Implementing the Whole Language Approach in “Selected Readings of English and American Literature” Course

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This article explores the ways and activities designed on the Whole Language Approach to foster learners’ integrated language skills and their ability to read and appreciate great English literary works. Based on the major principles of Whole Language instruction, the course syllabus requires that learners read and write on massive amount of English literary works to achieve fluency in reading and writing and use the language in collaborative groups or in a workshop atmosphere. The student-centered activities are designed and practiced with satisfactory results. The holistic assessment of students’ work is also discussed in the paper. The paper concludes with the claim that implementing the Whole Language Approach in “Selected Readings of English and American Literature” contributes both to students’ holistic language skills and to cooperative learning in small groups.

Key Words: Whole Language, holistic, literature, double-entry journal, student-centered activities

Theory of Whole Language

The term Whole Language was created in the 1980s by a group of U.S. educators who were concerned with the teaching of language arts, that is, reading and writing in the native language. Then it was practiced in the field of second language teaching. Whole Language is strongly opposed to the decoding approach which focuses on teaching the separate components of language such as grammar, vocabulary, word recognition and phonics. The Whole Language Approach sees language as a whole entity and argues that language should be taught as a “whole”. It attempts to cover the whole gamut of language learning, including reading, writing, speaking. In his article I Didn’t Found Whole Language, Professor Goodman illustrates “Whole Language is producing a holistic reading and writing curriculum which uses real, authentic literature and real books. It puts learners in control of what they read and write about. But it also produces new roles for teachers and learners and a new view of how learning and teaching are related. (1992:196).

The Whole Language Approach is based on key principles about language (language is whole) and learning (reading, writing, listening and speaking should be integrated in learning)(Richards 2001:109). It emphasizes learning to read and write naturally with a focus on real communication and reading and writing for pleasure. “What began as a holistic way to teach reading has become a movement for change, key aspects of which are respect for each student as a member of a culture and as a creator of knowledge, and respect for each teacher as a professional” (Rigg 1991:521). Whole language views language from an interactional perspective which regards language as a vehicle for human communication and in which there is an interactional relationship between readers and writers. “ Language use is always set in a social context, and this applies to both oral and written language, to both first and second language use.” (Rigg1991:523) Whole Language
also views language from psycholinguistic perspective which views language as a vehicle for internal interaction, for egocentric speech, for thinking through reading and writing for meaningful purposes. The learning theory underlying Whole Language is in the humanistic and constructivist schools. Whole language classrooms, as democratic learning communities, reflect humanistic approaches to education and to language learning, featuring in being authentic, personalized, self-directed, collaborative and pluralistic. Such characteristics are believed to focus learner’s attention and to motivate mastery. Constructivist learning theory holds that knowledge is socially constructed rather than received or discovered. Thus constructivist learners create meaning, learn by doing and work collaboratively in mixed groups on common projects. Instead of transmitting knowledge to students, teachers collaborate with them to create knowledge and understanding in their mutual social context. Instead of trying to cover the fixed curriculum, learning focuses on the learners’ interests, experience, needs and aspirations. Each Whole Language teacher, therefore, can practice the theories of Whole Language as he or she interprets them and implement the Whole Language Approach according to the kinds of classes and learners he or she is teaching.

Course Design

The major principles underlying the design of Whole Language instruction include following points:

- the use of authentic literature rather than artificial, specially prepared texts and exercises designed to practice individual reading skills
- the reading of real texts of high interest, particularly literature
- reading for the sake of comprehension and for a real purpose
- writing as a process through which learners explore and discover meaning
- integration of reading, writing and other skills
- student-centered learning: students have choice over what they read and write
- reading and writing in partnership or in groups with other learners
- encouragement of risk taking and exploration and the acceptance of errors as signs of learning rather than of failure (Richards 2001:110)

The course Selected Readings of English and American Literature is open to English majors in their fourth year study. It is also open to non-English majors as their selective course. Students’ attitudes towards the course are both anxious and full of expectations because they haven’t learned English and American literature before. They showed some interest in the course but at the same time were afraid the course may be very difficult In order to make the course accessible to the students and keep their motive for the study of great literary works, it is necessary to apply the Whole Language Approach in the whole process of the teaching of this course, including the design of the course syllabus, arranging course procedure, material selection, class activities and students’ evaluations. Based on the major principles of Whole Language instruction, the course syllabus aims at integrating the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking through fluency-first activities in a pleasurable, meaning-driven, task-based learning environment, and lets students practice the language in groups or in a workshop atmosphere. Students’ need and interest are given priority throughout the whole course of study.

Procedure

The procedure for Selected Readings of English and American Literature is as follows:
1. reading 10 or more pages per day in selected novels to achieve fluency in reading;
2. writing double-entry journals and keeping portfolios to achieve fluency in writing;
3. viewing excerpts of related videos and courseware;
4. discussing the readings and sharing journals in collaborative groups;
5. making presentations in the workshop in class.

The designed activities of this course reflect the main principles of Whole Language instruction in that they include the use of authentic materials instead of artificial, specially prepared texts; the practice of fluency-first reading and writing; reading for the sake of comprehension and for a real purpose; exploring and discovering meaning through writing; encouragement of cooperative learning among students; concern for students’ attitudes, interest and aspirations, and facilitation of the development of all aspects of the language. As Whole Language instruction advocates the real-world materials rather than commercial texts, a piece of literature is an example of “real-world” materials in that its creation was not instructionally motivated but resulted from the author’s wish to communicate with the reader. Exploitation of literary resources in the Whole Language classroom suggests the interest in the use of literature in support of second language learning.

**Reading Selection & Requirement**

Students read selected works from English and American Literature, about 10 pages per day outside of class. Selection of books is designed to accommodate different tastes and styles of great writers in each period of history of English and American literature. So a sense of continuity develops during the course, as students compare and contrast the books’ themes and characters. Engaging and challenging the novels whose language is accessible to students are essential to the successful reading. Through a questionnaire students are encouraged to select reading materials which they find are enjoyable and worthwhile to read. It must also be taken into consideration the personal preferences, the interests and abilities of the students. In the questionnaire, students are given a list of great works of famous writers to choose, considering the difficulty of language, students’ interests in the book, and their recommendation whether to use the book. There are 3 levels in language difficulty: 3=Too difficulty, 2=Appropriate difficulty, 1=Easy. Student evaluation of interest in the book is shown in 3 degrees: 3=Very interesting, 2=Interesting, 1=Boring. And student recommendation of whether to use the book in the future: 2=Recommend, 1=Don’t recommend. The questionnaire reflects students’ interests in and evaluation of the reading materials, which will ensure students’ strong motivation for the study of the reading assignment. Worldwide famous writers in each literary period and their award-winning novels for which movies are available are given priority. Take selected readings in English literature as an example, we select *Merchant of Venice* Act Ⅳ, Scene 1 by Shakespeare in the Renaissance Period; *Gulliver’s Travels* Part Ⅳ by Jonathan Swift in the Neoclassical Period; *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen in the Romantic Period; *Wuthering Heights* Chapter 15 by Emily Bronte and *Tess of the D’urbervilles* Chapters 13, 55&56 by Thomas Hardy in the Victorian Period; *Pygmalion* Act Ⅱ &Ⅴ by George Bernard Shaw in the Modern Period. The opportunity for learners to choose and discuss a book with classmates who have similar tastes in reading increases their level of commitment. The teacher facilitates the overall process, but the students assume more responsibility for its details. They are encouraged to read 10 or more pages per day at a steady pace for fluent reading, focusing on important information about theme, plot and characters. In
Goodman’s view, it is more important that reader construct his own meaning from the text than it is for him to accurately read what is on the text. As they read, students mark sections which are of particular interest to them, and make reflections on the reading materials by writing double-entry journals.

**Double-Entry Journal**

After reading a daily assignment, students look over the parts that are of particular interest to them and copy them, with page numbers, on the left side of their double-entry journals (notebook divided in half with a vertical fold). This actually starts a conversation between the reader and the writer. While copying, the student is listening to the story told by the writer and feels his/her emotions. Another reason for copying sentences from the book is to have idiomatic, beautiful English for study and appreciation. Then on the right side of their double-entry journals, students freewrite a reaction to the passage, such as comments, questions, opinions, predictions and memories. Writing free reactions in the right-hand column establishes an interactional relationship between the reader and the writer. It makes students think and exchange ideas with the author. It also helps students understand better the intention, opinions and feelings of the writer. For example, after reading *Pride and Prejudice* Chapter XII, one student wrote his reflection in his double-entry journal.

**Copied text**

Mr. Collins, to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable: his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. It was the only honourable provision for well-educated young woman of small fortune, and, however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it.

“I see what you are feeling,” replied Charlotte: “…I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.” (p.110, 113)

**Free written reaction to text**

The financial necessity of making a good marriage confronted most middle-class women. The concern for these women is best expressed through the character of Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte seems to me a mediocre and vain young lady. She accepted Collins solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment. Her mediocre perception and eagerness to get married prevented her from detecting Collins pomposity and foolishness. But in Jane Austen’s days, Charlotte’s attitude was a practical approach to the realities of a young woman’s life. As a plain girl, the eldest of a large family of modest means, Charlotte can only hope for a marriage that will bring her security. By marrying Charlotte to such a ludicrous husband as Mr.Collins, Jane Austen serves the comic aspect of her novel, but tells us something serious as well about the women of her day.

As we all know, “love and marriage” is the theme of Jane Austen’s works. She classifies the marriage patterns and shows people’s different attitudes towards marriage through the characters in her novels. What this student wrote in his double-entry journal shows his interest in the attitude held by Charlotte Lucas towards marriage, that is, marriage for establishment, material wealth and
security of life from want. He also makes comments on this marriage pattern and analyses the social position of middle-class women in Jane Austen’s times.

Writing free reactions in the right-hand column provokes students’ thinking, reasoning, even arguing with the writer. It reflects their understanding of the original work and personal opinions on the theme, portrait of characters and writing techniques of the work. At the same time, it helps students increase their fluency in writing because while writing they focus on expressing meanings and making comments.

Videos and Courseware as Learning Tools

Videos and courseware support the process of developing reading fluency. The self-constructed courseware for “Selected Readings of English and American Literature” consists of two parts: Part One English Literature & Part Two American Literature. There are 8 chapters, each of which covers one literary period in English or American literature. English Literature contains 5 chapters: Chapter One The Renaissance Period, Chapter Two The Neoclassical Period, Chapter Three The Romantic Period, Chapter Four The Victorian Period, Chapter Five The Modern Period while American Literature consists of three chapters: Chapter One The Romantic Period, Chapter Two The Realistic Period and Chapter Three The Modern Period. Each chapter contains rich background information of its period, the main literary forms and many related reading materials hyperlinked to the courseware. For example, when we discuss Shakespearean sonnet in the Renaissance Period and Gothic novels in the Romantic Period, the courseware provides useful information downloaded from the internet about the different forms and rhyme-schemes of the Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet and the English (Shakespearean)sonnet, the origin and features of Gothic novel. Each chapter also introduces great writers of the period and their famous works, followed by literary criticism, with discussion questions for students’ group work and journal writings. The courseware is designed to provide authentic language environment for students to construct meaning and increase knowledge by autonomous learning because students can use the courseware for their self-study. Meanwhile reading the original work, accompanied by watching the corresponding film on computer, will become interesting, exciting and entertaining. The marvelous acting techniques of actors and actresses, such as their facial expression, gestures, body movements, tones or intonations will help students to gain a deeper insight into the inner mind of the main characters and have a better comprehension of the theme of the novel, its artistic and social significance. As a matter of fact, using videos and the courseware increases students’ motivation and interest to learn and engages them both visually and aurally in the process of learning so that they can understand the books better. Thus their reading and writing fluency, listening ability and self-confidence in literary study have increased accordingly.

Student-centered Class Activities

Challenging yet pleasurable group activities promote a positive attitude toward the daily reading. Student-centered class activities include working in groups on reading comprehension, journal sharing, question discussion and role-playing of the characters in the books or dramas. Group activities not only promote students’ cooperative learning but also enhance their communication abilities. The goal of comprehension activities is to bring all students to a common understanding of the essential elements of plot and character in the reading assignment. Giving groups a brief quiz to do collaboratively is a way to evaluate comprehension informally with reduced pressure.
As an alternative to quizzing, I give small groups a task in which students compare and clarify what they understand and appreciate the main points of the reading. For example, after finishing the selected reading of *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, students are given a task to figure out the theme of *Robinson Crusoe*. They work together in groups, each illustrating his/her point of view, and finally reach the common understanding that the novel *Robinson Crusoe* is a realistic account of the successful struggle of Robinson single-handed against the hostile nature, a typical eighteenth-century English middle-class man with a great capacity to work, inexhaustible energy, courage, patience and persistence in overcoming obstacles. Students realize that in describing Robinson’s life on the island, Defoe glorifies human labor and the Puritan fortitude. The goal of journal sharing is to provide an opportunity for students to exchange their reactions to the novel and the writer. Members of each group react with comments, questions and attempts to answer each other’s queries. They may have insights into a problem from different angles and work out possible answers to their questions. On the other hand, role-playing gives students an opportunity to practice the language with passion. For example, by acting out the drama *Merchant of Venice* Act IV, students pay adequate attention to pronunciation, intonation and non-verbal communications, such as facial expression and gestures to reflect vividly the inner mind and true nature of the main characters, especially Portia and Shylock. Of course, the design and focus of these activities vary depending on the particular interest of the students, the resources available, and the creativity of the teacher.

Making presentations in the workshop is another important class activity. After reading the assigned literary works, students will choose one of their favorite to have further research or study. The study may include the background knowledge of the author, the social significance of the novel, an analysis of the main characters and theme of the novel, the comments on the writing style and language features and so on. Students can make good use of library and internet resources to collect relevant information and data for their research. After a good study, each student is required to make a presentation in class. Students are so enthusiastic about it that everyone has a full preparation beforehand. They have made vivid Microsoft PowerPoint with pictures and flash to go with their presentation. Each student’s presentation has its own features and focus. The following is an outline of one student’s presentation on *Scarlet Letter* written by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

1. Introduction Of The Author
2. Content Of The Story
3. Study Of The Theme
4. Analysis Of The Writing Style----Symbolism

In *The Scarlet Letter*, the letter A, spirit of the novel, builds up the framework and launches a close link between the human relationships.

- As Adultery The letter “A” worn on Hester’s bosom, is a symbol of her adultery against Chillingworth. According to the Calvinistic canon, Hester was put into prison and was forced to wear the scarlet letter on her gown at all the time. Here the letter A symbolizes shame and punishment.

- As Able and Angle Hester is skillful in needlework. Her skill first shows in the fine way that she stitches a large A onto her dress with gold thread, giving the letter an air of elegance. Furthermore she tries her best to help the poor and the sick by her excellent needlework though
she is poor herself. Thus the image of Hester turns to be an Angel in people’s eyes.

- As Arthur In Hester’s eyes, the letter A also represents her lover Arthur. So the scarlet letter can be regarded as the badge of their ardent love.

5. Comments On The Main Characters Hester & Arthur

6. Conclusion (with questions for further study)

Making presentation involves holistic practice of language skills of reading, writing, speaking and the ability to do research. It is really a good practice for students to appreciate the great literary works in their unique way.

**Holistic Assessment**

Another important aspect of the Whole Language Approach is holistic assessment to students. Since the course syllabus facilitates the development of all aspects of the language, the evaluation of the students should be made to measure their improvement in all language skills. So it is made clear in the syllabus that students’ work can not be evaluated only by the final examination. Instead the improvement of their language abilities should be judged by their performance in various learning activities, such as reading, writing double-entry journals, participation in group discussion and making presentation. As a result, with students’ agreement, the course evaluation goes like this: assigned reading homework takes up 10 % of the total scores of this course. The double-entry journals for each home assignment, together with other writing notes such as the summery of themes, the analysis of characters and writing styles of the selected readings which are kept as portfolios amount to 15% of students’ final scores. The initiative and cooperation in group discussions will account for 5 % and the presentation by each student amounts to 10%.

**Problems to Be Solved**

In spite of the smooth implementation of the Whole Language Approach in “Selected Readings of English and American Literature” course, there still exist problems. The typical problems are the pace of reading and journal writing, and the dynamics of small groups. A few slow students may fall behind in their reading and journal writing. It is advisable for the teacher to encourage students to keep reading schedule and build the schedule into the course syllabus. The late journal writing gets reduced credit. Yet the slow reader or writer is allowed for only once to skip to the current reading and writing without making up the earlier reading and writing. But it is important for the teacher to deal with the problems as early as possible. The teacher should give individual help to the students and encourage them to read fluently, not word by word, and to write double-entry journal to express ideas, not to worry too much about whether their understanding or opinions are right or wrong. They have to keep pace with the reading and writing schedules. Students who can keep their reading and writing schedules are more likely to participant actively and readily in group discussions. The evaluations of students’ performances are made by their contributions to the group discussion. So it is teacher’s concern to create a free and friendly atmosphere to optimize the active participation of each member of the group and minimize the possible conflicts arising from different personalities or misunderstandings.

**Conclusion**

Using the Whole Language Approach in teaching “Selected Readings of English and American
Literature”, I have found, is refreshing and fulfilling. As soon as students settle into the rhythm of their reading schedule, the class develops its own momentum. With the teacher’s guidance and feedback, students become more actively involved in learning tasks. As they share their writing and thinking with the group, they inspire each other to do better work. Many students express their satisfaction in the realization that they are reading and enjoying great literary works, something most have never done before. The experiments show that through student-centered activities, students not only raise their four language skills to a much higher level, but also assume greater responsibilities in cooperative learning. Of course, more research and experiments should be done to further increase teaching effectiveness in literature study.

Bibliography