

The Interaction between Films and British and American Literature in Literature Teaching

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Abstract. Over the past few decades, the English departments in China are faced with several major problems, namely the motivation on literature reading is falling, which results in students' poor academic performance and lack of creative, critical and analytical thinking. In terms of this issue, this paper explores a method for the teaching of American and British literature: the employment of films in literature class. Three approaches are proposed, Input Approach like making predictions while watching a film and reading a text; Interaction Approach including generating three levels of questions about both films and texts; Output Approach involving mind maps and creative writing. Through proper and creative use in literature classes, films can motivate students to stay focused and meanwhile cultivate their critical thinking and analytical skills.

1. Introduction

In November, 2015, "Symposium on the Teaching of Literature Reading in English Departments" was held by the department of English at East China Normal University, with the purpose to address the current problems that most English departments in China's colleges and universities are faced with, namely the focus on "skill training" [1] and "the stress on literary reading on the decline" [2]. The reason why these problems have gotten more and more attention lies in the fact that nowadays students in English departments are generally described as being poor at academic performance and lack of creative, critical and analytical thinking [1,2]. As a result, according to Su Dingfang (2015) and Gu Yue (2019) over the past decade, English majors have suffered from increasing difficulty obtaining employment and from high risk of unemployment.

Furthermore, according to Chen Aiming's (2002) study, more than 60% university teachers in China's English departments still follow the traditional teaching mode, namely teaching oriented instead of student-centered methodology. The formulaic teaching method results in tedious class atmosphere and students' passive learning. Consequently, due to showing little interest in class, students are not active in after-class reading.

Facing such unprecedented challenges, in the symposium, scholars and teachers from Peking University, Fudan University, Xiamen University, Shanghai International Studies University and East China Normal University discussed and analyzed the importance and necessity of the revival of teaching English literature, with the hope that literature may bridge the gap between language skills and thinking skills, language proficiency and humanist thoughts. Therefore, how to carry on the literature reading teaching effectively is an urgent problem to be solved.

In confronted with such a problem as low efficiency of literature teaching, Liang (2011) points out that one of the reasons is the lack of making full use of audio-visual teaching resources and multimedia equipment. [3] In addition, with the popularity of Internet and media, it is an undeniable fact that, in the past few decades, films have increasingly impacted literature teaching and therefore have received much attention from literature teachers. However, the purposes and the practical methods of employing films in literature class haven't been fully explored. Accordingly, this paper is aimed at discussing these issues in detail.

2. The Importance of Employing Films in British & American Literature Class

2.1 The significance of using films

“Should the college teacher of English try to raise student taste in movies, radio, and television?” This is a question raised by Martin Kallich and Malcolm M. Marsden (1956) about 60 years ago, and it is still a question proposed by many English teachers in literature class today.

Currently, concerning applying films in literature teaching, there is a major problem to be addressed: owing to English teachers’ lack of training to treat “film as film”, over the past decades, teachers have misused films in literature class, [4,5] and accordingly, the role of films in literature teaching has been underestimated.

With regard to this problem, Lipiner (2011) points out that “media literacy, including film, our most ‘popular’ culture, should not replace the conventional written word of literature, but rather lend a helping hand to teaching literacy,” which, without doubt, can stimulate students to learn within a learning environment that they are familiar with. [6] Similarly, Golden (2001) holds that “the moving image provided an opportunity for the students to grasp narrative structure and characterization-the actions, thoughts, emotions and appearance of the character.” [4] In addition, Muller (2006) believes that it is impossible for “film as film” to substitute the study of printed literature, yet “film as film” can act as a bridge between students’ existing interest in multimedia and the significant critical-thinking skills. [5]

Similarly, in China, concerning the feasibility of using films in literature teaching, Liang (2011) mentions that films share much the same quality of literature and that the employment of films can enrich teaching contents and can promote in-class interaction. [3] The reason lies in the fact that the emergence of film is inseparable from literary texts, and accordingly films, to some extent, are part of literature. Similarly, it is believed that film adaptations are a visual interpretation of literature, which, to large extent, require films to maintain the literariness of the original works.

Besides, Liang (2011) also proposes to use films as a supplementary means in literature teaching, because with images, films are much easier for students to understand and therefore motivate students to read related literature works. [3] What’s more, films can be seen as a means of literary criticism, because film adaptations are interpretations of literature from the film director’s point of view, which can provide students with a new angle to understand literature works.

2.2 The goals of the application of films in literature class

Based on the previous studies conducted by scholars and educators both abroad and in China, it is believed that watching and analyzing of films can have a great impact on students’ ability to read and critique literature. However, to what extent can films affect literature teaching mainly relies on how clear the teaching aims are. Accordingly, to employ films in class efficiently, it is a must to give priority to the setting of goals.

To start with, the application of films is to enhance students’ active learning. Films are believed to be able to involve students in class, because with images and plots they can stimulate students’ active mental engagement with study process and provoke active reactions. [7]

Furthermore, employing films is to help cultivate students’ critical thinking. It is acknowledged that critical thinking is multidimensional, including “the ability to evaluate evidence for conflicting arguments and to consider issues from many viewpoints.” [7] Films, with conflicts and drama, can therefore inspire students to go beyond identifying text materials to doing a critical analysis of multiple perspectives.

Last but not least, by using films, it is aimed at creating connected learning. Connected learning lays emphasis on sharing ideas, personal experiences, and empathy with others, providing students with opportunities to relate emotionally to course materials. [7] There is no doubt that the employment of films may allow students to enter the characters’ world view, thereby identifying with their struggle. Consequently, it may motivate students to think more fully about the original literature works and to use their experiences considering themes, characters, plots and symbols presented.

3. Methods of application of films in British & American literature teaching

3.1 Three types of films employed in literature teaching

In order to help students understand literature works from different perspectives through films, it is suggested to provide students with varied types of films.

3.1.1 Film adaptations

Film adaptations of literature works are not radically intended to turn text into images. Instead, such films are interpretations of literature works from film directors' and producers' points of view, which highlight the themes that the interpreters, namely directors, producers, and even actors, believe to be significant.

Following this look, film adaptations can be seen as teaching materials, by comparing with the original work, which can help students be familiar with the main plots and characters, and motivate them to discover and analyze different themes presented by both texts and films. In addition, the existence of such differences may further inspire students to do more research and therefore lead to critical thinking.

3.1.1 Biographical films

Biographical films attempt to tell the life story of a historical-based person comprehensively or at least the most historically important years of his or her life. Therefore, such films as "*Becoming Jane*" (2007), "*Shakespeare in Love*" (2010), "*Hemingway & Gellhorn*" (2012) are of great help for students to learn about the lives of authors, which, without any doubt, will eventually be helpful for students to understand literature works.

3.1.2 Film clips

Film clips from different films, with their unique brevity, rapidity and emotional intensity, can illustrate or identify a particular point in literature teaching. Generally speaking, film clips have two major functions. For one thing, by comparing film clips from film adaptations of the same literature work made in different years, students may get a closer look at varied interpretations of the original work. Accordingly, analyzing such different perspectives can trigger multiple, and sometimes contradictory emotions and thoughts in students.

For another, film clips can help students understand some abstract literature concepts better. For example, by showing clips of extravagant parties from "*The Great Gatsby*", it will be much easier for students to understand what "Roaring Twenties" looks like and how "the Lost Generation" led their life.

3.2 Methods of using films

In second language learning, it is widely acknowledged that input, interaction and output are essential for exposure to language, reflection on learning and production of language respectively. Based on the *Input Hypothesis* (Stephen D. Krashen, 1985), the *Output Hypothesis* (Merrill Swain, 1995) and the second language acquisition (SLA) theories [8], on the condition that input is negotiated and output is produced by language learners in interaction, learners can internalize input that is comprehensible to them, and accordingly produce output automatically. In SLA, it is such a process that makes it possible for learners to take in what they have learnt and experienced.

The role of films, as a medium of second language learning in British and American literature class, can be explained through the perspectives of input, interaction and output.

3.2.1 Input

The reason why a number of English majors cannot engage themselves in reading English literature works mainly lies in the fact that students find it hard to understand what the original works try to convey, literally or culturally, sometimes both, thereby losing interest in literature reading. However, according to Krashen's input hypothesis, only when learners understand input can SLA take place. Therefore, to improve the efficiency of literature class, comprehensible and effective input is essential, like films, with vivid images and clear plots easier for students to understand, which can serve as a trigger to stimulate text reading.

As for the first stage of learning in literature class, namely exposure to literature, it is suggested biographical films and film adaptations can be employed. For one thing, with the help of

biographical films, instead of just remembering some rigid facts, students can get a better understanding of authors, which is definitely useful to appreciate literature works. For another, as for literature works, such as “*The Great Gatsby*”, “*Moby-Dick*”, “*The Sound and the Fury*”, which are generally believed to be difficult to comprehend, it is proposed to watch the adaptations first to have a basic understanding of main characters and storylines, which is of a great help to read the text works.

Yet, comprehensible input alone is not enough. Based on the SLA theories, in order to help learners internalize what they have experienced and learnt, input should be negotiated.

According to Golden (2001), “one of the most successful activities for pairing film and literature is to show the opening shots or sequences from a film and ask students to make predictions about what will happen next.” [4] To ask students to make predictions in class, teachers pause the film from time to time and ask questions:

- (1) What will happen next?
- (2) Why is this scene essential to the plot development?

After students discuss the questions and list reasons for their predictions, teachers ask students to read related text to check if their predictions are proper or not.

Moreover, in order to help students respond to films and texts, thereby becoming involved viewers and readers, after watching part of a film, teachers should ask students some general questions:

- (1) What is your first impression of this film?
- (2) What does this film remind you of?
- (3) What part made you feel puzzled or uninterested? Why?

After sharing opinions, students are required to read relative text and then the same questions are brought up:

- (1) What is your first impression of this novel?
- (2) What does this text remind you of?
- (3) What part made you feel puzzled or uninterested? Why?

By making predictions and responding to film and text, the comprehensible input of visuals in film and language in print will enable students to grasp deeper meaning and conceptualize literature works in an effective way. Besides, students’ descriptive and inferential skills will be extended at the same time.

3.2.2 Interaction

According to Zhang (2009) , L2 acquisition will not occur in spite of proper quantity and quality of input if without being internalized by the learners and becoming part of their interlanguage system. [9] Similarly, Bonnie D. Schwartz (1993) proposes that should input not get involved in interaction, it would be impossible for it to function to the full in SLA. Moreover, it is suggested that interaction is an attention-drawing device, which serves to draw learners’ attention to the language they are learning.

With regard to interaction, Golden (2001) points out that in order to achieve a real connection with a film and a written text, one of the most efficient ways is that students generate focused and relevant questions by themselves. Furthermore, he proposes three levels of questions, namely questions of fact, questions of interpretation, and questions beyond the text or the film. [4]

As for questions of fact and interpretation, film clips are believed to be efficient to be employed in class. The reason lies in that with clips, teachers can check on students’ comprehension about the film. Besides, it is easier for students to gather support for their arguments. In terms of questions beyond the film, it is better to use adapted films. Questions beyond the film require students’ overall understanding, so only after watching the whole film can students form a general idea. Below are sample questions I created for “*The Great Gatsby*”, covering all three levels.

- (1) Questions of fact:
 - a. Use one word to describe Gatsby’s parties.
 - b. Why does Gatsby invite Daisy to his mansion?
- (2) Questions of interpretation:

- a. What does the director do to make us sympathize with Gatsby?
- b. What does the green light at the dock represent?
- c. Describe how jazz music helped create a joyful atmosphere at the parties.
- (3) Questions beyond the film:
 - a. What is your understanding of “the Lost Generation” and “American Dream”?
 - b. Is the lifestyle that the roaring 20s led similar to that of some young people nowadays?

After students learned about how to question a clip and a film, the same strategy can be applied in literature reading, which can draw students’ attention to the text and help them understand the text better.

3.2.3 Output

When it comes to SLA, Merrill Swain (1985) believes that the best way to check on the extent of one’s knowledge, especially linguistic knowledge, is to use that knowledge in some productive way, for learners need the chance to use their linguistic resources meaningfully to achieve full syntactical and grammatical competence.

In order to produce comprehensible and visible output, mind maps, image-centered diagrams representing words and ideas linked to and radiating around a central key word or idea, to produce which requires a close viewing of film and a close reading of the written texts, can stimulate learners to reflect on what they have watched and read. To be specific, the idea is to ask students to draw an outline from a film or a literature work and to represent their ideas briefly.

As far as mind maps are concerned in literature class, there are three aspects involved, namely mind map of character relationship, mind map of plot, and mind map of symbols. Both films and written texts can be addressed by such an approach, which meanwhile requires students to explain what in the film or in the text itself lead them to make these particular choices of words or ideas in the mind map. The following is a mind map of character relationship drawn from “*Pride and Prejudice*”, from the film and the text respectively.

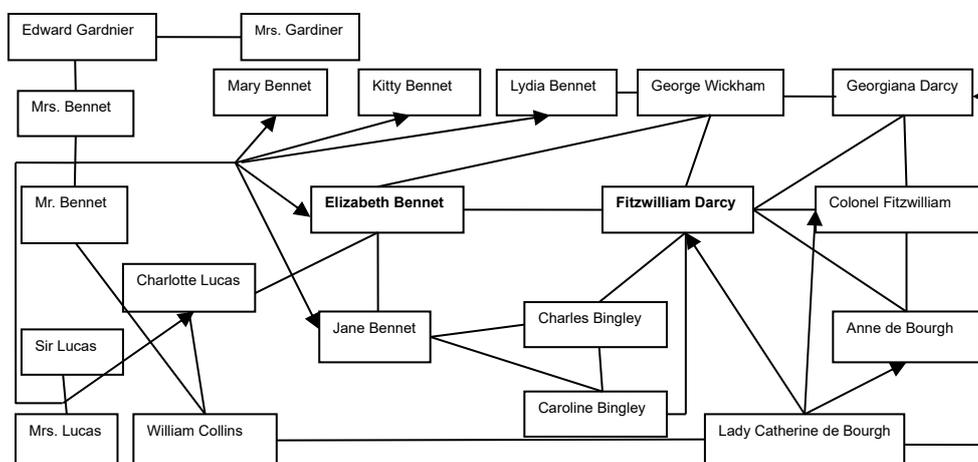


Figure 1 mind map of character relationship in the film

students are fully engaged in a text, we have done our job.

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