider their personal and emotional response to literature are favored by students and bring about better results (Divsar & Tahriri, 2009).

The Study

The study aimed to find out what teaching methods are used in literature classes taught at Sultan Qaboos University from the point of view of students taking them. It also aimed to investigate students' feelings and opinions about these methods in order to see if they have any relationship with their attitudes towards literature.

The Instrument

The main tool used to gather data was a semi-structured interview where the researcher asked each participant to tell her about how literature was taught in the courses she took at SQU; and how student experiences and background knowledge, vocabulary and grammar were handled in these courses. The researcher used this instrument to maintain informality and objectivity at the same time. Each participant was met alone at her own convenience. The length of the interview depended on the amount of information each participant was willing to share. Therefore, the time ranged between 30 to 40 minutes. Because the interviews were conducted in the dorm where the students lived, and at a time that they chose, they yielded much data, giving the researcher an adequate insight into what was taking place in many literature classes at SQU.

The Participants

The sample in this study included twenty-three Omani female students majoring in English Arts and English Education. They were in their third academic year, even though a few had studied one non-credit semester in the English Foundation program at SQU's Language Center. The participants were exposed to literature through the credit courses they took at the Language Centre and in the College of Arts' Department of English. The number of literature courses they took ranged from three to five, and they were taught by different instructors. Only female students volunteered to participate in the study.

The Analysis

All interviews were transcribed to allow careful analysis of participants' answers and comments. The transcribed data was then read carefully as a whole and main themes (types of teaching methodology) were extracted. Then the data was re-

examined to place the answers into thematic categories. The findings are displayed in the next section.

The Findings

When the participants spoke of their English literature classes and their experiences in them, almost all believed that their enjoyment and engagement hinged upon the teacher. Four profiles of literature teachers emerged from the participants' comments. The major profile most frequently mentioned was the teacher who imparted knowledge to students and astounded them with interpretations. The method of such a teacher was to start the class by plunging herself and the students into an interpretation of every element of the story. She would read a part or an excerpt of the story and then explain it to the students. The role of the students was merely to receive her interpretation dutifully and to keep listening. The students did not get a chance to speak in class or to engage in discussion. Therefore, the participants indicated that they were not motivated to even read the story before class because they knew that their reading in advance was purposeless or pointless. Some participants even indicated that they were sometimes late for class or absent because they knew how the lecture would go and that the teacher would "go on speaking and lecturing for herself." From such a teacher the participants indicated they learned the least.

The second profile that emerged was the literature teacher as a language teacher. Some students indicated that some of their reading teachers merely focused on vocabulary instruction. The students would read the story, answer some questions and discuss vocabulary. Each week, the students got a list of vocabulary that they had to commit to memory for their next quiz. Students felt overwhelmed by these lists and felt that they could not retain the words in their memory because they hardly ever had the chance to use them. Although participants felt a dire need to know more vocabulary, they felt that instruction on vocabulary and vocabulary lists did not always translate into active knowledge and use of the words. The quality and amount of exposure to the new words they learned in their classes and read in their lists were inadequate to sustain their retention.

Participants also indicated that literature classes that focused on vocabulary did this at the expense of getting meaning from the story. Consequently, students were not involved in the process of constructing meaning or of negotiating it inside the classroom. They perceived many of the stories that they took with such a language teacher as pointless and as not related to their culture. "The Story of an Hour" was given by one participant as an example of a story that she thought of as useless to her and pointless to be taught. When the researcher asked her about how she understood the story, it turned out that all she grasped of it was that "it was about a woman who was told that her husband died but then she died." When the researcher engaged her in a discussion and explained to her some elements of the story, the participant remarked that her teacher never went into discussing the story, contenting himself with just reading the events and explaining the vocabulary.

The third profile of the literature teacher was the analyzer. Two versions of the analyzer appeared to emerge from the participants' description. The first was the instructor who did not involve either the culture of students or the text in his interpretations or discussions. This teacher would dissect the story into its literary elements - characters, plot, climax, resolution, narrator, setting, point of view and so on. Many participants (e.g. participant 16) indicated that this type of teacher did not always "make an effort to introduce the writer, his ethnicity and background in order to

connect the writer with what he wrote.” Therefore, the participants felt that their attempts at interpretation proved sometimes faulty because they lacked information on the background of the writer or the story. The literature teacher as analyzer did involve students in class. However, often there was one meaning he was in search of. No matter how hard the students tried to arrive at that correct meaning, their efforts usually failed.

The other version of the analyzer was the instructor who involved culture in his literature classes. Unfortunately, and to the great dismay and disappointment of the participants, this type of teacher just criticized Arabic and Islamic culture, giving no chance to the students to answer his criticism. Not only that but this type of teacher also espoused the superiority of the West over the East, which not only frustrated but also humiliated the students. An example of such a teacher was one who knew very little about the Koran but still criticized its instruction. Another example was the teacher who thought that all Arabic writings were worthless and discussed no worthy topics or dealt with no important issues. Since most literature teachers are foreigners, Omani students felt outraged at the biased comments made by a few of them. They repudiated their attempt to cast doubt and criticism on Arabic and Islamic culture while trying to demonstrate the superiority and supremacy of Western societies and cultures. Participants who commented on these foreign professors felt much pain and rejection toward the classes and attitudes of these professors. They also indicated that they were not allowed to argue their own positions and opinions and thus they had to grudgingly listen and take things in. The students also felt frightened to disclose their opinions if they were ever allowed to speak because they felt they were vulnerable to the power of the professor who had the authority to reduce their grade. Needless to say, the participants were not motivated to read or speak in the classes of such a teacher.

The fourth profile of the literature teacher that emerged from the interviews was the teacher who used a combination of methods. The class of this teacher was varied and stimulating. While he analyzed, he involved the students in the analysis. He tried to understand their culture and did not discount their interpretations. He asked them about their personal experiences and about how they reacted to the story or felt about it. This teacher compared cultures sometimes, but never made value judgments about the superiority of one culture over another. The participants celebrated this type of teacher for making the effort to involve them and for taking an interest in their own knowledge and cultural experiences. For the class of this type of teacher, the students said they prepared by reading the stories or poems ahead of time and even by searching the Internet to find more information on the literary text they would be taking in class. Because they were always involved, students were alert and paid due attention to what was discussed or said in class.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the findings, four different styles of literature teaching have emerged from the data. However, the most preferred by the students was clearly the last, which used a combination of methods and involved students' culture and background knowledge in class discussions and in comparing, without passing value judgments, the text's culture with their culture. The teacher using this approach valued these learners as cultural beings with valid experiences and perspectives on life. While s/he encouraged comparison between cultures, s/he was not biased against the students' culture. Students reported being very enthusiastic in the class of the teacher who employed this methodology. Therefore, the findings of this research echo those of

previous research that an integrated approach is one that works best and that learners most prefer. These findings carry implications for the literature classroom. Using reader-considerate methods (which can also be called student-centered), literature classes can serve better educational, communicative and humane functions and can be a venue for creating and negotiating meaning rather merely a venue for vocabulary and grammar discussion or textual interpretation. Literature classes can inspire students and help them develop morally, psychologically, socially and intellectually. But such cannot be achieved if the humanity of the students and their experiences are not given the highest regard in these classes. Hence, the need to use reader-considerate approaches and other student-centered strategies (e.g. reader response) in the literature classroom.

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