

## ***The Challenges of Designing Drama Syllabus to Applied English Students: ISLG Students as a Case Study***

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**Abstract:** Survey-based, the paper evaluates the syllabus of a classical drama course designed for first year applied students (2016 - 2019) at the Higher Institute of Languages of Gabes, Tunisia (ISLG). The paper will refer to the problem of capturing the attention of business English learners who have often asked about the use of attending a drama tutorial in the age of digital humanities. It studies the challenges of teaching and also learning drama in a Post-Jasmine Tunisian revolution context. The lack of motivation is the main challenge for teaching drama in a foreign context. Learners face difficulties at grasping the significance of a classical dramatic text and they often get blocked at the literal meanings of the text. The present paper aims at showing the role of redesigning drama syllabus in achieving better learning outcomes, in creating active learners and in making the drama course a more beneficial course to business English students. A qualitative method will be deployed to evaluate the drama syllabus, to perceive students' preferences and to fix new pedagogic parameters. Data analysis is meant to recognize the pedagogic needs of business English students, to compare them to fundamental students and to understand their challenges. Developing certain awareness about the challenges of learners is a fundamental step for reaching pedagogic efficiency. To reach the conclusion about the importance of students' engagement, the paper will be divided into two major parts. The first part approaches the problem of motivation and students' preference for modern drama over classical drama by foregrounding a gender-oriented change in students' attitudes throughout the course. The second section deals with an analysis of the survey and it highlights the role of variety in enriching drama syllabus. The final goal of the paper is to conclude that teaching drama in a foreign context becomes pleasurable for both teacher and learner when students start to be involved and to create a dialogue between different and incomparable cultures. Some recommendations for redesigning the drama booklet will be suggested in the light of the students' responses. Responding to the needs of learners is another tool for achieving pedagogic efficiency.

**Keywords:** Drama Syllabus, EFL, ISLG, Jasmine Revolution, Learner-oriented Methods, Motivation, Pedagogic Efficiency, Qualitative data, Syllabus design, Fundamental vs applied branches.

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الملخص: تتطرق ورقة البحث الى تقييم كيفية تصميم مادة المسرحية الكلاسيكية لطلبة السنوات الاولى تطبيقية 2016-2019 بالمعهد العالي للغات قابس تونس. تشير ورقة البحث الى تحفيز طلبة الإنجليزية الاعمال وتوعيتهم حول اهمية تعلم المسرحية في عصر الرقنة. يتناول الجزء الاول مشكلة تحفيز الطلبة وشرح اسباب تفضيلهم المسرح الحديث على المسرح الكلاسيكي. يتناول الجزء الثاني تحليل اراء الطلاب كما يبرز دور التنوع في اثراء حصص المسرحية. يتلخص الهدف النهائي في استخلاص متعة تدريس وتعلم المسرحية في سياق أجنبي واهمية دور الطلاب في خلق حوار الحضارات. الكلمات المفتاحية: مناهج تدريس المسرحية، المسرحية في سياق أجنبي، التحفيز، الفروع الاساسية والفروع التطبيقية.

## 1. Introduction

The present paper focuses on the challenges of designing a drama syllabus to First year applied students who have business interests and who have shown a lack of motivation, especially at the beginning of the semester. A syllabus is defined as “the specification of a teaching program or pedagogic agenda which defines a particular subject for a particular group of learners (Widdowson, 1990: 127). In other words, syllabus design is a fundamental step within the pedagogic chain as it creates certain dialogue between the learner and the teacher. In fact, the interests of the learners should be taken into consideration while designing a syllabus.

Syllabus design is a challenging task because it is a fundamental in the learning process. Indeed, “the syllabus serves as a roadmap for students to refer as they wind their way through the course” (Rodriguez, 2015: 279). Literary syllabus design and redesign has become a challenging task in a postmodern context where humanities are in peril. In this respect, the choice of a literary syllabus (drama in specific) for first years applied students at the ISLG has been a challenge because students have business orientations.

## 2. Literature Review

Many Tunisian scholars have evaluated the implementation of the LMD system in Tunisia and they have suggested the improvement of the quality of teaching by opting for new methods of teaching, by incorporating ICT tools and by reforming syllabus. In this respect, Zriba (2014) commented on the richness of the cultural studies program. In his, ‘Appraising Teaching/Learning English Cultural Studies in LMD System in Tunisia,’ Zriba wrote: “*Reading into the official [Tunisian] syllabus, it is crucial to notice the richness and diversity of cultural studies courses*” (2014: 5).

In the same context of the richness of the official syllabus, the present paper will explore the richness of the drama syllabus at the university of Gabes and it will examine the similarities and differences between applied and fundamental English drama courses. The present paper argues that applied English students tend to be more likely interested in culture and literary studies. Thus, the drama texts should be well selected to meet the expected learning outcomes and to motivate business English students.

Moving to a boarder level and to the issue of syllabus design in the Arab Maghreb, Arbi (2012) has suggested the necessity of adding movies to the drama syllabus to animate classes and to motivate students. She invites literature teachers to “*integrate the cultural knowledge in EFL learning and literature classroom by having students revealed their perceptions of target culture through the implementation of movies which are considered*

*very motivating*” (Arbi, 2012: 13). In the same context of using films as sources of motivation, will refer in the present paper to the efficiency of using films while teaching Shakespearean excerpts.

In a similar vein, Berrahel (2009) focuses on the difficulties of teaching literature in a foreign context; she suggests the collaboration between linguistic and literary elements. She highlights the importance of authenticity and requests literature pedagogic teams to coordinate and “[to use] a basic grammar review text and supplement it with a literary reader that introduces students to authentic literary texts” (Berrahel, 2009: 56). The role of authentic language will be further developed in the present paper by referring to Nunan’s (1988) functional national syllabus and to the necessity of linking linguistic to literary skills.

Other scholars, have linked syllabus design to the post-revolutionary Tunisian political system and noticed the link between Tunisian identity and foreign language learning. In this respect, in her *‘on Identity Politics in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia and Implications on English Language Teaching: A Rebuttal of Closure’* the Tunisian scholar Mzoughi (2014) has focused on the similarities between the political context of novel and the Tunisian political scene after the Jasmine revolution. She asserts: “*As a reference novel, Segu reflects on how both secular and religious Tunisians, can be two contrasting breaths of the same spirit*” (Mzoughi, 2014: 5).

This argument will be discussed by showing the role of revolution in creating certain political diversity and pluralism in Tunisia after a long period of repression and uniformity. This paper, focused on the effects of the Tunisian revolution on drama syllabus design and the way students reach the choice of political texts.

In addition to the political elements, gender issues can be taken into consideration while designing drama syllabus. In their, Ziad and Ouhmiche (2019) highlighted the importance of investigating gender bias in learning materials. They (2019: 786) state that:

The role played by the teacher in helping learners adopt a critical attitude towards gender representation is of capital importance. It is hardly surprising that many language teachers find this issue somewhat irrelevant to them given that they spend huge amounts of time on direct teaching responsibilities. These views, however, can easily be challenged if these teachers are directed to reflect on some of their usual practices with learners, which can be unintentionally discriminatory in nature. This heightened awareness of one’s own practices can be transformed into a critical eye that discerns different forms of gender bias.

The paper will develop the importance of gender by adopting a gender-based analysis of some classical dramatic excerpts. The aim behind raising the importance of both political and gender elements is to show the role of authenticity in capturing applied students’ interests in classical drama courses.

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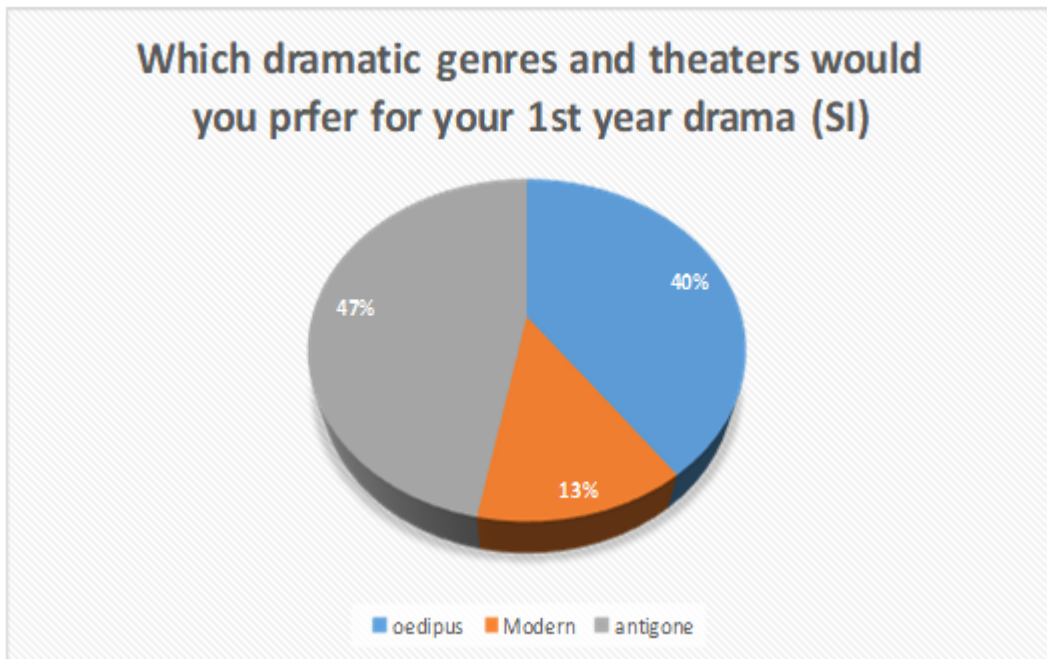
### 3. Drama Syllabus and Variety

#### 3.1 Greek Drama

In order to motivate students and to raise their awareness about the interdisciplinary nature of literature, I have opted for various types of syllabi while redesigning the drama booklet. I relied on a content-based approach while selecting excerpts from Greek tragedy. “The stimulus for content-based syllabus is the notion that unlike science, history or mathematics, language is not a subject in its own right, but merely a vehicle for communicating about something else”. (Nunan, 1988: 38)

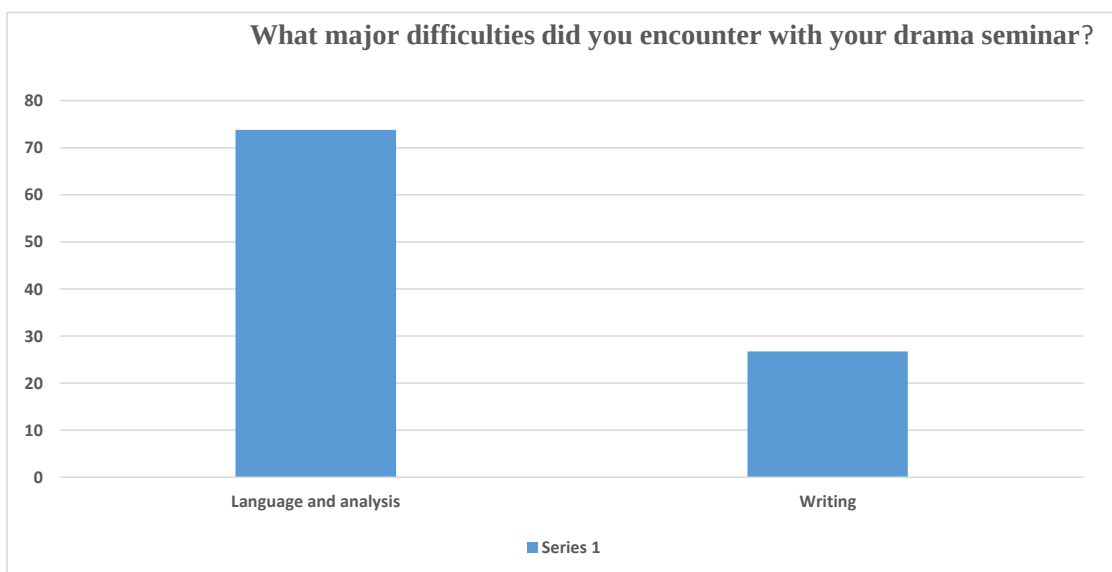
In this respect, I paid attention to the thematic concerns and to the tragic aspects of the protagonists. For example, I have given priority to content while choosing to study the characteristics of a Classical Greek tragic hero. I selected the scene of anagnorisis from Sophocles’ Oedipus the King because poetic language (which is marked by the profuse employment of rhetorical questions “where am I? is this my voice That is borne on the air? What fate has come to me” (Sophocles, 1996: 55), the use of the emphatic form “I did it” and the diction which is evocative of awe “agony, pain, suffering”) contributes to present the tragic dimension of Oedipus, to confer a mood of pathos and to form the theme of oscillation between free will and predestination. While asked about their suggestions for 1st year Drama course for the first Semester, (What plays or literary periods would you have suggested for your 1st year Drama course) six out of fifteen students proposed Oedipus as an essential part of the Drama course (S1), seven students opted for Antigone and two students chose modern drama as part of the syllabus.

Students opted for classical drama and they chose plays that are familiar to them. The rationale behind this choice is that they have a priori knowledge about the myth of Oedipus and they identify with the universal experience of the protagonist. I noticed that students sympathized with the tragic doom of Oedipus and they were actively involved in group discussions about Oedipus as a decision maker or as a victim of his own fate. We deduce through this active involvement that students become much more motivated when they identify with the dramatic experience of the character. I also find out that teaching drama in a foreign context should start with cross cultural texts and with myths students are familiar with.



### 3.2 Syllabus Design and Shakespeare

Choosing a Shakespearean passage has been another challenging task because the Shakespearean language is riddled with the use of archaic words. In fact, while asked about the major difficulties encountered (**What were your main difficulty/(ies) in your Drama Course? Language, analysis, writing, other?**), eleven out of fifteen students revealed that they had difficulties with language and during the drama sessions they have often complained about the difficulty of understanding the literal meaning of some words (especially when it is related to excerpts from some Shakespearean plays).



This alarming rate indicates that the majority of students are blocked at the level of words. This difficulty enables them to move to the stage of deep analysis or to perform a good piece of literary writing. The learners' 'remarkable block at the superficial meaning of some Shakespearean excerpts stems from the differences between the jargon used by the renaissance Adam and the postmodern Tunisian learners. To find a remedy for this difficulty, I inserted the modern version of the selected Shakespearean passages within the booklet. Apart from the linguistic obstacles, learners find difficulties at the level of analysis and they display a superficial analysis which shows the lack of deep reflection. Indeed, the majority of students are victimized by the technological invasion which has contributed to reproduce passive learners and has affected the faculty of thinking.

To find a remedy for this problem, I have encouraged learners to refer to some film adaptations of some Shakespearean plays and to visualize some scenes. For instance, I have chosen to work on the content of Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy because it represents Hamlet as a renaissance thinker and it raises philosophical questions concerning human existence.

My rationale behind choosing this soliloquy is that it contains a universal appeal about the essence of the human being. I have selected Franco Zeffirelli (1990) modern film production of Hamlet because it has a special camera touch. Indeed, the camera movement highlights the facial expression of Mel Gibson and it stresses his exaggerated weariness. What is specific about *"Mel Gibson's Hamlet is [that he is] full of quite different emotions, depending on the objects and aspects addressed in the various lines, but he begins and ends the scene in resignation and sorrow"* (Johannes Riis, 2003: 143).

This emotional pathos is meant to touch learners about the embarrassment of Hamlet because of the remarkable political corruption and to make them sympathize with the hero's existential dilemma about the essence of life. In this respect, Zeffirelli puts an extra dim light inside the Elsinore castle and he directs the camera in a professional way.

The choice of this scene is meant to raise Tunisian students' interest about political issues in a Post Tunisian Revolution context when democracy has taken a new shape and political diversity has been generated. In fact, I recognized that students have acquired a critical spirit: in many occasions they have linked the dramatic text to a Tunisian context and they tend to have a sarcastic tone about the national political context. For example, when we dealt with the theme of regicide in Shakespeare, a student affirmed that regicide in a post revolution context has taken a new shape as it is based on killing the individuality of the citizen and on forcing him to serve the political dominant groups. Another student raised the issue of political existence and she claimed that the revolution endowed citizens with a sense of freedom and political diversity and the new dilemma becomes whether to accept or not to accept the politically and ideologically different other.

### 3.3 Modern Drama

In the same context of making students aware of the development of the history of thought from Greek to modern age, the syllabus encompasses excerpts from modern drama which offers another definition of tragedy. Unlike the Aristotelian presentation of the error of judgment as a defining feature of the tragic hero, Arthur Miller defines the

tragic hero as an “individual attempting to gain his rightful place in society...ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing-his sense of personal dignity”.

In order to motivate applied students and to introduce them to the preoccupations of modern characters, I relied on a functional notional approach. In his *Syllabus Design*, David Nunan defines the functional-notional syllabus using the following terms: “functions may be described as the communicative purposes for which we use language, while notions are the conceptual meanings (objects, entities, states of affairs, logical relationships and so on) expressed through language” (Nunan, 1988: 35).

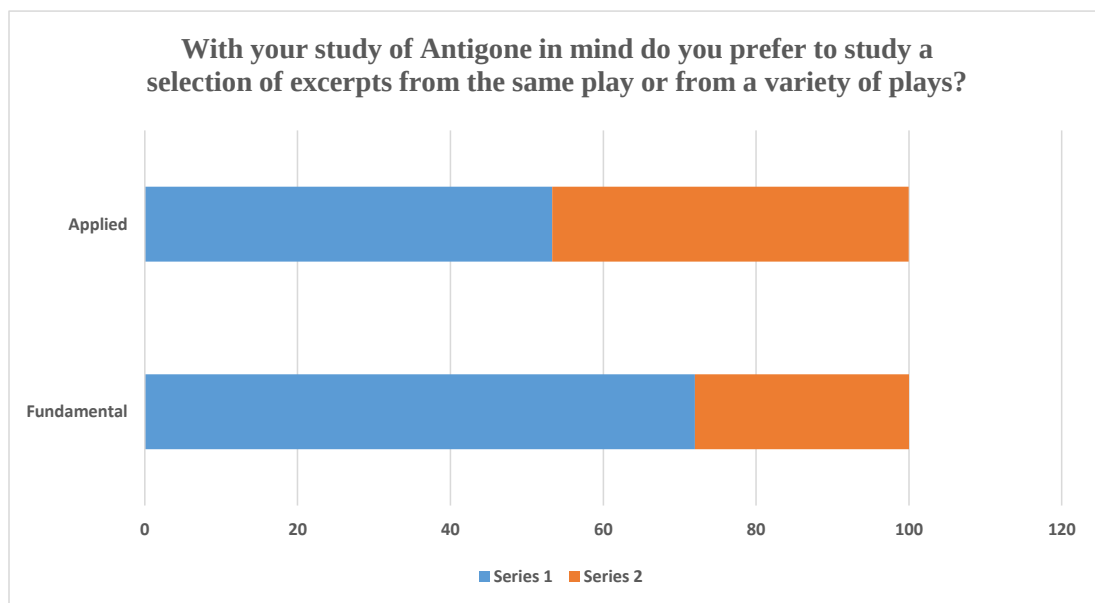
Put differently, the functional notional trend is based on creating a smooth link between form and semantic content and it aims at developing students’ communication, writing and critical skills. In this context, language use, the type of dialect used by characters, fragmented speech, fragmented pronunciation and grammatical errors are taken into consideration while selecting excerpts from modern plays. In other words, not only does the syllabus design focus on the connection between form and content, but it is also meant to introduce students to the British and American culture. For instance, the rationale behind inserting an extract from Tennessee Williams’s *Glass Menagerie* is to help students get acquainted with the Southern American culture, to be cognizant of the preoccupations of the modern American Adam and to be introduced to the American home.

The passage gives learners an idea about Laura Wingfield’s family whose members are facing financial difficulties after being left by the father. Her son (Tom) is frustrated because he “makes a slave of himself” to do the rent. His ironic tone shows his dissatisfaction with playing the role of the breadwinner of his family. In a nutshell, the passage from the family play offers learners an understanding of the cacophony of voices, the disharmony and the gap between members of Wingfield’s American Southern family. The family’s continuous conflicts aim at inviting learners to recognize that the American dream of family union is a myth.

### **3.4 Teaching Sophocles’ *Antigone* in a Post-Revolution Tunisian Context**

Unlike the first semester which is based on separate excerpts from different plays, the second semester syllabus dealt with analyzing Sophocles’ *Antigone* in the two previous years. The main focus was on the complexity of plot, the tragic dimension of characterization, universal themes and the role of the chorus. Applied students faced many difficulties while dealing with a Greek context. Indeed, cultural remoteness is another challenge of teaching Greek, British and American drama in a Tunisian context where learners have a limited knowledge about foreign cultures.

In relation to the main objective of showing that the needs of learners should be taken into consideration while designing and redesigning the drama syllabus, the questionnaire is helpful as it detects the response of students regarding the second semester second drama syllabus. While asked the following question: “with your study of *Antigone* in mind, do you prefer to study a selection of excerpts from the same play or a selection of dramatic excerpts from a variety of plays?” 18 out of 25 fundamental students answered that they prefer a selection of excerpts from the same play. The majority of applied students (9) out of 15 say that they prefer a selection of dramatic excerpts from various plays.



In Explaining his motivations behind preferring to study a play fundamental student 12 wrote: “I prefer to study the whole play to establish a continuity and a link between ideas.” Fundamental Student 8 adds: “I prefer to study the whole play; that’s how we can better understand and analyze it”. The reaction of applied students is totally different. On the other hand, applied student 1 explains: “*different excerpts can help me to know about different characters and different types of drama*”.

One of the Applied students who is keen on having a whole play instead of selected excerpts argues: “*I want a whole play because I get familiarized with its content and I do not find difficulties in the exam*”. This answer is limited compared to the response of fundamental students because it has a short-term objective which is reduced into exam preparation. It is clear that the reactions of fundamental and applied students differ because learners do not share the same objectives. While fundamental students have a long-term vision and they are working to enhance their analytical skills, applied students have a short-term vision and they are concerned with exams as they know that the literature module will be omitted in the second year. We deduce through the different responses that the response, the level, the needs of learners should be taken into consideration while preparing a drama syllabus.

#### 4. A Gender Oriented Analysis

First years applied English students faced many difficulties while dealing with *Antigone* and they were not motivated at the beginning of the semester. I noticed a change at the level of the students’ attitude only when they started developing an awareness about the universal dimension of the play. Male and female students do not react the same way with the content of *Antigone*. Male students were active participants in class discussions related to the theme of political corruption, the dichotomy between ethics and politics, political tragedy, power and justice.

Most applied male students were comparing the political scene in Thebes to the political situation of a Post-Revolution Tunisia. In fact, “*democracy brings into question the narrow definition of the political [system] construed by Creon.*” (Chanter, 2011: 84). In the same context, some students were keen on rethinking the notion of democracy in a post Revolution Tunisia and they added that democracy is still limited as the ideologically different other is considered as an enemy. They asserted that the violent punishment of Antigone is a reminder of the atrocious assassination of some political figures in Tunisia. This type of discussion made classroom discussions beneficial as learners moved from being passive to becoming active participants.

Unlike male learners who have shown an interest in the political dimension of the play, female students appreciate the audacious side of Antigone and they compare the social position of Antigone to their situation and to the position of the southern Tunisian woman. Like Antigone who is marginalized because she disrespects the social rules, some Southern women are victimized by the patriarchal mindset of their parents. In the session related to gender issues, many female students expressed their resentment against the social conventions. For example, one student complained the way her father guides her and chooses her way of dressing. We deduce through the different discussions that the drama session becomes pleasurable when students start getting personally involved and when they succeed at creating a cross-cultural dialogue.

### **5. Redesigning the Drama Booklet: Recommendations**

In the same context of evaluating and of redesigning the drama syllabus for applied students, students were invited to suggest a dramatic genre. Because of time constraints, because of the inability to deal with tragedy and comedy in one semester and in order to introduce students to various literary periods and dramatic genres, the teaching team has decided to discuss the notion of tragedy in the first semester and to move to comedy in the second semester. We decided to start from Greek comedy, to deal with extracts from Shakespearean comedies and to focus on the comedy of manners.

In this respect, I suggested dealing with a situational orientation to teach the comedy of manners. Situational syllabus creates a link between language and “*the situational contexts in which it occurs*” (Mohseni, 2008: 1). An extract from Oscar Wilde’s *A Woman of no Importance* has been chosen as it is characterized by the remarkable use of epigrams and irony of situation. This type of irony is meant to lampoon the triviality of the English upper class. The gap between what is said and what is done crops up when Lady Caroline tries to defend Mrs. Allonby because of her noble origins, but she is in reality gossiping about her: “*it is said, of course, that she ran away twice before she was married.... I myself don’t believe she ran more than once*” (Wilde, 2013: 7) Lady Caroline’s gossip of her guest, exemplifies the pettiness of the upper class. It is meant to touch learners and to endow them with “a deeper understanding not just of themselves but of what is to be human” (Johnson and O’Neill, 1991: 12). In other words, the drama session aims at inviting learners to be personally involved.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, redesigning the drama programme for applied students and choosing to deal with texts that motivate them is a challenging task. Starting from the belief in the necessity of establishing ‘synergy with the objectives of educational reforms to conform to what is expected from the role of teaching, learning and evaluation’ (Kerma and Ouahmiche, 2018: 125), students’ reactions, teachers’ recommendations and pedagogic implications were taken into consideration while redesigning the new drama booklet. The drama syllabus should be composed of different texts which will allow students compare the literary periods; the various approaches can also add an authentic touch to the drama session. “*Drama in education uses the same tools employed by actors in the theatre. But while in the theatre everything is contrived for the benefit of the audience, in the classroom drama everything is contrived for the benefit of the audience, in classroom drama everything is contrived for the benefit of learners*” (Wessels, 1987: 8).

Accordingly, the motivation of students should be taken into consideration while preparing drama syllabus. The contribution of the present paper lies in highlighting the importance of cultural and political contexts in teaching classical drama. Innovative ways of teaching, redesigning the drama syllabus in accordance with the students’ needs and continuous coordination meetings designed by the teaching teams are necessary for reaching pedagogic efficiency.

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## Appendix (1) : Student Survey –Fall 2017- ISLG<sup>1</sup>

**Q1. In 4 words, describe your experience of your 1<sup>st</sup> year drama class in SI and SII?**

1<sup>st</sup> Year Drama Course- SI: 1...../ 2..... /  
3...../ 4.....

1<sup>st</sup> Year Drama Course- SII: 1...../ 2...../ 3...../ 4.....

So, would you say you wish to study Drama in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year Applied English as well?

- Yes, I do.

REASON.....

- No, I don't.

REASON.....

**Q2: What is it you gained mostly from the *Antigone* in your SII Drama Seminar? (\*seminar is a class offered for a small group of students at university)**

- How to listen to the protagonists, understand their motives, and have sympathies for their suffering and be heedful of the Greek tragedy's unity of time, space, and action.
- How to recognize the plot-structure of Greek tragedy and its separate parts (prologue, episode, finale, chorus, etc.) as well as mentally respond to the protagonists' and antagonists' dramatic monologues and dialogues, bear witness to their pain, understand their weaknesses, and still disagree with their moral choices.
- How to consider the righteousness of the protagonists' actions, the implications (consequences) of their daring deeds, and the imperfection of their persons while yet being heroes.
- How to recognize their frail humanity in the play's moments of reversal and recognition (as when Ismene's moment of recognition by supporting Antigone in her trial, rather than earn her forgiveness, incurred her sister's wrath; or when Creon's recognition of his wrong could not alter the foreboding of the blind prophet, Tiresias, of death paid with death (his son's death for Antigone's; his wife's death for the desecration of Polynices' corpse).

- Other.....  
.....  
...

**Q3: The *Antigone* you read for your SII drama seminar is**

- the last part of Sophocles' trilogy of the Theban Legend.
- a tragedy by Euripides.
- a travel via words and imagination to ancient Thebes.
- a Greek tragedy by Sophocles.

<sup>1</sup> The present survey is prepared in collaboration with my colleague Selma Helal who shared the same experience of teaching drama to applied English students at the ISLG.

**Q4: Are there any scenes from the *Antigone* that you particularly remember, Why?**

.....  
 REASON.....  
 .....

**Q5: To what extent did your reading of the play affect you,**

**As a student:** very little

..... very much

REASON.....

.....

**As a person:** very little

..... very much

REASON.....

.....

**Q6: Would you say a drama course as part of a literature module in your major is**

- irrelevant
- not interesting
- required
- important
- useful
- interesting
- enjoyable
- enriching

**Q7: With your study of the *Antigone* in mind, do you prefer to study:**

- a selection of excerpts from the same play
- a selection of dramatic excerpts from a variety of plays
- a selection of dramatic excerpts from a variety of dramatic traditions and theaters

REASON(S).....

.....

**Q8: Which dramatic tradition the *Antigone* belongs to? Which theater?**

- Comedy
- Tragedy
- Satyr
- Classical
- Elizabethan
- Jacobean
- Modern

**Q9: Which dramatic genres and theaters do you prefer and would suggest for your 1<sup>st</sup> year Drama**

**course:**

SI.....SII.....

.....

**Q10: Overall, what major difficulties did you encounter with your literature module, and particularly in your Drama Seminar (Language, analysis, connecting to the play, class discussion, other?)**

.....  
.....  
.....

**Q11: What skills, if any, did the course help you develop? How did it add to your knowledge?**

.....  
.....