

Enhancing Learners' Cultural Awareness in EFL Literature Classes through the Use of AI-Supported Digital Tools

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Abstract ;(not more than 10 Lines)

In the vibrant intersection of FL instruction and technology assisted language learning, this study delves in the potential of teaching culture through literature within the English as a foreign language (EFL) context seeking to prove that incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) supported digital tools fosters understanding of context-specific themes, norms, practices, and socio-cultural backgrounds. The current research presents a theoretical account of how literature is a window into the FL's culture and explores EFL learners' needs for promoting their cultural awareness. It also provides an overview of the implementation of certain AI supported tools (Google Classroom, Padlet, and Kahoot) in literature classes. It, then, proposes a detailed lesson plan around Roald Dahl' short story The Way up to Heaven (1954) whose outcomes are to help learners gain a broader understanding of the cultural context as well as develop their analytical reading and critical thinking of the cultural influences on this short story. In light of such descriptions, instruction aims to improve the learners' comprehension and appreciation of literary texts; develop their cultural awareness; enhance their interpretative and critical thinking skills; promote empathy and open-mindedness; and integrate certain digital technologies for e-teaching and collaborative learning.

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1.

ntroduction

In the last decade, there has been an upsurge of interest into how technology can be used in the educational sphere. Scholars attempted to develop principled and feasible approaches to using technology in the language classroom. At the same time, the last few decades have been giving thoughtful attention to the place of literature particularly in the foreign language (FL) context. Literature greatly enriches learners and helps them achieve their main purpose of receiving education, essentially learning the language and what accompanies it particularly that literary works are rich carrier of cultural representations. In light of these interests, this paper aims to propose a generalizable plan of a literature lesson involving the use of digital tools that are applicable to FL learners and relevant in demystifying cultural representations.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

2.1 Literature in the Foreign Language Context

There exists a plethora of definitions for literature. A simple one is provided by Gillian Lazar (1993) claiming that literature means “those novels, short stories, plays and poems which are fictional and convey their message by paying considerable attention to language which is rich and multi-

I layered” (p. 5). Literary works not only cultivate ways of thinking by requiring readers to interpret the layered meanings, but they also empower readers with a way to understand the intricacies and dynamics of the world. Literature is not mere narration of events and description of people; it transcends cultural barriers, creates sensations, and conjures images in the minds of the readers. Literature, when read at early stages, prepares people for life and what awaits them. Through literary texts, readers can be empowered through the practice of inquiry, interpretation, analysis, argumentation, and empathy (Irvine, 2008, p. 4).

In an academic context, teachers frequently raise inquiries regarding the best approach to teach literature/literary texts or how an effective teacher gets his or her students to stay motivated and engaged in literature classes. These concerns are with no doubt the reason behind several major breakthroughs in language teaching that have been taking place in the FL context. Being a form of creative human activity and a means of communication presented through linguistic constructions and artifacts (Moody, 1983) deems literature a window into the target language’s culture and a necessity for holistic language learning. One of the aims of introducing literary texts is to help students unravel the cultural representations embedded in a text. Students would often need guidance when exploring the multiple

cultural contexts in literary texts, and teachers would need to devise materials and tasks which help them understand the new perspectives.

Even though literary works do particularly use a different language, the frequent occurrence of certain patterns and structures and the layering of meanings is what makes them more aesthetically pleasing to read and possibly more difficult to discern. Despite this, literary works offer more than just nuanced figurative language, and sheltering learners from this genre of texts may not lead to the academic enrichment and the learning potential which education is supposed to achieve (Gilroy-Scott, 1983). Literary texts are authentic representations of the target language's culture. They are carriers of not only language but details about the norms, the traditions, and the customs of the language being learnt, and, therefore, they constitute an indispensable part of the learning experience in particular and of human life in general. Paran (2008) claims in this regard that:

If we take as our starting point an understanding of the role of literature in daily life, the way in which narratives function in learning, the role of literature and narratives in education, and the language-literature link– all these are important in understanding that literature may have a place in L2 teaching more than [other] subjects. (p. 469)

So in order to avoid socio-cultural difficulties, it is essential to introduce EFL learners to literary texts. In light of

the above, the research at hand seeks to keep up with the technological advents which the world is rapidly witnessing in all fields and to overview some digital tools and their implementation in teaching literature to EFL learners to enhance their motivation, improve recall and comprehension, and offer a more up-to-date learning experience.

2.2 An Evaluation of FL Learners' Needs for Studying Literature

It is undoubtable that introducing literature in the language classroom leads to improved reading comprehension, the ability to analyze and interpret texts, and enhanced writing skills. However and with the implementation of digital tools in the literature classroom, other benefits can be noticed and various other competencies can be developed. Not only do these tools lead to greater engagement from the part of the learners, they also contribute positively to collaborative learning fostering interaction and development of a range of communication skills. Artificial intelligence (AI) ensures that these digital tools offer personalized learning experiences by adapting to individual student's needs and preferences. Platforms with adaptive learning technologies for teaching literature can provide for instance customized reading materials, exercises, and assessments. Being adaptive, these tools can also cater to the different learning styles offering various mode of learning leading to improved comprehension particularly of complex literary texts.

In spite of the views which claim that literary texts should be eliminated from the language classroom on grounds of their complexity and unconformity to the standard language (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014) and the uselessness of lecture-based teacher-centered classes (Edmondson, 1997), several researchers have proven the usefulness of using literary texts. Maley (1989) and Paran (2008, 2010) believe that teaching literature, even when the materials are used as a resource, leads to improved reading interpretation, enhanced writing skills, developed critical thinking skills (through the identification of literary devices and socio-cultural contexts), and raised cultural awareness (through exposure to diverse literary works from different cultures which aid in promoting cross-cultural understanding and empathy and understanding of cultural references, idiomatic expressions, and historical contexts). Lastly, Alderson (2000) believes that what makes literary texts special is their ability to activate the readers' imagination and visualization. This process of course contributes greatly to comprehension as well promoting creative skills as in the cases where readers are required to create alternative endings, step in the shoes of certain characters, or change the setting of the literary work. It is, therefore, not only important to teach literature to FL learners but with the help of certain digital tools, many gains can be achieved.

2.3. The Use of Digital Tools in Teaching Literature

Using digital tools, especially if they are AI supported ones like Google Classroom, Padlet, and Kahoot, in teaching literature to EFL learners can significantly enhance the teaching and the learning experiences. These digital tools can make learning more interactive and engaging, which is crucial for maintaining students' motivation. Tools like Kahoot, which is a game-based learning platform that makes it easy to create, share, and play learning games and trivia quizzes, use gamification which according to Deterding et al. (2011) make assessment fun and competitive increasing the learners' participation and enthusiasm, particularly when the learning materials are of literary nature to which learners have great apprehension. *Kahoot* provides immediate feedback to students, allowing them to understand their mistakes and learn from them in real-time. Nicol and Macfarlane (2006) believe that immediate feedback is crucial for EFL learners as it helps them to quickly correct errors and reinforces learning. With the introduction of AI, these tools can help tailor the learning experience to the individual students' needs. *Google Classroom*, for example, can track students' progress and provide personalized feedback, helping each student learn at their own pace and addressing specific areas where they may need improvement. It most importantly enables teachers to post materials and assignments online, which students can access at their convenience.

These digital tools also ensure collaboration among students. *Padlet*, which is a versatile and intuitive virtual post board that can be shared with students either in class or as a form of online teaching/learning, allows for discussions around the shared boards, enabling students to work together on assignments and share their opinions easily. This is particularly beneficial for EFL learners, as it provides opportunities for authentic communication practice outside the classroom setting. As much as these tools make teaching and learning fun and feasible, they most importantly allow for learning to happen flexibly making online learning more accessible and online teaching more manageable.

The digital tools presented thus far offer numerous benefits for teaching literature to EFL learners. They enhance engagement, personalize learning, facilitate collaboration, yield immediate feedback, and offer flexibility (Manzollilo, 2016; McBrien et al., 2009). By integrating these tools into the teaching process, educators can create a more effective and enjoyable learning experience for their learners of literature.

3. A Lesson Plan Illustrating the Implementation of AI Supported Digital Tools in Literature Instruction

This section of the paper presents the outline of the first lesson of a literature course implementing three AI supported digital tools.

- **Title:** AI-Supported Digital Tools in Teaching Literature to EFL Learners

- **Course Level:** Intermediate EFL learners

- **Course Description:**

- 1- Introduction to contemporary and classic literary texts.
- 2- Development of reading, analytical, and critical thinking skills.
- 3- Incorporation of digital tools to enhance engagement and understanding.

- **Learning Outcomes:**

- 1- Improving comprehension and appreciation of literary texts.
- 2- Enhancing language skills through reading and analyzing literature.
- 3- Utilizing digital technologies for literary analysis and collaborative learning.
- 4- Developing critical thinking skills and cultural awareness.

I. Lesson 1: Introduction to Digital Tools and Literary Texts

- **Learning Objectives:** Students will:

- 1- Become familiar with the digital tools and platforms that will be used.

2- Gain a foundational understanding of key literary terms and concepts.

3- Begin exploring literary texts with an emphasis on comprehension at different levels (literal, inferential, analytical, and cultural).

- **Steps:**

- 1- **Pre-Reading:**

- Introduction to Digital Tools

- Objective: The teacher overviews the digital tools and platforms that will be used (Google Classroom, Padlet, Kahoot).

- Google Classroom: teacher demonstrates how to navigate the platform, submit assignments, and participate in discussions.

- Padlet: teacher shows how to create and share content and how to collaborate with peers.

- Kahoot: teacher guides students on how to participate in interactive quizzes.

- ✓ The teacher explains how these tools will enhance learning and engagement.

- ✓ The teacher ensures students are comfortable using the digital tools

- Introduction to Literary Terms and Concepts

Objective: Establishing connections between the cultural context of the short story and students' own cultural backgrounds.

- ✓ The teacher introduces definitions of key literary devices/concepts (plot, setting, characters, narrative point of view, and figures of speech) using Martha Salinas' short story *The Scholarship Jacket* (1986).

- Tool: Google Classroom

- ✓ The teacher highlights the importance of analyzing these devices to comprehend and interpret the literary text and introduces the cultural context of the literary work through providing a brief overview of the societal and cultural setting of the selected work (Mexican cultural elements in *The Scholarship Jacket*).

- Discusses questions:

- ✓ What cultural differences or similarities do you notice between this story's setting and your own society?

- ✓ How might societal pressures influence the character's actions?

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- ✓ **Activity 1:** the teacher creates an interactive quiz on these key literary terms.

- Tool: Kahoot

Question	Options
What is the main conflict in The Scholarship Jacket?	• Marta's struggle to pay for the jacket • A competition between teachers • Marta's emotional struggle about fairness • Marta's argument with her family
Where does The Scholarship Jacket take place?	• In a small rural school in Texas • In a large urban city • At Marta's home • In the principal's office
Which character is most responsible for the conflict in The Scholarship Jacket?	• Marta's father • The principal • Marta's grandmother • The janitor

Jacket?	
What effect does the first-person narration in The Scholarship Jacket have on the story?	• It makes the reader sympathize with Marta's personal experience • It distances the reader from Marta • It reveals the thoughts of all characters • It creates a feeling of confusion

- ✓ **Activity 2:** Students brainstorm and post examples of cultural norms or values from their own backgrounds that align with or differ from those in the story.

Tool: Padlet

2- *During Reading: Exploring Cultural Dimensions*

Objective: Fostering understanding of how cultural norms and values influence characters and themes in *The Way up to Heaven* (1954) by Roald Dahl.

- ✓ **Activity 1:** Guided reading and discussion using Google Classroom.

Discussion Questions:

- ✓ How does Mrs. Foster feel about being in Paris?

- ✓ Who are the protagonist and the antagonist of the story? List their traits.
- ✓ Pick out expressions that describe the setting of the story.
- ✓ How does the story reflect mid-20th-century American societal expectations, particularly regarding gender roles and marriage?
- ✓ Does the author use a first or third narrative point of view? Justify your answer.
- ✓ How do cultural norms about duty and family influence her choices and conflicts?
- ✓ Was Mrs. Foster right to want to live in Paris next to her daughter and grandchildren instead of spending the rest of her life in a country where nothing of importance (work) is left?
- ✓ How might Mrs. Foster's desire to live in Paris relate to her cultural background and values?

- Tool: Google Classroom

✓ **Activity 2:** In Google Classroom, students compare Mrs. Foster's experiences and societal pressures with the norms from their own cultures.

- ✓ How might a character like Mrs. Foster behave in a culture where women are more empowered?

- ✓ Analyze how cultural undertones are conveyed through Dahl's use of language, setting, and narrative perspective.

3- **Post reading: Connecting Cultures through Creativity**

- **Objective:** Allowing students to reflect on cultural insights and draw comparisons.

- ✓ **Activity:** students create a short digital presentation where they compare a literary character from one of the stories with a figure from their culture who displays similar traits or faces similar challenges.

- ✓ **Example:** How does Mrs. Foster compare to a strong, independent figure from your cultural history?

Tool: Use Prezi or Canva and Upload the presentation to Google Classroom.

4. **Practical Tips for E-Teaching Literature to Algerian EFL Learners**

In fact, teachers may face several challenges trying to implement these tools in EFL literature classes. These challenges may be attributed to teacher's reluctance and unfamiliarity with these tools. It may seem time-consuming and redundant at first. Nonetheless, in a time of global digitalization, it is of utmost importance for teachers to stay up-to-date in order to meet the needs of their

subjects and keep up with the highly-digitalized international educational systems. What follows is a set of practical guidelines for e-teaching literature to Algerian EFL learners with the aim of raising their cultural awareness.

- Doing students' needs analysis to learn more about what the subjects want to get from literature and to be well aware of students' general apprehension towards literature classes.
- With students' needs in mind, it is important to acknowledge the fact that variety in reading materials is necessary; therefore, the teacher ought to create a healthy mixture of both classic and contemporary literary works.
- A diverse selection of classic and contemporary literary works fosters cultural awareness by exposing students to a range of historical contexts, cultural values, and perspectives, helping them understand and appreciate different traditions, beliefs, and societal changes over time.
- Incorporating digital tools without first scaffolding their proper use is futile.

- Centering the use of these tools to transmit literary and cultural knowledge in equal parts way without disregarding the learners' needs.
- Emphasizing how literature reflects societal norms, values, and conflicts unique to each culture.
- Facilitating discussions that explore the cultural roots of characters' decisions and story events.
- The choice of the reading material determines the type of activities and the digital tools to be subservient to facilitate teaching.
- Online discussions and group works are in no way a substitute to the teacher's explanations. These digital tools are in no way a substitute for the teacher. Their role is essentially facilitative.
- Creating an easy-going atmosphere that encourages theme-focused open-ended culture-related discussions helps the teacher create a healthy rapport with his/her students.
- FL teachers' role is essential in changing and promoting the education and technological environment (Godwin-Jones, 2015).

Conclusion

Due to students' general apprehension and lack of engagement towards literature and due to the teacher-centered nature of literature classes, it is recommended by a large body of researchers to integrate digital tools to teach this subject. With the implementation of these tools, millennial Algerian university students get to receive a higher in quality standards e-learning. The presents study aimed at showing how to incorporate three AI supported digital tools in teaching literature to Algerian university students can aid in developing their cultural wareness. Using Google Classroom, Kahoot, and Padlet allows teachers to adapt today's technological advents and to adopt up-to-date teaching strategies that entice students' creativity, collaboration, leadership, and communication. The study also provided practical recommendations on how to pedagogically teach literature online supported by the findings of several scholars who have positive attitudes towards the use online discussion forums, collaboration tools, and creation-based websites (Dauer, 2003; Dhawan, 2020; Manzollilo, 2016; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

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