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Polish university students' and recent graduates' reflections on discussing controversial topics in American literature courses: a preliminary qualitative study

Abstract: Exploring contentious subjects in literature courses can provide students with cognitive, social, and emotional benefits (Flynn & Rivera 2022; Rybakova et al. 2013). Hand and Levinson (2012) note that discussion is commonly considered as the most effective means to explore sensitive topics in the classroom. According to Flynn and Rivera (2022), teachers should seek appropriate pedagogical approaches to engage students in meaningful discussions on controversial issues. Critical pedagogy, most famously promoted by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator striving for social justice, may be useful in foreign literature classes to help create an inclusive environment for awareness-raising discussions on challenging topics, especially concerning social inequities and politics (Darder et al. 2009; Kincheloe 2008; McLaren 2009). This research explores Polish university students' and recent graduates' perceptions of discussing controversial topics in American literature classes. Written critical reflection prompts were administered to fifteen Polish university students and graduates to gather qualitative data, which were subsequently evaluated using content analysis. The study revealed that classroom discussions on sensitive issues can benefit Polish students, provided that American literature instructors remain impartial, promote inclusivity, and raise awareness of cultural and linguistic differences between Poland and the United States. In light of this, critical pedagogy is recommended as an effective approach to teaching controversial topics.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, language teaching, higher education, American literature, contentious topics, Polish university students and graduates, critical reflections

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1. Introduction

This article addresses the research gap regarding students' and graduates' reflections on discussing sensitive subject matter in foreign literature courses. A qualitative study was conducted to discover how students and graduates representing two Polish universities perceive discussions on contentious topics in American literature classes. The results revealed that, albeit challenging, said debates can stimulate students' intellectual development and increase their sensitivity to controversial issues. Influenced by various philosophies, critical pedagogy, widely associated with Paulo Freire's legacy, integrates theory and practice to counteract social injustice. With its roots in critical theory developed by neo-Marxian scholars of the Frankfurt School, such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the critical approach encourages students to question the status quo and actively oppose any forms of socio-political oppression (Darder et al. 2009; Kincheloe 2008; McLaren 2009). Promoting inclusivity and student empowerment, as well as counteracting teacher bias, critical pedagogy can facilitate classroom exploration of emotive topics.

2. Literature review

Flynn and Rivera (2022) argue that exploring controversial topics in literature classes can enhance adolescent and young adult students' socio-emotional growth. The authors highlight that the practice has been found to heighten learners' perceptiveness to diverse viewpoints, develop critical thinking skills, increase compassion and self-confidence, help question harmful assumptions, and provide meaningful insights into personal struggles. They also note that teaching controversial literature is conducive to constructive dialogue and the pursuit of social equity. Similarly, yet focusing specifically on young adult literature, Rybakova et al. state that "[t]he goal for raising hard topics in the classroom [...] is for students to recognize injustice, question the status quo, develop their own opinions about others, and learn how to overcome the angst and pains of adolescence" (2013: 39). Hand and Levinson (2012) note that discussion is widely considered as the most effective method of exploring contentious topics in the classroom. They also explain that exposing students to their peers' diverse ideas and values is more impactful than lecturing on a contentious subject.

According to Flynn and Rivera, "English teachers should select their pedagogical approaches to controversial literature wisely as to promote more opportunities for students to discuss these debatable topics in a safe and sensitive classroom environment" (2022: 156). Critical pedagogues postulate that the classroom be an inclusive, dialogic environment where previously silenced voices can be heard and respected. Hence, with its emphasis on learning about various contexts related to discussed issues, critical pedagogy encourages students to broaden their perspectives and be more receptive to the intricacies of human experience (Kincheloe 2008; McArthur 2010; Motta 2013). In light of

this, critical pedagogy, promoting openness to diversity, constructive dialogue, and the pursuit of social justice, can be an appropriate approach to teaching about controversial topics in literature classes. However, it is vital that discussions during courses complying with critical pedagogy be led in a secure, inclusive environment; otherwise, students and instructors may experience tension and anxiety in the classroom (Serrano et al. 2017).

Shin and Crookes (2005) conducted a case study in two EFL courses in South Korea, aiming to integrate critical pedagogy-informed components into the existing program and enable junior and senior high school students to concurrently improve their language skills and criticality. While the courses in question were culture- rather than literature-oriented, students were expected to read several assigned readings and engage in discussions on challenging topics. In both cases, student-centered classroom discussions allowed numerous course participants to express their diverse experiences freely, enhanced their critical thinking, and made learning more relevant, resulting in a sense of confidence and autonomy. Only one student deemed such classes less efficient compared to traditional lecture-based courses. Notably, although students agreed that discussing contentious topics in a foreign language was challenging, for most of them striving to do so increased their awareness of the purpose of foreign language learning.

In the context of language learning in higher education, using a particular literary work as a point of reference, Derince (2011) conducted a project involving Turkish university students of English, who investigated critical pedagogy issues within the context of Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel, *Brave New World* (1932). The project fostered collaboration and inclusivity among students. Furthermore, the learners' concluding observations demonstrated that the course enhanced their language competence and boosted the relevance of the learning process.

Also in the context of higher education, Motta (2013) attempted to implement critical pedagogy in an MA course at a renowned university. The objective was to foster students' openness to alternative viewpoints and promote social justice. Although the author did not classify the endeavor as a literature course, its purpose strongly resonates with the socially-oriented aims of tackling contentious subjects in literature classes. However, the pedagogical approach challenging hierarchical classroom structure and requiring increased participants' involvement evoked mixed reactions among the students. While some considered such education unreliable and unsatisfactory, others saw it as an opportunity to challenge firmly entrenched harmful majoritarian ideas, thus increasing underprivileged students' sense of inclusion.

3. The present study

This section aims to explain how the present study was conducted. The first subsection provides information about the research question and objectives. Subsequently, there is a description of the employed methodology, providing details concerning the research

instrument, ethical considerations, and the method of data analysis. Finally, the third subsection characterizes the research participants.

3.1 Goals and the research question

The study was designed to discover Polish university students' and recent graduates' perceptions of discussing controversial topics in American literature classes. The objective was to explore the benefits and downsides of said debates in foreign literature classes. Also, the study sought to determine whether critical pedagogy may serve as an effective pedagogical tool in the discussed context. In light of this, the following research question was posed: What are the perceptions of Polish university students and graduates of discussing controversial subjects in American literature classes?

3.2 Methodology

Critical theory, informing critical pedagogy, is also at the heart of critical reflection, aimed at identifying and analyzing the power relations that influence the processes under inquiry (Brookfield 2009). Besides, according to Ochieng (2009: 16, emphasis in original),

Qualitative methods are highly appropriate for questions where preemptive reduction of the data will prevent discovery. If the purpose is to learn from the participants in a setting or a process the way *they* experience it, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience, the researcher needs methods that will allow for discovery and do justice to their perceptions and the complexity of their interpretations.

Against this background, a written critical reflection prompt in the form of a questionnaire was selected as the most effective instrument for discovering Polish university students' and graduates' distinctive experiences and complex viewpoints on challenging discussions in American literature classes, especially including discussions concerning social inequity and politics. The questionnaires were administered in English. The questions were crafted specifically for the purpose of the study being part of the author's Master's thesis. An introductory statement outlining the research context and objectives preceded a number of open-ended questions, several of which will be discussed in this article. The participants were instructed to answer each question in at least three sentences (excluding the demographic questions) and submit their responses within approximately two weeks.

Bogdan and Biklen (1998: 43) noted that “[t]wo issues dominate traditional official guidelines of ethics in research with human subjects: informed consent and the protection of subjects from harm.” With respect to ethical considerations, prospective respondents, cognizant of the study's purpose, voluntarily consented to participate in the study and permitted the publication of the research results in the Master's thesis, at

academic conferences, and in journal articles. Content analysis was chosen to evaluate the qualitative data. According to Cohen et al. (2007: 476), “content analysis involves coding, categorizing (creating meaningful categories into which the units of analysis – words, phrases, sentences, etc., – can be placed), comparing (categories and making links between them), and concluding – drawing theoretical conclusions from the text.” Complying with the abovementioned steps, the following section presents the participants’ critical reflections, which have been organized into themes that emerged after two rounds of coding and categorizing conducted by the author of the article. The grammar of certain responses was slightly corrected to improve clarity but had no impact on the meaning. As a student pursuing a Master’s degree in TESOL, I acknowledge that my personal experiences and beliefs may have impacted the interpretation of the findings. To prevent any potential misinterpretation of the responses, however, the participants were allowed to view the results report before publication.

3.3 Participants

The research was conducted in October and November 2022. Fifteen students and recent graduates of English studies, comprising ten females and five males aged 23-25, participated in the study anonymously. The participants represented two Polish universities and were randomly selected from various classes, which makes it difficult to estimate the number of American literature courses and instructors referred to by the respondents. The educators mentioned by the participants did not claim to be teaching within the parameters of critical pedagogy. Regarding the participants’ field of study and earned degrees, the majority (ten participants) held a Bachelor’s degree in English Philology and were studying for a Master’s degree in TESOL; three respondents held a Bachelor’s degree in English Philology and were studying for a Master’s degree in English Philology; and two participants held a Bachelor’s degree in English Philology solely. The courses attended by the participants included courses on American and British literature and culture, introductory lectures to literary studies, and specialization courses on American, British, and Canadian literature and culture.

4. Study results

This section aims to present the participants’ critical reflections addressing the research question: What are the perceptions of Polish university students and recent graduates of discussing controversial subjects in American literature classes? To discover the respondents’ opinions and emotional experiences related to any challenging discussions in their American literature classes, the participants were asked: “How are/were contentious topics (e.g., race, gender, politics, or religion) handled in your American literature classes? How do/did you feel when discussing them? What are the possible benefits and/or risks of discussing controversial issues in American literature classes?” To explore

the participants' reflections on discussions concerning social inequities, they were asked: "What are the possible benefits and/or risks associated with discussing matters pertaining to racism, discrimination, or other inequality issues in literature classes?" Finally, to investigate the respondents' perceptions of the intersection between politics and education, the following questions were posed to the participants: "What are the possible benefits and/or risks associated with discussing matters pertaining to politics in literature classes? Do you believe that education is inherently political? Why?" The findings of the study, grouped into themes established through the analysis of the participants' responses, are presented in the following subsections.

4.1 Positive evaluation of the teacher's handling of contentious topics

The majority (eight participants) stated that their American literature instructors (generally) aptly led in-class discussions on controversial topics. For instance, cognizant of educators' diverse approaches to analyzing texts addressing sensitive issues, Participant 1 noted:

In my opinion, the contentious topics were usually handled very well in my American literature classes. Some teachers thoroughly analyzed topics of gender, religion, race, etc., that were given in the books, while others only mentioned them and focused on the literary devices such as themes, symbols, etc.

Recalling a seminal antislavery work that explores the abovementioned topics, Participant 4 noted: "I remember that these topics were handled well, giving us a chance to reflect on relevant pieces of literature (such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe), and subsequently discuss issues regarding these topics." Also in reference to learning about past atrocities, Participant 10 demonstrated a contrast between the character of the addressed themes and the manner in which they were handled by her American literature instructor, stating: "The contentious topics were usually dealt with in a subtle way, though not neglecting the brutal aspects of history."

4.2 Affective responses to challenging classroom discussions

Four respondents admitted that they did not feel secure or comfortable when discussing contentious topics in their American literature classes. Participant 2 observed: "All of the topics were sad and there was nothing positive, which is difficult because young people need to think about something positive sometimes". Participant 9, who found classroom discussions on race and gender unsettling, deemed his instructor's and fellow students' attitudes toward such debates inappropriate. Also feeling uncomfortable during discussions on sensitive topics due to peers' attitudes, Participant 13, without alluding to the instructor's conduct, responded:

I felt really anxious and uncomfortable when we discussed topics such as gender, sexual orientation, and religion. The reason behind that is that I felt like not everyone was broad-minded. On top of that, some students did not like talking about matters which were not connected with American literature.

Participant 14, who favorably evaluated her American literature instructor's management of challenging discussions, also identified fellow students' narrow-mindedness as an impediment to productive debates on sensitive topics, noting that the peers' stubbornness, paired with the willingness to impose conservative views on others, disrupted classes and evoked discomfort.

Contrary to the participants whose affective responses to classroom debates on controversial issues were negative, another four respondents explicitly admitted to feeling (rather) comfortable when discussing delicate subject matters; for instance, Participant 4 stated: "I like discussions and I don't mind tackling difficult problems, especially given that questions were usually formed in ways that allowed us to speak freely." Participant 10, despite admitting that sensitive topics were properly handled by the instructor, expressed ambivalent feelings toward classroom discussions, stating: "It happened that sometimes I did not feel completely comfortable when some topics were discussed, but it was good that they were brought up, because it was worth learning some things." Participant 3 recalled being moved when specific themes emerged in classroom discussions:

Race and gender are two of the most discussed topics that come to my mind. These topics were a bit emotional. I have often been able to realize how little I know about a topic and how much it can mean to some people/groups.

Conversely, Participant 1 admitted to being emotionally unaffected by the exposure to contentious subjects, stating: "I felt mostly neutral about discussing them. However, I know that it is essential to learn about these topics." Finally, Participant 8, who did not recall discussing contentious issues in American literature courses, noted that instructors "could be afraid to talk about controversies during classes."

4.3 Intellectual and socio-emotional development

The actual benefits of classroom discussions on contentious topics reported by the respondents concerned their intellectual and socio-emotional growth. Participant 1 remarked that literature classes frequently address timeless concerns and encourage reflection. Referring to intellectual development, Participant 4 observed that the "[b]enefits of a well-prepared discussion on controversial topics range from students' developing of a mature stance on contentious issues to students' being less certain of the idea that truth can be found only in one approach." Analogically, Participant 5 responded: "The

benefit is the discussion because you can see the opinion of others which sometimes is eye-opening.” Similarly, Participant 12 stated: “We spoke about politics, religion, and gender. It made me aware.” Participant 3, in addition to intellectual growth, identified affective stimulation as the benefit of discussing controversial topics, stating: “[T]he benefit was certainly to make students aware of many topics, but also to awaken a general sensitivity.” Comparably, Participant 15 stated:

All of the topics were discussed. We would usually have a discussion where everybody was welcome to share their opinion. I found the discussions very interesting. No one was offended by them. Such a way of conducting a class definitely makes one more sympathetic and understanding.

Concerning discussions on inequality, Participant 4 explained: “As university graduates, it is vital that we develop intellectual ‘tools’ to analyze and consider varied viewpoints, and one of such ‘tools’ is knowledge of difficult topics such as racism or discrimination.” Participant 8 also emphasized the significance of acquiring a broader understanding of social inequities, remarking that it raises awareness of the subject among young people and aids in navigating the globalized world’s intricacies. Participant 13 perceived the opportunity to exchange diverse opinions as a benefit of in-class debates, believing that “by discussing matters such as racism, or discrimination people become wiser, and they are able to realize things they may not have seen in the past.” Participant 15 referred to the darkest chapters in human history, stating:

The benefits are countless. It definitely makes one more open-minded but also sympathetic. I believe that everyone should know at least a little bit about such events as the Holocaust or slavery, which both derive from discrimination. Talking about it during classes should not be considered uncommon. It should be a teacher’s duty.

As far as discussing politics is concerned, Participant 2 recalled: “We had many interesting discussions about politics which made me reflect on the voting system and discrimination. We also could compare politics in other countries to Poland, which was eye-opening in some way.” Participant 4 observed that “one of the goals of higher education is to produce responsible and constructively critical citizens, and it cannot be done without discussing such problems.” According to Participant 7, it is valuable to discuss politics even if it entails an exchange of opposing views:

It is beneficial to get to know different perspectives and political views of other people, even if you do not agree with them. It is also valuable to learn how to express your opinions in a clear, assertive, but civilized way.

Participant 15 believed that tackling the abovementioned topic “definitely makes one more open-minded but also more woke (socio-politically aware),” adding that “everyone should have an opinion on such an important topic, and not having one makes you ignorant. Therefore, talking about it during classes should not be considered uncommon.”

4.4 The potential advantages of challenging classroom discussions

Several participants mentioned the potential benefits of tackling controversial issues in American literature classes. Participant 5 expressed the belief that “[i]f the teacher is understanding and not judgmental, it might be fun and educational to have discussions in class.” Participant 10 briefly remarked that the discussions in question may be informative. Participant 11 identified expanding horizons as the primary benefit of tackling sensitive issues in literature classes, noting that “such literature can raise awareness of a variety of topics” and “benefit students.” Pointing to the transformative potential of tackling sensitive issues in literature classes, Participant 1 explained that discussions on social inequity might help certain students recognize and subsequently change their own discriminatory behaviors, as well as provide support for underprivileged students. Participant 3 noted that debates on inequality “can raise awareness of the importance of the issue.” Participant 5 stated that discussing inequality in American literature classes “might help one come to different conclusions and open the eyes.” Participant 11 identified not only intellectual development as the potential benefit of classroom discussions, but also increased empathy, noting that

[b]y raising awareness and discovering writers who write about inequality, one can gain a new point of view and understand these issues. And this, in turn, can enrich and sensitize the participants of the discussion to these topics.

Similarly, Participant 14 stated that discussing inequality in American literature classes is important and can be eye-opening. Participant 1 stated that classroom debates pertaining to politics may encourage students to critically reevaluate their standpoints. Participant 10, also in reference to discussing politics, identified the possibility to express varied viewpoints in the classroom as the potential benefit.

4.5 Students’ and teachers’ inappropriate attitudes

A number of respondents identified the detrimental impact of their teachers’ or fellow students’ inappropriate attitudes as a serious drawback of classroom debates on sensitive topics. Participant 6 observed that course participants’ varied viewpoints usually prompt unproductive altercations, adding that “the issues raised in the literature do not always arouse sympathy among students.” In reference to discussions on inequality, Participant 2 criticized her instructor for insufficient sensitivity to “real-life problems,” although

without specifying the nature of those problems. Participant 9 expressed the opinion that “there is a huge risk of descending into glorification of despicable acts presented in literature due to the cultural differences between Poland and the US,” adding: “As the students learned, for instance, about the treatment of women in the 19th century, I recall at least two occasions when male members of the class mocked the situation.” Participant 9 mentioned the teacher’s partiality as a significant impediment to informative discussions:

Those topics should be discussed in an unbiased, factual manner. However, as far as my own experience is concerned, the ability to provide students with politically neutral information is uncommon. I honestly cannot see any benefits of discussing racism, discrimination, and inequality during literature classes as the students are often so politically divided that the discussion is sure to descend into an argument.

Pointing to the disadvantages of classroom discussions on inequality, Participant 14 observed that “most of the conservative people do not try to understand such topics. Even worse, they impose their views on others, often in an aggressive way.”

4.6 Lack of interest in the course content

Two participants expressed dissatisfaction with the content of their American literature course. Perceiving it as excessively pessimistic and ineffectively presented by the instructor(s), Participant 2 explained:

During the classes we discussed interesting books but also very difficult poems which were written in a language that nobody was able to understand. We also needed historical context to understand them, and it wasn’t easy to interpret them. I didn’t feel interested in discussing history in a boring way, with just dates and no interesting approach to the topic.

Participant 7, on the other hand, observed that although it is valuable to discuss challenging subjects, they frequently take exaggerated precedence over other aspects of American literature classes that also deserve attention. In response to the question about the benefits and risks of discussing inequality issues, the respondent elaborated on his opinion, stating:

It is beneficial if it is connected with the discussed work/author/literary movement, etc. If not, then I would argue it is unnecessary as it diverges from the topic at hand. I think it is easy to let these issues dominate the class, even if it is not always desirable. Broadening awareness of such matters is a good thing, but I have noticed that it sometimes tends to eclipse other parts of a literature class, which I personally find disappointing as it is not my main area of interest.

4.7 The potential disadvantages of challenging classroom discussions

Several respondents referred to the potential disadvantages of discussing sensitive topics in American literature classes. Participant 1 remarked that discussions on contentious issues in American literature classes may contribute to conflicts among course participants, and that there could be students experiencing discomfort having to discuss problems related to their personal experience. Participant 3, who identified the teacher's potential bias as the key impediment to productive debates, explained that because educators' and students' opinions may vary, careful planning of classes involving discussions on contentious topics is needed to avoid altercations spoiling the classroom atmosphere. Participant 4 also listed the teacher's bias as the potential disadvantage of discussing sensitive topics in American literature classes.

Referring to the impact of cultural and linguistic disparities on classroom discussions on inequality, Participant 1 explained:

[I]n English, there are words connected to race that should not be said during a lesson. While most people are aware of the fact that using racial slurs is very harmful as they are connected to historical events (such as slavery), some Polish people might not fully understand the meaning behind these words because of the language and cultural differences. Therefore, teachers have to be very delicate while discussing this subject because they might not explain it properly and create an ignorant environment in the classroom.

Participant 5 noted that tackling discrimination issues in American literature classes can lead to arguments because of students' differing opinions. Participant 6 stated "Each issue related to such sensitive topics may meet with a diverse student reception." Participant 9 also identified potential conflicts as the primary disadvantage of classroom discussions on inequality issues. Participant 10 observed that students may unconsciously offend someone or feel discomfort when discussing discrimination in American literature classes. Similarly, Participant 12 identified the possibility of offending others based on their race or sexuality as a downside of discussing inequality in American literature classes.

Regarding discussions on politics, Participant 1 observed that they might lead to conflicts due to students' differing views. Participant 4 responded that discussing the abovementioned topic can be controversial and unpleasant. Regarding the instructor's role in this process, the respondent mentioned the teacher's potential bias as a disadvantage of classroom discussions on politics. Analogically, Participant 7 observed that the instructors' imposition of specific assumptions on students may impede debates on the topic in question:

[S]uch discussions may be used by certain teachers to project their own views onto others, and I do not believe that literature classes should be used to promote any particular belief.

Everyone should be able to formulate their own opinion, regardless of how different and/or controversial it might be.

Comparably, Participant 5, highlighting the impact of the teacher's attitude on classroom debates concerning politics, noted: "Maybe if the teacher has different opinions, they might 'punish' you by giving a poor grade." Participant 6, in addition to identifying potential conflicts stemming from adverse viewpoints as the potential risk of discussing politics, observed that certain topics might be emotionally triggering to particular students. Participant 15 also identified possible altercations as a risk of discussing politics in American literature classes. Referring to the same risk as Participant 7, Participant 9 responded: "While the teacher's political views will be obvious in the course of a lesson, they should strive not to bias their teaching." Participant 10 observed: "[P]olitics is a turbulent topic, and discussing it is like walking on thin ice. Some students may argue or convince others of their opinion by force. By conducting classes tainted with political bias, the teacher risks creating division in class." Participant 13 stated that in certain circumstances students may "feel forced to speak" about issues pertaining to politics.

4.8 Opinions on the political nature of education

The majority (nine respondents) admitted that education was, or might be (inherently) political, although, as added by a few of them, it should not be so. Participant 2, referring specifically to the Polish context, stated: "Education in Poland became political but it wasn't really visible during literature classes. In other classes, however, we had to be careful about our opinions and pretend that we have a different one." Pointing to the impact of educators' personal preferences or prejudice on their teaching, Participant 1 explained:

In my opinion, education is inherently political as teachers unconsciously may convey their own opinions during a lesson. For example, teachers who support LGBTQ+ rights might highlight authors' sexual orientation and analyze hidden homosexual motifs in books, while other teachers might ignore them or even talk about them in a negative manner.

Participant 5 expressed the belief that "education might be political." Participant 8, despite perceiving education as political due to its dependence on governmental decisions, noted: "I couldn't say that I felt any limitations when it came to discussing politics during literature classes. Maybe it could be explained by the fact that we were discussing past facts." Providing an analogical argument, Participant 12 stated: "The ruling party always puts something in the books so that they can control the younger generation." Participant 14, expressing the belief that education was political, also referred to the governmental control of education. Pointing to teachers' impartiality, Participant 3 observed: "Education

should not be political, but unfortunately it often is. Instructors/teachers should not express their views to students, and especially should not impose them. I haven't seen it often, but it has happened a few times."

By comparison, Participant 4 expressed the hope that education was not inherently political despite being affected by politics. Participant 9 also noted that education should not be political, although without determining whether it was. Participant 7 referred not only to education in general, but also specifically to literary education, explaining: "I would say that education does not have to be inherently political, but literary education probably is, since literature reflects our reality and is influenced by certain beliefs." By contrast, Participant 11, who also referred to literary education, disagreed with the assumption that it was inherently political, stating: "I don't think political matters are very much related to literature. Discussing literature does not necessarily involve discussing politics. I don't really think that education is inherently political." Similarly, Participant 13 stated: "I do not believe that education is inherently political. I believe that literature is a form of expressing yourself, and it was one of the very few subjects that students did not have to focus on so much. We were able to read, discuss and think about the authors' approach towards the books we read."

5. Discussion

The study revealed the participants' varied experiences concerning debates on sensitive issues in American literature classes. Table 1 concisely shows the respondents' affective responses to challenging discussions:

Table 1. Emotions and feelings evoked in the participants by discussions on contentious topics

Neutral	(Quite) Positive	(Rather) Negative	Stirring	Ambivalent	No Recollection/ Response
1 participant	4 participants	4 participants	1 participant	1 participant	4 participants

According to scholars such as Flynn and Rivera (2022), McArthur (2010), and Serrano et al. (2017), it is vital that challenging topics be discussed in a safe and inclusive atmosphere. The majority of the participants positively evaluated their American literature instructors' management of challenging discussions. Besides, several respondents reported feeling neutral or (quite) comfortable when tackling sensitive topics. A few respondents, however, experienced discomfort due to their instructor's or fellow students' inappropriate attitudes.

The research also revealed several advantages and downsides of discussing controversial issues in American literature classes. Table 2 summarizes and juxtaposes the

actual benefits and disadvantages of tackling contentious topics, including discussions on inequality and politics mentioned by the participants of the present study.

Table 2. The actual benefits and risks or disadvantages of discussing contentious topics, including discussions on inequality and politics mentioned by the respondents

Benefits	Disadvantages
Intellectual development	Students' or teachers' inappropriate attitudes
Socio-emotional development	Lack of interest in the course content

The benefits of discussing contentious subjects in literature classes mentioned by the participants support the assumption by Flynn and Rivera (2022) that the practice in question can foster students' socio-emotional growth. Furthermore, a few respondents emphasized that classroom discussions on controversial subjects not only foster critical reflection on matters concerning social inequities, but also have the potential to inspire students to actively oppose detrimental practices. This corresponds with the belief shared by the authors cited in the literature review that classroom dialogue can help students discern and oppose social injustice. Besides, several participants highlighted the benefits of exchanging varied views with peers, which seems to be in line with the assertion by Hand and Levinson (2012) about the usefulness of classroom discussion in exploring sensitive issues. The abovementioned advantages also correlated with the purpose of the critical pedagogy-informed course described by Motta (2013), aiming to foster students' openness to perspectives other than the dominant one. However, it should also be remembered at this point that there were students who evaluated the abovementioned course negatively. Comparatively, in the present study, many participants emphasized the high probability of such interactions prompting unproductive altercations among students. This implies that classroom discussions on challenging topics, although useful, can spoil the classroom atmosphere if mishandled.

Finally, the study by Shin and Crookes (2005), as well as the one by Derince (2011), showed that debating controversial topics in a foreign language can improve students' language skills. By contrast, in the present study none of the participants reported improved learning abilities as a result of discussing controversial subjects. Instead, a few respondents noted that due to linguistic and cultural differences, Polish students may unconsciously use offensive language during classroom debates on sensitive topics.

6. Limitations

At this point it is essential to highlight that the present research has several limitations. Due to the study's qualitative nature, the number of participants was relatively small,

and thus the results are not statistically representative. Given that the respondents' reflections are nuanced and context-specific, they should be generalized with caution and only to similar contexts. Also, it should be noted that the adoption of a critical reflection prompt as the study instrument always entails reliance on the participants' accuracy and veracity.

7. Conclusion

The study aimed to explore Polish university students' and graduates' perceptions of discussing controversial topics in American literature classes. The findings revealed that Polish university students and graduates tend to positively evaluate their American literature instructors' approaches to teaching sensitive issues. The study also indicates that carefully managed classroom discussions can provide a valuable forum for the expression of varied perspectives, promoting intellectual, social and emotional growth among students. To minimize potential adverse effects of teaching about contentious topics, teachers should refrain from imposing personal beliefs on students, especially pertaining to politics. The research also suggests that encouraging inclusivity in the classroom is crucial to promote diverse perspectives and foster a constructive approach towards opposing ideas. To prevent unintentionally offensive behavior causing tension among students, Polish instructors teaching American literature should raise awareness of cultural and linguistic differences between Poland and the United States prior to challenging discussions. In light of this, critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on inclusivity and student-centered dialogue, can help academics to effectively explore controversial issues in foreign literature classes

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