

Building Environmental Awareness through Implementation of Ecocriticism in Literature Teaching

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Abstract—Ecocriticism and Nature Studies have been proved potential research directions worldwide. In Vietnam and other Asian countries, the interest in ecocriticism among academics and educators is not noticeable. This study aims to figure out how this research approach could be applied in specific disciplines in schools in order to build environmental awareness for students. In this case, we have conducted a survey and an experiment in a particular subject: Literature, in a limited scale: Faculty of Literature, Vinh University, Vietnam. The findings revealed that applying ecocriticism in teaching literature is a practical and efficient way of raising environment-tal awareness without distorting literature nature.

Keywords—*ecocriticism; literature teaching; environmental awareness*

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last few decades, growing awareness of widespread environmental crisis has brought to humanities studies a broad new range of “greening” approaches. Ecocriticism, literally born in the 1970s and virtually considered as an academic discipline in the 1990s, reflects human’s anxiety and activism consciousness about global environmental issues.

The nature of ecocriticism has been explored in numerous studies. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the pioneers in the field, has defined: “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” [1]. The other foundation researches on this field include books, articles by Kerrige and Sammells [2], Wolfreys [3], Barry [4], Thornber [5], Padilla [6]. However, Glotfelty’s definition has been the backbone shaping theory of the field so far. In other word, ecocriticism is by its nature an interdisciplinary study of literature and environment.

What makes this theory become the remarkable revisionist movement sweeping contemporary humanities studies? As Glotfelty stated in her definition of ecocriticism: “Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic lass to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” [1]. That is the revolutionary perspective: the conventional *human-centered approach* is substituted by

the ground-breaking *earth-centered approach*. “In most literary theory “the world” is synonymous with society – the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere” [1]. For centuries, human have taken the pride of being the center of the universe, the king of the world; conquering the natural world, hence, could be seen as the glory manifestation of their overwhelming authority. By contrast, ecocriticism demolished human’s dominance, reconstructs the relationship between the human and the ecology. Human, from ecocriticism’ point of view, are no longer authoritative; they rather find themselves as a modest and equivalent factor among the natural environment. The earth-centered approach can be considered as the fundamental to the innovation of ecocriticism, which leads to a wide range of subsequent changes in this theory. With the questions raised such as how is nature represented in the literary work? What role does the physical setting play in the novel’s plot? How do human’s metaphors of the land influence the way they treat it? Ecocriticism aims to engage literature with raising human’s awareness of environment.

Although past research has looked at the meaning of ecocriticism in accessing literary works, so far, very little attention has been paid to whether this theory can be implemented in literary teaching to build environmental awareness. Not until December 2017 the first international conference on the topic of ecocriticism was held in Vietnam [7]. This was the first remarkable event attracting interest of scholars, researchers, writers... on ecocriticism in national scale. Initial translations, interpretations and practice were experimented. However, among over 80 reports, only 1 research by Dang posed the very first question on “What can present-day high school literature education learn from ecocriticism?” [8]. In order to achieve the highest goal – ecocriticism as an activism rather than merely academic theory, education, in general, and literature teaching, in particular, should not be bystanders.

In Vietnam, however, raising environmental awareness is hardly seen as the story of Literature teaching. It rather belongs to either Civic Education, Geography, Biology subjects in high school curriculum or Environment research and management majors in tertiary education curriculum. This fact is partly attributed to the isolated approach in traditional education in Vietnam. In 2002, Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training

started experimenting integrated approach in secondary school curriculum. Since then, many positive movements can be seen among educators, teachers and learners at many levels of educational system. A modernized teaching methodology has been gradually realized, which focuses on integrated and interdisciplinary teaching approach. This establishes the strategic foundation of the implementation of ecocriticism in teaching literature.

This study set out to examine the restrictions of traditional literature teaching and the feasibility of modern, integrated-approach literature teaching in raising ecological awareness for learners. There are two highlighted features which characterizing each teaching method: traditional literature teaching is based on *human-centered* approach and see literature as an *isolated* discipline; modern literature teaching, by contrast, is set up on *earth-centered* ground and finds itself *integrated* with ecocriticism. Most importantly, the study aims to determine the specific ways in which ecocriticism could be implemented in literature teaching to build environmental awareness of students.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Questions

The study aimed to seek the answers to the following questions: Will the implementation of ecocriticism in literature teaching help to build students' environmental awareness? If it does, what are specifically efficient ways to adopt this theory into teaching?

B. Participants and Procedure

The research participants were 60 sophomore students, aged between 20 and 23, from two classes in Faculty of Literature, Vinh University, Vietnam. They were following Western Literature course that consisted of sixty lessons. They started their last ten lessons at the beginning of this study. The classes met for 100 minutes two times a week. Each class had 30 learners, whose major was Literature Pedagogy.

One of the two classes was randomly chosen to be the treatment group (hereafter named group A) and the other was the control group (hereafter named group B).

This study was to present two ways to adopt ecocriticism in literature teaching in order to raise learners' consciousness of environment. For the control group, the teacher kept using traditional teaching methods. Meanwhile, for the treatment group, the teacher utilized each of two experimental ways. After each way adopted, appropriate form of evaluation was applied to both groups. The results were collected for analysis.

C. Materials

The lessons during the survey belonged to the last chapter of the course, namely *The Twentieth American Literature*, including ten lessons. Each five lessons were spent on reading the novels *The Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway [9] and *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner respectively [10]. There were certain reasons for the selection of those literary works for this study. Firstly, the fact that they were American

literature challenged the study: whether or not teaching foreign literature and culture could raise awareness of not only global environmental issue but also our national problems? Secondly, the differences between two novels were to evaluate the feasibility of the research. While the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* had been taught for high school students before their entrance to university, *The Sound and the Fury* seemed totally new for them. Also, in the former novel, the nature, or ecology, was explicitly one major theme; the latter one, by contrast, implied the theme of nature in much more discreet way. The following part of the study is to demonstrate how each experimental way was implemented in the surveyed classes and the differences made between them after the treatment.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Designing Critical Question System about the Relationship Between the Human and the Nature

The question system plays a role as the framework of classroom activities. Changing approach to literary works as well as to subject teaching method inevitably leads to significant changes in question system.

The following is the comparison between the traditional question system and the one with ecocriticism implementation.

TABLE I. TRADITIONAL QUESTION SYSTEM AND EXPERIMENTAL QUESTION SYSTEM IN COMPARISON

	Traditional question system	Experimental question system
Approach - To Literature subject - To Literary works	- Literature as an isolated subject - Human-centered	- Literature integrated with ecocriticism - Earth-centered
Content	The human's social characters/ morality	The relationship between human and nature
Form	Based on the plot. Focusing on characters' life events.	Based on the details revealing the relationship between human and nature
Expected conclusion	Moral/ Social aspects of human	Not only moral/social aspects but also the entire existence environment of the human

As can be seen from the table, the traditional question system basically considers literature as an isolated subject. Also, when it comes to its approach to literary works, it follows the conventional view: human is the center of the world. As the result, the questions are usually built basing on the plot, focusing on merely the life events of characters in order to discover the social or moral aspects of human. On the other hand, when ecocriticism implemented, the teacher is more likely to access literature as an integrated discipline. And guided by the ecological thought, they understand it is not human, rather the earth that is the center of the world. Thus, the content of questions would focus on the relationship between human and nature, exploring details revealing that kind of relationship. The destination of those questions is not only

social or moral aspects but also the entire existence status of human.

When teaching *The Old Man and the Sea*, in the control class (group B), the teacher asked a range of questions in traditional method. That was, the questions were based on the novel's plot - the major events happening to the protagonist Santiago. The content of questions focused on which social characters of Santiago were reflected in the novel.

Here are some discussion question samples for group B:

- Summarize the plot of *The Old Man and the Sea*.
- How did Santiago catch the large marlin?
- How did Santiago fight with the sharks to protect the marlin?
- What could be inferred about Santiago's characters from that he conquered the fish?
- What is the message of the novel coming from Santiago's victory?

However, in the treatment class (group A), the teacher experimented a critical way of asking. Instead of the plot, the details which indicated the relationship between human and nature were explored in the questions. The learners were expected to examine that interrelation between them.

Here are some discussion question samples for group B (accompanied with subsidiary questions/ cues if necessary):

- How was the nature surrounding Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*? (Was it fierce? Or was it beautiful?)
- What was the relationship between Santiago and the fish? (Were they enemies? If they were, why did Santiago keep talking to the fish and giving them many compliments (for example, "It is a strong full-blooded fish", or even to the birds: "Stay at my house if you like, bird?")
- What did Santiago think about fishing? (Was it inevitable? "He thought, everything kills everything else in some way", or was it a tragedy? "Fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive." "I am glad we do not have to try to kill the stars.")
- How did Santiago feel after the catch? (Was he proud and happy? "And I killed him well.", or did he feel guilty/ tired? "I am sorry that I killed the fish though.")
- Did the human truly win the nature in this story? (Was it a victory? After the catch, Santiago thought: "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." Or was it a failure? The result of the catch was only the giant bone of the fish).

After the discussions, learners in both classes were required to write individual brief essays within 40 minutes on the following question:

The unique meaning of the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* by E. Hemingway is to extol the human's power of conquering the nature. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

The responses to the questions in 60 essays were collected and compared among the two groups. The results illustrated a remarkable difference between them. While 22 out of 30 students in group B agreed with the statement, none of 30 learners in group A believed that "to extol the human's power of conquering the nature" was the unique meaning of the novel.

Among 8 "disagreed" students in group B, there were only 2 students who suggested another meaning of the novel. One possible explanation for this result is that in the control class, the students, in spite of doubting on the tricky word "unique" in the question, still struggled with discovering the other meaning layers of the literary work. In group A, on the contrary, except 2 students whose ideas weren't clear enough, the majority of the learners could indicate many other subjects of the novel. The following is major interpretations of the novel's meaning given by students in group A:

- Extolling the human's power of conquering the nature
- Praising the beauty of the wildlife, the natural environment
- Addressing to the human's loneliness among human society
- Being nostalgic of primitive and core values of human being, which is harmonized with the wildlife: freedom, fairness, etc.
- Emphasizing human's dilemma: preserving the nature for the aesthetic values and exploiting the nature for their survival

The result indicated the significant distinction in environmental awareness between the control and experimental groups. For those following traditional lessons, what they concluded from the novel was nothing different from what they were taught in high school before, which means all they realized after all was the power of human, with no care about the environment. On the other hand, for those being guided by integrated-approach questions, the conclusion given apparently reflected their concern about the nature, wildlife and the relationship between human and the ecology. It is, in our opinion, the so-called "dilemma" between human and the nature that makes *The Old Man and the Sea* the great novel of twentieth century.

A similar research procedure was conducted in the discussion of the novel *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner [10]. Here are some samples of questions:

For group B:

- Summarize the plot of *The Sound and the Fury*.
- What happened to the three Compson brothers, Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and the sister Caddy?
- How was the decadence of Compson family described in the novel?
- Compare two characters, Benjy and Jason?
- How were the themes of race, money and morality reflected in the novel?

For group A:

- How was the nature described in Benjy's chapter?
- How were the natural world and artificial world described in Quentin's chapter?
- How was the industrialized society described in Jason's chapter?
- Examine the relationship between Caddy and the images of "tree", "flower", "rain".
- Which message did the dominance of artificial world over natural world in this novel imply to the readers?

After discussions, each class was required to write an assignment on the topic *The Sound and the Fury's* themes in 40 minutes. The result found that the two classes came up with some common ideas, with three major subjects mentioned: the moral obsolescence in times of civilization, the fact of economic recession, psychological trauma of human in modern society. Those subjects all focused on social aspects of human life, which was the traditional approach in literature, without caring about the physical environment. Noticeably, the treatment group's performance went beyond that trail, with some other meanings explored. Those included:

- Primitive nature as the symbol of the primitive values of human
- Destructions of nature going with destructions of human
- Contrasting the natural world and artificial world
- Criticizing the negative impact of industrialization on the nature as well as human's life

Once again, performance after the treatment clearly demonstrated learners' consciousness of environmental issues.

Taken together, these results suggest that there is an association between the use of question system focusing on the relationship between human and nature and the participants' environmental concern. Learners who followed those questions had a chance to enjoy a broader approach to literary works. They therefore tend to go beyond the subjects of social/ moral aspects to look upon the issue of existence environment of human. That way, through literature, teachers attempt to educate students to read literary works not as merely the story of literature but as the story of human's life.

B. Adapting Literature to Genres of Art

While the first solution – posing critical questions about human – nature relationship belongs to inside-classroom activities, this suggestion – adapting literature to artistic genres, is more likely outside-classroom, suitable for seminars, tutorials or extra-curriculum lessons.

This part of study was to experiment the adaptation from literature to either another or the same genre of art. Literary work could be partly adapted or adapted as a whole.

One of the Vietnamese students' issues when learning Literature is their restricted connection between literature knowledge and the real life. Seen as an isolated subject,

Literature is somehow too romantic and unpractical in the learners' point of view. That "norm" impedes the necessary influence of literature values on people's attitude and behavior. One of the possible solutions for this issue is that the students, instead of merely "study" literature, need to "live", and really "feel" the fiction world. The literature adaptation activity was designed to offer that chance to students, who, in this study case, would be teachers and organize such activities for their own students in future.

The questions pursued in this part of research were whether or not the adaptation activity could effect a change in students' consciousness of ecology. If it could, which would be the appropriate ways to do adaptation without distorting literature essence?

Unlike the first experiment, this adaptation activity was applied to the group B only due to the fact that unlike group A, they hadn't been explained about ecocriticism approach before. Their performance after treatment therefore could reliably picture the effect of activity.

After discussion lessons on *The Old Man and the Sea*, students in group B were required to perform a play adapted from this novel. The 7-10 minute-play would be on stage in a literature club held the next month. The teacher played a role as the mentor through preparation duration.

After the first script draft, students admitted they found it hard to act in up to 7-10 minutes because the plot of novel was too simple with not many events. With the conventional plot-approach, their script basically based on the events and actions of characters, which focused on what happened in the fight between the old man and the fish.

Pointing out the problem, the teacher suggested that another character should be considered: the nature, asking students to think about the wildlife's performance and its role in the novel. In this case, teacher could possibly apply the question system mentioned above to clarify the idea.

The second draft of script was different from the previous. That was, the scriptwriter added more details of wildlife: the birds, stars, clouds, many kinds of fish. The impression on the nature surrounding the protagonist was much bolder. However, they still struggled with how to innovate the acting of the actor, which was, at that time, mostly the fighting gestures of Santiago. It was more likely that the audience would get bored with such monotonousness.

The teacher explained the "monotonousness" came from that the students had emphasized on the plot only. Recommendation in this case was to pay more attention to the emotional stream of the character to see not only happened outside the character but also what happened inside him.

The last modified script, which was later used for the play performance, reflected the students' growth in understanding the novel's meaning. There were more dialogues between Santiago and the nature – fish, birds, clouds, through which, audience would understand the dilemma of human with nature. It mixed opposite values: pride and guilt, victory and failure, friends and enemies. A lot of meaning layers were unfolded.

Obviously, the progress of students' environmental awareness in this part of study was not quantitative. Their play performance was not something measured by calculation. However, the process went along with their realization of novel's meaning and of the human's ecology. Even, a minor change in details could say something about the change in mind. For instance, to decorate the stage, students drew a lot of illustrations. The marlin, one main character, of course, was carefully designed. After the modifications script, the students decided to replace the first illustration. A ferocious, cruel huge fish was substituted by an impressively grave, charming one. One possible interpretation for this decision was the students realized that the fish was not the old man's enemy, rather his friend, and the wildlife was not fierce only, rather it had its own beauty.

Similarly, after theory lessons on *The Sound and the Fury*, students in group B were asked to design three posters for the prospective play adapted from the novel. The posters were to illustrate three main characters namely Benjy, Quentin, Jason.

At first, the students were irritable because illustrating those characters was far from easy: they couldn't think of how to differentiate three characters, and how to picture their unique personality.

The teacher attempted to guide them to adjust their approach. Instead of focusing on the plot, they should explore the relationship between each character and his living environment. Understanding the living environment of each person, the students would be able to come up with ideas of the poster background and the character's expressions.

The result was beyond teacher's expectations. Without saying the names, the audience definitely could tell which poster was about which character. For example, while Benjy was demonstrated as a wild, naïve and nostalgic guy wandering on an immense wild pasture with trees, stream and flame, Jason looked like a cruel, busy, dissatisfied man running in a suffocating, dusty factory. Surprisingly, when asked to name the differences between two characters, the students were able to not only name the two opposing features, but also discover the causal relation between them, which they couldn't do before the experiment. What they answered to the teacher's question was: Benjy and Jason were the symbols of "primitive" and "modern" worlds respectively, their tragedy came from Benjy's nostalgia of the primitive world and Jason's being trapped in modern world; destroying and estranging from natural world led to human's tragedy.

The findings suggest that literature adaptation creates chances for students to take steps to realize the strong connection between human and nature, and to appreciate environment protection.

The generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations. For instance, since there were only ten theory lessons and two practice activities, the data withdrawn from the treatment might not have been sufficient enough. Further research could be conducted with a bigger size of population to confirm the reliability of the findings. In addition, students' environmental awareness is something that cannot be 100 percent quantitatively measured. It needs a long-term, sensitive

and careful evaluation from the teachers to confirm the feasibility of this study.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out with the aim of exploring the effect of implementing ecocriticism through Literature teaching process on building environmental awareness for students. There are two specific ways experimented in this study: firstly, designing critical question system about the relationship between the human and the nature; secondly, adapting literature to genres of art.

The research found that there is a strong relationship between applying ecocriticism in literature teaching and students' awareness of ecology. The treatment group outperformed the control group in terms of environmental awareness and they themselves progressed throughout the course.

Examining the transfer of raising environmental awareness from the Literature course to other contexts was also what the researchers in this study look forward to. In other words, even when the students are not attending the literature lessons, hopefully, they are able to do some sort of ecocriticism approach while reading literary works by themselves, thus more understand human's living environment issues. Further studies should be included to confirm the feasibility of the result in a broader scope.

In conclusion, this study extends our knowledge of the benefits of ecocriticism on building learners' awareness of ecology. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that teaching literature integrated with ecocriticism enhances not only students' understanding of literature but also their positive attitude to their living environment. It is therefore recommended that teaching literature should never keep itself isolated; it rather should aim to educate students more about their personality, their behavior to the real life. This study, at last, offers some insights of ecocriticism and its implications, especially for Literature teachers who are concerned with teaching a real human literature and developing learners' values.

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