



A Review on English Literature Instruction in the Algerian Context

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Abstract ;

English literature has a very important role in educational institutions and is considered as one of the compulsory subjects to be taught especially at the higher educational context. With the limited research conducted about this topic, this paper aims to add to the body of knowledge and provide teachers of English, in general, and teachers of literature, in particular, with a general overview of the different approaches, literary materials and the classroom that can be Implemented in English literature classes.

Article info

*Received
27 November 2023
Accepted
30 December 2023*

Keyword:

- ✓ *Teaching*
- ✓ *English Literature*
- ✓ *Algerian Context*

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1. Introduction

English literature has always been impressive with its countless benefits for teaching and learning as well as fulfilling the educational and research aspects of literary studies. Given that English literature is taught as a subject in the Algerian context and is first introduced to learners in the tertiary level (Bouazid and Le Roux 2014; Allami,2018; Kheladi,2021) where teachers of English literature are given flexibility to select the teaching approach/es, literary materials and classroom activities for their teaching in Algerian universities (Kheladi,2017; Kheladi,2019; Allami and Ghenim, 2022). Therefore, this article aims to provide a deep understanding of the current English literature teaching in Algeria. As it will contribute to the body of knowledge about English instruction, in general, and English literature, in particular.

1.1.1. Historical overview of teaching English literature

By way of introduction, it is necessary to provide a brief historical overview of how literature took place in EFL teaching. The status and position of literature have changed due to the emergence of different theories and methods in language teaching/learning (Delanoy,1997).

Literature was first introduced as the main source of input in the grammar translation method to help learners read and understand foreign literature (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) since it was the subject matter that dominated language teaching before the world war (Thakur,2003, cited in, Ismail, Abdul Aziz and Abdullah, 2008). This had soon changed with the emergence of the audiolingual teaching method, in the 1950s, which emphasized the use of dialogues and repetitive drills neglecting the use of literature (Isariyawat et al, 2020). Along with this, the pioneers of the functional approach considered literature as an unworthy subject in language teaching since it no longer met the learners' needs (Ismail, Abdul Aziz and Abdullah, 2008).

However, literature started to gradually gain its position back in language teaching. It was integrated in the 1970s as the source of authentic language in the communicative language teaching approach where the focus was mainly on the linguistic features in literary texts (Carter,2007; Khatib, Rezaei and Derakhshan, 2011; Allami, 2018). Literature has, once again, established its grounds as an important subject from the 1980s in language classrooms through the new evolution of the literary theory

(Bagherkazemi and Alemi, 2010; Rezaei and Derakhshan, 2011; Fehaima, 2017). This, in turn, was related to the increasing attention of developing learners' cultural awareness through using literature in EFL classrooms which is also "the recent trend regarding the inclusion of literature in foreign language teaching" (Granath, 2017). Over the last decade, literature has been considered as one of the most important and compulsory subjects in language classes especially those at college and university levels (Magulod, 2018; Thanh Du, 2022), which is also the case in Algeria where English literature is a compulsory subject in the general education curriculum of universities especially for students who specialize in foreign languages and English literature (Bouazid and Le Roux, 2014; Fehaima, 2014; Fehaima, 2017; Kheladi, 2017; Allami, 2018; Kheladi, 2019; Kheladi, 2020; Kheladi, 2021; Allami and Ghenim, 2022).

1.1.2. Overview of teaching English literature in Algeria

In recent years, the Algerian government considered including English learning in education for social and economic development (Bouazid and Le Roux, 2014). Several studies have revealed that although university students are open to and aware of the importance of English as a global language, they have a low proficiency level compared to other

Arabic-speaking countries and they still struggle to learn English as a foreign language (Kheladi, 2017; Allami, 2018; Kheladi, 2020). To explain more, there have been a lot of reforms concerning teaching English in Algerian schools until policy makers decided upon using a Communicative language teaching approach in pre-tertiary levels in 2005 (Rezig, 2011; Mami, 2018), in which the emphasis was on improving the students' communicative competence (Benrabbeh, 2014). English literature as a subject was only taught at the university level (Fehaima, 2014; Guerroudj, 2015), specifically for students who undertook English as a field of study for a university degree, and it can be summarised through the following quote: "Study of literary movements and the literature of earlier centuries is best kept for students who wish to specialize in foreign literature at undergraduate or graduate level" (Rivers, 1968, p. 231), which is the case of teaching English literature in the Algerian context (Kheladi, 2017).

Studies conducted on English literature instruction in the Algerian context (Fehaima, 2014; 2017; Bouazid and Le Roux, 2014; Allami, 2018; Kheladi, 2019; 2020; 2021) have shown that despite the challenges teachers encounter such as, students' anxiety, course coverage, students' learning assessment, lack of library resources and absence of teacher training, they have flexibility over how to

teach English literature including the choices, decisions and procedures they make in the classroom (Kheladi, 2017; Kheladi,2020; Ghenim, Allami, 2022). Little was done however on how teachers navigate this degree of flexibility in teaching English literature and how different factors can influence their autonomy in teaching English literature.

In order to explain the situation of English literature instruction in Algeria and provide future implication for this module in specific, Fehaima (2017) conducted a study to investigate teachers' instructional methods in English literature classes and students' perceptions about English literature as a module. Through using interviews, both teachers and students claimed that the use of while-reading activities was predominant in the classroom with the absence of pre-reading activities and scaffolding techniques (Fehaima,2017). To compensate the gap of focusing mainly on the pre-reading stage, it is needed to shed light on the teachers' whole instructional experience in the classroom and give them room to explain their instructional decisions, actions and procedures which might also be mediated by personal factors such as their training, teaching experience and contextual elements.

The students' perceptions about English literature were also a vital point of investigation. In a study into "EFL

students' attitudes and perceptions towards literature in the Algerian context", Allami (2018) found that most students held positive attitudes towards English literature; however, they found literature challenging as a subject in comparison to other modules like linguistics and civilisation. This, they stated, was related to the teachers' instructional methods (Allami,2018) through using teacher-centred approaches with the absence of teacher training (Fehaima,2014; Kheladi, 2017; Kheladi, 2019). The traditional teaching approach of English literature is highly used at Algerian universities; however, the reasons behind the teachers' choices from the teachers' perspectives seem to be absent in Allami's (2018) study. It is, therefore, crucial to investigate how teachers plan for their teaching of English literature with the absence of teacher training which leaves them with a responsibility to focus on both the language and content in their English literature instruction.

The findings of Allami's study (2018) have, also, shown that learners supported the use of classroom activities such as, film adaptations of the novel to promote discussions and encourage learner engagement in the classroom, yet their absence in English literature classrooms was not justified which might be related to the lack of resources. It is needed to investigate how teachers use the degree of autonomy they have to teach English

literature. Indeed, meeting the learners' needs is important; however, the focus of the study of Allami (2018) was based on learners' perceptions, and teachers' views were not included which calls for more research to explore how teachers select the appropriate classroom activities.

In the same vein, Kheladi (2020), in his article "engaging EFL students with literature: an Algerian perspective", found that literature instruction in the Algerian context tends to be challenging in comparison to other modules due to teachers' obsession with the course coverage and introducing students to an "overload syllabi" in a short period of time. Literature instruction, in Algeria, is best described by following the transmissive approach that relies on "... coverage of different literary periods, historical backgrounds, and biographical information about authors, literary concepts, or genre characteristics." (Beach et al, 2011, p.7) using teacher-centred approaches which are widespread in Algerian universities (Kheladi,2020). Teachers, he added, relied on teacher-centred approaches due to the learners' concern of passing the exams where exams are the main source of assessment in the Algerian context (Benmoussat and Benmoussat 2018; Kheladi 2019; Allami and Ghenim, 2022). Therefore, it is important to investigate the basis upon which teachers choose and use a specific teaching approach in alignment with

different factors such as, the context as these explanations seem to be absent in the literature.

Together, these studies tackled different topics on English literature instruction in the Algerian higher educational context such as, the students' perceptions on English literature (Allami,2018; Fehaima,2014; Fehaima,2017; Kheladi,2020) and the implications of English literature in the Algerian context (Bouazid and Le Roux,2014; Kheladi,2017). However, little was done on teachers' perceptions about the teaching of English literature. Therefore, it is significant to fill in this gap giving teachers a voice to explain their choices, decisions and actions in the teaching process.

1.1.3. Definitions of literature

As part of the literature review, it is essential to shed light on different definitions of literature. Thus, attributing a single definition to literature can be difficult due to the various ways in which theorists and critics perceive literature. Elkins (1996), for instance, stated that literature and language are synonymous. Supporting this, Leech (1969) argued, "we generally suppose that the literature cannot be examined in any depth apart from the language, any more than the language cannot be studied apart from the literature" (p.1). Therefore, literature emphasises the use of language to better

understand oneself through meeting people from different cultures, societies, time periods and discover the uniqueness of other beliefs (Kramersch,1993). Similarly, literature is seen as the work of art in which language is the medium of expression used to open doors into human lives, values, and experiences (Mu'in, 2021). In brief, literature is considered as a creative and imaginative work of art that reflects the development of society and the values of humanity (Parkinson, Thomas, 2004)

Definitions of literature may vary from one teaching situation to another (Parkinson and Thomas; 2004) especially that literature is a term concerned more with what something does than what it is said to be itself (Ellis,1974). Thus, it is needed to make a distinction between teaching literature either as a resource or a subject. The latter is related to how English literature is taught in Algerian universities (Kheladi,2020). Lazar (1993) gave a brief explanation of literature both as a subject and a resource, she noted:

The study of literature makes literature itself the content or subject of a language course, while the use of literature as a resource draws on literature as one source among other texts for promoting interesting language activities. Clearly, if it is the study of literature which is our aim then developing the 'literary competence' of our students is crucial.

This, for example, might be the case for a group of learners at tertiary level. (Lazar 1993: P,14)

Given that English literature is taught as a subject in the Algerian context and is first introduced to learners in the tertiary level (Bouazid and Le Roux 2014), it can be challenging for teachers, especially in the tertiary level, where they rely on their flexibility as teachers in their teaching of English literature (Kheladi,2017). Since teaching literature depends on the teacher's role in the classroom and the areas its integration can improve (Lazar,1993), it requires planning of the teacher in 'choosing the teaching approach, selecting texts, planning activities, leading discussions, formulating writing assignments, evaluating students' interpretations, etc.' (Beach et al., 2006:4) aligned with the goals set in the curriculum or by teachers themselves (Ristoska, Neshkovska, Poposka, 2021).

1.1.4. Approaches to teaching literature

A literary work can be approached in several ways to put the benefits of literature into educational implications. Therefore, an understanding of these approaches is important if teachers and learners are to determine how best to integrate literature as a way of improving the teaching/learning experience. There have been several approaches to teaching literature whose purposes vary from one another, and they were classified

differently by researchers (Cater and Long, 1991; Lazar,1993; Van, 2009; Bloemert et al., 2016; Mart,2019).

The approaches of literature instruction were divided into three main categories: the language-based, the content-oriented and the personal growth approaches (Lazar,1993). The first approach focuses on a detailed analysis of linguistically demanding texts. This, in turn, helps learners draw meaningful interpretations while relating linguistic forms to literary meanings (Hammad,2012). In this approach, learners relate to their language schemata, i.e., background knowledge of grammatical and lexical categories to make sense of the text (Bibby and Mcilroy, 2013; Bloemert et al., 2016). Even though this approach provides learners with a rich repertoire of linguistic terms and grammatical structures in authentic contexts, it neglects the historical, social, and cultural backgrounds of the literary text (Isariyawat, Yenphech and Intanoo, 2020).

In contrast to the language-based approach, the content-oriented approach puts more emphasis on the literary text in relation to the social, political, cultural, and historical background (Rahimipour, 2019). This approach is widely used in the tertiary education where literature is taught as a subject especially in the case of Algerian universities which rely on the content-oriented approach (Kheladi,

2020). Even though teachers are expected to consider several factors such as, time constraints, course coverage, and curriculum demands, they still can be flexible when teaching English literature (Kheladi, 2017; Kheladi,2021). To explain more, the teacher can choose the most appropriate approach for their teaching of English literature and the content to provide learners with to enhance their understanding of the text (Allami,Ghenim, 2022).

Whereas the focus of the language based-approach is on linguistic features, and the content-based approach on historical, social, and cultural perspectives of the text, the language enrichment approach emphasises the learners' opinions, thoughts, feelings, and past experiences to enhance both their language learning and develop their cultural awareness of the text (Rahimipour, 2019). In this approach, learners often relate to their personal thoughts and past experiences to be active intellectually and emotionally while discussing their ideas (Yimwilai, 2015). Although this approach increases the learners' motivation while expressing their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, it overlooks the linguistic elements that make for meaningful discussions.

Like the language enrichment approach, the reader response stance is among the newly emerged approaches (Allami, Ghenim, 2022) which consider learners'

opinions to generate meaning of the literary text (Mart,2019). As stated by Spirovska (2019): “The reader, with his past experiences, beliefs, expectations, and assumptions, interacts with the perspectives in the text, and meaning is determined as the result of this interaction” (p. 22). This approach “goes hand-in-hand with theories of top-down reading and readers’ schemata” (Bagherkazemi and Alemi, 2010) and emphasises learner engagement (Kheladi,2020). The use of this approach is absent in English literature classrooms (Fehaima,2014,2017; Guerroudj,2015; Kheladi,2017,2019,2020) due to the possibility that, if used inadequately, the students’ responses can deviate from the literary work (Van,2009) especially if students have limited knowledge on both the language and content of the literary work (Kheladi,2021). As a solution to this, Savvidou (2004) suggested the use of an integrated approach where different approaches of teaching can be used simultaneously to fit the learners’ needs (Marin,2017).

It is quite challenging for teachers to encourage undergraduate learners to fully express and engage with the literary text due to the limited knowledge they have about the English language and literary texts. Therefore, teachers are provided with flexibility to opt for the most suitable way of teaching English literature to reach their teaching objectives of this module

(Kheladi,2020). In similar vein, Kheladi (2017) states that “because of the flexibility of the curriculum at the tertiary level, teachers are provided only by the general guidelines, and it is up to them, collectively or sometimes individually, to tailor the content of the courses, not least that of literature”. Different factors can play a role on the teacher’s selection of materials such as the teachers’ training and teaching experience, as well as contextual factors such as collegiality and curriculum demands.

1.1.5. Selection of literary materials

Researchers have discussed several criteria for selecting materials in English literature classes (McKay, 1982; Lazar, 1993; Maley, 2011; Ainun,2019). Literature is taught as a subject through the use of literary texts which enhance the learners’ second language skills and preserve the text’s literary value (Kheladi,2021). It is, therefore, preferable to consider the learners’ age, level, intellectual maturity, interests, hobbies, and needs to select the appropriate literary texts for learners (Akintunde, Umezinwa, 2018) which might be challenging for the teacher given the diversity of learners within the same classroom. As a way to choose the materials in alignment with the learners’ needs, learners can decide upon what meets their “linguistic level, preferred learning styles and level of involvement in the text” (Maley,2011).

However, the teachers' flexibility to select the literary materials (Kheladi,2017; 2021) can lead to a mismatch between the teacher's goals and the learners' needs (Boşnak, 2020) especially that teachers rarely communicate their expectations of teaching English literature to their learners (Allami, Ghenim, 2022).

Mckay (1982) proposed the use of simplified, easy and young adult literary texts to overcome the linguistic and cultural complexity learners might encounter. However, there are no agreed upon standards to determine the level of complexity of a text in terms of its plot, characterization and cultural assumption (Mckay,1982; Bagherkazemi and Alemi 2010). Therefore, "... materials cannot be viewed independently from their users" (Graton and Graves, 2014, P.11). In other words, the selection of literary materials is mainly based on the teacher's flexibility about choosing the suitable content that aligns with the curriculum and institution (Richards,2006; Maley,2011; Tomlinson 2011; Kheladi,2019). To explain more, when the teacher is in control of teaching a specific module, they often choose the content to use through which procedures and for which level to achieve their teaching outcomes in a specific period (Tomlinson,2011), as is the case with teaching English literature at the tertiary level in the Algerian context (Kheladi,2017; 2021; Allami, Ghenim,2022). Similarly, even though

teachers are expected to consider several factors such as, time constraints, course coverage, and curriculum demands, they still can be flexible when choosing literary materials and classroom activities (Kheladi, 2017). As a part of investigating how teachers choose their teaching approach and literary texts, it is also needed to explore how teachers choose the appropriate classroom activities in compliance with personal factors such as the teachers' training and contextual elements such as, the curriculum demands, the availability of resources, classroom allocation and collegiality.

1.1.6. Classroom activities in teaching literature

Literature has the power to spur thoughts, provoke intellectual productivity and deepen one's insights into the nature of reality (Bennett and Royle; 2009) through the use of literary texts which promote different classroom activities. Among these classroom activities are group discussions to improve the learners' critical thinking (Showalter; 2003) in addition to role-play, drama and improvisation to promote collaborative work (Elliot, 1990). Although developing learners' communicative and critical skills is highly advised in teaching English literature, it is not always possible when the learners' level can prevent them to explain their opinions freely (Allami,Ghenim, 2022). As a solution to

this, film adaptations can be used in the classroom to make the literary work more accessible to learners (Allami, 2018), yet it depends on the availability of resources at the university to use this alternative.

Moreover, teachers are expected to acknowledge the diversity of learners in the classroom and use literary texts to help them “navigate their own way through them” rather than focus only on the grading of their language (Lazar,1993). It is, therefore, advised to use tasks and activities that promote students’ interpretations instead of suggesting that there is one 'correct' understanding of a text that students are expected to reach on exams (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 1988) even when their interpretations and answers are backed up by intelligent and logical reasons and based on a full linguistic understanding (Richards,2006). Thus, the use of appropriate classroom activities is often related to the teachers’ objectives of teaching English literature (Ugwu,2022) and the use of adequate instruction to best achieve them (Tomlinson,2011).

With discussing the points of controversy and consensus of teaching English literature, several approaches can be implemented for a successful teaching/learning experience, and a range of practical recommendations are presented in this review; however, it depends on the teachers’ perceptions and

views on teaching English literature and how they negotiate their understanding of English literature instruction in choosing and using the most appropriate approach/es, materials and activities to achieve their teaching objectives. Although teachers, students, the context and the curriculum are all pieces of the same puzzle, the teacher is the central piece for they facilitate, negotiate, incorporate and decide how the other pieces can fit together for English literature instruction to take place in the classroom (Renzi,2005).

1.2.The position of English literature

English literature had a very significant presence in the language classroom and is still today an important component of language teaching in many countries. Although foreign language teaching has received great interest, there has recently been a growing concern for English literature teaching and learning. This growing attention can be seen in different countries where the focus is on teachers’ challenges of teaching English literature in the higher educational context (Kamal, Hassan, 2020; Gubair, Eltahir, 2018) and teachers’ views and perspectives of teaching English literature in the secondary level (Guerroudj,2015; Giuria, 2015; Bobkina, Romero, Sastre-Merino, 2021).

Similarly, the Algerian case shares the interest in conducting research on English

literature, particularly in recent years, but this research remains limited as the primary focus has been on learners' perceptions and attitudes towards English literature as a module (Kheladi,2013; Allami,2018; Fehaima,2014; Fehaima; 2017) with a limited number of studies on teachers' perceptions about teaching English literature in the higher educational context (Kheladi, 2021).

1.3.Conclusion

English literature has always played an important role in language classrooms. This, in turn, places the responsibility on the English literature teacher for choosing the appropriate teaching approach/es, literary materials and classroom activities in their teaching process. The teachers' planning for the teaching of English literature is usually a complex procedure which might be mediated by different personal and contextual factors including teacher training, experience, collegiality, curriculum, availability of resources and others. Therefore, the aim of this article was to provide a brief summary about other researchers' recommendations on the different areas on English literature instruction ranging from deciding upon a teaching approach, selecting the literary materials and choosing the appropriate classroom activities.

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