

Holistic Literature-integrated Curriculum System for Pre-service Teachers of English at Chinese Tertiary Normal Institutions: A suggested model

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Introduction

The Chinese national government and many scholars of English have noticed the ineffectiveness of English teaching either in primary and secondary schools or in tertiary education. Vice-premier, Lanqin Li (1996) at one conference on foreign language teaching once said: "there prevails 'time-consuming, less-effective' problem in our present English teaching. It has become a must for teachers and educators to improve English teaching". Scholars and English practitioners also detected some problems prevalent in English majors' English-learning in tertiary education—"lack of critical thinking abilities" (Yuanshen Huang, 1998) and foreign cultural awareness and shortage of good humanist qualities in these English majors (Yiqing Liu, 2003). In order to improve English teaching, since 2000, national government carried a far-reaching reform in primary and secondary schools, effecting English teaching in tertiary education. Current nation-wide reform of Chinese compulsory education is challenging and making a greater requirement for teachers' expertise and proficiency in English teaching for primary and secondary schools. The successful execution of English teaching reform in compulsory education depends largely on the quality of teachers. At tertiary normal institutions (tertiary institutions aimed to train pre-service teachers) a central concern of teacher educators is how to successfully train pre-service teachers of English and to prepare qualified teachers of English for primary and secondary school to effectively bring about reform in the teaching of English.

In such a social context with an urgent need for English teaching reform and a thirsty need for qualified teachers of English for primary and secondary schools, teacher educators and teachers of English are trying to find an effective model for contemporary English teaching. The writer holds that the quality of pre-service teachers is to great extent dependent upon well-founded curriculum planning for pre-service and in-service English language learning. From this starting point, this paper investigates some weaknesses in the current curriculum for pre-service teachers and suggests an alternative model: in essence, the proposal maintains that literature, as a key aspect of humanities and a vehicle for humanist qualities in teachers, should be integrated into language curriculum systems for pre-service teachers of English. The current emphasis on linguistic skills is weak in shaping students' cultural awareness and humanist qualities. Without a curriculum that promotes access and appreciation for English literature expressed in a traditional and contemporary print culture, appropriately qualified teachers of English can not be developed.

The discourse at the heart of this paper deals with the following two questions: (1) what are teachers of English currently expected to do in the field of TESOL in primary and secondary schools in Chinese context? (2) What are the underlying weaknesses in the present language curriculum for prospective teachers of English at Chinese tertiary normal institutions?

National English Syllabus Standard

In China, the newly issued *National English Syllabus Standard* (Department of Education, P.R.C, 2003) for compulsory education clearly states that “English learning is not only a process for students to master English knowledge and skill and improve their practical language use ...but also a process for teachers to train their will, mold their temper, enrich their life, develop their individual character and abilities and sharpen humanist qualities”. For the first time such key concepts were written and highlighted in the new English national syllabus—English is not only a tool for communication but also a discipline of humanities; a humanistic approach to English teaching should be adopted. The embedded new views and thoughts on English teaching are a significant call for the development of teachers’ humanist qualities. As a teacher of English, besides the fundamentals of English language and skill, he or she must have richness and depth in the humanities, the footstone for teacher’s professional development. Only courses oriented to shaping pre-service teachers’ humanist qualities, can trainees be expected to carry on English teaching reform and make professional growth and innovation in their future teaching.

Due to the influence of the nationally planned economy on Chinese education since 1950s, departments of English in different tertiary institutions conformed to one curriculum model— the “classical humanist” model (Ronald Carter and David Nunan 2001, 180) of language curriculum with a set of literature courses as the core units incorporated into curriculum system, including such courses as: History of English Literature; History of American History; History of European Literature; and Appreciation of the Selected Readings of English and American literature. These core units played a very important role in training English talents for different fields and English scholarly elites and met the larger demands of the society for the English talents.

However, with the passage of time and the significant change from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, the numbers of scholarly traditionalists are on decrease, whereas numbers of linguistically competent users are increasing in different fields. Such a social change has a great impact not only on debates over the relation of literature to language in TESOL world-wide (Ronald Carter and David Nunan 2001, 180) but also on re-planning and reconstructing of the language curriculum for pre-service teachers of English at Chinese tertiary normal institutions. This has been based upon a paradigm in which language users’ practical linguistic competence is much more important than their humanistic qualities. The curriculum system shifted from monolithic literature-centered course units to much more open and flexible market-oriented courses in departments of English. Such a curriculum system caters for, to some degree, the demands of commercial communication.

But every coin has two sides. Accompanying the strength of such a curriculum system, some weaknesses in tertiary education (non-teacher-training, general institutions) also surface at tertiary normal institutions,

pointed out by advocates as follows: “pay more attention to sciences than humanities; pay more attention to specialties than basic knowledge; pay more attention to theory than practice; pay more attention to general instruction than individual development; pay more attention to utility than individual all-round development” (Shuzi Yang, 2002). The present curriculum system shows that more attention is focused on the courses for trainees as learners of English: such as the general courses for training “four English skills” (listening, speaking, reading and writing), linguistics and also market-oriented courses—travelling, law and business. In brief, high priority is given to English as a tool for communication, neglecting English as one discipline of humanities, with no recognition of the role of literature in curriculum system.

Such a curriculum system exerts, daily and hourly, an invisible, formative influence on prospective teachers’ attitude towards the relationship of literature study to language study and also more broadly upon their English learning behaviours. In 2003, through questionnaires and interviews the writer conducted an investigation involving 105 undergraduate students from department of English at Baoding Teachers College. The questions and interviews focused on 3 main categories: (1) English-learning (2) the role of literature in curriculum system (3) relationship between literature and language. The result showed: 85% of respondents believed that good-English learners are linguistically competent in speaking, reading and writing; while 75.3% of respondents think that English talents in the fields of law, travel and business are integral to English talents; and 62.7% of respondents held the view that literature was less important compared with linguistics in curriculum system. The respondents interviewed held the view that as they would be teachers of English in the future, learning linguistics well was their main occupational concern and studying literature well was a by-product. Though the investigation was done on a relatively small-scale, the results do function as a lens for teacher educators to view what is happening in Chinese English curriculum system for pre-service teachers and to what extent the impact of such a system is on their learning behaviours and will be on their future teaching actions.

Students’ attitudes towards English learning and English teaching shape the way they learn English and pursuing their further study. The writer has observed that, in undergraduate students spend much more time and energy studying linguistics than literature. They are frequently absent from literature lectures. In their last year of study in university, 2/3 graduates will choose linguistics as their option in their post-graduate stage. They believe that it is much easier for them to be admitted into postgraduate stage to study than if they choose literature as their orientation or specialisation. One major reason is that there are fewer linguistics books required to be read in that strand than in the literature courses. Important too is the fact that once they graduate from postgraduate stage, it is much easier for their papers on linguistics to be published in China than those on literature. Thus it is much easier for them to gain a reputation in the TESOL field. The phenomenon has a flow-through effect in TESOL in China— fewer literature teachers of English and more linguistics teachers of English; fewer literature learners and more linguistics learners; fewer literature researchers and more linguistics researchers

The writer does not imply that this phenomenon has no positives, but it does convey a message, or in some way, a potential crisis in the phenomenon for TESOL in tertiary normal institutions: can such a curriculum system and construct of English knowledge benefit teacher educators in achieving their teaching objectives—successfully training pre-service teachers of English for

primary and secondary school? Can our prospective teachers of English shoulder the responsibility to carry on nation-wide English teaching reform and meet the challenge of the *English New Curriculum Standard in China*?

A rationale for literature-integrated curriculum system

What is literature? The answer to this question seems easy to answer, 'yet the question gives rise to continuing debate.' (Ronald Carter and David Nunan, 2001). In this paper, the writer prefers the Greek philosopher, Aristotle's definition of literature in his *Poetics*—"imitated human actions". In addition, he clearly pointed out that the subjects of imitated actions are "mortal beings in action"—human beings' feelings, actions and personalities. (Xinguo Ma, 2002). Aristotle was first to touch upon the essence of literature and the relationship of literature with reality. In short, literature is an art with language as a medium, an indispensable constituent of human cultural heritage, an iconic attempt, metaphorical interpretation and symbolic solution to problems faced by the human race. Moreover, it is also the record of human spiritual activity. Since it is an art and a mirror to human spiritual world, it is of great importance to study literature, i.e. a way to reflect on human race, itself.

Literature is a part of culture, which is the very core of human language. "A dichotomy between language and literature is as absurd as a dichotomy between child and man" (Nelson Brooks, 1964). As a result, for a language learner to split learning between language and literature is ridiculous. For a language teacher to force dichotomy between the teaching of language and literature is unthinkable and harmful to his students' understanding. Scholars are clear that reading literary texts can help readers accumulate cultural awareness, language proficiency and personal growth (Ronald Carter and David Nunan, 2001).

To illustrate the relationship between literature and humanist qualities, the writer also prefers referring to Aristotle's *Poetics* (Xinguo Ma, 2002). In chapter 6, the "tragedy" is defined as "Katharsis" effect by causing the audience's pity and fear. Though scholars have a debate over the interpretation of "Katharsis", they do come to an agreement that the purgation of the tragedy has mental healthy effect on audience (Guangqian Zhu, 2002). The author thinks that the definition of tragedy given by Aristotle expounded the role of literature in shaping an individual healthy mind and humanist qualities as well as giving "aesthetic pleasure" (Claire Kramsch, 1993). This example demonstrates that literature has the capacity to evoke such senses and to be able to do that over centuries, connecting modern humankind to an emotional and cultural heritage, the heritage of humanities.

It is argued here that without literature there would be neither individual development nor national progress. Taking Renaissance period in England as an example, the whole society was prosperous as a result of economic development and political stability, which was indispensable to the flourishing of literature. England in this period was named as "a nest of singing birds" with many literary giants coming to the foreground of literary world and various literary works produced by these "giants". Many "giants" were embodiment of great writer, philosopher, and great thinker as well. Because they were endowed profound literary and cultural qualities, such giants could emerge to rule the country as politicians. Without the nourishment of literature, there would be no development in the humanist qualities of

populations. Similarly, without it, the teachers of English cannot be highly expected to effectively teach children and carry on English teaching reform.

A suggested model of holistic literature-integrated curriculum system

The *English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors at Tertiary Institutions* (Office of Tertiary Education in the Department of National Education, 2000) states clearly that the objectives for training in English are “interdisciplinary English talents with a good command of English language and mastering of wider varieties of knowledge as well as proficient English language use in the fields of foreign affairs, education, economy and trade, culture, technology and military affairs.” Accordingly, the training objectives for teachers of English at normal institutions, due to their respective roles, are that they become interdisciplinary teachers of English with a good command of English language and mastering of wider varieties of knowledge, as well as proficient English usage in the field of English teaching, research and reform. These teachers of English are expected to be highly knowledgeable and skillful in English communication, cultural awareness and literary aesthetics, with abilities in humanities and high capability to integrate the other disciplines with English.

In developing a curriculum with such training objectives as their guidelines, language curriculum planners, i.e. teacher educators, should update their ideas and concepts regarding English education. First, English should be understood to be not only a tool for communication, but also as a discipline of humanities. Secondly, the key position of literature in the curriculum should be enhanced so as to promote pre-service teachers’ improved humanist qualities. In addition to attaching a great importance to the courses for training students’ “four skills”, teacher educators should direct attention to holistically integrating courses on literature, culture and philosophical thinking, integrating courses focused on training their students’ aesthetic abilities and critical thinking abilities as part of the language curriculum. Only in this way can pre-service teachers be proficient both in language competence and in cultural competence; only then can they be known as English “professionals” rather than “tools” or pedants once they are out of the walls of normal institutions (Yiqing Liu, 2003). In a word, in this way TESOL at tertiary normal institutions is a dynamic environment for educational renewal.

The model being proposed here has the following teaching aims: (1) train students’ abilities of reading, understanding and appreciating original English literary texts; (2) cultivate students’ cultural awareness and shape their humanist qualities (3) improve students’ critical and philosophical capabilities.

In the suggested model respective purpose should be focused at two different stages—beginning stage (year 1–2) and advanced stage (years 3–4) in order to achieve overall aims. In language curriculum, three kinds of relationship should be carefully considered and dealt with: the relationship between language and literature, relation between beginning stage and advanced stage, the relation of respective stages to the whole. In order to shape students’ humanist qualities different course units forming a continuum of courses, and aiming at respective stages, should be holistically incorporated into students’ four years of study.

The principal teaching task at the beginning stage is to transmit basic literary knowledge on literature, to teach students an approach to text appreciation and to train students' overall basic literary skills as a solid foundation for their advanced study. The main teaching task at an advanced stage is to continue training students literary basic skills and offer such courses as aestheticism, philosophy and other courses related to literature so as to enrich their knowledge of literature, reinforce students' foreign cultural awareness and improve students' philosophical and critical thinking abilities with the ultimate purpose of developing students' overall talent for humanities and humanistic awareness. The two respective stages should focus on different courses on humanist qualities-shaping but also form a continuum and unity.

The courses on humanist qualities-shaping would consist of three modules: the first module—basic literary knowledge; the second module—appreciation on original literary texts; the third module—the courses related to literature. The corresponding courses in the three modules run as follows: the first module refers to the fundamental Chinese and western literary knowledge and reading skills. It includes such courses as Chinese, Chinese classical literary works, history of European history, the basic approach to literary criticism; the second module is about original English literary texts. It includes such courses as appreciation on literature in English-speaking countries, western cultures, western literary criticism and such. The third module concerns courses related to culture. It includes the courses of aesthetics, history of western philosophy. At the beginning stage, more courses on basic literary skills should be opened, while at the advanced stage teacher educators should open more courses on appreciation on original literary texts and the other courses related to literature. The classroom instruction of language may be adopted and changed with the characteristics of different courses—some courses in Chinese, other courses in English and the others in mixed Chinese and English. The courses provided for students may be in either required or selected forms. Students would experience these courses through teacher instruction in classroom and as independent learning, out of class. Lecturers from departments of Chinese and English would cooperate to teach these courses.

It is suggested that lecturers should employ teacher-centred lecture forms to give general instruction; and more student-centred forms of tutorial, seminar and workshop should be encouraged for individual instruction that would ensure students' individual development through critical discourse, inquiry methods and shared interpretation.

Conclusion

To summarise the ideas proposed, in planning and constructing language curriculum at tertiary normal institutions, teacher educators should examine and review their positions on TESOL, so that they come to regard English as a key discipline of humanities. More attention should be attached on the development of students' humanistic qualities to help ensure they are proficient in language usage as well as having cultural competence.

The suggested model is in its initial stages at the Department of English at Baoding Teachers College. Though there is a rational basis for it, it still needs data to substantiate its value, to make improve it and to extend its impact to other tertiary institutions in China or beyond. No matter what its teething problems are, the model has challenged present language curriculum systems to reflect and change. In addition, it is hoped the writer's purpose of writing

this article has been achieved: to draw more and more teacher educators' attention to planning an appropriate curriculum for pre-service primary and secondary teachers of English at tertiary normal institutions.

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