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Hashemite University English Department graduate students' perspectives on Anglo- American literature and culture

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Abstract

This study complements another conducted earlier by the researchers, which examined undergraduate student responses in the same department. The findings of the previous study were published in an article entitled “Bridges or Walls? The article mainly focused on the pedagogical approach that attempts to find out the best practices for teaching courses on Anglo-American literature and culture in a given context stated above. After investigating the responses of a little more than forty graduate students, it was found out that (30) students, 75% of the whole group of students/respondents, have positive attitudes towards the teaching practices of the courses under investigation.

Keywords: Pedagogy; Anglo-American literature and culture; English department/Hashemite university; Graduate students.

Perspectivas de estudiantes graduados del Departamento de Inglés de la Universidad Hashemite sobre literatura y cultura angloamericanas

Resumen

Este estudio complementa otro realizado anteriormente por los investigadores, que examinó las respuestas de los estudiantes de pregrado en el mismo departamento. Los hallazgos del estudio anterior se publicaron en un artículo titulado "¿Puentes o muros? El artículo se centró principalmente en el enfoque pedagógico que intenta encontrar las mejores prácticas para impartir cursos sobre literatura y cultura angloamericanas en un contexto dado anteriormente. Después de investigar las respuestas de poco más de cuarenta estudiantes graduados, se descubrió que (30) estudiantes, el 75% del grupo total de estudiantes / encuestados, tienen actitudes positivas hacia las prácticas de enseñanza de los cursos bajo investigación.

Palabras clave: Pedagogía; Literatura y cultura angloamericanas; Departamento de inglés / Universidad Hashemite; Estudiantes de posgrado.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, the researchers attempt to survey and assess the opinions of a little more than forty graduate students/respondents, asked to answer certain questions such as the following: What aspect or aspects of a given class did they like the most: the choice of material, the choice of the special topic(s), the theme(s), the teaching

method, the teaching philosophy or what? Why did they (the students) like it? What did the class/these classes make them learn, or unlearn for this matter? More specifically, what social, moral, cultural or literary values did they learn from the class? What window or windows of experience did it/they open to them? Throughout the course, students were asked to answer these questions in an essay form. There were no specific questionnaire items other than asking them to write a full-length essay/answer to indicate their responses fulsomely to the Anglo American literature and culture courses they have taken. By analyzing their essay-answers, the researchers will be able to know the students' opinions in isolation from those of their instructors, and thus come up with new strategies for enhancing the students' learning and positive practices and for helping them avoid the negative ones towards exploring non-native literatures and cultures.

Before presenting the research findings, it would be a useful starting point to give a brief idea about Hashemite University and its Department of English. Hashemite University is the fifth biggest state university in Jordan. The Royal Decree ordaining the establishment of Hashemite University was issued in June 1996. It is located on the outskirts of the city of Zarqa to the east (about 45 minutes' drive) of the capital Amman. Al-Zarqa Governorate is the second most populated Governorate in the country. Teaching started at the onset of the academic year 1995/1996, and students were admitted to the only three established colleges at that time: Sciences and Arts, Economics and Administrative Sciences, and Educational Sciences. Presently, the

University encompasses more than thirteen colleges, and that number is likely to increase in the very near future.

As mentioned above, the College of Arts at Hashemite University is one of the first three colleges of the University that were established at the opening phase; it has been in existence since 1995. Until the end of the academic year 2004–2005, there was a combined College of Sciences and Arts, but they were separated into two colleges in 2005 to give each of them more independence and improve their academic mission. The College has three major departments: Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Department of English Language and Literature and the Department of Human and Social Sciences. A service department, The Department of Allied Human Sciences, serves all university students by offering obligatory courses and some general electives.

The Department of English Language and Literature was established in 1995, which is the same year the University was established. It now offers two majors for the BA degree: English Language and Literature and Literature and Cultural Studies in English. In addition, the department offers one major for the MA degree: English Language and Literature. The study plan for the MA Degree in English Language and Literature comprises thirty-three credit hours that are divided as follows: fifteen compulsory credit hours, nine elective credit hours and nine credit hours for the thesis. All MA students are required to study the fifteen compulsory credit hours. These courses include Topics in Linguistics, Topics in Literature, Critical Theory, and Topics in Translation, Research

Methods and Research Seminar. After passing these courses successfully, students should choose one out of three areas of concentration for the elective courses. These areas are Linguistics, Literature, or Translation. Some of the elective courses in literature include Modernism and Post-modernism in Literature, Special Topics in American Literature, Special Topics in British Literature, and Topics in Literary Genre, Film Studies, and Comparative Literature, to mention just few courses as examples.

The present study is mainly concerned with the compulsory and elective courses in the literary track. Because of the large number of these courses, the study shall concentrate only on the courses that best reflect the students' response to Anglo-American literature and culture such as "Topics in Literary Genre" and "Modernism and Post-modernism in Literature," and "Comparative/World Literature."

The course entitled "Topics in Literary Genre" serves as an intensive study of a certain literary genre by tracing its development and various forms, and students are supposed to explore the different critical approaches to this literary genre. They can also compare and contrast these different approaches together in order to have a wide-ranging vision that will develop their ability to analyze, understand, discuss and evaluate different literary works that belong to a certain genre.

Whereas in the course entitled "Modernism and Post-modernism in Literature," students are expected to study the important elements of modernism and postmodernism, as they are expected to make use of

the theoretical background information about both schools to better comprehend certain literary works.

The third course addressed by the present study is “Comparative/World Literature.” In this course, students study the literary treatment of common themes and motifs in a selection of international literary masterpieces in English translation. The works studied in this course come from all over the world; they cover a wide range of texts that belong to the Anglo-American literary tradition. Some of the writers that might be discussed in this course include Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Naguib Mahfouz, Chinua Achebe, among others. Students study texts that may belong to the same aesthetic category or genre, or they may be ideationally and aesthetically related by belonging to the same literary movement or school. As a whole, students are expected to relate all the texts to the culture(s) that they represent, which will enable them to get a better and sharper understanding of such cultures.

While these courses concentrate on different literary genres, representative authors and different periods and trends in English and American literature, they also give a general idea about Western cultures in general. So, examining the course contents and the student responses to these contents in particular is made pertinent to the primary aims of this study.

In their article entitled “How Professors of American Literature Teach Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ to Undergraduate English Majors at Arab Universities: The Hashemite University, Jordan as an Example,” KIFAH AL OMARI, MARWAN

OBEIDAT, NAZMI AL-SHALABI, and SHADI NEIMNEH emphasize the importance of getting feedback from students about the teaching methodologies used by their instructors in order to find out about the existing methodologies and then “to improve them, hoping to achieve the best practices that help in bridging the gap between theory and practice, and thus achieving the best learning outcomes” (120). Similarly, in their article entitled “Literature, Language or Linguistics? Student Perspectives on What English Departments in Arab Universities Should Focus on,” RAHMA AL MASHROOQI and HOORIYA AL-SHIHI emphasize that:

[d]eciding what courses an English Language Arts study plan should include is a critical question and essential for any effective attempt to evaluate and restructure these study plans and even English Departments as a whole (165).

In order to answer this critical question, AL MASHROOQI and AL-SHIHRI conduct a study based on students’ perspectives. In addition, many other scholars in the field of teaching English Language and Literature did the same thing and use the same pedagogical approach of emphasizing the students’ perspectives in an attempt to find the best practices in teaching courses about Anglo-American literature and culture to Arab students.

To mention just a few of such studies, an article entitled “Globalization and EFL/ESL pedagogy in the Arab World” by MUHAMMAD ZUGHOUL, “Communication problems facing Arab learners of English” By GHALEB RABAB’AH, “Some Reading

Problems of Arab EFL Students” by KAMAL MOURTAGA, “Language vs. Literature in Departments of English in the Arab World” by Marwan M. Obeidat, "English Literature and Arab Students" by LAYLA AL-MALEH, "The English Department in the Arab World Re-Visited: Language, Literature, or Translation? A Student's View" by ALADDIN AL-KHARABSHEH, BAKRI AL-AZZAM and MARWAN M. OBEIDAT, "The Reception of American Literature in Jordan" by NAZMI AL-SHALABI and MARWAN M. OBEIDAT, "From Language to Literature in University English Departments" by M. H. SALIH, “Literary Texts in EFL Classrooms: Applications, Benefits, Approaches” by SHAMSUR KHAN AND ALI ALASMARI, and many other similar articles. The importance of discussing the best practices for teaching literature in the academy becomes more apparent in courses that deal with modern works of literature, like the one addressed by the present study: “Modernism and Post-modernism in Literature.” According to R. B. KERSHNER, even the selection of the works that belong to the modern period is “an admittedly arbitrary act” (31).

2. METHODOLOGY

Despite the importance of all these studies, most of them concentrate on the responses of English Departments’ undergraduate students; few have attempted to investigate the responses of graduate students. The present article endeavors to bridge this gap in the related literature of such studies. Compared to the undergraduate students,

graduate students are expected to provide mature answers for the questions raised by the study.

For this reason, this article mainly focuses on the pedagogical approach that attempts to find out the best practices for teaching courses on Anglo-American literature and culture for graduate students at the Department of English Language and Literature at Hashemite University, Jordan. After investigating the responses of a little more than forty graduate students, the researchers find out that (30) students, 75% of the whole group of students/respondents, have positive attitudes towards the teaching practices of the courses under investigation. Only (10) students, 25% of the whole group of students/respondents, have a negative response. Overall, it is possible to divide students' responses into four groups. The first group, (16) students and (53.3%) of those students who have positive reactions, refers to the students who have such reactions because of the teaching method and philosophy. The second group, (8) students and (26.6 %) of those students who have positive reactions, refers to the students who have such reactions because of the choice of material, special topic(s), and theme(s). The third group (6) students and (20%) of those students who have positive reactions, refers to the students who have such reactions because of both the teaching method and the choice of material. Finally, the last group, (10) students and (25%) of the whole group, refers to the students who have negative reactions towards both the teaching method and the choice of material.

3. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The first group of students refers to those who emphasized that they have benefited a lot from their experience in studying courses like “Topics in Literary Genre,” “Modernism and Post-modernism in Literature,” “World Literature,” and other similar courses. The main reason for their benefit from these courses is the teaching practices adopted by the instructors who teach them.

To this group of students, the strength and intensity of such courses greatly depend on active student participation and contribution to class dialogue. In their view, it is each participant’s responsibility to remain current and on top of the subject in all readings and assignments. Everyone of this group believes that s/he is expected to prepare all oral and written assignments in time for class discussion and by specified due dates and that s/he is evaluated primarily on how clearly she or he can express their ideas, encourage others to express their ideas, and how fully and rigorously they can evaluate the topics and ideas being spoken of or written about in class discussions, research papers and presentations.

Here is a sample of some responses made by students from this group:

1- “You are an extremely knowledgeable person who brings his experience to the table. Therefore, as a student, I benefit from your experience, teaching methods, themes, and even your own philosophy. You have taught me to be a brilliant writer and thinker. You teach me that I can develop my own point of view. You keep telling me that I can come up with various opinions and you will accept them as long as

I support my point of view with evidence. Your teaching method is brilliant. It is the first time that I feel there is no need to read a lot about the story. Instead, I read the work itself.”

2- “I have to admit that what I liked the most in this class is the teaching philosophy as it aims at bringing the best out of us, students, in terms of critical thinking, originality of ideas, and ethics of research-making. It is noteworthy to say that I am very fond of the teaching methodology of my professor because it revolves around ‘squeezing’ the best of the student’s mind. I enjoy writing the response papers every week and I appreciate that the professor reads every word I write and gives me feedback to ‘shape’ my abilities.”

3- “I am lucky to take such course with [an instructor] who appreciates his students and encourages them.”

4- “What I liked most in your class is your teaching method . . . you make everything in the class simple . . . Thank you very much for never letting me down . . . you play a ‘big’ role in my new way of thinking and my research development as well.

5- “When knowledge and experience coexist in one place, this means that the student will gain the utmost benefit. This is what I like most in our class, a professor who has superb knowledge with wide experience, [he provides us with] a solid way of thinking. I have learnt how to read between the lines. Criticism, in the way that I have learnt in this class, is to think always out of the box. This class raised my awareness to the problems I have, and the professor encouraged me to work hard. I appreciate the way the professor treats us.”

6- “I like the teaching philosophy of this class which aims at shaping the students’ ability of critical thinking. The fact that students are encouraged to speak their own thoughts and have their own voice through class discussion is interesting and enjoyable because students get to hear each other and express their opinions if they agree or not with each other. Furthermore, I like it when I write weekly responses that show my ‘reflection’ on the works the class deals with, and I like it more that my professor gives me feedback on my response papers.”

7- “The Professor’s teaching method focuses on explaining things clearly, changing how we study literature and why we study it. We are no longer looking for the grades, we become students who like to understand and then express their own opinions. Our Professor always supports us and encourages us to work on our weakness points.”

From responses such as these, one can overtly notice that there is much focus on the part of students on their instructors’ in class performance, teaching techniques and academic proficiency!

The second group refers to the students who have such reactions because of the choice of material, special topic(s), and theme(s), believing that these issues make all the difference.

Here is a sample of some responses made by students from this group:

1- “I really did enjoy this class as I have never read many works written by the same author.”

2- “I think that this class is one of the few classes I have truly enjoyed. I like the choice of material, the choice of special topics,

themes... I think that my feedback is positive since I enjoy all the aforementioned characteristics.”

3- “I will start answering this question by saying that I am totally satisfied. I am satisfied with the material that we have covered so far. It is not about how many works we have taken; it is about the quality of what we have learnt. I took something that will ‘serve’ me surely in the future.”

4- “I like the choice of works as they have common themes in between.”

5- “The novels I have studied in this class have changed the way I think about literature. I have started reading the novels in a different way, especially the last novel where I have to read, think and argue.”

6- “I find the choice of material very clever because we live in the age of films and movies which become part of our daily life. In addition, it is important to discuss the relation between Arabs and the West.”

7- “I liked everything we have learned in our class, but I liked ‘Marriage is a Private Affair’ the most because it makes me think of every decision I might take regarding my marriage in the future.”

8- “In my opinion, after this awesome class, everything we have discussed is very important, but I preferred the short story more; it is simple and clear, especially the last story which gives me more information about the Nigerian people and their culture.”

From the responses above, it becomes obvious that the choice of material and subject matter has been a major concern for this category

of students who have opted for the course content and what it offers them as graduate students in terms of content, substance and subject matter.

The third group refers to the students who have positive reactions because of both the teaching method and the choice of material. Here is a sample of some responses made by students from this group:

1- “Both the choice of material and the teaching method are new to us. In this class, I have taught the exact meaning of the Orient and the Occident, the connotations of the word “Arab,” the conflict between the East and the West, and its cause. Also, the [style] of teaching is very interesting. The Professor always makes sure to give examples so that we can relate to them.”

2- “There are many things that I liked about the course. One of them is the story about marriage, which helped me to think about the bad consequences of taking a bad decision. The other thing is the presentations that the professor asked us to do. They give us the chance to participate and to know more information about the writers. The course helped me a lot to change the way I read and analyze literary works. The course also helped me to improve my writing skills. Thanks to the professor who did his job in the best possible way.”

3- “Personally, I liked the novel ‘The Thief and the Dogs’ the most because it teaches us a lot about the history of Egypt and its people, especially the political and religious aspect of their life. In

addition, I liked the way we are taught to analyze the literary work and to look for the deeper meaning, not only the surface level meaning.”

4- “I liked the works we discussed in our class. They are related to our everyday life. The course is very beneficial because the instructor taught us many terms and techniques that will help us better read literature.”

5- “The stories we discussed in this class enable us to learn about the cultures and habits of other people, especially about marriage which is a very important subject for everyone. I liked the discussion that the instructor encourages us to have in the class, it enables me to know my friends opinions about this important subject,”

6- “All the fictional works we dealt with in this class are masterpieces, but I liked *Notes from Underground* more because it helps me more to understand the human nature. This work changed my view about people, and it helped me to understand myself much better, Thank you my professor, I have learned many things from this course.”

7- “First of all, I want to thank you my professor for your great effort during the course. Because of you, I can now comment on any passage. I read stories from different cultures, I know more about world literature writers and their cultural milieu.”

The aforementioned feedback makes it evident that this a “both” response group--showing concern for the content as well as the teaching method on equal footage.

The fourth and last group refers to the students who have negative reactions towards both the teaching method and the choice of

material. This group makes up (25%) of the whole group of students/respondents. Here is a sample of some responses made by students from this group:

1- “The hero of ‘The Thief and the Dogs’ does not have rational thinking, he does not listen to people’s advice. The story ‘Marriage is a Private Affair’ presents the opposite view about marriage in our Islamic society.”

2- “Personally, I like to watch movies more. I did not expect to take the course in his way. At the beginning, I was disappointed because this is not what I expected from the course.”

3- “Both the choice of material and the teaching method were new to us. We were not familiar with the works, which is a “big” problem, especially he works about Arabs. If we don’t understand these works, we will not be able to understand our past, present, and future.”

4- “At the beginning, I find it hard to understand some of the works we discussed earlier in the course; it is difficult for me to understand some of the words and terms that the writers use. I have also some difficulty in writing about and responding to some of the works we discussed in the class.”

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the empirical analysis and on the student feedback provided above, students’ attitudes toward the English and Western literary traditions and the very concept of their role and purpose tend

to be changing drastically among English Department students. At present, there is a heated debate about whether or not Arab students are actually culturally prepared to learn a foreign/non-native language or literature in the first place. And how much literary material (sometimes culturally insensitive, whether British or American) should be included in the curricula.

More complex-in-demand questions arise alongside this intellectual dichotomy, as follows: What literature is appropriate for our students, British or American, poetry or prose, modern or non-modern? Should we include its historical, cultural and political milieu, or do we simply teach the text as a text (the words on the page) in isolation from all other aspects and attributes? Do we need to focus on the text as language or go beyond the language level? Research attempts to answer questions such as these generate a greater amount of further intellectual controversy. On top of these unavoidably contentious, provocative questions, is yet a more complex, challenging and perceptive question: Are not many of the cultural, political and social values embodied in the English literary tradition alien and opposed to the common moral, social, religious and cultural values held by Arab students? Or, to put the matter in clearer terms, what kind of relationship is there between non-native literatures and the Arab students' moral, cultural, political and religious character?

The questions above will in their turn lead to a sequential cluster of other thematically related questions such as the following, as examples: Is it not rather perilous to teach Arab students (at both the grad and undergrad levels) literatures that pose a major moral, cultural,

political and social setback for English departments? What benefits and/or rewards are there in teaching a foreign literature? What moral, cultural, or political effect (or effects) does a foreign literary text have on our students?

In answering these, together with other intellectually necessitating, imposing questions of basically the same nature, some researchers in the Arab academy (ourselves included) contend that when we introduce Western literatures into English programs, we are, in effect, introducing a culturally superior, if somewhat “threatening,” subject matter that corresponds to a world more dominant, more dictating and more ordaining than our own. From this specific, contentious perspective, the English literary tradition is viewed by many academics as belonging to a culture, which has, in reality, colonized or dominated ours for substantially prolonged periods of time. Others deem the very idea of teaching English literature not as an attempt toward a better understanding of the culture which it exemplifies, but, rather, toward spreading racist, reductionist, prejudiced and hostile views that sharply conflict with the cultural norms and ethos. In occurrences such as these, any non-native literature is, therefore, viewed with suspicion as a subject culturally and socially unfit for the Arab university student.

Be this argument as it may, some of the respondent students in question here do like only some of the literature courses because they enlighten them and equip them with the skills needed for upper-level literature and culture courses. Some have admired the way(s) these courses are being taught because of the intellectual exuberance and in-

depth knowledge of their instructors. Some, on the other hand, like such courses because of the critical thinking abilities they have developed throughout their academic career. Others simply do not! They believe that the political rearing of the literature courses renders their appreciation of them so difficult—if not impossible!

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