

Application of P & RBL Model to English Literature Course: Using Teaching Framework Based on Three Key Concepts

Xiaolin Yang

Southern Medical University, Guangzhou, China

Zhen Hu

Shanghai Second Polytechnic University, Shanghai, China

Abstract—This course reform is designed to construct a P&RBL teaching framework by adopting three key concepts, namely “parallel narrative” centering on the literary masterpieces, “authors’ bio-fictional narrative” focusing on the bio-information of writers, as well as “mash-up narrative” riveting in the literary genre, into literary teaching, aiming at establishing interconnectedness between literary history and present, stimulating students’ interest in reading literary classics, enhancing their understanding of theoretical development all way to postmodernism and promoting research consciousness and capability.

Index Terms—course of English literature, parallel narrative, authors’ bio-fiction narrative, mash-up narrative, P&RBL model

I. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In his highly-regarded monograph *The Western Canon* (1994), American literary critic Harold Bloom says that man should never stop reading classics, otherwise, man will stop thinking as wisdom can be sought exclusively through classic literature. And in his publishing phenomenon *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Allan Bloom makes such a compelling case for reading, or rereading, classic works, with his criticism revolving around the belief that the “great books” of Western thought should never be devalued. In China, western literature is taught both as a required course for English majors and as a general-education course for non-English majors. The designed aim of this course is to foster critical reading, build valuable skills, and expand students’ worldviews by reading and appreciating literary texts. Few other courses can give students’ critical abilities such a workout as the close reading of a work of literature. The students could learn to think critically about the characterization in a literary narrative and how themes present, what’s the author’s rhetorical purposes in writing it by adopting any specific narrative skills, and how the texts are interrelated with social context and so on if their lessons would be conducted in a systematic and stimulating way. However, in China nowadays most of the English majored students even lose their interest in and lack the impetus for reading literary masterpieces. The causes of this situation lie in several aspects. Among them, the teaching methods and curriculum design are the most accusable (Lü 2006). How to attain effectively the teaching objectives of the English literature course has become a pressing question.

This question has been seriously meditated during the recent years by our teaching group at Southern Medical University and Shanghai Second Polytechnic University, which have achieved fairly significant success in transforming our research into teaching practice, which can serve as a kind of experience for the English literature Course Reform at larger scale, hopefully at the international scale for English-as-foreign-language countries. As we know, students’ cognitive engagement is more or less dependent on the guidance of the teacher, so the design of the teaching framework is very important. After carefully considering the characteristics of Literary teaching, a three-key-concepts framework is supposed to be an optimized method as the three designed key concepts covers the three important aspects of literature learning, namely, works, authors and genres. Basing on three key teaching concepts, namely **Parallel Narrative**, **authors’ bio-fictional Narrative** and **Mash-up Narrative**, our reformed curriculum is supposed to overcome the defects in the traditional teaching, such as boringly diachronic and unsystematically teaching organization, teacher-centered un-illuminating teaching method and so on. Here, P&RBL means problem-and-research-based-learning. That is to say, by guiding the students to ask and think through the three key concepts, their interest in reading literary texts and academic consciousness in researching literary problems can be enormously enhanced. Among them, Parallel Narrative riveting in works, and the Authors’ Bio-fictional narrative focusing on writers, and Mash-up Narrative centered on literary genre, each of them focusing on one dimension of literature learning, forming a complementary and three -dimensional teaching system. In the process of this teaching reform, this model has been proved as successful in making students realize naturally the values of reading classical works and stimulating students to think creatively, actively and critically those questions related to literature learning.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

Altogether 160 Year-3 Junior college students majored in two different orientations-Business English and English Translation participated in the teaching experiment, with the 83 students in English Translation in the control group and the 77 in Medical English in the experimental group. Before the experiment, the English proficiency level of the students from these two orientations were basically similar, but with their average TEM4 scores being 73.3 and 68.1 respectively. That is to say, the control group did better in TEM-4 test than the experiment group did. The researcher is the teacher to and the co-performer with the students, conducting traditional teaching to the control group and the P&BL model with three-key teaching framework to the experiment group. Finally, the other two experienced professors in the field of English Literature Studies served as assessors to analyze the data obtained from the two different ways of teaching through course papers, examination and questionnaire by using the SPSS.

In the process of experiment teaching, the three key concepts need be introduced to the students so that they could take their advantages when they are required to do pre-reading and think about the answers to the questions and search the related information before each lesson. After research, this experiment P&RBL system of teaching framework based on three keywords, namely **Parallel Narrative**, **Literary Authors' bio-fictional narrative** and **Mash-up Narrative** shows its advantages over the traditional teaching in many ways. This teaching model starts by posing questions and scenarios rather than simply presenting established facts or portraying a smooth path to knowledge. The students are provided with the concepts and questions related to the concepts, that is to say, they are distributed in a structured inquiry (Banchi and Bell, 2008). However, the examples and explanation have to be generated in the process of their active searching, reading, comparing and repeated discussion.

The teaching framework of the experimental group is presented as follows:

A. *Parallel Narrative to the Classical Works*

Parallel Narrative refers to a piece of new fictional works derived by a contemporary writer from the literary masterpiece by a canonized author through maintaining the social context, basic story-line and the cast of characters while changing the narrative perspective or voice or extending its story-line by writing a prequel or sequel. Parallel Narrative in the narrow sense, the derived text should coincide its time and space, its story-line and every important event with the source text. However, broadly speaking, it also refers to any fictional derived narrative "parallel" any aspect with the source work, for example, with paralleled characters (the frame of the story time or the story-line is not necessarily paralleled), or the paralleled event leading to the different end, or the characters from different classical works appear in the same text, or the time travel of the canonized characters to the contemporary world, or the creation of a new character to lead the narrative progress, or the change of a flat character into a round one, or the elaboration of a brief line in the source work into a full narrative and so on. Therefore, generally parallel narrative can be categorized into several types - type of minor-character-as-narrator, type of prequel or sequel to the classic works, and the parody or burlesque of the classics, etc. From the ancient epic *Beowulf* (about 750 a.d) to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601) to Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), parallel narratives can be found everywhere in contemporary literary works. And some twentieth-century authors who have written novels that comment upon and challenge Victorian classics by creating parallel narrative, like Jean Rhys and Peter Carey, by shifting the point of view or by rewriting one of the characters. Thus, Rhys makes Brontë's Bertha the heroine of her novel while Carey makes the escaped convict Magwitch the focus of his. Peter Carey not only recreates Dickens's characters into his novel but also inserts the novelist himself - alas Tobias Oates, who stands in for him - in the action.

Firstly, in the process of introducing the very concept of Parallel Narrative, the students are required to compare the similarities and difference between the pairs of paralleled works. For instance, when studying Shakespeare in the Renaissance literature, the well-known representative play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1968) by Absurd Theatre playwright Tom Stoppard and *Gertrude and Claudius: A Novel* (2000) by John Updike can be timely introduced to the students and ask them which canonized plays they are paralleled to, how they are paralleled and what's the effect of this narrative technique. After discussion, the majority of the students in the experiment group realize that both of the two contemporary works reconstruct *Hamlet* through subverting the relationship of the narrator and the narratee and deconstructing the hero and the marginalized or silenced characters. By paralleling and intertextualizing the Shakespeare classic, a sense of post-modernistic in the niche of contemporary context and a new understanding of feminism and ethics can be achieved.

Secondly, after a good acquaintance with the concept of Parallel Narrative is acquired by the students, they were assigned the pre-class task of searching the other parallel narratives related to different classic texts. In this process, students are actively involved in the reading and searching before they can put forward their ideas in class discussion and comparative analysis. They can write critical essays about the works they like and value. At the end of the experiment, students essays in experiment group vary in different classical and derived works such as John Gardner's *Grendel* (1971) to *Beowulf*, and Sena Jeter Naslund's *Ahab's Wife* (1999) to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a prequel of *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Margaret Atwood's "Gertrude Talks Back" (1994) as an elaboration of one passage in *Hamlet* (1603), Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) as the parodied parallel narrative to E.M. Forster's *Howard Ends* (1910), and *March* (2005) as a minor-character-changed-narrator from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), etc. Interestingly, one of the students has found Jo Baker's *Longbourn* (2013) as a

reimagining Parallel Narrative to *Pride And Prejudice*, with the focus shifting from Jane Austen's principals to the servants below stairs who cooked their food and washed their laundry.

B. Bio-fictional Narrative about Literary Authors

As mentioned above, Author's Bio-fictional Narrative centers on the dimension of the canonized authors. It is actually a subtle combination of biography, fiction, essay and literary analysis, which takes historical authors and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the fictional narrative techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography (Lodge, 2006).

During the recent 25 years, such fictional narratives regarding the life of the poets, playwrights and novelists as narrative imperative and launch-pad have been published at an acceleratory pace, forming a unique subgenre to historical or biographical fiction. These contemporary works mainly parallel to the previously published scholarly biography. However, due to its imaginative exploration and fictional techniques, such narratives are far more interesting and easier to be digested than the formal biography. General narrative strategies used here include adopting the biographee as the narrator, the changing of the perspective from the biographer to the real life people around the author or even the fictional character the author created, the elaboration of the author's often mysterious period of life. The difference between the first and the second key concept lies in that the formal focus of parallel rivets around the works while the latter around the authors.

First of all, we can deepen the students' understanding of this concept by introducing some examples. For example, Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife* (2011) is introduced when talking about the biographical information about Ernest Hemingway, Anthony Burgess' *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1993) when discussing the life of Christopher Marlowe, and Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) is referred when studying Oscar Wilde, and Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D. H. Lawrence* (1997) when David Herbert Lawrence is mentioned, and *The Master* (2004) by Colm Tóibín when referring to Henry James, and Matthew Pearl's *Dante Club* (2004) is inserted into the introduction of fireside poets like Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, Bryant, Whittier to strengthen their memories of these poets, and meanwhile acquire the knowledge of connection between the poets and the translation of *La Divina Commedia* by Dante Alighieri. Actually, just like *Dante Club*, some bio-fictional narratives are not related to one specific author but a group or generation of authors. Further such examples include Jude Morgan's *Passion: A Novel of the Romantic Poets* (2006) and Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* (2002), etc. And the Lost Generation is interpenetrated in *The Paris Wife* (2012) with the secret anecdotes about these writers such as Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound and so on. From another perspective, this bio-fictional narrative could be analyzed as a parallel narrative of Hemingway's posthumous works *A Moveable Feast* (1964).

Through the acquisition of this concept, students find more interest in reading the life stories concerning the historical authors. What's more, students are stimulated to trace the different details appearing in scholarly biography and their bio-fictional narrative and discuss interactively about this topic on the E-learning website we established for the course. Comparatively speaking, the students in the experiment group are far more actively involved in the web-discussion than the control group. Through the second concept, the students not only get more familiar with the authors and their times, but also get more knowledge about the process of their literary creation as some bio-fictional narrative are concerning life and works of a historical author from perspective of their muses, such as Victoria Lamb's *His Dark Lady* (2013). This bio-fictional narrative is told from four perspectives: Lucy, Elizabeth, Good luck, and Shakespeare and makes the mysterious dark lady image in Shakespeare's sonnet vividly created. This narrative strategy also makes the students understand how to present a subject from different angles, especially in the context of post-modernism, how to present a feminist, racist, post-colonialist viewpoint towards the historical subject.

C. Mash-up Narrative

In this teaching program, mash-up narrative refers to a work of fiction which combines a pre-existing literature text, often a classic work of fiction, with another genre, such as horror genre with the suspenseful thriller, the detective mystery and the zombie and vampires mingled. Comparatively speaking, this last one of the three concepts is the most minor but brings the new cultural and supernatural elements. The concept appears to have first been coined in a review of Seth Grahame-Smith's 2009 novel, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Kellogg, 2009). Mash-up narrative can be also a kind of Parallel Narrative in the light of novels such as *Sense and Sensibility and sea Monsters*, *Death Comes to Pemberley* as well as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. As such narrative is basically in coincidence with the source works in terms of characters, plots and settings, the students can be stimulated to learn more about its classic source. This is a type of mash-up narrative connected to the textual parallel. And the other is associated itself with the author's life with the most salient example being *Zombie Island: A Shakespeare Undead Novel* (2012), *The Poe Shadow* (2007) and *The Last Dickens* (2009).

Here when the third concept is introduced to the experiment group, discussing topics like what's the difference between Genre Fiction and Literary fiction and why there seems a tendency of merging of the two in contemporary literary creation can be assigned to the students in class. The era of Postmodernism provided a perfect background for these kinds of works. Therefore, these key concepts help students understand post-modernity in a deeper level.

Now with all the three key concepts clearly presented we can safely conclude that all of them in the teaching framework are a type of rewriting in this way or another. Often, their aim is to fill in the blanks so as to give a voice to

the oppressed, marginalized characters whose stories, experiences, voice remain silenced in the original work. In other cases the author invents alternative turns of the story-line or changes the outcome of the events. Also, prequels and sequels inspired by the classics are popular with readers who want to know what happened to their beloved heroes and heroines before, or after the existing narration. Most of writers of the rewritings pay their homage and tribute to their literary precursors by recognizing and readopting their wordings and ways of narration while some of them ironize through parodizing. Anyway, while challenging the original text and engaging with it, rewritings integrate information about our present cultures and thinkings and ideologies into the historical pre-texts, serving as a bridge between the literary classic and the contemporary works.

Finally, with these three key concepts in mind, some of the students even have begun to create and upload their own Parallel Narrative, Author bio-fiction or Mash-up stories based on their favorite classical works on the E-learning website.

III. FINDINGS AFTER USING THE PROBLEM-BASED THREE KEY CONCEPTS FRAMEWORK

After twenty weeks' experiment in the course, findings show that the experimental group performs significantly better than the control group on several aspects. Firstly, in terms of basic knowledge absorption, the GPA of the literary knowledge test of the experiment group is 82.58 whereas the control group 72.05 and all the SPSS data in the following form shows significance of the teaching method. According to the Cognitive Load Theory, a learner should be encouraged to use his or her limited working memory efficiently, especially when learning a difficult task (Van Gerven et. al., 2003). And this teaching framework benefits the students from the experiment group by efficiently limiting the amount of extraneous load and building instructional presentations and activities that encourage germane load or schema formation to take place (Chipperfield, 2006). That is to say, the consistent key-words teaching model help the students construct efficient cognitive schema to learn the literary knowledge and form the critical thinking ability. The data from the teaching experiment have been processed through testing the independent sample t of SPSS system and matched sample t. The results are shown below:

	GPA of the literary knowledge	t-value	P-value	Standard deviation	Pieces of critical discussion essays more than 400 words presented on the E-learning website
The control group n=83	72.05	-10.732	0.00	6.91	121 (person-time)
The experimental group n=77	82.58			5.35	329 (person-time)

The results of the course paper assessed by the two professors in the field of English Literature are as follows (both of them give a score to every piece of essay from both experiment group and control group and we calculate the average score for every students, and then get the average scores for both groups):

	GPA of the British and American course paper (full score is 100)	t-value	P-value	Standard deviation
The control group n=83	71.81	-17.027	0.00	7.08
The experimental group n=77	87.72			4.27

The data analysis shows that:

1. The test scores of literary knowledge on the experimental group get higher than in the control group, and there is a significant difference indicating that the related cognitive load of the experimental group over than the latter.

2. The results of assessment for their literary criticism writing of the experimental group exceed the control group by 15.91.

3. In the survey, we have found that the degree of participation in the discussion through the non-class E-learning website is absolutely higher than that of the control group. The experiment group share 396 person times their reading experience on the E-learning platform (we only calculate those talkings with more than 400 words per time), which is almost three times more than the control group. In other words, the students in the experiment group read more and produce more output due to the key-words teaching framework. That is to say, at the later stage of the course, the cognitive skill is acquired and the students can create more autonomously than before.

Let us go back to the beginning of the experiment. As we mentioned above, actually, the English proficiency level of the experiment group were overall lower than that of the control group. However, after experiments, it seems that the experiment group exceeds the control group in many aspects of language performance. What's more, we find out that students of the experimental group can easily enter the stage of structured inquiry from the stage of confirmation inquiry and then possibly into the stage of guided inquiry.

THE FOUR-LEVEL MODEL OF INQUIRY ACTIVITY (QUOTED FROM BELL ET AL., 2005, P.32)

Four levels of inquiry activity	promoting	question	offering solutions	sending right answers
level 0 confirmation inquiry	v	v	v	
level 1 structured inquiry	v	v		
level 2 guided inquiry	v			
level 3 open inquiry				

Meanwhile, the framework is proved to be a good model to foster students' germane load (Renkl & Atkinson, 2005: 17). With their increasing of knowledge, the reduction of teacher's guidance can help release more memory capacity to improve their ability of solving problems, thus for some of the students such as the students who create their own rewritings of literary classic, even the guidance effect of the teacher have been gradually reduced so that they reach the best state of the open inquiry finally. In other words, this teaching mode not only helps the students increase the amount of English literature input by reading, but also helps improve their writing skills of literary criticism. Most of students could search autonomously with the teaching framework as a guidance by themselves and read actively in order to find the answers to the inquired questions. And some of them have even searched theoretical works concerning to our teaching framework, for example, 43% students from the experiment group have found *The Author as Character: Representing Historical Writers in Western literature* (1999) written by Paul Fransse and A. J. Hoenselaars, *Literary Afterlife: The Posthumous Continuations of 325 Authors' Fictional Characters*(2010) by Bernard A. Drew, *Reinventing a Past: Historical Author Figures in Recent Postmodern Fiction* (2010) by Marcel Cornis-Pope etc.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The objective of the present study was to examine the underlying assumption that the three-key-concepts teaching framework has a large degree of autonomy (i.e. when students engage in individual reading and thinking), which is expected to result in cognitive engagement with the literary study. From the experiment, we can conclude that the experimental group are more cognitively engaged and the model has shown its advantages as it is a consistent framework throughout all the course teaching, making the students know their clues beforehand so that they can make self-help searching and learning before every lesson, assigning more concrete tasks of reading and comparing after class to the students and leading their cues and core of thinking and discussion in the whole term. As the three key concepts are carefully and complementarily designed to cover all the three important aspects of literary learning, with Parallel Narrative centering on works, Bio-fictional Narrative on authors and Mash-up Narrative on genre, it successfully and efficiently integrate the scattered knowledge in the process of literature teaching into an interconnected web, serving as a memory cues and thinking clues. Instead of the traditional method, the newly designed course can achieve systematicness between classic and contemporary literature, interactiveness between students. Above all, it serves as a good solution of serious problem of deficient literary reading among the college students by greatly stimulating the students' interest in reading both classic and contemporary literary works.

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Xiaolin Yang is an associate professor at the School of Foreign Studies, Southern Medical University. She is currently engaged in the study of English Literature and Narratology.





Zhen Hu is an associate professor in Faculty of Foreign languages of Shanghai Second Polytechnic University, China. Her research interests focus on the field of application of pragmatics.