

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE CLASSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION. A CASE STUDY

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Abstract. *The study of comparative literature is a major component of the Philology curriculum in higher education in Romania. As the main objectives of the comparative courses and seminars are cross-cultural and interdisciplinary aspects of literature, students may have difficulty in dealing with comparative literature issues. The article aims to investigate Philology students' perceptions of comparative literature classes from various angles, such as syllabus content, teaching methods and strategies used during courses and seminars, and learners' awareness of the role of comparative literature in developing their cultural knowledge and critical thinking. The analysis of these perceptions may serve as a good starting point for designing effective comparative literature classes, helping instructors in their endeavour to give students a better understanding and appreciation of this academic subject.*

Keywords: *comparativeliterature, students' perceptions, active learning, motivation, higher education*

1. Paper Rationale

Given the fact that the study of comparative literature is an important component of the Philology curriculum in higher education, the paper tries to assess the impact of comparative literature classes on Philology students. Considering that learners' perceptions are a good barometer of the teaching and learning process, the goal of the research is to identify problem areas and provide suggestions for improving the quality of the instructional process and for stimulating students' interest in comparative literature classes.

2. Theoretical foundation and related literature

Being an intercultural and transnational academic field which explores relations between literatures, or the dialogue of literature with other disciplines, arts and cultural forms, comparative literature exposes students to the "broadest possible picture of human response to perennial issues" (Scollon R. and Scollon S., 2002, p. 1). In other words, the main goal of

comparative literature classes is to acquaint students with broad intertextual perspectives and develop their skills to make comparisons and connections across literatures and cultures in all periods of history.

According to Carter and Long, literature teaching “embraces a particular set of learning objectives for the student of literature”, objectives which they define as “the cultural model, the language model and the personal growth model” (1991, p. 2-3). As far as the teaching of comparative literature is concerned, all the three models are applicable to the instructional process to different degrees. In the light of the cultural model, the study of comparative literature proves to be invaluable to students from many points of view. Thus, it provides them with knowledge about the literatures and cultures of the world, especially about the circulation of themes, motifs, symbols, myths and movements from one country to another in different time periods. Moreover, comparative literature studies enable learners to investigate the interconnectedness of literary works and the historical, social and cultural contexts in which they were created, helping them to understand how ideas are generated and how they are artistically shaped. Due to the fact that comparative literature is cross-disciplinary, students have a great opportunity to deepen their knowledge by exploring topics across different areas of study in a meaningful learning experience.

As regards the language model, it should be noted that the purpose of comparative literature does not overlap with the one of the second language acquisition classes where literature serves as an instrument for teaching grammar and vocabulary skills (Carter and Long, 1991; Lazar, 1993; Carter and McRae, 1996). However, language awareness and even stylistic analysis may be beneficial to students’ learning, especially because the comparative approach requires the use of original texts in at least two distinct languages. In order to recognize the linguistic features of a text, grasp its hidden meanings and make valid interpretations, students need solid knowledge of foreign languages which they have to put into practice during the comparative process. Apart from that, translation itself may become an object of study if students are interested in comparing, for instance, published translations of literary works, or in examining theoretical problems related to translation.

And finally, it is the specificity of this discipline that favours students’ personal growth and fulfilment. By introducing learners to a wide range of texts, ideas and art forms, the study of comparative literature enriches their aesthetic and cultural experiences, and expands their knowledge of the world contributing to the development of their intellectual, emotional, social and behavioural competencies. Furthermore, if students’ interaction with the texts is supported by their interaction with other fellow students in classes carefully designed by the teacher, their motivation for learning increases

because, as Retallack and Spahr emphasize, “the collaborative making of meaning that is possible in a classroom is at its most productive and enlivening in an intertextual, conversational milieu” (2006, p. 7) which may lead to the formation of durable learning habits.

It should be added that in the case of comparative literature the three approaches discussed above operate convergently within an integrated learning model whose major purpose is to “connect learning across subjects, between contexts, and over time” (Huber, 2015, p. 15). As the students of comparative literature have to assimilate and process complex information from different literatures, cultures and disciplines, they need to have a wide variety of skills that range from literary to interdisciplinary and cross-cultural abilities. Taking into consideration Galik’s concept of interliterariness defined as “the basic and essential quality of literature in an international and inter-ethnic context” (2003, p. 34), it can be said that interliterary or intercultural skills and knowledge represent the kinds of competencies needed by the student of comparative literature who, in brief, is expected to:

- trace and compare the evolution of literary themes, genres and movements across time and space;
- relate literary and artistic works to their historical and cultural context;
- examine the influence of arts and other cultural expressions on literary works;
- analyse the response of literature to theories and ideas from other fields (philosophy, anthropology, history, gender studies, etc.);
- compare literary texts from different cultural contexts and historical periods;
- perform comparative analyses of texts from various media;
- examine an issue from a multitude of perspectives;
- synthesize concepts and ideas from different sources;
- have knowledge of various theoretical approaches and apply them to the texts;
- perform critical reading, using critical terminology appropriately;
- apply the conceptual tools of the comparative method to the texts;
- construct valuable comparative arguments.
- appreciate cultural differences and diversity;

The fact that comparative literature attaches great attention to cross-cultural issues does not mean that it incorporates the object of study of other cultural disciplines that are part of the philology curriculum. In spite of its openness to other fields, comparative literature places emphasis on “literariness”, that is, the specific features of literary works, but works which are culturally determined. As Tomo Virk argues, the comparative approach means “the investigation of specific, immanent literariness and

connectedness of literature with culture and society” (2003, p. 14). Consequently, a crucial step of the instructional process is to develop specific literary skills that students need in order to understand and critically analyse a literary text before identifying and investigating its relations with other cultural discourses. As Domínguez et al. state, “The teaching of literature has to partake of a constant effort to recuperate the phenomenological basis of the literary fact, that is to say, the relation of the reader to the text. From the moment such a relation weakens, or even disappears, any teaching of literature will become absurd.” (2015, p. 177) As the comparative analysis is not possible in the absence of the personal experience with the text, learners are expected to demonstrate complex literary skills, such as the ability to recognize the formal and structural elements of the text, to comprehend and interpret implied meanings, to contextualize the text from a cultural and historical point of view, to understand how literary texts respond to various theories and artistic expressions, etc. In other words, the act of reading literature is a complex process involving a cognitive and emotional relationship between the student and the text, or, to cite Brumfit and Carter, it is “a process of meaning-creation by integrating one’s own needs, understanding, and expectations with a written text” (1986, p. 23).

Nevertheless, the focus on the text with a view to highlighting the intrinsic qualities of literary works does not automatically imply the use of a comparative approach, which normally requires supplementary skills to the literary ones. As a matter of fact, what the learner need is to be guided by “the comparative reflex”, which means “a comparative way of thinking” (Saussy, 2006, p. 5) based on the concepts and methodologies specific to the field. Concretely, the student of comparative literature should be able to:

- identify and analyse attested relations such as sources and influences, which Galik calls “relations in the genetic-contact field” (2003, p. 37);
- find and describe analogies, defined as “structural-typological affinities” or parallel studies (Galik, 2003, p. 38), which do not necessarily imply evidence of influences;
- compare and contrast multicultural aspects;
- process and interpret concepts and ideas from interdisciplinary perspectives.

According to Shunqing Cao (2013), cross-civilisation studies are directly connected with what he calls the variation theory. If the study of influences and analogies deals with “transnational and interdisciplinary comparisons” whose major purpose is to “seek commonness”, the variation theory proposed by the Chinese scholar favours heterogeneity or variation as a source of the comparative approach. In this context, the act of comparing signifies “to discover the differences out of similarities and the similarities

out of the differences of various literatures” (Cao, 2013, p. xxi). As the two approaches constitute the specific objectives of comparative literature, students should be familiar with exploring not only the common features of the investigated phenomena, but also with the differences between literature and other disciplines or cultural forms.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the research: to assess Philology students’ perceptions of comparative literature classes in order to improve teaching strategies and stimulate their motivation for comparative literature courses and seminars.

The objectives of the research:

O1: identifying students’ opinions about the comparative literature syllabus;

O2: identifying students’ views on the effectiveness of the teaching methods and strategies used in courses and seminars.

The hypothesis of the research: as the study of comparative literature classes requires a wide range of skills, learners may perceive such classes as discouraging, unappealing and even useless. The analysis of students’ perceptions may help the instructor to improve his course design and seminar activities in order to enhance learner motivation for studying comparative literature.

Description of the instruments

The research was based on a questionnaire that included 10 items, out of which 8 were a mixture of semi-open and closed questions, and 2 were closed. These questions were meant to investigate Philology students’ opinions about the effectiveness of comparative literature courses and seminars, and their awareness of the role of the discipline in the development of their cultural knowledge.

Target group

The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 75 respondents specializing in Philology at the Faculty of Letters and Sciences within the Petroleum – Gas University of Ploiesti. All participants in the research attended the Comparative Literature courses and seminars in the second year of study.

4. Results and discussion

The survey questions refer to both components of the instructional process, courses and seminars. Thus, as seen in table no. 1, the majority of the respondents (69.33%) have a favourable opinion about the comparative literature courses, their arguments showing that they are aware of the formative role of this academic discipline. What they appreciate most of all is that such courses offer them the opportunity to broaden and deepen their

knowledge by getting them acquainted with the great works of world literature and the major issues of the Humanities. They also believe that discussing literature in broad contexts across time periods and geographical areas may enrich their way of seeing the world. On the other hand, only 30.67% of the respondents dislike comparative literature courses. Their reasons are various but the most significant one is that they consider the subjects representing their specialty (Romanian and English) more important than the other subjects of the curriculum. Moreover, the study of the relation between literature and spheres of knowledge with which they are completely unfamiliar is perceived as unattractive and difficult to understand. In their opinion, sophisticated information beyond their capacity of comprehension will be of no help in the future.

Table no. 1

Q1. How do you find the information presented during your comparative literature courses? Justify your answer.	
Interesting	69.33%
Not interesting	30.67%

As regards the respondents' opinions about the comparative literature seminars, the percentages shown in table no. 2 do not differ significantly from the ones in table no. 1. Nevertheless, the percentage of the students (74.66%) who prefer the comparative literature seminars is slightly higher than the one corresponding to the learners who appreciate the courses (69.33%). This may be explained by the interactive nature of the seminars and the fact that the frontal teaching style characteristic of most lecture courses is rarely used. As students' answers testify, seminars are appreciated because they have the opportunity to discuss the readings and solve certain tasks, which are designed to facilitate the understanding of the material required by the syllabus. One activity that they particularly enjoy is the oral presentation of topics either imposed by the teacher or chosen by students, their preference for such a task being justified by their tendency to read less than required ("in this way you can learn useful things about varied authors without having to read them").

Table no. 2

Q2. Do you find your comparative literature seminars interesting? Justify your answer.	
Yes	74.66%
No	25.34%

The percentages shown in tables no. 3 and 4 reinforce the findings discussed above. Comparing students' involvement in the learning process during courses and seminars, the results reveal that 50.67% of the students believe that courses do not encourage their participation in the class, whereas 52.00% of them consider that seminars provide them with such an opportunity. Nevertheless, the proportion of learners (49.33%) who admit that active learning techniques are "often" and "sometimes" used during courses is also significant because it demonstrates that lectures are not always perceived as a one-sided process during which students have to pay attention to the instructor's authoritative figure and take notes almost mechanically, without processing the information presented in the classroom.

Table no. 3

Q3. How frequently do your teachers use active learning strategies in comparative literature courses?	
Often	12.00%
Sometimes	37.33%
Never	50.67%

Table no. 4

Q4. How frequently do your teachers use active learning strategies in comparative literature seminars?	
Often	52.00%
Sometimes	38.67%
Never	9.33%

Further details about students' perceptions of comparative literature classes were provided by question five: *What do you most dislike about your comparative literature courses and seminars?* The majority of their answers converge on the idea that the syllabus is overloaded and the time allocated for the readings is not sufficient. In addition, some learners are of the opinion that lectures are sometimes fast-paced making their note-taking difficult while others believe that some of the texts discussed during seminars are too complicated for them to understand. It should also be noted that some learners dislike frequent interruptions to the lecture, especially when their classmates ask the teacher to explain simple issues or initiate discussions as a pretext to enjoy "a short break". They consider that paying attention to the teachers' speech and scrupulous note-taking will spare them from searching for a lot of material in the future.

Question six was meant to reveal students' awareness of effective teaching in both cases, courses and seminars: *What teaching strategies should be*

adopted by instructors to stimulate your interest in comparative literature courses and seminars? Justify your point of view. Except for a small number of learners who suggested general ideas about how classes should be (“the teacher should conceive an interesting lecture”, “the course should be based on important information”, “the content of the course should be useful”), the majority of the respondents provided specific answers which prove that they have clear ideas about the effectiveness of comparative literature classes. The responses referring to courses are summarized as follows: the teacher should use handouts, slides and audio-visual aids on a regular basis to facilitate the understanding of the presentation, the teacher should allow time for students to complete their notes, the teacher should ask questions throughout the lecture to check whether learners have understood the most difficult points, class discussions should be initiated more often because they stimulate students’ reflection on the information presented by the teacher, complex issues should be simplified into understandable ideas, etc. As far as seminar classes are concerned, most respondents admit that they have a high degree of interest in their classes if they are participatory. In their opinion, seminars based on interactive activities, such as debates or any kind of collaborative work, lead to a deeper understanding of the texts proposed for analysis, particularly the difficult ones, as they increase the opportunities in which students can consult each other to clarify ideas and learn from each other. The use of reading comprehension strategies is also seen as beneficial because they help learners to develop their ability to deal with literary texts.

Students’ opinions about the tasks required for comparative literature classes were highlighted by question seven: *Which assignments do you find useful for improving your creative skills? Justify your answer.* Most respondents believe that the assignments involving self-study, such as the oral presentation of the readings in a seminar and writing essays on cross-cultural topics, are very useful because they have the opportunity to put their learning into practice and evaluate the skills gained from the comparative study. Other students argue that the projects required for both seminars and courses are challenging because they have to apply information to context, discover the connections of literature with other forms of art and culture, and demonstrate their ability to critically analyse texts from different literatures.

With respect to the respondents’ attitude towards reading, table no. 5 shows that the books required for courses and seminars are not read in a satisfactory proportion. Significant percentages of students (42.67% and 41.33%) read fewer books than required, invoking various reasons, such as an overloaded timetable that does not allow extra time for reading, a great number of authors that have to be studied, and even the fact that students cannot cope with multiple tasks and priorities (*i.e.*, they have to read for other disciplines, too).

Table no. 5

Q8. To what extent do you read the bibliography required for comparative literature classes? Justify your answer.	
I read it all	13.33%
I read it partially	41.33%
I read a few books	42.67%
I don't read anything	2.67%

According to table no. 6, a high percentage of the respondents (70.67%) view comparative literature as a foundation for other literary and cultural studies. They consider that the knowledge and skills acquired during their comparative literature classes can help them better understand the works of the Romanian and English writers, particularly because they may study themes and ideas common to these literatures and because the comparative perspective may deepen their understanding of the literary works. At the same time, only 29.33% of the students have an opposite opinion motivating that they do not find it necessary to apply the information about the literatures of the world to the study of other academic subjects.

Table no. 6

Q9. Do comparative literature classes help you with the study of other subject areas of the curriculum? Justify your answer.	
Yes	70.67%
No	29.33%

As seen in table no. 7, a large proportion of respondents (74.67%) maintain that the study of world literature and culture is essential for their future career. In their opinion, being a good teacher of Romanian or English requires not only solid knowledge of these disciplines but also a broad cultural horizon and the ability to make connections between literature and other fields in order to make students better understand the linguistic and literary issues that are taught to them. In addition, they believe that an interdisciplinary approach to teaching languages can meet the requirements of today's society in a globalized context. On the other hand, 25.33% of the respondents believe that the knowledge and skills gained through the study of comparative literature will not help them in careers that do not involve classroom teaching or education in general. As a result, they prefer narrow specialized studies to the global perspectives of comparative literature.

Table no. 7

Q10. Do you find comparative literature classes useful for your future career? Justify your answer.	
Yes	74.67%
No	25.33%

All in all, it can be said that the high percentages shown in table no. 2, 6 and 7 represent the dominant tendency of the respondents' perceptions, reflecting their favourable opinions on comparative literature as a discipline of the Philology curriculum.

5. Conclusion

The findings contradict the research hypothesis and lead to the conclusion that the large majority of the respondents have a consistently positive attitude towards comparative literature classes. They are fully aware of the educational role of the discipline in broadening their cultural horizons and appreciate its contribution to their intellectual formation as future teachers. Only a small percentage of learners consider that the study of comparative literature is not necessarily useful, their conviction being explained by the fact that they intend to pursue other career paths which, in their opinion, do not require the knowledge and skills acquired through such studies.

It is also worth mentioning that, irrespective of the learners' attitude towards comparative literature, most of them tend to perceive lecturing as a traditional teaching method and the seminars, which mainly focus on student interaction and debate, as more attractive than courses. Given this fact, instructors should adopt a series of effective teaching strategies to improve the quality of the lecture-based courses. First, using active learning strategies on a regular basis may better motivate students to engage in the learning process. Second, as learners feel uncomfortable when they are exposed to dense information, which sometimes seems to be well beyond their capacities, restructuring the syllabus content according to the principles of clarity and accessibility may enhance the effectiveness of lectures. Furthermore, reducing the list of themes and authors in order to favour in-depth studies can be a solution to motivating students to learning. Third, relating the content to students' knowledge and experience as well as encouraging their participation in the selection of the readings can be fruitful ways to stimulate their enthusiasm about comparative literature.

Many other strategies could be added to the list, but the central idea is that a teaching style based on active learning and students' involvement in the instructional process is the key to teaching comparative literature effectively and making them fully aware of the fact that the knowledge and skills gained through these studies will be of great help not only in the teaching profession

but also in any other field that requires the ability to understand cultural diversity.

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