

# The Internet and Cultural / Critical Consciousness in Teaching English Literature for Algerian Students at Bejaia University.

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## Abstract

*Cultural consciousness imposes itself each time there is contact with the other / a foreigner to one's own community. Consequently, it is impossible to teach English language and literature for Algerian students without exposing the cultural issues entailed in the process. Consequently, and in a globalized world wherein both power and prominence are in the hands of the wealthiest, usually represented by the West, students of foreign language and literature should possess a critical consciousness that permits them to perceive the manipulated Western images concerning African identity aimed at absorbing them as any manufactured clichés fashioned for the purpose of colonizing the mind. Subsequently, this article explores the use of the internet, and the literary*

## ملخص

إن الوعي الثقافي يفرض نفسه كلما كان هناك التقاء بالآخر أو بأجنبي عن ثقافة المجموعة. ثم إنه من الصعب تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية وبالأخص الأدب الإنجليزي دون التطرق إلى إشكالية الثقافة أو الثقافات الأخرى، لذلك وفي عالم تسوده العولمة، أين توجد كل مظاهر القوة وخطاباتها في قبضة الأقلية الأكثر ثراء والتي يُمثلها الغرب، لزم على الطلبة الجزائريين التسلح بوعي ثقافي نقدي كفيل بمنحهم القدرة علي فهم وتحليل العبارات المبتذلة والقوالب الجاهزة التي تؤثر سلبيا على هويتهم الإفريقية، لأنها تهدف أساسا إلى تحويلهم ثقافيا إلى عبيد من نوع معاصر. لذلك حاولنا في مقالنا هذا دراسة موضوع استعمال شبكة الإنترنت في تدريس اللغات،

*representations of the other to analyze the interaction of the students with the circulating cultural (negative) images, and their response to them. Furthermore, it uses the experience of Google Group Method that helps to discuss and fashion the critical consciousness of the students without inciting them to hate or reject the other's culture(s), or more dangerously to disdain/obliterate their own.*

وعلاقتها بالصور الأدبية التي تمثل  
 " " أثرها في تفاعل الطالب  
 لصور الثقافية السلبية المنتشرة  
 عبر الشبكة. ولأجل الوصول إلى نتائج  
 أكثر موضوعية عززنا ،  
 تمثلت في استعمال منهجية  
 Google في تدريس مسرح شكسبير  
 لطلبة السنة الأولى ماستر ،  
 وحضارة إنجليزية بجامعة بجاية.

## Introduction:

This article explores the use of internet (a ubiquitous vehicle of cultures), and the literary representation of the 'Other' to analyze the interaction of the students with the circulating cultural (negative) images, and their response to them. Furthermore, it examines the experience of Google Group Method that helps to discuss and fashion the critical consciousness of the students without inciting them to hate or reject the other's culture(s), or more dangerously to disdain /obliterate their own. Thus, the purpose is in fact to create a cultural dialogue which is the best way of consolidating the different cultural elements like religion, race, sex and class through a fruitful discourse by accepting the existence of other cultures without erasing one's own specificities, or claiming superiority over others' cultures.

While proposing to the sample population of students to share discussions about *Othello* through Google Group, we noticed many reactions and comments in the four languages; Tamazight, French, Arabic and English. These comments vary from the impossibility of even considering the proposition since they are either not connected to the web, or they don't own computers. Other students find it interesting and worth engaging since it will launch a web of discussion which is not limited to *Othello* only. Another part of the group seems lost and hesitates to take part. However, and after motivating them by explaining that

their involvement would influence their grades, they agreed to make an effort and to set off in the adventure of discovering Shakespeare's *The Moor of Venice* through Google Groups.

The students are members of the Muslim Amazigh community, sharing with Othello his ancestors' African cultural background. As a result, the students' cultural identity will generate an interaction and identification with Othello because of Shakespeare's controversial alternative of portraying a Muslim Black African man raised into apotheosis at the beginning of the play, and then relegated and metamorphosed into a bloody monster through the machinations of Iago at the end of the play. This contentious depiction of this character will nourish the debate and even indict both the playwright of racism and his play as being a diffuser of Eurocentric myths of racial superiority.

The students' belonging to a group and their self concept-mainly when it is positive-is essential for their academic success. While group belonging constitutes the learners' source of motivation that equips them with behavior patterns, the need to adopt a positive self-image is the foundation stone for their future accomplishments. The aim of this study is to help the students to develop a critical consciousness through which they may challenge any biased representation of their cultural identity through debate between themselves to answer back the center's stereotypical images intended to stigmatize them as being opprobrious and vitriolic.

The research questions that this study attempts to answer through this relatively new experiment are the following:

- 1-What are the major differences between the study of the play in the classroom and the Google group method?
- 2-To what extent does this new way of analyzing the content of the play enhance the students' acquisition of English language and involve them in the issue of cultural identity and consciousness considering the dimensions of universal fusion and globalization?
- 3- What are the limitations and compensations this method entails?

## 1-Presentation of the Study:

It is truly an appealing experiment for the students of English literature and civilization to communicate with both their teacher and their peers through the *Google group method*. This procedure, according to the definition provided by Rachel Quirk and Jessica Colgan is a free service from Google wherein users can join already existing groups or create their own groups. More details are dexterously explained in a seminal article entitled "*Teaching Using Google*" written by Claudio de Paiva Franco (2010), who proffers teachers a brief overview of some Google applications and resources which may strengthen teaching methods whether in face to face, hybrid or online context.

Claudio de Paiva delivers new services and infrequent Google tools that are implementing for classroom activities that are both practical and handy for teachers and learners. Among these services he cites: Google Custom Search, Google Scholar, Google Docs, Google News, Google Reader, Google Translate, Google Buzz<sup>(1)</sup> and Google Groups I propose to explore in this paper in parallel with teaching literature.

Google Group can be constructed following three steps in the link (<http://groups.google.com>) after creating a Gmail account. First, the teacher sets up the group, names it and decides who can view the site. Second, s/he invites the members who are going to participate in the discussion, and third, s/he posts upload information, additional pages, changes the logo and limits the access. Once in the group, the user can share files, invite friends, create pages and participate in discussions. Applying this method to teaching drama involves the students in discussion about the play and its socio-historical context. The name of the group we have created is *othellobejaia2012*; the students were asked to create accounts in Gmail and invited to join the group. Soon after the creation of the group, they started to post their comments, answers and critics.

## 2-Using Google Group Application in teaching Othello:

It is always with apprehension that we introduce a new perspective in teaching mainly when it is not definitely reliable as a teaching material. Yet, experimentation proves that Google Group can be an efficient tool since Google

offers it for free and with no constraints. There were twenty three students in the classroom; yet, only ten of them created accounts and actually took part in the group discussions. It is their last year of studies at the university, and almost all of them prepare visa files to leave Algeria for French universities, heading for further studies and supplementary intellectual background.

Subsequently, introducing the theme of an African Muslim foreigner (Othello) attempting to be integrated in the Venetian (European) society is pertinently inducing for a cultural debate and a fascinating polyphonic symposium in which cultural identity, assimilation and cultural hybridity interact to answer some crucial interrogations related to the cultural belonging and the future of a foreigner in a western (unknown) society. The Western world is both luring and ensnaring to the Algerian student who absorbs a variety of images and clichés that pierce the net to colonize his mind. Subsequently, and since identity formation is a dynamic process that changes and endlessly redefines itself through *contact* with the *Other*, *critical consciousness is necessary* to protect his own identity, respecting others' differences.

Speaking a foreign language requires an engagement with a new/foreign culture and civilization. In this respect, Franz Fanon (1967) writes: "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture to support the weight of a civilization" (p.17-18). However, it does not mean, at the same time, that the learner of a different language than his own should deny his own culture and his own identity for the sake of espousing the culture of the target language, and the diverse cultural images forwarded by the digital space without analysis and criticism.

Algerian students who learn English as a foreign language are closely in touch with the Anglo-Saxon culture and civilization and are consequently influenced by the ideological messages transmitted through internet and tempted by all its freely offered services. For instance, starting from the first year at the University (Bejaia), students imitate the African American speakers emulating their native accent and their intimate way of articulating letters which is visible in the students' written expressions. This unhelpful

influence comes from chatting and short messages sending spread by internet and cell phones. These students indulge themselves in dropping inappropriately some consonants and even writing *slang*<sup>(2)</sup> English while they are supposed to learn correct, simple and academic English as they are not native speakers. Expressions like “I gonna, I wanna, yo man...” are recurrent in the classroom discussions, even overwhelming their written expressions and internet chatting intensifies this linguistic phenomenon. The negative outcome of such linguistic use is that the students loose the correct form of the target language since this kind of language (slang) is constantly changing and dynamic according to the cultural and socio-historical context of the linguistic community from which it emerges.

To teach the students a correct English pronunciation, we believe that our duty as Algerian teachers of a foreign language lies in creating a “cultural distance” between the students’ and the *Other’s* culture without excluding or imposing specificities of any culture over another. This space would permit the dialogue of these cultures without causing the linguistic distortion of the target language on the one hand, nor triggering the foreign learners’ acculturation<sup>(3)</sup> on the other hand.

Studying William Shakespeare’s play *Othello* in the classroom had always been enticing and so tantalizing for the students since it creates a lasting and exciting moment mainly if the teacher shares his entire passion of the world of theatre and literature in general with the learners. Moreover, Shakespeare’s drama offers a beautiful and extremely varied body of written material that is tightly related to the eternal fundamental human issues like love, race, religion, life and death.

Furthermore, a literary work can transcend both time and culture to speak directly to a reader from another country or a different period of history. Being an authentic material for language teaching, a literary text incites the readers to cope with the language intended for native speakers to gain more familiarity with both textual and contextual levels of the work. Hence, the student handles a variety of linguistic uses, array of texts like irony, exposition, narration, argumentation and figures of speech. As for the contextual level of the work, the students are involved with all the questions related to real life that they

themselves are daily confronted with. The theoretical lecture introduces the student into an astute understanding of the dramatic structure, the development of characters, the mechanisms of tragedy, and the context that is politics, questions of background, Shakespeare's biography and Elizabethan /Jacobean life and theatre.

Many students are attracted by re-creating fifteenth century costumes by *Googling* the clothes of the same period while others are interested in the sets, props and lights used in staging the play. Unfortunately, full-scale staging of the play in the classroom is not possible; thus, we proceeded first to the study of the context in which the play had been written, and then, we analyzed the selected scenes that the student had previously prepared.

Othello is a black character and called the Moore all over the play. He is the *other* imagined by William Shakespeare to represent the fifteenth century European hostility and prejudice against foreigners of any origins mainly infidels to the Christian religion. This hostility, as Daniel Vituk argues, was the result of the Elizabethan audience's fear and the collective anxiety about religious conversion felt by Post-Reformation England that focused on the Roman Catholic enemies and their trepidation about the imperial power of the Ottoman Turks, who were conquering and colonizing Christian territories in Europe and the Mediterranean (147).

The term 'Moore' as used in the play refers to the Berbers of North Africa because of the presence of two words "Barbary", and "Mauritania" as argued by Ridley M.A. (1958). However, during this period of history, Cowhig (1985) reported that all Moors, white or black were associated with loads of negative characteristics; being cruel, greedy, inferior, impulsive, aggressive, pagan, devilish or voluptuous. These negative images are re-produced in the play when referring to Othello. Consequently, the students felt emotionally involved with Othello's fate in the dramatic structure of the play because they sympathized with him since they share the same origins. This feeling influenced their response to the play.

Right at the beginning of the first scene of the play, Othello is described by Iago and Roderigo the Venetian characters, as "thick-lips", "thief", "old black ram",

“courser”, “lascivious moor”, “Barbary horse” and so on (I.i.26-27), when they intend to denounce him to Brabantio, Desdemona’s father. The latter’s racist register is not less violent since he calls Othello “sooty bosom / of such a thing as you: to fear not to delight” (I.ii.p.32), when he discovers that he secretly married his daughter.

“Barbary horse” refers to the famous and strong North African horses, yet used by Iago to name Othello, this metaphor reflects the racism of the characters in the play and of Shakespeare’s contemporary audience. Further, the play is set against the backdrop of the war between the Muslim Turks and the Christians and the reader of the play is incessantly confronted with the clash of two civilizations; the heretics / Muslims against the Christians / faithful ones. Consequently, reading such stereotypes is painful for the students who should react defensively against these biased images presented in the play. Yet, the students’ reactions are superficially exposed before introducing the method of Google group to the lecture since reading the text of the play in the classroom leaves little time for a wider discussion of the cultural attacks on Africans, blacks and Muslims. Though the reading is accompanied by swift exegeses the teacher provides, this procedure needs more time to be satisfactory.

Subsequently, introducing Google group method into the lecture maintains *momentum* and personalizes the students’ response by encouraging an extensive reading habit and a critical consciousness to formulate their own points of view to sustain arguments or to refute an opinion among an ongoing group discussion. The student’s critical consciousness<sup>(4)</sup> is her / his ability to recognize the conditions that result in the privileging of one idea over another, how power is used in texts by individuals and groups to privilege one group over another within a particular culture or society. This way of critical thinking is tightly related to stereotype formation and the ways these clichés limit if not distort the students’ modes of thinking and perception that prevent them from personal growth and moral maturity.

### 3- Analysis of the Real Experience:

After creating a Google group (*Othellobejaia2012*), we sent invitations to the members of the group explaining to them that a regular consulting of their e-



mails is compulsory to participate and update the debate. The presence of the teacher in this forum is important since s/he directs and guides the students in their debate. Conceivably, I will be indicted of being motivated by the teacher-centered method, yet it is the preeminent way to correct both the form and content of the student's comments. A moderate authority imposes respect and creates a positive influence and instills order in the digital classroom.

When reading the students' feedback, we noticed that their interventions are not those squat and most of the time awkward comments they used to utter in the classroom. They took more time to think and transform their suggestions and ideas into sentences without any kind of pressure or anxiety. Usually to the question "why did Shakespeare use the racist expressions as 'thick-lips', 'thief', 'old black ram', 'coursers', 'lascivious moor', 'Barbary horse'?" Their answer does not go beyond the shallow physical appearance of the character: "Othello is black and he is different from the white Venetians". Thus, it is the teacher who explains the nature of such racial stereotypes.

In Google group discussion students' comments transcend the text to reach the person of Shakespeare himself and Jacobean society to question their culture and ideology as far as the treatment of the foreigner (Black / Muslim / African) was concerned. A student referred to as A.S said;

A.S: I think that William Shakespeare is a racist in *Othello* because he gave the image that the white man is always superior and always a great winner at the end.

Another one agreed and his comment is:

K.F: Yes, I think so merely because through Othello who is a black man, Shakespeare wants to show to the reader or the audience that the status of the black man in the European society is always inferior even if his rank is a high one.

Another well turned-out comment goes as follows:

H.D: I don't think so because the story of the play is set in Venice and Cyprus; so there is no reference to England, perhaps it is only in Shakespeare's imagination.

A.A: even if the setting is Venice and Cyprus, the former is described as paradise and the latter is just like hell. So, there is still a kind of racism and preference for Europe and Christianity rather than Muslim Turkey.

Through the study, we were also acquainted with other voices; those of silent but brilliant students who during the class lecture hide behind their coyness and introversion yet in front of their laptops give free run to their thoughts and mature commentaries. In addition, the students have enough time to look for other critics and attempt to investigate more issues related to segregation and racism and the way the west fabricate false images about the Africans and non-Christians to influence their choices and their ideologies. For instance, some passages from *Othello* painfully reach the minds of the students since it indicts Africans for bestiality and witchcraft to manipulate the Western mythical character. Among these excerpts we can cite Brabantio's discourse loaded with hatred and contempt against Othello and his race after hearing his secret marriage with Desdemona:

Brabantio: oh thou foul *thief*,  
Where hast thou *stow'd* my daughter?  
Damn'd as thou art, thou hast *enchanted* her  
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,  
(if she in chains of magic were not bound)  
Whether a maid, so tender, fair, and happy,  
So opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd  
The wealthy curled darling of our Nation  
Would ever have (t'incur a general mock)  
Run from her guardage to the *sooty bosom*,  
Of such a thing as thou: to fear not to delight?  
Judge me the world, if 'tis not gross in sense,  
That you thou hast *practis'd* on her with *foul charms*,  
Abused her delicate youth, with *drugs or minerals*,

That weakens motions. I'll have 't disputed on, 'tis probable, and palpable to thinking;  
 I therefore apprehend and do attach thee,  
 For an abuser of the world, a *practiser*,  
 Of arts inhibited, and out of warrants;  
 Lay hold upon him, if he do resist  
 Subdue him, at his peril. (I.ii.p. 32)

Referred to as “the moor” by Iago all over the play, Othello’s origins are Muslim and he represents a potential threat to the peace of the Venetians and their Christian religion. The marriage of Othello and Desdemona reinforces this fear, as the foreigner is now a part of the Venetian society through a mixed marriage, which aroused passionate controversy in the readers of the play since she loved him after hearing the danger he underwent. A student in Google group made an interesting parallel between Othello and an Algerian who went to live in France, and became a legal / permanent resident there by means of marrying a French woman. This young man seduced a French girl who fell in love with him through hearing the perils he underwent in crossing the sea as a “Haraga<sup>(5)</sup>” to reach the shores of Spain and then anonymously traveled to France.

This parallel is significant as it informs of the presence of attentiveness to this social phenomenon and to the way the West receives these unwanted and irregular immigrants. However, Othello is not a “harag”, and even if he valiantly served Venice, he had been metamorphosed by Iago into a murderer who killed his wife and committed suicide at the end after insulting his origins: “I took by the throat the circumcised dog, / and smote him thus”, Stabbing himself (V.II. p. 138). So, we can imagine the fate of a “harag” who intends to introduce Europe as a thief.

As we can see, the students kept a cultural distance by voicing their own concerns as young Algerians who perhaps would live the same situations; they gained a kind of critical consciousness about the way a foreigner is treated in Europe or elsewhere in the world and that racism is a timeless hitch that erodes societies from within.

## Conclusion:

Introducing Google group to the teaching of literature and specifically Shakespeare's *Othello* proved to be valuable and instructive for the members of the group. This method provides more time for the students to deepen their personal analysis through acquiring an extensive reading habit that permits the deconstruction of a literary text. Moreover, being connected to Google permits them to re-visit the past, and wander in the Elizabethan / Jacobean society through internet, this smart window that transports them to the fifteenth century stage and audience, and introduce them to the different cultural codes.

Furthermore, Google group method results on the raising of the student's critical consciousness through reading the comments of many critics about the issues of race and religion that are usually the sources of cultural exclusion and segregation among the nations. Being so close to the protagonist through googling his diverse dimensions and portrayals by film-makers and theatrical versions constricts the gap between the fifteenth century and the modern times and reinforces the importance of theatre as a powerful cultural and social phenomenon that is capable of producing certain images, counter-images and transforming other ones for the sake of serving and / or indicating any system's shortcomings. Moreover, this consciousness incites the students to question cultural images and stereotypes and answer back through a judicious argumentation in order to destroy any attempt or negative influence against their cultural identity. Pertaining to a group reinforces one's own self-confidence and instructs students the art of debating through interaction with the teacher or other interlocutors with respect to ethics. After being assaulted by hegemonic Western discourse, students will deconstruct these images to construct a counter-hegemonic one defending and shielding their own cultural identity.

Another important result through using Google group is the surprising creativity of the students who proposed to provide another end to *Othello* that is re-writing the play out of sympathy to this character, and to correct the fate of this foreigner. Yet, others disagreed with her, commenting that it would be shallow if Othello would win at the end and in fact it is this kind of tragic end that eternalizes him in the reader's mind

Though the results obtained through Google group can be achieved in the classroom, yet, it needs supplementary time and extensive efforts from both the teacher and the students. Google group method proved to be an important means in teaching; however, it cannot be generalized and applied to all the students of the classroom since not all them can have a computer or/and a daily access to internet. From the 23 students who joined the experiment only 10 of them were regularly consulting their mails and participating in Google group discussion. A few students justified their lack of interaction by the difficulty they encountered since they should wait for hours to accede to university's computers. Yet, this belief is effortlessly refutable as the new generation's interaction with technology is ubiquitous. This experiment is in fact a work in progress since we intend to follow Google Group discussion for the coming academic years for a deeper exploration of this method.

## End Notes:

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(1)- Google Custom Search creates a search engine according to one's own needs by including specific websites that are pertinent to the research avoiding unexpected content. The link is (<http://www.google.com/cse>).

Google Scholar provides an academic scholarly search from books, theses, abstracts from different subject areas and from a wide range of academic publishers, professionals and universities. (PDF and DOC files.)

Google Docs is a web-based word processing, spreadsheet and presentation program that enables the creation of documents and help keeping an electronic student's diary, building a portfolio, sharing the course agenda, completing writing assignments and comparing experiments online.

Google reader is a tool whereby teachers and students can read shared items and also comment on the news articles.

Google Buzz allows sharing a wide range of documents (texts, videos, pictures) with colleagues or publicly. It requires a Gmail account and is available for mobiles as well.

Franco.C.D.P (<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Franco-Google/>)

(2)- Michael Adams (2009) explains it as "the area of speech in which biological, social and aesthetic elements of human experience meet. It is liminal language, a transition between or

among a broader linguistic interest and motives, and it is often impossible to tell, even in context which motives or interest it serves.” (P.xiii).

- (3)-Acculturation is a term that refers to the notion that an individual from one culture must adapt to a new culture. Moreover, it refers to the case in which an individual's first culture is submerged in the new culture and there is often a loss of first-cultural values, beliefs and behaviour patterns. Schumann (1986) explains it as the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group (p. 397). However, this notion is negative since it forces a cultural divorce with the learner's first culture.
- (4)- Paulo Freire(1994) defines critical consciousness as the state of becoming aware of the historical, social, and cultural mores or ideologies that create what is acceptable or not within a particular society.
- (5)-Haraga comes from the classical Arabic word “haraqa” which means to burn something. It is taken by common people in dialectal Arabic and designs traveling through the sea without official permission for the sake of escaping one's country (Algeria) to live in Europe without a visa. Algerians resort to such method mainly after the black decade of terrorism when all Algerians are considered as terrorists suspected of terrorist acts and thus refused everywhere.

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