

**Innovation vs. Canonisation: Foreign Literature Content in the Algerian Degree of English**  
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**Abstract**

The present paper discusses the content of foreign literature syllabus in the frame of the Algerian university degree of English studies raising three questions: What are the goals that shape the design of the foreign literature syllabus? On which ground do canonized texts gain institutional interest? and What should be the profile of the syllabus designers? Not only did the investigation's findings reveal that the syllabus content does not take into consideration the student's future professional needs, but it also demonstrated that most teachers proceed to manoeuvre so as to cope with the students' expectations. Thus, the recommendations from this study are twofold: first, to develop a well structured theoretical frame able to reshape the goals of the foreign literature syllabus; second, to enhance a more beneficial result in teaching this literature.

**ملخص**

إنَّ أيَّ تحديد لمحتوى ما يدرّس بعيدا عن توقعات المتعلّم والمعلّم يجعل البرنامج مبنيا على أسس غير تربوية وغير هادفة. وفي هذا الإطار تعالج دراستي محتوى برنامج الآداب الأجنبية لدى طلبة الليسانس في اللّغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة الجزائرية انطلاقا من الأسئلة الآتية: ماهي أهداف هذا البرنامج؟ ما الذي يبرّر للمؤسسة تدريس النصوص الأدبية الأجنبية المقتنّة؟ وكيف يجب أن يكون ملمح مصمّم البرنامج؟ وعليه فإنّ توصيات هذه الدراسة تدعو إلى التركيز على الجانب النظري الذي يستوجب التسطير الهادف لبرنامج الآداب الأجنبية، ومن ثمة تيسير استيعابه.

**1-Introduction**

Before being an educational practice with internal research on important issues like method, syllabus, content, and material teaching, ELT practice remains government prerogative before being designers' one; a truth too often forgotten. A survey of the literature on ELT advances that the latter cannot be considered within the practice of the language solely, rather, it should be seen within a wider socio-cultural and economic context of its use; therefore, it remains an issue from which political interest and power cannot be removed. Referring to the thesis that no syllabus is *neutral* <sup>(1)</sup> (Freire, 1970; Candlin, 1984), the foreign literature syllabus content in the frame of the Algerian licence of English is, then, questioned. The presupposition is that the syllabus, necessarily, carries a heavy heritage of *cultural imposition* <sup>(2)</sup> which is primarily responsible of the ill-match between teaching and learning within ELT. The claim is that designers and practitioners of ELT should revise their orientations as Wikins (1976) advances: "The process of deciding what to teach is based on

considerations of what the learner should most usefully be able to communicate in the foreign language.” (p.19)

It is only after having placed the learner at the apex of their priorities that they could pretend at pedagogic effectiveness.

The present paper is an attempt to pin down the causes of the chronic difficulties that crop up in the transmission of knowledge in literature as it is taught in English at the university level in Algeria. As there are few supporting studies in the field (L.B.S.M, 2005), the present work will basically proceed from empirical observations<sup>(3)</sup>. It, therefore, raises the following questions:

- 1-What are the goals that shape the design of foreign literature syllabus?
- 2-On which ground do canonized texts gain institutional interest?
- 3-What should be the profile of the syllabus designers?

This reflection will progress as follows. It will start by a description of the university context in which foreign literature is delivered and the main objectives that shape the Ministry of Higher Education design of the syllabus. Then, it will unveil the prevailing myth over the teaching of canonical texts to non-natives of the literature. Third, it will attempt to profile syllabus designers' role for the genuine fulfilment of an educative mission. Finally, it will attempt to provide a set of suggestions along with examples on how each suggestion could be used effectively so as to bring over a positive change.

## 2- The System

All along the preceding eras, the Algerian university maturity and autonomy has been characterised by a set of drastic reforms<sup>(4)</sup> which aimed exclusively at quantity at the expense of quality. Therefore, as one of the major institutions whose contribution is unmeasured, the university priorities diverged from the noble objective of equipping young and fresh minds for intellectual challenge and scientific endeavour. On the contrary, a huge number of primary and secondary teachers were needed to confront the crisis thus more students were welcomed by Algerian Universities. (See Table 1).

1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2001	2004
1137	12243	57445	181350	466084	552804	700000

Source: Saad, M., Zawdie, G., Derbal, A., Lee, R., (2006). **Issues and Challenges arising from greater role of the university in promoting innovation in developing countries: a comparative study of experiences in Malaysia, Algeria and Ethiopia** available at [www.triplehelix5.com](http://www.triplehelix5.com).

However, time came where the Ministry of Education could no more afford the creation of new jobs for these young teachers. Their degree of teaching restrained their opportunities in the job market. Thus, in front of another obstacle that university did not expect and for which it did not have immediate solutions, it found itself obliged to direct the target of the degree from a licence of teaching to a licence of 'Arts & Foreign Languages'. Actually, no one is able, at least at the official level, to provide appropriate explanations concerning the major objective of this new licence. The Ministry of Higher Education has proceeded to a set of reforms at the level of the

syllabus and at their apex a removal of subjects devoted to the preparation of learners to the teaching domain. Instead, these same learners, fourth-year under-graduates then, are left the choice to read for a memoir in one of the subjects that calls for their interests<sup>(5)</sup>, and which, in fact, represents a quite interesting experiment in the research domain; yet, devoid of any practical use in the teaching domain. Therefore, learners are left in a vacuum, in a world full of unanswered questions and with a terrible uncertainty overshadowing their future professional life.

Moreover and in the frame of the continuous reforms generated by the Ministry of Higher Education, the latter seems to have neglected an important aspect of the licence which concerns the content to be taught. Being primarily concerned by the statistical aspect of the phenomenon, i.e. how many graduates university is able to produce a year, what to be taught in the modules that shape the licence has not welcomed much debate or initiative to stimulate learners to acquire knowledge. In deed, the fact that these contents correspond to the native learners' profile do not give right to syllabus designers to impose them on the non-native ones and qualify them as unavoidable pillars for the learning of a foreign language.

Put differently, the modules' contents, as issued by the Ministry, proceed neither to a diachronic nor to a synchronic evolution. It is very rare, for instance, to observe that teachers consult one another while dealing with the teaching of the same module over two different levels of the degree. Most often, teachers' lectures are the outcome of personal preferences- or rather their own whims- regardless of the direct usefulness of the content to be taught to the student. A lack of compatibility, of coherence and even of transition is noticed as hampering the student's final background.

Another crucial point seems also to be misunderstood by a great number of teachers while attempting to interpret the syllabus objectives. The official syllabus provides the teacher with generic views that most of the times seem to hamper the teachers' conception of their own syllabi. Moreover, the freedom offered to teachers renders them tyrant executors of the Ministry directions. Unfortunately, and in most cases, the teachers' freedom makes their laziness grow steadily. They, thus, repeat the same lectures year after year at such an extent that they succeed to learn them by heart therefore depriving them of any objectivity or intellectual status.

More strikingly is the way the Algerian student is taught the different modules of the licence. Each module is devoted room of its own, and therefore, it is not related to the other modules. Linguistics, for instance, a module of paramount importance and a subject much welcomed by learners, is conveyed independently from the other subjects. The failure to explain its utility in the understanding of the remaining parts of the degree reduces its worthy aspect.

In addition, the literature module does not seem to have any compatibility with the rest of the modules<sup>(6)</sup>. It is conveyed as a series of texts, be they novels or short stories or even poems, for the sake of language improvement. In most cases, these texts are approached thematically, as if another approach; let us say; theoretical is too pretentious for the learner's basic knowledge. Instead, the subject is filled with writers and poets' biographies or lists of personal publications. Hence, for a degree devoted to the acquisition of the other's entire being, the assessment of four years of literature is very meagre due to the triviality of the teachers' decisions, or more exactly their lack of righteousness.

In the frame of adjusting the Algerian university profile to the threatening world's demands, the Algerian government leaders were obliged to cope with change. Gradually, the change has spread overwhelmingly in our universities without being completely understood nor explained. The L.M.D. educative system is installing itself despite the reticence of a considerable number of teachers about its efficiency. The L.M.D system then, licence, master, and doctorate, is no more than an Anglo-Saxon system that aims before all at producing specialised graduates of English in very particular domains. With the advent of the world economy in the under-developed countries, English language has become an indispensable means of communication. Therefore, as a country which depends to a great extent on the international market, Algeria has quickly become conscious that implementing the Western educative system is necessary to cope with the world's standards. It, then, undertook a series of reforms which first affected the middle schools and second the lycées to finally reach university. No one can deny, however, that narrowing the profile of the future graduates and offering them the opportunity to be specialised in one field could be beneficial for the national economy, had it been implemented according to the standards and norms of the Western countries. Again, the Algerian university seems to use learners as laboratory rats for the fulfilment of a *utopia*, for, if the objectives have changed and aimed at a standardisation of degrees, the infrastructure, i.e. staff, equipment, the number of students and so on remain unchanged. It is very ambitious, one may venture to say, to pretend at a scientific emulation, had the latter considered the lamentable conditions in which the Algerian university is grounded.

At this point of reforms which care too much about the economic situation of the country, one can but confirm the former worries that have threatened the status of literature as a subject in the licence degree. Put differently, this new targeted profile of the licence seems to deepen the gap between the too pretentious aspects of literature teaching and the practical objectives planned for the improvement of the national economy. Whilst acknowledging these truths, a working understanding of what kind of texts are selected in the content of foreign literature syllabus is required.

### 3- The Myth of the Canon

Whether the genuine literary texts selected by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education fit the requirements and the competence of the Algerian learner is a question that remains, to my sense, unanswered and for which there seems to be no urgent preoccupation.

At first, Algerian syllabus designers seem to favour a chronological arrangement which provides an historical satisfactory perspective thinking that it best suits the students' way of

being acquainted with the foreign literature. In other terms, teachers are bound to respect the major literary movements which correspond to definite historical periods. For instance the syllabus of British literature is arranged as the following<sup>(7)</sup>:

-2<sup>nd</sup> year syllabus: from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; mainly 16<sup>th</sup> century drama, 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical poetry, and the rise of the Novel.

-3<sup>rd</sup> year syllabus: 19<sup>th</sup> century (The Victorian Literature)

-4<sup>th</sup> year syllabus: 20<sup>th</sup> century (Modernism and Post Modernism)

Yet, the results of such a selection are not satisfactory at all. The experience has proved that the response and the interaction with a contemporary novel or poem that often offers elements of identification is quite different from the response to a metaphysical 17<sup>th</sup> century poem by John Donne whose complexity of structures and ideas may not be understood at all, so, on what ground does the higher ministry prefer this historical categorisation while other arrangements; for instance, thematic or formalist could be more effective?

More dangerously is the arduous business of teaching literature across cultures, which actually requires from the agents of design not to minimise the cultural *impermeability* <sup>(8)</sup> of certain authentic texts for the foreign learners of different cultures. For instance texts which carry dominant themes in Western Literature like Greek myths, Oedipus myth, or others which foreground typical Christian notions of , let us say sin and guilt, lend themselves necessarily to rejection by readers brought in a culture of conservatism, abnegation, and denial of sensual experience. Thus, the Algerian learner who is constantly asked to empathise with the foreign literary text does not find elements of cultural analogy and may feel lost in front of such texts, as K.M.Osterloh points out:

Western language productions..... aim at the individual experience of the reader, and expect him to relate to the text's manifestations and react accordingly. This use of language is most difficult for the student from the Third World.(1986:46)

In spite of the existence of certain concepts that carry general consensus, one should not forget that values differ from one cultural group to another and thus Brian Harrison in *Culture and the Language Classroom*(1990: 52) claims that, “....overseas much English literature, if best approached at all, is best approached via something comparable in the local culture.”

Clearly, the mission of syllabus designers is of a paramount importance had they considered the expectations of the learners of a literature that is not theirs! In the following part of my discussion, I will demonstrate that the institution of the canon transcends the worthy value of literature to confront more urgent and practical demands.

The argument so far is that the body of literary texts that form the canon could be regarded as an institutionalised variety of interpretation. To this extent, we cannot do without a canon. This is confirmed by the fact that change in the canon is not autonomous, but it is rather due to influences external to literature. Whatever it may be, the canon is certainly not something given or eternal whose origin and nature cannot be sought. But who makes, changes, and maintains the canon?

Actually, the function is attributed to some groups of literary professionals whose practice has serious consequences for numerous communities. They represent institutions, power, and thus seem to have decisive influence in the process of forming the canon. On the one hand, it could be argued that the institutional perpetuation of the canonical texts is one possible explanation for the survival of eminent works such as those by Homer, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, or Dickens; however, other explanations should also be considered, especially when questions as: Why should we regard a canon formed by special community of professional as the only important one? Why are canonical texts passed on from one generation to another? find no immediate answer. Clearly, the canon appears to be subject to arbitrariness, and thus

this brings us to the conclusion that the selection of texts worth studying, the body of literature to be interpreted is itself the result of explicit or implicit rules, theoretical considerations, and value preferences which, in turn, can be described as a system beyond or within the objects in question, which, as a consequence, are no longer objects-in-themselves, but products of subjectivity, performed by interpretation.

What seemed to be an incarnate 'nature' turns out to be a pure construction... We now

know that the institution of art is, in the truest sense of the word, groundless.(in Miall, 2006: 92)

Overall, not surprisingly, even the canonical literary texts taught at universities are formed by the professional powers. Therefore, the canon gain the curricula and impose itself on the communities of education, regardless of the accessibility of "Great Works" by the learners of literature. The body of esteemed literary works, then, reflect, necessarily, high authority predominance as Shavit advances:

The dominant institution gains the mandate, which has nothing what-so-ever to do with 'poetic justice' nor with the question of the value of the texts...A text gains a high status not because it is valuable, but because ...someone has the political-cultural power to grant the text the status they believe it deserves. (1991: 233)

and this in turn, represents a danger; in that texts which are qualified as canonical are the result of theorists and critics' views at a particular moment of time and in a particular place. Yet, one should not forget that they have gained that status because they were responsible of a change in the period in which they appeared. Works of Dickens or Hardy, for instance, represents *avenues of emancipation* before being instruments of social change. According to Rose (in Miall, 2006: 14), these works have been canonised because they succeeded in enhancing the working class readers to see new worlds and recognise a common humanity in the figure of David Copperfield or Tess D'Urbervilles, and which in fact, empowered them to change their lives and the lives of those around them. Thus, the danger remains in the refusal to offer these texts another context of interpretation. Put differently, the learner of literature asked to interpret a Spencerian poem or a Shakespearean sonnet on the basis that the themes they convey are universal, and may lead themselves to accessibility even for the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner, is not a convincing argument. Love, hatred, revenge, and death represent universal themes but how about the socio-cultural context in which they were produced and canonised; and which is, in fact, far remote from the learners' one.

On the other hand, the canon could survive by renewing itself through being re-interpreted and re-experienced (Miall: 2006). New interpretations generally compete with extant rival views, suggesting widespread disagreement over what a given text "means".

This phenomenon argues against institutional determination of the literary canon, but the renewal of interpretation itself points to the need for continual repositioning of a given text in relation to contemporary historical and social conditions. Reinterpretation is thus a sign of the inexhaustible vigour of the canonical texts at issue, ".....a canon is not fixed, but can be extended, enriched, and modified." (Kalmâm,2008: 4) This brings us to an interesting point. The assumption that a text is part of the canon together with its interpretations, could lead other texts, which in some way resemble the first to be interpreted much more easily and so incorporated

into the canon. Innovation is attributed a place of experimentation at the expense of the survival of eminent works of literature. The issue at stake deserves more attention, especially if considering the agents of education struggling against the prevailing conservatism that dominates the syllabi of foreign literature. Most of the time, despite the fact that the curriculum is formed by professionals in power, those not in power, teachers then, often challenge this sort of canon and create their own canons, in which they disregard the obligatory readings as the most valuable works and what they read most is quite different from that canon.

### **3- Who should be Designers?**

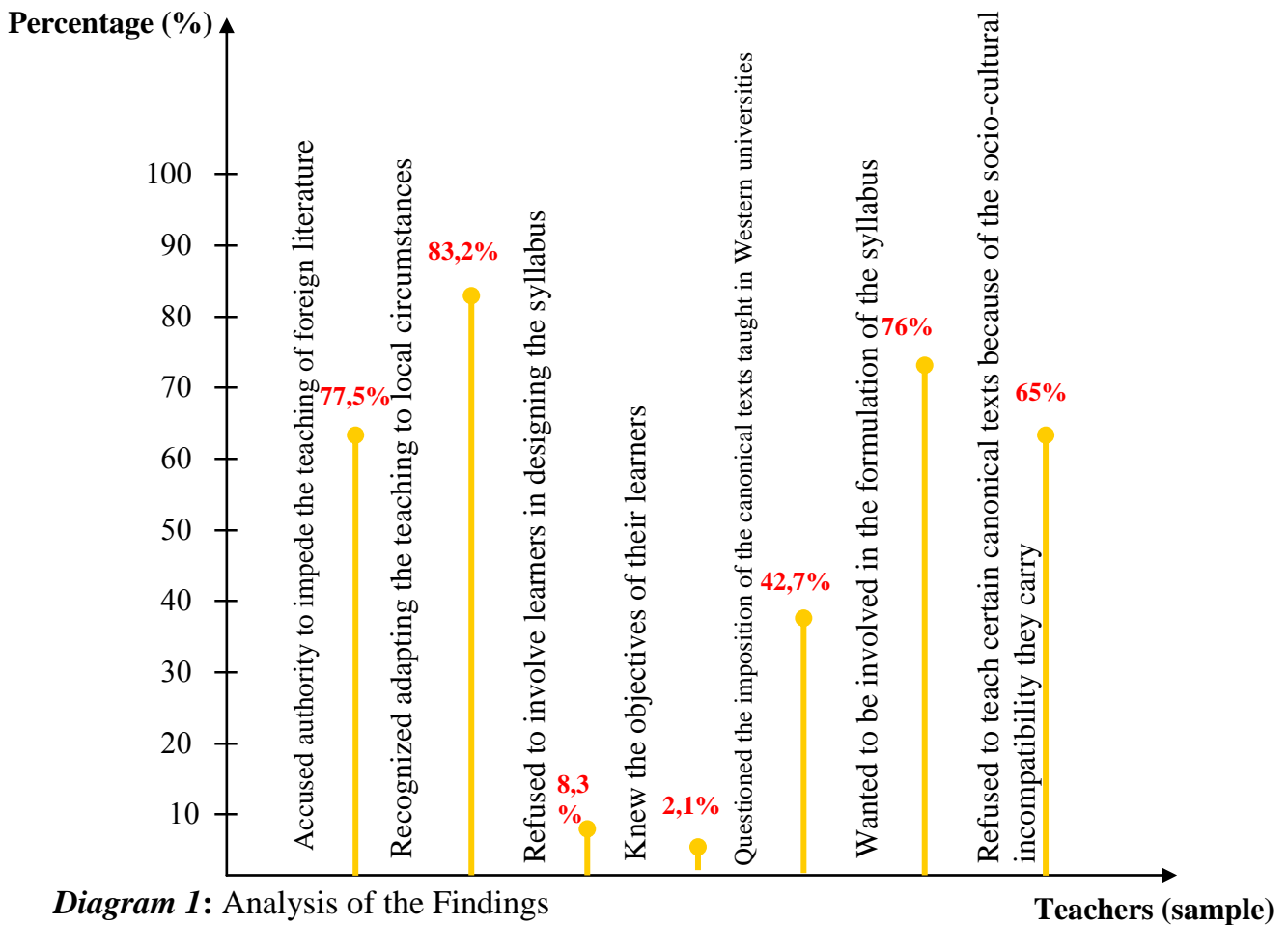
Altogether, the early part of my discussion has exposed a complex web of conditions surrounding the lack of effectiveness of the foreign literature syllabus in the Algerian degree of English studies, and the difficulty to maintain the teaching of canonical literary texts to non-natives of a language. Hence, I believe that the debate cannot be satisfactorily resolved unless there would be a closer analysis at the profile of those who are responsible of the design.

While it has been demonstrated that there are substantial problems in discovering what is more or less useful for learners, and that the notion of expert syllabus designer is necessarily indeterminate, we still are in the dark. In other terms, we are still in the vicious circle which requires from syllabus designers to go towards learners and learners to go back towards them. The hint so far is that there is an urgent need to make teachers and learners; the most concerned and the most subjective agents of design take part in the business of design.

Indeed, according to (Djafri: 2007), the marginalisation of the subject of foreign literature from the part of Algerian learners appears to be teacher-made. Had the teacher considered the objectives of the learners' professional carrier, she/he would have questioned the policy behind the syllabus design. However, it is easy to blame the teacher and accuse her/him of all the teaching failures, the latter is limited by the constraints of the official syllabus as designed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, another neglected truth which should urge educators to reconsider their priorities.

#### **3-a Questionnaire**

In the frame of the above worries, the present paper reports a small-scale study, undertaken as a preliminary investigation in university educational settings. Through the introduction of a questionnaire (See appendix 1) to 30 teachers of foreign literature from three universities of the West of Algeria, the findings have revealed that:



**Diagram 1:** Analysis of the Findings

### 3-b Discussion

The analysis of the finding (See Diagram 1) helped understand three main truths. First, it has been noted that despite the existence of an official syllabus designed by the authority and in which the teacher is asked to teach a particular kind of literary texts, canonical ones most of the time, the teacher often proceeds to manoeuvre so as he/she could adapt the syllabus according to local circumstances. While, in this particular frame, the teacher is regarded as an unproblematic agent of education helping a more appropriate delivery of the syllabus, he/she seems, on the other hand, unable to reshape the whole objectives of the degree. Therefore, and here I would join Hall (2000), what would be the necessity of imposing a syllabus if the latter is going to be altered and changed in ways not intended by the designer?

Indeed, the most striking revelation of the questionnaire lies in the fact that a great number of foreign literature teachers have manifested their desire to embark upon the adventure of designing their syllabi. They have seemed optimistic about the promising results that might be enhanced by their involvement in shaping the content of foreign literature teaching. More explicitly, they see in the disregard of power from the syllabus an opportunity to enrich the circle of exchange between cultures and facilitate their students' acquisition of knowledge. Yet, they also have showed poor information concerning their learners' future professional worries.

Finally, these same teachers, who seem to have shaped an expertise from the observation of their learners' worries, refuse to see them involved in the formulation of



their syllabi. Foreign literature teachers seem to deliberately perpetuate Freire's notion of 'bank' of education, where the traditional status of teacher and learner are maintained,

The teacher chooses the programme content, and the students adapt to it; the teacher chooses and enforces this choice, and the students comply; the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher thinks, and the students are thought about. (Freire, 1972: 46-47)

Apparently, there seems to be no room for innovation. The will to perpetuate the dichotomy teacher vs. learner rather than the reconciliation teacher *and* learner is in itself a canonisation that operates like an obstacle to the genuine transmission of a foreign literature.

### 3-c Prospects

Although the study is based on the analysis of a small number of data, I believe that the implementation of a powerful thesis of syllabus design would redefine knowledge, teaching, the teacher, education, and the purposes of education. It would also re-orient the objectives to take into consideration the requirements of young Algerian learners in the professional contexts. While the incompatibility between teaching and learning foreign literature at Algerian universities has been the outcome of a quantitative policy that does not take into account the quality of knowledge transmitted, there seems to be an urgent need to provide room for teachers and learners to negotiate (Candlin: 1984) in order to embark upon practical reforms. The reticence of teachers is to be overcome. I am aware, however, that my investigation operates within a narrow context of speculation; yet, I also believe it a *starting point* (Brumfit: 1984) for change.

### 4-Conclusion

My discussion started with the premise that no syllabus is *neutral*. I, then, discussed the policy behind the design of foreign literature syllabus in the Algerian degree of English studies and how the latter is purely government's prerogative. This involved analysis of the choice of literary texts taught and how canonical ones gain our university curricula despite the resistance of a considerable number of teachers. The last part of my investigation concerned the delivery of a questionnaire to 30 Algerian university teachers of foreign literature. The results demonstrated that the syllabus of foreign literature should be reshaped and thus redefined including the teacher as an active actor and the learner as a 'bank' of needs and requirements. It is our hope that the foreign literature delivery in Algerian universities will move beyond the level of theoretical suggestions of syllabus reform toward the implementation of an effective and innovative pedagogy, and as such would contribute to reattribute the subject the worthy position it used to have.

### Notes

- 1- The term "neutral" is borrowed from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972).
- 2- I am borrowing the word from Graham Hall which refers to the deliberate imposition of cultural values on the learners claiming them as vehicles of modernity.
- 3- This work is supported along with materials gathered from a personal experience of teaching British literature to Algerian university learners and from the analysis of the programmes as issued by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research in Algeria.

4-1971: the first reform, 1975-1976, 1984, 1987: « restructuration » of modules. Literature, linguistics, civilisation and T.E.F.L.: these subjects were transformed to entities which inferred an administrative framework and “le C.P.C. par matière” stated, thus, their autonomy from the remaining subjects.

5- In a recent research ( Djafri:2007), it was demonstrated that only 5% of undergraduate students from the university of Mostaganem, Algeria, read for memoirs in literature( be it American or British), as opposed to 35% reading for mémoires in linguistics and 33% in American history.

6- In the present syllabus, only 6, 2% of the total amount of the weekly teaching load is covered by literature and this is throughout the whole syllabus spanning over four years. (Cited in L. B. S. M.: 2005, p.34)

7- The official syllabus of British Literature as issued by the Ministry of Higher Education shows the above chronological arrangement.

8- I am borrowing the word *impermeability* from Harrison(1990:47).

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Appendix 1

TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is designed to bring to the fore the importance of reconsidering the policy behind the design of foreign literature syllabus in the frame of Algerian Licence of English studies.

Instructions: Please answer the following questions by putting a cross in the appropriate space whenever necessary.

1-Do you find difficulties in teaching foreign literature to your students?

Yes.....
No.....

2- Do you teach according to the official syllabus as designed by the Ministry of Higher Education?

Yes.....
No.....

3-What do you think about it?

.....
.....
.....

4- Do you see the official syllabus fitting the learners' expectations?

Yes.....
No.....

5- What do you think about the literary texts imposed on you by the official programme?

.....
.....
.....

6- Have you ever wondered about your learners' future objectives?

Yes.....

No.....  
.....  
.....

7- Have you ever proposed texts of your own readings and critical thinking?

Yes.....  
No.....  
.....  
.....

8- Have you ever dropped certain texts because you find them unsuitable to your learners' objectives?

Yes.....  
No.....  
.....  
.....

9- If you have already proceeded to personal manoeuvre, do you think that it is part of your prerogative?

Yes.....  
No.....  
.....  
.....

10- Do you believe that agents of design are usually the appropriate persons? Explain

Yes.....  
No.....  
.....  
.....

11- Do you think it is important for teachers of foreign literature to be involved in the design of syllabus?

Yes.....  
No.....  
.....  
.....

12- Do you think that you should involve your learners in the design of their syllabus?

Yes.....

No.....  
.....  
.....

13- Do you think that it is possible to reach reconciliation between the literary texts taught and the professional objectives of your learners?

Yes.....  
No.....  
.....  
.....