

Teaching Literary Reading for Transfer: Hugging and Bridging Designed

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Abstract

As researchers are looking for different strategies to reform on a straightforwardly presented instruction in the English literature classroom, the specific ends of teaching literature for transfer are sometimes neglected. That does not mean transfer is not valid in a literature course, but teachers should design a course persistently and systematically enough to foster transfer. This study revisits the hugging-bridging framework to explore the instructor methods in a literary reading course and suggests creative writing as a hub of teaching transfer. Main focus would be given to the design of hugging in class reading instruction and bridging in transferable task of writing. Though effective transfer is decided by students’ familiarity with the knowledge and proficiency in using certain knowledge, learning for transfer could be conducive to shaping a routine problem- minded concept for learners.

Key words: Literary reading course; Teaching for transfer; Hugging; Bridging

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INTRODUCTION

The process of a conventional literature class usually begins with teachers’ introduction of the historical background and the life of the author and continues into analyzing the literary text. But such straightforwardly presented instruction has long been denounced as “teacher-speaking-alone class” in China. A survey conducted by Cheng Ai-min et al. (2002, p.17) revealed that it has witnessed an increasing proportion of student discussion in the literature class since 2000s, which could be seen as a shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered instruction. So, promoting students’ participation in a literature class has become a consistent effort for teachers these decades. For some, the approach is to keep a fickle students’ attention at literature. They advocate the use of multimedia, internet resources and movies to mobilize students’ auditory, visual and tactile senses when appreciating a literary text, which is acknowledged as a multi-modal design (Ye, 2011; Xu, 2012; Li, 2017; Cai, 2018). Others turn to the combination of online and offline teaching by getting students to watch the online teaching videos to acquire the pre-class idea of background information and other general knowledge of the text, so that the class instruction is open for discussions and Q & A sessions (Guo, 2017; Wei, 2017; Wang, 2018). Such design is applauded as “flipped classroom”, which comes in a wave of MOOC and micro-course online videos launched in China after 2015.

The instructional innovations are indeed helpful to promote students’ interest and thinking to some degree, but it raises other doubts. On one hand, the multi-modal teaching can inspire students’ interests and may have a role in developing students’ critical thinking, but it inevitably distracts students from the literary text by focusing on the external superficial stimulus. On the other hand, if the background knowledge has been condensed into 10-minute short videos and a literature class is just about lively performance, presentations and

casual discussions, students might fail to have an access to the most significant and profound part of literary appreciation. Moreover, while teachers emphasize lively and interactive instructions, they rarely mention if there is a transfer target amid these topic-specific and fact-based questions and activities. However, according to Marini and Guenereux (1995, p.1), learning transfer represents a fundamental goal for classroom, “when they [students] fail to appropriately apply their classroom learning in settings outside of school, then education is deemed to have failed.” Accordingly, at issue here is whether we can foster transfer in the instructional settings of a literature course.

1. LITERATURE COURSE AND TEACHING FOR TRANSFER

Transfer means having skills or knowledge learnt in one context reach out to help us handle with experience in another context. Teaching for transfer was first proposed in 1980s as the ultimate goal of education, and since then has been widely used in science subjects and physical education. With regard to ELT, only some subjects tend to embrace the idea of transfer, like those focusing more on skill drilling (e.g. listening), or those paying attention to remind learners of common ground between English and Chinese (e.g. grammar). Transfer of skills is usually considered as the routine target. Though not popularly related to skill training, literary appreciation in effect always employs “transfer” in teachers’ instruction. For example, students are encouraged to identify themselves in the position of Hamlet and figure out their dilemma so as to understand Hamlet’s indecision. Students’ personal experience of struggle, anguish, love and guilt can help invest intimate understanding into these eternal dramas in literary studies. From one’s life experience to a similar life situation in the literary text demonstrates a near transfer or hugging, which depends on considerable perceptual similarity between situations. When students make a different choice of revenge from Hamlet, it is not just a result of personal choice, but can be seen in relation to historical, cultural and philosophical differences. Asking students to contemplate over their different choices by juxtaposing different contexts, such as past and current, west and east, Christian and Confucian, side by side for comparison and contrast demands more on mindful abstraction of knowledge and particularly the application of knowledge of history, culture and philosophy to the literary context. Such is called far transfer or bridging, which always involves reflective thought and seeking connections with other contexts deliberately. As a result, transfer should not be narrowly seen as merely transfer of skill or knowledge; attitudes or cognitive styles might be transferred as well (Perkins & Salomon, 1988, p.22).

Though transfer is found in the aforesaid tasks, it does not necessarily suggest that students will therefore spill automatically what they have experienced or learnt to many other contexts where these experience and knowledge can be applied. Certain factors should be taken into account. Perhaps transfer cannot appear routinely as expected. Perkins and Salomon (1988, p.23) argue against the “Bo Beep” theory, an assumption of automatic transfer. They prove that when students do not think about new situations themselves and apply what they have learnt to problem-solving contexts, their knowledge tends to be passive. Thus, the hoped-for transfer involves students’ genuine initiative to discover a new situation, but the current instruction relies much on teachers’ lead-in questions. For another, perhaps the tasks designed have contextualized a certain pattern. The individual tasks could help students scrutinize a certain question in detail, but also might localize a view without seeing the general transferable aspects of knowledge. As a result, rather than designing an individual task or lesson, instructors may need more effort to plan the course systematically so as to saturate the need for transfer.

There is ample reason to believe that transfer tasks play a key role in teaching thinking approach. Wang Yanyan and Feng Xiaojing (2009) verifies the positive impact of transfer on the improvement of students’ interest and effectiveness in an ELT course. The aspects in their consideration include the transfer of motivation, emotion strategies, cognitive transfer strategies and metacognition strategies. Literature study has more potentials of learning for transfer than other ELT courses, for it can develop out of the details an overarching generality. While the skill-based, knowledge-specific subjects tend to be highly specialized and lack cross-disciplinary in character, literature course encourages students to generalize a view from a text and transport ideas to or from life experience. Also, the problem awareness in interpreting a text, such as exploring the theme, defining exactly what the conflict and problem are, identifying the motive, intention, inner conflict, and the unconscious of a character, and examining the style and form of a writing, provides useful and general thinking strategy for other analytical contexts. These advantages, though acknowledged by educators, are rarely tracked in the transfer research on literature course, possibly because literary appreciation is never seen as with principles and trackable, or perhaps the attention of transfer is given to no other than reading. If the purpose of a reading course is to help students handing the understanding of a text, in which the transfer is more inwardly directed, my study attempts at an outwardly directed transfer by getting students to apply what they have learnt in a literary reading course to handling creative and critical writing.

2. DESIGNING INSTRUCTION

Selected Reading of English Literature is an elective course for English major in Faculty of English Language and Culture in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, a prestigious university in South China. Those selecting this course are mainly from first and second grades. There are 30 students in one class and my teaching syllabus contains two categories: English fiction and poetry. My transfer research mainly focuses on the instruction of English fiction. In the first introductory lesson, I assigned a reading of a short story by Spencer Holst, "The Zebra Storyteller", and asked students to write a 200-word literary review. This is supposed to be a pre-lesson survey of students' level of proficiency. Their writing indicated that students had little experience with reading literature in English before. Their review was mainly descriptive, retelling the story and expressing their liking or disliking, and seldom paid attention to the figures of speech and fictional elements. An inadequate exposure to literary reading could be a reason, because the curriculum in the first two years focuses more on language skills, and Communicative English, a core course of four semesters, do not contain many literary texts.

Literary reading is a complex process with an aesthetic quality just like M. H. Abrams' model of Universe, Work, Artist and Audience (1971). In this framework, we have to consider the relationship between the author and the work, between the readers and the work, between the universe as a whole and the work itself and relationships within the work. Since this is not a course of literary criticism and students are beginners to literary reading, who are sometimes restricted by their language level, life experience, knowledge and creativity, I give more emphasis on the relationships within the work itself, though exploring the other relationships in case of needs. Generally, I follow a new critical approach of close reading, helping student identify the fictional elements and literary devices used in the literary texts (as indicated in Table 1) and meanwhile encouraging personalized interpretation of these elements.

Table 1
Syllabus and teaching focus

Weeks	Literary text	Literary elements for instruction
2-4	"A Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin	Plot (conflict, climax and anti-climax), Characterization, Setting, Theme, Symbol, Dialogue, Action,
5-7	"The Indian Camp" by Earnest Hemingway	Suspense, Reader response, Point of view, Unreliable narrator,
8-10	Chapter 1 of Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë	Suspense, Humor, Figures of speech (e.g. repetition, metaphor, rhyming, irony), etc.

Unlike a linear introduction in the conventional instruction, here the literary elements are designed explicitly as learning points. The task of the instructor is to design classroom tasks for students to identify the internal elements of a literary text, consolidate their

learning and get ready for the practical application. Modeled on Mark James' instructional strategies (2006), I designed the hugging tasks (Table 2). A near-transfer activity is instrumental to tap students' inert knowledge for use, since students are not lacking the knowledge of reading a Chinese literary work. The strategies elaborated in Table 2 would just provide a framework for reference, as one can adopt and adapt to specific cases.

Table 2
Hugging tasks

Instructional strategy	Elaboration and examples
Setting expectations	Telling students explicitly and regularly those writers might use the typical structures in their works to convey his or her messages. So, it is worthwhile to identify these elements when interpreting the message. e.g. The climax is the point at which a conflict reaches its peak and therefore calls for attention to a clash of values. These could be the themes of the story.
Matching	Making learning activity as similar as possible to future application activity. e.g. The image and personality of a character is enhanced by the description of the character's behaviors and actions. When introducing the character's personality, students are asked to give an analysis of the character's behaviors and pay attention to the choice of verbs.
Simulating	Simulating real life situations in learning activities. e.g. Students are encouraged to judge whether the plot development is logical or not based on their real-life experience and look for the connotation for the illogical elements.
Modelling	Demonstrating a certain way of reading. e.g. Ask students to compare the use of active and passive voice in certain expressions and discover different overtones accordingly. With a studying model, students are supposed to notice how a message is expressed instead of what is expressed in a literary text.
Problem-based learning	Students can share their doubts and confusions in a study group and try to solve the problems together.

2. TRACKING TRANSFER

Reading is a powerful way to develop learners' cognitive ability and according to Perkins and Salomon's expectation for far transfer (1988, p.24), one can abstract a pattern of thinking from the presentational and argument structures of a written text to handle complex tasks elsewhere. This forward-reaching transfer is commonly assumed in reading course, in which students are oriented to a solution-minded awareness. They are armed with solutions and wait for the right problem to come in and testify their solution to be feasible. However, in the world of literary reading, one appreciates more originality and creativeness than repetition and imitation. Students would find their solution yielding no fruitful understanding when they come to read another text. By introducing a backward-reaching transfer in bridging, Perkins and Salomon (1988, p.31) value a problem-minded awareness.

Sometimes it would be more effective to examine the problem before coming into a quick solution, “one finds oneself in a problem situation and reaches backward into one’s experience for matches” (Perkins & Salomon, 1988, p.26). As a result, I find a design of writing tasks would be instrumental to throwing students into such problem situation. They have to go back to the lesson and forage what they have learnt for a possible matching solution.

In my study, I offered a writing workshop by assigning a fiction writing task to students. This was supposed to be a process work, for students had to keep pruning their writing. Since I spent three weeks on one text and each time, I emphasized the use of certain literary elements in the text, students could seek connections with their writing at each stage of learning. They would form study groups, in which each could share their stories, report their problems encountered and provide alternative solutions to others every three weeks. My assistance to students is modeled on Mark James’ bridging strategies (2006) as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3
Bridging strategies

Instructional strategy	Elaboration and examples
Anticipating applications	Asking students to consider different contexts in which they are able to apply new knowledge and skills. e.g. If students want to set up an unexpected ending for their story, they are encouraged to look for how many ways a suspense is set up in the text they have learnt.
Generalizing concepts	Asking students to develop general rules from their learning experience. e.g. Students can sum up the rule of employing irony and try to invent some ironies in their writing.
Using analogies	Students are encouraged to make use of analogies. e.g. A Cinderella motif can be reshaped into a new story in a new narrative point of view.
Parallel problem solving	Students can work together to solve problems that have similar structure. e.g. In their study groups, they can share their problems, learn from each other and look out for opportunity to apply their learning.
Metacognitive reflection	Students can monitor and evaluate their learning in a process. e.g. The modifying process in their fiction writing can illustrate the step by step progress in each stage, so students can evaluate their outcomes accordingly.

In my study, I tracked the changes in students’ three drafts and noticed apparent improvement in terms of the meticulous design of plot development, the treatment of suspense, the enrichment of the characterization, the abundance of verb uses and the dealing with descriptive details in setting. For example, in “The Story of an Hour”, we discussed about “heart disease” as a foreshadowing factor, which was posited right in the beginning and threaded through the plot development until finally resulting in the death of the heroine. Some students gave more attention to build up the exposition of their second

draft in creating a foreshadowing effect. When it comes to *Wuthering Heights* and the concept of unreliable narrator was introduced, those employed a limited third person narrative would invest more effort in shaping their narrators in the third draft. The changes in three drafts indicate that students tend to transfer what they have learnt in the class into what they are writing. The order of literary elements transferred seemed to coincide with the order when they were taught in the instruction.

After finishing my instruction in the fiction part, I assigned another short story of Spencer Holst, “The Monroe Street Monster”, for students’ literary review. Compared with their pre-lesson review, the second review contained more analytical focuses. Instead of following only the story line, students would report on the theme, climax, the use of symbol in setting, the narrative point of view of the characters, the character’s psychological action, behaviors and dialogues, the foil characters in the story, the use of rhetorical devices, and so on. When students employ what they have learnt into their fiction writing, it helps to enhance their understanding of literary elements in the perspective of an author. As a result, the experience of becoming an author helps to shape a new insight for students as a reader of a literary text.

CONCLUSION

Compared with the conventional teaching, the literary reading course designed in learning transfer strategy requires teachers to focus on literary elements as the learning points. It is appropriate that instructors develop related strategies to foster a transfer in students’ learning. It is also recommended that the literary elements should be made explicit to students so that they can discover the situations for transferrable use of these elements in their reading and writing. Students should realize that reading a fiction is not about knowing a story, since it contains specific knowledge and reading skills, which is also found useful for writing transfer. It must be noted that while some hugging and bridging methods were proved effective to help students transfer what they have learnt to reading other texts and writing their own fiction, some intended transfer are less valid for some literary elements. For example, plot development, characterization, setting description and use of rhetorical devices gained obvious improvement in students’ creative writing than narrative point of view, suspense and humor, though students showed the tendency of experimenting the latter and giving attention to them in their critical reading. Still, we have the reason to believe that effective transfer is decided by students’ familiarity with the knowledge and proficiency in using certain knowledge. In a nutshell, learning for transfer could be conducive to shaping a routine problem- minded concept for students.

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