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The feasible strategies and problems of English learning and literature teaching in China

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Abstract

The English literature teaching, as an important component of liberal arts, has become a popular course of foreign language learning in many non-native countries. In China it is only since the reform and opening up that this area has attracted more attention among EFL teachers and educators. This article aims to discuss the significance of literature teaching, illustrate its characteristics in the EFL context, analyze the current situation, disclose the problems and explore the feasible strategies in order that it can help teachers elevate the quality in their teaching, and learners the efficiency in their learning.

Keywords: Literature Teaching in the EFL Context, Significance, Characteristics, Situation, Problems, Strategies.

Introduction

The Literature, as an important component of humanities, is a very popular subject which reflects human culture, knowledge and wisdom. Literature is an art, an art of language, more than just an entertainment, so it has a very close relation with language and linguistics. As everybody knows, it is an important embodiment of the language in which it is presented. That's why it is endowed with a worthwhile role in language teaching, esp. in the EFL classroom. In many countries today, literature has been taken as a compulsory subject, an indispensable component of modern liberal arts, which occupies a seat among school curriculums. It is an undeniable fact that literature plays an important role in English teaching and learning in countries where students learn English as a foreign language. It has been probably acknowledged that it is the reform and opening-up that serves as the turning point in the wide-spreading and promoting of English learning and literature teaching in China. The implementation of the reform and opening-up policy entailed the wide communication and cooperation between different countries and regions with various cultural backgrounds, which made it necessary for Chinese people to have a good command of foreign language, particularly English, which is regarded as the global language for its special position and role in the world. In this new atmosphere where international communication is a lot more popular and frequent, much importance is attached to English learning and teaching; in the meanwhile, as an indispensable part and means of English teaching, literature gains its deserved place. Nowadays every university has literature curriculum and every student has the chance to experience and appreciate English literature in their learning of English at college. However, comparatively literature teaching in China is a weak area and there is a conspicuous lack of experience and skills in this field. Despite the problems and defects, a lot of progress has been made since. This article is intended to define the role of literature teaching, discuss its significance, illustrate its characteristics in the EFL context, analyze the current situation, clarify the problems and explore the feasible strategies in order that it can help teachers elevate the quality in their teaching, and learners the efficiency in their learning.

Role and Significance of Literature Teaching in the EFL Context

Literature is usually considered as the encyclopedia of a nation's civilization and culture; it reflects the psychological structure of the nation, spiritual pursuits, cultural customs, religion, history, economy, political system and other aspects of ideology from different facets. In

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literary works, readers can also learn and find something about the society as it is the mirror directly or indirectly representing the society of the writer. It usually unfolds a panorama of the society by giving detailed and dramatized descriptions of the social life of the people and disclosing the contradictions and problems in the society. So literature is closely connected with social culture. Readers can experience the life of the people portrayed in a work. That is to say, by literature teaching, teachers can enable the learners to learn about culture in the relatively natural way. Besides, by literature teaching, teachers can also get learners to learn about history because literature usually contains some historic knowledge, just as some put it, literature and history always coexist. For example, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* tells of the American Civil War and in Thomas Hardy's *God's Funeral* readers can experience the piece of English history when religious faith ebbed in the middle and late Victorian Age. However, we must know that "it is unhelpful to view literary texts as either naturalistic pictures of British or American life, for purposes of cultural study, or as examples of the best use of the English language, for language courses. The language and content of literature is deliberately and creatively modified (or even distorted) for the needs of the writer." (Brumfit 25) On the other hand, literature is the art of language and it cannot exist without language. Therefore in literature learning one can learn language and linguistics as we have talked; the three are interrelated to each other. Literature reading involves language learning and it is an indispensable means for students to learn English esp. in countries where English is not a native language. Literature is an important curriculum in tertiary education with its noticeable advantages in language acquisition. Literature expands language awareness. Asking learners to examine sophisticated or non-standard examples of language makes them more aware of the norms of language use. Literary works are not confined to the forms of language and language in literature is relatively more free and flexible, which can make it possible for learners to be exposed to various forms of language instead of some rigid and dull materials which are deliberately made or chosen for language teaching. Literary materials are more effective than drab ones often compiled for strict grammatical and syntactic purposes and used mechanically in language classrooms. In this case, literature can arouse learners' interest in their language learning, and help them dispel boredom in dry language learning and keep pace with the teaching progress. It is in literary materials that they can find and enjoy freshness and satisfy their curiosity in language development and it is more important to English majors and other advanced learners, as we know, they have had a good enough knowledge of the English language. For them, it is more necessary to learn language skills and rhetoric so as to improve their language art. Literature appreciation can shoulder this mission, fulfill their aspiration and realize their dream. Learning literature can help students learn about the language in all-round fields because literature can supply the most authentic materials in various forms and of different kinds in their language learning. It is good to expose learners to this source of unmodified language in the classroom because the skills they acquire in dealing with difficult or unknown language can be used outside the class. Literature abounds in artistic language and language skills, which is considered by many experts to be one of its biggest idiosyncrasies. It is just for this point that many colleges

have literature as a compulsory course for English learners esp. English majors. "Reading is the most autonomous and individualizable ability in language proficiency, and literature is one of only three areas on which a foreign language content syllabus could be based." (Brumfit 185) Apart from the functions in culture and language learning, literature learning has another one in ethic teaching and value judgment. Literature educates the whole person. In literature there are plenty of materials which can be exploited as the materials for moral education. Every writer cleverly weaves his value and view of the world in his work; usually it is implied in his writing. By examining values in literary texts, teachers can encourage learners to develop attitudes towards them. These values and attitudes relate to the world outside the classroom. Learners can cultivate themselves in value judgment. Literature teaching at college enables learners to learn much more about humanity. More often than not they can find role models in some certain virtue, for example, Prometheus in Greek myth, who can be a role model in thinking for the human race and fighting against Zeus by stealing fire in order to bring light to the earth, and whose heroic spirit is worth promoting. Reversely some are the evil models with their distinct. Nevertheless there are no all good men or all bad men. Literature teachers should give learners the right guidance in value judgment and moral appraisal and prevent them from falling into the extreme phenomenon. Literary education is seen by many as the inculcation in students of the kind of sensitivity to literature which allows discrimination of the "good" from the "bad". Using literature materials is the most available and accessible in teaching ethics in accordance with the current standard of morality in the circle of ideology in a country.

Characteristics of Literature Teaching in the EFL Context

The Literature teaching has its characteristics and literature teaching in the EFL context has more characteristics because of its dwindled denotation compared with the former. Simply it has more limitations, which endow it with a lot more features. Firstly it is set in a non-English-speaking country where English is not the native or first language. Here the purpose of literature teaching is to improve learners' English ability instead of literature appreciation only. Of course it has the function of literature appreciation, but its major aim is to serve language learning. And it is often taken as one of the ways of language learning. As for the part of appreciation, it is the second aim or by-aim. Language learning is the first target, while literature appreciation is the second and it is actually the means to serve language learning. It is the biggest difference between literature teaching in native countries and that in non-native. Secondly learners in the EFL context have a limited command of English, which will result in a poor understanding of English literature esp. in the original way without simplification. This point requires teachers to be thoughtful and careful in material selection as well as in teaching progress. The obvious consequence of this relatively weak language foundation is the slowness of reading, which will affect learners' deeply understanding the details and implications in the literary text because too slow a reading may break the sequence of idea catching. Thirdly learners in the EFL context lack necessary knowledge of English culture. They do not have a big enough collection of information about the cultural background of English, which will be another barrier in their way to a full comprehension

of the text. Learners of different cultural backgrounds will have different interpretations and reactions to the views of the writer. In this case, teachers should provide learners with some necessary Western cultural information as a supplement for their shortage of cultural knowledge.

Current Situation and Problems of Literature Teaching in the EFL Context

The Literature teaching has been a popular curriculum for English learners in China's colleges and there has been much progress in this area. A certain amount of experience has been summarized and accumulated. With the further push of the country's economic and cultural constructions, the central government takes education as one of the biggest concerns on the way to the grand goal of national revival, declaring that education is the first base on which Chinese socialist mansion rests and granting the priority to be strengthened. With this campaign, foreign language education is exalted at the same time to keep pace with the economic development, always at the center. Correspondently literature teaching at college is emphasized in the meanwhile as one of the most important ways to cultivate learners in their integrated skills of English so that they can smoothly accomplish the tasks in international communication and cooperation and enhance the understanding and respect in the global context in the movement to build global harmony. Inspired by the spirit of the new era, people concerned have done much and great achievements have been made in English literature teaching in China's colleges, but there are still many problems and unsatisfactory areas in this field. Firstly it is the inadequacy of qualified teachers who have the expertise in English literature as well as the ability of teaching it armed with enough experience and necessary skills. The need of qualified teachers is the primary issue in current English literature teaching in China and it is the guarantee for the success of this section. Without excellent teachers, effective literature teaching will be only a mirage in the desert, so it is a problem which should be solved immediately.

The second problem is the lack of appropriate and effective teaching materials which can meet the needs of different levels. Nowadays the text books, relatively old, lag much behind, and cannot cater for the new situations. The kinds of text books are too limited to satisfy learners of different levels and demands. It is necessary to compile a certain number of textbooks of different subjects, different genres and different language levels. Textbook construction is a link which cannot be neglected. It is another important factor which somewhat decides whether the teaching is successful or not. The third problem is perhaps the fact that the English levels of learners are quite different, which will directly affect the organization and operation of the classroom teaching. Obviously it will be difficult for teachers to operate their teaching plan and fulfill their pre-set aims. In the native context, learners are almost of the same level and there is not such a problem as level difference. Anyway teachers and others concerned are enthusiastically striving to deal with all the problems and there appears a good prospect in this field in China. Fourthly there is a demand for effective accessible approaches in literature teaching. At present, the course is operated mostly in the old ways, the traditional ways used in mother-tongue literature teaching. Research on approaches of this course is still a weak area in China and it is hoped that more scholars and experts will devoted to this problematic research and provide teachers with more feasible approaches.

Strategies and Cautions to the Current Situation and Problems of Literature Teaching in the EFL Context

We have talked about the characteristics of English literature teaching in the EFL context. Facing those characteristics, teachers should use some certain suitable strategies to fulfill their teaching aims. As the saying goes, teaching has approaches but no fixed ones. Teachers should modulate their ways to suit the specific situations in different places even in the same country, for example, in China there is a great variance in education level and cultural customs. Teachers should not confine themselves to one or two old fixed modes of teaching or neglect the specific situation they and their students are set in. Actually an excellent teacher will always change his way of teaching along with the new circumstance and he does not cling to the so-called established ways to deal with different students and different textbooks. Flexibility is the essence for the success of teaching. Here are some feasible ways for teachers to refer to in their work. Some of them are really worth spreading and promoting not only in China but also in some other countries of the world which share the similar situation and issues in their English literature teaching. Some teaching principles which have proved effective and necessary should be followed in teaching activities.

Combination of Language Learning and Literature Appreciation

Combination of language learning and literature appreciation is characteristic of English literature teaching in the EFL context. Unlike in the native context, literature course in a foreign country has two equal tasks---literature appreciation and language learning. It has to cover the two aspects and fulfill the two tasks and as a double-task course it should accomplish the two duties. On the one hand students will appreciate literature; on the other hand they will learn language at the same time. Actually in many cases language learning is exalted over literature appreciation esp. in some remote and backward areas. Literature course is regarded as an accessory way to learn language or it can simply be called literature-based language learning. In this circumstance teachers should remember the feature of duality and balance the two tasks in the class teaching and should not overemphasize one and neglect the other. As for the students, they will always meet with new words and expressions during their reading and they need to solve these language problems before they come to a relatively satisfactory comprehension. Sometimes they may meet with intricate sentences and phrases that may deter and break their reading; in these cases, teachers need to help them clear the obstacles on their way to literature appreciation by explanation, exemplification, interpretation and illustration. In the meanwhile this class should keep and highlight the features of literature. From this perspective it is not difficult to find that language learning and literature appreciation effectually go side by side in literature classes in the EFL context. So in non-English-speaking countries like China literature teachers should avoid going to the extreme. Literature and language teaching should be linked and made mutually reinforcing.

Utilization of Modern Electrical Equipment and Instruments

In literature class multimedia can be used to facilitate teaching and learning. Students can watch a film or video concerned with the text which is being learned or has been

learned to experience what the text conveys in the visual way. Many researchers have agreed that this is a nice way to visualize the printed text and it can present what the text says in the visual way and students can see it on the screen instead of the rigid and stiff words only. This way can avoid the monotony caused by constant reading of the text and students can also discover or understand the hidden meaning in the literary material with the help of the pictures and actions. They can experience literature intuitively, visually and acoustically. Students can also be told to create a series of “slides” about the major scenes described or narrated in the text. Sometimes they can add a caption to each of the slides. If it is possible, teachers can ask some questions about each of the slides concerning how they decide to depict the particular scene. Sometimes teachers can create chances for students to comment on their work. Teachers themselves can also prepare PPT materials to illustrate the literary text and students can also make some for themselves if they are interested in it. All the strategies can turn abstract into concrete, general into specific, complex into simple, and difficult into easy. As a matter of fact, they are some accessible and effective ways which deserve to be recommended in modern English literature teaching.

Step-by-Step Principle and Sequencing Tasks

In formulating the tasks, teachers need to think about how to best sequence tasks so that each task prepares students for subsequent tasks “first things first.” Teaching must be operated step by step. Do remember the saying “more haste, less speed.” Rome was not built in a day. Literature learning takes time and it should be taken in a long run. Teachers cannot do it for “instant success and quick profit.” Take a long view and make a long-time plan. In thinking about sequencing tasks, teachers need to consider the possible difficulties and problems students tend to encounter and find corresponding solutions to pave the way for them so that each student can progress smoothly from task to task and enjoy getting involved in class activities and they will have the confidence to follow the class. Progress occurs as a result both of conscious effort and of spontaneous, subconscious mechanisms, activated when learners get involved in the activities in the foreign language. (Littlewood 91) In cases of different grades or ability levels teachers need to create alternative versions of tasks to match differences in students’ grade or ability level. They also have to continually revise their tasks even during their instruction to accommodate for differences in students’ abilities, engagement, interests, attitudes, and performance.

Suiting Teaching to Students of Different Abilities

Teachers should take their students’ situations into consideration and find different ways for different students just as the famous Chinese saying in education “teach students according to their aptitude”. It well exemplifies this principle. As is known to most educators, every student has his individuality, which is another aspect for teachers to pay attention to. Teachers need to swift their methods to meet different demands of students, which is meant to preserve learners’ zeal upon ceaseless their pursuit and avoid their abandoning it half way. “Motivation is the crucial force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he preserves.” (Littlewood 53) In reality, many learners are likely to give up literature learning for some reason, mostly

the reason that their interest has waned and died out, so it is a vital link for the teachers to try to keep their students’ curiosity about literature exploration. If necessary, teachers have to add fuel to the fire. There exists a Chinese saying “Interest is the best teacher”. Interest is the power for people to start their tasks and successively produce new power to help them follow through. It is not so tough to find ways to consecutively motivate and spur students to accomplish their tasks in literature course and meet the standards of the school and equip themselves with a certain amount of literature knowledge. Literature itself, for its great multiplicity in genres, language styles and subjects, is a rich resource for diversifying teaching content and forms. It is fairly easy to enliven students and vivify teaching only if teacher have enough passion and devotion to their job.

Proper Evaluation and Assessment

Since literature is a curriculum, evaluation and assessment are an unavoidable link in the process of teaching. Setting an academic and scientific evaluation and assessment system is also a key factor in literature teaching as in other subjects. It is suggested that evaluation of learners’ literary competence should contain two forms, oral and written, and two sections, objective and subjective. As for the oral form, learners are supposed to articulate their personal responses to the text and answer some random questions raised by teachers; as for the written form, it has many ways. Learners can be asked to write a term paper on a free topic relevant to the text. The objective test can include some data, facts, or some literary terms to interpret, while the subjective test can be some essay questions, a summary, or a term paper. The key point is that the subjective test should be graded on the students’ personal perception. It is acceptable to grade the thought, not the content. When marking papers, teachers need to be aware that literature is not like most other subjects where the content is what is essential. It is the creativity and thought behind the content that makes a literary essay stand out. You are also grading the content, obviously. But in literature, you have to give more marks to the student with a controversial and creative interpretation and a few less to the student with the ‘textbook’ interpretation.

Variety of Feasible Methods

While reading, or after, teachers are supposed to respond to the text and then they need to reflect on their responses and interpretations and based on the reflections, predict how students at a certain grade level will respond to this text and how their responses might differ from their responses. Teachers need to prepare for the possible responses from students and predict the possible reasons. Furthermore, they can organize heated discussions on some possible interesting topics to wield the advantages of literature as a material rich in topic cultivation. Discussion is a most effective way in language-centered literature classes where students can be easily motivated and involved in the class activity. In discussion students can be stimulated to find insights into literature themes and deeper meanings conveyed in the works. Students will be trained in sensitivity to literature analysis and appreciation as well as criticism if the discussion goes a certain length. Another possible way is a debate on proper topics and to do it well, teachers need to read the text well enough and form their own opinions about the messages in the text and select proper topics which are available to learners and may motivate them to think and

express their opinions. This is a good way to help learners to gain the hidden and implied meanings in the text while they are dwelling on the topics, and elevate their communicative ability while they are debating. There is no room for a unanimous agreement in literature, so different views are always appreciated in literature interpretation and evaluation. Role-play is another often-used way to animate the still text; this is the way to make the text come into life. Role-play promotes the process of cross-cultural dialog while at the same time it provides opportunities for oral communication. (Brown 174) The text is written, but users can express it verbally and even dramatize it. Students may be creative in acting out imagined conversations and interactions between/among characters. Teachers, by this means, can make the class more lively and interesting. It is a contemporary slogan to advocate “embedding learning in enjoyment” and a skillful diversification of teaching methods is the key.

Conclusion

In many countries today, literature teaching, as a compulsory subject and an indispensable component of modern liberal arts, occupies a steady seat in tertiary education. It is an undeniable fact that it plays an important role in language teaching and learning in the EFL context. It has many distinctive characteristics as a school curriculum in non-native countries, so teachers must refer to different flexible approaches according to specific situations to fulfill their teaching tasks. They should not cling to old modes or limit themselves to stereotypes to block their own ways. It is hoped that this article can give some inspiration and guidance to those who are engaged in this work.

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