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The Use of Literature in EFL Classroom: Italian Canadian Short Stories as a Teaching Innovation Experience Through Flipped Classroom Strategy

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Abstract

The aim of this article consists of showing that motivation is necessary for the success of a teaching and learning experience in an online classroom. By using the flipped learning method, the student becomes the central part of learning, being more active than in the traditional class and taking responsibility for his/her learning. He/she goes from being a mere spectator who only listens to the teacher's speech to someone with a voice in the classroom structured to allow student to acquire knowledge and build different competencies. The experience described below by implementing the flipped learning in the subject *Contemporary Culture and Society of the Anglophone Communities*, of the online Bachelor's Degree in Spanish Language and Literature, at the University of Burgos, excitement and self-expression replaced fear and dread. This awareness helped students in the construction of critical thinking and, in this specific case, culture and literature represented a better way for students to understand and know the society in which the language used in the texts is the language spoken (Valdes, 1986).

During the first phase of this experience, the 56 students were divided into 14 groups of four members in each one; they were given instructions by different videos recorded by the teacher and during which she explained what to do, how to develop the project and how to proceed and deliver the final task. She also introduced the general topic of the Unit "Acculturation, adaptation

and sense of belonging in women emigrants through Italian Canadian short stories” by uploading different readings by different women writers who had migrated from Italy to Canada for different reasons and in different periods since XX century until today. Mostly based on real events, these writings unveil the different coping strategies deployed by Italian Canadian women and how they dealt with the complex process of settling into life in a new country. After having chosen the writer to work on the 14 groups proceeded to research and investigate them. They also kept regular contact with the teacher by fora or tutorials so the teacher could track and monitor their learning progress and needs. The project consisted of preparing a presentation on the woman writer selected including the context she lived in and her work.

During the last phase, after the task delivery, she asked all groups to share the posters and presentations and to ask questions and comments about them in a forum opened for that purpose. Finally, a questionnaire on their perception of the flipped learning approach in the course was prepared and distributed to the students. The result of this experience has shown that the flipped learning strategy succeeded in motivating the students to build and acquire knowledge and to reach beneficial outcomes.

Keywords: Motivation, flipped classroom, migration, Italian-Canadian literatura, short stories

Introduction

1. Flipped classroom: description and approach

In recent decades, a way to implement an increasingly motivating and effective methodology has been sought within the European Higher Education Area. The flipped classroom learning strategy, in this sense and, as regards the teaching of foreign languages and cultures, is considered one of the most suitable for today's university learning space as it reverses the teaching-learning model. This implies some learning processes that previously took place outside the classroom and now are a fundamental part of it, fostering in students the acquisition of knowledge, its assimilation and its implementation. According to several scholars, Abeysekera and Dawson (2015) describe, give a definition and analyze widely flipped classroom approaches and their implementation. Another interesting aspect that Abeysekera and Dawson (2015) analyze regards the way flipped classroom helps intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. By implementing flipped classroom strategy, student represents the active and central subject of this process and, from this point of view, and thanks to several studies (Bergmann and Sams, 2012; Anakin, 2013; Berenguer, 2016; Atta and Salem, 2013; García-Barrera, 2013; Barrera, 2013; García, 2014; García Gómez, 2016) demonstrate that the implementation of this methodology in the classroom is satisfactory in terms of student

motivation and their performance in the different subjects. Moreover, Steen-Utheim & Foldnes (2018) insist on the importance of flipped classrooms as a way to engage students.

García-Barrera's theoretical study (2013) describes the flipped classroom as a formula designed to carry out practical activities within the classroom, leaving out the exposition and explanation of concepts. In this way, students will have to investigate the solution of possible doubts and problems, after an in-depth study, to expose them to the teacher and proceed with the development of activities whose result will be the construction of their wealth of knowledge. In the meantime, the teacher will have the opportunity to consult with other colleagues and collaborate to find solutions and implement them. It should be noted that the use of technologies, in addition to both autonomous and group learning, facilitates the student's search for knowledge and learning.

As María Asunción Barreras Gómez (2016) points out, the teacher acts outside the class, as a guide as the student develops his work in the classroom. In this way the teacher has the time to be able to devote more attention to students who normally find themselves in difficulty, assisting them in a personalized way.

According to Berenguer (2016) and Berrett, D. (2012), the advantages provided by the flipped classroom methodology include greater responsibility for the student as a collaborator in the classroom, personalization of learning adapted to the place and needs of students, greater attention from the teacher towards students, promotion of critical thinking and analytical strategy thanks to greater participation and involvement in the classroom, fostering collaborative learning and attention from students.

This methodological process not only inverts the learning process, but, if we compare it with the master class, the teacher needs to change his/her role, since he/she goes from being the person who exposes his/her contents to a guide and adviser of the students during the acquisition of their knowledge, Tedesco, (2010), cited in García-Barrera (2013). The student becomes the central part of the learning process, being more active than in the traditional class and taking responsibility for their learning. He goes from being a mere spectator who only listens to the teacher's speech to someone with a voice in the classroom, who has to be structured to acquire knowledge.

2. The importance of literature in a foreign language and culture classroom

On the other hand, literature belongs to the field of creative language whose message is perceived in a subjective way based on the user who is in front of it. Its use in the foreign language and culture classroom has been revalued in recent years since a close connection has been noted between

utility and benefits not only at a linguistic level but also and above all at a cultural level and in the development of different basic skills such as linguistic, personal, motivational, literary, intercultural and critical competence. In fact, we must not set aside the idea that literature enhances these skills and students develop and strengthen a consciousness that goes beyond language learning and that encompasses the analysis and learning of socio-cultural, historical and literary aspects that reflect the different texts studied during the course.

The current approach to foreign language and culture takes place thanks to the support of other disciplines including literature which is no longer considered as a language far removed from the everyday communicative approach (Abadalejo, 2007). There is research that supports the possibility of organizing a foreign language learning curriculum through literature but other studies reveal the multiple reasons why literature is not a useful resource as teachers often do not believe they are competent in using this tool in the classroom. This lack of confidence derives from the poor training of teachers in literary aspects and this represents an important reason that does not stimulate them to use it in the classroom.

From these reflections comes this experience put into practice in the subject *Contemporary Culture and Society of the Anglophone Communities*. As stated before, motivation for both teachers and students is necessary for the success of teacher innovation proposals and, in the case of literature, excitement and self-expression could replace fear and dread. This awareness helps in the construction of critical thinking and in this case, literature represents a way to transmit the culture of the society in which the language used in the texts is spoken (Valdes, 1986). Along the same lines, Collie and Slater (1987) believe that literature is a great source of cultural enrichment, so contact with literary texts written in another language brings us closer to the cultural aspects of a particular country and a particular society. When learning a foreign language, it is important to have not only a linguistic but also a cultural connection to understand and complete the communication process, as language and culture are two inseparable concepts.

One of the advantages that Collie and Slater (1987) describe regards "the learning process is essentially analytical, fragmented and, at the level of the personality, quite superficial" (Collie and Slater, 1987, p.7). Furthermore, the fact that the students, if involved in the text, focuses on its aspect that goes beyond linguistics or cultural diversity. When a literary work is written for a sufficiently long period of time, and through an active methodology, it produces in the reader a feeling of familiarity and, at times, that this sensation makes the writer feel part of the text. If the student feels involved in the construction of the knowledge of the story that the text tells and if he feels part of it if he feels part of the story or agrees in some way with the text. Once this connection between the reader and the text has been achieved, students will be

more motivated and, also thanks to the type of work done, their feelings and opinions on the text will be encouraged and will be able to express these emotions in English. demonstrating the vocabulary and grammatical aspects they have acquired. In addition to this, it can be said that literature “can help to stimulate the imagination, to develop their critical abilities and to increase their emotional awareness” (Lazar, 1993, p.19).

3. Short story genre: a didactic tool suitable for the classroom

Short stories represent, since, as Collie and Slater (1991) and Pardede (2011) affirm, they are practical texts which, thanks to their extension, are perfectly suited to the classroom. This brevity, coupled with increased plot intensity, also plays an important role in keeping the reader focused and nervous from first to last page (Hernández Lerena, 2014).

This genre, with its great variety of styles, themes, cultural and linguistic aspects, offers endless possibilities to invent a text suited to the interests and tastes of students. As stated earlier, the fact that these are short stories prevents students from feeling overwhelmed by the text and motivates them to read, understand and finish the story, giving students “a feeling of achievement and self-confidence” (Pardede, 2011, p.18). As for how to introduce the stories in the classroom, Lazar (1993) proposes a classification in which to divide the different activities with which the text will be worked. This organization is made up of three different groups: pre-reading activities, reading activities during and post-reading activities, which will be explained later in the didactic proposal of the work.

4. Italian Canadian short stories in the *Culture and society of the Anglophone communities* classroom through the flipped classroom strategy

Contemporary Italian Canadian short stories have recreated the lived experiences of Italian women who emigrated to Canada. Mostly based on real events, these writings unveil the different coping strategies deployed by Italian Canadian women and the ways in which they dealt with the complex process of settling into life in a new country.

Among the selected short stories I have chosen some written in English by four contemporary Italian Canadian writers, namely Delia de Santis, Caterina Edwards, Licia Canton and Rosetta Rosati. They describe the process of acculturation at four different stages in the lives of their protagonists.

The first story, “Coming of Age”, belongs to section II, Memoirs/creative non-fiction of the volume *People, Places, Passages: An Anthology of Canadian Writing* published in 2018 and it explores the experiences of a teenager who has just arrived in Canada. The second story, “Prima Vera”, belongs to the volume *The Island of the Nightingales*, a

collection of short stories by Caterina Edwards, published in 2000. It delves into the life of a young Italian woman who joins her husband in Canada and lives on to motherhood there. The third story, "Refuge in the Vineyard", belongs to the second collection of short stories Pink house and other stories, published by Licia Canton in 2018. It revolves around a woman who is fully integrated in Canada and who returns to Italy for a week, with her Canadian family, to visit her father. Finally, the fourth story, "Searching for Home", is part of a collection of short stories Maples and Chestnuts, by Rosetta Rosati published in 2017 and it depicts an older woman who leaves Italy as a child, lives for years in Canada and then returns to Italy.

Method

1. Participants

As stated above, this educational experience has been carried out with the 56 students of the Contemporary Culture and Society of the Anglophone Communities online subject, taught in the Bachelor's Degree in Spanish Language and Literature, at the University of Burgos.

2. Objectives

The experience described is based on the development of some of the skills described in the program of the subject.

- Knowledge of the English language, its variety and culture
- Knowledge of the cultures and societies of the English-speaking communities
- Critical and self-critical skills
- Ability to generate new ideas
- Ability to know how to use the tools offered by ICT
- Ability to know how to use the strategies offered by active methodologies.

3. Design and Procedure

In order to carry out this experience, the students were given an initial questionnaire in which their motivation, their prior knowledge of the subject matter and their knowledge of the flipped learning methodology used were measured.

After that as an introductory activity, the teacher made the detailed program of the topic available to the students and asked them to comment and ask for information. At the same time, the teacher established as an introductory activity three different forums to meet the expectations of the students on the one hand and to get to know their knowledge both of the literature of the United States and Canada in general and of the migration

literature written by Italian emigrant women. in Canada. Thanks to the participation of almost the whole group in the forum, the teacher realized that the students were very motivated and that they had a lot of desire and enthusiasm to start and learn, however, they had little time available as in most cases they were working students. So, she decided she had to do something to keep students' motivation high. Thanks to other parallel activities, the students were already used to working in groups so the teacher started the realization of the flipped classroom.

During the first phase of this experience, the teacher divided the 56 students into 14 different groups and asked them to watch 4 videos, previously edited by the teacher, in which she explained what to do, how to develop the project and how to proceed and deliver the final task. She also introduced the general topic of the Unit "Acculturation, adaptation and sense of belonging in women emigrants through Italian Canadian short stories" by uploading different readings by different women writers who had migrated from Italy to Canada for different reasons and in different periods since XX century until today.

After that, she asked them to ask questions in the fora, opened for this purpose and to start to build their knowledge on the topic in order to create a poster and presentation for each topic selected. Finally, she asked all groups to share the posters and presentations and to ask questions and comments about them.

After searching for the material and preparing the text, the students, in a group of four, used the wiki and created a text in it. In this way, the different texts were shared. Finally, in videoconferences in groups of four, they would present their work by using an infographic and commenting on it. For each thematic block developed, the type of activities proposed was varied to keep students' motivation alive. In this way, autonomous learning has been promoted, a form of learning in which students take responsibility, organize their work, acquire knowledge and assimilate it at their own pace (Rico Vercher and Rico Perez, 2004).

The students were actively involved in the research and selection of materials to work with; they felt responsible for choosing their own learning strategy as well as for their own progress; They became aware of meaningful learning and enjoyed the benefits of continuously working with the support of various different tools and colleagues. At the end of this experience, students were given a questionnaire on their perception of the flipped learning approach in the course. In general, they expressed that this approach of learning was very motivating, more effective and efficient. They felt more participative and active in the process of learning. They appreciated the flipped classroom strategy as a way to facilitate the understanding of the course topics and at the same time to strengthen the relationship with the rest of the classmates and

with the teacher as well. Some of them, in this sense, has underlined the importance of closer contact with the teacher and classmates, in the case of online teaching, which, thanks to the videos and their instructions, has improved and motivated them a lot.

4. Contextualization

The program of the subject was divided into two main blocks within which different themes were developed: on the one hand culture and society of the United Kingdom and Ireland and on the other the culture and society of the United States and Canada. One of the topics covered during the lectures was dedicated to Canadian literature and in particular to short stories written by Italian Canadian authors, born in Italy and moved to Canada during childhood. In the light of what has been described above, the students participated in the selection of the texts and authors to work on, since they were offered, also for the type of work done, different possibilities, titles and authors, explaining the topics that would be covered in each activity carried out. This type of selection was supported by other later authors who state that “one way to open new realities is to empower students by making them party to decisions about text selection” (Maley, 2012, p.307). In this way, students will choose the text they prefer best.

Results

At the end of the experience, a short questionnaire was administered to the participating students in order to assess its implementation, as well as the perception of future education professionals and the importance of this methodology as a teaching resource. The results showed that the flipped classroom is a useful tool for this target of students who, in general, felt satisfied with the learning experience carried out, and are convinced that this type of work, as future teachers of foreign culture languages, could help them to reach objectives related on the one hand to the deepening of literary and cultural knowledge and an in-depth study in the field of interculturality and on the other hand it facilitates in the pupils an improvement and motivation in terms of both oral and written production skills. They also greatly enjoyed sharing ideas, doubts and opinions and at the same time had to solve tasks and build knowledge. The obligation on the part of the teacher in which students prepare the class and present it was also assessed. Without realizing it, their motivation and desire to commit grew more and more as business development proceeded.

Conclusion

In light of these results, we can conclude that this experience was extremely positive for both the students and the teacher involved. Using the

flipped classroom has been found to significantly improve the way they learn. The effort required by the teacher was rewarded with the result of the implementation. All this convinced the teacher to adopt the flipped classroom strategies in future courses. It was an experience that everyone learned from. To conclude, it should be emphasized once again that the flipped classroom methodology, on the one hand, motivated the students in developing the tasks required by the teacher and, on the other hand, encouraged their active participation as it strengthened the exchange of views between students and between the teacher and the students. This experience has shown that this way of learning motivates students in online learning because modules are more practical and students feel part of them.

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