Challenges of Teaching and Learning Literature

in a Collegiate Environment in Taiwan

Leung, Yiu-nam  
Department of Foreign Languages and Literature  
National Ilan University, Yilan, Taiwan

Cheung, Kai-chong  
English Department  
Shih Hsin University, Taipei, Taiwan

It is beyond controversy that the number of credits allocated to literary courses in the curricula of the departments of Foreign Languages and Literature or English has been greatly dwindled due to the increasing attention given to courses pertinent to basic language skills and teaching English as a Second Language. Literary courses in general occupy less than one third of the total amounts of courses offered in these departments. Many of the required literary courses, such as English Literature, American Literature, and European Literature, have turned out to be electives. On the top of it, students' population from the Foreign Languages and Literature demonstrate less interest in taking literary courses. Teaching professionals also face immense challenge and run in high risk of offering literary courses without having enough students taking them. This paper aims at addressing the following questions: what are the challenges/difficulties met by both teachers and learners in teaching and learning literary courses? And what are the solutions to the challenges?

The greatest challenge for offering basic literary courses, such as “Introduction to Western Literature” and “Critical Readings for Literature,” for teaching professionals is purposely turning away from the perceived need for line-by-line explanation of the text. Given the amount of materials to be covered, careful translation and close reading are not recommended strategies. However, the policy of assigned reading that is not followed through with careful demonstration of learners’ comprehension results in a sense of guilt on the part of the instructor, and perhaps resentment among learners who have struggled through each line with looking for the meanings of vocabulary with the auspice of a dictionary and the mass amount of the reading assignments.

Since basic comprehension and awareness is the academic goal of these courses, learners are encouraged to read the English-language original text once before class, and again after the teacher’s in-class lecture and understand the plot through reading summarizations in English, as well as Chinese-language translations of the texts.

Some courses such as Literature Appreciation and Literary Theory demand a reversal of focus away from the literature toward the abstract, theoretical, or ideological. These courses use fictional texts as resources for the study of methods of critical reading. Experience suggests that this is a difficult transition for learners, as they enter the course prepared for a focus on the fiction itself, and with the expectation that their objective is to achieve comprehension of the text.
These courses are especially challenging for learners largely whose language proficiency is not high and who are being asked to criticize or evaluate texts. Learners’ also have received little training along this line and accumulated little experience in thinking critically about a text. Facing this challenge, instructors usually start the semester with an activity or a simple exercise that encourages learners to express or express their initial and final impression on an assigned text and reasons for their preference. This activity are designed to help students overcome their discomfort and build confidence in themselves as having the intelligence and integrity necessary for taking a stand, expressing an opinion, and defending one’s arguments with the support of objective evidence rather than subjective and groundless judgment. For this, learners need to achieve a degree of familiarity with the vocabulary of criticism.

Obviously, an important challenge for the teacher in these courses is to provide learners an explanation of the critical approaches and the vocabulary necessary for the proper application of these critical methods. Instructors are highly advisable to furnish learners with examples through extra texts, and make use of PowerPoint to supplement their brief lectures.

Advanced literary courses, such as “Asian American Literature,” “The Post-colonial Novel,” and “Ethnic Women Fictions of North America,” provide very different challenges to learners and teachers. Here the burden is upon the students to complete the required readings and attain high degrees of comprehension prior to each class session. Ideally, these courses are designed for a small class with a strong emphasis on discussion and close reading of a literary text. In their reading the students must practice identifying the literary elements of individual text and their characteristic traits.

Apart from comprehension of the form and content of literary texts, instructors face another challenge of changing the learners’ attitude and motivation for learning. Another challenge for instructors to offer literary courses stems from learners’ active class participation. They must have experienced frustration when the learners remain silence, are reluctant to participate in class discussions and refuse to venture an opinion about the text. As we know, class sessions, without learners’ participation, become a one-way traffic devoid of interaction between teachers and learners, degenerating easily into teacher-centered lectures where only one viewpoint— the instructors’—dominates and exorcises all other opinions and further silences learners' analyses. Teachers’ encouragement and strenuous efforts spent in correcting learners’ attitude and arousing their motivation, and smaller class size as well the creation of a relaxed atmosphere are feasible measures instrumental to solving this kind of problem.