

BETWEEN REALITY AND IDEALISM: DOES NOVEL READING GENERATE EMPATHY IN ALGERIAN EFL STUDENTS?

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Abstract: This study is an exploration of the extent to which reading novels develops Algerian EFL students' empathetic attitudes towards human issues in the novel they are exposed to on the one hand and towards current local and worldwide issues on the other. To achieve this aim, a survey questionnaire is designed. The respondents are 50 MA students of Anglo-American Studies at the English Department of Oum El Bouaghi University (Algeria). The students have been exposed to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a part of their syllabus. Accordingly, their reactions to the questions concerning this novel provide the necessary data around which this study hinges. The findings of the research are meant to help teachers and researchers to seek out new possibilities of developing more effective ways of using novel reading in EFL university classes. Additionally, the results serve to raise Algerian EFL students' awareness about reading novels and their impact on stimulating their imagination, critical thinking and emotional attitudes.

Keywords: *EFL teaching/ learning, novel, narrative empathy, empathetic attitudes, critical thinking, Algeria.*

INTRODUCTION

Up to now, integrating literature in EFL classes as an engine to ignite language learning remains a site of contention between EFL scholars and educators. There is no general consensus about what to teach and in what way to achieve the required objectives. Despite this fact, a big proportion of scholars convincingly argue that literature in this type of classes proved to be an outstanding medium in favor of the learning process if used properly (Collie

& Slater, 1987; Lazar, 1993; Widdowson, 1975).

Other important issues came resonantly to the fore after literature regained its importance in the 1980's as a language learning material. The debate over the ability of literature to nourish mental faculties and psychological responses, rather than developing the four skills, of the reader, hence the learner, was accelerated by means of abundant publications. To put it in another way, scholars sought to take the

implications of literature integration beyond the doors of the EFL class to the real life. That reading literature can create empathetic individuals who care about one another becomes a strongly held belief with the publications of Lazar (1993), Helton, Asamani and Thomas (1998), Nussbaum (1997), Zunshine (2006).

Extending the implications of literature teaching in the EFL class beyond its doors has been always a controversial challenging topic. This is simply because it is claimed by many specialists in the field that engaging students with literature may prompt, sustain or improve social skills especially empathy. This latter is of great importance to this paper since it links the empathetic attitudes of the reading experience of a sample of Algerian university students with their empathetic attitudes towards real life issues. The contributions of Martha Nussbaum (1997) and Suzanne Keen (2007) to this topic are very memorable, for both of them succeeded to narrow down the previous studies by relating empathy to pedagogy. Like other scholars, they believe that narrative fiction, and not popular fiction, is the most suitable literary genre to nourish empathy. Yet, each of them approached the topic from a different angle.

In this context, it is worth starting with the views of some scholars who believe in the power of fiction to lend such promising results after reading. Poulson, Duncan and Massie (2005), for instance, argue that reading fictional narratives "may have an important and profound impact on how people feel and behave in their daily lives" (cited in Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, par. 1). Lisa Zunshine (2006) takes the study into another level by investigating her claims within the scope of evolutionary psychology using

Theory of Mind (mind-reading theory) to support the idea that if readers are met with critical works that encourage them to question other minds, they will certainly appreciate them, and hence, they start to speculate every single detail about the characters. As it will be shown later with the ideas of Nussbaum and Keen, this is clearly the starting point of empathy. Zunshine seems not only to be in favor of the readers' empathy towards the characters but also about the repercussions of this empathy on daily life. She (2006, p.164) makes her claim clearer at the end of her book: [W]e do read novels because they engage our ToM [Theory of Mind] ... Fiction helps us to pattern in newly nuanced ways our emotions and perceptions; it bestows "new knowledge or increased understanding" and gives "the chance for a sharpened ethical sense"; and it creates new forms of meaning for our everyday existence. All of this exploratory work is inextricably bound up with ToM, and the overall effect of it on the reader is not reducible to the sum of this narrative's engagements with our various cognitive adaptations. Some day we may have a conceptual framework that will allow us to speak about this overall effect – that "emergent meaning" of the literary narrative.

In contrast with Zunshine's cognitive view of empathy, where mind is involved to decipher other opinions and to make inferences, Patrick Hogan (2010) argues that affective empathy is also "an essential component of the understanding and enjoyment of fiction" and that "literary representations of emotion may be 'purer' than those encountered in real-life, and thus have the power to enhance individuals' affective empathic responses" (cited in Stansfield & Bunce, 2014, p.9). In this

paper, both types of empathy are taken into consideration.

As a philosopher who is interested in the Cultivation of Humanity, Martha Nussbaum sees in literature, narrative fiction, a fountainhead to shape liberal-thinking people. To her (1997, p.11), a key ability that comes from reading fiction is Narrative Imagination which is "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself [empathy], to be an intelligent reader of that person's story." Through her pedagogical approach, Nussbaum sees that this ability is the outcome of critical reading and tight relation with the text (ibid, p.100). This can be best done by introducing students to controversial novels that "challenge conventional wisdom and values" (ibid, p. 99). She makes this expression clearer by equating it with "[t]he inclusion of new and disturbing works in the curriculum" (ibid). The student, in this case, will be obliged to make moral choices, and this is what Eric Leake (2014) calls difficult empathy. When fleeing this zone of psychological ease, the student can really access and read the world of the character by assimilating himself to this character. Nussbaum insists on the fact that putting oneself in someone else's shoes requires "the thought that this suffering person might be [the reader himself]" (1997, p. 91).

Drawing on many sciences and studies, like neurosciences, psychology, and literary studies, Suzanne Keen summed up her ideas about the relation between novel reading, empathy, and

altruism in her book *Empathy and the Novel* (2007). At the beginning of her book, she defines empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of effect, [which] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (p.4). She goes further to consider this behavior as a response that is not necessarily conscious (ibid, p. 4). Keen (2007, p.3) states: "[i]f novels can be considered a part of readers' environment, then fiction may elicit the expression of dispositional empathy, or it may cultivate the sympathetic imagination through the exercise of innate role-taking abilities." It is the fictionality of novels that leads readers to empathize with characters providing "safe zones" for them to feel empathy without any need to resultant prosocial behavior (ibid, p. 4). This is the very essence of Narrative Empathy which is characteristic to Suzanne Keen's research. It is delineated as "as an affective transaction accomplished through the writing and reading of fiction" (ibid, p. xv). So, authors and readers are equally involved in the creation of this emotion towards narrative fiction. According to Keen, two major techniques can considerably provoke empathy: character identification and narrative situation. Narrative Empathy in Keen's eyes is not necessarily a text response that is followed by altruistic action. She (2007) sees that this hypothesis is not really tested, and it is a matter of exaggeration. The Reasons behind her view are averred in many occasions in her book.

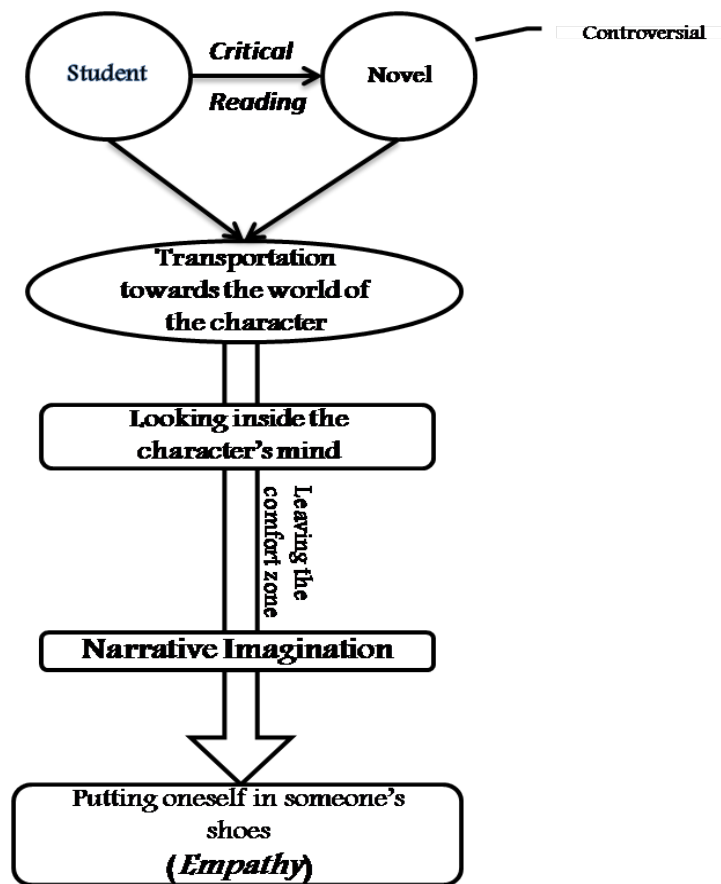


Figure 1. *How Empathy Occurs* (based on Nussbaum's ideas)

To the researchers, the fact that some MA students' language proficiency and critical thinking are highly distinctive is in many ways encouraging, but their appreciation of the value of literature is much less satisfactory. They seem to underestimate the cultural and human understanding that might spring from their reading experiences. They also ignore that these attitudes may stem as a serious deterrent in their future development since the ability to envisage what others feel and think becomes an overriding constituent to solidify human relationships be they within the country, Algeria, or abroad, Maghreb and the whole world.

So, the study will try to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Does reading novels promote empathy in Algerian university EFL students towards characters-related issues and real human issues?
- 2) Are students aware of the results of neglecting literature reading on their future relations and its effects upon their perceptions of their surrounding events and cultures?

Before dealing with these two important questions, the researchers find it worth to answer the following questions:

- 1) How much do EFL students read literary novels and to what extent are they able to respond critically to the texts they read?
- 2) What attitudes do Algerian university students have towards

the already-chosen novels of their syllabus?

- 3) Why do students under-appreciate the power of literature? i.e. what leads them to maintain such negative attitudes towards reading literature?

METHOD

The present study relies on a descriptive method which is proceeded by means of a survey questionnaire to provide data about the population and their psychological responses towards *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It is conducted in the Department of English (Faculty of Letters and Languages) at the University of Oum El Bouaghi. It takes as its sample MA II students of Anglo-American Studies (AAS) who had been accepted initially in this department to complete a B.A in English on the basis of their grade in the Baccalaureate Exam.

It is worth to mention that AAS exposes students to a considerable set of modules of civilization and literature in which both are given a due concern in terms of number. In addition, during the first year in the program, our sample class is asked to read Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) as a part of the syllabus.

Participants in this study belong to a class of 50 students (the only class of this course) who are aged between 22 and 28. The administration of the questionnaire took place in the first semester of the academic year 2015-2016. When the questionnaire was delivered, 6 students were absent and the present ones were 44 females. One of the researchers distributed the questionnaire to the students and helped to clarify the instructions. No time limit was set; therefore, students were requested to take their time to respond to the questionnaire. As the section of results will reveal later, only about 9% of the

students were found interested in reading in general.

To achieve the aims of the study, a four-section questionnaire is developed. It consists of different types of questions: Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ), Open-ended Questions, Closed-ended Questions. The first section, with three main items, aimed at getting background information about the respondents as their age and interest in the basic subject matters of their course (literature/civilization). The second section was designed with the aim of inquiring about the students' reading habits and their personal preferences (types of novels they like). Evaluating their reactions towards the chosen text was the focus of section three. Through the last section, which is entitled the text and its effects, the researchers aimed to see to what extent students are able to carry their emotional baggage towards human issues in the novel to current real life issues, recent world events most precisely.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reading experience. The researchers analyzed data obtained from the second section of the questionnaire to find answers to the three sub-questions listed above. Analysis showed that 29.54 % of the students spend their free time in watching movies, 20.45% in surfing the net, 09.09 % in reading books, and only 2.27 % of the total number, i.e. one student out of 44 students spends her free time in reading literary novels. As to the number of novels they read in the course of the last two years, results demonstrated that 75% of the respondents read between 1 and 5 novels and 15.90 % read between 5 and 10 novels.

Among the total number of students, 65.90% declared that they like

reading novels. This claim was not only justified by the importance of such a fictional sub-genre in improving the skills needed in learning the target language, but also by the aesthetic pleasure that literary novels can confer. Some students went further to consider reading literary novels as a kind of psychological relief and among the ways that help them to escape the real world. Moreover, others pointed to the role which is played by literary novels in broadening their visions and introducing them to new perspectives. Respondents who had negative attitudes towards reading novels (34.09%) attributed this to the fact that novels (especially assigned ones) are often boring, long, and difficult to read. As a matter of fact, they prefer cinematic adaptations and summaries of the novels in case their teachers ask them to read.

In a response to the question about the type of novels students like reading most, 29.54% of them chose historical novels, and only 2.27 % preferred satirical novels. The latter is the type of the novel that was taken as a case in point. Also, inquiry about the basic criteria students adopt to select novels they read revealed results in which the teacher is at the center by imposing novels (upon 27.27 % of the population), recommending (to 09.09%) or both (18.18%). 15.90 % of the students claimed that they choose the novels randomly while only one student had an in-advance prepared list.

When students were asked if they prefer to have a free reading list of novels in their modules of literature, 84.09% of the respondents ticked "yes" option. A major reason spelled out for this choice was the motivation that stems from it since it gives them the opportunity to search and discover different types of novels. This, in turn,

would make them updated.

Additionally, students considered the novels of their syllabus as boring (classics) and saw that the personal choice satisfies their needs and lessens their panic/ stress. Students who ticked the "no" option (15.90%) provide their lack of interest in reading literature and experience to choose as their justifications.

Students' responses to the text. About 77% of the students found themselves absorbed in their reading of the novel asserting that Mark Twain managed to attract the readers' attention. To them, this was adeptly accomplished through tackling serious issues related to black American slaves by harmonizing different literary genres and techniques (satire, picaresque, humor ...). The most frequently identified important issues of the novel center, thus, around slavery vs freedom. Besides, other issues like the possibility of co-existence of blacks and whites, the problem of identity, innocence, and hypocrisy of white people were spotted. There are 16 students who did not respond to this question.

Unexpected results came with the question seeking students' feelings about the story of Jim, for 21 students did not respond and 11 others provided irrelevant answers. Only 12 answers were considered relevant showing students' supportive feelings which range between feeling sorry and sympathetic towards Jim and all the slaves with their experiences without exception. To justify their feelings, almost 16% of the total population that answered the question thought that local or worldwide issues are well-reflected through the experience of this character. In relation to the same point, 21 students skipped the question which required them to point out the event that remained etched on their minds after

reading the novel. 17 answers were irrelevant and only 6 students provided clear answers revolving mostly around scenes combining both main characters: Tom and Jim.

The text and its effects. This section along with the previous one aspires to find answers to the main questions of this study. In particular, the section tests the ability of the learners to link human issues, mainly the repression of black people, raised in the novel with real life issues. So, a considerable number of the students, i.e. nearly 57% of them, reported their dissatisfaction with the situation of the citizens in the Islamic World. This attitude was clearly demonstrated through the following statements:

Student (a): Citizens of the Islamic world are the subaltern of a complex combination of oppressive powers; they are voiceless.

Student (b): Because Arabs have been repressed mentally, they do not get the chance to even express their needs and desires.

Nevertheless, 34% of the population, unlike the previous group, seemed satisfied since at least religious freedom is guaranteed.

In the next question, 61.36% of the students expressed their empathy for the Arabic citizens standing against the oppressive regimes whilst 31.81% of them had opposing views. They referred to most of the countries affected by the Arab Spring like Tunisia, Syria, and Egypt. Yet, most of them concentrated on the Syrian issue by expressing their empathy through negative psychological responses (pain, sadness, sorrow). In the course of analyzing the results of this question, the researchers came across two interesting initiatives which exceeded the step of being empathetic to becoming active:

Student (a): I feel their pain because what's happening is irrational; I share what I believe in via the different social networks.

Student (b): The Syrian cause will be the topic of my dissertation this year.

In the same vein, unexpected reactions came out towards other issues in the western countries like the terrorist attacks in Paris, Charlie Ibdou incident and ISIS attacks since only 52.28% of the students showed empathy for them.

Few days before the questionnaire was administered, an explosion took place in a refugee camp in Ouargla. When our sample students were asked to express their reactions about it, unfortunately, almost 57 % of them left the space blank, and 16 % stated that they did not hear about the incident. Only 27 % of the total number tried to describe the type of feelings they had towards the victims (sadness, sympathy, being sorry, hoping their situation will change). The latter proposed encouraging individual initiatives, visiting the victims, organizing charity campaigns and raising awareness about the situation of the refugees once asked about the things they can afford to help. Here, 43.18 % did not answer the question, and 6.81% were irrelevant.

Attempting to realize the key objective of this section, learners were guided to identify the local Algerian issues that crossed their minds while reading the novel. 72.72% of them did not answer and 6.81 % of the responses were irrelevant. To the rest, it was mainly the period of French colonization, the black decade and the recent events of Ghardaya. Concerning whether reading the novel helped the students to view the issues raised in the novel differently, the results revealed that 56.81% did not respond while only 13.63% noted that their views remained the same.

As stated earlier, the researchers presented an evaluation of novel teaching to tertiary EFL students with the aim of investigating to what extent reading novels cultivate empathy in them.

The results of the second section of the questionnaire revealed the students' neglect of reading generally and reading novels specifically despite being an overriding component of their syllabus. Nevertheless, the students' awareness of the importance of novel reading in a reaction to another question is discernable. This reluctance to read may be ascribed to both individual and instructional factors, for most of the participating students perceive reading as a compulsory task:

1. Inappropriate choice of the novels taught to/in this class as teachers usually prefer the classics.
2. Students' unfamiliarity with reading.
3. Students' inability to either understand the literary language or interpret the symbols and motifs used by authors to allude to other issues i.e. their critical thinking is not fully developed.
4. Time restrictions because students are exposed to many modules of civilization and literature.

These factors can adequately explain the difficulties the students encountered while reading the selected novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* leading them to favor reading summaries or watching cinematic adaptations.

The evaluation of answers about the thematic concerns of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* itself indicated the students' understanding of what the story revolves around. Yet, the series of unexpected results in which they skipped answering the remaining questions or provided irrelevant reactions lead us to say that in spite of reading the novel, our

respondents did not understand the intentions of the writer. This also could be related to their inability to imagine the situation of the characters. Therefore, they did not empathize or at least sympathize, as it is expected in regular situations, with the characters of the novel as believed by Martha Nussbaum (1997). It has been already shown that she sees Narrative Imagination as the result of critical reading of a contentious narrative fictional text.

Through the last section of the questionnaire, the attentiveness of the students towards the dominating issues in the middle-east (Arab Spring above all) can be induced. These issues impose themselves upon the lives of the Algerians due to the emergence of private News TV channels and a wide access to means of technology. This in turn created a sense of annoyance and fear of being trapped in the same situation. Worth underlining here is the fact that this wide access to the different media types (especially the net) participated undoubtedly in making the students obsessed with the current situation at the expense of reading or other important things. For this reason, students were less empathetic to western issues if compared to Middle East issues.

As far as local issues are concerned, the results do not lead us to say that 43.18% of the respondents are not empathetic since they declared their lack of knowledge about incident of Ouargla. This could be explained by the fact that it is a local issue and it did not receive enough attention as other Arabic or western issues. Another finding of our evaluation is the minimal responsiveness to the association between the text and real events –local, Arabic or western– which can be possibly attributed, as hinted above, to the students' inability to imagine or to show critical thinking. Hence, they cannot interpret hidden

messages conveyed by the author. This is the most important point of the paper that could be directly related to Zunshine's cognitive view (2006) of the whole matter. To her, a work of fiction must trigger the reader's mind to read the character's mind. Understanding and empathy that spring in this case is called Cognitive Empathy. Obviously, this is what the sample students of this current study lack.

CONCLUSION

This study was inspired by the teachers' experience in this pedagogical setting where English, as a foreign language, is a medium of instruction more than being an objective of instruction. To phrase it differently, learners at this level, in Widdowson's terms (1975), are supposedly guided, using English, to learn other disciplines rather than learning the language itself, a step which in our case involves studying literature. The dearth of studies that have been conducted to improve the teaching of literature generally and the impact of novel reading on the students' psychological traits particularly in a university-level Algerian context was another motivating factor. Therefore, the researchers, who believe that this modest study is just a starting point, hope that this initiative will instigate further attempts in this area for which empirical research, precisely experiments, is obviously required to arrive to a better understanding of how empathy in such a context really occurs taking into consideration that Algeria has its own cultural specificities. The latter of course include gender differences and their relation with empathy which is given a due concern by Suzanne Keen (2007). Adding to this, empathy is an important capacity in a population that is normally characterized by major cultural

differences, and Algeria started to become one since it is now an open market to different nationalities.

As a starting point, the researchers postulated that the reading experience of the sample students spawns no satisfactory empathetic attitudes, and the underestimation of the value of literature on the one hand and the lack of reading literary texts on the other stem as serious obstacles in the face of developing the students' empathy and their reception of real and important human issues. Overall findings paved the way to the researchers to unveil the problematic situation of teaching literature in this context. Neglecting reading despite being aware of its advantages which is mostly related to the students' obsession of technology has also a series of instructional reasons as indicated above. The impasse of feeling obligation and boredom while reading could be solved by means of suggesting a free reading list. Certainly, this will have outstanding effects on the students' performance in such modules if combined with small-group learning. Involvement, motivation, interaction, circulation of knowledge, and the development of critical thinking are only few gains to mention here in case students' preferences are taken into account. In this point, the teacher can, for instance, specify a literary genre and ask his students to choose a representative novel. Additionally, allowing students to choose their texts will render them more responsible and also set the essence of the LMD system, as a learner-centered educational system, into practice.

Moreover, if we intend to develop teaching literature in Algerian universities and to extend the effects of reading beyond the classroom precincts, then lecturers and course designers are invited to work hand in hand. A set of

simple practices could be effective in meeting the students' needs. To begin with, allocating much time to the modules of literature will be helpful to cover the objectives in a more adequate manner through creating a range of motivating activities like group works, presentations, and discussions. Adopting more specialized modules of literature, like Contemporary Literature, Women Literature and Postcolonial Literature, is another practice that can lend promising results given that boredom will be led to an end. This point can be accelerated by means of introducing two other practices: (a) first, giving the opportunity to the students to choose modules of interest at the beginning of the program like it is the case in most of the universities all over the world, and (b) second, introducing Anglophone African literatures as the researchers' experience shows that the students are more attached to the literatures of the continent.

Returning now to the question posed at the beginning "does novel reading promote empathy in Algerian university EFL students towards characters-related issues and human real issues?", we can say, after considering the results, that our sample students possess sympathy and empathy towards people of the major events in their lives. Yet, their attitudes are not satisfactory as it expected at this level where students are supposed to have developed critical thinking and awareness, and they are normally being prepared to get real life opportunities as mainly teachers after graduation. So, the empathy they show does not normally come totally from novel reading since the results led us to come across the questionable status of literature teaching which was against the developmental effect of empathy in real

life. The above practices are expected to boost interest in reading, hence to develop empathy.

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