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Windows and Mirrors' for Critical Cultural Literacy in Literature Teaching

النوافذ والمرايا « لتعزيز الثقافة القرائية النقدية في تعليم الأدب

Fenêtres et miroirs » au service de la littératie culturelle critique en didactique de la littérature

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Introduction

The concept of self- and world-consciousness and its relevance to literature and cultural studies has long attracted scholarly interest. Many researchers emphasize the role of reading as a means of introspection and engagement with both objective and subjective realities. Recent studies have interrogated the social function of fiction, treating literary works—whether factual or imaginative—as windows into human experience. As Ochoa (2018) asserts, “When books become windows, they open our eyes to other worlds and other ways of being”. Similarly, Bishop (1990: 9) highlights that “Literature transforms human experience and reflects it to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience”

Against this backdrop, the “window and mirror” framework of reading has gained traction among scholars (Colvin 2017; Conrad 2017; Tschida et al. 2014). It presents reading as a reflective journey into self-awareness, shaped by narratives that either mirror the reader’s identity or offer glimpses into unfamiliar worlds. Colvin explains, “Mirrors are narratives that reflect the reader’s experience or identity, while windows are narratives that offer readers a glimpse into an unfamiliar experience or story”. (Colvin 2017: 1)

This metaphorical theory, expanded to include “sliding glass doors,” is rooted in the foundational work of Bishop (1990). He championed reading as a transformative act, one that not only presents constructed realities but also reflects those realities back onto readers’ lives. Through such literary experiences, readers are encouraged to empathize with diverse social groups and develop a deeper awareness of themselves and others (Conrad 2017). As Ochoa and McDonald (2020) argue, reading offers a safe pathway to cultural literacy and cross-cultural understanding.

In the 21st century, literature education increasingly aligns with the goals of cross-cultural studies, marking a shift from literary to cultural literacy (Cue & Casey 2017). Although introduced over a century ago, Hirsch’s (1989) concept of cultural literacy remains influential in contemporary education. Its resurgence reflects global trends that envision the world as an interconnected community rather than isolated national entities.

Cultural literacy is commonly defined as the ability to engage with other cultures and to co-create and express cultural identities and values (Lähdesmäki et al. 2022: 5). Initially, Hirsch (1989, 1990, 1988) emphasized its role in supporting linguistic literacy,

arguing that students must grasp “core cultural knowledge” to interpret texts – knowledge described as “the shared culture of the common reader” (Hirsch 1989: 456). In this framework, understanding culture was key to language acquisition.

Hirsch also valued interdisciplinarity, advocating for connections across fields to enrich public dialogue and foster meaningful social engagement in diverse societies (Hirsch 1988). While his model emphasized national unity, more recent perspectives recast cultural literacy as a dynamic, dialogic practice central to 21st-century education (Maine & Vrikki 2021; Maine & McCaughran 2021; Ochoa & McDonald 2020).

The DIALLS project (2018) further explores cultural literacy through themes like tolerance, identity, multiculturalism, and social responsibility. It promotes these as essential for cultivating critical literacy and intercultural understanding (Bayeck 2021). Similarly, Lähdesmäki et al. (2022) conceptualize cultural literacy as a dialogic social practice grounded in tolerance, empathy, and inclusion. Drawing on Cohen (2004), they define tolerance as accepting differences, empathy as imagining oneself in others' situations, and inclusion as full participation in diverse communities. These values underpin democratic engagement and emotional peace across cultural boundaries.

However, critiques of projects like DIALLS reveal limitations. Many initiatives remain Eurocentric and monolingual, neglecting non-English cultures and offering minimal engagement with critical literacy (Gibson & Hartley 1998). Critical literacy, as framed by Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* and *Between Two Worlds*, emphasizes the power of language to challenge social norms and develop self-awareness. Shor (1999: 3) defines it as “language use that questions the social construction of the self” enabling learners to examine their identities and societal roles.

Critical literacy extends beyond cognitive development to encompass multiliteracies, or the ability to navigate and assess diverse cultural texts (Liao et al. 2020). Shor (1999) further describes it as a struggle to forge meaningful connections with knowledge and social systems. Freire likewise argues for “demythologizing reality” through critical reading, linking personal and societal transformation (Macedo & Freire 1987; Burbules & Berk 1999).

Empirical studies highlight how integrating literature into education can nurture both linguistic and critical capacities (Lazar 1993). Bobkina and Radoulksa (2016) and Borsheim-Black et al. (2014) argue that engaging with literary texts helps learners interrogate and understand their personal and societal growth. Simmons (2012) recommends fantasy literature as a vehicle for action-based learning that supports identity formation and social awareness.

Shor (1999) aptly remarks that, through critical literacy, we use “words and other actions” to “build ourselves in a world that is building us” (282). Freire sees this as the essence of literacy: the ability to “read the word to read the world” (Macedo & Freire 1987: 16).

In this vein, numerous scholars have proposed instructional methods linking literature and culture in language education (Borman et al. 2019). Byram and Planet

(2000) introduced the comparative approach, which connects the cultural contexts of texts with students' own backgrounds. This method promotes intercultural competence by encouraging learners to analyse communication styles and values in other cultures.

Flohr (2010) offers a creative approach built on pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading phases, encouraging students to activate prior knowledge, engage with texts, and critically evaluate them. Ochoa and McDonald (2020) advocate a reflective pedagogical approach, emphasizing contextualization, shared reflection, and perspective-taking as tools for enhancing language and cultural awareness. Similarly, Enriquez (2021) argues that reading books as mirrors and windows helps children recognize cultural diversity and reshape their worldview, with lasting effects beyond the classroom.

Despite growing interest in fostering intercultural competence, few studies have explicitly focused on cultural literacy within literature education. Some international studies provide valuable insights into how cultural and critical literacy are conceptualized and practiced worldwide. For instance, Fatima et al. (2024) in Pakistan emphasize the role of world literature in fostering peacebuilding and intercultural empathy. They argue that postcolonial narratives, when taught critically, help dismantle hegemonic views and build global understanding through literary interpretation (Fatima et al. 2024). In Indonesia, Marmoah et al. (2024) evaluate national literacy initiatives like the School Literacy Movement. Their systematic review highlights disparities in program implementation and notes the absence of critical thinking objectives in the curriculum, pointing to the need for more inclusive and dialogic pedagogies that reflect local and global cultural realities (Marmoah et al. 2024). A study from Oman by Al-Dhahli and Issa (2025) investigates how citation practices reflect cultural cognition and linguistic structures in academic writing. Their work supports the integration of cultural adaptability in academic literacy, underscoring the need for teaching frameworks that accommodate local epistemologies (Al-Dhahli & Issa 2025).

In the United States, Paris, Boutte, and Nash (2025) advocate for "culturally sustaining pedagogy" in early literacy. They critique recent policy constraints (e.g., book bans) and highlight the urgency of preserving culturally responsive literature education that sustains minoritized identities (Paris et al. 2025). Meanwhile, in the European context, the DIALLS project has been both lauded and critiqued. While it champions social responsibility and democratic values, scholars like Bayeck (2021) caution that its Eurocentric and monolingual bias may hinder its potential as a truly global model for cultural literacy. This criticism aligns with Templer's (2024) work in Bulgaria, where using local folktales in EFL classrooms encourages cultural pride and aesthetic engagement but risks essentializing culture if not handled critically (Templer 2024). From Australia, S. Rocca (2025) introduces the concept of digital multiliteracies, connecting global language education to cultural literacy via digital storytelling, gaming, and online collaborations. This approach modernizes Freirean pedagogy by embedding empathy and cultural identity formation within digital interactions (Rocca 2025).

Lastly, in the Ghanaian context, Asare-Yeboa (2024) reflects on the difficulty of shifting from transmission-based to independent learning in cross-cultural higher education. He highlights the tension between traditional pedagogical expectations and the reflective, learner-centered strategies required for cultural and critical literacy (Asare-Yeboa, 2024).

Despite considerable studies immersed in integrating culture and literacy at schools, many institutions still lack coherent frameworks or pedagogical strategies to integrate cultural and critical literacy meaningfully. Furthermore, recent calls to implement the “Mirrors and Windows” model (Damrosch 2003; Colvin 2017; Ochoa & McDonald 2020) often emphasize dialogism over critical inquiry, encouraging students to passively accept other perspectives rather than develop tools for critical reflection. To address these gaps, the present study proposes rethinking and adapting the “Mirrors and Windows” framework as a foundation for both cultural and critical literacy.

1. Research Framework and Methodology

1.1. Background of Research

This study was conducted within the Algerian context, specifically in the Department of English at Oran 2 University during the Fall 2022 semester. At the tertiary level, literature instruction is guided by chronologically structured syllabi that offer considerable flexibility in material selection and curriculum design, allowing for a diverse and enriching range of teaching content. In contrast, the secondary school curriculum predominantly centers on American literature and culture, tracing a historical trajectory from the Plymouth Plantation and the Pilgrim Fathers through Romanticism, Realism, Existentialism, and the Local Colour Movement. Some exposure to African literature is also included, such as Chinua Achebe’s “Civil Peace”. Despite the chronological coherence of the syllabi, literary texts are often selected based on students’ interests and academic needs.

However, with regard to the cultural dimension of literature instruction, traditional teaching practices remain prevalent. Many educators continue to adopt teacher-centered, transmissive methods that hinder meaningful student engagement with the cultural contexts of literary texts (Sadykova & Meskill, 2019). Kheladi (2017) similarly observed that literature teaching in many Algerian classrooms still adheres to an outdated informative model that minimizes the students’ active interaction with the text. As a result, local literature classrooms often exhibit low levels of student participation, limited collaborative engagement, and a noticeable absence of dynamic or culturally immersive learning experiences (Li, 2022).

1.2. Purpose of Study

The paper aims to address the teaching of literature by merging two goals: critical and cultural literacy, and examines the significance of the “mirrors and windows” model as a freshly minted teaching framework. The creative hub of this research is to move beyond Bishop and others’ “mirrors and windows” model, which advocates perceptive and

reflective responses to questions about multicultural literature. To provoke an advanced sense of critical thinking in learners, the proposed model invests in active, discussion-based strategies, along with Value-Clashes readings (counter-textual analyses) that aim to make the process more critical and enriching.

The ultimate objective is to prepare students for the 21st-century globalized world by galvanizing them through productive skills and dynamic strategies into active actions such as reading and writing against the implied ideologies of literary texts. As critical cultural literacy pedagogy remains on the sidelines of academic routines, the significance of this research lies in its effort to address gaps in multicultural literature pedagogy and propose an effective methodology for cultural literacy education. Accordingly, the empirical study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the possible implications of teaching literature through “mirrors” and “windows” on learners’ fostering of tolerance, inclusion, and empathy with other cultural traditions and social regimes?
2. What is the effect of reading with and against the text’s perspectives on intermediate students’ development of critical literacy in the EFL context in Algeria?
3. Can the process of re-examining literary narratives through and beyond the “mirrors” and “windows” lenses result in a negative learning action? How well are students equipped to face such challenges?

To answer these questions, the remainder of this paper aims to offer well-grounded conclusions that may clarify how the teaching of literature through a “windows and mirrors” framework can meaningfully contribute to the development of critical cultural literacy.

1.3. Materials and Methods

This hypothesis-testing research draws fundamentally on the empirical manipulation of variables observed and tested within a case study context. The rationale for opting for a case study design lies in the formative influence it enables in examining the participants’ development of critical cultural literacy, by opening “Mirrors and Windows” doors to the study of English rhetoric inside the Algerian EFL learning milieu. The experiment was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2020/2021.

The study was designed to yield reasonably reliable and carefully plausible conclusions regarding the effectiveness of this discursive and cutting-edge model in reshaping how learners engage with texts imbued with intercultural values. It aimed to diagnose the metamorphosis in their capacity to acquire tolerance, inclusion, and empathy towards foreign cultures thoroughly at odds with their own beliefs, norms, and behaviors.

1.3.1. Participants

The researcher adopted a purposeful sample design, selecting participants from the intermediate level, specifically second-year EFL students at the University of Oran 2, Algeria. The participants (aged 19–20) included 30 undergraduates (20 female, 10 male), all enrolled in the Department of English.

The rationale for working with second-year students—“guinea pigs for this novel experiment”—resides in the potential of cultural literacy and critical pedagogy to support the learners’ interpretative growth at elementary and intermediate stages. Literature, being a central curricular component, is often approached too late in the academic pathway, thus depriving students of early symbolic training.

1.3.2. Procedures

To operationalize the experimental objectives, the researcher selected two lengthy literary narratives from the gorgeous world of fiction: *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Famished Road* by Nigerian author Ben Okri. These authentic works of world literature were chosen solely for empirical purposes. Each novel offers illuminating vignettes of distinct cultural settings, portraying peculiar lifestyles and idiosyncratic practices that may seem paradoxically familiar to diverse communities with different races, beliefs, and traditions.

During the course of instruction, a sequenced set of teaching procedures and tasks was implemented to appraise students’ potential for developing cultural literacy. These procedures, alternating between teacher scaffolding and student-centered inquiry, are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Windows and Mirrors* Instructional Procedures

Stage	Instructional Focus	Instructional Activity
Pre-Treatment	Cultural Familiarization	Classroom discussion on background cultural elements of each text
Pre-Treatment	Setting the Context	Preview of major themes and cultural questions in the narratives
During Treatment	Textual Exploration	Reading assigned chapters and identifying value clashes
During Treatment	Critical Dialogue	Small group discussions and whole-class debates
During Treatment	Empathy Development	Role-play or reflective writing on characters’ experiences
Post-Treatment	Reflection and Evaluation	Written post-test and classroom debrief on cultural learning

1.3.3. Data Collection Instruments

To collect both qualitative and quantitative data, the researcher adopted a before-and-after study design (Pre/Post Tests), regarded as a reliable instrument to evaluate shifts in students’ cultural and critical awareness.

The Pre-Test was conducted after the initial course development phase, during which learners had been introduced to the general content and linguistic features of the two selected literary works. Students were given two topics and were instructed to choose only one:

- Topic 1 focused on *The Famished Road* and included culturally significant statements extracted from the novel. Learners were asked to mirror the Nigerian local culture by illustrating key images of identity and spirituality.
- Topic 2 explored the Puritan religious cult in *The Scarlet Letter*, inviting students to reflect on central themes of sin, morality, and social norms.

The Post-Test, administered at the end of the instructional treatment, included parallel tasks. Students were invited to:

- interpret selected cultural statements from both novels,
- discuss American cultural values such as equality and freedom,
- and revisit the notion of sin within the framework of Puritan ideology.

This pre/post testing protocol enabled a contextualized assessment of learners' progression in cultural literacy, empathic understanding, and critical engagement with literary texts.

1.3.4. Data Analysis

The assessment framework adopted in this study draws upon three complementary scales of dynamic evaluation, each aligned with the pedagogical aims of cultural understanding, empathic engagement, and critical literacy.

1. Culture-Based Assessment. This first scale examines both rudimentary and in-depth knowledge of the target cultures. It assesses whether students are able to fluently interpret, construe, and discuss cultural symbols, images, and values embedded in the selected literary works. The goal is to determine their capacity to navigate between the textual world and the cultural systems it reflects.
- Empathy-Based Assessment. This dimension focuses on the empathic effects produced by the act of literary reading. It evaluates:
 - the emotional and ideological resonance of the cultural infrastructure within each narrative,
 - the learners' ability to relate personally to fictional characters, conflicts, and contexts,
 - and the degree of relativistic overlap—to what extent can the stories of others echo the learners' own lived experiences?
2. Critical Literacy-Based Assessment. Rooted in Luke's (2000) theory of critical literacy, this third axis explores how learners:
 - Make meaning (knowing),
 - Solve problems and make decisions (doing),
 - Take stances (arguing)—especially when confronting ideological or cultural assumptions in the text.

This model encourages counter-textual readings, prompting students to question dominant perspectives and uncover hidden value systems. Alongside these core

dimensions, the study also tracks signs of learner discomfort or resistance, including anxiety, silence, irrelevant responses, or passive feedback. Such reactions are treated as significant indicators of how deeply the narratives challenge students' interpretative habits and socio-cultural assumptions.

2. Results

2.1 Pretest Results

In the course of the pretest evaluation, students' grades have been straddled through three rubrics; 1) content knowledge (identification), 2) sympathy and tolerance (perspective takings), and 3) critical value judgments (knowing, doing, arguing). Twenty points are offered for each stage. After deliberate assessment of 30 test copies, the descriptive statistics from pretest scores (Table 2), appraised through SPSS, show overall humble results on the part of examinees before the trial.

As Table 2 portrays, cross-tabulation of the scores reveals that the pretest scores are unsatisfying as the overall mean is below the average ($M= 7.65$), and most of the students' scores range from 2 to 12. Noticeably, the displayed grades also highlight that most students' grades fluctuate in a range of 9.33, with an upper grade of 11.5 and a lower grade of 2. The exhibited datum also unveils the low achievements of the participants in each assessment rubric. 70% of the participants have been unable to reach the mean in content knowledge ($M= 8.25$), while only 44.3% could have averagely pleasing grades in expressing empathy and understanding of otherness, and not surprisingly, students in the majority (80%) prove below average critical literacy. As far as the *measures of variability* are concerned, the results below lay bare that the dispersion between the variables in this test is moderate (std. deviation= 2.35).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the pre-test score

	<i>N</i>	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
Content knowledge	30	10.50	3.00	13.50	8.25	2.46
Perspective takings	30	10.00	2.00	12.00	8.21	2.74
Critical literacy	30	10.00	2.00	12.00	6.48	2.92
Pretest	30	9.33	2.33	11.67	7.65	2.35
Valid <i>N</i> (listwise)	30					

Retrospectively, the target of the pre-achievement test is to measure improvement in critical cultural literacy for a sample of Algerian EFL intermediate learners before and after adopting and adapting the "Window and Mirror" teaching model in literature sessions. When assessing painstakingly the participants' answers, each of the identification of cultural concepts, and sympathy came up with a deplorable level of commitment, as most of the grades are between 03 to 09.5 and 02 to 09.5, respectively. Not in the least agreeable, students' performance has deteriorated concerning critical literacy as 18 examinees got scores below 7, 6 students score between 7.5 and 9.5, and 6 only succeeded to reach the average (scores from 10 to 12).

2.2 Posttest Results

Impressionistically, the enlightened data in Table 3 marks a thriving culmination in the general posttest mean after treatment achieving 11.32 ($M= 11.32$) and 11.25 as the median. Regarding the range of marks, 16.7% of the students come below the average, and 83.3% have succeeded to have the mean with scores shifting approximately from upper-grade 15 to a lowest-grade 8.5. Interestingly, to have a far better-particularized glance into the participants' performance concerning each assessment level, the table also showcases that the grades from cultural identification range satisfactorily from 9 to 16; in which 4 students only have gained grades below average (09 to 09.5), in parallel, 26 examinees could reach the average with some scores that oscillate in between 10 and 16, with a mean of 11.61, and 12 as mid-point.

On the same case-by-case basis, Table 3 parades the holistic posttest mean of the student's development of sympathy and inclusion in global culture, which comes closer to 11.28, and a median of 11. The findings also shed light on the fluctuation of grades that ascend from 8 to 16. Analogously, the descriptive statistics demonstrate that the mean on critical value judgments perks up to 11.06, while students' score varies from minimum grade 6.5 and apex grade 15.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the post-test score

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Std. deviation
Content knowledge	30	7.00	9.00	16.00	11.61	12.00	1.76
Perspective takings	30	8.00	8.00	16.00	11.28	11.00	1.69
Critical literacy	30	8.50	6.50	15.00	11.06	11.25	1.94
Post-test	30	6.67	8.33	15.00	11.32	11.25	1.57
Valid N (listwise)	30						

2.3. Comparison between Pretest and Post-Test Score

In the most laudable wish to pinpoint prominent areas of progress and/or sluggishness in participant's outcome after treatment, the experimenter had to undertake via SPSS paired sample t -tests, parametric and non-parametric. Implicitly, the results obtained from tests of normality "The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test" ensure that the distribution of the pretest, as well as posttest scores, are normally distributed, as evidenced by asymptotic sig. ([2-sided test] $p= 0.001$). Along the process, the researcher has to check the reliability and significance of the proposed teaching model in stimulating critical cultural literacy, relying on *SPSS-paired samples t-test* (Table 4), then trying to attach the findings to the central themes of the current study.

As Table 4 depicts, students participating in active classroom assignments throughout the implementation of critical "Windows and Mirrors" readings prove to promote their critical cultural literacy after the intervention (Mean= 11.32, SD= 1.57), compared to pretest scores (Mean= 7.65, SD= 2.35), with a difference in mean of -3.67. One can also notice from the second box in the same table that there is a strong association between

variables from both tests as the correlation value approximates 1 ($rp= 0.786$), indicating that the results of the experiment at all have had a remarkable influence on the posttest score. Ultimately, to inject the evidence on the magnitude of the experiment with more robustness, foregone conclusions should be built upon paired samples test sig results. Statistically speaking, the experiment is manifestly significant with the corroborating evidence of three found values: the sig. a value lower than 1, a significant degree of freedom, and a t -value that is far from -0 ($p= 0.000 <0.001$, $t= - 13.578$, $df= 29$).

Table 4. SPSS-paired samples t-test of difference in the pre-test/post-test scores

Measure	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	t(df)	p	Correlation (r)	Cohen's d	95% CI of Mean Difference
Overall Score	7.60 (2.32)	11.35 (1.55)	-3.76	-19.37 (61)	<.001	.76	2.46	[-4.15, -3.37]

3. Discussion

What can be construed from the earlier portrayed results is that the study of English rhetoric from world culture heritage through the adaptation of the “mirrors and windows” mode of teaching is a tool for fostering dual perspectives; critical and cultural literacy of second-year EFL Algerian learners (Oran2 university). The proposed teaching framework which advocates active dialogic skills of learning has reinvigorated the diagnosis of canonical literature in a sociocultural laboratory. As divulged in the findings, the reflectively intensive readings of cultural codes have contributed to a thorough extent in cultivating critical awareness of text and also the TC, by enriching the learners’ cultural knowledge agenda, and stimulating their sympathy and tolerance to otherness, and much more evocatively, shoring up many hindrances and challenges impeding cultural readability and textual understanding.

As portrayed earlier in this study, the results derived from the experimental research and observations have led to conclude that the proposed teaching framework is both stimulating and evocative. Beyond transmissive learning habits, “the window” reflection upon both narratives; The Famished Road and Scarlet Letter, have offered a broad platform for cultural understanding. At the beginning of the semester, the students confronted a lot of difficulties in figuring out the meaning of some cultural images from The Famished Road. As teaching culture used to be an overlooked subject of study, the learners in the majority have scratched only a surface understanding of some images defining the Anglo-African Nigerian history like, the devil, and heartlessness of human beings, which they failed to perceive their connection to the brutality of British colonization. Given the lack of exposure to the writers’ cultural collective historicity, only a few students have bothered to explicate other symbols of postmodern spirituality and mythology characterizing Okri’s (1992) narrative. For instance, the words “incarnation” and “spirit-children” generated serious upheavals in comprehension

for many students, since most of them could not grapple with the fanciful spiritual world of the author, which has much to do with miracles, death, and after death, and metaphysical speculations. From a luminous corner, the posttest results have revealed an outperformance in identification-with-the-text scores, which indicate the effectiveness of the implementation of the “mirrors and windows” teaching model in literature intermediate classed in fostering cultural literacy.

Reading from “*a window prism*” have allowed the learners to decode implicit messages and find identification tokens in the texts, by equipping them with some necessary knowledge toolkits that raise their textual awareness. Extrapolating from the tests, a high percentage of participants have unequivocally elucidated many religious and historical statements from *The Scarlet Letter*; as Chillingworth, Isaac Johnson, Anne Hutchinson, the Scaffold, and Meteor, which they perceived as cultural symbols that best epitomize the deep author’s faith in Puritanism.

Worthily still, reading the text from’ a mirror lens’ has helped to revitalize learners’ empathy and intimacy with the others’ stories they read, till those stories interfused with their own. As delving into details, the assessment of the learners’ answers in the posttest as opposed to the first test has measured great strides in the readers’ capacity to communicate with the texts. It is fair to say that the intensive readings of rhetorical discourses have enticed the Algerian learners to betake themselves into the inner side of the human cognitive and emotional system.

There are various points of importance to draw here: first, the language-based model used at the beginning of lectures that pays a lot of care to the aesthetic beauty of the language proved insufficient to satiate the learners’ thirst to find the emotional appeal in the story. However, window and mirror analysis of the texts, as the treatment has illuminated earlier, have encouraged the learners to exchange perspectives with the writers, (e.g., discussing the condemnation of Hester Prynne from an outer/inner point of view). Second, the model under study has prompted the students to morph from impartial bystanders of the narrative scenes, to inclusive – somewhat intrusive – characters prone to grow through emotions. As far as the findings can tell, many students show after experimenting a tremendous empathy with the wretched life of the impoverished child Azaro, and his miserable family longing for a drug of hope in the dissolutions of their dreams. Some learners could even bring some examples of Algerian postcolonial literature, which set to depict the same themes of the narrative, like that of Mohammed Dib’s trilogy of *The Great House*, unveiling the severe bruising of characters shattered by the angst of colonization.

As far as critical literacy is concerned, the experiment also unveils the improvements in the participants’ critical thinking skills at a higher-level elusiveness. Teaching literature through a windows and mirrors perspective has sustained the target group not just to read the text curiously and empathetically, but also critically. Critical literacy overlaps decision-making and problem-solving skills that buttress argumentative readings *for* and *against* the texts. Besides the ability of an experiment to demonstrate climactic volt-face in the learners’ perspectives towards other cultures and ethics of perceiving the world,

students proved also apt to grow their strategies of criticism underpinned by a counter-dialogue with the text. An instance to draw here is the tendency and potential of many students to question sensitive dilemmas in “Puritan humanism”.

Extrapolating from discrepancies between the tests, it is noticed that before the experiment, learners have lucidly circumvented to argue against the mindsets of the text (e.g., thrashing out the Puritan religious cults, as is the case in *The Scarlet Letter*). Productively, the findings have revealed that all students (100% positive difference ranks) have thrived on critical literacy strategies. 1) The experimenter has observed that the sampling under study has succeeded to make active position takings with and against both materials, (e.g., x: I can't imagine the ridiculousness and sanctimoniousness embedded in Okri's – 1992 – over-magical story, that surely failed for me to address the rigors of colonial hostility staining all Africa'). Others think that *The Famished Road* is just a ground- breaking fit of art. 2) There is a flourish in the learners' Metacognitive reading strategies and critical value judgments. For instance, some critically-oriented answers from tests and observation have epitomized moral and cognitive development in the student's capability to interrogate multidisciplinary hierarchies of knowledge, not least those about another's religion and cultural ideologies. As an example, many learners conferred from an Islamic perspective that Prynne's lifelong punishment for adultery is too much cruel and unfair, as God grants forgiveness to those sinners who honestly repent.

The findings of this study compellingly illustrate that the “Windows and Mirrors” model, when critically adapted, can significantly enhance Algerian EFL learners' cultural and critical literacy. The experimental framework successfully bridged canonical literature with intercultural empathy and reflective pedagogy, fostering students' ability to engage meaningfully with diverse texts. Participants demonstrated marked improvements in recognizing cultural symbolism, articulating empathetic perspectives, and formulating critical arguments grounded in literary and social analysis. This validates the study's theoretical premise that reading *with* and *against* the text cultivates deeper levels of critical awareness, inclusion, and tolerance.

Nonetheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's sample size (30 students from a single institution) restricts the generalizability of the findings. The cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds of students at Oran 2 University may not be representative of broader Algerian or North African educational contexts, let alone global EFL learners. Expanding the participant pool across institutions, regions, or grade levels would enhance the external validity of future investigations.

Second, while the study embraced a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach, it heavily relied on pre/post-tests and subjective teacher observations without incorporating student voice or longitudinal tracking. Learners' affective responses, motivations, or transformative learning experiences remain partially unexplored. Incorporating semi-structured interviews, focus groups, or reflective journals could provide richer insights into how students internalize and act upon critical cultural themes in literature.

Third, the implementation of critical literacy strategies encountered challenges linked to students' language proficiency and sociocultural readiness. Some learners displayed discomfort or disengagement when confronting cultural dissonance or unfamiliar ideologies. These issues underscore a need for scaffolding: language support, intercultural sensitivity training, and culturally adaptive materials are essential to ensure equitable access to deeper critical engagement. Fourth, the study was constrained by time and curricular demands. Conducting an intensive, dialogic, and counter-textual analysis of only two novels—*The Scarlet Letter* and *The Famished Road*—over a single semester limited the scope of thematic and comparative exploration. A broader text corpus including local literature, contemporary voices, or multimodal texts (e.g., visual narratives, films, digital storytelling) could diversify and enrich students' critical encounters. Finally, the cultural specificity of the chosen texts—anchored in American Puritanism and Nigerian magical realism—may have posed comprehension barriers for learners unfamiliar with these contexts. While cultural defamiliarization can be pedagogically productive, future studies might explore how glocalized texts, or those closer to students' cultural spheres, can complement or mediate the complexities of global narratives.

Building on these findings, future studies should include larger, more varied populations to validate and refine the model across diverse educational and cultural contexts while employing qualitative tools—such as learner reflections, interviews, or peer discussions—to better understand how students negotiate cultural meaning and develop critical awareness. Additionally, researchers could experiment with integrating local literature, films, or multimodal texts to bridge global and local cultural frameworks more effectively. Longitudinal studies tracking students over multiple semesters would help assess the long-term development of cultural and critical literacy, while investigations into affective responses—such as discomfort, resistance, or empathy—could provide deeper insights into learners' emotional engagement with “otherness”. Finally, involving teachers in co-constructing curriculum models that balance global literary exposure with cultural sensitivity and critical pedagogy would strengthen the practical application of these findings in classroom settings.

Conclusion

Within literary discourse, the concept of “culture” constitutes a compelling yet persistently contentious subject, often relegated to the periphery of mainstream pedagogical frameworks. Despite its intrinsic significance, literature classrooms have historically neglected its systematic integration—a consequence of entrenched academic paradigms that prioritize conventional methodologies over innovative pedagogical evolution. Although cultural literacy has recently emerged as an indicator of comprehensive education, this domain remains fraught with the absence of a cohesive instructional framework and a consensus on effective pedagogical practices. The present study thus seeks to address this gap by proposing a sustainable approach to cultural literacy—one that aligns with contemporary scholarly trends while fostering intellectual rigor and intercultural tolerance.

The findings of this study substantiate the validity of existing theoretical propositions. First, the application of the “Mirrors and Windows” paradigm in teaching canonical world literature has proven instrumental in cultivating the foundational tenets of cultural literacy—namely, tolerance, empathy, and social inclusion across diverse communities and ideological systems. Notably, dialogic and reflective pedagogical strategies, which encourage reading both *with* and *against* texts, have enhanced students’ critical literacy, enabling them to interrogate complex sociocultural constructs such as religious doctrines, political ideologies, moral absolutism (e.g., the influence of American Puritanism), and the interplay between realism and spirituality. The “Mirrors” dimension facilitated deep personal engagement, allowing students to reflect on their own identities through textual encounters, while the “Windows” aspect expanded their imaginative and cognitive horizons, albeit occasionally provoking resistance when confronted with cultural dissonance. For some learners, this exposure to alterity proved destabilizing, revealing varying degrees of readiness to engage with Otherness. Furthermore, this study suggests that visual culture, action-based strategies, and cooperative learning present viable supplementary avenues for advancing cultural literacy pedagogy, offering alternatives to traditional text-centric approaches.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Pre-test

Before handling the pre-test questions, the teacher distributed selected excerpts from Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* to each student, namely: **Excerpt I** [Section 1, Book One, paras. 3–6], "There was not one... Our pacts were binding" (pp. 1–2); and **Excerpt II** [Section Two, Book Six, Four], "The DEVIL has come into our midst! ... His congregation picked up the cry, lifted it up to the heavens, and fell silent, waiting" (p. 277).

Answer ONE of the following topics.

Topic 01

1. Building on the sociocultural and historical background of the narrative, explain the underlined cultural images that pervade the passages under scrutiny, and discuss their contribution to the representation of Anglo-African culture. **(20 pts)**

- 1- The heartlessness of human beings
- 2- The DEVIL has come into our midst
- 3- Tender sibyls
- 4- Benign sprites
- 5- The serene presences of our ancestors
- 6- As we approached another incarnation, we made pacts that we would return to
- 7—the spirit world
- 8- Living as *abiku*
- 9- spirit-children
- 10- GOD HAS ANSWERED OUR CRY
- 11- Let us stand as one to drive out this ABOMINATION

In what ways does the author deploy rich images of identity and spirituality in the novel so as to offer readers "a window" onto Nigerian local culture, in tandem with a broader, mainstream Anglo-African "enchanted" culture? **(20 pts)**

Topic 02 (20 pts)

According to Hawthorne's narrator, yielding to Puritan religious strictures—like engaging in an illicit love affair—constitutes a villainous **sin**. This moral logic expels Hester Prynne from the social fold and places upon her bosom the shameful red letter “A” as an enduring mark of guilt.

(1). In light of this account, elucidate how the narrator probes the culpable consciences of his characters in order to reveal a relic of Puritan faith, providing relevant illustrations from the novel. **(20 pts)**

Appendix B

Post-test

Topic One

(1). Define the following items from *The Scarlet Letter* from a historical—sociocultural perspective, and clarify their role in shaping the spirit of seventeenth-century America. **(5 pts)**

- a. Anne Hutchinson
- b. Darkness
- c. Chillingworth
- d. Day and Night
- e. Isaac Johnson
- f. King's Chapel
- g. Oak
- h. The Meteor
- i. The Scaffold
- j. The Scarlet Letter “A”

(1). The notion of “sin” in the narrative is deliberately elusive. Explain how the writer depicts sinfulness and justice within a society deeply shaped by Puritanism. **(1 pt)**

(2). To what extent do you agree with the adage, “Man is not only a passive recipient but is actively responsible for his own deeds”? Illustrate your answer through your own understanding of equality and freedom, drawing on your religious beliefs and personal convictions. **(2 pts)**

(3). Do you think Hester Prynne is more to be pitied than condemned? Do you view her stern punishment for adultery as a legitimate act of societal retributive justice, or as a sign of Puritan hypocrisy and moral corruption? **(1 pt)**

(4). Critique the writer's ways of depicting the frailties and sinfulness of human nature. **(3 pts)**

Topic Two

(1). Explain Okri's sustained infusion of spirituality in the novel as a means of imparting an “enchanted” history. **(1 pt)**

(2). Explore the ways in which the writer employs postcolonial and modern tropes to reclaim a renewed African identity at the intersection of “spirituality” and “veracity”. **(1 pt)**

(3). Provide, from the fictional narrative, examples that reveal the African cult of ancestor veneration. **(1 pt)**

(4). What similarities and differences – political, religious, social, and cultural – would you draw between Nigerian postcolonial social angst and the dream of political reform, and the social, political, and cultural order shaping postcolonial Algeria? **(1 pt)**

(5). Give examples of Algerian postcolonial literature that depicts themes comparable to those developed in the narrative. **(1 pt)**

(6). Do you think the author suggests that “magic realms” may function as a utopian dream of a spiritual world – one that is so indigenously dismal that it can conceal a multitude of sins and deceptions within African mythology and cultural beliefs? Discuss. **(3 pts)**

Abstract

In the past three decades, the rapidly evolving and highly diverse landscape of education has elevated the teaching of culture to a leading focus in both instruction and research. This shift aligns with the growing efforts of social activists, who are advocating for a new era of multiculturalism aimed at fostering cultural and critical literacy as cornerstones of social democracy and academic transformation. Given the prominence of cultural literacy in literature education, this study seeks to explore the impact of using literature as a tool to promote critical cultural literacy, applying the “windows and mirrors” framework. To achieve these ends, the research utilized pre- and post-tests for data collection and analysis, drawing on a randomized sample of 30 second-year English as a Foreign Language learners (EFL). The results demonstrate that the “windows and mirrors” approach to literary readings has enhanced learners’ empathy, tolerance, and inclusion of diverse cultures, broadened their understanding of cultural knowledge, and sharpened their critical literacy skills.

Keywords

Cultural literacy, empathy, inclusion, tolerance, “windows and mirrors” framework

Résumé

Au cours des trois dernières décennies, dans un contexte marqué par une super-diversité et une activité intense, l’enseignement de la culture s’est imposé comme l’emblème d’une branche de pointe de l’enseignement et de la recherche. Ainsi, les militants sociaux accélèrent au-

jourd’hui une ère extraordinaire de multiculturalisme, où l’objectif fondamental est de promouvoir la littératie culturelle et critique en tant que piliers de la démocratie sociale et du changement académique. Face à l’importance croissante de la littératie culturelle dans l’enseignement de la littérature, la présente étude se propose d’examiner l’efficacité de l’utilisation de la littérature pour promouvoir une littératie culturelle critique en adoptant le cadre pédagogique « fenêtres et miroirs ». Pour atteindre cet objectif, la présente recherche s’appuie sur des tests pré- et post-intervention en tant qu’outils de collecte et d’analyse des données. Un échantillon aléatoire de 30 étudiants de deuxième année apprenant l’anglais en tant que langue étrangère a été sélectionné pour participer à cette étude. Les résultats montrent que l’approche pédagogique des « fenêtres et miroirs » appliquée aux lectures littéraires a renforcé l’empathie, la tolérance et l’inclusion des apprenants envers les cultures diverses, élargi leur compréhension des connaissances culturelles, et affiné leurs compétences en littératie critique.

Mots-clés

Littératie culturelle, empathie, inclusion, tolérance, méthodologie « fenêtres et miroirs »

الملخص

على مدى العقود الثلاثة الماضية، وفي ظل بيئة تتسم بتنوع هائل ونشاط ثقافي مكثف، أصبح تعليم الثقافة محركا فعالاً لتعزيز التطور الحاصل في مجال التعليم والبحث. ومن هنا، يبدأ النشطاء الاجتماعيون على تسريع عصر استثنائي من التعددية الثقافية، حيث يتجلّى هدفه الأساسي في تقوية الوعي الثقافي النقدي ويعتبر هذا الأخير ركناً أساسياً من أركان الديمقراطية الاجتماعية والتغيير الأكاديمي. وبناءً على الدور المتزايد للوعي الثقافي في تعليم الأدب، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف فعالية استخدام الأدب لتعزيز الوعي الثقافي النقدي لدى الطلاب من خلال تبني أسلوب ”النوافذ والmiraias“ كمنهجية تعليمية. لتحقيق هذا الهدف، اعتمد البحث على اختبارين أحدياً قبل ثم بعد تبني المنهج قيد الدراسة كأدوات لجمع وتحليل البيانات، واختار الباحث عينة عشوائية مكونة من 30 طالباً من طلاب السنة الثانية في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

أظهرت النتائج في الأخير أن القراءات البلاغية القائمة على منهجية ”النوافذ والmiraias“ ساهمت في تعزيز التعاطف والتسامح والشمولية لدى المتعلمين تجاه الثقافات الأخرى، كما وسعت من معرفتهم بالمحظى الثقافي، وصقلت مهاراتهم الفكرية النقدية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الوعي الثقافي، التعاطف، الشمولية، التسامح، منهجية ”النوافذ والmiraias“