

Practice of and Reflection on Drama Teaching in British and American Literature Course

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Abstract: *Drama has the attribute of education and the potential function of action guiding. The integration of drama teaching into the course of British and American Literature provides an effective carrier for language learning, and can improve students' cross-cultural communication skills, innovation consciousness and ability. In teaching practice, the instructor explored the effective implementation of drama teaching through pre-class blended and task-driven teaching, in-class drama rehearsal, final theatrical performance, diversified assessment methods, and analysis of the teaching effect by means of online questionnaires and offline interviews, to reflect on the optimal solutions in drama teaching.*

Keywords: Drama teaching, *British and American Literature*, Teaching practice.

1. Introduction

The world is a stage, but there's more than "a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage" (Shakespeare, W., 2024). Instead, the drama on the stage also helps the characters in the play and the audience in the theater to clarify the truth, and find out the direction of action. In the ancient Greek period, Aristotle regarded drama as the essence of life, a vehicle for sublimating emotions and cultivating insight. Since its birth, drama has had the attribute of education and the potential function of action guiding. Drama education in modern society is "a teaching method that uses the techniques of drama and theater in the classroom (Zhang X H., 2014). This teaching method complements *British and American Literature*, a humanistic course for English majors in colleges, and is worth exploring.

British and American Literature is an art of language, with the thickness of history and the breadth of culture, as well as the profundity and richness of literature itself. While promoting the learning of English language, the *British and American Literature* course also bears the responsibility of general education to inherit the humanistic spirit. According to the Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Universities, the purpose of literature courses is to promote the improvement of students' basic English skills and humanistic qualities, and to enhance students' understanding of Western literature as well as culture. But in teaching practice, there are three barriers confronting teachers and students: one is the vast amount of works, resulting to heavy teaching task; the other is the difficult words and various schools of thought that bore students; the third is the daunting traditional assessment based on knowledge and memorization. Thus, *British and American Literature* could be easily reduced to a course being obscure and difficult, dull and boring. On the basis of affirming the humanistic attributes of the *British and American literature course* and establishing the goals of English language learning and ideal personality building, the introduction of drama teaching provides an effective way for the reform of the *British and American literature course*.

2. Significance of Drama Teaching Applied to *British and American Literature Course*

1) Providing an effective vehicle for language learning. Drama performance practice makes the static and abstract language in literary texts vivid and concrete. The presence of audience strengthens the speaker's sense of context, and only when speakers analyze the background of the story and the relationship between the characters in a specific context, can they further choose the appropriate use of paralanguage such as speed of speech, tone and intonation, and expression, so as to accurately convey the meaning, express the emotion, and guide the action. At the same time, dramatic performance enables students to carry out language learning efficiently in a dynamic and diversified form (Jin L L., 2000).

2) Increasing cross-cultural awareness. Language and culture are inseparable. *British and American literature* contains a rich and complex cultural code, which reflects local history, religion, politics, customs and so on, either explicitly or implicitly. Drama teaching classroom enables students to immerse themselves in the cultural context jointly prepared and constructed by teachers and students, so that they can chew and digest the local customs behind every word and every action. When transforming it into drama performance, students can also participate in designing costumes, props and makeup to further experience exotic culture, savor a foreign life, and cultivate cultural self-awareness (Liao Q F. & Tang J H., 2004).

3) Developing innovation ability. The design and implementation of drama teaching is both a process of search and discovery and a process of reinvention for students. In the process of figuring out the script and polishing the lines, students constantly leveled the classics with their individual experience and gave new meanings to the works with their reasonable imagination. In the process of discussion and cooperation, team members constantly collide with sparks of ideas, and their mind is activated infinitely. In order to optimize the dramatic performance in a limited time and space, students need to be bold and innovative, adapt the play appropriately, and adapt to the requirements and challenges of the new era with the help of details, such as costume design.

3. Theoretical Background

The exploration and study of the integration of drama into education has a long history in Western countries. Rousseau advocated learning in educational practice in the 18th century. In China, the integration of drama and language learning has also been widely welcomed by English teachers in recent years. Overall, drama integration into education has a deep theoretical foundation and deserves a deeper exploration.

3.1 Whole Language Learning Theory

According to Goodman's philosophical view of whole-language education, language is a whole, and language learning is a complete, meaningful, and systematic process, which should not be separated into isolated teaching of phonetics, vocabulary, and reading, but should be learned in real contexts for the integrated application of language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Wang Q., 2009). The introduction of English drama expands the time and space of classroom teaching, and provides a social and linguistic scene close to the real world. Students understand the meaning of the text and penetrate the cultural background in the reading of the work, practice listening and speech in dialogues, experience the charm of language and conduct individual thinking in the rewriting of the script, which promotes the synchronous development of students' language, thinking, and emotion at the same time.

3.2 Constructivist Theory

Constructivism holds that knowledge is acquired by learners in a certain context, i.e., the socio-cultural context, by means of collaboration and communication with others and by means of the construction of meaning. Learning is a process in which learners actively construct meaning with the help and facilitation of teachers. With the strong support of information technology, drama teaching provides an ideal learning environment consisting of context, collaboration, communication and meaning construction for English language learning. In this environment, students can either expand their original knowledge structure or rebuild a new one, which not only deepens their understanding of their own language and culture, but also improves their cross-cultural communication awareness and ability, and creates a new zone of proximal development (ZPD).

3.3 Cooperative Learning Theory

Cooperative learning is a mode of learning in which learners engage in a clear division of responsibility and mutual assistance in order to accomplish a common task. Cooperative learning takes group performance as the evaluation standard, and develops students' good mental qualities and professional skills by mobilizing a positive psycho-social atmosphere (He X., 2011). The common goal of group members creates a positive interpersonal and social context for students, where each group member can not only focus on his or her own task, but also follows the progress of other members. During such teamwork, some develop leadership skills in helping others, while others increase their self-confidence in the accomplishments of the cooperative group.

4. Practical Exploration

Based on reforming and vitalizing the teaching mode of the course, and cultivating versatile English talents, the author has carried out practical exploration of and reflection on the *British and American Literature* course for English majors in China.

The two core tasks of this course are class presentations and a final theater performance. Students form groups of 4-8 students according to their own interests, and each group is required to complete at least two classroom presentations and one final theatrical performance. The classroom presentations could be in any form from recitation, singing, storytelling to role-playing, and etc. The final drama performance is one open to the public in the school auditorium.

4.1 Pre-class Blended and Task-driven Teaching

Theatrical performance itself is a process of contextualization and meaning construction, which coincides with the constructivist explanation of the learning process. In order to build a small environment of literary excerpts in a limited time and space, students need to understand the larger environment in which the works are located. For this reason, the teacher established an online course on the learning platform before the class, and the students could experience all kinds of environmental stimuli after entering the platform, including: the English language environment in real scenes; the timeline of the history of *British and American literature*; readings by famous writers, songs, films and television adaptations, and beautiful illustrations; the cross-cultural materials such as works of Chinese writers of the same period/subject matter; and a forum for discussion.

For example, when introducing Pre-romantic poet Robert Burns and his *ballad Auld Lang Syne*, the online learning platform categorizes and provides materials such as Burns' own portrait, his former residence, manuscripts, the textual materials including Burns' life, works, the translation of *Auld Lang Syne* in Scottish dialect, English, and Chinese, the presentation of the song *Auld Lang Syne* in the movie *Waterloo Bridge* and the British TV drama *Downton Abbey*, and the singing of the song in different occasions such as in China and UK. Students experience the work from multiple perspectives in an immersive environment, drawing inspiration and developing their own unique insights.

Through the online platform, the instructor had actually driven students to select works of interest for in-depth understanding, team up with peers sharing same interests, and work together to discuss and determine how to present their work (Ma Q C., 2020). Thus, when entering the classroom where online and offline teaching are truly and effectively linked, students are already well prepared (Deng W Y., 2020).

4.2 In-class Drama Rehearsal

Based on the effective pre-class driving, students came to each class "prepared" with their group work. Two to three groups in each class presented a variety of activities, including reciting Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*, singing W. B. Yeats' poem *When You Are Old* in both English and Chinese, recounting

Oscar Wilde's fairy tale *The Happy Prince*, role-playing Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, dubbing Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, enacting a classic balcony scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and so on. Although each group was given only a few minutes and the space in the classroom was limited, this kind of close-up, family gathering-like presentation created a relaxed and free atmosphere. Some groups would play background music that matched the theme, while others would have members playing live guitar. The seemingly unattainable English literature has become much more accessible.

The classroom presentation was both a trial-and-error rehearsal for theatrical performance. A 3-5-minute Q&A and peer assessment session was arranged after the classroom presentation to help the group unclog the connecting pivot between internal understanding and external presentation. The instructor made comments and suggestions, including digging the deeper meaning of the language, placing the writer's work in the context of the times or even in the vast expanse of history, and exploring the writing characteristics and historical significance. For example, when supplementing the materials related to Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*, the instructor analyzed the poem's iambic pentameter and the meter of abcdcd efef gg, the pronunciation and use of Old English vocabulary such as *thou, thee, thy, thine* and so on, the relationship between acronyms and rhymes of the poem, and the climate in England, etc. The teacher also placed Shakespeare in the context of British Renaissance, compared the similarities and differences of his works with his contemporary poet Spenser, and explored his interactions with the times to learn about his influence on English literature as a whole.

The rehearsal-style preliminary stage provides students with the opportunity to review their work from multiple perspectives, and the group can use this as a part of their final play, or adjust the characterization, or even start all over again.

4.3 Final Theatrical Performance

Script perfection. After seeking, discovering, and creating meaning in the text before and during the class, students eventually chose the play that would be brought to the big stage, which would be not only interesting and understandable, but also one that would carry their unique understanding of life. And students would add, tweak, or delete some lines to meet the needs of stage. In the case of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, one group arranged to sing Taylor Swift's *Love Story* in the backdrop of the stage after Romeo and Juliet had made up their minds, using the line "*He knelt to the ground and pulled out a ring/And said/Marry me Juliet you'll never have to be alone.*" to express the girl's fantasies about love; another group recited Elizabeth Barrett Browning's iambic pentameter sonnet *How do I love thee?*, an expression of passionate, exuberant, life-or-death love. When staging *The Cop and the Anthem*, a work by American short story writer O Henry, students played song *Que Sera Sera* (meaning "*Whatever will be, will be.*"), which expresses young people's curiosity and yearning for the future, and is also a realistic portrayal of the current situation of college students confused about life.

Preparation for the stage. Hearing an American accent in Shakespeare's plays can easily take the audience out of the theater. In order to avoid such embarrassment, students constantly followed and imitated the reading in adapted films, adjusting the timbre and refining the intonation, so that Eliza's change of awareness in *Pygmalion* and Portia's defense in *The Merchant of Venice* can be easily perceived by the audience in different voices. In addition, make-up, costumes and props are all effective aids to three-dimensional characterization. Apart from costumes such as Victorian lace dress, students also made use of curtains, scarves, hats, umbrellas, rice paper, drink bottles and other self-created props, which are interesting and environmentally friendly.

Performance promotion. We not only selected hosts for the theatre show, but also made large posters and electronic invitation cards, inviting all the teachers and students to attend and enjoy it. What's more, we recruited the English majors in the lower grades to be volunteers for seat guidance, props carrying, filming and recording, etc., so that they could enjoy the professional performance and at the same time familiarize themselves with the stage procedure in advance.

Stage presentation. For most of the students, this was the first time they were so immersed in the creation of a classic role in English literature, giving the character a vivid life with vivid language, exaggerated movements and other paralanguage. It was also a great test of their comprehensive professional skills and ability to respond to emergencies. Facing the audience, cheers and applause, the young students' desire to perform was satisfied, their self-confidence was boosted, and all their previous efforts were worthwhile.

4.4 Diversified Assessment

Online system evaluation. The online learning platform could automatically record students' online learning, frequency of interactions, and submission of assignments of each student and synthesize an online ordinary grade according to the pre-set criteria by the instructor (Jin Y., 2020).

Teacher evaluation. In the classroom, the instructor would synchronize the course evaluation with course teaching by group performance, questions and answer, and task assignment, etc., solving students' difficulties and confusions, and observing students' classroom participation as the basis for classroom evaluation.

Audience evaluation. Whether a performance is successful or not is measured by the audience. The same is true for English drama performances. Whether the information is effectively conveyed, whether the expressions and movements are in place, whether the atmosphere is just right, whether the story is immersive or thought-provoking, whether the voice is attractive, etc., all these are the criteria for the audience's evaluation. The audience just scan the evaluation QR code when they are seated in the auditorium to make quantitative ratings of each program.

Teammates evaluation. The long preparation period of a theater performance is a great test of students' comprehensive abilities. Group members hone their interpersonal communication skills in script selection and role allocation,

learn to resolve disputes in countless rehearsals, and share sweetness and bitterness in grand stage scenes. It can be said that group members know best the professional ability and personal involvement of each member, so it is only natural to include mutual evaluation within a group.

5. Reflection on Teaching Effect

At the end of this course, the author surveyed students' feedback on the effectiveness of drama teaching integrated into the *British and American Literature* course. An online questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale was conducted to measure students' language learning effect, creative consciousness and ability, teamwork ability, and cross-cultural communication consciousness and ability. The total number of samples was 130, and 125 valid questionnaires were collected.

The results show that the average score of language learning effect is 3.69 to 4.06, and more than 92% of the students agree that drama teaching makes them have a deeper understanding of English literary works and significantly improves students' self-efficacy in English learning; the average score of innovation awareness and ability is 3.58 to 4.18, and teamwork ability 4.04 to 4.47, with most of the students being clear about the team's goals and individual roles, and able to listen to/accept others' suggestions when opinions differed; and the average score of cross-cultural communication awareness and ability is 4.07 to 4.28. The results show students' high recognition of drama teaching integrated into the *British and American Literature* course.

6. Conclusion

English drama is an effective language teaching tool, providing students with opportunities for language learning, cultural experience, interpersonal communication, emotional expression, and demonstration of learning effect, and cultivating students' imagination, creativity, critical thinking, and positive ways of conflict dealing. The effective implementation of drama teaching in *British and American literature* course depends on sufficient preparation before class, rich activity forms and diversified evaluation methods, and requires teachers and students to work together to explore a wider range of educational practice.

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