Humanistic Education in College English Classes: Problems and Solutions*

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The humanistic quality is one of the most important qualities for students to acquire in humanistic education. However, the limited class time for tightly scheduled teaching tasks fails to guarantee a satisfying result for humanistic education. In this paper, three strategies are proposed as the way out of this dilemma. The first, is to equip the College English teachers with rich professional and humanistic knowledge. The second is to change the traditional College English Teaching aim which is not suitable as a guide for current teaching. And the last is to require all the English teachers to explore and clarify the humanistic connotation in the texts which helps shape students’ view of the world and value of the life.

Keywords: humanistic education, college English classes, problems, strategies

Humanistic education has its roots in Renaissance philosophers who emphasized the study of the humanities: grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy; these in turn built upon classical models of education. It internalizes humanistic knowledge into personality, temperament and accomplishment through imparting humanistic knowledge and edification of humanistic environment, thus becoming a relatively stable inner character of human beings (Zhou, 2009, p. 103). In recent years, there is serious separation between “humanity” and “literature” in higher education in China, and there is a phenomenon that “humanity” is neglected, while “literature” is emphasized. Due to the utilitarian psychology brought about by the market economy and the high expectations of parents for their children, the exclusive examination-oriented education has become dominant in College English classes in China, humanistic education has become increasingly marginal (Han et al. 2008, p. 135). This can find its reasons in the lack of humanistic concern in university education management, the loss and invalidation of humanistic education in university, and the absence of humanistic reading guidance (Chen, 2013, p. 189). The lack of humanistic education has resulted in college students having vague ideals and beliefs, distorted values, weak sense of integrity, poor sense of unity and cooperation, and lacking social responsibility, to varying degrees (Gong, 2006). There is urgent need to reform the knowledge structure and ability training mode in education of college students, and strengthening the humanistic education can be an important way to the

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reform. For college English teaching, which is a common foreign language course in universities in China, it is also necessary to strengthen consciously humanistic education.

**Survey on Humanistic Education in College English Classes**

Humanistic quality is the inherent accomplishment formed gradually through students’ humanistic knowledge learning. College English classes, which focus on language knowledge and language skills training, have been criticized for their ignorance on humanistic quality education. Both Wang Shouren (2001) and Liu Yi (2000) believe that the main reason why foreign language major students in China pay too much attention to skill training while neglecting humanistic education is that there is a big gap between them and the other liberal arts students in “depth of thought, structure of knowledge and ability to analyze problems”. Liu Wei (1995) pointed out that “the tendency to downplay humanistic education brought about by the transformation of training objectives is a fatal injury to the development of foreign language colleges and universities” (p. 56). Hu Wenzhong (2006, p. 243) directly called for that the cultivation of foreign language talents should not only target the market demand, but also to take the fundamental goal of university education into consideration. English major in colleges and universities in China should return to the humanities standard and actively expand to the relevant fields of humanities. The existing teaching system, curriculum arrangement and the knowledge construction of teaching staff should be reformed to adapt to the aim of humanistic education.

Compared with teaching English as a major, College English teaching (as a foreign language) is more difficult to escape the fetters of instrumentality. The Ministry of Education of China clearly stipulates in the Requirements for College English Syllabus (2007) that college English should not only undertake the task of improving students’ comprehensive cultural literacy, but also undertake the educational infiltration of humanistic literacy. However, after years of teaching reform, humanistic education in College English is still far from satisfactory. It seems to be more practical to strengthen humanistic quality education in college English teaching. To achieve this, it is required first to improve teachers and students’ awareness of humanistic education.

**Subjects of the Survey**

In order to study the current situation of humanistic education in College English teaching, a questionnaire survey and telephone interview were conducted. The subjects of the survey are 60 teachers of college English teaching in East China University of Science and Technology (a key university directly under the Ministry of Education of China). The teachers in this university were chosen as the survey objects, mainly because college English class teaches English more purposefully as a language tool rather than a humanistic subject in universities of science and technology.

**Purpose of the Survey**

The purpose of this questionnaire survey is to investigate the current situation of humanistic quality education in college English teaching.

**Methods of the Survey**

According to the definition of humanistic knowledge (i.e. the basic knowledge of human beings in the field of humanities, mainly in the field of spiritual life, such as history, literature, politics, law, art, philosophy, religion, morality, and language etc.) and the definition of humanistic accomplishment (i.e. the research ability, the
human-oriented and human-centered spirit embodied in humanistic quality—the intrinsic quality of human beings), this paper designs a questionnaire on humanistic in College English classes with the teaching material of the Textbook of Comprehensive English Course. The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part is about the background information of the survey subjects, such as gender, age, academic degree, title, etc.; the second part is the main content of the questionnaire. The 10 questions involve teaching methods based on humanistic knowledge and cultivation of humanistic quality. After the questionnaire was completed, there were also telephone interviews conducted with 20 teachers who participated in the questionnaire survey.

Findings of the Survey

There were altogether sixty questionnaires distributed and sixty of them were recovered, with a recovery rate of 100%. The survey results (as shown in the figure) show three trends:

1. The teachers participating in the survey do consciously regard the humanistic knowledge in the text as the necessary content of college English teaching. The survey results show that as many as 70% of teachers are used to teaching humanities knowledge in texts by background introduction. However, more than 80% of teachers chose to “do it occasionally” in order to excavate the deep humanistic knowledge behind the text.

2. More than half of the teachers do consciously combine the text content to carry out infiltration education in the aspects of traditional cultural propaganda, national patriotism and ethical and moral education. However, there are very few teachers who have paid any attention to the text, life education, ecological care, aesthetic taste and other humanistic qualities.

3. Almost all the professors participating in the survey can take the initiative to pay attention to the cultivation of students’ autonomous learning ability and cooperative learning ability, but very few teachers pay attention to the cultivation of students’ critical thinking ability.

After the survey, twenty teachers interviewed through telephone gave further explanations of their options. Their explanations are as follows:

1. In view of the limited class teaching hours of College English, it is more suitable to teach humanistic knowledge within background introduction, which is of great help for students to understand the text. However, the introduction of too much humanistic knowledge may distract classroom teaching and thus may leave not enough time and emphasis on language teaching and discourse analysis.

2. In the limited class hours of College English teaching, spending too much time digging deeply into the humanistic knowledge behind the text undoubtedly will deviate from the main direction of college English teaching, and it is like to train the students of science and engineering as English majors, which is totally inappropriate.

3. It is difficult to reach a seamless connection with the current teaching materials in terms of humanistic quality contents such as aesthetic taste, bioethics, ecological care and critical thinking ability, and there are certain difficulties in the trial combination.

Table 1

| Teaching Methods of Humanistic Knowledge | Number of Subjects | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| A. background                          | 48                 | 0.80           |
### Solutions to Humanistic Education in College English Classes

Humanistic quality plays an immeasurable role in the all-round development of human beings. Einstein once said that without music education, he would accomplish nothing, and that physics gave him knowledge and music gave him imagination. Ieoh Ming Pei, the famous architect, once mentioned that Lao Tsu, the ancient Chinese philosopher, had far more influence on his architecture than anyone else. In a word, humanistic education can promote thinking training and intelligence development, and can achieve twice the result with half the effort for the all-round development of human beings. The survey on humanistic education in college English teaching was conducted from two dimensions: humanistic knowledge and ability training. The results show that teachers can consciously teach traditional culture, national spirit, patriotism, ethics and other humanistic knowledge, and can actively cultivate students’ cooperative learning ability and autonomous learning ability. However, there is a lack of sufficient understanding in life education, ecological concern, aesthetic taste and other humanistic knowledge, especially in the training of students’ critical thinking ability. To achieve this end, it is believed that the implementation of humanistic quality education in college English teaching should focus on the following three points:

| Category                              | A. regularly | B. occasionally |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Teaching of Deep Humanistic Knowledge in Text | 7            | 43              |
| Life education                        | 2            | 15              |
| Ecological awareness                  | 4            | 21              |
| Traditional Chinese Culture           | 50           | 10              |
| National spirit and patriotic spirit  | 36           | 16              |
| Cultivation of Aesthetic Taste        | 1            | 6               |
| Ethics education                      | 51           | 9               |
| Cultivation of Autonomous and Cooperative Learning Ability | 60           | 0               |
| Cultivation of Critical Thinking Ability | 3            | 0               |

For each category, the table shows the frequency of teaching in regular and occasional sessions.
Equip English Teaching Staff with Solid Humanistic Knowledge

The foundation of humanistic education is the study of humanistic knowledge. Rich humanistic knowledge can provide opportunities for personal development and can improve one’s understanding of others, thus to help to sharpen the insight into thinking about human destiny. Humanistic knowledge provides the cultures of all countries in the world, and it thus cultivates students’ cross-cultural communication ability. Humanistic education undoubtedly plays an important role in the formation of students’ outlook on life, world values, and is crucial to improving students’ cultural taste, aesthetic taste, humanistic and scientific cultivation. From the previous survey, the view that “it is difficult to reach a seamless connection with the current teaching materials in terms of aesthetic taste, bioethics, ecological care and critical thinking ability” is still quite common. This shows that it is very necessary and important to implement humanistic quality education in college English teaching and to establish a team of teachers with excellent language knowledge and humanistic knowledge. However, it is more urgent to provide humanistic knowledge training for college English teachers.

Establish a New Teaching Concept Aiming at Cultivating Students’ All-round Development

The results of the previous survey show that most college English teachers mainly teach language knowledge and language structure, supplemented by humanistic knowledge of texts, which is the result of the consideration of the presentation of teaching emphasis (language knowledge and discourse analysis). They believe that digging deeply into the humanistic knowledge behind the text deviates from the main direction of college English teaching. From the perspective of the function of humanistic education, this language knowledge and language structure oriented teaching concept needs to be revised.

The ultimate goal of language learning is to help students to establish a way of thinking about the world correctly, to deal with real problems with the great world view and vision, and to improve their own knowledge structure and ability structure. College English teaching as a foreign language, is a humanities subject, the language knowledge of which is a kind of humanities knowledge. Therefore, humanistic education in college English teaching will not affect the acceptance of students’ professional knowledge, but will definitely promote the all-round development of students. On the relationship between language and thinking, Benjamin Lee Whorf (2012:xv) has long believed that (1) all higher-level thinking depends on language; (2) The structure of the language people used to using affects the way people understand the surrounding environment. Images of the universe vary with different languages. Thus, it is suggested that the concept of college English teaching should start from paying attention to the all-round development of each student, and that more attention should be paid to the cultivation of students’ various abilities while teaching language knowledge and skills in the College English classes.

Explore Humanity from English Textbook Materials to Consciously Nurture Students’ Humanistic Accomplishment

The above survey results show that the deep humanistic knowledge behind the text is not the focus for college English teachers in College English classes. The articles in College English textbook are language products of people of different emotions and different values. The text of the textbook can reveal or reproduce people’s emotional experience and traces of all kinds of joys and sorrows in the process of practice. A careful interpretation of the rich humanistic knowledge contained in the text is an edification of students’ humanistic
quality. Using teaching materials flexibly is the best way to edify this behavior. With good use of the text, College English teachers can cultivate students’ ability to analyze the text and to understand its connotation by asking them to read the text carefully and understand what every writer, painter and musician has expressed. This is of far-reaching significance to cultivate students’ ability to ask questions, to analyze problems, to synthesize materials and to demonstrate effectively in oral and written expression. In fact, the textbook of “Comprehensive English” course contains rich humanistic knowledge, such as life education, ecological concern, dedication, ethical and moral aesthetic taste, etc. How to interpret the profound humanity in the text and carry out humanistic education for students at the right time is very important. Wu Biyu (2014) made an attempt in this field by constructing an interpretation model of the connotation of life education in the text of Comprehensive English Course. The model she constructed provides us with an feasible theoretical basis for interpreting the humanistic knowledge in the course of Comprehensive English, which is worth learning from.

Conclusion

Humanistic education is a process of education based on humanity, philosophy and culture. College English learning should not only help students master English knowledge and various skills of language expression, but also help students improve their practical ability of language application. More importantly, through the humanistic education, students should be educated to sharpen their will, cultivate their sentiment, broaden their horizons, develop their thinking ability and their personality, and improve their humanistic quality. Paying attention to humanistic education in college English teaching is to integrate language learning with culture and philosophy, and to combine appreciation with discrimination and thinking. It also enables students to learn to think from others’ point of view and to understand others and the society correctly.

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