



Morality Cultivation in College English Reading and Writing Course Through Blended Learning

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Abstract: In recent years, “blended learning” and “curriculum-based morality cultivation” have become two research hotspots in Chinese tertiary foreign language education field. Enhancing morality cultivation (also termed as moral education or ideological-political education by some researchers) is the goal for higher education achieved through the instruction of general and specialized college courses. Blended learning, an inevitable product of “Internet + Education” era, provides an effective approach for both teachers and students to reach the goal. For decades, English is learned more as a tool than a means to cultivate students’ humanistic values. Besides, there’s a serious insufficiency in the training of higher-order thinking skills in tertiary EFL classes. To tackle the two problems prevalent in today’s college English teaching, this paper, guided by two important official Guidelines, analyzes the connotation and ways of cultivating morality through language teaching. It also reviews the research on blended learning and blended language learning to show the potentials of this learning model. One specific teaching example from College English Reading and Writing Course is given to demonstrate the ways of imparting knowledge, developing skills and cultivating values by effectively integrating face-to-face and online learning. The study is expected to provide a feasible solution to the two problem mentioned above, deepen readers’ understanding of the two research hotspots and enable teachers of College English Courses in China to apply this model to their teaching practice.

Keywords: Morality Cultivation, College English Reading and Writing Course, Blended Learning, Teaching Practice

1. Introduction

Morality cultivation has always been a major responsibility of teachers in China. Dating back to the Tang Dynasty, Han Yu, a great writer, thinker and philosopher, said in his article On Teachers that “in ancient times those who wanted to learn would seek out a teacher, one who could preach the transmit wisdom, impart knowledge, and resolve doubts.” The “doubts” here does not only refer to questions about books but also puzzles about life. Many scholars also believe that learning to be a person of integrity is the prerequisite for doing any academic work. This traditional thought in Chinese education has recently been further strengthened by the Chinese government, who repeatedly stresses the critical role of morality cultivation for higher education. In a guideline released by the Ministry of Education in 2020, teachers are supposed to nurture students’

moral awareness through the instruction of all courses in an implicit way [1]. For basic courses like College English, teachers should cultivate in students values like having firm ideals and faith, patriotism, wide horizons, striving spirit and developing all-around qualities [1]. This guideline is to solve the current problems in education and meet the needs of talent training in China.

So, how can teachers from colleges and universities achieve this goal proposed by the government? How can teachers of all courses successfully fulfill this ideal responsibility of educators? Faced with this challenge, a large number of EFL teachers in China keep exploring ways to integrate morality cultivation into foreign language courses [2-4]. Taking advantage of the increasing popularity of online teaching/learning, esp. since the breakout of COVID-19, this paper, therefore, hopes to share with peers a way of teaching College English Reading and Writing Course with morality elements through blended learning.

2. Problems with the Current College English Teaching

2.1. *The Neglect of Humanistic Values*

As stated clearly in College English Teaching Guidelines, College English is not only a language course that provides basic knowledge about English, but also a capacity enhancement course that helps students broaden their horizons and learn about different cultures in the world [5]. So, this course serves not only a tool but also has humanistic values which include developing intercultural competence and the ability to understand and interpret Chinese culture [5]. The humanistic function emphasizes the value of human beings and aims to promote people's rounded development. However, in real EFL teaching practice, the course has mostly been taught as a language tool for communication [6]. It's true that a majority of EFL teachers still attach great importance to the instruction of language difficulties, such as vocabulary, grammar, sentences etc. Cai pointed out in *The Journal of Chinese Science* that English is a tool for gaining the latest knowledge, for international exchanges in different fields and for telling stories about China as well as other countries [7]. It shows that whether English should be taught as a tool for communication or as a carrier for talent cultivation is still a controversial issue.

2.2. *A serious Lack of Higher-Order Thinking Training*

Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (2001 revised version), a hierarchy model to classify thinking into six cognitive levels of complexity, is gaining wide acceptance in Chinese tertiary education when setting curriculum goals. According to this Taxonomy, the lowest three cognitive levels (remembering, understanding and applying) are lower-order thinking while the other three (analyzing, evaluating and creating) are higher-order thinking [8]. For years, Chinese EFL teachers in college are used to spending a large part of class time dealing with lower-level objectives (like explaining vocabulary, phrases or sentences), which is probably due to the limit of class time or their weak awareness of morality cultivation, thus leaving no time or chances for them to help develop students' higher-order thinking. However, it is crucial to promote students' analyzing (drawing connections among ideas), evaluating (justifying a stand or decision) and creating (producing new or original work) in order to achieving whole-person educational goal. This is why Chinese government is calling for a reform in higher education, asking colleges and universities to give classes embedded with higher-order thinking, creativity and challenges.

3. Important Issues on Morality Cultivation in College English

3.1. *Connotation of the Reform*

To better fulfill teachers' responsibility of morality

cultivation through courses, it is of much significance to make clear the meaning of cultivating morality through College English. The current opinions mainly fall into 4 categories: an educational belief, a series of courses, an educational system and a teaching method. Wang & Huo believe it's the integration of both educational belief and method because it is a belief-guided teaching practice [9]. Wen interprets its meaning from the perspective of classroom teaching and defines it as "teachers serve as the guide and fuse the belief of morality cultivation into every section of classroom teaching through teaching content, course management, assessment and teacher's behavior to help students cultivate right worldview, outlook on life and values." [2] This definition covers four main elements (who, what, how and why) and addresses morality cultivation in the whole teaching/learning process. Cai holds that the 24-character Core Socialist Values are the specific connotation or elements and the purpose of this reform is to help students become persons of virtue, honesty and responsibility. He also expounds on the social and educational significance of fostering integrity and promoting whole-person development [3]. Despite different interpretations of its connotation, researchers all agree that the fundamental task of fostering good virtues and promoting rounded development of people is the guide of curriculum-based moral education.

3.2. *Ways of Implementing the Reform*

Many scholars of this field have proposed different ways of conducting this reform, either from macro or micro perspectives. Meng explored the ways of implement through six semi-structured interviews and found story-telling, cooperative learning and assessment and also proposed a STPS blended learning model [4]. Wen put forward a systematic description framework for integrating moral education into college foreign language teaching from the perspective of classroom teaching with teaching content, course management, assessment and teacher's behavior as four horizontal dimensions and scope, main task and key strategies as three vertical dimensions. She also gave college EFL teachers practical suggestions on applying this framework [2]. Although her theory is quite instructional in practice, the most challenging parts lie in teaching content and assessment because course management and teacher's behavior are two general criteria for being a good teacher. Cai introduced three ways of implementing this reform for teachers of College English: implicit morality teaching through courses, EGP (English for General Purposes) and ESP (English for Special Purposes) with specific English readings. He advises teachers of College English to explore useful materials from English texts since moral standards, talent cultivation standards and core socialist values such as honesty, bravery, benevolence, harmony, freedom, equality, patriotism and integrity are universal [3]. Though specific ways may be different, these researchers all suggest implicit and subtle way of teaching morality through courses instead of preaching explicitly. To put it in vivid metaphors, this

integration should happen like “dissolving the salt in water” or “moistening all things gently and silently like spring drizzle”.

4. Research on Blended Learning

4.1. Previous Studies on Blended Learning in China (BL)

Blended learning originated in business training and was later introduced into higher education and language teaching [10], and it emphasizes a mix of online and offline or inside and outside the classroom in the spatial dimension. Blended learning has been listed in the Horizon Report for five consecutive years and is considered as a key trend in promoting the use of technology in higher education, and blended learning is becoming the new norm in the future of education. Nevertheless, there are different views on the definition of blended learning. Some define it as a blend of distance and traditional education, others as a blend of various technologies, and still others as a combination of various teaching methods [11]. Sharma & Barrett propose a broader definition that views blended learning as a blend of classroom instruction and expanded use of technology [10]. In contrast, more scholars agree that blended learning is a way of learning that combines the advantages of traditional face-to-face learning and online learning, and that the relationship between the two is not additive but rather multiplicative, with a focus on providing learners with a more engaging learning experience and thus making learning more effective [12]. It can be seen that the research of blended learning has shifted its focus from technology to the occurrence of learning.

4.2. Previous Studies on Blended English Learning (BEL)

A large body of research on blended English learning (BEL) has been done both nationally and internationally. Tomlinson & Whittaker described 20 cases of blended learning in various ELT settings (EAP, ESP, EFL and GE) [13]. Mohammed also reviewed many examples of BEL applications worldwide [14]. He concluded that students have positive feedback and higher level of satisfaction with BEL. BEL provides rich pedagogical tools, learning resources, opportunities for interaction, timely feedback, and gives students more power and opportunities for collaborative learning, self-reflection and management of learning. BEL is also a hot topic of research in Chinese language teaching communities. The integration of blended learning and various types of English courses took place just several years ago, but it has developed rapidly in recent years, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Yang et al. explored the application model and characteristics of the blended learning approach to English teaching by taking English Communication in Daily Life at Tsinghua University as an example. Their teaching practice suggested that highlighting the autonomous role of students and using various forms of communication in interaction are the fundamental guarantee to realize the effective integration of online and offline

teaching [15]. Wang & Zhang applied a blended learning model with Mosoteach (an online learning management system) to the course of English Linguistics. Their study proved that the new model is more effective than the traditional model, and there is a significant positive correlation between participation in learning activities and final exam results [16]. As Garrison & Vanghan argued, blended learning is new just in the sense that it helps to fundamentally redesign the learning experience, focusing on practical results rather than forms, and truly enhancing the traditional value of higher education [12].

4.3. Research on Conducting College English-Based Morality Cultivation with Blended Teaching

In recently years, some Chinese college English teachers have been trying to incorporate the advantages of blended learning into curriculum-based morality cultivation reform. Li et al., reviewed 95 Chinese studies on College English blended teaching between 2001-2021 from six aspects including development background, theory foundation, design philosophy, model construction, teaching effect, future direction. They found that integrating moral education in College English through blended teaching/learning has become a new model, but only a few CSSCI articles were published, so they concluded that how to improve teachers' capability of instruction under the blended teaching mode is a hotspot for future research [17]. Zhai & Wang also use blended teaching model to nurture curriculum-based political and virtuous awareness in Media Literacy, an English-language general education course [18]. Their teaching was based on the framework of integrating moral education into college foreign language teaching proposed by Wen [2]. Their teaching practice made a successful attempt in achieving the goal of whole-person education in this model.

5. Teaching Practice from College English Reading and Writing Course

5.1. Textbook and Online Platforms

In China, College English course are classified as EGP (English for General Purpose) for non-English majors (freshmen or sophomores as well). Very often, the course is taught as two separate classes: reading and writing for one class, viewing, listening and speaking for another. Next, the authors would share one example from their reading and writing class. The textbook used is New Horizon College English (Reading and Writing, book 1) [19]. As to online teaching/learning, students use U-Campus (an online learning platform based on the textbook from Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press), Mosoteach (a free online platform for interactive teaching). Both platforms can record students' learning performance and can be used on computers or smart phones. To use them in teaching, teachers need to set up classes on the platforms. They constitute online learning communities in which students and teachers work together

for the same learning objectives through sharing resources and opinions, assessing assignments and asking questions. Besides, students can learn at their own paces. In the authors' class, U-Campus is mainly used for students to learn the teaching materials before or after classes; Mosoteach is mainly for sharing learning resources and other interaction between teachers and students such as roll-call, brainstorming, voting, discussion, assignment and assessment.

Four years of teaching practice indicate that the two platforms are suitable tools for college English blended teaching and learning. Based on Wen's framework on exploring relevant morality elements from teaching material, three steps are taken: understand the objectives for morality cultivation, analyze the teaching content and design teaching activities [2].

5.2. An Example

Table 1. Class design 1.

| Unit topic | Heroes of Our Time |
|--|--|
| Objective for moral education | After learning this unit, students are supposed to understand and talk about qualities of heroes (such as bravery, dedication, social responsibility, patriotism, selflessness, benevolence, honesty) and to write stories of their heroes in English. |
| Before class (online) | Students read Section A (Heroes among us) and finish the exercises on comprehension, vocabulary and sentence structures; teachers monitor their learning (U-Campus); 2. Students read an English article on 7 stories of everyday hero (Mosoteach); 3. Students share ideas on the questions: What makes a hero? Can you give one example? Students comment on peers' posts and teachers give feedback on their ideas or language and correct their wrong values (Mosoteach). Teachers give a quick vote on the exact definition of "hero" in the unit among three meanings from the dictionary (Mosoteach); 2. Teachers comment on students' pre-class learning on U-Campus in terms of quantity and quality and direct students' attention to common mistakes they make; 2. Students work in groups to clear doubts about text comprehension; teachers conduct a rapid Q & A session to ensure students' correct understanding of the article and also show them some short videos on different types of heroes like war hero, firefighters, great leaders, great scientists; 3. Brainstorm: What make them heroes? What qualities do heroes have in common? (Mosoteach); 4. Teachers share their answers on screen and invite some students to further elaborate on their views in class; teachers comment on their talk and encourage them to explore the underlying reasons of heroism from human nature and Confucianism; 5. Teacher direct students' attention to the QEC (question-example-conclusion) pattern by questions and discuss one example in detail from the article; students work in pairs and draft an outline with this pattern; 6. Teachers assign homework: Who is your hero? Who is the hero of our time? Write his/her story following QEC pattern. |
| Teaching activities through blended learning | During class (online and f2f) Students read Section B (A hero's aspiration) and finish comprehension and vocabulary exercises (U-Campus); 2. Students watch an English documentary (The lockdown-One month in Wuhan) and comment on the heroes in it and give supporting details (Mosoteach); 2. Students watch the movie (Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom) and answer the question: What's the most impressive part in the movie? 3. Students submit their writings online (Mosoteach) which are assessed by teachers, peers and themselves based on the criteria given by teachers. |
| After class (online) | |

5.3. Analysis of This Example

In the example above, the article tells several stories of ordinary people who save others at the cost of their own lives. The author asks two big questions: Who's a hero these days? Who are the heroes among us? It's a good article for cultivating students' morality on heroism in an age when some people are so egoistic that they care about their own interests. By reading their stories, watching related documentaries and movies, sharing their ideas and writing hero stories, the students are encouraged to figure out the qualities of a hero such as bravery, dedication, social responsibility, patriotism, benevolence etc., all of which are the virtues of Chinese people and vital qualities of talents. Furthermore, students are lead by teachers to explore the underlying reasons of their heroism from human nature and Confucianism. For example, students read a quote "Heroism is latent in every human soul." from an American college professor [19]. Confucius said in The Analects of Confucius that "a courageous man is never afraid" and "When you meet a worthy man, think how you may equal him in virtue" [20]. Through in-depth discussion, students understand what makes heroes and are inspired to follow their examples. In this way, the humanistic values of English language can be

well explored and instilled explicitly into students.

In addition, the online learning via U-Campus and Mosoteach effectively extended the learning time and space, improving students' meaningful engagement and efficient autonomous learning through online learning communities. Lower-level cognitive tasks (remembering, understanding and applying) are mostly fulfilled by students online before and after class. Meanwhile, higher-order cognitive tasks (such as analyzing, evaluating and creating) can be done in class through teacher-guided activities, making it possible to cultivate students' independent, creative and critical thinking. Therefore, this blended learning design can help create a good language learning ecosystem, achieving both higher-level thinking objectives and morality cultivation objectives.

Another strengths of this design is students' intercultural communication competence is enhanced by comparing heroes between the West and China. Despite the differences in ideological and political system, common qualities of heroes such as bravery, social responsibility, patriotism and benevolence are found to be universal among human beings. Seeking commonality across cultures helps promote the understanding and mutual respect between them and can definitely be conducive to building world peace and harmony.

This goal is also clearly specified in the College English Teaching Guideline and perhaps a unique one compared with other courses.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, guided by the Guidelines for Curriculum-Based Morality Cultivation in Higher Education from the Ministry of Education and the Guidelines of College English Teaching from the National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board, Chinese EFL teaching for non-English majors are undergoing a fundamental reform to better meet the country's needs for talent cultivation. It's a new Chinese approach which shifts the focus of language learning from form to content. The humanistic values of language teaching are attached great importance and explored deeply from traditional values to modern civilization and from West to East. Morality cultivation is expected to be integrated consciously but explicitly into College English Courses to make students persons of virtue, honesty and responsibility. The future talents are those with great love for family, country and those with international vision besides professionalism. In the "Internet + Education" era, blended learning seems to be an ideal way to fulfill this mission owing to its unique advantages for language learning. One example of class design plus detailed analysis from the authors' teaching experience is given in the paper to add a small piece of wisdom to this major educational reform in the hope that our peers may gain some insight into the two research hotspots ("blended learning" and "curriculum-based morality cultivation") and find it easier to apply this model into their own teaching. Inspired by this paper, our peers can have more practical ways to redesign the overall curriculum for tertiary EFL teaching to better satisfy the needs of the country and college students.

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