

Philosophical Underpinnings of EFL Students' Reading Practice and its importance in their Target Cultural Background Knowledge Acquisition for EFL Literature Study.

الأسس الفلسفية لممارسة القراءة لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وأهميتها
في اكتساب المعرفة في الخلفية الثقافية المستهدفة لدراسة أدب اللغة
الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

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Abstract: Dealing with foreign literature at University involves taking into account the philosophy of literature reading and the freedom to question the world we live in. We investigate here students' reading habits in particular which influence their ability to interpret EFL literature. On one hand, if we overlook cross-cultural issues the reader may feel disregarded. On the other, allowing interpretations that may be unfaithful to the author are too great not to make investigating the role played by EFL students' reading practices in their target cultural background knowledge acquisition a fundamental enterprise. This article presents an exploratory case study with a mixed research design using both the questionnaire and the interview. If literature allows awakening consciences and emotional responses, both the teachers and the students inquired are aware of an underlying uneasiness related to their lack of reading practice. We suggest these cause damages in literature class if they remain unchecked.

Keywords: reading practice, cultural knowledge, cross-cultural reading, critical thinking, EFL literature.

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ملخص : يشمل التعامل مع الأدب الأجنبي في الجامعة مراعاة فلسفة قراءة الأدب وحرية التشكيك في العالم الذي نعيش فيه. ونبحث هنا في عادات القراءة لدى الطلاب على وجه الخصوص والتي تؤثر على قدرتهم على تفسير أدب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. من ناحية، إذا تغاضينا عن القضايا العابرة للثقافات، فقد يشعر القارئ بالتجاهل. من ناحية أخرى، فإن السماح بالتفسيرات التي قد تكون غير مخصصة للمؤلف يجعل التحقيق في الدور الذي تلعبه ممارسات القراءة لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في اكتساب المعرفة بالخلفية الثقافية المستهدفة مشروعًا أساسيًا يقدم هذا المقال دراسة حالة استكشافية مع تصميم بحث مختلط باستخدام كل من الاستبيان والمقابلة. فيما إذا كان الأدب يسمح بإيقاظ الضمائر والاستجابات العاطفية، فإن كل من المدرسين والطلاب المستفسرين على دراية بعدم الارتياح الكامن المتعلق بافتقارهم لممارسة القراءة. نقترح أن هذا الوضع يمكن أن يسبب أضرار في أقسام تدريس إذا بقي دون رادع الكلمات المفتاحية: ممارسة القراءة، المعرفة الثقافية، القراءة عبر الثقافات، التفكير النقدي، أدب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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1. Introduction

Today, the Algerian university students who have learned to speak and write in English have access to information from the entire world, and can communicate with people of different nationalities. The study of literary works involves knowing philosophical concepts such as nationalism, humanism, feminism, and the like. However, reading EFL literature is an even more complex enterprise as it includes an intercultural setting; learners need to acquire target cultural knowledge to comprehend the EFL texts they study.

Hence, intercultural reading practices require innovative teaching methods even though English is their third and

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sometimes even their fourth language. Essentially, interpretation is a transferrable skill from L1 to L2 etc. based on the learner's reading abilities and practices and this has become an issue with the EFL Algerian university students who, similarly to their counterparts around the world, are also 'digital natives'. We would like to explore both teachers and students beliefs about the Algerian EFL students' reading profiles and how they affect their target cultural knowledge acquisition. We need to understand whether the students' EFL literature reading experience allows them to uncover the cultural cues in spite of their estrangement or if they are discouraged when they miss the cultural symbols and hidden meanings. Hence, the following research questions:

1. What do Algerian EFL university students rely on primarily for cultural acquisition?
2. Can they be motivated to read with topics that are attractive to their generation of 'digital natives'?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Multilingual Algeria:

To begin with, multilingualism is a noticeable characteristic of the Algerians; additionally to speaking more than one language, Arabic, Tamazight and French, their mother tongue is not one they all share. It may be oral Arabic also called "Eddarija", "Kabyle" or "Chaoui" for instance amongst students coming from Berber-speaking areas.

Considering our EFL environment, reaching out to otherness from the students' native background perspective before the foreign context of the target language, will allow EFL students to live a harmonious learning experience. Students would be given a voice and not feel rejected, and as a result will be able to open their minds to other realities and ideas even if these are very divergent to what they initially know. For

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instance, Lev Vygotsky, who introduced the 'Zone of Proximal Development' in the late 1920's, explains that culture teaching can reinforce the students' affect essentially through the scaffolding of previously taught material (Vygotsky: 1978).

Highlighting our Algerian cultural specificities as well as our resemblances with the target cultural elements that are taught to our EFL students is an endeavor already practiced through comparative literature. Kaced, A. (2015) made a parallel between African American Novelists and Algerian novelists during the war of independence. Hence, it sounds pedagogically sound to draw parallels between the learners' native culture and the target culture they need to comprehend. As claimed by Lazarus (1979), focusing on the similarities of both cultures can bring about a level of acceptance that encourages in turn the EFL learners' skills development. In a country where women have played predominant roles in politics or at war, for example with El Kahina, Lalla Fatma N'Soumer, or Djamilia Bouhired, just to name these the similarities are almost immediately obvious with the women who fought racism during the segregation years in the USA. Angela Davis, the African American civil rights activist who went to visit prisons to speak out for unfair treatments in the penitentiary or Rosa Parks, the teacher who refused to give her seat in a bus as a sign of protest are portraits to which the Algerian students can easily relate.

For Bartlett, F. who developed schema theory (1932), the human memory systematically recalls one's background knowledge. Background knowledge is also known as the content schema, needed in order to reach comprehension during the reading process. In cognitive science, the mental pattern of handling incoming information while reading consists in connecting new knowledge to the preexisting knowledge that is already in our long-term memory. However, we note the challenge this represents for the students of the present

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generation. Prensky, M. (2001) was the first to coin the term 'digital natives' for the youths born with internet and technology use; by doing so he highlights the challenge to teach high order thinking skills in a world where knowledge is accessible one click away. Particularly when learning is believed to be built on the scaffolding of previously learned material.

2.2 Reading the threshold to Critical thinking:

Thus, although knowledge acquisition has always been central for the Algerian population, the sacredness of the Koran associated with knowledge acquisition has caused to privilege the use of rote learning as a traditional learning practice in our country. Therefore, students need to be assisted in critical thinking abilities development by enriching their TCBK. Cultural background acquisition, which is at the heart of our exploration, is also a catalyzer for critical thinking. Critical thinking is officially among the essential goals of pedagogical training for learners of all levels and around the world, hence cross-cultural reading brings about interesting and original analyses and debates.

Additionally and within the social constructivist theory of learning where the teacher is the guide, Piaget (another important social constructivist theorist alongside Vygotsky) identified that a state of disequilibrium appears when a new information comes contradicting the existing preconceptions of a person. Graff (1997) for instance, says that the differences or contradictions even, that teachers exhibit about one another tend to puzzle the students who are no longer concerned with academic proficiency, but rather with uncovering what each teacher wants from them and this on an individual level.

According to Semara & Slamani (2014), critical thinking is rarely encouraged before University. When observing a high school class they established that teachers made mostly use of

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teacher talk and rhetorical questions. Procedural questions using ‘how...’ for example, or convergent questions that make use of an open-ended form or yet again divergent questions that bring about multiple answers are all shunned. Instead, we have a largely dominant amount of instructional questions, display and referential questions that only serve to reveal surface-level information.

In the foreign literature classroom where personal analysis is required, and sharp accurate interpretations follow an investigation at the library, doing without critical thinking skills is impossible. Consequently, this research confirms the existence of what we know in Algeria to be the rote learning tradition, which is composed of an extensive time devoted to teacher talk punctuated here and there by rhetorical questions.

2.3 Intercultural Awareness

Every community has common values and principles, and its beliefs about the ‘Other’ depend on the level of intercultural awareness that its people have reached; although one can argue that the objective of reading EFL literature goes beyond familiarizing students with foreign cultures. A few decades ago there were many TV commercials with the motto ‘food for Africa’, showing those African landscapes associating them with drought and famine. This simple manipulation of the ‘signified’ (De Saussure’s semiotic dichotomy, 1915) brings the audience to think that the European wilderness is rich in comparison to the African one. As a result, Europeans are brought to think they are happy to be where they are when Africans are convinced they need to flee a hostile land. Similarly, Aidoo, A. A. (1996) also blames the Western media to promote a negative view of the Africans around the world as well as in the minds of the Africans themselves. She declares:

In Western visual media, especially the African woman is old beyond her years; she is half-naked;

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her drooped and withered breasts are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around the faces of her children, and she has got a permanent begging bowl in her hand. (Aidoo, A. A. in Jarrett-Macauley, D. (ed.), 1996: 156)

It is not a fortuity that the abovementioned examples are Westerners' positioning as to the impossible autonomy of formerly colonized people. Mediatizing the poor in third world countries puts emphasis on the weakness of their newly acquired independence, causing them to remain in need of the assistance of their former colonizers, who originally established themselves in Africa to bring assistance and civilization. Kermezli (2018, p.56) adds:

“The colonial representation of the colonized relates to a state where a certain image of the latter is made, in order to accommodate the former's whole plan of colonization.” (Kermezli (2018, p.56)

In our Algerian context, our rote learning history has widened the gap of acquired learning strategies and needed learning strategies as well as background knowledge. During French colonization, Algerian natives as they were labelled, went to the Medersa to learn the Koran and then integrated their classes in the French schools where they had enrolled. Kermezli (2018, p.71) adds: “The Algerian children used to spend about 12 hours of study between the Koran schools and the French state ones. This fact denotes how important knowledge acquisition for the Algerian was.” (Kermezli, 2018: p.71)

Cross-cultural reading is an encounter of two or more cultures, ways of seeing things, different sets of values etc... the quiet discussion that takes place between the author and the reader, intended or not, is to discover who we are in relation to one another. Following Byram's Model of Intercultural

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Awareness (Byram: 1997) the sociocultural representations we have about a given culture strongly influences the way we view ourselves in comparison to other societies. If literatures depict their societies to beautify them or to restore them in their truths, it is the freedom of the reader to identify himself with a national or foreign perspective. This is an issue in literature teaching when literature, an artistic work meant to touch the hearts, is contested in its very core. Reaching out to otherness is to beautify individuals who dialogue, not unify or mould one way of thinking for all. Yebra, J. M. (2013: 167) says:

When I make reference to the political and ethical undertones as well as the responsibility of other literatures, or literatures of others, by others or for others, I am necessarily assuming a cultural perspective...concepts such as subjectivity (which implies 'the other'), deeply embedded in Liberal Humanism, are determined and ascribed culturally. (Yebra, J. M., 2013: 167)

A neutral, communicative approach to literature study according to Bensemmane, M. (2006) is needed to foster academically proficient techniques for literature study. He says:

At this juncture, it would be appropriate to mention ideologically-based approaches to literature, and which take account of the confrontational views between North and South in terms of culture and civilization, as notably propounded by postcolonial theory in literature. Interesting studies have been conducted to compare texts of former empires and those of colonies to examine in them cases of intertextuality and dialogism. (Bensemmane, M. 2006: pp. 89-90)

Critical reading is the objective of cross-cultural reading, a reading where we analyse foreign literary works by comparing

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viewpoints, themes exploitation and character description. Teaching to read foreign texts otherwise would only be manipulative.

3. Research Design

3.1 Methods

The researcher here explores the dialectic connexion between the target cultural background knowledge and the students' native cultural upbringing as a means to facilitate their acceptance and their comprehension / interpretation of foreign literatures. Our investigation is exploratory, and its main objective is to assert whether the foreign language learners' reading comprehension of literature, the teachings they receive, and their interpretations of EFL literature are in any way affected by a deficiency in target cultural background knowledge.

Our study presents a mixed method research design where we use mostly qualitative data and data collection process, even though there are some elements of data collection tools that have a quantitative characteristic, such as the closed-ended questions in the questionnaire.

Our focus for our research design was mostly exploratory; we wanted to obtain 'thick data' according to Brown, J. D. & Rodgers, T. S. (2002)

3.2 Participants

All 15 literature teachers who were approached by the researcher and accepted to participate in the study, were given a teachers' questionnaire to fill in, either in person or by e-mail, depending on their time schedules and availability. The students enrolled in this research are 62 individuals, a group of 20 students both in the 1st and 3rd year literature class; and of 22 students in 2nd year (this is the actual attendance rate across groups yearly, as the other students being repeating students their attendance is not mandatory). Each group was randomly selected

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out of the list of the 14 number of groups of each year, 1st year, 2nd year, and 3rd year.

3.3 Materials and Procedure

The tools selected to research these are the survey and the interview. The teachers were first given a questionnaire with multiple choice items and open-ended questions. The teachers who decided to continue to participate in the study were interviewed to share their thoughts on TCBK and its value in the literature classroom. The same procedure was applied for the student participants.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

For the questionnaire, a mixed data analysis was used. The multiple choice items required frequencies and percentages, but the open-ended questions were analyzed thematically (Dawadi, S.: 2020). Although the theme analysis is very similar to the content analysis, it presents themes that were originated by the participants themselves and were not suggested by the researcher's questions at any point.

4. Results and Discussion

The results presented in this section concern the reading practices habit as a philosophical foundation for target cultural knowledge learning short of erasing EFL Algerian native identity. In this study, our wish is to validate a new focal teaching perspective that overthrows Western Centrism as a philosophy. Hence, the following sections were established: sources of choice preferred by students to learn about EFL culture, generational topic selection and its usefulness to encourage reading practice among 'digital natives', students' variety of reading profiles, elements motivating students to read, and finally the effect of extensive reading instruction by EFL literature teachers.

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4.1 Means for EFL Students' Cultural Acquisition

Today, there are various sources of choice preferred by students to learn about EFL culture, they appear in the following table.

Table 1. Means used by Students for Cultural Acquisition

	1 st Year Students (%)	2 nd Year Students (%)	3 rd Year Students (%)
Social Media (YouTube)	50	36.36	40
Teachers	15	13.63	15
TV	30	31.81	20
Book (Novels)	5	9.09	20
Family Discussion		4.54	
Discussion on the Net		4.54	
No Answer			5

The results to this question show clearly that ‘social media’ is the source of choice for the students of the three groups: 50% in the first year, 36.36% the second year and 40% the third year. ‘Television’ comes next with 30% in the first year, 31.81% in the second year, and 20% in the third year. ‘Teachers’ come only in the third position with 15% in the first year, 13.63% in the second year, and 15% in the third year. A student explains in the comment section:

‘I usually rely on both the teacher’s content and social media, I like to think that the teacher opens the door and social media guide me through the culture.’ (3rd year student)

After the ‘teachers’, we have ‘books’ with 5% in the first year, 9% in the second year, and 20% in the third year. We observe that although the rates for ‘books’ are little there is a

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progression, the closer the students get to graduation the more aware they come to be of the importance of books in their scholarship.

4.2 Generational Topic Selection and Reading Practice

Philosophically, it is interesting to research the usefulness to encourage reading practice through the introduction of the concept of ‘generational topics’. Introducing the Algerian EFL students as ‘digital natives’, (Prensky, M., 2001) shifts our paradigm as to how we tackle the questions of education and digital learning. It causes the questioning of tradition over modernity in pragmatic and didactic survey.

Table 2. Topics Preferred by Students for Cultural Study

	1 st Year Students (%)	2 nd Year Students (%)	3 rd Year Students (%)
Topics of your age concerns	75	45.45	35
Colonization & History of Algeria	10	4.54	35
Both	5	40.9	15
No answer	10	10	15

This question aimed at prompting the issue raised in a previous work by the researcher (Fasla: 2009) concerning the value of native culture in the literature classroom and whether it was topic-related. The first year students are direct in their answers as 75% declare to prefer ‘topics of their age concerns’. Second year students are explorers in their choice as 45.45% prefer topics of their age concerns and 40.9% wish to read about both kinds of topics. Finally, the third year students are very much undecided in their choices; 35% of them prefer to read about topics of their age concerns and another 35% want to read about ‘colonization and history’. The following is a statement of

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a student who justifies a certain boredom for 'historical topics and colonialism'. The third year student says, "The topic of colonialism has always been present in our educational system. At some point any other topic feels like a breath of fresh air."

4.3 EFL Students' Reading Profiles

This section allows thinking of EFL students from around the world, who are not in an immersive learning context and in need of reading as a medium of contact with EFL literature and culture. Therefore, the power of reading is heightened.

Table 3. Students' Reading Profiles

	1st Year Students (%)	2nd Year Students (%)	3rd Year Students (%)
a) I never read, as I was not much introduced to literature in school.	20		5
b) I have read novels occasionally for school homework and the like.	25	50	35
c) I was often curious to read and read books during vacations for example	25	50	15
d) I like reading, I recognize its value in my studies, and I do a lot of research.	10		5
e) I love reading I am what we call a 'bookworm' I read for pleasure and for studying.	20		40

The responses given by the first year students are scattered in all the options provided by the question. 20% of them chose a) "I never read..." 25% stated, b) "I have read occasionally..." 25% selected c) "I was curious to read..." 10% decided on d) "I like

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reading...”, and 20% opted for e) “I love reading...” the responses seem to show us that first year students have utterly different reading profiles.

Despite the options in the question, the second year students’ responses were clear-cut; 50% said b) “I have read occasionally...” and 50% took c) “I was curious to read...” In this section, there are no book lovers nor are there any book haters.

Lastly, the responses of the third year students are dispersed similarly to the first year student replies, but with nuance. Their answers are as follows: 5% of them picked a) “I never read...” 35% indicated, b) “I have read occasionally...” 15% selected c) “I was curious to read...” 15% d) “I like reading...”, and 40% indicated, e) “I love reading...” We note that the biggest percentages for this group are 35% who declared b) “I have read occasionally...”; and most probably refer to their reading practices at university as third year students, and 40% who specified e) “I love reading...” undoubtedly as a result to having read regularly through their licence period.

Supplementary explanations come from the clarifications several students made for this question. Both a first year and a third year student made the same statement as to their familiarity with reading:

‘I like reading when the topic is chosen by me of course, not the topic of the literature teacher, A Passage to India is not interesting.’ (3rd year student)

‘I like to be able to choose what I read, but when I’m forced to read a long novel that does not interest me, I hate it.’ (1st year student)

The following comments from a second and third year student also portray the students and their love of reading having been initiated away from the classroom:

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‘I was introduced to the beauty of books and reading when I was a child, therefore reading is a part of me, and it keeps me happy...’ (2nd year student)

‘First of all, I read for myself to develop and improve my skills and sometimes I read just for fun.’ (3rd year student)

4.4 Extensive Reading Instruction:

Analytical philosophy, an Anglo-American movement of the late 19th and early 20th C, which emphasizes on language and logical analysis of concepts, has inspired this section.

Table 5. Extensive Reading Instruction

I haven’t convinced them to read the book in the program	20%
I suggest titles of the same author / period with different authors	40%
Yes, but they never read	26.66%
I instruct them to read analytical reviews	06.66%
Sometimes	06.66%

The results for this section are quite striking. The elevated rates concern a lack of reading on the part of students. Although 40% of teachers declare ‘suggesting titles’ for reading extensively, 20% admit not being able to ‘convince the students to read the books in the program’. Additionally, only 06.66% teachers ‘instruct their students to read analytical reviews’.

Finally, the teachers’ instructions, a manifestation of their efforts for the habit formation of extensive reading seem fruitless as 26.66% of them state that their students ‘never read’.

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Following the theoretical background and the findings of the study, we can conclude that the Algerian EFL students lack reading practice in terms of habit formation due to a lack of

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philosophical principles or paradigm matching adequately their educational objectives.

- Their sources of choice for cultural information are Social Media,
- The topics they lean to are those of their generation,
- Their reading profiles, although disparate, are not developed until they reach university,
- Topic selection and movie adaptations weigh greatly in their motivation to read,
- Teachers admit their students do not read even when instructed,

In light of the abovementioned conclusions, the researcher recommends to give reading more visibility throughout the students' educational life right from their first steps to school in their infancy. It is the 'milieu' to which we belong that dictates how much we read or what we read; it also decides of the references to which we become accustomed. (Bennabi, M., 1959 : p. 23). We also recognize that in an environment where reading is not favored as an activity, students who reach university ground cannot accomplish their academic duties. This is particularly true in a digitized environment where students 'copy and paste' randomly from the internet instead of researching or collecting academically valid information.

Finally, we recommend other researchers to conduct large-scale experimental investigations to identify correlational links between the different factors involved in reading EFL literature, such as identity and self. The critics, teachers and all those in charge of 'curating' literary insight need to encourage thinking on a relatable and local origin, i.e. this entails valuing EFL students' native cultural identity. Globalization according to Boulbina (2018) has rendered the Westerners to a diminished horizon and lessened their influence or radius of propagation.

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According to the French-Algerian philosopher, we need to accept that every perspective on an EFL literary text is legitimately equal to any Western acclaimed vision. L' 'Eloge de la désorientation' or paradigm shift is to avoid referring systematically to Western thinking, a perspective already widely claimed by the father of Deconstructivism Jacques Derrida (1992). Deconstructivism allows us to shift our understanding of literary works. A famous example of such a philosophical dichotomy is Camus' *L'Etranger* (1942); both celebrated and disapproved as to how the author presented the Algerian autochthones: silent! *Mersault Contre enquête* by Kamel Daoud (2014), written in reaction to the original novel, was to voice the originally voiceless character of the Arab shot by the leading character.

We wish to end our paper with Frantz Fanon (1961), who dedicated his life work to the fight for freedom of the Algerian revolutionaries and their African brothers. He argued strongly against Mannoni's theory on the dependency complex of the colonized or 'Le Complexe du Colonisé' (Mannoni: 1950). With these examples that stand as historical and living evidence of an Algerian thinking elite that strives for Algerian greatness, we do not need to prove anymore our intellectual value, but put it in practice through our educational system.

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