FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND DIDACTICS IN THE ERA OF UNIVERSITY REFORMS : - Toward A Better Teaching Of English As A Foreign Language ?.

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Introduction :

The role of the subject of didactics of foreign language teaching in general and English language in particular is becoming a primary concern for both theoreticians and practitioners. This growing interest is taking such a dimension because of the introduction of the commonly known new reforms in higher education in Algeria. This new situation is merely justified by a strong need to search for an effective, ideal, and more importantly a generalizable teaching methodology across widely varying audiences, that would successfully teach students a foreign language in the classroom.

In short, teaching methodology or rather didactics is no more than an issue of providing simple approaches, methods or techniques to name all these. But still, this subject has come to stand as a systematic operation that deeply seeks to improve the quality of language teaching and learning through addressing the key matters that shape the design and delivery of language teaching. These issues generally turn around: understanding learners and their roles, rights, needs, motivations, strategies, and the process they employ in foreign language learning; understanding the nature of language teaching and learning and the roles teachers, teaching methods play in facilitating successful learning; understanding how English functions in the lives of learners the way the English language works, the particular difficulties it poses for foreign language learners, and how learners can best achieve their goals in learning English; and finally, understanding how schools, classrooms, and the language teaching profession can best support the teaching and learning of English.

Therefore, this communication is situated inside this problematic. In its broad sense, this study aims to explore some of the background knowledge and beliefs that can be a reference for us to understand the great usefulness of teaching methodology (didactics) in the teaching of any course on the whole. In its very narrow scope of study, this work is meant to engage us in a critical reflection on matters that can bring our current practices into the heart of what teaching methodology of English as a foreign language language postulates. Such a way of conceiving things is the solely manner by and through which our practices can be made theoretically-grounded and operationally-systematic and hence make our teaching very effective.
I - Key Concepts in Language Didactics:

In language didactics, we use a great number of terms. Each one of these terms bears a particular meaning. This variety in terminology may pose some difficulties for both researchers and practitioners. Such a difficulty is generally manifested in the presence of ambiguity or confusion that can lead to misunderstanding. In order to minimize this intricate problem, it has become crucial for us the need to clear up the ground and explain the concepts we use. At this point, this can be done by illustrating the differences in meaning for each one of these terms.

01-Learning:

Learning presents two different senses. In its broad meaning, it has always been associated with the findings in the domain of psychology. The psychological concept of learning goes far beyond popular uses of the term. It includes not only the learning of skills, but it also transgresses to learning to think, the modification of attitudes; the acquisition of interests, social values, or social roles; and even the changes in personality. Language learning, in keeping with this broad interpretation of the concept, is also very widely conceived. It encompasses all kinds of language learning for which a formal provision is made through teaching (H.H. Stern, 1983:18-9).

In its limited scope of meaning, the concept learning refers merely to that process which has been included or influenced by some form of deliberately planned intervention. Such an act is often justified by the presence of relatively formal setting, which requires the use of some tools, techniques and strategies to fulfill the desired tasks. For many didacticians, the concept learning is subsumed under the concept of "language learning" first or second "language acquisition" or "learning", the development of bilingualism, and the learning of linguistic variations within a language (H.H. Stern, ibid).

02-Teaching:

Language teaching can be defined as the activities which are intended to bring about language learning. For many didacticians, the concept teaching differs, to a large extent, with the other concept "instruction". For those who bear such a difference, they consider that the activity of instruction should be put inside the process of teaching, and hence the latter becomes a wider manifestation of the former.

In language teaching, the concept teaching is often defined as, "the activities intended to bring about language learning". The supporting activities such as, the preparation of teaching materials, teaching grammars, or dictionaries, or the training of teachers, as well as making the necessary administrative provision inside or outside an educational system, they all fall under the concept of teaching (Illich, 1987).

03-Method:
In language didactics, it is very fundamental to make clear cuts between terms such as, "method", "approach", and "technique". Anthony (1963) and Norris (1965) provided a definition in which they made the distinction between those concepts. Approach constitutes the axiomatic or theoretical bases of language teaching. Method is procedural. It is the selection of materials to be taught, the gradation of those materials, their presentation, and pedagogical implementation to induce learning (Anthony, Norris, 1969: 02). Within one approach there can be more than one method; but each method must be based upon the selected approach. Technique is implementational. It describes a particular task, stratagem, or contrivance used in classroom (Stern, ibid: 474). It must harmonize with a method and consequently also with the underlying approach. Anthony and Norris (ibid) concluded that, "a method must be based on axioms, and it must be implemented through techniques selected to lead students to the desired language behavior, as defined by those axioms" (1969:96). Stern (ibid) concluded that such an interpretation of these terms, "approach" is the theoretical assumption, "method" is the teaching strategy, and "technique" is the classroom activity. But still, the presentation of these didactic concepts does not reflect the broad way in which those concepts are actually used today.

04-Methodology:

In its clear meaning the term "methodology" completely differs from the other concept "method". In this respect, language teaching methodology is regarded as a set of thoughtful actions which are carried on in order to yield accurate responses to some raised questions about issues strongly related to the field of language teaching. Purren (1988) suggested the following definition, "language teaching methodology is the sum of coherent procedures that often seeks to generate a relatively original explanation of some phenomena in language teaching research". This manner of conceiving this concept considerably differs with the way through which we have identified and defined the term "method" so far. Narcy-Combes (2003) made this distinction clearer enough for us. He pointed out that research in language didactics could not rely on what is said to be "method". Rather, research in education in general needs to depend on precise methodologies, which enable researchers build pertinent assumptions on the whole process under research.

II- Understanding what language didactics is:

01- Definition:

Language didactics could be seen as the domain where one needs to deal with aspects and factors that interfere in language teaching. For many scholars language didactics is equivalent to the other term "pedagogy". In order to provide a thorough and a comprehensive definition of this term, Narcy-Combes (ibid) goes back to Bailly (1987). The latter noted that the concept of language didactics, as it is conceived in the present time, refers to the process of distanciation and the act of theorizing an
activity. In other words, this implies that a researcher, or an observer needs to be very present when carrying on an analysis of the whole teaching operation, or adopting precise strategies in teaching, or transferring the set of competencies from teacher to learner. Likewise, this also concerns the use of particular ways by learners during the learning process. Such an interpretation of this concept leads us to a number of assumptions. First, this definition considers us as mere observers, and not full practitioners. Second, the didactic object, as it is seen here, lies more on what one can refer to as a description, and not as an action.

02- Theoretical insights: language didactics and epistemological position:

a- What is epistemology?

The term "Epistemology" is polysemic. It comprises a multitude of methods. It is specific to all sciences. It also includes any assumptions about scientific thinking. It is the search of strong evidence and scientific truth. For many scholars epistemology is the construction of knowledge within individuals.

b- What is epistemological position?

Epistemological position is the sum of theoretical assumptions about a given issue under research that a researcher holds. It is his reference to that background when carrying on his research. Bachelard (1936) demonstrated that in order to get valid results for a particular research, the researcher must move from the ready-made explanations on a specific idea to rely on a defined theory or approach.

c- Language didactics and epistemological position:

Refering to this explanation of what "epistemological position" is, there is a strong stress that a researcher or a practitioner in language didactics has to express his classroom practices on the ground of clear theoretical convictions. Planning a course of a study, judgements about language teaching and decisions that a teacher makes in his everyday classroom practices are not a result of mere personal experiences, but they are seen as very systematic procedures that need to be put in their right theoretical framework.

III- Criteria of language teaching theory:

Stern (ibid) proposed that theory in language teaching should satisfy some basic criteria. If realized in such a way, language didactics can avoid some inadequacies of theoretical formulations, false dichotomies, irrelevant oppositions, and the weak conceptualizations. Some of these suggested criteria can be identified as particularly relevant to the development of a theoretical foundation in language didactics.
a- Usefulness and practicality:

Since a theory of language didactics is a theory of practical activities, it should be useful, effective, or applicable. It can prove its usefulness by making sense of planning, decision making, and practice. A theory in language didactics which is not relevant to practice is not worth to be dealt with since it is a weak theory.

b- Explicitness:

A theory in language didactics should state and define its principal assumptions as clearly as possible. No language teacher can teach a language without a theory of language teaching. Theoretical awareness is an essential criterion in carrying on pedagogical activities.

c- Coherence and consistency:

A theory in language didactics should systematize a number of phenomena. A good theory has to reveal order, pattern, and establish in our minds an awareness of relationships which can enable to recognize the relationships. A theory, in this context, can be represented by a model which can visualize the pattern.

d- Simplicity and clarity:

It is often agreed upon that a good theory in the domain of language didactics is the one that aims at being simple, economical, and is expressed in as straightforward a language as possible. Simplicity must not be thought at the price of overgeneralization and oversimplification.

Conclusion:

To conclude, two main reasons incited us to tackle this subject. First, regarding what is being done in the field of language didactics, one can come up with the assumption that such practices are mere accumulation of individual practices, and personal initiatives that do not rely on any sort of valid theoretical bases. Second, language didactics has turned for many, who are involved in the field of foreign language teaching, a simple collection of a number of approaches, methods, and techniques that have become current for everybody. Therefore, our major objective in the present communication is to sensitise mainly foreign language teachers on the fact that teaching a foreign language is not a simple activity that comes up as a result of someone who knows or gets from a teaching experience. Rather, those teachers have to strive very hard to look for appropriate theoretical foundations on which their practices should rely. The other crucial objective is to enable foreign language teachers seek for any discrepancy and consequently conceive the subject of language didactics as a discipline that offers a
system of thought, a method of analysis and synthesis, or a conceptual framework in which to place different activities. If this objective is accomplished, language didactics can turn to becoming a domain in which one can clearly distinguish between solid truth and mere personal practices.

References:


The Objectives of Using Literature in the EFL Classroom

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Introduction

Many EFL teachers consider the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and worthy concern. Literature is regarded as an important module for university students of English. But, one can notice that most of those learners are not motivated to study this subject. This may be due to different factors.
Therefore, this article comes to show the importance of using literature in the EFL classroom. In fact, the main motive behind handling this paper is that most students of English are plagued with some misunderstandings whenever dealing with literature.

There is often a considerable controversy among literary critics as to how literature can be defined. For some literary theorists, literature is regarded as an expression of art created to communicate feelings, thoughts and ideas. Next, we will examine a number of objectives of having recourse to literature in EFL classes.

Literature as a Language Tool

Linguistically, literature may help learners of English to master the vocabulary and grammar of the language as well as its four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking. It can motivate students of English to use language. When literary materials are carefully chosen, learners may feel that what they do in the classroom is relevant to the levels of their linguistic development (Collie and Slater, 1987).

Further, literary language is somehow different from other forms found in other types of discourse, i.e., it breaks the usual rules of syntax, cohesion and collocation (Short, 1996). Thus, some teachers of literature claim that they sometimes expose their students to unconventional uses of language, making them feel confused (Widdowson, 1975). However, it has been proved that by making learners explore such linguistic uses, the teacher is also encouraging them to think about various norms of language use.

Literature provides learners with a wide range of individual lexical or syntactic items. Students become familiar with many features of the written language reading a substantial and contextualized body of text. They learn about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures and the different ways of connecting ideas, which develop and enrich their own writing skills. To understand the stylistic effects of any unconventional linguistic use, students ought to be made aware
of how it differs from common usage (Arab, 1998). This step can help to develop their abilities to find out the main themes of the literary work under study.

Literature as a Cultural Tool

Literature helps the learners to understand the others’ culture. It shows the learners various themes and unexpected uses of English. Exposing students to English literature, the teacher should ask them to think about the culture from which this literature is derived (Stern, 1987). Searle (1984: 17) describes that in the Caribbean, students of British literature feel that “they had to put the world and the people they knew around them against a barrage of hostile, alienated knowledge which bore no relation to the reality they saw around them” (Searle, 1984, quoted in Lazar, 1993: 16).

For such learners, literary works such as novels and short stories facilitate understanding how communication takes place in the writer’s community. Though the world of any literary work is imaginary, it presents a full and colourful setting in which characters from many social backgrounds can be described. A reader can discover the way the characters in such literary works see the world outside (i.e. their thoughts, feelings, customs and traditions). This colourful created world can quickly aid the student to feel for the codes and the preoccupations that shape a real society through visual literacy of semiotics (Lazar, 1993). Literature is perhaps best regarded as a complement to other materials used to develop the EFL learner’s understanding into the writer’s society.

Literature as an Educational Tool

Literature may have an educational role in the classroom: it can help the teacher to stimulate his/her students’ imagination. Besides, it develops the learners’ critical capacities and increases their emotional consciousness (ibid.). Studying literature, learners may feel increasingly confident in expressing their own ideas in English. In addition, it can develop their interpretative abilities: students are urged to introduce their own ideas in the classroom (Krsul, 1980).
Once the student reads a literary text, s/he begins to inhabit the text. S/he is drawn into the text. Understanding the meanings of lexical items or phrases becomes less significant than pursuing the development of the story. The student becomes enthusiastic to find out what happens as events unfold via the climax; s/he feels close to certain characters and shares their emotional responses. This can have beneficial effects upon the whole language learning process. At this juncture, the prominence of the selection of a literary text in relation to the needs, the expectations, the interests and the language level of the students is evident. In this process, s/he can remove the identity crisis and develop into an extrovert (Lazar, 1993). Thus, it is well worth the time spent in attempting “to achieve a good match between a particular group of learners and the literary work they will be asked to read” (Collie and Slater, 1987).

In the English classroom, the use of literary texts is often regarded as a successful way of promoting various activities where learners need to share their views and feelings (Zoubir, 1997). One can admit that literature is rich in levels of meaning. In fact, the task which involves students’ personal responses to these levels can accelerate students’ acquisition of language (Zughoul, 1986).

**Conclusion**

In a nutshell, EFL learners’ motivation in the learning process is usually determined by their interest in and enthusiasm for the material used in their class. Thus, the teacher should select the literary texts relevant to the objectives of his/her teaching. While selecting literary texts to be used in language classroom, the students’ language proficiency, interests, age, gender, etc should be taken into account in order not to bore them with inappropriate materials. Overall, the purpose of this paper was to present the rationale underlying the use of literature in EFL classrooms. We hope this article has shown how teaching literature can develop EFL students’ motivation to learn English, and that the ideas introduced here would facilitate teachers’ effective use of literature in EFL classes at the Algerian university.

**Bibliography**


