MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES IN TEACHING LITERATURE

MONICA OPRESCU, FLORIN OPRESCU

University of the West, Timişoara

Abstract: Discussing the conventional teaching of literature versus an alternative one, a new viewpoint is brought by Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1983). Considering that we have different ways of increasing knowledge, of learning, we thought of a way of developing these intelligences through literature: the practical approach refers to literary texts studied from all these perspectives.
Key words: alternative teaching, conventional teaching, literature, multiple intelligences.

1.Background

Literature methodologists have gathered a multiplicity of reasons for teaching literature, as expressed by Showalter (2003), Carter & Long (1991), Mc Rae (1991), Bassnett & Grundy (1993), McKay (2000): literature is meant to moralise, civilise, humanize; it transmits moral values and offers spiritual guidance; it enriches cultural knowledge; it is an explicit political act, a mode of conscious raising, a branch of philosophical inquiry. But literature is more than that, as Showalter (2003:24) states: "all of us who teach literature believe that it is important not only in education but in life".

Literature reflects the image of a society at a certain point, sublimating reality, a community being represented by the fundamental literary texts that make up its cultural heritage. The connection has been analyzed several times from the perspective of the literary canon: the set of distinctive principles that are the basis of the literary canon can be seen from the perspective of social values. This could be noticed especially in the evolution of the literary studies at the end of the last century when we notice an opening perspective of literature towards other territories.

The conventional study of literature involves the use of traditional methods, based on the reading of the text and its interpretation. The texts used are mostly canonical ones, the issue of the canon rising a debate on the chosen texts. The literary canon (Bloom 1994) is generally defined as a set of standards, general aesthetical rules, which distinguish and set a corpus of literary texts that marked the history of literature. The disagreement regarding the necessity of a literary canon arises from the desire to overthrow values, to deny tradition, to redefine the

present in terms of the "new". This generated, in the second half of the 20th century, a new aggressive conflict, such as the one between modern and traditional, between the post-structuralist supporters of cultural studies and the traditional supporters of aesthetical value.

Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, but, especially in *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages* (1994), sees the roots of the canon in the ideological revolutionary context of 1968, whether French or American. Setting a body of literary texts, building the canon, is one of the important issues regarding the teaching of literature.

Another important issue refers to the actual approaches used, the methods that teachers employ in order to rise the students' interest and motivation. Therefore, we can distinguish theories in the didactics of literature, balancing between tradition and modernity, involving the use of canonical texts or not, centering on the teacher or the student. According to Showalter (2003) there are four types of theories that refer to the teaching of literature:

1.1. *Subject centered theories* represent traditional approaches to teaching literature. They are also called "transmission theory of teaching", based on transferring information from the teacher to the student, focusing on the content proposed.

1.2. *Teacher centered theories* are called the performance approach to teaching, focusing on the teacher. They are conventional and traditional, stressing the instructor's speaking and acting abilities, along the intellectual ones.

1.3. *Student centered theories* are modern approaches, based on active learning. The emphasis is on the learner, the techniques used being the dialogue, problem solving, shifting from the teacher to the student.

1.4. *Eclectic theories* are modern approaches, a mixture of all theories. They involve the use of modern and traditional techniques, but the final touch is a modern one, as the focus is still on the student.

Whereas traditional theories believe in uniformity, transmitting the content in the same way, modern approaches, such as student centered theories or eclectic ones, focus on individuality, personality, variety. It is a perspective common to many educational approaches today, one of them being Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Even tough it is not an educational theory, but a psychological one; it has been applied in many educational situations. Gardner himself pleads for the personalisation of the content, teaching it in various ways, as we have different personalities and different types of intelligences. It is an alternative perspective, a pluralist view on the mind, leading to a pluralist view on education, which should be based on the individual, should consider the multiple intelligences in teaching and learning.

Linking didactical theories of teaching literature to psychological ones, adopting a modern perspective, focusing on the student, introducing multiple intelligences in teaching literature could become a way of motivating students, convincing them to approach a literary text in a personalized manner and, therefore, more successful.

2.Practical approach

2.1.Purpose of study

The aim of the study is to adapt literature to students' personalities, teaching it through different activities devised according to different intelligences, personalizing the content, making it adaptable to all types of learners (reading and interpreting, dramatizing, categorizing, analyzing stylistically).

"I'd like to see an erosion of the boundaries between literary criticism and creative writing, between teaching and acting, between the abstract ethics of theory and the real ethical and moral problems involved in teaching material that raises every difficult human issue from racism to suicide. Graduate training in PhD should include training in pedagogy, and also in acting, performance and writing. Teachers should read contemporary literature, go to the theatre and movies, watch television, write in all forms and reflect on how all these activities contribute to what we do in class." (Showalter 2003: viii)

Starting from this theoretical background, our paper aims at finding an answer to the following questions:

- Could literature be taught according to the multiple intelligences' theory?
- Will students be interested in different types of activities, adapted to their personalities?
- Will this type of approach suit them better than a traditional one, which proposes just one type of activity for the whole class?

2.2. Participants and methodology

A group of 40 students in the 2nd year, Romanian and English, Faculty of Letters, West University of Timişoara participated in the study. The qualitative methods used were the experiment (which consisted in introducing new, modern activities for teaching literature based on multiple intelligences theory), students' feedback, observation and retrospection.

2.3. Stages

The first stage of the process consisted in giving the students the necessary information related to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, discussing it and asking the participants to

discover, through introspection and observation their own types of intelligences. Following Gardner's instructions, we did not use tests to determine a certain type, but qualitative methods mentioned above (introspection and observation). All the participants were able to determine several intelligences they had and identify, a dominant one.

The selection of texts and creation of the activities was the next stage, which involved the answer to an important question: What type of texts should we choose: canonical ones or not? The texts chosen were canonical ones, Virginia Woolf - *Mrs. Dalloway* , Oscar Wilde - *The Importance of Being Earnest,* Oscar Wilde - *De Profundis*, R. Frost - *Fire and Ice,* Edgar Allan Poe - *The Raven,* as we consider them fundamental texts, necessary for any students' background. The types of activities were designed according to the intelligence meant to be developed, therefore the texts were chosen accordingly:

- The first activity aimed at increasing the *verbal-linguistic intelligence*, as it was a creative writing activity. The students were asked to read R. Frost's poem *Fire and Ice* and create their own poem on the same theme and with the same title.

- *Logical-mathematical intelligence* was developed through a task that involved the use of charts in order to order different elements: participants were asked to read an excerpt from Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* and categorize the stylistic devices in a chart (epithets, metaphors, and personifications).

- *Spatial intelligence* was connected with an activity that involved the graphical representations of a literary text. Students had to read a fragment from Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven* and draw the image suggested.

- The fourth task referred to *kinaesthesic intelligence* and concerned the acting of a theatre piece. Participants were asked to read and then interpret a fragment from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest.*

- *Musical intelligence* was connected with rhythmic speech: the task was to read a stanza from Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven* in a rhythmic manner.

- *Intrapersonal intelligence* was developed through diary writing. Students had to write a diary page starting from the fragment taken from Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*.

- The last activity was meant to increase the *interpersonal intelligence* and for that purpose we proposed project work. Starting from Robert Frost's poem *Fire and Ice,* participants were engaged into making a project representing the apocalypse.

2.4. Findings and discussions:

The intelligences of the 40 participants were distributed in the following way: intrapersonal intelligence -12, verbal linguistic intelligence -10, interpersonal intelligence – 9, musical intelligence – 4, logical mathematical intelligence – 3, kinaesthesic intelligence – 2.
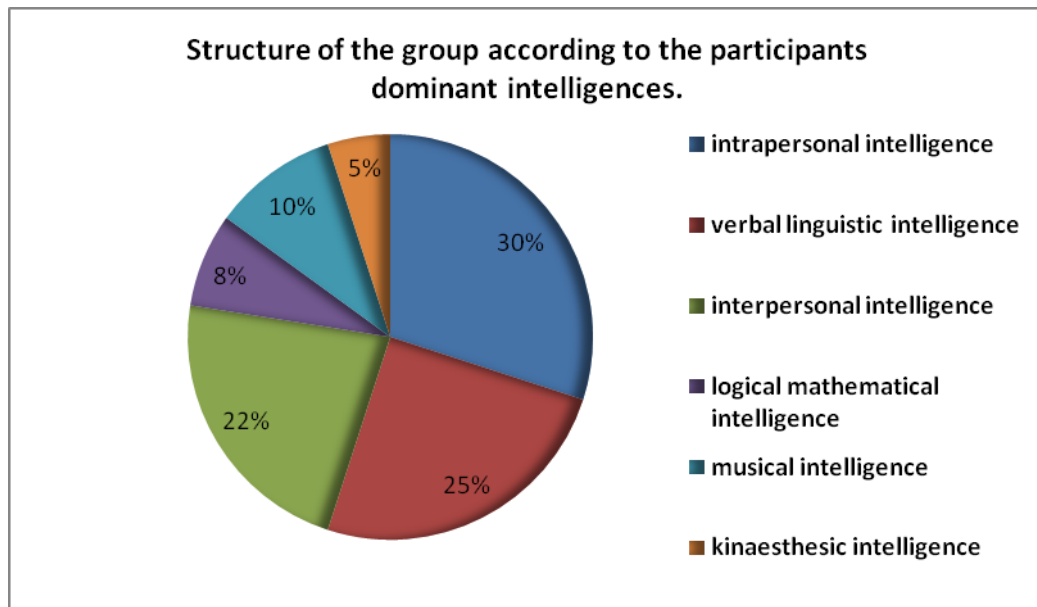
The feedback and our observation techniques gave us the following results: students completed their tasks successfully and considered them appropriate for their type of intelligence and appreciated the qualities of their activities, as imaginative, creative.

Nevertheless, there were few students (4 out of 40) who misjudged their type of intelligence, realising it afterwards. They even asked for a test to determine their type of intelligence, an element Gardner finds irrelevant, suggesting observation instead.

The musical and kinaesthetic tasks were considered the most entertaining and appreciated by the other students, as well. Interpersonal learners judged the task interesting, a good opportunity to express their thoughts, a liberation.

Here are some of the students' opinions:

- "From my point of view it is easier to remember what the text was about and the activity instils in a different way in your memory."

- "I liked this task because I think it fits my type of intelligence, I enjoyed it even tough I don't like literature".

- "The exercise was challenging, and it also proved stimulating for my creativity."

"It is quite hard to determine your type of intelligence without a test."

- "This activity is quite difficult. I am not sure I have chosen the right type of intelligence".

The majority of the students enjoyed the activities and all of them solved them successfully. However, there were few students who considered that they haven't chosen their right intelligence, because the task did not fit. The overall impression was positive and the approach was considered new and challenging. Students were surely interested in different types of activities, adapted to their personalities, with the help of the theory of multiple intelligences. It proved that literature can be taught according to the Gardner' theory, based on differentiated learning, on activities devised for each type of intelligence.

This type of approach seemed to suit them better than a traditional one, which proposes just one type of activity for the whole class. All the students were involved in the task received; they completed it successfully and enjoyed doing it. However, there were inherent difficulties, caused by the right choice of dominant intelligence and therefore the right type of activity. Another problem referred to the large groups of students, the approach prooving difficult to use. It remains an experiment to be improved and hopefully used in the future with smaller groups.

3. Conclusions

In the context of actual literary studies, the problem of re-discussing literary approaches is closely linked to the educational system, to methodologies of teaching literature: schools have an essential role in setting canonical texts and the manner they are taught and adapting the teaching methods to the dynamics of the modern world becomes a necessity.

The debates concerning the multiple intelligences also bring a new perspective. Quoting Gardner, who says we have multiple intelligences, we can also state that we have multiple literatures, multiple manners of approaching a literary text. A difficult task which could be achieved, as Showalter states (2003: viii), through "training in pedagogy, and also in acting, performance and writing. Teachers should read contemporary literature, go to the theatre and movies, watch television, write in all forms and reflect on how all these activities contribute to what we do in class."

The conventional, canonical approach to literature can not be replaced by modern approaches, but they can only coexist, offering each individual something valuable to learn from and develop their own identity, sense of values, personality and knowledge.

References

Bassnett, S., Grundy, P. 1993. *Language through Literature*. London: Longman.

Bloom, Harold. 1994. *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages,* Harcourt Brace & Company, New York.

Bloom, Harold. 1973. *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry,* Paperback, New York.

Carter, R., Long, M. N. 1991. *Teaching Literature*. London: Longman.

Carter, R., McRae, J. 1996. *Language, Literature & the Learner*. London and New York: Longman.

Gardner, H. 2006. *Inteligenţe multiple. Noi orizonturi (Multiple intelligence. New Horizons*). Bucuresti: Sigma.

McKay, Sandra, 2000. "*Literature in the ESL Classroom*" in *Literature and Language Teaching*, edited by Brumfit, C. J., Carter, R. A. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McRae, John, 1991. *Literature with a small I*. London: MacMillan.

Showalter, Elaine, 2003. Teaching Literature, Malde, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Notes on the authors:

Monica Oprescu is Lecturer, Ph.D**.,** *Teacher Training Department, West University of Timişoara*. Her areas of interest are English methodology, teaching literature, education.

Florin Oprescu is Lecturer, Ph.D*., Romanian and Comparative Literature Department, West University of Timişoara.* His interest areas are: modern comparative literature, poetical influence and interdisciplinary canon.

Acknowledgements