

THE DIDACTICS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENT-CENTERED STRATEGIES

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Abstract

One of the responsibilities of English teachers is to change students' perceptions about literature and the value of literary texts. One of the most difficult tasks of teachers is to raise the students' interest in reading literature and by 'reading' we refer to that process which is generally called interpretation and which is meant to help readers decode all types of information hidden behind the aesthetic beauty of a work of art. The student-centered approach to teaching and learning differs from the teacher-centered approach in terms of theoretical foundations, the teacher's and the students' role, planning tasks, learning environment and assessment procedures: instead of being objective and fixed, knowledge becomes personal, social and cultural as it is constructed by the learner. Hence, we consider that student-centeredness is the best approach to enhance students' motivation in reading literary texts with a view to building skills characteristic of literature classes such as critical thinking or analytical reading, the ultimate goal being that of supporting students in understanding the motivation of learning and constructing their own learning style which may also enhance life-long learning.

Key words: Didactics, literature, student-centered strategies

1. The paradigm of student-centering

In the student-centered approach to education classroom activities focus on the needs of the students rather than on the needs of the other actors involved in the educational process by involving students particularly in group-work, and also by encouraging initiative and decision-taking from the part of the student. In the student-centered class, teacher talk has diminished drastically to give way to student talk, student-student interaction and student assertion. In this way students are encouraged to create and develop their own learning style. The teacher acts as a

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mediator and guide rather than as a main source of information. Besides promoting peer communication, collaboration and active learning or learning through discovery, student-centeredness also aims at turning students into independent, autonomous learners by creating and developing self-motivation and self-regulation skills. Such skills may serve them in future self-educating initiatives (McCombs and Whistler, 1997; O'Neil and MacMahon, 2010; Cojocariu, 2012; Arends, 2012). The student-centered approach to teaching and learning, often referred to as the constructivist approach to teaching and learning, “holds that knowledge, instead of being objective and fixed, is somewhat personal, social and cultural. Meaning is constructed by the learner” (Arends, 2012, p. 355). Therefore, students should be provided with learning skills during the didactic process so that they may develop their own learning style. The main principles of student-centered learning are (McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 5):

- the learning process is “active, volitional and internally mediated”; meaning is discovered and constructed from information and experience, “filtered through the learner’s unique perceptions, thoughts and feelings”;
- the goal of the learning process is to create “meaningful and coherent representations of knowledge regardless of the quantity and quality of data available”;
- the learner constructs new knowledge based on “existing and future guided knowledge”, past experience and present applications and practice in a unique and meaningful way;
- students should acquire higher order thinking skills that may allow them to display creative and critical thinking, and also flexibility in responding to new situations, as the bases for lifetime learning;
- the student-centered approach to teaching and learning takes into consideration the learner’s system of beliefs, values, interests, goals, expectations and emotional states as motivational influences – that may be positive or negative – on the learning process;
- learning is influenced by the learner’s intrinsic motivation which manifests itself by involvement, curiosity, enthusiasm for understanding what they have to learn;
- student-centered learning tasks should appeal to and stimulate the learner’s curiosity, creativity and higher order thinking;
- the student-centered approach to teaching and learning takes into consideration the fact that each learner is unique in terms of physical, intellectual, emotional and social development that determines the way they learn, remember, understand and do things;

- social and cultural diversity are regarded as factors that should support interaction among students with a view to developing interpersonal skills;
- the learning environment should promote social acceptance and self-esteem: learning is enhanced when students feel appreciated and socially accepted;
- learners have and develop different and unique learning styles as an effect of their different biological, cultural and social backgrounds;
- the learner's prior learning acts as a cognitive filter, that is, as a basis for constructing reality and interpreting life experiences.

The ideas of active involvement, social integration, self-reflection and personal validation as pillars of the student-centered paradigm are also supported by other authors, such as O'Neill and MacMahon (2005) or Cojocariu (2012). We chose here to refer to the principles of student-centered learning in the view of McCombs and Whisler for the fact that they relate to all the learner-related aspects that we regard as having a significant part in the students' professional and personal development. From these principles, we may draw the conclusion that a student-centered classroom environment should promote individualization, interaction and integration (Moffet & Wagner, 1992, p. 21). Among the most common types of student-centered learning, also referred to as the constructivist perspective on teaching and learning, we may mention:

- collaborative learning: through cooperation, the members of a group build consensus, the most efficient way of working being that in which the skills and contributions of each of the members of the group are highlighted, acknowledged, respected and turned to advantage; collaboration is opposed to competition as the way of highlighting only the best individuals in a group (Panitz, 1997, p. 2);
- experiential learning: learning through experience means learning by doing or learning through reflection on doing (Kolb, 1984);
- mediated learning: the specificity of mediated learning consists in the way in which the learner is helped, guided and supported in structuring his activity of learning (Cojocariu, 2012, p. 103).

These three types of learning, together with other types of learning such as simulation-based learning, problem-based learning, interactive learning, are called student-centered because they all imply a process of learning focused on the beneficiary of learning, i.e., the student. The teacher's role in student-centeredness is that of mediator and guide, of "coach, facilitator and co-learner" (Vighnarajah & al., 2008, p. 38). In the student-centered approach, the teacher's skills include the following:

- being able to convey and digest information from one situation to another;

- adapting his instruction to the developmental level of his students;
- paying attention to individual differences in learning as each student is unique;
- paying attention to the students' expectations concerning the outcome of their learning as compared to the objectives stated for the course;
- being able to give useful practical suggestions and constructive feedback, to act as a resource, to monitor students' work, to improvise if necessary, to cope with unexpected situations in class, to cope with students that have different learning styles, to create their own materials, to help students in planning their learning, to approach the community for help.

Another central element of student-centering is represented by the students' needs, meaning that each learner is unique in terms of personality, socio-economic background, creativity, (intrinsic, extrinsic) motivation, past experiences, previous acquisitions, learning style, learning rhythm, response to new information and all these parameters affect their process of learning. In student-centeredness, the student's role is an active one, the student being encouraged to interact with others and get involved in investigation and problem-solving activities (Arends, 2012, p. 356). By taking into consideration the students' needs, student-centeredness promotes a more equal relationship between learners, thus enhancing growth and development, and also an advantageous interlacing of the student's cognitive and affective dimensions (O'Neill & MacMahon, 2005, p. 3).

2. Teaching literature from the perspective of student-centered strategies

The relevance of studying literary texts for the purpose of teaching English as a second language is highlighted by the following quotation: "Let me make clear at the outset that I fully endorse the proposition that literature is, and should remain, central to the teaching and learning of English in the secondary curriculum" (West, 1994, p. 109). When it comes to teaching literature, we consider that a text-based approach is more effective in creating the desired effect in our students, namely, to increase their interest in reading literary texts. And because we consider that teaching literature means more than just teaching about the themes, plot summary, characters and setting of, for example, a novel, we shall here attempt to provide some suggestions in this respect. We consider that student-centeredness is the best approach to enhance students' motivation in reading literary texts with a view to building skills characteristic of literature classes such as critical thinking or analytical reading.

We have chosen to refer to the subject of English literature because literature has always played a key part in the human beings' search for meaning. The main functions of literature are: "telling human beings what is important in life [...] what's worthy of our admiration or our contempt,

[...] what it's like to be those who live in different circumstances and in other historical times and in other gendered bodies [...] what we should pay attention to and what we can afford to ignore, [...] how life might be lived this way rather than that way” (Chambers and Gregory, 2006, p. 2).

When it comes to methods of teaching literature, we should keep in mind the fact that critical, independent thinking skills cannot be built by means of right-wrong or yes/no questions, or by repetitious exercises. Language should be regarded as a discourse and students should be guided towards looking at how words and grammar, for example, are used in context over an extended period (Harmer, 2011, p. 25). When teaching English literature, and literature in general, teachers should engage the students in the literary-critical discourse as participants in a significant socio-cultural practices.

There are certain socio-cultural pedagogic principles that teachers should take into consideration when teaching literature (Chambers and Gregory, 2006, pp. 125-132):

- *the principle of engagement*: according to this principle, students should be made aware of the fact that they are going to study a literary text, they should be lured into the activity and made to think and reflect upon the activity of reading by the teacher who may ask them to draw a distinction between, for example, a novel they have read and a movie they have seen not only in terms of content but, especially, in terms of the act of reading as compared to that of watching, the effort that each of these activities required, whether it was an experience shared with others; the students' thoughts, beliefs and feelings are thus brought to the surface and the students' attention is connected to the subject of literature;

- *the principle of intelligibility*: if students are to interpret, analyze and evaluate a literary text, “if students are to be active makers of meaning, then what they are taught must be intelligible to them from the start” (Ibidem, p. 128); moreover, teaching should be done starting with examples and moving towards explanations;

- *the principle of participation*: the principle of engagement and of intelligibility encourage the participation of students; activities usually involve reading a story/poem/fragment from a novel/play followed by a series of questions that “stages” the students' reading, analysis and interpretation of the text.

We consider that role-play, with its more elaborate version represented by drama, provides good opportunities for practicing critical, analytical and independent thinking skills, together with such other classroom activities as: debates, singing, reciting, writing one's pieces of fiction or poetry, converting dialogue into description or vice-versa, which may be adjusted to suit the needs and levels of various ages of students, at the same time complying with the demands of student-centeredness.

The information communication technology, such as film, video, audio, computer applications and Web-based activities, may also be used in literature classes: for example, several versions of the same scene from a certain play may be viewed with the students, working in groups, noting down the differences in terms of: textual variations (cut and rearranged lines), aural variations (sound and music), visual variations (costumes, sets and props), and cinematic variations (types of shots, lighting etc.) (LoMonico, 2012, p. 21). Instead of teaching technology, such assignments determine students to engage with technology. Groups of students may be involved in creating videos of scenes. It is important that students should enjoy a literary text or fragment before they even get to understand it and the best way to make students like a piece of literary writing is to get them to perform the whole or part of it.

Role-play has been highlighted as having a central role in teaching literature by several authors (Geoff, 2009; Goodwin & Branson, 2005; Pollard, 2008; LoMonico, 2012). In a role-play for the subject of English literature, the students may take on the roles of characters in a novel they are reading and the class interviews them about their motives. Role-play helps students develop their interpersonal skills, and also constitutes an opportunity to practice their skills in a risk-free environment. Besides supporting students in developing skills in negotiation in an assertive but respectful manner, role-play may explore emotive issues, for example, when students take on the role of a discriminated character, or of a victim from the fictional work. The role-play may even be a single performance viewed by the rest of the class and in this case the observers may be given a specific role, such as: to look for the use of special words, repetition, metaphors. The role may then be interpreted by another student who may provide his own, different approach.

The role-play activity, just like drama, should be carefully planned. The teacher should let the students know exactly what is expected of them. The teacher should also have in mind the skill/skills that will be practiced during the activity: critical, analytical thinking skills in our case. All the students in the class should be involved, either directly in performing a role or in observing the performance from a certain perspective. During the role-play, the teacher should interfere as little as possible. However, one of the characters may be allowed to stop the role-play at any point for such purposes as to consult with others, to think on how to proceed and then resume the play from where it left off. If the students are confident and used to role-playing, their performance could be even video recorded. After the role-play has been performed, questions may involve students into discussions regarding self-evaluation, evaluation by others, the way in which the role-play was performed, whether a certain character could have acted differently, how the players felt while performing their roles etc.

The advantages of using drama in teaching literature are that it raises self-esteem and self-confidence, and may often allow “hitherto unremarkable members of [the] class to shine”

(Goodwin and Branson, 2005: 260). The students' empathetic skills are also heightened as they usually identify with the characters portrayed. The subject matter should obviously have emotional content, as this is also important for affective education (for example, telling students to avoid pregnancy vs. letting them watch a play about this topic). The play that students should perform could either belong to some writer or could be written by themselves. However, in case the students are writing their own play, the teacher should give them a brief, such as, for example: a play about the effect of having a baby on a fourteen-year-old girl (Idem, p. 261).

Regarding the performing of plays or fragments from plays written by some famous author, we consider that when a student tries to find the best way to say the respective lines and the most appropriate tone of voice and movements that should accompany the verbal uttering, he or she re-creates the respective piece of literary writing. Thus, drama resorts to and stimulates the student's creativity, thinking and originality, and also complies with his/her needs since the student will eventually act out his part of the literary text in a way that is characteristic only to him and that does not violate his zone of comfort. While preparing the performance, students may be asked to look closely at the text and see whether there are any words or sentences that may be eliminated, or even whether they would add some words or sentences of their own creation to the text they are studying. By trying to figure out which words could be eliminated or replaced, the students study the meanings of words and the way in which the words in a text interact with each other, thus resorting to and developing their analytical thinking skills. When it comes to scenery, costumes and make-up, their analysis supports students in inferring cultural, historical and social facts about the age to which the play belongs, making the acquisition of such information easier and more interesting. At the end of the role-play or drama activity, the feelings and emotions experienced by students during the preparation of the performance and the performance itself may be discussed: this analysis gives the students the chance to know themselves better, to acknowledge their skills, strengths and weaknesses. Feedback from the other students may also be helpful, provided it is offered in a neutral, polite, uncritical and friendly manner.

3. Conclusions

We have approached the theme of teaching literature from the perspective of student-centered strategies because we consider that such strategies encourage students to turn to advantage the skills they already possess, to discover new things they are capable of doing and also to acquire new information in a more relaxed, interesting way that responds to their needs to a larger extent than the teacher-centered approach to teaching and learning. Also, by using their imagination,

creativity, by searching for cultural, historical and social information related to the text that they are to perform, students develop their own style of learning. Moreover, by carrying out such activities, students learn how to look for information hidden behind the aesthetic beauty of a literary work and come to appreciate literature from a different standpoint.

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