

A CASE STUDY ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LITERATURE CLASSES IN STUDENTS' VIEWS

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Abstract

In accordance with the changes brought about by the new educational framework, students' evaluation of the teaching process has become an important measurement instrument of the quality of the instructional performance. This idea lies at the basis of the present pilot study, which aims at discovering the impact of students' evaluation of their literature classes on the classroom environment as, in our opinion, such assessment may lead to the improvement of the teaching strategies used during literature courses and seminars.

Keywords: *literature class, evaluation, teaching strategies, improvement*

1. Introduction

The present paper is part of a broader study which aims at evaluating the state of the educational system in our institution from various perspectives: students' perceptions of the teaching process in general, and the assessment of language and literature classes in particular. Our approach is in line with the measures imposed by The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in compliance with the European higher education standards. The starting point of our research was the Quality Barometers published in 2009, 2010 and 2011 by the Agency, as well as the educational policies adopted in our country up to the present.

As reflected by the 2010 Quality Barometer, the respondents' "dominant opinions are that "the information provided in courses is of interest" but that too much emphasis is placed on memorizing, while the practical side is neglected." (2010, p. 15). This opinion led us to carry out the present study to check its validity within our university.

In addition to this purpose, we intended to discover other particular aspects related to the teaching of literature in our institution, focusing on the quality of classroom instruction and its evaluation from students' perspective. In relation to the former concept, we had in view Scrivener's "experiential learning cycle" which involves the following steps:

- “1. doing something.
2. recalling what happened.
3. reflecting on that.
4. drawing conclusions from the reflection.
5. using these conclusions to inform and prepare for future practical experience.”

(Scrivener, 2005, p. 20)

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From this model, we deduce that high quality teaching has to adapt its strategies to this cycle, which, in case of literature teaching, can be translated into more practical activities based on students' needs.

Needless to say that high standard teaching should be guided by a well conceived syllabus that can be defined as representing “the teacher’s personal plan for the course, based on the requirements of the curriculum, the content of the textbook and the concrete conditions imposed by the school/classroom and the group of students.” (Vizental, 2007, p.128). In other words, the syllabus should express the best correlation of the inherent factors constituting the educational process. If the correlation above is accomplished, then a literature class “can promote teacher quality and student achievement” (Hightower, M. A. et al., 2011, p.7). Furthermore, high quality literature classes cannot be separated from the development of pedagogical skills that teachers need as real change starts “with an examination of pedagogy and domain content” (Moore, H. A. et al., 2008, p.6), and not only with the introduction of new technologies which cannot replace the role of classroom strategies in developing students' skills.

Another characteristic of good quality classes is the enhancement of intrinsic motivation, which means that students might be stimulated “by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better” (Harmer, 2007, p. 98) As researchers have state, “intrinsic motivation produces better results than its extrinsic counterpart” (Harmer, 2007, p. 98). We should mention that students “come to love the learning process” only if teachers shift the focus from teacher-centred classes to student-centred classes, by using active learning strategies.

In our opinion, if teaching reaches high standards, students' evaluation of the classes they attend will successfully complete the educational process by providing instructors with relevant suggestions that could help them adapt, improve and change literature classes. Meaningful change does not require great effort (McGowan & Graham, 2009), but creates opportunities for interaction in the classroom, leading to better student-teacher relationships. Moreover, teachers prepare for their classes starting from students' assessment of their performance, which obviously paves the way for more effective learning.

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.

In order to achieve these objectives, our purpose is to answer the following research questions:

1. What is students' perception of the literature courses and seminars in our faculty?
2. What kind of teaching methods are used during literature classes?
3. To what extent and how can students' evaluation contribute to the change of the literature classes that they attend?

2.2. Participants

The people involved in the research are 60 students specialising in Philology, within the Petroleum – Gas University of Ploiesti. They are in their second year and they attend courses and seminars of English, French, Romanian and Comparative Literature as

part of the curriculum. In selecting the participants, the main criterion was their literature knowledge, half of them having grades between 5 and 7, and the other half between 8 and 10.

2.3. Procedure

Our study is based on a quantitative method that used as a main instrument a questionnaire consisting of 10 items, intended to bring to light certain aspects that could help us find answers to the questions above. The data were interpreted quantitatively, being expressed in percentages that reflect the respondents' evaluation of literature courses and seminars, except for one item, which was an open one, offering the students the opportunity to freely convey their opinions on the investigated phenomenon.

3. Data Analysis

The collected data indicate students' opinions on the way in which literature classes included in different specialties (English, French, Romanian and Comparative Literature) are taught, thus suggesting to us an interesting perspective on the status of teaching literature in our institution.

From the very beginning, it should be noted that a great many students (55.00%) perceive the literature courses they attend as being dull and monotonous, which may reflect their dissatisfaction both with the teaching style and the content of the subject.

At the same time, the high percentage of the questioned students (43.00%), who have a favourable opinion on the courses, is diagnostic of a certain quality of the instructional process.

Q 1. I consider my literature courses (English, French, Romanian and Comparative Literature) to be		
A	Very interesting	21.00%
B	Quite interesting	22.00%
C	Somewhat boring	35.00%
D	Very boring	20.00%
E	Undecided	2.00%

Regarding the literature seminars, it is worth mentioning that they reveal the same perceptions, the percentages being close to the ones above: almost half of the students (46.00%) find seminars engaging and stimulating, while 52.00% consider them to be boring and very boring, leading us to the conclusion that their perceptions are not inconsistent or superficial.

Q 2. I consider my literature seminars (English, French, Romanian and Comparative Literature) to be		
A	Very interesting	19.00%
B	Quite interesting	27.00%
C	Somewhat boring	38.00%
D	Very boring	14.00%
E	Undecided	2.00%

Furthermore, question 3 shows that their dissatisfaction with literature classes may be a result of the fact that more than half of the students (59.00%) do not attach any importance to the materials needed for the study of literature. However, the percentage of students who admit the usefulness of reading (41.00%) what teachers require for literature classes proves that the instructional process tends to reach a good teaching standard. The almost equal percentages of students who read the materials and those who find literature classes interesting show an objective reality that cannot be ignored, in spite of the negative opinion rendered by the other category.

Q 3. Do you consider it useful to read the materials provided (written courses, bibliography, realia) by your literature teachers?		
A	Yes	41.00%
B	No	59.00%
C	I don't know	0.00%

As to question 4, we may state that a possible explanation of students' favourable opinion as shown by more than 40.00% of them lies in the fact that half of the literature teachers employ active learning strategies during their classes. As known, classes that are more dynamic have a greater impact on students than the traditional ones. As a result, the percentage of discontent students (around 50.00%) is similar to the one indicating that teachers rarely use active strategies.

Q 4. To what extent do your literature teachers make use of active learning strategies during courses and seminars?		
A	permanently	8.00%
B	very often	16.00%
C	quite often	21.00%
D	rarely	51.00%
E	never	4.00%

With respect to the students' involvement in the learning process during the literature classes, we have noticed three tendencies according to which about a third (36.00%) of the learners admit that they are not active participants in these lessons, another third (33.00%) is somewhat involved and another third (31.00%) shows great interest in the learning activities.

Q 5. Taking into consideration your literature classes, express your attitude concerning your participation in the learning process. Use the following scale, where 1 means "I am not involved at all" and 5 means "I am highly involved".				
1	2	3	4	5
7.00%	29.00%	33.00%	17.00%	14.00%

In order to identify the reasons why students are not enthusiastic about the literature classes, we asked them to enumerate some of the weaknesses that, in their opinion,

characterise the courses and seminars dealing with literature topics. Their answers point out several aspects that can be divided into three categories: the first one refers to the teaching process itself, which is seen as ineffective due to the following practices: the teachers do most of the talk, there is no interaction in the classroom, students are discouraged to express their own ideas by authoritarian teachers who do not take into account their needs. The second category includes the syllabus itself which, in students' views, overloads them with too much information, as they have to study a great number of writers in a short period of time and do too many homework assignments during a semester. The last category brings to the fore problems connected to the facilities provided by the university, such as the lack of the works and materials they are supposed to read, limited number of written courses in the library and, most of all, the impossibility to borrow books to read at home. An interesting finding concerns their capacity to evaluate the teachers' performance, as they consider that some of the shortcomings of the literature classes result from the teachers' lack of experience in interacting with the students and managing the teaching process in general.

Other causes explaining the state of the instructional process are shown in the table below, which expresses students' evaluation of literature classes as follows:

Q 7. Read the following statements and write "yes" or "no" according to your opinion.			
		Yes	No
1.	The taught materials are interesting and stimulating from an intellectual point of view.	43.00%	57.00%
2.	We always receive feedback for our written assignments.	42.00%	58.00%
3.	Grading criteria are clear and communicated in due time.	37.00%	63.00%
4.	Grading is objective, reflecting our literary knowledge.	39.00%	61.00%
5.	Literature classes encourage us to continue studying on our own.	34.00%	66.00%

The first two statements reveal the two tendencies we have already analysed, the percentages being almost similar, that is, 42.00-43.00 % of the students appreciate the teaching materials and the feedback offered by their teachers, while the rest are not satisfied with their quality. A finding that should be taken into consideration shows that more than half of the learners (61.00-63.00%) signal inconsistencies of the assessment system, which seems to lack objectivity and well-defined criteria. This remark may explain why 66.00% of the students do not perceive literature classes as encouraging them to continue studying individually.

Q 8. Read the following statements and state if the following types of activities are encouraged by your literature teachers, using yes/no answers:			
		Yes	No
1.	Memorizing and reproduction	68.00%	32.00%
2.	Synthesising and organising information	36.00%	64.00%

3.	Critical evaluation of information, arguments and methods of working with the texts	31.00%	69.00%
4.	Stimulating intertextual and interdisciplinary approaches	28.00%	72.00%
5.	Interactive and creative activities	38.00%	62.00%

Question 8 restates the opposition between the two major trends of literature teaching in our institution: on the one hand, we have noticed a trend reflecting the traditionalist supporters, who base their teaching methods on memorising and reproduction and ignore the role of synthesising and organising information, interactive activities, as well as students' independence and critical thinking in approaching literary texts; on the other hand, the supporters of the modern methods are appreciated by approximately one third of the respondents, who value active learning.

With regard to questions 9 and 10, learners' answers reveal a significant finding, namely the very positive impact of their evaluation on the improvement of the teaching process. High percentages of respondents (90.00%, 80.00%) consider that, as a result of their evaluation, the student-teacher relationship has definitely improved leading to trust, closeness and more attention paid to their needs and use of stimulating learning procedures. Students' opinions are indicated in the tables below:

Q 9. In your opinion, what are the effects of your evaluation of your literature classes on yourselves and the student-teacher relationship?		
1.	Trust	51.00%
2.	Closeness	39.00%
3.	Fear	2.00%
4.	Tension	5.00%
5.	Conflict	3.00%

Q 10. In your opinion, what are the effects of your evaluation of your literature classes on the teachers?		
1.	Stimulating	48.00%
2.	More attention to students' needs.	32.00%
3.	The teachers become more authoritarian.	12.00%
4.	The teachers pay little attention to it.	6.00%
5.	No effect	2.00%

The low percentages of respondents who have a negative opinion on the effects of their evaluation of the literature courses and seminars are not significant, emphasising the above mentioned trend.

4. Conclusions

According to the analysed data, the percentages of students' who have both positive and negative views of literature classes they attend are almost equal, this demonstrating that traditional and modern teaching methods coexist during lectures and seminars.

The main conclusion of our research is that students' evaluation of the literature instructional process constitutes a reliable tool for improving the educational programme in our institution. As the data we have examined show, this system has been subjected to a radical change, evolving into more effective class activities.

In spite of the fact that there are still supporters of the traditional teaching style, which is reflected by almost half of the students' answers, the passage from the old methods to the modern ones is a reality that cannot be denied.

Using students' evaluation of literature courses and seminars represents an efficient barometer which, if taken into consideration, could help literature teachers to adapt the content of the syllabus and their classroom techniques to students' needs.

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