Learning How to Learn Through Literature - A classroom experience

Dalila ZEGHAR
Département d'Anglais, Université Alger 2

Introduction

I learned my profession while I began practicing it. I was asked to teach a program and just do it. Intuition has been my first guide. But teaching English language skills and the teacher training in Delaware University helped me a lot in dealing with the whole and move step by step in my learning how to teach. Albert Jacquart shows how teaching and learning are intimately related :

> Pour bien pénétrer un domaine scientifique le plus sûr moyen est d'écrire un livre sur le sujet. Un autre moyen est d'enseigner ; tous les professeurs en ont fait l'expérience, l'obligation d'expliquer est la meilleure incitation à l'effort nécessaire de comprendre[26].

However, I came to realize that the study of English as a second language or a discipline such as literature were not students' main problems. The real problem was at the level of learning how to learn. Teaching literature or any other discipline should begin where the students' needs stand as their difficulties are not related to a particular discipline but to learning in general due to a systematic fragmented vision of knowledge. A more learner-centred approach related to "a cooperative reflective teaching" and its necessary interrelation with "a cooperative reflective learning" may lead to a solution. In their constant interactions with others in class, they may develop autonomy in thinking and create with pleasure learning strategies to reach a global vision of themselves and thus of the world

Various readings (often related to The Methodologies in Teaching English Language) helped develop my thinking about teaching relating it to students' cooperative learning in classroom. My teaching of literature is the field of learning practice experienced in/out classroom. The aim is to show that literature does not exist by itself, isolated from the world: its meaning is strengthened through its links to other disciplines such as linguistics, sociology and history. Students' difficulties in class are the starting point of our reflections and our objectives. Their reactions will lead to a collective reflection. Here is a diagram which shows what happens in an ideal situation for a development in teaching and learning:

First diagram: **T** stands for **Teacher** and **L** stands for **Learner**

---
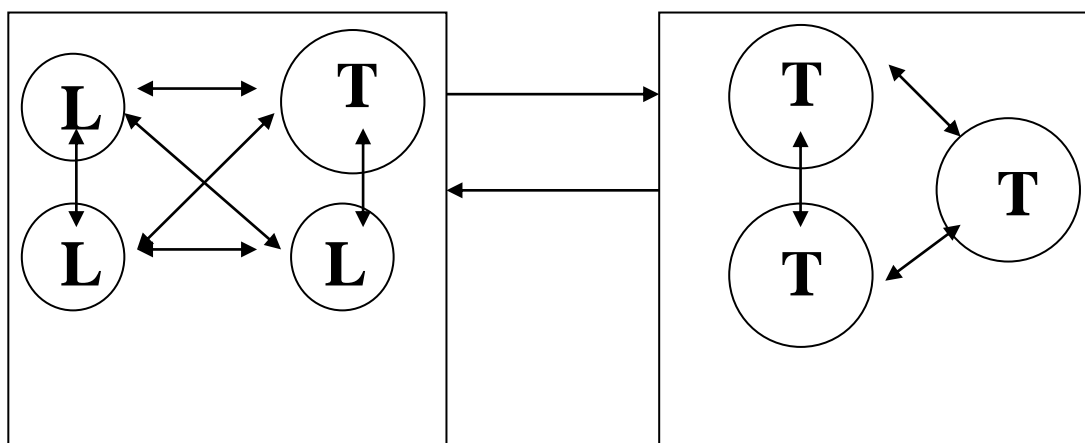
[26] Albert, Jacquart, Idées Vécues, 1989, p. 113.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING   COOPERATIVE TEACHING

1. On the one hand, we have the Teacher reflecting on teaching with other teachers.
2. The same teacher reflecting on learning with learners and then, learners reflecting with each other on Learning.

1. Planning For Learning

Michael J Wallace proposes a model for Teachers' Education at the core of which is a process of reflection on professional action and development. He calls the model "the reflective cycle" and shows increased professional development and competence. The process of professional development varies from one person to another for we all have our own different kinds of professional experience, knowledge, background and expertise. Strengths and needs may also vary[27]. Wallace calls teachers' reflection on their profession "action research": it arises from some specific problem or issue in professional practice. The teacher, without becoming a researcher, finds ways to continue develop as a teacher, using "action research" as a tool in this process: an effective method for improving professional action of individuals or small groups. Through the building of motivation, teachers are able to reflect on their teaching through action research and create case studies in order to find solutions to problems they may meet in class. Moreover, through sharing
experience, teachers build competence and confidence. The aim is to learn how to implement communicative approach in the classroom (p.62). The case study proposes various techniques such as observation, questionnaire interview and verbal report (p. 160). It is done by systematically collecting data on everyday practice and analysing it in order to come to some decisions about what future practice should be. His proposition is relevant to the development of research skills not only among teachers but also among learners.

Second diagram: **The Reflective Cycle for Teachers**

---
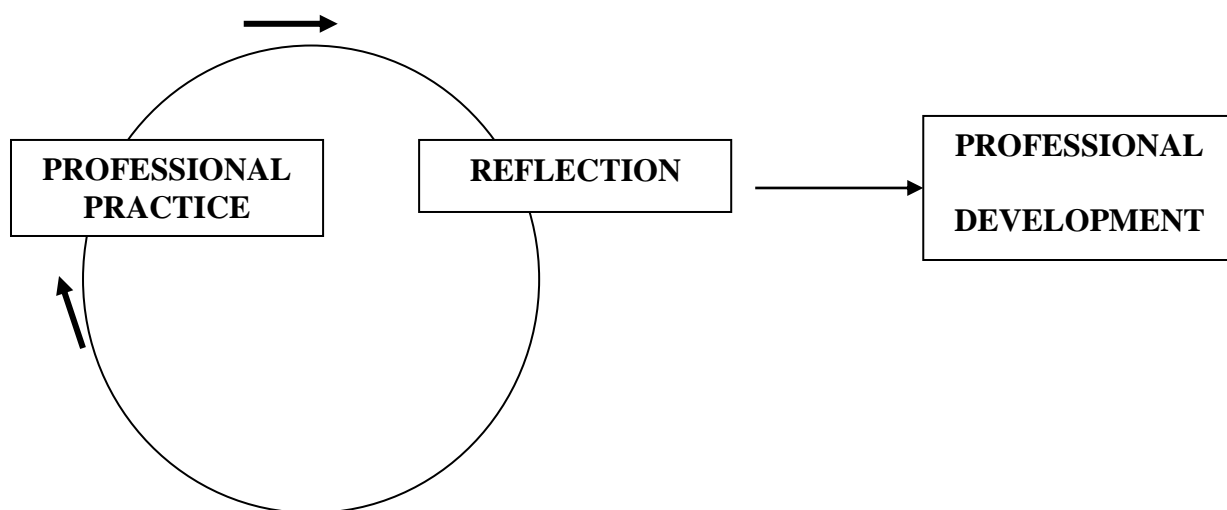
[27] Michael J Wallace. Action Research for Language Teachers , 1998 , p. 14 (diagram).

The professional practice, when reflected, will lead to professional development.
What if we adapt the model, **the Reflective Cycle, to learners'** development ? It appears as such :
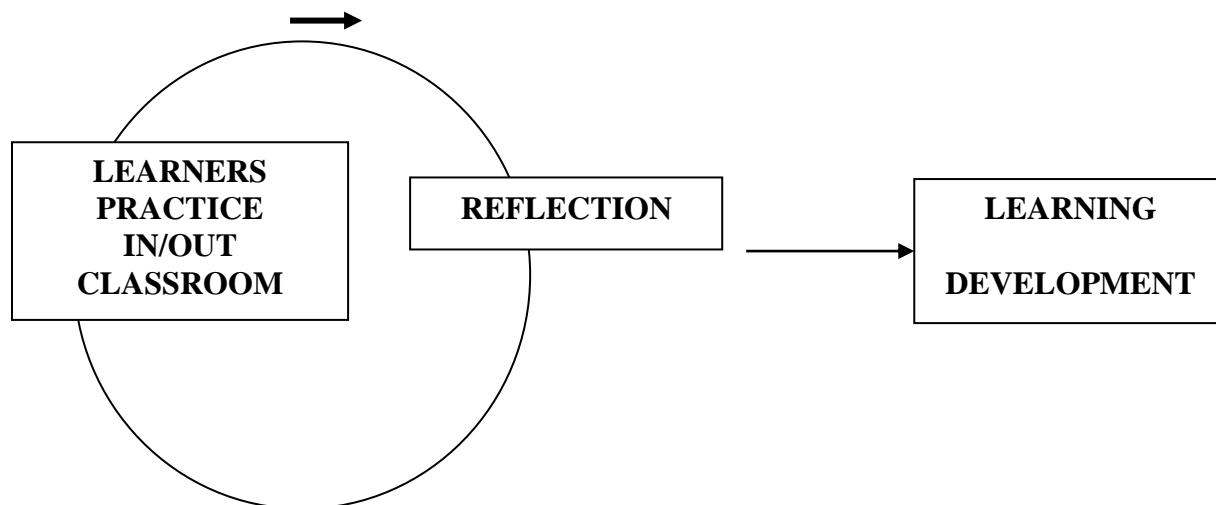

Finally, the learners' practice in and out classroom, when reflected, will lead to learning development. This model can help all of us be more effective in teaching and learning strategies.

2.1. Teacher's discourse of success and students motivation.

Jeremy Harmer points out that what students need most is motivation[28], a very important factor to achieve successful learning. However, he insists on the importance of teacher professional development as a condition which leads to change (p.344-350). He stresses the humanistic approach which takes into account the variety of students' personality (p.90). He adds that instead of pointing out their failures which very often create anxiety and a lack of confidence, students should be encourage to know how to use their capacities to learn consciously through activities. These activities should be achievable and helpful in the finding of solutions to some problems. Students, who learn how and why to integrate knowledge, feel free to accept or reject it thanks to their self-awareness in thinking, self-esteem and self-confidence. He proposes that in managing classes, "students' Grouping" is necessary (p. 114-124). Here is the third diagram: **Group Work: T (teacher), L (learner).**

---

[28] Jeremy Harmer, The Practice of English Language Teaching, 1982, p. 51-53.
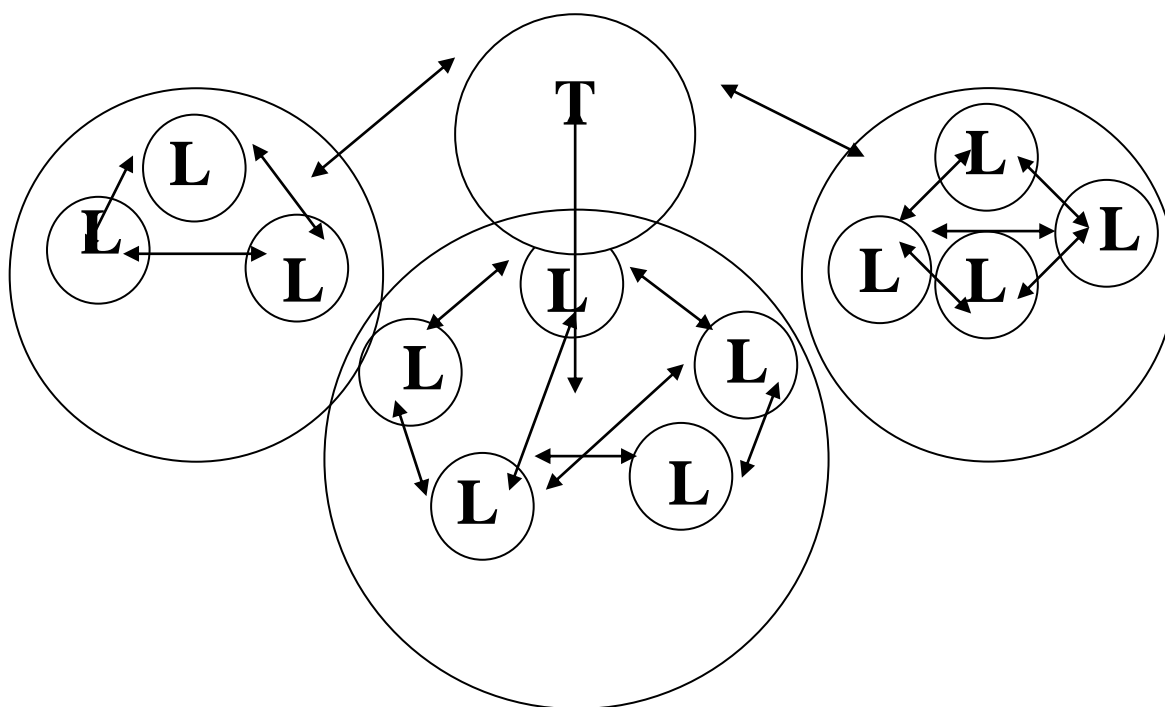
2.2 Material Tools: Work Organization

To make students' learning effective, I propose a material planning first for it helps in building up knowledge about how students learn and make progress. They are asked to have three (03) copybooks: one for lectures on literary theory, one for literary texts analysis and one for homework research. The program of the year is given with a bibliography to be used as a reference. Lectures are typed and distributed. They are asked to think of Regular Presence in class in order not to disturb Cooperative Group Work. To humanize their relationships, to develop their sense of community, they are also asked to create Groups of Work (03, 04 or 05 students). Through the help of Teacher and through students' own reflection on their learning or others' learning will help them build Confidence and Competence: The more they question their way in learning objectives, the more they can question their teacher's teaching and come with new propositions, new ideas to enhance the classroom atmosphere. What makes teaching and learning interesting is their dialectical relationship which creates movement. If this relation is absent, there is no personal development, no pleasure.

3. Literary Texts and Learning Strategies through Reading and Writing

The first step is to have a discussion about their learning of "Reading habits" and reading for pleasure to make them aware of their strengths and needs! Extensive reading is reading in general and is different from academic reading. Stephen D. Krashen shows how "extensive reading" develops other skills such as writing, oral, listening and spelling. He says: "Reading is the only way we become good readers"[29]. Richard R. Day and Julian Bomford have introduced the affective dimension of the reading process of extensive reading. They think that in research little concern is given to affective variable such as "attitude" and "motivation" in learning to read a second language. Teachers often stress "the tangible, concrete aims of

---

[29] Stephen D. Krashen, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, 1982, p. 38.
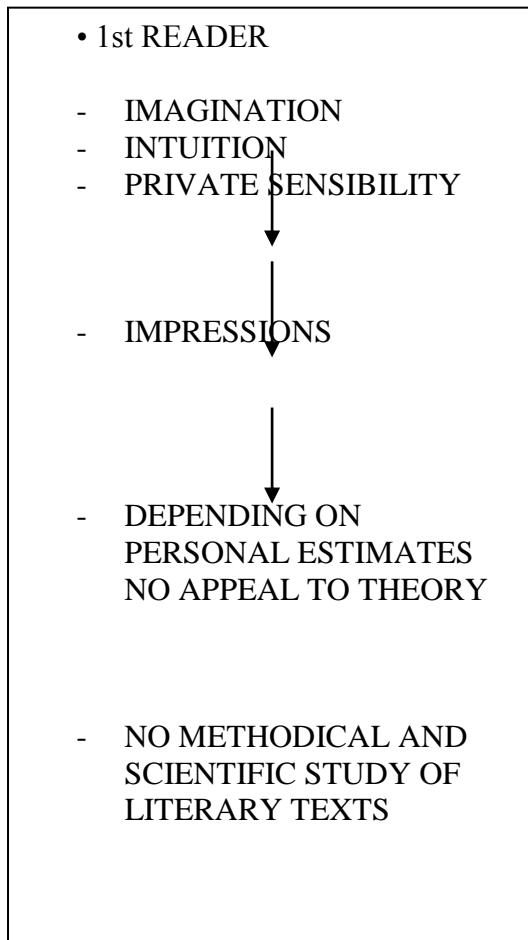
the heading of the course"[30]. In our case, the teaching of literature imposes extensive reading as a necessary tool. The affective dimension is the students understanding of the difference between reading for pleasure and academic reading: reading for pleasure helps to an easy integration of academic reading in literature. Subject teaching involves not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of the ability to think and reason. Students develop the ability to be "critical" of what they read. A bibliography is given to students and discussed through these questions: What is it? How to use it? And why is it useful? The aim is to be able to read not only primary bibliography (ex: A play by W. Shakespeare, a novel by Charlotte Bronte) but also learn how to read critical texts in order to enter into the world of literary theory where they can be initiated to research. Just show me how to do it! Thus, to avoid difficulties in understanding and in taking notes in English, lectures are typed and distributed to students. Students read silently and thus learn how to concentrate, to reflect and be conscious of their intuitive personal strategies in learning (from their learning background). At the beginning of the academic year, this reading experience lasts 15 to 20 mn. Then, step by step, students will show more autonomy for the reading will be naturally prepared at home. They will come with their own understanding which will be compared to other students' reading in their group. Through their questions and answers, they will practice critical thinking and be able to find methods or procedures to organize knowledge. Then, I study the literary text with them and test their comprehension through questions and oral answers. They may not integrate the "how to do it" easily, but step by step, they are more and more expressing their needs. They are naturally calling for their intuitive abilities and learning strategies while they are on the process of building their understanding.

Writing skills is a necessary practice to show their abilities to assimilate and reformulate their knowledge. My aim is to teach them how to use writing in their learning. They practice their understanding through short summaries, paraphrasing, or outlining. Their propositions are good but they show the lack of method, of building a mental structure which could make assimilation easier. Students need a lighter, synthetic and systematic form of learning which can help their assimilation and reformulation of knowledge. Writing exercises including methods of understanding and building order in ideas related to the topic of the lecture are given to students. Here is a fourth diagram: an example of the building of two (02) semantic groups in the definitions of subjective and objective literary critic in criticism from a theoretical text given to students.
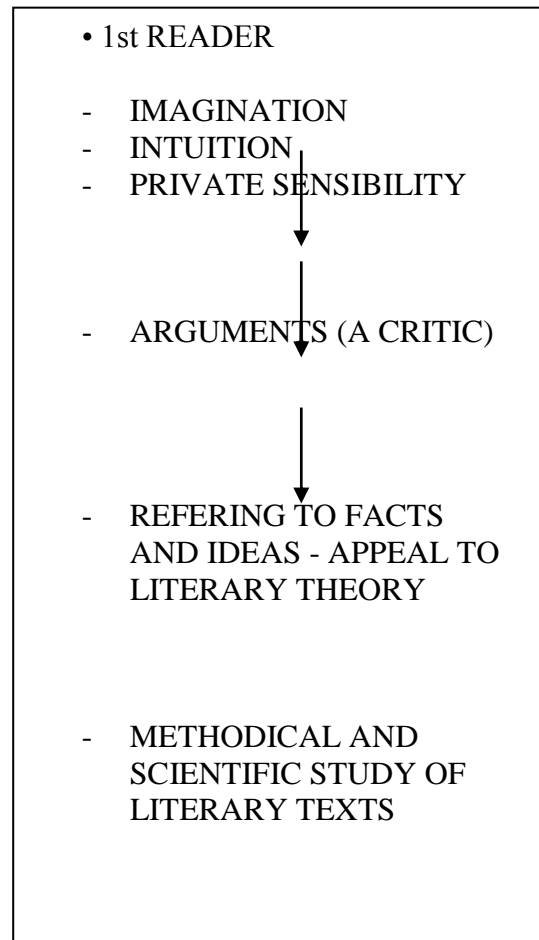
---

[30] Richard R., Day and Julian, Bomford, *Extensive reading in Second Language Reading*, 1998, p. 21.

SEMANTIC GROUPS

SUBJECTIVE CRITIC	OBJECTIVE CRITIC
• 1st READER	• 1st READER
- IMAGINATION	- IMAGINATION
- INTUITION	- INTUITION
- PRIVATE SENSIBILITY	- PRIVATE SENSIBILITY
↓	↓
- IMPRESSIONS	- ARGUMENTS (A CRITIC)
↓	↓
- DEPENDING ON PERSONAL ESTIMATES NO APPEAL TO THEORY	- REFERING TO FACTS AND IDEAS - APPEAL TO LITERARY THEORY
- NO METHODICAL AND SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF LITERARY TEXTS	- METHODICAL AND SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF LITERARY TEXTS

Then, the other exercise is to draw other diagrams on other texts. The drawing of the semantic group is the explanation of a diagram and how useful it is? This method attracted their attention because it called for their creativity and freedom to propose their personal way of thinking in building learning strategies through their diagrams which summarize their asking questions and finding answers, their planning of ideas and their mutual monitoring in Groups.

4.   Learning Theoretical Approaches in Literature Through Concepts from other disciplines

Before using literary theory, students have to read and understand literary texts. They have to assess the quality of their diagrams related to their good reading, good understanding and good capacities in assimilating and reformulating ideas. Then their discovery of theoretical concepts will show them that literature is based on the following fundamental principle: all disciplines may be interrelated. This non fragmented approach to knowledge help them build up thinking skills.

4.1. Definitions of Concepts (Tools) From Linguistics

The notion of "structure" and that of "totality" from linguistics are at the basis of the structuralist approach. Students integrate these notions through the structural study of a literary text: how is it structured? Why is it structured this way? The study of literary devices is expressed through a literary context and terminology.

It is necessary to know how to read, understand and analyse the structure of a text considered as a self-contained universe. Every element of the study is dealing with the inside text only. Thus, the structuralist approach is necessary but not sufficient because it does not relate the text to a wider context, a socio-historical context for a wider meaning.

4.2. A Socio-historical Approach: From Structure to Beyond (use of other concepts)

Literature is not only made of structures but of ideas which relate texts to history. Comparative literature and its methodology show us how to make links between other disciplines (such as history, sociology, linguistics, epistemology). Thus, students learn more than literature, they learn a building process of integrated knowledge which will develop their prior knowledge.

The socio-historical approach uses concepts such as ideology, hegemony (Antonio Gramsci), history (Frederic Jameson), historicity (Marc Angenot), chronotope (Mikhaïl Bakhtine) and the concept of totality (Lucien Goldman)[31]. Students understanding of the socio-historical approach lead them to make liaisons between themselves (as first readers and objective critics) with text and socio-historical context (society and history). Here is the example of the play "King Lear" by William Shakespeare. The text is structured (structure of literary devices) in a way which calls for the socio-historical context where the hegemony is the dominating mercantilism letting Feudalism behind. Shakespeare is a realistic writer because he is able to show the socio-historical movement but his ideological position remains conservative because he refuses the coming mercantile values. His vision of history is pessimistic: death dominates the play.

Conclusion

Thus, through their thinking development, students learn to be autonomous and situate themselves in relation to their own culture and their own history. This is where literature becomes a pleasure because those who practice it are not excluded. Both their background knowledge and their developing vision of the world are expressed. They have reached a high level of autonomy and intellectual maturity to become "Happy Researchers". Students understand that what is essential is to discover. They learn to understand that to attain knowledge, there are important rules to follow; one of them is the exploration of difficulties. Knowledge is a long walk whatever is the path; what is important is to walk. And that whenever there is a human role to play, when enthusiasm, generosity and other human values can be developed and shared, we can reach a learning, a teaching for pleasure.

---

[31] Abdelhamid, Zoubir, Mouaouia, Bouabdallah, Fatiha, Hamitouche, Safia Boushaba and Dalila, Zeghar, *Samples and Analyses of United States Literature*, 1997, p.22-29.

Bibliography

1. Angenot Marc. *Pratique de la Critique Contemporaine.* Montréal: Hurtubise, 1978.
2. Bakhtine Mikhaïl, *Esthétique et Théorie du Roman.* Paris: Gallimard, 1978.
3. Day Richard R. & Bamford Julian, *Extensive Reading in the 2ⁿᵈ Language Classroom.* Cambridge: CUP, 1997.
4. Gramsci Antonio, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*. New-York: International, Publishers, 1980.
5. Grellet Françoise, *Developing Reading Skills*. Cambridge: C.U.P, 1999.
6. Harmer Jeremy, *The Practice of English Language Teaching.* Cambridge : Longman, 2001.
7. Jacquart Albert, *Idées Vécues*. Paris: Flammarion, 1989.
8. Jameson Frederic, *Criticism in History in: Weapons of Criticism: Marxism in America and the Literary Tradition.* Palo Alto, P.U.P 1970.
9. Krashen Stephen D., *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Pergamon Press, 1982.
10. Kral Thomas, *Teacher Development. Making the Right Moves.* Washington: OELP, 1999.
11. O' Mally Michael, Uhl Chamot Anna, *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: CUP, 1996.
12. Randal Mick with Thornton Barbara, *Advising and supporting teachers.* Cambridge Teacher Training and Development. Cambridge University Press, 2003, (2001).
13. Willis Jane, *A Framework For Task-based Learning*. Addison Wesley Oxford : Longman Limited, 2000.
14. Zoubir Abdelhamid, Bouabdallah, Mouaouia, Hamitouche, Fatiha, Boushaba, Fatiha and Dalila, Zeghar, *Samples and Analyses of United States Literature,* OPU, Alger, 1997 (1991), p. 22-29.