

Original Paper

Teaching Shakespeare in China with a Communicative

Approach

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Abstract

This article outlines the necessity and challenges of teaching Shakespeare to EFL students in China. It argues that teaching Shakespeare's plays fulfills the multidimensional purposes of English learning including developing linguistic, literary and cultural competence, as well as facilitating critical capacity and personal enrichment, which are indispensable for advanced language learners. Through the introduction of the teaching procedures of Shakespeare's Henry V and its two film versions, which are designed within a communicative orientation, it concludes that Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Task-based instruction (TBI) are central to fulfilling the aforementioned goals in literature teaching, and can cope well with the tough challenges in teaching a difficult author to EFL students.

Keywords

Teaching Shakespeare, Communicative Approach, TBI, CBI

Introduction

The practice of teaching literature to EFL learners is well acknowledged in the faculty where I teach. It is widely accepted here that the acquisition of a second language suggests the improvement of language competence, pragmatic competence and cognitive competence. Literature education is indispensable in cultivating learners' cognitive capacity, as it develops their knowledge of the world, and engages them with key issues of human life. Well-aware of the functions of literature in language learning and in accordance with the Faculty's principle of "Whole-person" education, a variety of literature courses are offered to the undergraduates here. The recent plan is to initiate Shakespearean Drama as a selective course to the undergraduates. Despite the long tradition here of offering Shakespearean Studies as an MA course to both the postgrads of English Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies, it is still a bold move considered by many. The difficulty of the language, the rich cultural connotations have

always put the implementation in check. It is the purposes of this article to outline the necessity as well as the challenges of teaching Shakespeare to EFL Students. It argues that teaching Shakespeare's plays fulfills the multidimensional purposes of English learning including developing linguistic, literary and cultural competence, as well as facilitating critical capacity and personal enrichment, which are indispensable for advanced language learners. Through the introduction of the teaching procedures of Shakespeare's *Henry V* and its two film versions, which are designed within a Communicative Orientation, it concludes that Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Task-based instruction (TBI) are central to fulfilling the aforementioned goals in literature teaching, and can cope well with the tough situation in teaching a difficult but indispensable author to EFL students.

Necessity

Shakespeare is said to have contributed 37 plays, used about 21,000 different words, and introduced nearly 3,000 words into the English language. Expressions from the works of William Shakespeare have become 'anonymous' parts of the English language. It is perhaps fair to say that no other individual writer has left such a permanent imprint on the English language. His influence is so encompassing that he has transformed not only English drama and theatre, but the English language as well (Qtd. in Lima, 2014: 192). For EFL students, the cultivation of language competence is certainly desirable, and Shakespeare, as a prominent playwright who has contributed so much to the English language, and whose works are embedded in the British culture, or even influence the world culture at large, certainly deserves further exploration in classrooms for EFL learners, in particular, for advanced learners.

Besides cultivating language and cross-cultural competence, Drama as a literary genre has distinctive formal features, and adopts specific techniques. A masterfulness of these techniques contributes to the exploration of the characters, conflicts and motifs of a specific drama piece, and allows for the transference of the literary skills acquired to the interpretations of other pieces, which are conducive to the cultivation of literary insight and critical thinking. Shakespearean Drama possess the distinctive formal features of that genre. Therefore, one of the objectives is also to comprehend the general features of drama as a literary genre, and to facilitate learners with knowledge about dramatic techniques and literary cognition in general.

Also, there are few writers from any period whose works have been so central in the history of literary critical theories. Shakespearean plays are ubiquitous when discussing contemporary literary and cultural theories, ranging from New Historicism, Post-Colonialism, Psychoanalysis, etc. and the list goes on. The reinterpretation of some of the plays launched various literary and cultural schools and movements. For instance, Freud and Lacan's interpretation of *Hamlet* ushers in Psychoanalytic approach in literary and cultural Studies. Greenblatt's "Invisible Bullets" and its discussion of the Henry plays institutes New Historicism; The reinterpretation of *The Tempest* highlights the colonial context. Accordingly, the readings of individual plays have been important in establishing

comprehension of various critical schools. Therefore, teaching Shakespeare is conducive to the training of cognitive and critical competence.

Challenges and Problems

The obstacles mainly reside in two aspects: For one thing, the language of Shakespeare is difficult even for native speakers, let alone EFL learners. An extensive knowledge of both vocabulary and syntax is required. Besides the difficulties in language, the context of the plays is also the main factor that stop students and teachers from engaging with Shakespeare's texts in EFL classrooms. In the Chinese context, learners' familiarity with Chinese versions of Shakespearean plays is also a main obstacle. Most students in their high school years are acquainted with excerpts like *The Merchant of Venice* in Chinese, familiar with the plotline of *Romeo and Juliet*, and some can even produce a Chinese version of Hamlet's monologue. The familiarity with Shakespearean characters and plots makes Chinese learners unwilling to immerse in the reading of Shakespearean English, since familiarity and tough language take away the curiosity and enjoyment of reading in most cases.

Teaching Shakespeare with a Communicative Orientation

Contemporary views of language learning argue that communication is seen as resulting from processes such as collaborative creation of meaning, creating meaningful and purposeful interaction through language, negotiation of meaning as the learner and his or her interlocutor arrive at understanding etc.. Advocates of CBI believe that the best way to do so is by using content as the driving force of classroom activities, and to link all the different dimensions of communicative competence to content (Richards, 2006: 27). In the case of TBI, the claim is that language learning will result from creating the right kinds of interactional processes in the classroom; TBI argue that grammar and other dimensions of communicative competence can be developed as a by-product of engaging learners in interactive tasks. It makes strong claims for the use of tasks and sees them as the primary unit to be used, both in planning (i.e., in developing syllabus) and also in classroom teaching (Richards, 2006:30).

As argued by many, Literature education is among the central goals of communicative language teaching: The complexities and subtleties of literature can not be found in other types of material (Carter & Walker, 1989); Its ambiguities and indeterminacies provide natural opportunity for discussions and different interpretations to be expressed (Maley, 1989). Literature has the special advantages of being universal, involving personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power (Carter & Walker, 1989); *Shakespeare in the EFL Classroom* (Eisenmann, 2014), as reviewed by Paran, is permeated with learner-centered, activity-oriented pedagogy (Paran, 2016: 463).

This article, therefore, argues for teaching literature within a communicative orientation. The below section uses a specific case of course design to establish grounds for teaching Shakespeare to EFL

students for the acquisition of language, the cultivation of literary awareness, and the enrichment of cultural horizon and personal enlightenment with communicative and task-based orientations.

Implementing Literature Teaching within a Communicative Orientation in EFL setting

Over the past 10 years, I have conducted these teaching approaches in EFL classroom to groups of MA candidates in English Literature, with sizes varying from 10 to 22 over the years. In general, five plays ranging from *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Henry V* will be discussed in depth over a span of 16 weeks, with 2 class hours per week. This article will use the teaching of Shakespeare's *Henry V* and its two film adaptations, one directed by Lawrence Olivier, and one directed by Kenneth Branagh as specific cases to illustrate why and how the integration of Content-Based Instruction and Task-Based Instruction in teaching Shakespeare in ELT classroom is indispensable and full of potentials. My choice of plays are texts which "(a) engage affectively, (b) challenge cognitively, (c) promote language awareness, and (d) help learners to reflect critically about and respond imaginatively to the world where they live" (Lima, 111).

Teacher's roles and learners' roles

Teacher's role in this integrated approach within a communicative orientation is indispensable. To begin with, comprehensive knowledge about the play in discussion and the relevant motifs to be involved in discussions, presentations and reflections is a pre-requisite. Necessary references books to assist students overcome language obstacles, such as introduction to the prominent features of Shakespearean language. Then, careful selection of reading assignment and video clips is the key step. The selected readings should consider the language proficiency of the learners, and deem appropriate for the intended discussions, as well as fulfill the distinctive goals of the intended activities. Last but not the least, class management and time management skills are indispensable. Instructor should be able to shift between the roles of class-dominator and discussion generator. In introducing key facts about the play and key literary terms, the instructor plays the authoritative role. While in presentations and group discussions as well as class reflections, the instructor recedes to the background so as to cultivate learner autonomy, which is vital for the development of the learner-centered collaborations and personal enrichment.

Learners must finish the relevant reading assignments before class, carefully prepare for presentations, and actively engage in group discussions, class reflections and end-of-semester performances.

Course Structure and Procedures

The aim of this section is to provide an introduction to the overall structure and processes in teaching Shakespeare's *Henry V* and its fulfillment of multi-purposes with approaches within a communicative orientation, in particular, Process-based CLT approaches including Content-Based Instruction and Task-Based Instruction.

The key procedures are as follows:

Pre-task Activities

1.1 Pre-class reading: Students are assigned to read the complete play along with the Chinese version. Key scenes of this play, in the case of *Henry V*, the Prologue, Act I Scene I, Act III, Scene III will be examined to find out students' comprehension of the language and the play.

1.2 Pre-class division of presentation topics: students will be divided into 2 groups, one group responsible for the research of historical background, in particular, the royal lineage from the Normans to the Plantagenet, and finally to the Tudors, with a focus on the relationship between France and England. Group 2 will center around the discussion as to why Henry V starts the war with France based on the text of *Henry V*.

Task Cycles

Each task cycle, in general, consists of initiation, instruction, interaction (presentations, group discussions), and reflection.

Task Cycle 1

To enhance textual comprehension with a focus on why Henry V starts the war against France. Learners' reflections and responses will be expected as well. Act I will be the focus of discussion.

1.1 Multiple Choice Questions for Comprehension with a focus on language competence: Students will be tested on the assigned reading excerpts.

1.2 Oral Examination: One or two students will be asked to read aloud the specific excerpts.

1.3 Presentation on the historical background with a focus on the relationship between France and England in terms of royal succession.

1.4 Group Discussion: Students divided into groups to discuss the question as to why Henry V starts the war against France.

1.5 Presentation: Why Henry V starts the war against France.

1.6 Summary of and comments on the presentation.

Task Cycle 2

Enhance textual comprehension with a focus on the theme of nationalism and Kingship. Students' reflections and responses will also be expected. Act III will be the focus of discussion.

2.1 Multiple choice questions to test students' comprehension of the relevant excerpt.

2.2 Oral Examination: One or two students will be asked to read aloud the specific excerpt.

2.3 Instructor's illustration of the relevant excerpts.

2.4 Instructor's introduction of the concept of key terms of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Community* in relation to nation and narration.

2.5 Group discussion on the theme of nationalism and its relevance to the play.

2.6 Instructor's introduction of Machiavellianism in relation to the theme of Kingship.

2.7 Students are invited to share their reflections on the theme, and their personal responses.

Task Cycle 3

Implement a comparative perspective to facilitate literary and cultural competence through comparing the two film versions of Henry V (Olivier, 1944; Branagh, 1989).

3.1 Play video clips from the two films versions, in particular, the war at Harflour and the Agincourt Address by Henry V.

3.2 Students form discussion groups to respond to the video clips played, with presenters of the topic as moderators of group discussion.

3.3 Two students will give presentations on the assigned topic with a focus on the differences of the two film versions.

3.4 Instructor's summary of and comments on the presentations.

3.5 Instructor introduces Montrose's concept of "textuality of history" and "historicity of text";

3.6 Students are invited to share their reflections on the concept in relation to the two film versions of Henry V.

Task Cycle 4

A special event or gathering for students to perform favorite scenes with illustration of their interpretations accompanying the performances at the end of the semester.

Evaluations

Learners are constantly involved in peer evaluations and teacher's evaluation in the following forms.

1. Language Competence: Multiple-choice questions to testify students' reading comprehension, which can be conveniently conducted on all the learners. In addition, oral examination conducted on a random base followed by instructor's comments and illustration.
2. Literary Competence: Carefully formulated comprehension questions draw students' attention to the plotline and structure of the play; Introduction of key literary terms accompanied by either group discussion or class reflections help the instructor to identify students' comprehensive grip of the play as well as the key literary terms.
3. Critical competence and personal enrichment can be reflected through students' presentations, group discussions and class reflections, as well as the end-of-semester performance event.
4. Self-evaluations and findings

Working with students registered the course

Two groups of students sit in the class room. One group consists of students registered for this course and are required to take written, oral exams as well as deliver presentations and participate actively in discussions and performance. Over an extended period of approximately 16 weeks, they read five full plays by Shakespeare, with key excerpts being examined either in written form or orally, and deliver presentations on assigned topics, freely choose scenes from the plays to act out at the end of the semester. As the course progressed, it became clear, through observation and feedback, reading speed

and comprehension of Shakespearean language is significantly improved, fluency in expressing ideas had noticeably increased. Most of them report a profounder understanding of the target plays in terms of characters and structure as well as the history of the target play's reception. In some discussions and reflections, there occurs the application of key literary terms acquired previously to the analysis of the discussing play. This may indicate that literary awareness has been cultivated along with the development of reading for a specific purpose.

Once a full discussion of a play was completed, students completed a self-evaluation questionnaire to inform me with an idea of their personal perceptions.

How has my reading comprehension improved?	How has my literary awareness improved?
How has my cultural awareness improved?	
What have I discovered about myself ?	What have I discovered about the world?

Some of their comments follow:

My understanding of Shakespeare's language has improved significantly. When I started the course, I do not seem to be able to make much sense of the lines. The introduction of some basic linguistic features of his language is very helpful. Now in most cases, I can read the lines and make some sense, and if not, am able to refer to annotations. Also, I tend to have a better understanding of the plotline and overall structure of the play, the questions, including multiple choice questions, in particular, the discussion questions assigned by the teacher draw my attention to the framework of the play, which are rather illuminating.

I like the discussion groups where you can talk freely about what you think, though I believe there are also peer pressure. It is good that after the discussion we can listen to the relevant presentation, I admit that in some cases the presenters make me aware of my own bias or prejudice, and teacher's summary is very much to the point, and can point out their bias or introduce more details which I think is rather beneficiary. I think I learn to attend to more details in reading and discussions.

Personally, I think the presentation is very challenging but fulfilling as well. I have to read the play text very carefully to come up with my understanding as to why Henry V starts the war. Intertwined with history and shocked by the sharp differences between the two film versions, I tend to have better understanding about literature and its reception. At least I will think more about the reception of a literary text in the future.

Besides the improvement of my reading comprehension and speed, I tend to have a better understanding of the character Henry Vas portrayed, and the discussion about Machiavellianism in relation to the play and its film versions actually sets me to think about our own situation. It's always a tough choice between idealism and pragmatism.

Working with students who sit the course

There are five students who did not register the course but are allowed to sit the course, they are not supposed to take part in examinations, presentations, but are allowed to participate in discussion groups. In general, the comments are positive, but most of them express regret for not being able to engage more actively. Most students who did not register the course but choose to sit the course explain to me that they have too heavy a workload, yet they are still interested in Shakespeare. One student particularly explains the reason why she does not register for this course as she thinks that Shakespeare is too difficult and she is afraid that she might fail, but she has a tremendous interest in him. Some of the comments are as follows:

I like the organization and arrangement of the course, and benefit a lot from it. But I think people around me tend to make more progress. I think reading with a clear focus and active engagement in presentations will allow you to contribute more in group discussions and class reflections.

I do learn quite a lot about the history and culture, some of the topics of class reflection sets met to relate the question to my personal situation. It's a pity I can not devote more to this course. But at least I can say, I am not as scared by Shakespearean language as I used to be.

Some of the discussions draw my attention to the details of the text which I tend to ignore. And teacher's summary and questioning are also beneficiary.

Towards a Communicative Orientation

The teaching approaches appear to share with both the Communicative Approach (CLT) and Task Based Learning and Teaching (TBL) elements which create genuine learning opportunities.

One thing in common with the strategy of CLT is its attention to input activities wherein learners are to acquire some pre-knowledge before interaction or communication. Written and oral exams are conducted efficiently to make sure learners are committed to their readings. Comprehensive input is provided through reading and discussions and peer presentation before learners are encouraged to do class reflections and performance. Besides, interactions are key components of class activities, including the interaction with peers in group discussion and that with the instructor in class reflections. Furthermore, output activities ranging from group discussions, presentations, class reflections and performance are indispensable, and carefully integrated into class activities.

Proponents of TBL suggest that for a language to be learnt, and for acquisition to take place, the following are required:

exposure to rich comprehensible input

use of the language to get things done (for example the exchange and negotiation of meaning)

motivation to listen, read, and to speak the language (Willis 1996).

My teaching approaches provide access to these conditions as learners are motivated to read, given time, space, and choice to complete a clearly defined task and a genuine motivation and arena for communicating their ideas. Comprehensible input is provided through reading and interaction within

the discussions. Peer-initiated feedback to language choice and usage is coupled with teacher-led feedback on task performance.

Conclusion

I have argued for the necessity and potentiality of teaching literature, in particular, Shakespearean drama, to EFL students within a communicative orientation. The construction of a collaborative, multidimensional learning platform for focused extensive reading and collaborative purposeful discussions and reflections, as well as performance, fulfills the multidimensional purposes of English learning including developing linguistic, literary and cultural competence, as well as facilitating critical capacity and personal enrichment. Through the introduction of the teaching procedures of Shakespeare's *Henry V* and its two film versions, which are designed within a communicative orientation, it concludes that Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Task-based instruction (TBI) are central to fulfilling the aforementioned goals in literature teaching, and can cope-well with the tough challenges in teaching a difficult author to EFL students.

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