

Towards a New Perspective to Understanding American Civilization: A Critical Hermeneutic Analysis

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Abstract:

Teaching American civilization courses to students' whose native language has never been and will never become English may bring to mind plethora of questions especially when it comes to the interrogation of how technology in general and web-based technologies in particular can be implemented in education. Constant transformations in teaching and learning English as a foreign language are undeniable under the canopy of emerging cutting-edge scientific know-how which had revolutionized not only education, but even every single aspect of individual's life. From this stance stems the problem that seeks to answer how to effectively teach either American or British civilization to EFL students who barely understand concepts of others' civilization. Insofar as the pros of hermeneutic approach are concerned, the active participation, not just passive reception, in reading series of automated texts related to American or British civilization seems to be immensely significant for understanding English civilization in EFL settings. The flagship objective of the present research work is to find out optimal ways to demonstrate the worth of hermeneutic approach in teaching American civilization courses to EFL students by considering that the majority of them are known as 'digital natives'. This can be achieved by opting for a mixed methods approach in which the triangulation of data gathering tools is marked. The results of this study deepened our understanding on the significance of teaching and learning academic texts of American civilization in accordance with the tenets of critical hermeneutic approach.

Key words: American civilization teaching, digital natives, critical hermeneutic analysis

الملخص

ان تدريس محتوى مقياس الحضارة الامريكية للطلاب الذين لغتهم الام ليست الانجليزية يقود الى طرح عدد وفير من الاسئلة خاصة في ظل هذا التطور التكنولوجي الحديث. لا يمكن انكار فعالية الثورة التكنولوجية في شتى مجالات الحياة وبالتحديد في ميدان تعليم اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية. وفي هذا الاطار المشكلة التي تطرح نفسها تطوف حول ايجاد الطرق الناجعة لتعليم و تعلم مضمون محاضرات الحضارة الامريكية في المواضيع اين تعتبر اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية وبذلك يتعسر على هؤلاء الطلاب استيعاب المحتوى المراد نقله. باعتبار مزايا المنهج الهرمينوطيقي, فان تدريس الحضارة الامريكية باستعماله يمكن ان يحفز المتحدثين غير الاصليين للغة الانجليزية من الطلاب لقراءة مختلف النصوص الالية المتعلقة بكلا الحضارتين امريكية كانت او بريطانية. الهدف الرئيسي من هذا البحث هو محاولة البرهنة على امكانية ادماج مبادئ علم التاويل في تلقين دروس الحضارة الامريكية للجيل المعاصر من الطلاب المشهور بالفئة الرقمية. في هذه الدراسة تم اختيار منهج البحث المندمج اعتمادا بذلك على مصطلح التثليث من اجل جمع البيانات اللازمة. النتائج المحصل عليها عمقت فهمنا لاهمية تلقي مضمون الحضارة الامريكية عن طريق نظرية الهرمينوطيقا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحضارة الامريكية, الجيل الرقمي, الهرمينوطيقا

Introduction

English is rapidly becoming a global language. Teaching English, therefore, to speakers of other languages speedily captured interest for the inevitability to speak and understand this language and that deems undeniable in reference to Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill and Pincas (2003) who classified English as a worldwide language. In the light of the prior discourse, one can easily render in drawing the indispensability of learning English and its civilization. When saying English civilization, the cursor clumsily swings upward and forward, not succeeding to stumble upon its ace.

Each of British, and American civilization courses mandatorily assigned to be taught in bachelor's or masters' degree programs at almost all Algerian Universities. Learning about the civilization of foreign language is acknowledged as a must in order to attain the desired objectives behind studying such a non native language (Nieto, 2010). However, the realization of this nearly every foreign language learner's aspiration tends not to come –at- able.

It is imperative to not disregard the fundamental role of content modules, for instance culture of language, in foreign languages teaching and learning since language proficiency can be developed through content; language and culture are inseparable and they can never be detached from each other (Byram& Grundy, 2003). From this point, it is evident to note that teaching English civilization aims at not only enhancing language skills but also awakening curiosity to discover and delve deeper into the minutiae of the target language.

Yet, it merits reduplicating in other words that English civilization courses (American/British) constitute the building block of foreign language pedagogy as a whole; nevertheless, delivering such instructions in EFL contexts is not an easy task for both teachers and EFL students. This latter seems to be a big challenge for teachers and students alike. Herein, the majority of EFL students is constantly complaining and declaring that they encounter difficulties in understanding concepts relevant to the field of either British or American civilization in addition to the serious hardship to grasp the general meaning of English civilization course content (the researcher's observation and students' survey questionnaire)

As far as this problem is concerned, the following questions can be raised:

- 1/ how can hermeneutic approach intermediate in understanding American civilization course content?
- 2/ does critical hermeneutic analysis help non-native teachers of English civilization introduce and convey meanings of their course content?

3/ how can critical hermeneutic premises affect EFL students' comprehension and formation of general meanings of concepts related to American civilization content?

Significance of the Study

In undergraduate level, English civilization courses are introduced as the corner stone of EFL students' formation structured in the Algerian higher education system. The interwoven relationship between language and culture confirms the solid binding between language and culture teaching, thus, each entity is the lens through which the other can be portrayed.

EFL settings as a matter of course call for teaching English civilization to students whose native language and culture is quite distinctive. Here of, an EFL student cannot make any single stride forward to approach success in manipulating foreign language with all its content if s/he is not exposed to learning about the **civilization** (Culture) of the target language.

The current research work is an attempt to explore the existing theoretical and practical body of knowledge and ponder over the areas in which different hermeneutic methods have been utilized. Moreover, interest in sorting out the optimal critical hermeneutic techniques of analysis that are compatible with the American civilization course content is highly focalized.

Brief Explanation of the Principles of Critical Hermeneutic Analysis

It seems noteworthy to draw a picture on the origins of the term hermeneutics; this latter is an amalgam of two Latin words: the verb *hermeneue* in which bears the English meaning of 'to interpret', and the noun *hermeneia* which expresses the sense of interpretation (Byrne, 2006).

The field of hermeneutics is too broad regardless to what type it is (philosophical, literary, objective, critical or whatever). However, there are clearly defined common standards of critical hermeneutic analysis.

The dogma of holistic view is principally crucial. On this account, meaning is constructed mainly through social interaction, for instance between the writer and the reader, and even in monologues it can be depicted. Accordingly, Thompson (1981) supports the former argument by stating that both language use and the process of socialization play an immense role in forming meanings.

Thereafter, Roberge (2011) viewed through similar lenses dual experience between the writer and the reader as the cornerstone of constructing meanings to words by way of interpretation. In that event,

critical hermeneutics is based on social interplay built between the author and the reader so that reciprocity of comprehension would be achieved.

Then, self-reflection with its paramount impact on the alteration of one's self in terms of attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, values and so on is to a high degree crucial. In other words, social interaction plays the major role in self-orientation, conforming to Habermas (1970), and that leads to changes in the character.

In critical hermeneutic analysis, going beyond the linguistic structure is heavily stressed. Hence, linguistic analysis in terms of structure (form) and language use is marginalized as the emphasis put on methodologies of interpretation rather than a descriptive analysis (Mumby, 1988).

By drawing on many standpoints, critical hermeneutic analysis lends itself to a sort of its peculiar specificities which overlap to build the backbone of this methodology of interpretation. From the last latter expression, one may recognize the amalgamation of theory and practice in the field of critical hermeneutic analysis.

Methodology

This study is an endeavor to explain the nature of the relationship delineating the application of critical hermeneutic analysis to teaching the course content of American civilization in an EFL classroom. The complexity might be derived from the broadness of both fields led us to opt for the methodology that is a two-stage process.

The present paper emblemizes the first phase which tends to be exploratory in nature for, of course, a reason. The rationale behind such a decision resides in the pressing need for constructing preliminaries about the phenomenon under investigation in order to demystify opaque features that may hinder the obtainment of a thorough understanding about our research topic. In this vein, Bailey (1994) asserts the significance of exploratory studies in covering the essentially important aspects of the issue at hand.

The overall purpose of this study, investigating the cause/effect relationship pinpointing the impact of teaching critical hermeneutic analysis on EFL students' understanding of English civilization courses, is to answer our research questions and solve our research problem; however, the desired objectives cannot be achieved at once. Thence, the researcher found it evident to split the work into two stages.

The complexity of our problem derives from the broadness of both fields named hermeneutics and American civilization respectively. In this context, the following quotations can expressively confirm the former point of view:

“...hermeneutics is not something which cannot be easily taught, trained, or learnt” (Wodak, 2011, p.625).

Since American civilization is new and not so clearly understood as a major in history or economics, it has further difficulty in attracting students

(Grier, 1954, pp. 179-180)

In accordance with Wodak’s and Grier’s arguments, each of the fields exhibits on its own a certain degree of hardship. Ergo, this bound led us to opt for a methodology that can be described a ‘two-stage process’.

Delving into teachers’ attitudes towards the use of critical hermeneutic methodology of analysis in interpreting texts of English civilization (American or British) beforehand, then introducing them to EFL students is of an unqualified importance. Thus, deciding upon interviewing six teachers specialized in English civilization at the Department of English, Batna-2 University (Algeria) was deeply perceptive. As Kvale (1996) reported, the use of interviews helps researchers gain a clear comprehension of what is revolving in participants’ minds. Furthermore, the kind of the interview chosen in this small-scale research is a semi-structured interview. This type, as posited by Dornyei, is more applicable to the exploratory study since it affords a sense of emancipation for interviewees although the earmark of some pre-prepared questions is noticed.

In compliance with teachers’ interview, obtaining information from Third Year students of English at the same department to know if they understand texts of civilization when teachers’ interpretation is employed in the instruction delivery tended to be insightful as that added an in-depth understanding about the phenomenon under scrutiny. In this respect, Walliman recommended the use of a survey questionnaire because it ‘is a very flexible tool’ (2006, p. 88). Henceforth, the researcher decided upon the survey questionnaire as an anther data gathering tool.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Teachers’ replies paved the way for lengthy discussions about the topic under consideration. In this respect, interviewees’ feedback portrayed a kaleidoscopic picture of opinions which can be stated as follows.

Teachers’ answers to the first question concerning their experience in teaching English civilization module displayed that all of them have long been teaching the module in which they are specialized (from 15 to 25 years).

A propos the second question addressed to teachers of English civilization about EFL students' reaction towards learning concepts of English civilization, nearly all the inquirers observed constant complaint about their inability to grasp the wide-ranging meanings that can be attributed to the simplest concepts of British or American civilization alike.

Interviewees' points of view about the next question swirling round the possible reasons behind EFL students' powerlessness to make sense of English civilization courses came with appealing notifications. On that, the overwhelming majority of teachers reported that EFL students' lack of comprehension might be bound to students' disinterest to learn the civilization of the target language which, in turn, can be caused by the absence of either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to learn the aforesaid module.

However the remaining minority of teachers strongly believed that teachers' teaching method can be the only reason leading to hindrance of catching on general discernment about the course contents. They added, the teacher is 'the facilitator', and he is fully responsible for making choices that suit students' needs and interests. On that account, it was evident from their answers that only lecture method had monopolized the teaching of American civilization courses at the same Department.

Exceptionally, a single teacher appealed to the seriousness of this research problem that can be turned back to more particularly EFL students' language deficiency that automatically led to the birth of a genre of antipathy towards learning American or British civilization module. And in furtherance for the complication created from deficiencies in language learning, the difficulty of the course content planned by teachers tend to be another factor that may cause impediment in conceiving concepts of foreign civilization.

It follows that all participants showcased their inclination towards the adoption of critical hermeneutic approach as a facilitating tool to help EFL students understand concepts of American and British civilization contents. Thereupon, an obvious assertion that the main premise of critical hermeneutic approach takes from the socio cultural learning theory can powerfully enhance students' comprehension of English civilization issues.

In compliance with teachers' interview, results obtained from students' questionnaire were informative and confirming to teachers' assumptions and observations formed on the basis of experience. Hereof, a lion's share of students perceived English civilization courses as monotonous, and tedious.

Respondents of our sample reported their pressing need and demand for interpreting the course content of text civilization module and the majority confessed that Text Civilization can be likened to a nightmare.

Besides, participants declared their inability to comprehend neither concepts nor general meaning. The last point, therefore, caused undescribable disinclination towards learning this module.

In accordance with the results obtained from students' questionnaire and teachers' semi-structured interview, it is noteworthy to note that teaching English civilization courses by applying the principles and methodologies of critical hermeneutic analysis would be of unimpeachable outcome.

Further Recommendations

The primary concern of this investigation is to sort out the relationship among a number of variables such as EFL students' perceptions of English civilization course contents, teachers' use of hermeneutic analysis in teaching civilization courses, EFL students' motivation to learn Text Civilization Module. We accept that there is a shortage of research on this topic about the amalgamation of both fields claimed to be vast. This work has been conducted to set the ground for further initiatives.

Conducting a correlational study, not the experimental study, is recommended if the focalized objective is not the accentuation of cause/effect relationship between or among variables. In doing so, twofold objectives can be guaranteed by correlational research methodologies such as helping in explaining the phenomenon under investigation and predicting likely outcomes comes in the second position.

Accordingly, the predictor Vs criterion dichotomy is revealed. Predictor variable here might be EFL students' level of comprehension in English civilization; criterion variable is teachers' use of critical hermeneutic analysis in teaching English civilization.

As a strengthener to what aforementioned, opting for a multiple regression prediction would be of a great benefit to determine the relationship between the former variables which cannot necessarily be cause/effect one.

The 'scatter plot' is another possibility to be used in order to predict the link possibly being existed among variables. In the prior data, the correlation coefficient should be calculated to dissect the relationship.

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