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## **Incorporating the dialogic approach in literacy classes: An empirical study**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims at portraying the effect of using the dialogic approach by teachers in teaching a literary text to Algerian EFL learners at Teachers higher college of Laghouat. It depicts the approach's impact on improving their communicative competence in class. Using a questionnaire and a classroom observation as research instruments, this research tempts to investigate the approaches used by two literacy teachers and evaluate the challenges they face in teaching a literary text through these approaches and its impact on developing the learners' communication skills in class. Preliminary results of the study reveal that using traditional reading approaches resulted in lack of interest and understanding from the part of the learners whereas students who were familiarized with the dialogic approach had adequate understanding. For, this study showed that the suggested approach for teaching literacy had a great potential for enhancing EFL learners communicative competence in learning and understanding a literary text in class.

**Keywords:** Dialogic teaching; literacy teaching; EFL context; talk; interaction

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### **1. Introduction**

Teaching learners who have another language besides English can be hard even when teaching tangible subjects as physics and math. Since the appearance of the communicative language teaching and the fact that language is best used when it is taught for communicative usage, the communicative task has gone up to a situation of eminence as a unit in syllabus design. The advent of the modern language learning approaches has led to various explanations of what exactly makes a literature course and to varied plans for education syllabuses. Learners in the classroom can highly process the language being learned if it is meaningful through the dialogic approach. Because literacy tempts to develop EFL learners' potency in a way which encompasses their imaginative, emotional, and intellectual side for the sake of building a kind of harmony between them and their social environment.

Besides, the teaching of literature is a complementary and basic element for language teaching in the syllabus of many teachers. It is considered as an important merit of a holistic education. As Lazar (2003, 54) <sup>[7]</sup> argues, literature should be used with the language learners for many reasons. It is a motivating material, exposing learners to difficult themes and unexpected use of language. It yet increases language acquisition exposing learners to authentic language thus raises critical abilities and increases emotional awareness. There are plenty of teaching approaches which can go in line with the teaching of literary since the incorporation of literature into the English language educational curricula. These approaches may serve as the auto didactic acts for the lecture and help learners improve their language skills, stimulates their imagination, and increase their critical skills. Along with the models of teaching literature suggested by Carter & Long (1991) <sup>[5]</sup> which have been integrated with the different approaches of teaching literature including the Personal-response and reader response approaches, Language-Based Approach, Information-Based Approach, and stylistic Approach which

highly contributed to the success of classroom teaching a literary text in many ways. (36)

However, teaching literacy in Algeria is much seen as a subject to be learned neither a tool for promoting language or efficiency in reading literature, nor a source of enjoyment in class. Therefore, many teachers may encounter obstacles and challenges in choosing the appropriate approach and material for teaching a literary text, and fail to establish a sphere of interculturality between EFL learners and the literary text itself. In fact, modern learning theories such as cognitive, constructivist, and social cognitive theories paved the way for implementing new teaching approaches and challenged the traditional goals of teaching which help learners construct language themselves and most importantly learn by doing rather than receiving knowledge from teachers. In effect, the dialogic approach along with other approach such as the monologic approach or monologue is a pedagogical tool which encourages dialogic talk in class to develop learners thinking and problem solving. Thus, allows learners to communicate and be able to achieve the teacher's goals by being deeply in touch with the talk's goals.

### **2. Review of Literature**

Our society is based around communication and language is the means of talk. It is the way we think, learn, and communicate. Talk is used to communicate with others and interact in society. Most humans spend long times engaging in talking and listening for achieving goals. Thus, it is necessary to get an idea on how to speak and listen effectively in our daily life or academic career. For instance, talking with someone who is not an attentive listener may make the conversation less efficient. Besides, when someone fails to express himself may cause obstacles for those who are listening.

In the context of English language teaching, learning is a social process in which learners are exposed to have facilities to

experiment with language in a particular learning setting. In an EFL class, learners can deal with the language by observing, listening, and experiencing what they see, thus develop their communicative skills. Ideally, learners can develop both their linguistic and communicative competence through socialization of language. Indeed, learners can develop their speaking skills due to social interaction which leads to successful interaction in class.

The term dialogic teaching “reflects a view that knowledge and understanding come from testing evidence, analyzing ideas and exploring values [through the use of talk], rather than unquestioningly accepting somebody else’s certainties” (Alexander, 2006, 32) <sup>[1]</sup> In a literature class, teachers can have many objectives of teaching a literary text; this can be viewed in sharing information, asking questions, expressing feelings, imagining, and constructing relationships through communicating with others.

Dialogic talk can vary depending on the situation, but overall it consists of purposeful, collaborative and engaging talk where students and teachers share authority for knowledge within a supportive learning environment. Dialogic talk involves extended conversations and aims for deeper understandings from all persons involved. Dialogic talk can provide opportunities for teachers and students to listen to and share ideas with each other supportively, including the consideration of alternative perspectives. However, the simple use of dialogue in education does not make learning dialogic.

Dialogic teaching and learning is founded on Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, Barnes (2008) concepts of exploratory talk, Wells’ (1999) dialogic inquiry approach, and Rosenblatt’s (1994) transactional theory of reading. According to Palinscar (1998), using dialogic talk in the classroom can help students get highly engaged in learning and get opportunities to talk and be more active learners by being collaboratively engaged in the learning process of the literary text.

On the other hand, as social constructivists believe knowledge and meaning are created by individuals based on their life experiences by establishing culture of meaning. Arguably, learning is a social process and a change in human behavior as a result of a particular experience. Occasionally, Vygotsky (1978) <sup>[2]</sup> explored how culture and society are related to the nature of the individual and how they act according to the activities they participate in and the conditions in which they are live. (Berk & Winsler, 1995) <sup>[2]</sup>

Using a dialogic talk in the class is seen as an interactive experience, as Alexander (2006) <sup>[1]</sup> believes that classroom interaction increases the power of talk by engaging learners, by stimulating their thinking, and improve their understanding. (p. 37) There are some educationists who have stressed the use of dialogic teaching and learning approaches using dialogue as an essential tool, as Wegerif (2010) claims that teachers are teaching for dialogue at the same time are teaching through dialogue. (18) According to Alexander (2006) <sup>[1]</sup> there are some classified principles of dialogic teaching, these can render the teaching and learning processes of the literary text. Among those principles, there is the collective teaching where both teachers and students do tasks together and work co-operatively rather than working individually. The reciprocal teaching in which both teachers and students listen to each other, interact and share information in

class. There is also the purposeful teaching in which teachers can have different educational goals (28)

David Skidmore’s (2006) work on dialogical pedagogy, which draws on Bakhtin’s contrast of monologic and dialogic discourse, parallels Alexander’s foundational work on dialogic approaches. Where monologic recitation is controlled by the teacher, in fact; dialogic teaching is a collective process which involves both students and teachers doing tasks together unlike monologic teaching which requires only the role of the teacher. As Skidmore (2006) claims that using the dialogic approach, students are supposed to think critically as they are not asked to remember (505) whereas; (Lyle, 2008, 225) <sup>[9]</sup> believes that dialogic talk “creates a space for varied discourses for challenging the power relations constructed by monologic approaches. Further, dialogic teaching and interactions in class typically contribute to improving speaking skills.

According to Wegerif (2010), to have adequate understanding in learning language or literature, this needs dialogic relations which result in understanding ideas and information discussed in class (28). In a dialogic teaching and learning class, students are obliged to be active in their learning, to share opinion, answer questions, or discuss themes, through working together and learning from their colleagues and teachers. Drawing upon the work of Vygotsky, the teacher guides learners as they are both engaged in constructing shared knowledge. (Alexander, 2006; Skidmore, 2006) <sup>[1, 11]</sup>

Dialogic teaching can also help learners learn through oral language. Based on the social nature of cognition, dialogic approach involves a shift in thinking about the teacher and student way of talk in the classroom. Dialogic learning involves students’ supported use of talk which includes questions, exploration, imagination, reflections, dialogue, feedback, and collaboratively engaging in knowledge building within a safe learning environment. Although the teacher facilitates the learning, he or she works cooperatively with the student acting as a listener, a speaker, and a member of the audience as the students talk and interact more than teachers to create appropriate knowledge.

By this, students become more effective communicators by developing their communication skills. Teachers should give the students the chance to speak and express their opinions using different structures of talk. Occasionally, Boyd & Galda (2011) <sup>[3]</sup> shed light on communicative competence and talk and discussed authentic talk and its function in real situations for particular purposes. They describe a continuum for the function of talk from reproduction to transformation. Based on their experiences and imagination, students make new experiences and discussions, and can engage freely through the process of language socialization. (03) this makes students socialized by using language appropriately, while connecting their life experiences and their learning in class. Therefore, authentic talk is deeply related to language learning.

Within a dialogic approach to teaching, the teacher transforms from transmitting knowledge to facilitating knowledge. To quote Wells (2006) <sup>[13]</sup> words: “the greatest benefit of collaborative knowledge building is the reciprocal development of understanding between individuals and the group” (Wells, 2006, 416) <sup>[13]</sup>. For, dialogic teaching can provide EFL students with chances to improve their speaking and listening skills and get

confidence to commit errors, and watch when others are performing. Yet, Alexander (2006)<sup>[1]</sup> consider errors as learning opportunities for students and a tool for success and argues that making errors in front of others is motivating to learn rather than causing embarrassment (21) Finally, the collaborative nature of dialogic teaching makes students able to afford their errors as opportunities to build new knowledge within a safe learning environment.

On the other hand, students of language and literature need to learn how to communicate freely and how to respond to other’s communications, and interact with them. Some individuals can easily better communicate, and this depends on the level of intelligence or motivation; but learning to communicate through language is more efficient. Indeed, in the process of communication, some ways of talking are appropriate for communicating with people around. Typically, using language to communicate can be classified into many various categories related to the context and aim of communication. For instance, EFL learner, can be communicatively competent than achieving a formal linguistic correctness. (Broughton et, al, 1980, 39)<sup>[4]</sup>

**3. Aim of the Study**

In addition to different approaches which are used to enhance EFL teaching and learning, constructivist and cognitive theories predominated in teaching literature bringing about new pedagogical tools such as monologic and dialogic approaches. This study tempted to contribute to the line of research core with dialogic education by investigating the process of applying two teaching approaches, reader-response and dialogic, to two groups, CG and EG; in an EFL educational setting in enhancing the learners’ communicative skills in a literature class. We tempted to raise the following research questions for solving the research problem:

- To what extent can dialogic teaching contribute to make EFL students of Laghouat College more communicatively competent, and how can it help them understand a literary text through dialogic talk?

**4. Materials and Methods**

In order to gather the data we need and achieve the objectives of this study, the researcher conducted an empirical research at ENS of Laghouat with two groups of Third grade students. The sample is composed of 22 students who have a literature class every week who are divided into two groups. They were taught a literary text

through two approaches personal-response teaching approach and dialogic approach in class. After the lecture is done by the teachers of both groups CG and EG, a questionnaire was prepared for students and a classroom observation was prepared to evaluate and to elicit information in order to validate the research questions of the study. The researcher has opted for particular research tools for the sake of gaining enough and appropriate data in the investigation of both teaching a literary text through the dialogic approach and responses of learners towards the teaching methods used by teachers. Therefore, using a case study research through which she can be conductive to the rigidity of the research design and lead to adequate discussion and interpretation of the findings.

Observation is considered as a strong tool for answering research questions and contributes to understanding a phenomenon for many researchers. The observation process allows researchers to obtain essential information for drawing inferences and making decisions. Occasionally, Creswell (2006)<sup>[6]</sup> argues that observation is the best research tool which gives adequate understanding of the obstacle between teaching and learning in the language learning classroom. As he argues that, the observation can build the profile of the teacher and contribute to the professional growth of the teacher when the researcher acts as a teacher at the same time. (35)

**5. Results and Discussion**

In order to prove the validity of the research tools, the questionnaire was given to the participants to elicit data after the lectures set of both groups, CG and EG. The researcher tempted to use the item analysis method for analyzing the required data, following the following mean scores category.

**Table 1**

<b>1-1.5</b>	<b>Very low</b>
1.8 -2.5	low
2.8 -3.5	Moderate
3.8 -4.5	High
4.8 -5.5	Very high

The questionnaire was distributed to 22 students which are divided into two groups, CG= 11 and EG = 11. The following table represents the data gathered from question one in the questionnaire.

**Table 2:** Q1. Which English skill you think you developed through the learning process of the literary text?

	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>STD</b>
	N%	N%	N%	N%		
1. When I talk more, I can learn better.	00 %	29.08 %	1254.50%	418.18%	2.18	0.85
2. I express my opinion freely in the classroom without any fears.	522.72%	940.90%	29.08 %	00 %	3.76	0.90
3. The approach used actively ito find meaning to the text and interpret in their own words. n volves students	522.73 %	836.36%	418.18%	14.55% 1.21	3.51	
4. We investigate truth together from various Perspective.	418.18%	1359.09 %	313.64%	00% 3.82 0.91		

Table 01 clearly shows that there are some differences between the students of the two groups; the vast majority in the control group (06 out of 11) claim that their reading skill has been

developed prior to the use of the reader- response approach to studying a literary text. While (09 out of 11) from the EG state that they developed their speaking skill, and this can clearly be represented through their interaction and talk in the classroom.

The second question of the questionnaire was about getting the students' views about the approaches used in class. Each group

answered according to his experience in studying literature with the suggested approach.

**Table 3:** The CG students views about the teaching Approach used in class

	A	SA	D	SD	Mean	STD
	N%	N%	N%	N%		
1. When I talk more, I can learn better.	940.91%	1150.00%	14.55%	0 0 %	4.27	0.77
2. I express my opinion freely in the classroom without any fears.	1045.43 %	522.73%	418.17%	14.53 %	3.87	1.32
3. The approach used actively involves students to find meaning to the text and interpret in their own words.	313.64%	1150.00%	29.09%	00 %	3.67	0.84
4. Language is used as a basic tool for dialogic interaction.	836.35 %	1045.44%	00%	29.08%	4.10	0.94

The Data above show that CG students believe that the approach of reading a literary text helps them find meaning and easily interpret the text. (M= 3.51) as most of them argue that they can better get adequate understanding of the themes through the teaching materials and their active involvement in reading in class. (M=3.76) Whereas EG students felt very satisfied with the approach of teaching which they think is efficient. Most of the participants think that talking in class can lead to adequate interaction and leads to better understanding of the text, which appears in the means score (M= 3.82) The results reveal students in a literature class can be communicatively competent through

interaction and communication in class.

On the other hand, the EG students' score were a bit different in terms of their views about the teaching approach with the mean scores (M= 3.67), (M= 3.87), and (M= 4.10) in this order, which signifies that EG students were more satisfied with the teaching approach which they think it helped them get more understanding of the literary text through interaction. Further, the data collected from question three was about knowing about the CG and EG students' attitudes when interacting and whether they could highly communicate in class. The results of their answers are introduced in table 04 as follow.

**Table 4:** CG students' attitudes towards communication in class

	A	SA	D	SD	Mean	STD
	N%	N%	N%	N%		
1. I learned communicate easily with others	6 27.27 %	8 36.36 %	6 27.27%	29.09%	3.46	1.41
2. I became more motivated to improve my speaking skills.	6 27.27%	11 50.00 %	1 4.55%	29.09%	3.82	1.18
3. I felt shy to speak public ally.	6 27.27%	8 36.36 %	4 18.18%	0 0%	3.73	1.08
4. Understood the lecture without making interaction	6 27.27 %	8 36.36 %	5 22.73%	00%	3.68	1.13

**Table 5:** EG students' attitudes towards communication in class

	A	SA	D	SD	Mean	STD
	N %	N %	N %	N %		
1. I learned communicate easily with others	12 54.55%	9 40.91%	1 4.55%	0 0%	4.46	0.74
2. I became more motivated to improve speaking skills	11 50%	8 36.36 %	2 9.09%	0 0 %	4.27	0.94
3. I felt shy to speak publically	4 18.18 %	14 63.64 %	1 4.55%	0 0 %	3.96	0.72
4. Understood the lecture without making interaction	4 18.18 %	9 40.91%	3 13.64%	0 0%	3.64	0.95

Data collected from question three shows that both groups CG and EG were highly content as a result of their engagement in the learning process. Besides, despite of the majority of the students' lack of motivation in a language class and especially literature classes; the results of this question prove that students of both groups have high motivation as shown in the tables above. CG (M= 3.82) EG (M= 4.46). Indeed, the mean of motivation for the students is lower that communicating with others and higher than other benefits introduced in the table.

In addition to the questionnaire, an observation was conducted to evaluate the students' experience with the Reader-response and dialogic approach. Observation helps researcher to explore the authentic situations and enables them elicit first-hand information about what is truly going on in the classroom. Bryman (2012) argued that, the information elicited from classroom observation

is more reliable in timing and frequency. As Cohen et. al (2010) claims "in the structured observational method researchers formulate systematic rules for observing and recording of individual behavior and a schedule or coding scheme are used to structure the observations" (cited in Haqyar, 2013)

In total, 22 students were observed (CG= 11) and (EG= 11); the lectures took 35 minutes long. The researcher was observing the attitudes and behaviors of the students in the class and recording that to the observation form. The researcher used ten statements about students' motivation and behavior in class to complete the observation sheet, each statement was scored on a tape of 4 (Excellent, good, adequate, poor) to 1. Thus, the highest possible score was 10 on any one statement during the four sessions. One each statement, the researcher circled one number (from 1 to 4) with the average mark of 3 on any statement.

**Table 6:** Overall Motivation and behavior Scores in CG and EG

Excellent= 4	Good= 3	Adequate= 2 Poor= 1
Item	Session02	Session 01
	CG EG	CG EG
a. Appropriateness of the Approach Material 1	2 2	3
b. Appropriateness of the level of the students 2	4 1	1
c. Relevance and Interest of the chosen text 1	2 1	1
d. Variety of tasks and activities 3	4 2	2
E. Opportunities for students' Participation 1	4 1	3
F. Cultural background 3	4 1	3
g. Clarity of language 3	3 2	4
Group average score/ session 1.71	2.42 2.00	3.28

The scores of the CG and EG students' level of motivation and behavior in class on each session are introduced in the table 06. The above data from table 06 revealed that the students' motivation of the overall class on session 1 in CG was 2.00 with a score less than 3, while in EG was 3.28 with less than the highest score 4. In session 2, the overall motivation of the class in CG was scoring less than 2 with a percentage of 40% whereas in the EG it scored with 2.42 less than 4, with 60% on the average score. Based on the above data elicited from the observation sheet obtained by the researcher, we can argue that the level of the students' motivation and performance developed when they were familiarized with the dialogic approach and interaction teaching methodology in class.

#### 6. Limitations of the study

Although it was a bit difficult to conduct this study because of certain circumstances in college, the researcher made a challenge to question and to observe the teaching class and getting participants to questionnaire. Regarding to the scale form of questionnaire, most respondents answered all questions and felt comfortable in doing so. Besides, this made the research valid and relevant and helped the researcher find appropriate answer to the research question. Further, the researcher could argue that in the Algerian context of teaching English, most teachers do not much use interactive approaches or dialogic teaching; may be because the students are not active enough or interested enough to learn literature, that's why the researcher suggested teaching a literary text through the dialogic approach and expected relevant and satisfying results. However, according to the result of observation, teachers rarely use dialogic approach. Mainly they ask questions to get feedback after the end of the course with the purpose of testing the students understanding. For, this had higher impact in the lessons in helping students stimulate their imagination, express their ideas, construct knowledge themselves, and most importantly learn by doing.

#### 7. Conclusion

This main aim was to examine the use of the dialogic approach in teaching literature in an EFL class. Using two different tools of research quantitatively which helped the researcher collect data easily. Indeed, through observation; real information on what was going on in the class has been detected and through questioning, the students' responses, behavior, and understanding and views about the challenges were found. However, it did not provide enough opportunities for the participating teachers to express their views, beliefs and experiences out of the pre-prepared questions. Teaching a literary text through dialogic teaching can be beneficial to increasing the learners'

communicative competence and therefore develops their literary competency. Teachers of literacy can be selective in teaching a literary text to their students by choosing the most appropriate approach that best satisfies their linguistic, cultural, and communicative needs of learners. In short, we can conclude that the dialogic approach can enhance the learners' communicative competence and render them actively competent in class. This study illustrated how the suggested approach to studying a literary text in class can contribute to the development of learners' communicative competency and language communicative skills. This makes them familiar with the literary text by increasing their motivational awareness in learning a literary text.

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