How to Teach and Learn English Literature in E-Education Era

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Abstract—**English Literature is a compulsory and meanwhile difficult courses for English majors in China. While, in today's e-education era, its traditional course design is proved to be much lagging behind. Teachers of this course should make full use of modern devices including multimedia and on–line resources to improve literature teaching and learning. Based on related teaching and learning theories, this article tends to provide some in-class and after-class teaching and learning activities of English Literature. The in-class teaching activities include multimedia teaching, students' presentation, text drama, etc; the after-class activities include stage play, movie dubbing, course blog or BBS, etc. It is expected that such interactive teaching in e-education era can improve the teaching effect and eventually raise students' literary appreciating competence.**

Index Terms—**e-education; English Literature; learning activities; teaching activities**

I. INTRODUCTION

In Chinese colleges and universities, English Literature (here mainly refers to British and American Literature) is a compulsory and key, while rather difficult course for English majors. It is designed not only to help students learn the history of English literature and appreciate its literary works, but also to serve for the cultivation of their cultural sensitivity and humanistic consciousness. Nevertheless, this course has been confronted with serious challenges in recent years. In terms of its status, it has been gradually marginalized in today's business society. More and more English majors begin to invest more time and energy in practical courses related to translation, business, computer, tourism, etc. In terms of teaching approach, most teachers still adopt the traditional teacher-oriented lecturing method. It is teachers' job to provide the students with almost all relevant literary knowledge like historical background, general ideas of important literary works, writers' artistic features, achievement and contributions, etc. It is evident that such teaching procedure will dull students' curiosity and fail to arouse their interest. Therefore, according to the present situation of and the existing problems in English, i.e. British and American Literature teaching and learning in China, it is high time for teachers to make changes and reforms in the design of the course, which includes the two aspects of teaching and learning. The 21st century is an era of internet. Computer devices and internet are bound to play a dominant role in all aspects of modern society including, undoubtedly, education. In recent years, many researchers have employed

computers and internet in language teaching. They think that the convenient devices in e-learning environment are an integral part of language teaching and learning and have achieved good effect. While, as to English Literature course, the traditional course of English majors, its teaching method seems much lagging behind the rapid growth of modern technology. Most of the teachers continue to use the traditional teacher-centered classroom teaching method, which is obviously out of date. Thus, it is not surprising that students show little interest to the course and the course is gradually marginalized. To improve the teaching efficiency of British and American Literature and change its embarrassing status, teachers should catch up with today's e-education trend and make use of internet and computer resources to design colorful teaching and learning activities.

II. THEORETICAL SUPPORT FOR THE DESIGN OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE COURSE

Literature is a comprehensive course. Even for the native speakers, whose language competence they needn't worry about, they feel hard to understand and appreciate literary works for there are so many legends, allusions and literary quotations, etc. Thus, for non-native learners, to learn the course of English Literature well is more difficult. Students need both good language abilities as they are not native in language and a wide range of knowledge of western history, customs, mythology, etc as they are neither native in culture. It is impossible to make students master this course purely depending on the teacher's sole effort. Thus, in teaching this course, teachers must design efficient teaching and learning activities to help students learn this course better. There are two key points in the course design: first, it should make full use of the modern teaching and learning device in the e-learning environment; second, teachers should turn to related theories for the course design. Here, teaching theories are the basis and support for teaching and learning activities employed in British and American Literature course.

A. Theoretical Support for Teaching Design

Teachers' job is to cultivate students' intelligence. In the traditional teaching method, especially that of English Literature, teaching is mainly focused on the cultivation of students' linguistic intelligence: the remembering of literary knowledge through reciting and the reading of literary works. But, not all students are good at linguistic intelligence, so teachers should think over how to develop students' literary appreciating ability through multiple aspects. Multiple intelligence theory is such a theory to guide teachers in designing a great diversity of teaching activities. It was first

put forward by American psychologist Howard Gardner in his work *Frames of Mind* (1983). He has initially stated that there are at least seven different ways for students to learn: linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematic intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily kinesthetic intelligence, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence. It has been proved that each student exhibits a combination of the various intelligences. While, in the traditional literature teaching, students who are good at intelligences other than linguistic intelligence will lose interest and find it is difficult for them to learn the course well. Based on multiple intelligences theory, teachers should expand their current teaching repertoire to include a broader range of methods, materials and techniques for reaching a wider and more diverse range of learners. Here, the "computer-aided multimedia teaching" is a good way to achieve the goal of engaging as many of these different capacities as possible within the same leaning program.

B． Theoretical Support for Learning Design

A successful course design involves two aspects: teaching and learning. But, the traditional literary course lays more emphases on teaching instead of on learning. Teachers spend much time in improving teaching skills and methods, while ignore how to develop students' self-learning ability. Here, constructivism can help teachers solve this problem.

Constructivism has been in the spotlight of current educational circles since the 1980s and it is still at the center of educational debate. Constructivists reject the traditional assumption that there is "true" knowledge, independent of the learner; instead, constructivists assume that within the realm of constructivism, learners have to construct their own knowledge, individually and collectively. According to constructivism, humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences. Learning is accomplished best by experimentation, and not by being told what will happen. Thus students should be left to make their own inferences, discoveries and conclusions. And the teachers should play the role of an observer, an assessor and director. In British and American Literature teaching, teachers should provide students enough chances and opportunity to construct their own understanding of literary knowledge, and ability of appreciating literary works. While, in this construction process, the in-class teaching time and materials provided in the text books are limited, which will affect students' construction of literary knowledge. Fortunately, the boundless internet resources can solve this problem. Taking full use of the advantage of nowadays e-learning environment can aid students accomplish knowledge construction easily and efficiently.

Constructivism can instruct teachers' course activity design in a broad sense. While, concerning English Literature course, especially literary appreciation, it is not enough. As is prescribed clearly in the *Teaching Syllabus for English Majors in Chinese Higher Institutes*, "the objectives of the literature course are to develop students' ability to read, comprehend, and appreciating literary works, and to enable them to master basic knowledge of and approaches to literary criticism; and by reading and analyzing British and American literary works, to improve students' language skills and

humanistic awareness, and to strengthen their understanding of western literature and culture." Here, it is the key point to develop students' capacity of appreciation, which is the base of developing humanistic awareness and literary criticism. The appreciation ability can not be compelled into students by teachers. Instead, teachers should help students develop their own response. Actually, reader-response theory has been popularly used in EFL literature teaching in the past decade. The central tenets of reader-response theory are that meaning is not something that is contained in a text, but is produced by readers. That is to say teachers should focus on the mutual communication between reader and the text in reading literary works. To achieve this goal, the classroom teaching is deficient, and students should extend learning from within classroom to out of classroom. On internet, students can be familiar with the western lives, culture, and customs through reading news in western websites, listening English songs, or watching western movies or TV series. Usually, the topics in modern western society are similar to the recurrent motifs in many classical British and American literary works, such as mutual love and care, pursuit of happiness and humans' trying situations. Sometimes just browsing of web page can enlarge students' knowledge scope and in turn help them create their own response to a certain literary work.

III. DESIGN OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES FOR ENGLISH LITERATURE IN E-EDUCATION ERA

Nowadays, the advent of the information age has completely subverted the way that people gain information and knowledge. Accordingly, e-education has covered almost all fields of modern education. It is fast, convenient and efficient. E-learning environment provides a wide range of technical choices for English Literature teaching. Based on years of teaching practice, the following are some attempts employing multimedia devices and internet resources in teaching and learning British and American Literature.

A. In-Class Teaching and Learning Activities

The traditional English Literature class is solely the stage of the teacher's own performance. Students are seldom involved in class activities. In teaching history of literature, teachers provide students with all necessary information; in teaching literary selections, they lead students to analyze a given text sentence by sentence, paying close attention to words meaning and sentence pattern. Such teacher-dominated class will undoubtedly make students feel bored and insipid.

To solve the above problems, teachers should design various teaching and learning activities in class. For teachers, "computer–aided multimedia teaching" is an effective teaching method. Actually, multimedia has been widely applied in English teaching in recently years. While, comparatively speaking, its application in literature class, especially in non-key universities and colleges as the author is working in, is insufficient. Many teachers continue to hold the traditional teaching concept. Such teaching is unavoidably dull and inefficient. To change such dissatisfying situation, multimedia devices can improve the

low teaching efficiency and arouse students' initiative. Take the study of the famous British pre-romantic poet William Blake for example. The author has presented the covers of his two poem collections *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* to students in practical teaching. The former shows us a picture of a boy and a girl enjoying their parent's story telling under a big tree; while, the latter draws a picture of the boy and the girl weeping besides the death bed of their parents. Here, just through the simple contrast between the two covers, it is easy for the students to conclude the difference between the two works on theme, language and writing style. Take Arthur Miller and his *Death of a Salesman* for another example. The author has showed the students the book cover, the movie poster and the stage play poster to let students have a direct and concrete impression of the plot of the story and the character of the protagonist Willy Loman. Further, "stream of consciousness" technique is widely employed in the play and the protagonist hovers between reality and fantasy. While, it is abstruse for students to master the features of this technique just by the teacher's lecture. Here, the author attempts to show students the film version and let them pay attention to the function of the light and the door which are the mediate connecting reality and illusions. By this way, it is easy for students to master "stream of consciousness" and comprehend its importance in characterization and plot development.

In a word, in British and American Literature classroom teaching, teachers can add picture, music, and video relevant to or adapted from literary works to teaching procedure. For one thing, this multimedia teaching can create a lively and active learning atmosphere with information of sketch, writing, voice, picture, etc. For another, students can make use of their multiple intelligences to remember the otherwise dull and boring literary knowledge.

Comparatively speaking, the learning activities for students in class are richer than that of teaching. Students' presentation and text drama are the favorite activities in the author's practical classroom teaching.

First, let's take students' presentation for instance. Normally, British Literature course and American Literature course occur respectively in the first and second semesters of English major's third academic year. Its teaching task is formidable within the limited teaching time of less than 40 hours in each semester. Because of the time limitation, teachers usually choose to dominate the class themselves, telling students all important points of literary history and literary works. While, this traditional input teaching method may strip students of their chances to know literary knowledge and appreciate literary works. To solve this problem, teachers may encourage students to search as much information as possible to construct their own acquisition of knowledge. Literature, especially literary works, is boundless. Thus, what teachers should teach is not the limited literary knowledge but the ability of literary appreciation and criticism. The development of such abilities is a process of knowledge construction. In practical teaching, the author attempts to assign each student a certain presentation job relevant to a certain literary period, a representative writer or a classical works in advance. Then students can make full use of the internet or campus website to search for relevant

information, select important points and finally draw their own conclusions. Some of the presentations are really impressive and informative. Take two cases of students' presentation from class 0810113, Changchun University of Science and Technology in American Literature class last semester for example. One student's presentation job is F. Scott Fitzgerald. She, after searching Fitzgerald's important information after class, designed a piece of newspaper including all the important points of the writer---his photo, life experience, important works and writing style. Just through this piece of paper, other students can have a comprehensive understanding of the writer. Another students' presentation job is Ernest Hemingway. He used some typical episode in *The Old Man and the Sea* to illustrate the typical Hemingway code theme and his code hero. Such illustration is more vivid and interesting than the pure abstract explanation of these two terms. In a word, the well prepared and planned presentations by students may be new, unique and interesting compared with the information in the textbook. Sometimes even teachers can benefit a lot from students' presentation.

Besides presentation, other in-class activities which can stimulate students' learning interest include group discussion, debate and text drama. Among them text drama is most popular to the students. It provides students with a virtual environment for them to experience the feeling of the fictionalized and dramatized figures. In practical teaching, the author will first divide students into several groups of four to six members. Then the group leader will further divide their assignment: some students will search the original play or novel they prefer on internet, some will be in charge of finding the relevant stage performance or adapted movies, and some will be responsible for the preparation of music, setting, costumes and instruments. Besides, imagination and adaptation are encouraged in students' role-play. In recent years, students in the author's class have performed many classical works including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Jane Eyre*, *The last leaf*, etc. In their performance, the author has found the students passion and enthusiasm for literature and meanwhile discovered their different potentials. Some students are good at coordination and organization, some are good at drawing and setting design, and some are expert in selecting music for accompaniment. Generally speaking, their performance is natural, their dialogue or monologue is fluent, and the atmosphere in class is hot. The students' text drama did help the literature course be more attractive and colorful. The performance of text drama contributes a lot to literature teaching and learning. For one thing, both students' interest and knowledge construction ability will be greatly improved through the experience of performance. For another, the preparation process can improve students' multiple intelligences and finally achieve all round education.

B. After-Class Teaching and Learning Activities

For English Literature course, the classroom teaching time is limited while the literary works and knowledge are comparatively boundless. Thus, the in-class teaching and learning activities can not meet the object of the course. Here, after-class teaching and learning activities can be as a

supplement. For in-class activities, the teacher plays a key role of instructing; for after-class activities, students begin to play a dominant role with the teacher as a guider and a helper.

The after-class teaching and learning activities for or concerning English Literature course are also of great diversity. There is campus art festival in my university once a year. Students' favorite performance is the stage play. They will first select a classic English novel or play to act. Then they search the movie version and comment of the novel or play or its main characters in the internet to prepare for the final performance. Usually, there will be some adaptation to make the performance more humorous and attractive and to suit the modern society and the college students' life. In the preparation of the stage play, the "actors" will understand the novel or play, its characters, plot and theme better, and meanwhile, the audience' interest for literary works can also be aroused.

Besides, movie dubbing is also a good choice for students to improve their literary appreciating ability. At the end of each semester, the author will choose one movie adapted from an English novel for students' movie dubbing. Students are divided into several groups and finally grades will be set according to their performance. Take Jane Austin's masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice* for example. This work describes the love and marriage theme of middle class people in Austin's time. In traditional teaching method, teachers will spend a long time analyzing the historical background, the personalities of main characters and the unique writing style of the author. Yet, in the practical teaching, the author has attempted to let students dub a segment from the newly adapted film *Pride and Prejudice* directed by Joe Wright. After dubbing the film, the students find it is now very easy for them to remember the themes, social background and writing style of Austin's works for they themselves have been fused with the novel and its characters.

Additionally, course website, course blog or Bulletin Board System (BBS) are the most convenient method for after-class interactive communication between teachers and students. With the rapid development of internet and campus network, today, information is available at any time from any place to any internet user. Thus, teachers can establish their own course website, course blog or Bulletin Board System (BBS) to communicate with students out of class to solve the problem of heavy course task within limited class hours. Take the teaching of selected excerpts for example. The renowned Canadian writer Robertson Davies once pointed out that the subconscious intent or conscious meaning that had entered the work as the writer wrote it no longer existed when the book reached the hand of readers. That is to say, different readers have different understanding of the same character or literary work. Thus, based on the reader-response theory, teachers should develop students' thinking ability by assign them literary works to read after class. Then, another problem appears: how can students communicate with their teacher after they have finished their reading? In the class once a week or during the five or ten minutes break between classes? Obviously, even if there can be some communication, it is quite insufficient. While, the above mentioned course website, blog or BBS can provide us such a stage to communicate conveniently and flexibly. In the

author's practical teaching, a course BBS has been established. The subjects are divided according to different literary periods as British Renaissance Period, American Romantic Period, Contemporary English Literature Period, etc. Students can communicate with the teacher and other students on their own understanding of a writer or of a certain work in different subject area. Take Ezra Pound's representative imagist short poem "In a Station of the Metro" for instance. It only contains two lines: "*The apparition of these faces in the crowd*; /*Petals on a wet, black bough.*" While after appreciating it in class, students' response is in a wide diversity. In BBS, some attempt to research on the influence of the poetry in Tang Dynasty on Pound's poem and have found some similar image comparison in Li Bai's poems. Some center on the direct metaphor between "faces" and "petals" in the poem and develop their original understanding. Some list a dozen of Chinese translation versions and share their own analysis of which one is the best. The course BBS has indeed provided teachers and students with a space to share their innate response after reading literary works, which, in the author's opinion, is the essence of literary appreciation. Besides, the course BBS is also a gather-together place providing model tests, literary works appreciation and relevant video resources. In short, with interactive internet teaching, the limits of classroom teaching on space and time have vanished and the literature learning becomes more flexible.

IV. EXISTING PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES OF ENGLISH LITERATURE TEACHNG AND LEARNING IN E-EDUCATION ERA

We have discussed fully the benefits of making use of computer or internet devices in English literature teaching and learning in e-education era. However, network is a double-edged sword. There are some challenges for teachers and students and some problems we should pay attention to. First, colleges or universities should provided campus website and classrooms equipped with multimedia devices, which is the basis for the teaching and learning activities of British and American Literature course in the information age. Second, teachers should be familiar with computer operation and technology, which can guarantee the success of the e-learning platform. Thirdly, teachers should learn to be a guider, director and partner in the process of learning, instead of a transfer to deliver information to students. Fourthly, students should be self-disciplined. The learners in the network are difficult to control themselves. The students-centered learning model needs students' determination, persistence and commitment, especially for the anthology part. In a word, students should learn to strengthen their self-constructivist learning ability. Last but not the least, there are overwhelming amount of information on internet. Teachers should teach students how to distinguish the useful information from useless information or even sometimes bad information. Here, providing students with some common-used literature websites is a good way to solve this problem. All in all, we should try to avoid the problems such as high cost with low outcome, low studying efficiency, counterproductive learning effect, etc. Teachers

should play the mediating functions to mediate students' e-learning in the aspects of learning interest, motivation, learning strategies and self-control, and eventually help to cultivate students' autonomous learning competence. Besides, we should not abandon the traditional English literature teaching and learning method wholly. E-learning is only a tool of teaching and learning aid, and the sole e-learning is far from being sufficient. Thus, blending learning, combination of the traditional classroom teaching and the modern e-learning is a more effective and practical way for English Literature teaching and learning.

V. CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, network with its advanced technology has greatly expanded the boundaries of time and space. E-Learning has provided the guarantee in order to strengthen quality education and improves the quality of education, and satisfies the need of construction on lifelong education. In today's society, learning is more and more considered as a process of constructive, distributed, and situated cognition, instead of the transmission of knowledge. As for British and American Literature course, based on constructivism, reader-response theory, and multiple intelligences theory, the teaching approaches of British and American literature should shift from teacher-oriented to student-oriented

teaching model. Teachers of this course should make full use of the advantage of internet or computer and design various extracurricular recreational activities to reach the goal of effective and efficient teaching. Only in this way, can students learning interest, individual potential and self-learning ability be cultivated.

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