

Promising an Alternative Path: Analyzing Students' Attitudes towards Comparative Literature Studies

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Abstract

In the twenty first century world everything changes so quickly and education systems have also been affected by such rapid change. As a result of the parallelism to the changes, globalism and cultural studies have gained significance within the field of education. For novice teachers in particular, having cultural awareness and a point of view about what has been happening around the world are significant factors for becoming a well-equipped teacher. In relation to this, comparative literature studies may be a means to assist novice teachers to gain both cultural and social awareness. As a result of its nature, comparative literature studies trigger the study of sociology, psychology, political sciences and cultural studies and may therefore help students' both linguistic and sociological development. In order to analyze students' attitudes towards comparative literature studies a six question survey was given to ELT students at Dokuz Eylül University. As a result of the findings it becomes patent that although students appreciate literature courses, they would also prefer to engage in different course content. In addition, according to the survey, students underline the fact that grammar study alone is insufficient for becoming a teacher; they also need to be aware of their own and other cultures. In relation to the above, there is a significant need for studying both Turkish literature and comparative studies within the Turkish education system.

Key Words: Comparative Literature Studies, ELT, Education Faculties.

Introduction

Dating back to 18th century Europe, comparative literature has been acting as a bridge between different disciplines and cultures. As it calls strictly for focusing on similarities and differences, it sheds new light upon both literary studies and education systems. In the 21st century world in which globalization and multiculturalism work as the locomotives of human life, comparative literature has gained a new momentum. As comparative literature encourages the use of disciplines such as sociology, psychology, history, and political sciences it promotes the development of different skills. In relation to this, the use of comparative literature for education faculties gains significance, especially in foreign language departments. Although novice teachers have been trained in the literature of the language they will teach, such as English Literature, French, German, and Italian and so on, they will have graduated from university without having studied background information

about their own literature, which is Turkish literature. Parallel to this dilemma, novice teachers learn other culture's history, sociology and cultural life through literature courses; however, they do not have the opportunity to study their own literature, and therefore Turkey's history and sociology plus contemporary issues of their culture. Such a dilemma may be solved through using comparative literature for education faculties and adding comparative literature courses to the curriculum. This may assist in the education of novice teachers who should become more aware of their own literary history and sociology. Therefore, through adding comparative literature courses to the curriculum novice teachers will gain cultural awareness but also have the chance of studying their literature while comparing it with others.

The History of Comparative Literature

Comparative studies date back to 18th century, when social sciences used it in order to compare the developments in other countries. In the nineteenth century, comparative studies gained new momentum when it began to be used as a tool for various disciplines such as sociology, literature, law, political sciences, and psychology. Especially in the twentieth century, dramatic social changes triggered the development of comparative studies.

When the history of comparative literature is analyzed several names gain significance. It should be noted that intellectuals such as Montesque, Elias Schelegel and Madame de Stael's works were the founding fathers of comparative literature. Later on, the development of comparative literature was encouraged first in France by Louis Benbew, Philarete Chasles and Jean Jacques Ampere. Mathew Arnold from Britain and Helmut Hatzfeld, Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach from the United States are also significant names. It should also be emphasized that the Unites States is the most significant country in the field of comparative studies. Paul Hazard and Paul van Tiegham are among the important names for comparative literature. Especially universities such as Harvard and Colombia Universities are the pioneers of comparative literature departments.

There is general agreement that comparative literature acquired its name from a series of French anthologies used for the teaching of literature, published in 1816 and entitled *Cours de literature compare*. In an essay discussing the origins of the term, René Wellek notes that this title was 'unused and unexplained' but he also shows how the term seems to have crept into use through the 1820s and 1830s in France. He suggests that the German version of the term, 'vergleichende Lieraturgeschichte', first appeared in a book by Moritz Carrière in 1854, while the earliest English usage is attributed to Mathew Arnold, who referred to 'comparative literatures' in the plural in a letter of 1848. (Basnett, 1998, p.12)

In Turkey, as in Europe and the United States, interest in different cultures and literatures crystallized the borders of comparative literature (Sakallı,2006,p.12). It is noticeable that the history of comparative literature in Turkey dates back to the 1940's. Comparative literature courses in Turkey were first given in the 1940's at İstanbul University and later developed, especially by Gürsel Aytaç, through the courses he gave at Ankara University. For Turkish academics comparative literature is significant as it creates an interaction among different

cultures (İlkhan,2003, p.175). Furthermore, as noted by Güresl Aytaç, comparative literature calls for acceptance of differences (Aytaç,2003, p.14). In relation to the force of comparative literature, Bilgi University in 1990's and later Osmangazi University and Koç University established Departments of Comparative Literature. In addition, comparative literature courses have been given in Haliç, Hacettepe, Yeditepe, İstanbul, Ege, and Marmara University. It is evident that comparative literature studies have gained enormous popularity both in Turkey and worldwide (Erkman and Yıldız,, 1999, p.127).

Why Does Turkish Education System Need Comparative Literature Courses?

In Turkey unfortunately no comprehensive bibliography of comparative literature is available. It should thus be emphasized that a systematic plan is required for the development of this area. The urgency of such a systematic plan is outlined by İnci Enginün, who notes that researchers of Western Studies are unaware of Turkish Literature, while researchers of Turkish studies are unaware of any others. (Enginün, 1999, p.18). This analysis alone is sufficient evidence of the need for comparative literature. Of the many academics in Turkey who have been studying Western Studies, most, as a result of the higher education system are not aware of Turkish Literature. Therefore, they teach other literatures without knowing their own. This dilemma may be observed in education faculties. For instance, although in ELT departments students take many courses relating to British Literature, they do not have information about their own literature, and thus history. In such a powerful history, even Turkish literature is sufficient for the development of comparative literature when it is regarded as a powerful area with our country's history and sociological significance. (Özmen, 2007, p.263). Therefore, comparative literature is significant for Turkish Studies (Karaismailoğlu, 2002, p.172). In such a global world, students must be culturally aware and must get in contact with other cultures after studying the sociology of their culture. In relation with this as underlined by Bennet,

There is an urgent need to foster global awareness among today's children and youth. The human race faces a number of critical concerns that if left unresolved are likely to result in the destruction of life as we know it: destruction of the ozone layer, environmental pollution, poverty, overpopulation, nuclear arms, draught and famine and world hunger, the spread of AIDS and other diseases. The resolution of these problems as well as participation in global trade and economic development require global cooperation. This cooperation requires human beings who possess some degree of cross-cultural understanding.(Bennet,1999,p.22).

Evidently, comparative literature is the most efficient means to teach students about what has been happening in the multicultural global world.

An education that is multicultural is comprehensive and fundamental to all educational endeavors. Given an understanding of the nature of human differences and the realization that individuals approach concepts from their own perspectives, advocates of education that is multicultural are consistent in their belief that respect for diversity and individual difference is the concept's central ingredient.(Dodd 1987) (In Tiedt and Tiedt,2002,p. 14).

As literature is the most efficient means to teach history, comparative literature is also affected by both globalism and liberal democracy (Aydın,2008,p.12) and as it is the natural result of social changes, the education system should derive benefit from comparative literature courses in order to create well-equipped teachers. Education faculties are the locomotives of Turkey as they create teachers who will teach future doctors, engineers, teachers, politicians and other professionals. As a result, understanding the literature and thus the historical, psychological, and sociological dynamics of their country will help them to build a bridge with other cultures and literatures.

Comparative literature, then, means the study of literature in its totality, independently of linguistic distinctions. Such a conception, it seems to me, belongs definitely into a coherent scheme of general education. M. Albert Thibaudet has suggested that there should be professors of philosophy and not professors of the history of English or French or German philosophy. This is precisely the ideal which should be envisaged in a program of general education. The ideal teacher will be the man or woman who teaches literature and not the history of English or French or German literature. Concretely, this will mean two things: every educated person should have come into contact with literature, experienced literature, and have begun at least, to understand, analyze, and criticize literature. Thus, even on an elementary level, much can or could be done to awaken a student's interest in the nature of poetry, fiction, and the drama. (Wellek, 1948, p.216).

In relation with the above, comparative literature courses may be integrated within education faculties in which students will have the chance of learning Turkish literature and other literatures. As emphasised by Bülbül, comparative studies has a great significance in language teaching as the analysis of literary texts not only promotes creative activities but also abstract thought (Bülbül, 2008, p.150). As a result of this notion, a questionnaire was given to ELT students at Dokuz Eylül University.

The study

Participants

120 Turkish fourth grade undergraduate students majoring in the English Language Teaching Department at Dokuz Eylül University provided the participants for this study. Their ages ranged from 22-28 and they were all in their final academic semester. The selection of this group as the participants in this study was due to the fact that they had already taken different literature courses at the end of their student life. Moreover, they had the capacity to analyze the quality of the courses they had taken, and they had previously experienced courses on literature and literature teaching.

Instruments

A six item questionnaire was given to students in order to analyze their feelings and attitudes towards literature courses and comparative literature. The questionnaire was administered once at the end of the semester.

Procedure

At the end of the semester three weeks were given to comparative literature analysis. A lesson plan was developed including Elif Şafak's *Forty Rules of Love*, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, both representative of postmodern literature. After teaching the works comparatively a final examination was given to students. They were asked to compare and contrast the two works from the perspective of comparative literature. As comparative literature encompasses various disciplines, the students' essays included sociology, philosophy, psychology, history, post-colonialism and other areas. After they had completed the essays students were given the questionnaire to analyze whether they felt the lack of comparative literature and studying Turkish literature were deficiencies, and how comparative analysis might enlighten their knowledge.

The Central Points of Interest in the Questionnaire Were:

1. Whether ELT students believe that studying British and American literature without studying Turkish literature is a problematic issue for education.
2. Whether they believe that comparative literature may contribute towards both their professional and social life.
3. Whether they believe that it is a deficiency in their department not to have comparative literature courses.

To investigate the above three points six questions were asked:

1. What do you think about literature courses in your department? In what ways do you find the courses useful?
2. Do you think it is a deficiency to study British and American literature without studying Turkish literature?
3. Do you think studying your own literature parallel to British and American literature (comparative analysis) may contribute to your profession?
4. In what ways may comparative analysis of literary texts enhance your knowledge of literature?
5. In what ways may analyzing Elif Şafak's *Forty Rules of Love* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* contribute historically, socially and psychologically? Would you like to make use of comparative literature in your own classroom?
6. Do you think comparative literature courses should be added to ELT programs? Why/not?

Analyzing Students' Attitudes

1. What do you think about literature courses in your department? In what ways do you find the courses useful?

95% of the students like literature courses. However, responses clearly reveal the fact that students are not satisfied with the course content. The answers postulate the key words and

for the first question “cultural awareness” is the key word of what students intend to gain from literature courses. 85% of the students think that they find the courses useful for the development of their writing, reading and speaking skills. Furthermore they believe that through analyzing literary texts they subconsciously learn about other cultures. However, the question sheds new light upon students’ ideas about the deficiencies of literature courses, which underline the fact that courses should be adapted to daily life. Therefore, they would like to focus on contemporary issues and texts. Instead of *memorization* they support the idea of *discussion* in literature classes. Most students find literature courses unappealing and wish to focus more on contemporary texts. Responses to the first question reveal how 80% of the students emphasise the lack of children’s literature courses in ELT departments.

A diagnostic look at the structure of literature courses leads to a closer examination of the syllabus design for literature courses. Therefore, according to the findings, although 89% of the students find literature courses useful, they find the syllabus design and the content of the courses problematic.

2. Do you think it is a deficiency to study British and American literature without studying Turkish literature?

95% of the students find it a deficiency not to study Turkish literature. “Advantage” is the key word of the second question of the questionnaire, as most students think that it is an advantage to know your own literature before studying other nations’ literature. They believe that they should firstly study Turkish literature. Therefore according to students’ comments:

A: It is a deficiency not to study Turkish literature.

B: The question postulates the key word “roots.” As most students believe that knowing the literature of your own country is equal to having knowledge of your *roots*.

C: In relation to the previous point, most students write “my own literature” in order to emphasize their attitude towards Turkish literature as they give significance to studying their own literature prior to other nation’s literature.

3. Do you think studying your own literature parallel to British and American literature (comparative analysis) may contribute towards your profession?

80% of the students think that the most useful method for studying Turkish, British and American literature is via comparative analysis. “Globalization” is the key word of this question. Most students believe that in the twenty-first century global world they should study different cultures simultaneously. Through comparative analysis they think that they learn more *effectively* and may discern *differences*. Instead of blindly focusing on one literature they would like to study Turkish literature along with those of other nations. They emphasise the fact that “*learning grammar is not enough*” in order to be a well-equipped teacher. They believe that acquiring methodology and other teaching skills are insufficient for the professional development of a novice teacher.

4. In what ways does comparative analysis of literary texts enhance your knowledge of literature?

“Differences” is the key word of this question. Through comparative analysis students emphasize the following terms.

HISTORY

PSYCHOLOGY

NEW POINT OF VIEW

NEW OPTIONS

MORE WILLING TO STUDY TURKISH LITERATURE

It is evident that students interpret comparative analysis as a means to learn the history and psychology of the culture that the texts represent. Therefore, by using the term “new options” they emphasize the fact that comparative analysis provides them with a certain form of freedom while analyzing literary texts.

5. In what ways does analyzing Elif Şafak’s *Forty Rules of Love* and Chuck Plahniuk’s *Fight Club* contributes historically, socially and psychologically? Would you like to implement comparative literature in your own classroom?

The most significant item of the questionnaire is the fifth, which analyzes students’ attitudes towards comparative literature in their classroom. 90% of the students replied that they would like to use comparative literature. In relation to *Forty Rules of Love* and *Fight Club* “Psychology” and “Sociology” became the key terms of this question. The students think that comparative analysis can contribute to their knowledge of history, psychology, sociology as they carried out research on both Turkish and American culture. The topics they research include: Turkish culture, Modern life, Consumption, Love, Anatolian history, Tasavvuf, Mevlana, and Postmodern culture. Students would like to use comparative literature in their classrooms through using children’s literature.

6. Do you think comparative literature courses should be added to ELT programs? Why/not?

93% of the students provided a positive response, and added that comparative literature changed their “point of view” about life. They underlined how it created a bridge between other cultures and Turkish culture. They generally used the words such as, enjoyable, affective, and attractive for comparative literature. They emphasised its link with history, psychology and sociology. Generally, they wrote “understanding my own culture” in order to highlight the significance of studying Turkish literature with others. It can therefore be assumed that “historical knowledge,” “contemporary life,” and “cultural awareness” become key words regarding students’ attitudes toward comparative literature.

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century global world ‘multiculturalism’ has become a key term of human life. As a result of dramatic changes in technology, the modern world has affected the

conditions of human life where everything is connected with everything. In relation with these, literature has also been affected by such changes, and comparative literature has become a natural result of the multicultural global world. Although comparative literature has gained wide popularity around the world, in Turkey unfortunately it has still not gained the right amount of significance in the academic world. Through the analysis of comparative literature studies in Turkey it becomes patent that there is a great need for comparative literature courses at undergraduate level. As a result of this a questionnaire was given to undergraduate students in order to analyze their attitudes toward literature courses involving Turkish literature and comparative literature. The findings of the questionnaire clearly indicate the fact that novice teachers define being a well-equipped teacher not in terms of having sufficient knowledge of the subject area they are going to teach, but in terms of cultural awareness and having a connection with the contemporary world. In relation with this they define literature courses as a means to build a bridge between the contemporary world and their profession. At this point and parallel to the answers they have provided it becomes patent that they interpret comparative literature as a bridge between the contemporary world, different cultures and their profession. Therefore, they define comparative analysis as a tool to create a link between history psychology, sociology and political science while they are analyzing literary texts. The questionnaire that was given to fourth grade students reveals a very significant deficiency in the Turkish education system, i.e. students graduating without studying Turkish literature, and thus having little awareness of the sociological and cultural elements of their own culture. In addition to this, analyzing Elif Şafak's and Chuck Palahniuk's works simultaneously results in students' positive attitudes towards both Turkish and comparative literature studies. As a result of the questionnaire it becomes evident that teacher training programs require comparative literature courses in order to implicitly teach novice teachers history, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. Although departments offer various literature courses, they are insufficient to teach the sociology of both Turkish culture and British culture. Therefore, adding comparative literature courses may create a balance between the study of Turkish literature, world literature and historical knowledge, along with the variety of methods that may assist both instructor and students. In conclusion, it can be assumed that comparative literature courses may prepare novice teachers to become individuals who are well prepared for social life.

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Appendix

A SAMPLE LESSON PLAN FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Pre-Reading Activities
<p>Activity A The teacher makes an introduction to comparative literature by means of explaining what it refers to, what is its significance in literature in general.</p> <p>Activity B The characteristics of Post-Modern Literature are analyzed and some examples from popular literary works are given. The examples are chosen from different countries on purpose.</p>
While-Reading Activities
<p>Activity A <i>Forty Rules of Love</i> and <i>Fight Club</i> are analyzed in terms of its plot, its characters, common universal themes it includes.</p> <p>Activity B Historical, sociological, psychological elements of the texts are analyzed.</p>
Post-Reading Activities
<p>Activity A Students try to make a comparison between Turkish and American cultures and try to match the characteristics of each with the examples from studied texts.</p> <p>Activity B Students analyze both authors' perspectives critically and discuss them in groups. Later on, they write a research paper about it.</p>
<p>For the course contents of comparative literature in Turkey see: http://www2.ogu.edu.tr/~komparatistik/dersicerikleri.html http://www.register.bilgi.edu.tr/coursecatalog/yeni/index.asp?lang=tr</p>