

The Implementation of Literary Competence through Project Work Methodology: Advantages and Pitfalls

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Much has been said and written about the implementation of the Competency-based Approach (CBA) in the education sector. However, the relevance of this approach to the teaching of university courses, such as literature and civilisation, has received but little interest. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by conducting a field experiment based on task and project work methodology and assessing its results. Project work stands as the backbone of CBA; it is viewed “not as a replacement for other teaching methods but rather as an approach to learning which complements mainstream methods and which can be used with almost all levels, ages, and abilities of students” (Haines, quoted in Stoller F. L. 2002: 109).

What is meant by literary competence? In what perspective does CBA fit a literary course? In other words, what are its advantages and its pitfalls? These are some of the main issues that we address in this paper. To answer them, we shall first outline the prominent characteristics of project work and then provide a rationale for task-based instruction to show how project work can be integrated into a classroom work of literature. The next section of our paper will provide a course design in relation to project work methodology and discuss the results reached after a field experiment conducted with the third year students of British literature.

Project Work Methodology

Project work is defined as a student-generated action, based on authentic reading and cooperative learning .It sets problem-based tasks related to real-world matter in terms of topic and content to trigger the students’ thinking abilities through reading

and interpreting skills, and writing both along the process of learning and at its final stage. The end product of project work can have various configurations in terms of its nature and can be delivered in a way or another (an oral presentation, a stage performance, an article, a dissertation... etc).

Fredrika L. Stoller (2002: 111) distinguishes five types of project work with regard to collection techniques and sources of information:

- research projects** which are undertaken through library and/or internet research.

- text projects** which are carried out through literature, reports in news media, video or audio materials, and computer-based information.

- correspondence projects** based on communication with individuals

- survey projects** which deal with collection and analysis of data.

- encounter projects** which are related to face-to-face intercourse with guest-speakers.

To carry out project work, Henry (1994: 111) proposes three types of organisation which differ in terms of learning process, autonomy, and outcome. He calls the first type *structured project* and defines it as a work determined, organised, and specified by the teacher in terms of topic, materials, methodology and presentation. The second type, called *unstructured project*, is decided by learners without interference of the teacher. The third category, labelled *semi-structured project*, negotiates and blends the former types, because it is defined and organised by the teacher and the students together.

Whatever the category we are concerned with, it remains that a project is either introduced as a special sequence of tasks in a more traditional course made of disparate developed topics, or integrated into a content-based thematic unit. It can be carried out individually, in pairs, or in groups. It can take place in the classroom, outside the school, or start in class and have an extension outside. Its main feature, however, as an ELT approach, lies in the fact that, contrary

to traditional approaches, its value is not just in the final product alone, but in the working process as well.

Project work should be used in literature to promote linguistic, cultural and literary competencies. As this type of task is new to the students, it is advisable to start with a *structured text project* which needs to be planned, organised and processed by the teacher so as to help the students develop a literary competence. Once this preparatory step is achieved, the teacher can then move to projects where the students are given more autonomy.

Method

The implementation of competency-based approach on the course of literature led us to conduct an experiment with the classes of third year in the module of British literature. Our course went through the types of project organisation called *structured* and *semi-structured projects* which required from the students to develop **a portfolio including four poems of the same genre with their respective critical analysis** and a biography and philosophy of the poet to be studied. This portfolio represents an end project around thematically organized materials typical of poetry analysis. It has been accomplished through three stages and involved the use of both a literary corpus and critical materials.

Literary materials:

- * *I Wandered lonely as a Cloud* by William Wordsworth
- * *The Tables Turned* by William Wordsworth
- * *Intimations of Immortality* by William Wordsworth
- * *To Autumn* by John Keats

Theoretical and Critical Materials (Preparatory course):

*Definitions of Romanticism, its background, and its philosophy

* Definitions of key figures of speech (simile, metaphor, symbol, image...)

*The biography and philosophy of the poets under study

Stage I:

The objective of this stage was to allow a space for linguistically and semantically driven development to occur in

order to install in the students linguistic, cultural and literary competencies.

This stage has involved the study of *I Wandered lonely as a Cloud* by William Wordsworth. The following procedure has been undertaken:

1-Reading the poem and asking for the students impressions

2-Close reading of the first stanza for the purpose of:

-defining difficult words

-inferring the figurative language

-summarizing the idea developed in the stanza

3-Reading the second stanza and performing the same task as in stanza one, but this time the thematic link between the two stanzas is highlighted.

4-Following the same procedure for the remaining stanzas

Once the study of every stanza is achieved, the analysis moved to the investigation of the following aspects of the poem:

* Its setting

* Its atmosphere

* Its themes

Then the analysis was expanded to the study of the mode of writing and the students were shown how the romantic philosophy and themes are reflected in the poem, in order to settle in their minds literary knowledge which leads to autonomous study of any piece of literature.

Along this first stage, the teaching was teacher-centred as it was considered as an investment stage in which students develop their linguistic competency and become familiar with poetry analysis. As a consequence, the students were not given the freedom to choose the subject of study.

In the next step of **stage 1** the students were asked to work in discussion groups in order to start a process of reflective observation about theories on poetry analysis, and to try these theories out again in practice.

Stage II:

This phase involved the study of Wordsworth poem *The Tables Turned*, whereby the students were asked to recycle the procedure and the type of analysis followed in **stage I**.

During this phase, the teacher's role shifted from that of a knower transmitting knowledge to a knower-to-be, the student, to that of a guide who encouraged students to ask questions, use libraries and other resources, select, make and take notes, read and interpret texts and poems...etc

The teacher's guidance consisted in:

-reminding students the analytic procedure followed in **stage 1**

-guiding students through the different steps of the analysis

-supplying the linguistic, cultural, communicative tools for students to express themselves effectively and interpret accurately.

-helping students applying what they have learnt previously (figurative language, principles of romanticism...).

The analysis of the two other poems (Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* and Keats's *To Autumn*) was left for the students to analyse in pairs or groups. The students' autonomy and freedom of choice has been limited to these two poems because we wanted to conform to the curriculum. Besides, we think that, since the approach was new for the students, we would have run a risk in giving them too much autonomy at this stage.

Results

The study of the students' projects revealed some successful attempts. But these successes seem to have been achieved mainly by brilliant students. In the other attempts, we noticed the following weaknesses:

- Too much reliance on critical references, to the extent that the students merely copied long passages from the reading sources without even understanding what they reported.
- Weak writing skills, especially in summarising and paraphrasing.

- Lack of writing strategies, organisation and coherence in writing
- Lack of presentation skills which sometimes amounted to mere reading of the written performance
- The students did not seem to take profit out of the autonomy that they had been granted, since most of them remained sceptical about their interpretive abilities. This negative attitude inhibited their creative faculty.
- Even though the figurative language was easy to handle, students found problems to identify the different types of metaphors and to explain them .On the other hand, the different kinds of images (auditory, visual, spatial, etc) were handled with ease.

Discussion

The results show that the students' performances were affected by four major areas of weaknesses:

- a lack in the linguistic competence (weak reading and writing skills)
- a lack in the communicative competence (weak presentation skills)
- a lack in the literary competence (too much reliance on sources, lack in creative and interpretive skills, difficulties in handling the figurative language)
- no effective use of autonomy

To discuss the students' weaknesses observed in the implementation of literary competence, we need to define what is meant by literary competence, and then say how and why some students failed to acquire this competence. According to J.C. Alderson (2000) who referred to Gray, students in literature should develop their reading skills within an established hierarchy of levels of understanding of a text. The hierarchy comprises the following levels: one, reading the lines; two,

reading between the lines; three, reading beyond the lines. The first relates to the linguistic competence which leads to the literal understanding of a text; the second concerns the cultural competence and helps to understand the meanings that are not directly stated in the text; the third and last level deals with the literary competence and provides readers with the competency to highlight the main implications of a text by their critical value.

Alderson's hierarchy of understanding is useful because it sheds light on the cognitive and intellectual capacities required in the study of literature. From his description, one comes to the conclusion that literary competence is not an easy objective to attain, since it requires good background knowledge of the topic and a firm grounding both in the linguistic and cultural competences of the language in which it is studied. It seems to us that the absence of the last two competences has affected negatively our experiment, since most students displayed a slavish reliance on the library or internet documents, to the extent that they overlooked the great autonomy and big incentives that they were granted. Besides, the students' weak writing skills prevented them from displaying their truthful interpretation abilities and hindered the correct assessment and appraisal of their final projects. But does this mean that the failure of most students to perform a good project work is due to extraneous agents, such as their low level in writing and unfamiliarity with literature, and is not inherent in the method of project work? All in all, the experiment encouraged us to re-conduct it again and advise it to our colleagues teaching other modules. Why? This is due to many reasons:

One: using project work has had the merit to show the real level of the students in at least three skills involved in foreign language teaching (writing, speaking, and reading). The students were of course the first to achieve consciousness about their limitations. Such self-consciousness about one's weaknesses may be very valuable to the students in the course of their learning process.

Two: group work stirred high excitement among the students and enforced 'active' and 'interactive' learning in the classroom, thus breaking away from the monotonous atmosphere of former teacher-centered methods. In other words, the project work has immersed the students in the actual study of literature, because it has broken the monopoly held by the teacher both as the mediator and the interpreter of texts.

Three: students were urged to use the department's library and to develop skills related to book search. Other students resorted to the internet and developed skills related to electronic search, too. These two skills have further significance in the construction of the student's future learning.

Four: the students' unsuccessful attempts to infer the structure of imagery may still be valued because they remain autonomous attempts which may be improved through time. We have had the opportunity to notice this not in the students' products, but in the lectures following the end of the experiment.

All in all, these four reasons combined to infuse a new breath to lectures in literature classes. Yet, project work should be handled with care, because it is time-consuming for the students and teacher alike and, when carried inappropriately, may result in increasing frustration and discouragement. Such reactions, which may hinder the learning process, have been observed in some students whose works were rejected on the ground that the writing style and interpretation were not personal. They had committed themselves heart and soul to their project, to the extent that they could not take enough distance between their subjective feeling and the teacher's assessment. This attitude led them to perceive the negative results of the assessment as degrading for their personality.

On the basis of Gray's hierarchy of levels of understanding of a text, the students were also given the task 'to read beyond the lines' in order 'to make connections among textual elements and interpret those connections in terms of their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs'. In other words they were asked to use interpretation and discover the organizational

scheme of the text. But most of the students showed their incapacity to go beyond the initial step of reading ‘between the lines’ and even of ‘reading the lines’.

The necessity of prerequisites is put forward here as literary competence is specifically linked with students’ reading and writing abilities. Students should therefore master the linguistic competence which associates the field of sociolinguistics to highlight the cultural dimension of language so as to go beyond the notion of linguistic competence.

It is then a necessity for students to acquire language for cultural awareness in order to attain cross-cultural understanding in the target language for communicative and literary purposes. To put it in other terms, cultural awareness is seen as a prerequisite for communicative and literary competences which do not neglect the aesthetic and cultural dimensions in a world of pluriculturalism and plurilingualism.

According to Richard Kern (2000), students should grasp the pragmatic implications of the way the informational content is presented; in short, they should be able to interpret a text by using what McCarthy (1991:27) calls “a set of procedures, the approach to the analysis of texts that emphasises the mental activities involved in interpretation” and named procedural.

The procedural approach emphasises the role of the reader in actively building the world of texts which are social in origin, intimately related to other texts which are context-bound and socially embedded. He has to use his background knowledge of the world in order to make inferences by linking between form and content, comprehension and production; in one sentence to be able to use the text as a source for a new production.

As Michael Stubbs (quoted in Carter and Burton, 1982: 71) put it, literary competence involves “the ability to understand different kinds of semantic relationships between a text and a summary of it; between sentences and different kinds of propositions conveyed by them; and between what is said and what is implied. These distinctions give more precise insight into some aspects of literary fiction, since a traditional concern of

literary criticism is the ambiguity and multiple meanings of literary texts, and how meanings may be conveyed without having to be stated in so many words”.

The literary competence implies the students’ command of analytic skills related to understanding, selecting, discriminating, comparing, organising in order to re-use, re-shuffle information called from set books, lecture notes and critical works. It helps the students to escape the slavish reliance on critical references, to the extent that they would no longer feel the need to copy blindly passages from the sources.

Notes and References

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