



Transition from Cognition to Critical Thinking: Exploring New Approaches of Teaching British and American Literature to Chinese English Majors

Yonggang Miao and Yuping Jia(✉)

School of Language and Literature, Harbin Institute of Technology, Weihai 264209, Shandong,
China

zwinger76@hit.edu.cn

Abstract. In view of the current situation in China that students' English skills are generally improving, the focus of teaching British and American literature should change from language skills and literary knowledge to critical thinking and literary research. First and foremost, the ideological function of literatures should always be emphasized to enhance students' political awareness while focusing on universal humanities education; secondly, more comparative perspectives should be adopted in the teaching process to broaden students' scope of thinking and reasoning with the help of courses in Chinese and Western literature and culture; finally, the teaching of literature should be targeted at improving students' literary research ability, and take the study of the form and literary techniques of the text inwardly, and cultural studies outwardly to promote students' problem consciousness and sense of nativeness.

Keywords: British and American literature · New approaches of teaching · Critical thinking · Sense of nativeness

1 Introduction

For a long time, the teaching of English majors in Chinese colleges and universities has focused on the language itself and has always taken the training of the basic language skills as the main means of language acquisition, which has successfully trained so many English readers and speakers that China has needed urgently in the past few decades after the opening-up. Now that education in China has improved drastically and students have acquired pretty good English in their middle school, the approaches in teaching English majors in the past now seems out of date and to a certain extent is not conducive to learners' deeper grasp of the language and even affects the cultivation of

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students' thinking ability and critical ability, with the result that it fails to realize the true objectives of the English major and affects the cultivation of high-level English talents. This is especially reflected in the teaching of English and American literature and culture courses.

Chinese scholars and educators have been aware of this disparity between the traditional approaches in English learning and the present demand for high-level English talents, and the reform of English majors is being carried out vigorously, the training program being revised, courses being added and removed, and syllabus being reformulated. Actually in the past two or three decades, English teaching in China has undergone several up-and-down processes of change—from single-type teaching to complex curriculum to practical talent cultivation; this time, it tends to return to the essence of language and literature which emphasizes the education of humanistic thoughts and the cultivation of critical thinking ability. At this crucial point, the teaching of literature is bound to be one of the main bearers in accomplishing this reform task as the learning of English will certainly not be effective if it is not integrated with literature and culture.

The traditional method in teaching English and American literature has always been the so-called “four-step process”, including teachings of the background, of the writer's life, of the content of the work, and of the artistic features. What the students are required to do is to remember all the names and titles, read few excerpts, follow the routine of text analysis and everything will be just fine. This process of teaching and learning may promote their language competence to a certain extent, but it failed the true essence of literature. Therefore, it's high time to develop new approaches in teaching and learning English and American literature, including the emphasis on the ideological function, the comparative perspective, and the scientific research perspective.

2 Ideological Approach

The word “ideology” can be used broadly or narrowly. In the broad sense, it is denoted as “a systematic body of concepts especially about human life or culture” [1], and in the narrow sense, it means “a set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party, or organization is based” [3].

As the reflection of human condition, literature, both in East and West, has been carrying the responsibility of humanistic education in all facets of human life. In “Mao's Preface to the Book of Songs”, one of the earliest literary theories in ancient China, the function of literature is mentioned as “In ancient times, kings used poetry to correct the relationship between husband and wife, to cultivate filial piety and respectful behavior, to cultivate the rules of human morality, to improve the culture of education, and to change bad customs” [2]. Confucius said that “Poetry can inspire emotions, observe society, make friends, and complain about injustice” [6]. While in the west, Aristotle mentioned tragedy's “catharsis” of human mind, and emphasized on the educational function of poetry. English poet Philip Sidney, in his *The Defense of Poesie*, believes poets could inspire virtue and move the readers with “notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching” [4], while most writers in the Enlightenment period like John Dryden, Alexander Pope, advocated the social nature and moral edification function of poetry.

In the Chinese major in Chinese universities, just like the English major in the English speaking countries, literature is being taught and learned as literature rather than as materials for language study, then it is quite clear that now it's time for English majors in China to learn literature through English, but not to learn English through literature. All those beautiful ideas and universal values for all humans should be explored and studied. Then all the boring language points would be replaced by the romantic love in *Pride and Prejudice*, parental love in *The Joy Luck Club*, virtue rewarded in *Pamela*, the independence of personality in *Jane Eyre*, the cruelty of war in *All Quiet On the Western Front*, the dread of death in Allan Poe, the vicissitude in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and all the other emotions that permeate the human heart. Through reading of these literary works, the students could enter the minds of the individual characters to experience what they have not yet experienced so that their personalities could be built, their humanities be promoted and they could become better people and be beneficial to our society.

Besides the emphasis on humanistic education, we should also take into consideration the meaning of ideology in the narrow sense, namely, the political aspect of literature. Scholars from east and west have all argued for the political nature of literature. Through *The Republic* and other writings, Plato has explicitly put forward his idea that politics is the only standard of literary criticism and all literature and art should serve politics, namely, the interests of the country and its people. This idea has been reflected in both eastern and western literature. From William Shakespeare to Thomas More to George Orwell, from Renaissance to Enlightenment to Romanticism and Anti-Utopianism, the history of western literature has always been a history of ideological disputes with a purpose to safeguard economic development, the social stability and the well-being of the people in the western world while paying less attention to the east. Robinson Crusoe's enslavement of Friday and UK's colonization of India in *The Heart of Darkness* and *The Passage to India*, all reflect the political attitude of the western ideology.

Therefore, it's not improper for Chinese student to learn western literature from a Chinese perspective. Considering the conflicts of the political system, economic system, ethics and value system, religious ideas between the east and the west, Chinese students, being young and impressible, must be taught to read and think critically, and to distinguish what is universal humanistic from what is western ideology so that they may not be led astray blindly and unconsciously. The purpose of reaching out and communication is to understand but not to take in without any reasoning and critical thinking. Chinese President Xi Jinping has pointed out the fundamental issues like the purpose, standards and approaches of education while advocating that education should always serve the people, the development of Chinese socialism, and socialist modernization, guide the youngsters to enhance their confidence in Chinese socialism and inspire their patriotism [5]. Setting from this point, the student should be encouraged to read critically and learn to reason and judge. Besides appreciating the beauty and advantageous aspects of English and American literature, they should be capable of recognizing the specific historical background and cultural elements as well as discovering the disadvantageous aspects by making comparison with eastern literature and culture.

3 Comparative Approach

In today's increasingly globalized world, with the particularly advanced media, we are inundated with information from a wide variety of sources. This requires us to have multiple perspectives related to issues all around us. The same is true for the teaching of British and American literature. It is best to have a comparative perspective in the teaching process, and to appreciate and understand British and American literature in the context of world literature and culture, especially in comparison with Chinese literature so as to make it easier for Chinese students to understand and accept.

This comparative approach is adopted out of reasons caused by cultural environment differences. For one thing, British and American literature are not absolutely isolated and independent literary phenomenon, but have been influenced by many heterogeneous factors in their formation and development. For example, in the process of "Progressive Extending of Eastern Learning to the West", western literature was undoubtedly influenced by eastern and especially Chinese philosophy and culture. Chinese philosophy like Confucianism, Taoism and Zen Buddhism all have western admirers like French enlightener Diderot and Voltaire, American Transcendentalist Emerson and Thoreau, modern poets Gary Snyder, Robert Bly, Kenneth Rexroth. One of the most famous cases is ancient Chinese poetry's influence upon Imagist poets like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Pound's imaginative poems carry the distinctive features of the Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei in terms of form, rhyme, and emotional condensation. If we analyze Pound's poems in the comparative perspective, it will help students to better understand Pound's imaginative poetry, and to maximize their motivation and initiative.

Second, as a literary system, it is an underlying logic to understand why Anglo-American literature is the way it is, and how it differs from other civilizations. Comparing with Chinese literature is one of the most acceptable and understandable approaches for students. For example, in teaching the spirit of individual freedom in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, we may illustrate that though the spirit of individual struggle is not entirely absent in Chinese literature, Chinese culture appreciates a more collective spirit, a tendency to believe and rely on the community while minimizing the individual factor. There is no superiority or inferiority here, but rather the different cultural forms formed by different peoples in the course of history. In this comparative perspective, students can experience and grasp it for themselves, so that they may know and understand the relations between literature and culture more comprehensively.

As modern Chinese literary and art theorist Zhu Guangqian said: "To estimate mountains accurately, you must have travelled and measured all the world's famous mountains. This applies to the study of literature. The more works you have read, the more complex and diverse the styles you have experienced, the richer your comparative information you have accumulated, the more correct your perspective would be, and the more reliable your connoisseurship would be" [7].

In the literature classroom, the analysis and appreciation of literary text is always the core part of teaching. If we break through the closed analysis of a single text and take the corresponding Chinese literary works as the reference system, we can explore broader and deeper value of their uniqueness during the comparative study, and also the classroom may become more colorful and interesting. The comparative study may be conducted from the usual perspective of theme, characterization, narration, and it can

also be extended to literary theory, aesthetics, philosophy, psychology, anthropology and other disciplines. Because literature does not exist in isolation, the creative activities of writers and the development of literature are closely related to its specific cultural environment. Therefore, breaking the boundaries of disciplines, paying attention to the connection between literature and other related disciplines, and enriching the cultural content of foreign literature courses will be another new way for the development of foreign literature courses.

By introducing the comparative method in the teaching of foreign literature, students can understand the history and basic characteristics of the development of Chinese and foreign literatures through the ephemeral and co-occurrence methods, so that they can grasp the different trajectories of the development of Chinese and Western literatures on a macro level to understand the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, and thus further explore the different aesthetic psychological patterns of Chinese and foreign peoples.

4 Orientation of Literary Research

Research-based teaching, based on research and inquiry, constitutes a study group for teachers and students, and establishes a teaching pattern in which inquiry, research and discovery are the center of all activities, implementing a teaching mode that places equal emphasis on knowledge, ability and quality. Research-based teaching has profound connotations and values. It is characterized by a focus on the cultivation of abilities including critical and creative thinking skills, practical skills like the ability to ask questions, analyze problems, solve problems and evaluate them.

As the purpose of literature study has shifted from language learning to literature itself, the literature class for the Chinese English majors should be conducted similarly to the class for the British and American students who should be encouraged to read, think, and analyze literary works in an academic way, during which process the research-based teaching method must be employed to develop students' abilities in the above-mentioned aspects.

The research may be conducted inwardly and outwardly. The inward research focuses on the form and literary techniques of the text through close reading. Close reading of the text is not only about the understanding of language. The teacher should lead the students to discover the various expressions in the works, such as metaphors, symbols, allusions, aphorisms, puns and other rhetorical techniques, so that the students can understand the various expressions by experiencing the way of thinking and the deep meaning reflected in these rhetorical techniques. While the outward research focus on the outside factors related to the text such as its social, historical, and cultural significance.

An ideal classroom for literature teaching should be teacher-guided and research-oriented classroom with students' active learning as the main focus and close reading as the clue. Research-based learning means that the process of reading is the process of research, the process of interaction, questioning, and discussion in the face of real problems in reading and the formation of new ideas. In such a teaching process, reading is research, discussion is research, and the examination form of essay writing is even more of research. Through the construction of this three-dimensional research-based

learning mode, we can effectively cultivate students' cross-cultural cognitive ability, independent thinking ability, critical thinking ability and other academic abilities.

Project research is one of the main types of practice in which students engage in research-based learning; and collaborative group research is a frequently used organizational form. Due to the limited class time for literature, teachers spend most of the time in class on explaining the text, and students hardly have the opportunity to conduct research and discussion. Therefore, teachers can divide students into groups to conduct research-based discussions outside of class. The teacher should play a guiding role in the selection of the topic and encourage them to prepare for the research. For example, British literature is divided into the following periods: Renaissance, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Critical Realism, Modernism, and Contemporary Literature according to the textbook. The students are divided into different groups, and each group chooses a period as the main content of their research. Every group are required not only to read about the representative writers, representative works, and the current status of research on the writers and works at home and abroad, but also to give a presentation on "How have the representative works illustrated the literary features of that period". In this way, students change from passively accepting the teacher's knowledge input to actively researching and exploring, and becoming active learners, learning to learn literature on their own.

The whole teaching process may include the following steps: before-class reading and research; class presentation; class discussion; after-class revision (term paper). It has to be pointed out that the focus of research-based teaching should be laid on close-reading, in-class involvement, and frontier study materials. Moreover, during the process of learning different texts, necessary literary theories should be introduced and employed in the textual analysis as literary theory allows us to read the classics in a completely different way, and makes us realize that the classical writers are much more complex than they have been known in the past. Hence the students may better develop their abilities in reading, thinking and reasoning, writing, which are all needed by a professional researcher of literature.

5 Conclusion

The learning of a foreign language should not just be targeted at the language itself, but rather the culture that language and its literature carries, and through learning literature the students could get in touch with a universal civilization all humans could share and develop their potentials of thinking—logical, imaginative and critical. The three approaches mentioned above, though not quite all-around, could promote that purpose.

Moreover, it is the teacher's responsibility to get the students to know that all issues in the human world are open-ended and could be without an answer, and that ideas, meanings, or values, are not fixed but flexible and contextual. The learning of literature is not to seek for authoritative answer but to provide a place for the students to read and think in an independent way. However, all learnings should be set out and observed from the native perspective to foster the students' sense of nativeness and patriotism which is a universal principle and practice for all countries. To realize that target, there's more to do for the teachers of literature.

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