Constructive Alignment and Literature Pedagogy: 
A Study of Application-oriented Teaching Model of 
Literature Course in Chinese College

Hai-Yan WANG
No.1111, Huchenghuan Road, Shanghai Jianqiao University, Shanghai, China, 05037@gench.edu.cn

Keywords: Constructive alignment; Literature course; Application-oriented education; Pedagogy.

Abstract. Teaching literature to Chinese college students presents an arduous challenge to instructors. The previous analysis clearly demonstrated a proclivity for teacher-centered lecture, preoccupation with text analysis, and a tendency to memorization of the literary knowledge. This study reconceptualizes the teaching of literature course from the perspective of application-oriented education built on constructive alignment. The goals are to clarify the literature teaching objectives and create application-oriented language learning by supporting students’ full engagement with literature. The article specifically elaborates the literature pedagogy in terms of teaching objectives, course design, instructional methods, learning tasks and situational assessment under constructive alignment.

Introduction

Application-oriented educational objectives take application of knowledge and ability building as the final goals. This is especially true when the mission of the school is to educate rather than promotion of research and specialization. To illustrate it in detail, courses are designed in accordance with the requirement of end-users, with distinct characteristics of practice and diversified evaluation system. Currently, application-oriented specialties center on interdisciplinary training involving basic language skills, cultural knowledge and professional skills in some other fields. Among the above, the practical use of language is the first priority. However, language learning is not just for grasp of a basic tool for communication, but for the cultivation of critical thinking and intercultural abilities to facilitate the work in foreign-related fields like international trade, travelling, administration and so on. Literature course is one of core courses to fulfill that purpose.

Regarding the application-oriented specialties, excessive emphasis on “wide-caliber” model may result in a departure of the cultivation of inter-disciplinary students from the intended purpose of language majors. With the desire of instant success, students are more opt for courses for language skills rather than those for literature and culture. Also, choices of textbooks featured with words like “guide”, “selected reading”, “brief history” and “general introduction” due to the dramatic cut-down in the credit hours reflect that literature course is in a marginalized situation [1].

With a long cultural history, a variety of literature schools and diversified writing styles, literature course provides so much information that it is difficult for teachers to touch upon every single detail. Even worse, the adopted teaching model is often teacher-centered with a pattern of brief introduction to background, author and works. This may make the learning process very tedious and less systematic. Meanwhile, the assigned after-class reading doesn’t serve the right purpose due to students’ lack of background information, context awareness and independent thinking.

Related Literature in Literature Pedagogy

According to Carter and Long, the rationale for the use of the three main approaches to the teaching of literature is categorized as three: The Cultural Model, The Language Model and The Personal Growth Model [2]. Under the cultural model, the main educational purpose of literature
course is cultural heritage. Such a model requires learners to explore and interpret the social, political, literary and historical context of a specific text [3]. Literature is taught by means of what might be called textbook methods or research methods, and therefore their pedagogy is highly teacher-centered lecturing. Teachers pay more attention to the content itself rather than the students learning outcome.

The language approach is more frequently used in EFL classroom to serve specific linguistic goals. Such an approach helps learners to access a text in a way that teachers illustrate specific linguistic features e.g. rhetorical and figurative language, grammatical rules, direct and indirect speech. Carter and McRae describe this model as taking a ‘reductive’ approach to literature [4]. In other words, there is little interaction between the learner and the text other than language analysis and linguistic practice. Therefore, literature is used in a more simplified way to provide a series of language activities for students.

As for personal growth model, it focuses on the use of language in a specific cultural text. Learners develop ideas, feelings and opinions through different themes and topics or make comparison and connections between personal experiences and textual experiences. As Cadorath and Harris point out “Text itself has no meaning, it only provides direction for the reader to construct meaning from the reader’s own experience” [5]. Thus, literary study takes place when learners reinterpret the text and reconstruct the meaning on the basis of the interaction between text and reader. Teachers put more emphasis on the affective and aesthetic aspect in their teaching on a combination of cooperative learning and independent learning.

In Chinese literature classrooms, different theories are also applied to the course teaching like MI theory, the constructive learning theory and western literary criticism theory. Nowadays, with the wide use of technology, researchers shift their attention from the traditional instructional methods to computer-aided learning to facilitate flipped classroom and microteaching. It is found that the modern technology is an effective supplement to the traditional classroom teaching, especially when there is limited time during the class [6].

However, to achieve the application-oriented educational goal, two questions should be considered for this course: 1) What are the ultimate teaching objectives of literature course? 2. How does the teaching of literature course in Chinese Colleges promote the application-oriented cultivation?

**Application-oriented Teaching Objectives of Literature Course**

Professor Fan categorized the teaching objectives of literature course as five levels: 1) the experience level based on perceptual cognizance; 2) knowledge level based on the rational cognition; 3) the Aesthetic level based on critical thinking; 4) The intercultural level based on cultural cognition; 5) Philosophical level based on humanity concerns [7].

It seems that the above teaching objectives put more emphasis on guidance of student’s development in humanity and thinking in order to improve their literary accomplishment and sensitivity to target language culture. However, to meet the requirement of application-oriented talents training mode, the teaching objectives should be accordingly readjusted and reordered. Instead of focusing on language use only, the application-oriented model should be a more integrated process of literary study. First, acquaintance with western culture, development of literature through consulting or previewing, which can be summarized as knowledge level; Second, Reading, discussing and sharing of selected texts, the experience level; Third, analysis of the selected works from different perspectives, the critical-thinking level; Fourth, the adaption of works and performance, the practicing level; Fifth, the cultivation of intercultural awareness through videos and presentations, the cross-cultural level; Sixth, character building through reading and appreciation, the emotional level. The six-leveled teaching objectives are well knitted together from the basic requirement to higher standard, one relying on another.
Fundamental Concerns in Application-oriented Teaching Model

In this teaching pedagogy, three concepts should be taken into consideration: constructive alignment, teaching philosophy and learning environment. Constructive alignment tells us how to make the teaching procedures more compatible; teaching philosophy decides how a teacher conducts his teaching process and improves class efficiency and learning environment helps to achieve the intended goals.

Constructive Alignment

Constructive alignment (CA) is an outcome-based approach to teaching in which the learning outcomes that students are intended to achieve are defined before teaching takes place [8]. Primarily, teaching objectives are the fundamental rule for the teachers to follow. It establishes the principles of teaching cognition and decides the learning outcome. And also, the objectives themselves raise methodological questions. That is why, in this paper, I define teaching alignment as the consistency of teaching objectives, course design, instructional methods, learning tasks and outcome assessment.

Teaching Philosophy

Teaching philosophy decides how the teacher will perform in a class and what outcome of the teaching might be expected. This, one the one hand, gives the teacher a clear idea of how to do course design and on the other, how to implement teaching strategies, and thus would significantly decide how the students deal with learning. The previous analysis clearly demonstrated a proclivity for teacher-centered lecturing, preoccupation with text analysis and a tendency to memorization of the literary knowledge. In fact, teachers are expected to have basic tenets of literature, guiding students in effective reading and discussing as they evolve into better writers and critical thinkers; designing learning tasks and providing timely assistance for problem solving; and evaluating the students in different learning context to stimulate effective learning.

Learning Environment

A favorable Learning environment of literature study should be predictable enough for the learners to feel motivated to study both actively and positively, both independently and cooperatively. Firstly, in this environment, students need to feel stimulated in communicating with others for skills development and language acquisition. Secondly, teachers and students need to reach a consensus that thinking is essential, valuable and enjoyable. Thirdly, the learning process should be constant and needs joint efforts from both teachers and students in order to have full engagement with text reading and knowledge accumulation.

The ultimate purpose of the application-oriented model is to facilitate language skills and ability development. Therefore this teaching model should take place in such an environment that students are expected to learn literature with multi-dimensional purposes: culture as well as language, theory as well as practice, thinking well as character building.

An Application-oriented Teaching Model under Constructive Alignment

The intended goal can be achieved through a combination of theory-practice model, but the whole process should follow four rules: 1) teaching design based on knowledge application; 2) Teaching process with distinct practical characteristics; 3) Situational evaluation system; 4) Career-oriented ability cultivation.

Thematic-focused Teaching Design

Literature course presents to learners the political, economic, historical as well as ethical aspects of western country. Teachers are supposed to make the most of the teaching materials and teaching methods to perform the potential educational functions, involving class teaching with core social values and gradually externalize these values into behaviors and habits through practice. In some textbooks, teaching content is organized chronologically, others presented in the form of
single period. Teachers may attempt to use a thematic focus to design units, assessments, project-based learning instead of time-lined method. Love, overcoming obstacles, civil rights, identity, and patriotism are all at the core of the greatest of literary works. To go deeper into each theme connotation, teachers can cover different genres of literature and different style of writing, either through comparison or analysis. Using a theme for the class creates moments of multi-level communication among the texts as students discuss them in class. Students may find connections between the primary texts that will increase their meaning in surprising ways and perhaps deepen their understanding of a certain idea and form opinions on each of the topic.

Likewise, students can also be guided to do extra reading after class. The specific tasks are assigned to students based on the cultural-theme connotation, which can go from easier ones to harder ones to help them form good reading habit. It is to be noted that questions and discussions should be followed to inspire them to go further in extensive reading, which, in return, gradually enable them to become active learners and explorers.

**Process-based Learning Interactions**

Effective teaching-learning interaction leads to good teaching results and makes the learning process enjoyable. Here are some aspects: 1) Teacher-students dialogue. This dialogue comprises mini discussions, idea sharing or rational argument. The dialogue can be divided in to three stages: First, to launch questions before the dialogue for students to think about. Questions should be open-ended, typical and scientific so as to intrigue students’ deeper, expansive thinking and develop their confidence. Second, in the middle of idea sharing, students learn from each other, thus they will gradually form multi-dimensional thinking with different perspective via different methods. Third, after dialogue, students are required to reflect on, integrate or evaluate what has been discussed or argued in a more comprehensive way. 2) Text-visual interaction. The application of multi-media combines the movies and text reading perfectly. Compared with text reading, videos enable readers to be exposed to the western cultures, customs, local colors and characters more directly. Due to less class hours, it is necessary to edit movies into short video clips which may best embody the theme of the original works. Oppositely, students can be required to do script adaptation on the basis of the original works and put them into simply-coded performance. With script adaptation and video clips as carrier of learning, this, to some extent, sets a higher bar for instructors, but highly rewarding. 3 ) In-class and Outer-class interaction. For the purpose of constant learning, many teaching activities can be extended to after-class. In this case, teachers need to set specific instructions for students to follow so that they could have a clear direction in fulfilling the tasks. This in-class and outer-class interaction may make up for the missing part in class teaching, consequently making the literature learning a constant process. In some other cases, using tech platforms to engage students beyond the borders of the classroom would help students to prioritize class and feel less disconnected between social reality and imagination.

**Input-output Learning Tasks**

Task-based method is generally regarded as an effective teaching pedagogy in ASL [9], so is it in literature course. When a teacher sets a task to students, he or she should think about the following aspects: 1) the linguistic skills required to fulfill the task; 2) the positive psychological and emotional factors involved in the process; 3) the innovative perspective elicited from the task; 4) the expected outcome of the task. Any given task should be specific with clear instructions for students to feel not too difficult to accomplish.

There are three typical forms for students to display their learning outcome. Firstly, reading to writing. Studies find that reading-to-writing is a useful model for language skills. The advantages of integrating reading with writing include the following steps: reading to gain ideas about the topic; shaping opinion on the topic; using source texts for evidence, and using source texts for language support [10].This reading-to-writing method, like input-and-output process, allows students to make full use of the given text to create something new based on their own understanding. Generally, reading involves the readers’ attitude, feelings and opinions; therefore, reading is not just a passive
reception of the information, but an interaction between readers and the text materials. Through the reading process, students may figure out what the author is trying to get across to the reader and then reconstruct the idea. This process can be perfected through summary writing, simulated writing or critical writing. It is clear that reading-to-writing helps the learners to shift from two previous attitudes: shift from the passive reception of knowledge to an active seeking for knowledge; shift from the rote-learning of the text to a practical use of the knowledge [11]. Secondly, reading to presenting. This works the best when teamwork occurs. Teamwork involves joint efforts of a number of people towards a common goal. Students share workload, build bonds, increasing mutual creativity and learning opportunity. Members will supplement their skills, exchange viewpoints, produce new ideas to form something new and present to the audience. For English majors, presenting is a good way for language practice, ideas sharing and ability promotion. Thirdly, reading to performing. Creative drama is inclusive expression which encompasses a variety of activities and behaviours [12]. Like reading to writing, situational performance is also largely built on the original text and involves much of the reader’s interpretation and understanding. For one thing, it is a process of putting the text creatively into different forms of production, e.g.: script, drama or play before they finally put it on the stage. For another, when we do drama in literature study, we not only emphasize the language and content in the text, but also put more concern in the ethical values and philosophical insights derived through cooperative reading or independent learning. These ideas can be shared among class much more easily through an after-performance discussion. Also, because of involvement of collaborating acting and sharing, students are more inclined to take the task as an enjoyable learning process.

Outcome-based Teaching Assessment

Traditional assessments such as exams, paper test, journals and research papers no longer match the expected intention of literature teaching. Instead, they are supposed to be transformed into portfolios, reading reflections, reading notes that literature study is a constant process. This helps students set definite goals, form good reading habits and cultivate their awareness of self-study. Some other evaluation forms are more related to situational learning such as presentations, performance, class presentation and literature contest. This is good for two reasons: students always put literature and language learning in a context that involves a set of learning strategies; Literature learning is not just for language and information, but also for ability development. But no matter what evaluation form is adopted, teachers should make clear and specific criteria to follow so as to ensure fairness and validity. Sometimes partner evaluation is preferred especially for class presentation, which may help engage students’ attention while others are giving presentations or doing performance.

To make sure the intended teaching objectives are fulfilled, a survey at the end of the semester is very necessary. The questionnaire can include the flowing aspects: students’ attitude towards this course; the teaching content and teaching method; the evaluation method as the driving force of teaching; course objectives whether achieved or not. In doing so teachers get feedback from students, make reflections and summarize the whole teaching process and write course improvement report in order to make necessary adjustment in the next round of teaching.

In whatever way the assessment is done, the importance is to let the students feel literature learning is a rewarding and pleasant experience.

Conclusion

This study looks at literature teaching not just with the insight of language and culture. Rather it provides authentic and real context of language learning through communicative situations and literary experience, which is, to a larger extent, in agreement with the teaching alignment of the school.

In the context of application-oriented specialties construction, career markets are in great demand of innovative applied talents with wide horizon, creative thinking and comprehensive quality. Whether in the traditional English Specialty or Application-oriented Specialty, literature course plays equally
important role. This course provides great opportunity in terms of language practice and application, but one point is that teachers should foremost improve their teaching philosophy and perfect their teaching skills.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by the Shanghai Education Commission of China.

References

[1] Yating Zhang, Research on the Teaching of English and American Literatures in China, J. Education Theory and Practice, 24 (2015): 53-55.

[2] Carter, R & Long, M, Teaching Literature, Longman, 1991.

[3] Christine Savvidou. An Integrated Approach to Teaching Literature in the EFL Classroom, J. The Internet TESL Journal, 12(2004).

[4] Carter, R. & McRae, J. (eds). Language, Literature and the Learner, Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1996.

[5] Cadorath, J. & Harris, S. Unplanned Classroom Language and Teacher Training, J. ELT Journal, 3(1998): 188.

[6] Yuxin Guo, An employment of microteaching and flipped classroom in British and American Literature, J. Journal Beijing University of Chemical Technology, 2(2017): 86-88.

[7] Fan Yi, Rui Yuping, British and American Literature: Aim and Course Design, J. Foreign Literature Studies, 2005 (3): 150-156.

[8] John Biggs, Constructive alignment in university teaching, J. HERDSA Review of Higher Education, 1(2014): 5-21.

[9] Rod Ellis, Task-based Language Learning and Teaching, Oxford, 2004.

[10] Plakans, L. & Gebrial, A., Using Multiple Texts in an Integrated Writing Assessment: Source Text Use as a Predictor of Score. Journal of Second Language Writing, 22(2013): 217-230.

[11] Zhanfang Li, Chunhong Yang, Reading-to-Write: A Practice of Critical Thinking, J. Journal of Arts and Humanities (JAH), 3(2014): 70-75.

[12] Izabel Kapros Soloman, The Teaching of English Literature at the Secondary School Level and Implications of Creative Drama, 1972.