Using Appreciative Pedagogy to Teach Literature to ESL Students

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Abstract

This study explores how college literature instructors can use appreciative pedagogy in teaching students of English as a Second Language (ESL) how to appreciate works of literature. The study of literature can be used as a channel for college students to access a wealth of human experience and to develop their sensitivity, empathy, and compassion toward other human beings. However, most ESL students in Taiwan are used to following their teachers' interpretations and lack the confidence or experience to use their hearts to appreciate literature works. Appreciative pedagogy can be used in teaching literature. Through using the steps of the Discovery-Dream-Design-Delivery cycle designed by Cooperrider and Whitney (1999) in the practice of appreciative pedagogy, students can form a positive attitude towards their characteristics, values, and past experiences, thereby developing their self-confidence and competencies in studying literature. The quantitative instruments used were an English reading proficiency test and a student satisfaction survey. A fourteen-week experiment was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of using appreciative pedagogy with ESL students studying literature. The research results revealed that students instructed with appreciative pedagogy had improved English reading proficiency and greater satisfaction with their class.

Keywords: pedagogy, literature study, literature appreciation, English reading proficiency

1. Introduction

The study of literature can be used as a channel for university students to access a wealth of human experience, developing sensitivity, empathy, and compassion toward other human beings in the process. As Eliot (1948) said, because one cannot meet as many people as one should, and we cannot know others as well as we know ourselves, by exploring the lives and inner worlds of a variety of individuals in novels or other works of literature, people's imagination will be developed and their curiosity will be satisfied**.**

Students can acquire many benefits through the integration of humanities and literature into the curricula. Students' capacities for compassion and empathy will be enlarged after reading works of literature. By expanding their perception of self and

the world, they will be better prepared to cope with the society they live in. The other effect is that exposure to literature will develop students' reading and communication skills. Moreover, through studying literature, students can find pleasure and a release from the rest of their academic workload (Stowe & Igo, 1996).

Research has shown that people can learn more about humanities from literature than from science (Cawley, 1993; Chomsky, 1972; Hoshiko, 1985; Nussbaum, 1998; Pellegrino, 1981). While science endeavors to set up universal formulas, the plots in works of literature (novels and other works of fiction) are always unique, for each individual has a very different personal history. Serving as a complementary study of the humanities, studying literature can help foster human and humane understanding through developing skills of observation, diagnosis, insight, intuition, empathy, and self-reflection. Students with backgrounds in both humanities and sciences perform better in practice than those with backgrounds in science alone (Cawley, 1993; Chomsky, 1972). Viewed as a rich source of knowledge, literature can serve as a tool to teach and to understand different cultures and bring new insights into the world (Hoshiko, 1985). Through studying literature, students can recognize "the significance of symbol and language as the media linking human minds and personalities" (Pellegrino, 1981). Language serves as a vehicle through which people's needs are expressed, and suggestions and advice conveyed.
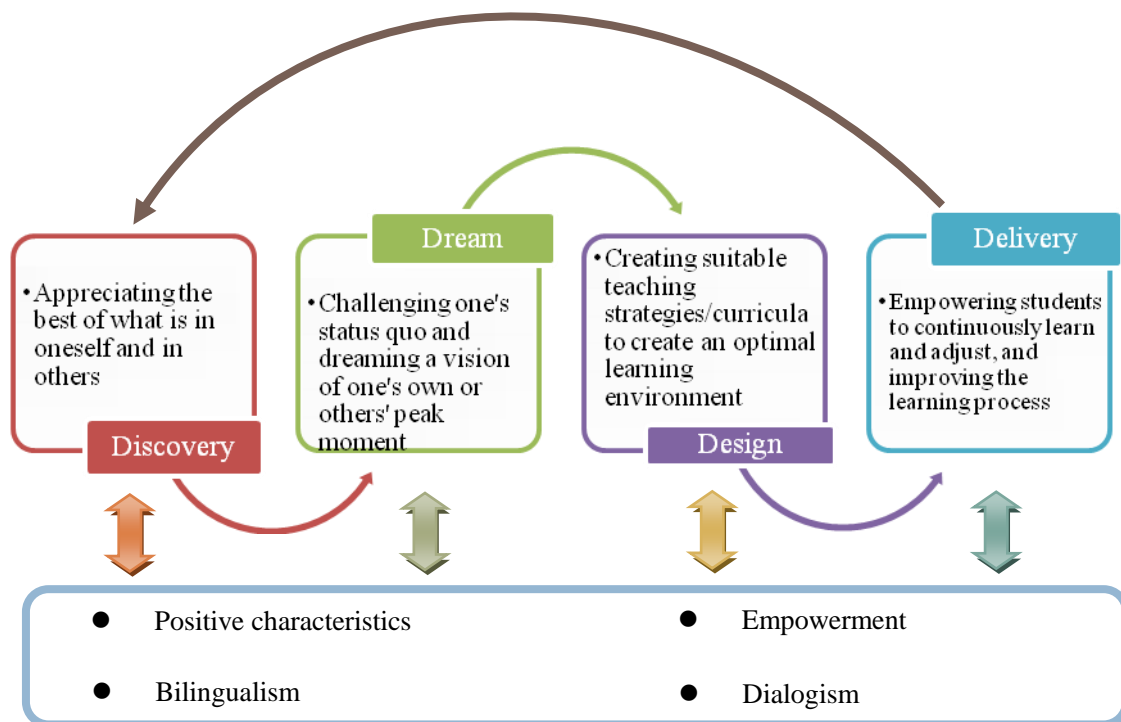
Moreover, through appreciating works of literature, students may be stimulated to consider new ways to solve problems, make decisions, and balance personal and professional conflicts; they can come to have a deeper understanding of the complexity of human experience, such as suffering, loss and bereavement. They can also develop their interpretive, critical, and analytical abilities by sharing their feelings about and observations of works of literature with others through dialogical interaction and critiques. Literature can be employed as a vehicle for expanding students' understanding of the complexity of the lives they encounter. Through the discussion of and reflection on moral, philosophical, and social issues in literary texts, students can be exposed to problems they may encounter in their careers. By appreciating diverse points of view and realizing their responsibilities, they can develop their critical thinking ability to formulate, evaluate, and defend certain issues that may occur in real situations (Kopelman, 2003).

If literature is a representation of human possibilities, the works of literature chosen for students will inevitably develop their sense of who they are going to be or whom they might be (Nussbaum, 1998). However, most ESL students in Taiwan are used to following teachers' interpretations, lacking the confidence or experience of using their heart to appreciate literature works. Hence, this study uses appreciative pedagogy to develop students' self-confidence and competencies in studying literature.

2. Appreciative Pedagogy

In 2005, Chao and Wang proposed using appreciative pedagogy for the English instruction process, which was derived from Cooperrider and Whitney's appreciative inquiry (1999). Appreciative inquiry is grounded on constructionism, which supposes that human beings construct their experience of reality by what they choose to notice and talk about (Mohr, Smith, & Watkins, 2000). Chao and Wang (2005) proposed that through the promotion of positive characteristics, bilingualism, empowerment, and dialogism in the cyclical Discovery-Dream-Design-Delivery process, the practice of appreciative pedagogy can enhance students' English learning performance. Figure 1 shows the Framework of Appreciative Pedagogy.

Figure 1. The Framework of Appreciative Pedagogy

Chao and Wang's appreciative pedagogy is a teaching strategy focused on identifying the best of "what is" in students, creating a mindset which enables students to use not only their minds and bodies but also their spirits to fully participate in the English learning process. In the discovery phase, both students and teachers should appreciate the best of what is in themselves and others, including positive characteristics, values, past experiences, etc. In the dream phase, they can challenge their status quo and dream or create a vision of their future or their peak moment, which could be their best English performance or something else they dream positively. When students have positive attitudes toward themselves and their visions, in the design phase, teachers can design suitable teaching strategies and curricula to create an optimal English learning environment. With teachers and students cooperating to achieve their peak performance in English studies, the delivery phase empowers students to continuously learn, adjust, and improve their learning process (Chao & Wang, 2005).

To sum up, the basic assumptions of appreciative pedagogy are—to discover the best of what has been in ourselves and learning environment, to envision what competency level we would like to have and what we are going to be in the future, to figure out an optimal learning environment for knowledge acquisition, and to construct an optimal learning environment, and to be empowered to deliver a new positive vision or image in themselves. Hence, with the possibility-focused mindset, students equip themselves with confidence in their learning process.

Appreciative pedagogy can also be used in studying literature through helping students identify the best of what they have and pursue the possibilities of what they can be, in order to arouse their appreciation of their characteristics, values, and past experiences, in turn building up their self-confidence. Instead of focusing on students' deficiencies, appreciative pedagogy promotes working with students' positive characteristics and competencies, by which students can develop their knowledge.

While implementing appreciative pedagogy in the study of literature, the following four techniques should always be kept in mind: one's positive characteristics, bilingualism, empowerment, and dialogism. Appreciative pedagogy insists that instead of focusing on students' weaknesses or deficiencies, teachers can help students identify their positive characteristics and competencies, derived from their previous linguistic experience, prior knowledge, or cultural traditions. The practice of

appreciative pedagogy is guided by the assumption that students come with a rich array of positive characteristics, such as cultural traditions, past experience, native language skills, etc. Having identified their positive characteristics and competencies, students can build up their self-confidence and vision while appreciating or interpreting literature.

Also, as Collier (1995) said, research has shown that the most efficient way to acquire second language literacy is through one's mother tongue. When acquiring English, students can use their native linguistic skills to connect with past learning experiences, cultural background, and personal experiences, and will thus be empowered to actively engage in studying literature. Moreover, with the assistance of the students' mother tongue, appreciative pedagogy also promotes using dialogue to negotiate conflicts and contested ideologies. Through negotiating or interacting with literature, students can achieve a reflective communication with their inner selves.

To examine the feasibility of using appreciative pedagogy in teaching literature, the study tested the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Students studying literature who are instructed with appreciative pedagogy will have a better English reading proficiency level that those not receiving the pedagogy.

Hypothesis2: Students instructed with appreciative pedagogy will be more satisfied with the course than those not receiving the pedagogy.

3. Methodology

In order to test the feasibility of using appreciative pedagogy in studying literature, two homogeneous and normally distributed classes were selected as the experimental group (38 students) and the control group (39 students). These participants were freshmen at one university in the central part of Taiwan. By flipping a coin, class B1 was chosen as the experimental group, while class B2 was the control group. The study lasted for fourteen weeks. The reading proficiency pre-test was used to evaluate students' prerequisite knowledge or linguistic competency to comprehend the main ideas, details, inferences hidden in the literature works, and their individual ways to criticize and appreciate literature works based on their existing values or prior knowledge. The reading proficiency pre- and post-test contained twenty multiple-choice questions in each the vocabulary and reading comprehension sections. Every question was worth two points, totaling 40 points each for the vocabulary and reading comprehension sections. There were two questions in the essay section, with each question worth ten points, making it 20 points in total. The pretest results (see Table 1) revealed that there was no significant difference between the two groups; hence, it can be inferred that they were at the same English reading proficiency level.

Table 1   Independent t-test results for the English reading proficiency pre-test

Test	Group	Mean	SD	t	p-value
Reading	Experiment	59.40	12.38	-0.76	0.45
	Control	61.44	11.14		

Experimental group: N=38; control Group: N=39

Both groups received the same teaching material, assignments, and tests; the only difference between the experimental group and control group was that only the experimental group was taught with appreciative pedagogy. Unlike traditional pedagogies, which focus on students' deficiencies and "finding and fixing" problems, the teacher in the experimental group worked with students' positive characteristics, creating a bilingual and dialogical learning environment to empower them to pay attention to what worked for them in the learning process and build on those things. Through the cyclic discover-dream-design-delivery steps, the teacher helped students identify their strengths and competencies and explore their potential in order to

achieve their peak performance in appreciating literature. The teaching content is given in Table 2.

Table 2. The Teaching Content

Week	Teaching Content	Week	Teaching Content
Week 1	"The Story of an Hour" (1894)	Week 8	"Everyday Use" (1973)
Week 2	"A Rose for Emily" (1930)	Week 9	"Everyday Use" (1973)
Week 3	"A Rose for Emily" (1930)	Week 10	"The Necklace" (1884)
Week 4	"A Rose for Emily" (1930)	Week 11	The Necklace" (1884)
Week 5	"The Yellow Wallpaper" (1891)	Week 12	"The Open Boat" (1897)
Week 6	"The Yellow Wallpaper" (1891)	Week 13	"The Open Boat" (1897)
Week 7	"The Yellow Wallpaper" (1891)	Week 14	"The Open Boat" (1897)

In the practice of appreciative pedagogy, the teacher in the literature study class served as a facilitator helping students, based on their values, characteristics, backgrounds, or prerequisite native linguistic competency, find the main ideas, details, images, inferences, or peak moments shown in the literature works. Moreover, through the application of positive characteristics, bilingualism, empowerment, and dialogism in the continuously recycled 4-D steps (shown in Figure 1) to the literature study class, the teacher helped students pay attention to the things that were working and built on them to maximize students' learning outcome. For students coming to the class with different values, characteristics, and backgrounds, their interpretations toward literature novels or short stories would not be the same. However, in the appreciative pedagogical class, while respecting and appreciating the teacher's and other students' interpretations of the literature reading, they could collaborate with each other to envision and interpret the stories and plots of the literature works. Hence, their ways and skills of interpreting literature works would be expanded and sharpened.

After the 14-week course, an English reading proficiency post-test and a satisfaction survey for the course were administered to students. The 34-item survey was based on a 5-point Likert scale, varying from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A pilot study showed that the reliability coefficients for the categories in the satisfaction survey were 0.78 (instructional objective); 0.89 (instructional material/method); 0.82 (teacher's qualities); 0.87 (class climate/environment); 0.78 (assessment); and 0.95 (overall). The quantitative results of both the English reading proficiency tests and the satisfaction survey for the course were examined by t-tests and compared using SPSS 10.0 (Statistical Packages for Social Science).

4. Results

To test Hypothesis 1, whether appreciative pedagogy has a significant effect on the reading proficiencies of college students studying literature, the results of the English achievement pre- and post-tests were examined via t-test. As mentioned above in Table 1, in the reading section, the experimental group scored 59.40 while the control group scored 61.44. The p-value was 0.45, larger than 0.05, which means that there was no significant difference between these two groups in the reading section before the course. In other words, these two groups were homogeneous in terms of English reading proficiency. However, there is a significant difference between the two groups in the English reading proficiency post-test (see Table 3): the experimental group scored 86.08, while the control group scored 72.44. The p-value is less than 0.01, smaller than 0.05. Obviously, after the course using the appreciative pedagogy, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in reading proficiency.

Table 3. Independent t-test Results for the English Reading Proficiency Post-Test

Test	Group	Mean	SD	t	p-value
Reading	Experiment	86.08	9.30	6.09	000**
	Control	72.44	10.35		

Experimental group: N=38; control Group: N=39
** $P < 0.01$

To test Hypothesis 2, whether appreciative pedagogy has a significant effect on student satisfaction, the results of the student satisfaction survey for both the experimental group and control group were examined via t-test. Table 4 shows students' satisfaction with the instructional objective: the mean of the experimental group is 12.97, while the mean of the control group is 10.49, slightly lower than its counterpart. The p-value is less than 0.01, smaller than 0.05, which indicates that there is a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in terms of satisfaction with the instructional objective. For the instructional material/method section, the mean of the experimental group is 59.83, while the mean of the control group is 52.51, significantly lower than its counterpart. The p-value is less than 0.01, smaller than 0.05, which indicates that there is a significant difference between these two groups in terms of satisfaction with the instructional material/method. For the teacher's qualities, the mean of the experimental group is 22.76, while the mean of the control group is 19.49, significantly lower than its counterpart. The p-value is less than 0.01, smaller than 0.05, which indicates that there is a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in terms of the teacher's qualities. For class climate and environment, the mean of the experimental group is 33.83, while the mean of the control group is 28.94, significantly lower than its counterpart. The p-value is less than 0.01, smaller than 0.05, which indicates that there is a significant difference between these two groups in terms of class climate and environment. For the assessment section, the mean of the experimental group is 19.21, while the mean of the control group is 15.22, lower than its counterpart. The p-value is less than 0.01, smaller than 0.05, which indicates that there is a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in terms of assessment. As for the overall satisfaction in the course, the mean score of the experimental group is 148.60, while that of the control group is 126.65 (p<0.001). Hence, the above t-test data demonstrate that those students instructed with appreciative pedagogy attained greater student satisfaction than those who were not.

Table 4. Independent t-test Result for the Student Satisfaction Questionnaire

Test	Group	Mean	SD	t	p-value
Instructional	Experiment	12.97	2.50	3.78	0.00**

Objective	Control	10.49	3.19		
Instructional	Experiment	59.83	11.97	2.89	0.00**
Material/Method	Control	52.51	10.22		
Teacher'	Experiment	22.76	4.47	3.33	0.00**
Qualities	Control	19.49	4.14		
Class Climate/	Experiment	33.83	6.52	3.57	0.00**
Environment	Control	28.93	5.51		
Assessment	Experiment	19.21	3.68	4.93	0.00**
	Control	15.22	3.42		
Overall	Experiment	148.60	15.13	6.67	0.00**
	Control	126.65	13.73		

Experimental group: N=38; control group: N=39
**$P < 0.01$

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study examined whether ESL students studying literature instructed with appreciative pedagogy would have better English reading proficiency levels and greater satisfaction in their course than those who were not taught with the pedagogy. The statistical results show that appreciative pedagogy promotes positive outcomes in students in terms of English reading proficiency and satisfaction in the course. After going through the discovery-dream-design-delivery cycle, a teacher can help his or her students recognize the best of "what is" in themselves and others. Hence, based on the dynamics of positive characteristics, bilingualism, empowerment, and dialogism, both teachers and students can create a vision to facilitate learning and cooperate with each other to achieve their peak performance. Moreover, the students have the chance to interact with and appreciate literary works that portray a variety of human thoughts, feelings, and emotions, allowing them to experience the lives and inner worlds of a variety of individuals and to develop an open-minded and humanistic outlook on life. Also, through appreciating literature from different perspectives, students are provided with the opportunity to develop their creative abilities and sharpen their critical and analytical skills, learning how to find ways of dealing with conflicts. Unlike traditional pedagogies which focus on finding solutions that are always outside the students' experiences, appreciative pedagogy believes that students can search for solutions that already exist in themselves. Therefore, with the assistance of appreciative pedagogy, they can develop self-confidence and their ability to comprehend English literature.

The use of appreciative pedagogy in teaching English literature is more than the transmission of the knowledge of literature: more importantly, it develops students' faculties to enjoy and criticize literature, also creating a vision of the worlds of literature and developing insights into the society in which they live. Also, when students begin to enjoy reading and appreciating literature critically and independently while figuring out plots, allegories, and symbols in the texts, they can at the same time develop their reading competency, having the ability to respond sensitively. Without a doubt, their English reading proficiency is increased.

The study has some limitations. First, students could not be randomly assigned to classes. Second, students' learning performance might be impacted by the examples of literature studied: they might not quite understand the literature. Hence, in order to realize whether students can comprehend the literature, future studies could use both reading comprehension tests and English proficiency tests to measure students' learning outcomes and to investigate what factors might influence the results. Also, future studies could examine and compare these students' English proficiency levels to national and international ESL levels for their age and grade level/year of study. Researchers may also apply the pedagogy to disadvantaged readers, or to students at other educational levels, such as those in junior or senior high school.

To a certain degree, all human beings have experienced an appreciative moment which has somehow changed our lives. As Henry (2005) said, rather than focusing on what is broken, appreciative inquiry helps human beings locate the energy to change. When we take the time to remember someone who believed in us and saw our strengths, we can identify our unique gifts and competencies. At that time, we are more than ourselves.

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