

ACTIVE LEARNING TECHNIQUES IN LITERATURE CLASSES

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Abstract

Active learning supports any instructional process, no matter the taught subjects. As known, at academic level, literature classes tend to be more traditional than other ones, ignoring the advantages of a cooperative and interactive teaching style characteristic of active learning.

The purpose of the paper is not to plead for the replacement of the traditional lecture, but to make teachers aware of the benefits of active learning in order to at least reflect on applying this kind of teaching strategies to their classes.

We consider that a combination between classical lectures and active techniques will increase students' motivation and involvement in the learning process.

Keywords: *active learning, teaching strategies, improvement, lectures*

1. Introduction

The present teaching strategies in most of the Romanian universities are mainly based on a traditional teaching approach consisting in lectures and seminars in all subjects, including literature. This approach is somehow in disagreement with the natural cognitive process, which requires an active involvement of the students instead of their passive way of receiving information. It is well known the fact that the more stimulated the human brain is, the greater its performance becomes. As many of the present day studies indicate, a possible way to improve the instructional process is to combine the traditional lectures with active learning strategies.

But what does active learning mean? Many researchers have tried to define this concept taking into account the fact that any instructional process should actively satisfy students' need if we expect this process to be successful. As Felder and Brent state "active learning is anything course-related that all students in a class session are called upon to do other than simply watching, listening and taking notes." (2009, p. 2). A similar

definition is provided by Faust and Paulson who define this concept as any learning process that engages students in a classroom activity “other than listening passively to an instructor’s lecture.” (1998, p. 4). Even though the two definitions above seem to be too wide to offer us the essence of the phenomenon, they refer to a precise set of strategies which characterize this approach, making it different from the traditional one which is mainly based on students’ passive participation in the classes. According to the classification of Faust and Paulson (1998), active learning strategies can be divided into three types:

- ✓ listening practice (students absorb what they hear);
- ✓ short writing exercises (students react to lecture now);
- ✓ complex group exercises (students apply lecture material to real life situations).

It is worth mentioning the distinction that the same authors make between cooperative and collaborative learning. The former refers to active learning activities which, instead of individual or pair work, “employ more formally structured groups of students” (1998, p. 4) with the view to solving complex tasks (research projects, presentations). The latter places the students and the teacher at the same level, collaborating for “designing assignments, choosing texts, and presenting material to the class.” (1998, p.4).

Using the classification proposed by Faust and Paulson (1998), we selected those active learning strategies that are most frequently used in teaching literature in our university. As to the individual work, the following are preferred by the teaching staff:

- ✓ The one minute paper – it is an effective method that can be used both during and at the end of the lecture, consisting in stopping the lecture in order to address students a question by means of which the teacher can check their understanding of the topic. For example, in a lecture on the aesthetics of Romanticism, a possible question can be: “What are the major features of this literary movement?”

- ✓ Affective response – it is a variation of the technique mentioned above, which has in view students’ emotional response to the topic about to be discussed, as well as its preliminary evaluation by them; that is why they are asked to note their opinions, being a good way to make students familiar with the subject of the lecture. For instance, when presenting Byron’s work, the teacher can ask at beginning of the lecture “What do you think of Byron’s poems?”

- ✓ Reading quiz – it has a double aim: first, to encourage students to prepare class material, and then to check their comprehension of the same material. As an example, we can include the following questions meant to check students’ reading of Kafka’s novel *The Trial*: ‘What particular detail

characterizes Leni's hand?', 'Who kills Josef K. at the end of the novel and how is he killed?' etc.

✓ Clarification pauses – this is one of the most frequently used technique during literature lectures, as it is a simple way to give students the opportunity to ponder over basic concepts presented by the teacher, who stops for a while in order to ask the students if they need any point to be clarified;

✓ Response to a teacher – centered activity – it consists in writing a short paragraph in which to reflect on the new ideas presented in the lecture;

Other techniques refer to questions and answers, literature teachers preferring the Socratic Method particularly in its variant that asks students to summarize another peer's answer.

As regards immediate feedback, teachers use the quotation technique, implying to choose an illustrative quotation belonging to one of the authors that was not studied to make students express their opinions before the teacher presents the topic. "In addition to testing students' comprehension of the material presented in lecture, this exercise develops critical-thinking and analysis skills." (Faust and Paulson, 1998, p. 11). For example, if the teacher has to present Oscar Wilde's aestheticism, he may ask the students' opinions on the following quotation: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." (*The Portrait of Dorian Gray*) which stimulates their imagination and way of understanding literature as a particular field of the artistic creation.

The development of students' critical thinking is generally achieved by discussions in small groups meant to make students share their ideas on the concepts and literary phenomena presented in the lecture. At the end of the course, students may also be asked, by means of post-lecture questions, to formulate the purpose of the lecture they listened to.

As usually students have problems with note-taking during a lecture, an effective strategy is to allow them time to share their notes in order to complete gaps and to correct any misunderstanding of the information the teacher presented.

If students are assigned an individual task, an efficient technique to use during a lecture is to evaluate their partners' work, after being provided with clear criteria for its evaluation.

As regards cooperative learning strategies, we can mention:

✓ Concept mapping is an effective way "to establish meaningful relationships between the pieces of information" presented during the lectures; a good illustration of this technique is to realize the map of the characters and the plot of a novel or a play.

✓ Jigsaw group activities are complex involving all students' active participation and consist of several stages: firstly, students are divided into groups, each of them being assigned a specific task. Secondly, "students re-

form into focus groups centered on their selected topics” (Faust and Paulson, 1998, p. 17) to discuss and write down their common ideas. Thirdly, the initial groups re-form to share ideas within the group. In the final stage of the activity the groups apply the newly acquired information in order to solve their tasks.

✓ Panel discussions “are particularly useful as a way to include the entire class when students give class presentations or reports.” (Faust and Paulson, 1998, p. 16). The chosen panelists should be prepared to answer the questions from the audience on a topic such as *The aesthetic features of the 19th century French Realism*.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives

The objectives of the present research are to find out if students’ evaluation of their literature courses and seminars, performed at the end of each semester, influences the teaching process in a bad or positive way.

2.2. Participants

The people involved in the research are 90 students specialising in Philology, within the Petroleum – Gas University of Ploiesti. They are in their final year and they attend courses and seminars of English, French, and Comparative Literature as part of the curriculum.

2.3. Procedure

For this study the participants were asked to answer a survey which included 10 closed items meant to reveal their perception of the use of active learning techniques during literature classes. We decided for this quantitative method as the interpretation of the data we collected enabled us to draw conclusions on the way in which literature is taught at academic level. Our intention is to show students’ opinions on the continuous changes of the educational process and the way they affect the process itself. Therefore, we are aware of the limits of the empirical method we chose, but the results may serve as a basis of reflection for both students and teachers.

3. Interpretation of results

In the context of the methodological changes affecting the instructional process, the first item in our questionnaire was intended to check if learners know the difference between student and teacher centred literature classes. As seen in students’ answers below, their majority are aware of what active learning strategies mean and their importance for the teaching and learning process.

Q 1. Are you familiar with the concept of active learning?		
1.	Yes	54.44 %
2.	No	45.56 %

According to the answers to the following two questions, we notice a difference between courses and seminars as far as literature teaching is concerned: most of the students' answers show that it is during seminars that the teachers make use of active learning (44.44%) techniques more often than during their courses (31.11%), which explains why they are familiar with this concept on the one hand, and, on the other hand the teachers' preference during courses for a more traditional approach (43.33% of the respondents mentioned the active learning as taking place rarely).

Q 2. How frequently do your teachers make use of active learning techniques during literature courses?			Q 3. How frequently do your teachers make use of active learning techniques during literature seminars?	
1.	Every class	5.56%	Every class	8.89 %
2.	Very often	8.89%	Very often	10.00%
3.	Often	31.11%	Often	44.44%
4.	Rarely	43.33%	Rarely	30.00%
5.	Never	11.11%	Never	6.67%

The fact that a significant proportion of the students acknowledge the practice of active learning at academic level explains why they are familiar with some techniques most frequently applied during literature classes. Among these, as shown in the table below, are: clarification pauses, discussions and the Socratic Method. As for the other ones, the students selected them, but as their percentage is low, a clear conclusion cannot be drawn about the diversity of such techniques. Nevertheless, it is significant that the low percentage of the most interactive strategies, such as the jigsaw group activities, panel discussions, note comparison/sharing, peer evaluation and panel discussions reveal the traditional tendency of the teaching process.

Q 4. How familiar are you with the following active learning techniques. Tick the ones your teachers use during literature classes.		
1.	The "one minute" paper	6.67%
2.	Affective response	5.56%
3.	Reading quiz	4.44%
4.	Clarification pauses	20.89%
5.	Response to a teacher centered activity	6.67%

6.	The Socratic Method	10.22%
7.	Quotations	6.67%
8.	Discussion	15.56%
9.	Note Comparison/Sharing	6.67%
10.	Peer evaluation	4.44%
11.	Concept Mapping	5.56%
12.	Jigsaw Group Activities	2.22%
13.	Panel Discussions	4.44%

An interesting fact revealed by the students' answers to question 5 is that some of the teachers do not attach much importance to collaborative teaching and prefer individual teaching activities. The high proportion of students' who chose "never" (83.33%) demonstrates once again the traditional type of the instructional process that literature teachers tend to apply to their classes.

Q 5. One of the strategies for promoting active learning is peer teaching. How frequently did you take part in such classes?		
1.	Very often	0.00%
2.	Often	16.67%
3.	Never	83.33%

A special mention should be made of the fact that students' positive perception (86.67%) of active learning techniques is in contradiction with the teachers' attitude who stick to the traditional instructional style.

Q 6. How do you find active learning techniques?		
A	Very attractive	30.00%
B	Interesting	56.67%
C	Boring	13.33%

That is why, when asked about reasons for which teachers do not make use of active learning techniques, students found as main causes their teachers' lack of interest, the difficulty in preparing such active activities and generally their teachers' centeredness during literature classes.

Q 7. In your view what makes it difficult for the teachers to use active learning techniques? Choose from the following items.		
A	Lack of teachers' experience.	13.33%
B	Lack of teachers' interest in new instructional methods.	32.22%
C	Preparing such classes requires more resources (time,	27.78%

	materials, planning)	
D	Preference for teacher-centred courses rather than student-centred ones.	21.11%
E	Class management is more difficult if such techniques are applied.	5.56%

As regards students' opinion on the improvement of their skills as a result of active learning, this reinforces their positive perception of it, more than half of them considering them as beneficial for their professional development. However, about one third of the responds still remain sceptical about the use of such techniques, fact which can be explained by their being used to a more traditional approach of the teaching process.

Q 8. Do you consider that your knowledge and skills improved as a result of the use of active learning techniques. Use the following scale, where 1 means "They did not improve at all" and 5 means "They highly improved".				
1	2	3	4	5
11.67%	21.11%	31.11%	25.56%	10.56%

Their positive view is again supported by the high percentage of respondents (63.33%) who trust in the effectiveness of active learning techniques as regards the solid preparation for a successful professional life.

Q 9. Do you consider active learning useful for your future career?		
A	Yes	63.33%
B	No	10.22%
C	I don't know	26.45%

As a result they consider that they would give great importance to such a teaching style, which in their view may contribute to the acquisition and development of the required competences in their future teaching career.

Q 10. If you were a literature teacher, what would you choose for your classes?		
1.	active learning techniques	67.11%
2.	teacher centred classes	30.89%

As these data show, a good thing is that at least during seminars (63.33%) students have the chance to take part in literature classes that are based on active learning techniques. Even though less than half of the respondents indicated that this is not the case during literature courses, they

are, however, familiar with such techniques, showing their preference for them.

Conclusions

As a conclusion to our findings we admit that the traditional methods are still present during literature courses in the academic environment, which can be explained by the general characteristics of the lectures, consisting in the following:

Firstly, teachers consider that lectures have the advantage of offering a large amount of information, organized thoughtfully and efficiently, in accordance with the requirements of the curriculum.

Secondly, lectures can be delivered in a quiet atmosphere which enables teachers to have complete control of the instructional process. This opinion is justified by the fact that students are passive receivers of knowledge, without interrupting the teachers' discourse.

Thirdly, teachers can adapt the content of the material according to the students' level of knowledge and needs and, in this way, they believe that the success of the learning process is assured.

Fourthly, lectures offer a model of a scholarly designed discourse which, due to the quality of the provided information, is perceived as being beneficial for the instructional process.

Although teachers are aware of the fact that active learning can increase students' performance, the analysed data demonstrate that they still believe in the efficiency of traditional lectures. This attitude towards the classical teaching style may result from the special conditions in which lectures are delivered. It is known from the instructional process that a teacher cannot handle a high number of students attending lectures as easily as he/she can do it during seminars, which are normally held with smaller groups. This explains why active techniques are more often used in seminars than lectures. As Bonwell and James (1991, p. 8) state "the total reliance on the lecture method" is a mistake as, naturally speaking, most people are not able "to listen effectively to any lecturer no matter how skilful over a sustained period."

Briefly, teachers should pay more attention to using active learning during lectures as it "makes dull, difficult or repetitive material interesting and engaging" (Schwartz Green, 2011, p. 10). By using such teaching style, the major advantage of the instructional process is that it builds "a community of learners who are cooperative, interactive and brain compatible" (Schwartz Green, 2011, p. 8). In other words if literature teachers combine the traditional lecture with the two major objectives of active learning, namely "self-directed learning" and "independent work" (Simons et al., 2000, p. 21), it will give students the opportunity to develop

their creativity and critical thinking making them partners in the teaching and learning process.

If students are actively engaged in their literature classes this will enable them to reflect more deeply on the course content and the instructional process taking place in the classroom will be more attractive stimulating their motivation which is the main purpose of any successful educational activity.

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