

Teaching Literature across Cultures: English Literature at Iranian Universities

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Abstract. Teaching literature has always been controversial, since it deals with culture, which includes one's religion and set of beliefs, gender and its prejudices, class and the vanities beside, race as well as the differences. Teaching a foreign language carries a novel culture with itself, so it is not surprising if literature as the main cultural camp for any language takes the lion's share in this regard. The subject seems more critical when we know that students' cultural backgrounds not only shape how they want to learn, but also what they want to learn. Many studies have been done in this area around the world, but the problem is that they are not fit for the Iranian cultural specificities. For instance, we barely have racial issues; ethnic matters are not also highlighted, since we teach English literature not Persian; but gender and religious questions, especially in literary criticism are of paramount significance. The problem is not over here, for transsexual theories have emerged during the last two decades in critical theories. Being aware of the differences between our culture and the Anglo-American one, on the one hand, as well as finding some possible solutions for each case, on the other, can help a teacher to know how to cope with the forthcoming problems.

In this study, the essayist will pose theories from diverse scholars and theorists in the area; then, they would be applied to the Iranian culture. In fact, academic experience is attached to the application to show which action on the side of the teacher brings which reaction on the side of students. As teaching philosophies change according to the context in which the teacher is teaching, the howness of the theories' application is of paramount significance. The findings confirm that a teacher can reconcile not only two different cultures but also two opposite or inimical ones, that is between the English or American literature and the Iranian students, colleagues, and academic environment.

Keywords: Teaching literature, across cultures, English Literature, Iranian Universities

1. Introduction

Teaching literature has always been controversial, since it deals with culture which includes one's religion and set of beliefs, gender and its prejudices, class and the vanities beside, race as well as the differences. If we just think of other branches of English language, translation studies, linguistics, and teaching, despite their focus on the topic of culture, teachers in none of them are confronted with literature's possible and potential threats. The significance of the issue is highlighted when we notice that although so many works of research have been done on the subject around the world, probably we can say almost none of them could be fit into our own Iranian culture with its specificities. However, to know the theoretical bases of teaching literature in a different culture is very helpful; the essayist here will pose some quotes from diverse scholars and theorists in the area; then, he tries to analyze them whether they are proper and applicable to the given culture.

John Dewey, the famous American philosopher, says, "Literature, art, [and] religion, when ... dissociated [from culture], are just as narrowing as the technical things which the professional upholders of general education strenuously oppose" (72). Indeed, this is to emphasize that the difference between technical majors and literature or broadly speaking humanities is the matter of culture. Therefore, teaching

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philosophies change according to the context in which the teacher is teaching; that is to say, if one everywhere teaches with the same methodology, it leads to separatism and racism (Ostrowski 2). Therefore, from a constructivist perspective, teachers must be aware of their students' cultural backgrounds in order to understand how they construct knowledge (Jordan, Carlile, and Stack 86-7). Therefore, teachers should respect students whose cultures differ from theirs (Willis "Keeping" 267-77). Moreover, teachers should remember that no subject is absolutely "culture-free" (Jordan, Carlile, and Stack 94).

In what follows, we are going to cast light on the theoretical aspects of the problem, to enumerate the dimensions of pedagogical culture, and to discuss the suggested methodologies; then, Iran will be taken as the case study in order to see to what degree the speculative ideas proposed by other scholars in other cultures could be applied in another country with an absolutely different culture. Mention should be made that it is often needed to bring some practical examples in the theoretical section. The researcher attracts the attention of his reader to the point that the different cultural matters discussed here are not to receive or reject any culture; they are only his academic experience that is to be shared.

2. Theories and Methodologies

In common language, we may divide two cultures by some mental pictures, such as gender, class, sexuality, race, religion, or ethnicity. Nonetheless, culture is not defined by the difference in any of these parameters, but by subsequent elements. Dimensions of cultural variability are four elements within which the above factors are wrapped. These have been expounded by Hofstede and Bond (418-19) as well as Chang and Kuo (75) deliberately.

Power distance, as the first sort, is the extent to which the less powerful accept power to be distributed unequally. Here, the relation between the teacher and the student is consequential, but it is not limited just to that tie-up. In a culture with great distance in power, for example, teachers do not accept students' commentaries; students look up to instructors as the primary source of knowledge. Therefore, constructivist types of learning which involve putting students in a participative learning meet some resistance. This is related to individualism and masculinity, other two elements explained below. Furthermore, if one gender is dominant in a culture, the relation between the two sexes acquires considerable significance.

Uncertainty avoidance is defined as the extent to which people wish to reduce anxiety by decreasing uncertainty or threatening ambiguous situations. As we see here, all gender, class, ethnicity, race, and religion are important. Making threat to any of them, depending on the culture, might arouse a possible reaction. Such cultures like clear rules and stable structures. For instance, cracking dirty jokes or dealing with sexual matters in coeducational systems are not suggested. In an ethnically sensitive environment, telling jokes concerned with its ethnicity is very dangerous.

Next, individualism is posed versus collectivism: In the former, people look after themselves and their families only, while in the latter they are in the groups which look after them for loyalty. In this regard, assigning students to do (team) projects should be predicated on the two subcategories; if the university is in a collectivist country, the parentheses are dropped, otherwise they should be taken into the play.

Masculinity and femininity are contained in the last rubric, which prevails almost all societies around the world. In fact, it occurs to the writer that a community is either masculine or feminine. Dominant values in the first are success, money, and things; moreover, the roles of men and women are distinct with little or no overlap. On the other hand, eminent merits in the second one are caring for others and life quality.

Having the taxonomies in mind, some cultural methodologies are broached. Cultural-response approach is the main one (Dong 367-382). The approach of this method involves the subsequent guidelines. The professor should design a multicultural syllabus to fit all students' interests (Ostrowski 4), especially the literature written about or by minorities (Willis *Teaching* x). Following that, (s)he can ask students for cultural insights, that is they ought to cruise the Internet and scholarly sources to build their backgrounds.

There are some advantages for this approach; for instance, it expands the students' and teachers' reading lists. It will be helpful in transforming teachers' attitudes toward the issues of culture, such as race (Dong 368). Besides, through the method marginal issues and voices are moved to the center of discussions

(Spears-Bunton 17-36). This causes students to feel better and become cultural insiders, although teachers become outsiders (Dong 376). In this way, it is not surprising if students feel more confident in commenting and learning, because they are more experienced in their race.

Nevertheless, there might be a variety of problems. By the given syllabus, teachers feel unprepared to teach multicultural literature (Fisher 14-23). They fear that their unfamiliarity reinforces literary stereotypes. Further, instructors wonder if their students can handle cultural issues with respect (Dong 368). Scholars believe that such concerns are solved by in-service courses for teachers.

Among other approaches, critical methods are in the list. New criticism tends to silence the adversary dialogues in the class, as everything should come out of the text (Hines 118). The methods such as the reader-response approach which encourage readers to make personal associations (Rosenblatt qtd. in Bressler 49), may not be proper (Jordan and Purves qtd. in Dong 369). University professors typically let homophobic slurs go unchecked in their classes, yet this practice, later on, actualizes stereotypes like “them”-and-“us” binary, continues to institutionalize identities, and denies multiplicities. Capitalism, essentialism, and colonization work to maintain the *status quo* by silencing, closeting, and effacing difference in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. On the other side, some critics are of the opinion that welcoming alternative viewpoints could be helpful (Jordan, Carlile, and Stack 93).

Indeed, despite the existence of differences among cultures, if teachers are absolutely clear about class rules there would be no room for anxiety. To add, consulting with colleagues who have had multi-cultural classes about students’ responses is a wonderful way. Finally, professors at the time of syllabus designing should see what editions or changes are needed to be made in order to circumvent the plausible prejudicial readings. In Iran, once *Norton Anthology* compilers had excluded D. H. Lawrence for his sexual descriptions. Indeed this is what Ostrowski calls “the validation of the text coding system” (3). In graphic words, some works like Beckett’s plays or Murdock’s novels should not be taught to the extremes, for they entice suicidal and sexual excitements.

There exist minor methods or key tips, among others. If we teach the concept of the “other” to legitimize that literature (Purves qtd. in Ostrowski 2), we summon up students’ sense of competitiveness. To bring one sample for our case study, we need to learn English and American culture, because they are our country’s enemies. This method has been utilized in the United States for instilling pupils to know each other’s culture as a positive way for coexistence, since there are a great deal of minorities in the country.

Asher focuses the instructor’s assessment on students’ engagement with self-reflexive exercises and the assumption of responsibility for one’s own “conscientization”, rather than simply on the content of their assignments. The encouragement during class discussions, she adds, in addition to asking students to explore further their insights and questions regarding their own historical and present-day encounters with difference come to the fore in the continuation. She believes that this approach makes it “safe” for students to grapple with their pasts as well as their internalized struggles with issues of race, class, and gender. Thus, such a multicultural pedagogy begins with the transformation of the self, not just the other (1090-91).

3. Application

Some linguistic schemata such as *harfe mardom* (people’s talk), *shekasteh-nafsi* (modesty), *qorbun sadaqe* (very warm greetings) (Sharifian and Palmer 36-44), and *ta’arof* (formalities) (Assadi 221; O’Shea 122-123) indicate “to what extent negating individuality and achieving conformity has been profound in Iranian society” (Ahmadi and Ahmadi 212). In this regard, what Iranian professors of English literature are confronting with is teaching the Anglo-American culture, which is individualistic (Jordan, Carlile, and Stack 84) at universities predicated on Persian conformism. The essayist suggests that if a teacher makes a competition among students he would be successful, concerning gender relations and *harfe mardom* (people’s talk). At the same time, Iranians are weak in team-working; thus, the instructor takes a burdensome task to assign group projects. Mention should be made that doing a team project is one issue, succeeding in that to the degree that it would be fit for publication is another. These are not to say that professors should give up such assignments, for in such a case, first, they as university professors of literature, with all connotations attached, are following the mob’s conformism; second, as learning occurs within culture which

encompasses every aspect of human experience, culture is also the content of learning (Bruner 43). That is to say, teachers should enculturate better concepts in any possible way. Further, as mentioned above, women care for others more than men. Since Iran's universities' admittance in English literature mostly includes girls, team projects would be done more tastefully and deliberately among female students than males.

Besides, the matter of culture and motivation is of paramount importance. Yao describes how Asian students are extrinsically motivated; for instance, they want to please parents or impress relatives. However, the western cultures prize individuality and self-attainment; hence, students are intrinsically motivated by their own desire to obtain good qualifications and jobs (82-8). As most students in Iran confuse English literature with English language, which is highly prestigious, professors of English literature, which is basically an intrinsically-motivating major, should keep in mind that inciting students is along with their other tasks. As above, stimulating group discussions among male and female students could be promising, although teachers should absolutely avoid making "gender wars" in their own classes.

Finally, cultural background not only shapes how students want to learn, but also what they want to learn (Samovar and Porter 247). Rhyme is part and parcel of Persian poetry and Iranians are used to hearing a poem in rhyme; however, in English poetry rhythm is the most fundamental aspect (Wolosky 151). The researcher advises his colleagues to teach rhyming English poems first and gradually shift to blank and free verses. Likewise, culture determines the way we interpret the behavior of others (Jordan, Carlile, and Stack 94). When we know that Iranian students are Muslims and for them religiosity is a consequential factor of selfhood definition (Good and Good 46), it would not be surprising if they have a tendency to study the texts which lend themselves to be criticized religiously. This is ostensible in the way they characterize a protagonist. For instance, the essayist's experience reminds him of the case about Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* in which a homosexual is highly appreciated, but usually students at an Iranian university ascribe negative interpretations to him. Therefore, a teacher's job, here, is to apprise them of the cultural background of the text.

As culture influences second language acquisition where group interactions are important and re the fact that language is known as the basis for literature, probably other pieces of research can be done to examine if we could change some of our cultural factors, such as conformism, would English literature be more or less successful than now.

4. References

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