

Research on the Student-centered Learning in Mass Media Reading course*

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Abstract—With China's impressive development in all fields, the need for all-round talents is becoming increasingly eminent. The society and our country demand that university students should not only be an expert in their own specialization, but also they be able to communicate cross cultures. Mass Media Reading course, as an integral part of the university English courses, is designed to serve that purpose. Through this course, students are supposed to broaden their minds and push forward the frontiers of knowledge by learning the culturally-loaded information embedded in the foreign news. They are also expected to sharpen their minds by exchanges of ideas and by comparing different perspectives. They are to hone their skills in English reading, speaking and translation through this course. The current course design is not successful in fulfilling all the purposes, and previous classroom performance shows the students are reluctant to receive new information and know the outside world through newspaper reading which they think is beyond their reach. However, studies and papers analyzing this issue are lacking. Therefore, research on how to improve students' enthusiasm and motivation in this course should be conducted. This paper tries to shed some light on the modes of student-centered learning that arouse students' interest in and enthusiasm for this course. Hopefully, this will be helpful to the teachers and students learning this course.

Index Terms—Mass Media Reading course, student-centered learning, modes of teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

This research is conducted based on the case of Mass Media Reading course at Southwestern Petroleum University, which is open for students who have passed the College English Test Band Four. College English Syllabus (For Trial Implementation) requires that the reading comprehension for non-English majors should be that they can read and understand some newspapers and magazines of common fields in English-speaking countries, with a reading speed of 80 word per minute. (chen zhongli, 2013). However, the fact fails the requirement. Problems about learning and teaching in this course remain to be solved.

A. Introduction to the Current Mass Media Reading Class

The Mass Media Reading course, being one of the most important English courses in the university, covers 32 classroom hours in one semester, with a large number of registration each year. Students have high expectations of this course and yet most of them regard it overwhelming to learn. The contrast of their expectation and their academic performance of this course at the end has led to a decline in the registration number. Changes and measures are to be made to encourage more students to learn and enjoy this course.

1. The purpose of Mass Media Reading course

Today, this era of information is asking China to get further integrated into the global community, and that people should learn to analyze problems, and make the best use of their opportunities by getting a whole picture of this world. In this sense, it is important and necessary that the students should learn English well and understand how the world changes and develops via newspapers, broadcasting, television, and the internet in a timely fashion.

The course is designed to promote the students' cultural awareness, enhance their pragmatic English skills, especially in reading and writing which may, to some extent, help them pass the exams such as CET6, postgraduate entrance exam, TOEFL, IELTS and the like.

2. The current teaching mode of this course

The current teaching mode is teacher-centered, in which the teacher's lecture takes up most of the time in the classroom, with the students trying very hard to comprehend the teacher's words. A book is used to provide "news" of the past, and the teacher, as they do in some other English courses, talk about the background information, the glossary, the structure, the difficult sentences and translation in the text. At intervals, questions are asked and reluctantly answered, with little passion and enthusiasm shown. Students barely open the textbook outside the classroom.

3. The problems existing

The current teaching mode puts the teacher in a predicament in which great efforts and time are committed to the preparations before and in the class on one hand, in the hope that students find it informative, enlightening as well as

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intriguing; on the other hand, nevertheless, the students, who already passed the CET4 always complain that this course is intimidating and at the end of this semester, the efficacy of this course is deeply doubted. They can only remember some words and sentences, maybe sometimes a few names of certain people. But that is all.

The problems derive from many aspects: first, only 32 classroom hours are allocated to this course for only one semester, which makes it impossible to cover enough useful information that are needed to form a basic frame of western culture, besides, many of the passages in the book are hardly discussed; second, the choice of words, the involved sentences in the passages only damp down the students' passion for study, not to mention their self motivation; third, since the teacher controls the class, does most of the lecturing, asking and answering most of the questions, it is only logical that the students take in the knowledge passively, which greatly reduces the effectiveness of their learning. (Ross, D. D., Bondy, E., Galligane, C., & Hambacher, E. 2008, accessed 16/10/2016 from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/210394221?accountid=15017>) They do not have their own opinion on certain news or events, they are used to waiting for the answer instead of getting their brains in gear. Worse still, some will skip the abstruse part of the passage; last but not least, a clear mechanism of mass media reading can not be formulated so that the students find their performance unsatisfactory.

As a major English course in universities, Mass Media Reading has enjoyed very little attention, especially ways of how to highlight students' initiative in this learning process and researches on modifications of teaching mode in this course are barely studied. This research, based on the course in SWPU, tries to shed some light on any improvements that can be made in the classroom management, student participation, and shapes of lecture.

B. Introduction to Student-centered Learning Theory

The study on how students learn began long time ago, yet most of the studies center on the role of the teachers in the classroom. The middle of the 19th century witnessed the preliminary development of student-centered learning in the United States. However, China lags behind the western countries in exploring students' role in the learning process, and researches on the significance of the students' active participation, requirements of the class, their problem-solving abilities, and their creativity in the process of learning. And recently more attention has been diverted to this aspect of study.

Rogers wrote that "the only learning which significantly influences behavior [and education] is self discovered". Student-centered learning, also known as learner-centered education, broadly encompasses methods of teaching that shift the focus of instruction from the teacher to the student. In original usage, student-centered learning aims to develop learner autonomy and independence by putting responsibility for the learning path in the hands of students. Student-centered instruction focuses on skills and practices that enable lifelong learning and independent problem-solving. Student-centered learning theory and practice are based on the constructivist learning theory that emphasizes the learner's critical role in constructing meaning from new information and prior experience. (accessed 17/11/2016 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Student-centred_learning)

Teachers, instead of being a pure lecturer, should provide guidance to the students and be an organizer, cooperater and mentor in the course, and the right to make decisions about how much they want to learn, when they want to learn and how they want to learn the course should rest with the students. Teachers should always be available when the students have any problems that might need help and instruction from the teachers. (Liu, Xianjun, 2012)

II. MODIFICATIONS AND EXPERIMENTS CARRIED OUT FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF LEARNING THE COURSE

In order to improve the effectiveness of learning in the Mass Media Reading course, experiments are carried out to find better methods of teaching and learning.

A. Arrangements for Experiments

It takes one whole semester to complete the experiments. Students registered for this course are randomly divided into two classes, each with 40 students, without considering their exact CET4 scores, as long as they have all passed it. Arrangements for the classes differ in the teaching mode, and the details are as follows:

For class one, the traditional teacher-centered teaching method is used. The course is carried out with a chosen book, and the teachers select six passages to learn in the class. The students are asked to familiarize themselves with the new vocabulary before class and teachers will check if they have done what they are told to do. Passages require previewing before class and difficult sentences are to be underlined. During the classes, the teachers will teach the students the usage of new words and translate some involved sentences with them. Questions are asked to see if the students have understood the passage, and some designed topics for discussion are given to the students after the lesson is analyzed. Students' academic performance is graded according to their final scores of their final paper, with extra credits rewarded for their active participation in answering questions.

For class two, the teaching mode is student-focused. This does not mean that the whole process is handed over to the hands of the students, rather, they do control the learning pace and topics they would like to discuss, and certain in-class activities are planned in a way that intrigue most of the students. The teachers will monitor the activities carried out by the students, help them solve problems that are out of their reach and of course help them evaluate their learning.

The second class is divided into about six or seven students, and learning activities are carried out both inside the

classroom and by the groups of students after class. The most significant feature of this class is that no selected book is used for the course, since the “news” in the book can not actually be called news if they are chosen to be printed in a textbook. It is one of the big challenges for this class, for the students might be totally at loss about what to learn and read for this course and about how they will be evaluated at the end of the semester. Therefore, specially designed activities and modifications of teaching methods carried out in various forms try to solve the problem. For each lesson, one selected group of students will be asked to be responsible for a special task, everyone in this group must contribute. In the end of the semester the students’ performance will be decided by their classroom performance and a final paper. The paper is not to test the students’ understanding of certain words but it will be test on their reading ability and their perspective towards and comment on certain news.

Finally a questionnaire will be conducted among the two classes to see their opinions about the teaching methods and their satisfaction of the course, and most importantly to enhance our ways of teaching in the future.

B. *Requirements for the School, Teacher and Students*

Innovation in the teaching methods demand support from the university, the teachers and the students. To carry out the mentioned experiments will ask the school to provide favorable environment for the course. Firstly, the teachers should be allowed to choose a textbook or not depending on their need, and for this course, books can be chosen to satisfy other requirements of the course such as extra reading material, certain information about the cultural, religious and political background of western countries, but not just a textbook. Secondly, the university can send the teachers to other universities that offer the same course to study and learn some new teaching methods, and invite some experts to give the teachers a lecture about the teaching mode; thirdly, different forms of classroom activities should be allowed as long as they are conducive to the effectiveness of learning of the course.

“Culturally speaking, the Asian (including Chinese) perspective on authority contributes to the thought that teachers are born authorities, who shoulder the responsibility of cultivating and attending to the students; while teachers in western countries are deemed to be accountable for academic duty only...the student-centered learning requires that the students not only learn and make decisions independently, but also put forward ideas distinct from the teachers’. It is natural that many students fail to adjust to this mode mentally and intellectually.” (Wubo, 2003, p. 100-102 My translation)

Therefore for the teachers in this course, there are also certain requirements: firstly, the teachers should be familiar with the knowledge about western political, religious and cultural aspects, and they are capable of working out a clear structure of such areas and able to articulate such knowledge to the students; secondly, the teachers should have a sense of cultural awareness to understand certain news and help students form a neutral understanding of some news that might be biased towards some countries or some people; thirdly, the teachers should be information-conscious, able to locate useful information and master technology know-how to make the best use of multimedia resources; fourthly, teachers are required to know the writing style of paper so that they can help the students write and read paper and learn how to improve their reading skills; last but not least, since the teachers act as the guide and instructor in the classroom, they must know how to manage time control and discipline of students both in and out of classroom.

According to Su Dingfang and Zhuang Zhixiang, “the decisive role in the learning process rests in the hands of the learners themselves, any successful education should take full consideration of the learner’s individuality. She added that this learner centered point, if stressed too much, amounts to the weakening or even neglect of teachers’ role...learning should be conducted under the guidance of the teachers.” (Qu Wenjie, 2004, p.78-79 my translation)

The teachers for this course should not only specialize in their academic fields but also it is imperative that they also learn some foreign language teaching theory and other related areas such as psychology and linguistics to better understand students’ individuality and their learning, and spot any difficulty and problem they are confronted with, thus providing guidance and instruction accordingly.

As for students, the most important part of the teaching equation here, they also should be prepared. Mass Media Reading course is regarded as more difficult by many students than the other college English courses, and one thing that is accountable for that is the language, the diction and figure of speech used in those news which add to the difficulties the students may encounter. Their understanding of the western world is blurred and fragmented memories they can barely recall, then if they want to learn this course well, it is advised that they make extra efforts to overcome the obstacles. Firstly, they should continue to improve their English skills all the time, so that enlarged vocabulary will reduce their trouble to some extent; secondly, they should spend more time reading news and understanding how the western world functions in economics, military, politics and the like; thirdly, they are asked to find the news that they are interested in and learn how to make comments and analyze the news; fourthly, they are required to learn to work as individuals and as group members, learn to contribute to the collective work.

C. *Modifications of the Mode of Teaching---Student-centered Learning*

In the second class, changes are made to the traditional class, and a whole new system of teaching is adopted to stimulate the students in thinking and participating in the activities, and be the master of their own study.

1. *Ways of motivating students*

The previous classes reveal that students are intimidated by the unfathomable sentences they are confronted with in the passages and there is barely enough time for them to digest one passage before they rush into the next one, that the

news which are supposed to be intriguing and inspiring end up being the ones puzzling the students and damping down their enthusiasm for learning. Actually, ways to motivate students in this course can be learned from other English courses.

Firstly, The topic, or news selected for this student-centered mass media reading class *“should be geared to what the students need. For non-English majors in some comprehensive universities they are more sensitive to the language which is more pragmatic and comprehensible, and to interesting topics. Narratives should be increased in proportion of all the passages chosen. And the title itself should be engaging so as to stimulate their curiosity.”* (Wubo, 2003, p.100-102 My translation) therefore, instead of some professional and science-intensive news, some entertaining and light topics should be included in the class. The students are also encouraged to choose the topic they like to discuss in the classroom.

Secondly, instead of just talking or reading some dry words, multimedia can be utilized to make the classroom more lively and exhilarating. Short movie clips and pictures can be shown in class to present the students with the on-the-spot effect and some background information, so that they may feel more involved in the news.

Thirdly, encouragement from the teachers and recognition from the class members also play an important role in the students' sense of belonging in the classroom. Besides, extra credits can be offered to students who make the most contribution to the group work.

Fourthly, students are encouraged to ask any questions about the news in the classroom and they should be free to convey and express their opinion on the issue at hand. Ideas are to be shared and discussed in the classroom instead of being criticized and judged. Their creativity and different perspectives should be respected and the teachers should be there to provide more insightful questions for the students to further their thinking.

Also, the current credit system of many universities for the students' academic performance is arranged in such way as forty percent of their academic score will be decided by their classroom activities and assignments, the other sixty percent goes to their final paper. In the student-centered class, *“their classroom performance should account for a larger share of the total score to stimulate more interest in and positive attitude towards the course...and when the students' performance and progress are acknowledged by the peers and teachers and that they can actually see the gap between the themselves and the top students are narrowing, their confidence is also enhanced.”* (Ni Xiao, 2014, p.147-148 My translation)

2. Applications of student-centered learning theory to classroom teaching

Based on the feature of this course and the current situation in our university, several experimental in-class and extracurricular activities are designed to explore better modes of teaching and learning of this course.

a. In-class lectures

As has been mentioned, Mass media reading course covers a wide range of topics stretching from historical features, and political issues to environmental problems. It is quite impossible for the students to comprehend and grasp the essence and significance of the news if they have no clue of how the western world organizes itself politically, religiously; and if they have only a vague idea of the concept of news. Therefore, before the other assignments and activities are handed out to the students, the teachers should manage to get the necessary knowledge through to the students.

On one hand, lectures on the concept of news, the features of news stories should be firstly given to the students. They are to gain an overview of the western media, and the major American and British newspapers and magazines and leading news agencies are introduced to the students, so that they have enough resources of information to learn this lesson; secondly, the features of journalistic English, the characteristics of the headlines and forms of discourse adopted in news report are explained to students in forms of several examples. For example, in order to show the originality of news, teachers may present the students with some newly coined words like pandahugger, cool beans, Obamacize, boomerang kids and so on to arouse students' interest. Students should understand the inverted pyramid form and pyramid form of news stories; other features and reviews are also part of the preliminary lectures. Thirdly, the structure of news and the different types of news lead are a must to the students. Through this lecture, students can understand the basic elements of news.

On the other hand, lectures about the political systems of America and Britain should be talked about. America's checks and balances, the major parties, namely the republican and the democratic parties and their different ideologies are essential to the course and can not be missed out. The British monarchy, the two Houses, the three big parties of the UK: conservative party, labor party and the liberal democrats and their respective ideologies must also be included in the lectures.

Last but not the least, the world's major religions such as Buddhism, Islam and Christianity and their origins, basic teachings and beliefs of different religions and also the famous religious holidays are, too, central to the study of the course. Those lectures held mostly by the teachers pave the way for student-centered learning in this course.

b. Mock news press

Once the students have gained an overview of the news and some essential background information, classroom activities can be arranged in various ways. In the mock news press mode, topic is chosen before hand by the teacher and the students, and one group of students are assigned with this task for which they must spend a large abundance of time preparing. At the beginning of the news press, a short video will be shown to present the story or background

information about the news to the students; besides, printed materials or other readings in electronic form are given to the other classmates before class to know and think about the news, so that they may be able to ask some well-informed questions during class. The video clip and reading materials can be assembled and handled by either the teacher or the selected group of students or with combined efforts. The students will firstly introduce the purpose of the news press and announce its begin, or the teachers may give an outline of the issue, and then ask the different groups of students to act as the interested parties in the news. Ideas and opinions and discussions are carried out under the teacher's guidance. The students are free to express their views on the news from the perspective of the concerned people. In this way, the students become the masters of the classroom, and their understanding of the news event is deepened through all these discussions. For example, if the topic is about the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, then one group of students are to search information on this topic and hand the useful information about its origin, growth, organization and so on to the teacher and the other students beforehand. As a result, the students come to the class well-informed and with their genuine insights. The teacher may also present related information at class, and the students are asked to represent delegates from different countries to issue their opinion on the matter at the mock convention. There are disputes, exchanges of ideas, and suggestions for improvement of our environment. Throughout the process, students are quite active in stating their views, and their understanding of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is also greatly enhanced. Discussion even continues after the bell rings.

c. News sharing groups

Students in Class Two are divided into several groups, and they are required to collect news information after class. For a certain week, all the groups are to participate in a news sharing get-together. The topics of the news of each group are collected by the individual groups and they are responsible to conduct a research on the topic and find out the related information of the news. Then during the meeting, twenty minutes will be assigned to each group to introduce the news; if the news is quite information-loaded, there will be handouts given to the other groups to be more well-informed of the news. Discussion is of course entailed for they may have different opinions about the same news or they may disagree with the other group's ideas. Teachers will oversee that the whole process be carried out effectively; they will be there to control the time, to unravel some puzzles and stimulate the students' thinking by asking further questions.

The students are allowed to use multimedia to present their news, such as the PowerPoint, some recordings, and video clips they are able to land. They are supposed to make their news interesting and digestible, and after the sharing, each group's performance will be graded by the teacher and also by the peer groups.

d. Flipping classroom

Flipped classroom is an instructional strategy and a type of blended learning that reverses the traditional learning environment by delivering instructional content, often online, outside of the classroom. It moves activities, including those that may have traditionally been considered homework, into the classroom. In a flipped classroom, students watch online lectures, collaborate in online discussions, or carry out research at home and engage in concepts in the classroom with the guidance of a mentor. (accessed 06/12/2016 from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flipped_classroom)

This type of learning can also be adopted in the Mass Media Reading course. The teacher will first of all prepare all the necessary information before hand in the forms of on-line texts and videos, and the important and difficult language points will be underlined or highlighted for the students to study. Questions about the news are designed by the teacher to which the students should find out the answers themselves. All the materials are given to students at least one week before class. In the classroom, the students become the teacher, so they should analyze the news and all the language points and crucial information in the printed material carefully so that they can be able to elucidate the information to the rest of the class. In the "flipping classroom" week, the podium is given to the assigned group, and it rests with this group to decide how they will present the essential information, what will be covered in their lecture, how much information will be appropriate for this session. Extra credits will be given to the students who voluntarily ask questions during the class, and if the "teacher" handles the question ably and skillfully, their performance will add to their final score. Since the students' activities take up about two thirds of the classroom time in this type of learning, the rest of the class will be left for the teacher to point out and correct some misleading points and help students dig further into the news.

e. On-line learning

As it is, this course requires in-class activities as well as out-of-the-classroom efforts, and mere classroom teaching can not be adequate. For the nature of this course, abundant information needs to be dealt with, so on-line learning can well make up for the inadequacy of classroom time.

For a specific news, the teachers should provide some useful websites for the students to learn more about the news and other related information. Some universities have also opened online courses which can be tapped into by our students. Online learning platforms such as Edex, Udacity, iLeaning, TED and other MOOC platforms are to be introduced to students. They can find more useful information and gain more insights from different perspectives through these channels than when they are just confined to the books. The specific information should be located by the teacher and then the students are learning on the teacher's instruction online, which will greatly reduce the students' time browsing through the enormous web pages trying to find the relevant information. The students should later report to the teacher about what they have learned from the online information in written form.

f. Other patterns

In addition to the mentioned modes above, there are other learning patterns that can motivate the students and make learning more of an active thing. For example, Jeffrey Froyd and Nancy Simpson (2010) mention that many different faculty members have developed and used approaches to teaching that fit the criteria for student-centered learning, such as peer instruction, peer led team learning and small group learning. (accessed 08/11/2016 from http://clicconference.org/files/2010/03/Froyd_Stu-CenteredLearning.pdf) foreign faculties from different countries can be invited to talk about a specific news from his or her perspective, and students get to look at a piece of news from diverse cultural backgrounds. They can also do role-playing to act like the characters in the news, and put themselves in the shoes of the men who have made the headlines. Also, they can be journalists and carry out some field interviews with some authorities from the government about a particular matter. More patterns are to be discovered by further study.

III. CONCLUSION

Those experimental modes of teaching bring lots of benefits to the students: first, these lessons promote reading skills, the students have to read extensively to carry out the in-class discussion; second, some of the patterns can trigger the thinking process; as a result, the things they thought about and discussed have been embedded in their mind; third, they can enhance their speaking skills. Since most of the activities are carried out by the students, they are arranged or forced to practice speaking, and because the contents of learning are mostly decided by them, most students are active in voicing their ideas; lastly, general knowledge about western mass media is gained so when the students look at a piece of news, they will know how to analyze the news and what is implied in the news, thus fulfilling the purpose of this course.

These student-centered learning methods focuses on how to help students learn to study, to more actively become a participant in the classroom, to discover ways of thinking , and know how to get access to useful information.

A. *Study of the Experiments*

Based on the performance and final exam scores of the students, the students of the first class, which adopts the traditional method of teacher-centered learning, at the end of the semester complain that for all the efforts they put in the course, they still can not get a satisfactory score, and all they think they get from this course are some difficult words and sentences which they surely will forget later on. They also report that the substantial amount of background information the teachers have told them become very blurred and yet they do not have the interest or patience to pick up again or further explore. If there are follow-up lessons for this course, most of them would not pursue.

Quite the opposite, the case in the second class is the other way around. According to their final scores and feedback, they complain that time assigned to this course is too limited, and that they quite enjoy the time in the classroom, where they feel like masters of their own study. The different modes of learning are never seen before, and they benefit a lot from the classroom activities. The words and sentences in the news are not printed materials for them to master, they are alive in their head. Most of the students admit that they can clearly recall every piece of news that is covered in this semester. And if they are to be asked again to talk about the news or other news, they have little trouble finding the useful information online and analysis of the news will not seem so overwhelming as before. They actually hope there will be some follow-up lessons of this course because they find it quite interesting and conducive to their future studies.

The results of the two classes form a sharp contrast, which sheds some light on the future development of this course. In the second student-centered class, students are greatly motivated and become active learners in the course. They are more willing to ask questions and conduct research to get the answers; most of them are good team players, they help each other work out difficult problems and teachers are not only their mentor but also their friends, which in turn, greatly stimulates their desire to learn more. They have shown unprecedented enthusiasm in this course in that exchanges of ideas not only happen in the classroom, but also outside it, and full class attendance greatly proves the point. Many of the students say they will continue this passion of study in their future learning.

B. *Suggestions on Further Enhancement*

Despite all the improvements achieved, further enhancement is still needed to overcome the unsolved problems in this course. In this semester, time is found lacking for more information to be covered, thirty-two classroom hours are quite inadequate for the students to gain more knowledge about western mass media. Therefore, rearrangement for the total classroom hours for this course is suggested; next, since most of the topics are decided by the students and sometimes together with the teacher, they tend to be easy and only be the ones that the students deem interesting. There are cases when the teacher choose the topics that may be of less interest to the students but which are of great value, there appear less motivation and enthusiasm among the students. They tend to skip the difficult topics such as technology news and natural sciences. It is advised that students be provided with more related materials maybe in Chinese version to acquaint themselves with necessary knowledge to read the English news, also, some speeches delivered by significant people in this field can also be offered to the students. For example, stories of the Nobel Prize winners can be told or printed out to students, or some videos about science award ceremonies can also be given to students to arouse their curiosity to explore. What's more, we could *"Build up on-line platforms for the teachers to access how the students have previewed and reviewed the lesson, the students can communicate with the teacher after*

class and reflect on one's academic performance." (Liman, 2012, p.32-36 My translation)

Mass Media Reading course requires an abundance of work done both by the teachers and the students, the mentioned modes of learning just provide some suggestions, further studies on the student-centered teaching modes still need to be conducted.

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