Short story analysis and writing in English Composition in China

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Abstract

This paper presents a short-story analysis and writing assignment that was underpinned by David Hanauer's (2012) meaningful literacy instruction and carried out in English Composition classes in China. This paper reviews work that has drawn on or been influenced by Hanauer's approach (e.g., Chamcharatsri, 2013, 2015; Garvin, 2013; Iida, 2012, 2014; Park, 2013) and proposes practical guidelines for applying meaningful literacy instruction in a scaffolded short-story assignment. The instructor argues for the benefits of the lesson, which include learners gaining control of elements of fiction useful for self-and other-understanding, as well as learners quickly becoming engrossed in writing activities about personally meaningful topics.

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Ever since David Ian Hanauer (2010, 2012) argued for meaningful literacy instruction, research drawing on this approach has been gaining momentum. Meanwhile, the growth of scholarship on connections between literature and language learning, such as here in The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching, illustrates vibrant interest in the field. This paper's purpose is to advance the discussion of meaningful literacy instruction and literature in language teaching. Specifically, this paper presents and explains theoretical underpinnings of a short-story lesson guided by meaningful literacy instruction, which was taught in English Composition classrooms in Mainland China. Using a short story set in Tibet that was written by a Beijing author, this assignment encouraged learners to reflect artistically on their own and others' unique humanity.

Meaningful Literacy Instruction

Meaningful literacy instruction is a pedagogical approach that seeks "a way to make language learning a personally contextualized, meaningful activity for the learner" (Hanauer, 2012, p. 106). According to the approach, how we interpret our world impacts not just how we view and interact in the world but also who we are (Hanauer, 2012). How Hanauer defines meaning is important for an understanding of the approach:

> To understand the world, to make sense of the world, involves far more than just intellectual activity. It involves affect and intention and integrates personal history and future actions. It is a holistic activity that defines the self at the moment of understanding and a perspective and orientation towards the world (Hanauer, 2012, p. 107).

In meaningful literacy instruction, learners occupy the center of instruction. The approach tries to draw on learners' autobiographical narratives, individual literacies, and unique humanity.

Empirical Support for Meaningful Literacy Instruction

A brief review of findings from scholarly work that has drawn on or been influenced by Hanauer's work helps to summarize what we know and where we can go from here.

To begin, Garvin (2013) drew inspiration from Hanauer's (2010) poetry-as-research methodology in four English Composition research classes in China. Garvin's context, in fact, was identical to the one described in this present paper. Garvin's (2013) study aimed "to develop English writing skills, provide space for individual expressions of L2 [second language] identity and voice, and potentially, contribute to L2 writing research" (p. 77). In interviews, learners reported (a) more confidence to write in English, (b) more positive attitudes toward writing English poetry, (c) a renewed interest in Chinese history, (d) greater ability to use a wider

range of English vocabulary, (e) more sensitivity to phonemes in the English language, and (f) a better understanding of poetic conventions common in English poetry (Garvin, 2013, p. 88). Garvin's learners also reported being less inhibited to write in English.

Also drawing on Hanauer's (2010) pedagogical and analytical approach to poetry writing, Iida (2012) examined how personally meaningful haiku affected argument papers of twenty-three Japanese learners of English. Through an analysis of pre- and post-arguments, haiku manuscripts, and interview transcripts, Iida found learners wrote more words, wrote more fluently, and wrote more directly after the haiku intervention. Iida's analysis of interview data found, like Garvin (2013), that writers reported lower inhibition to express their thoughts in English.

Next, Pisarn Bee Chamcharatsri (2013, 2015) analyzed how Thai learners expressed fear and love in writing literary genres in Thai and English. In 2013, Chamcharatsri asked learners to write personal narratives about scary life events. Participants reported not always being able to express fear better in their expert language, Thai. In addition, two of the four participants reported preferring how their English versions expressed fear. Chamcharatsri observed that it seemed easy for writers to compose personally meaningful narratives. In 2015, Chamcharatsri asked learners to write poetry about love in Thai and English. Afterward, learners reported being more aware of the linguistic, cultural, and emotional capacities of both Thai and English. Once again, Chamcharatsri (2015) found writers did not experience "writer's block," which supports that learners found it easy and enjoyable to draw on personal, "significant experiences" (p. 155).

Finally, Park's (2013) study drew on autobiographical-poetic writing to explore her own life as a teacher-scholar. In specific reference to Park's (2013) research project, Hanauer (2013) noted that Park's study represented how "Humanizing the language classroom means recognizing the individuality of consciousness, subjectivity and historical contextualization of everyone who is involved" (p. 4). Through analysis of her poetry, which she organized according to "autobiographical

waves," Park (2013) offered support of the use of evocative genres such as autoethographic-poetry in teacher-training programs.

The literature on this approach, then, suggests that prompting learners to write in literary genres that draw on life narratives has numerous benefits. It boosts linguistic development, nurtures self-understanding, and is inherently interesting. The current lesson tried to draw on these benefits while asking the following question: To what degree does engagement with fictive modes of characterization expand learners' ability to understand themselves and others?

Short Story Self-Contextualization: Guo Xiaolu's
"Winter Worm, Summer Weed"

Much work on meaningful literacy instruction has paid attention to English language learners' production. Yet Hanauer's (2010, 2012) pedagogy and research methodology has relied on the process of literary writing. This scaffolding involves learners reflecting on features and examples of a target literary genre. In a recent piece that appeared here in The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching, Iida (2014) noted how the integration of haiku in language classrooms in Japan followed such a scaffolding method. Similarly, in the short-story assignment to be discussed here, I drew on Guo Xiaolu's (2007) "Winter Worm, Summer Weed," a short story that appeared in the U.S. literary magazine Ploughshares, to enable scaffolding of meaningful reading and writing.

Context of the Lesson

During my seven years of teaching English Composition in China, I taught Chinese learners of English aged 18-22. As a course requirement, and sometimes as ways to get learners thinking about topics for argumentative writing, I brought in literary fiction and poetry. The learners who have experienced this short-story lesson have been in their freshman years of undergraduate education, with no special fiction writing or artistic skills. They have been enrolled in a dual-degree program involving their Chinese university and my U.S. university English department. Language levels ranged between beginner and low-intermediate.

The Short Story

I chose "Winter Worm, Summer Weed," a story of roughly 1500 words, for its craft and its being written by a Beijing author. Although I did not choose the story to confront learners with a political issue, I realized its political nature when news of violent clashes between Tibetan and Han Chinese appeared monthly or even more frequently on the news, and students seemed to be watching me carefully as I introduced the story. Westerners in China have been blocked from traveling to Tibet alone, for fear they will get involved with protests.

Chosen for its quality, "Winter Worm, Summer Weed" follows a Tibetan boy named Guo Luo. Guo Luo has a gift for finding a valuable herb on the Kunlun Mountains. The herb is really an insect (冬虫夏草, dōngchóng xiàcǎo) used as an ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine. In the story, a female tour guide leads a group of Japanese tourists to the mountain, where she helps Guo Luo get a good price. Later, the guide asks Guo Luo to come to work with her in the city. Unable to understand, Guo Luo refuses. The narrator in "Winter Worm, Summer Weed" dips into Guo Luo's thoughts, but never into the tour guide's. Still, as in many works of literary fiction, character is conveyed through modes of characterization (i.e., description, action, thought, exposition, dialog).

Table 1

Modes of Characterization in Guo Xiaolu's "Winter Worm, Summer Weed"

Modes	Guo Luo	Tour Guide
Description	He is described in the story as "skinny and about eighteen" (p. 80). He has "thick dark hair" (p. 80). He is "weathered and thinned by the sun" (p. 80). "His features are delicate, his face almost feminine despite his sunburnt skin. His eyes are bright" (p. 81).	She holds a "green flag flapping in the wind" (p. 82). "She is already thirty but wears her hair as if she were younger, in a girlish ponytail. Her plump curves stretch a tight pink sweater" (p. 82). Her "cheeks are rosy" (p. 82).

Action	He stays in familiar places. He "sits" "climbs" "gathers" "travels the fields and catches rats" (p. 80). He "stands" "watches" "looks" (p. 81). "He tightens his hat" and "turns back to the mountain" (p. 83). "He tightens his hat, as if to help him gather his thoughts" (p. 83). He looks at her body "as though hoping he might find some Winter Worm Summer Weed hiding there" (p. 83).	She leads people to new places. She helps him get more money. She tries to go, with him, to a new city.
Thoughts	"He feels as though [the mountain] has never melted in the eighteen years of his life. He can picture the snow line where the white winter lotus used to grow. The white plant was hard to see against the snow. He used to ride his horse up the mountain to pick it and then sell the flowers to the government pharmacy in the town. Now the lotus has almost disappeared, picked to extinction. No point riding up to the snow line now" (pp. 81-82).	--
Exposition	The narrator tells us Guo Luo is "empty and drifting in the afternoon" (p. 82). Similes/metaphors: "He moves like a little prince of the mountains" (p. 81). "The rats move like Guo Luo, slowly" (82).	The narrator says her "heart [is] full of expectation" (p. 83). Similes/metaphors: She is like an "overripe pear tree, heavy with blossoms" (p. 82). She is "like a lone thin cloud hoping for rain" (p. 83). She is "like a bloom that's lost its freshness" (p. 83).
Dialog	Formulaic, folk knowledge, innocent, language of capitalism: "City girls can pay the right price for my herbs" (p. 83).	"What are you thinking? What do you think about all day? Do you think about girls?" (p. 83).

Setting as Metaphor/ Character	sun … silent lake … mountains … unchanging symbols. "The land has become a desert, a rat-infested desert" (p. 81). "Now the lotus has almost disappeared, picked to extinction" (pp. 81-82).	On a road (p. 82). In a "parched and shriveled former grassland" (p. 83). "Her eyes reflect the land around them, the grassland without any grass" (p. 83). Finally, she "disappears into the sandy landscape" (p. 83).

As Table 1 illustrates, the modes of characterization in this story show how vastly the two main characters differ.

The Lesson: Short-Story Reading and Writing

The following short-story lesson presents a meaningful and non-political way to allow space for Chinese learners of English to reflect upon politicized discourses, here related to Tibet, through an accessible process of literary analysis and creative writing.

Step 1: Meaningful Pre-Reading Writing

Before learners read the story, they write according to the following prompt: Think about a time when you wanted to help someone, but that person did not accept your help. Write the event as briefly and simply as possible. Explain why the individual did not accept your help.

Here, learners may ask, "How can we know why someone refused our help?" This brings up the difference between *story* and *plot*. A story's *story* is simply *what* happens in chronological order; a story's plot, on the other hand, is *why* something happened (Forster, 1927/1955). A good answer to this question is an encouraging, "Guess."

After about half an hour of writing, learners pair up and tell stories to a classmate. The instructor collects the personal narratives, then asks learners to read "Winter Worm, Summer Weed" sometime before the next step.

Step 2: Analysis of the Story's Modes of Characterization

In class, the instructor explains that in literary fiction, modes of fiction, when

analyzed, often reveal more about the story's meaning and its characters' conflicts.

Learners spend half an hour carrying out the following task:

In pairs, go through the story to decide where modes of characterization appear.

After learners have gone through the story, the instructor hands out markers or crayons. Different colors represent different modes. The instructor models how to code. Sometimes, more than one mode will appear in one section. After modeling, the instructor asks learners to carry out the following task:

Use colored markers or crayons to code occurrences of modes. For instance, description (blue), action (red), exposition (yellow), thought (green), and dialog (pink). No sentence should go unmarked.

After learners have worked in pairs, the instructor helps learners place codes into a table, such as in Table 1 (see previous section).

Step 3: Literary Character Analysis

The instructor gives the following prompt:

In pairs, create an artistic portrait of one of the characters in the story. You may use pencil and paper, crayons and markers, or an online tool. Pay attention to how the modes of characterization can be artfully conveyed.

The point is for learners to work together to think about literary fiction in a multimodal way. Some learners in my class seemed embarrassed and were not sure what to do. Soon, however, groups lost themselves in the playfulness of the activity. After learners have created artistic portraits, it is time for individual writing:

Reflect on the table of modes of characterization. Now, draft a working thesis statement that explains some aspect of the story you did not realize before.

Step 4: Thesis-Driven Personally Meaningful Writing

After the instructor hands back the personal microstory from Step 1, the instructor gives the following prompt:

Read your story from before. Answer the question: How has your understanding of this life event changed through our reading of "Winter Worm, Summer Weed"? Do you better understand why that person refused your help?

After working through these steps, students may not have had a better understanding of why their help was refused, but they had more to write. Analyzing fictive structures that help to clarify the context of a situation seemed to have given learners more tools with which to think.

Step 5: Personally Meaningful Artistic Rendering

The final step of this sequence asks learners to analyze themselves as if they were a character in a work of fiction. Past research on storytelling in general has shown the benefits of narrative writing, such as: (a) English-learning immigrants were able to explore past, present, and future selves through stories (Early & Norton, 2012; Lee, 2013); (b) classrooms that allowed storytelling to emerge encouraged learners to place themselves in empowering agentive positions in life-history narratives (Early & Norton, 2012; Simpson, 2011); (c) English language learners (ELL) have resisted dominant linear narratives to express the complexity of hybrid identities (Ghiso & Low, 2013); (d) co-construction of narratives has encouraged more vivid tellings and rememberings (Holmes & Marra, 2011); (e) narrative writing has encouraged language development for expressive purposes (Holmes & Marra, 2011; Ko, 2010; Nicholas, Rossiter, & Abbott, 2011); (f) narrative writing has raised genre awareness (Nicholas, Rossiter, & Abbott, 2011); (g) narratives have enabled ELLs to create a sense of community (Nicholas, Rossiter, & Abbott, 2011); and (h) ELLs have reported expanding identity and viewpoint-taking through storytelling (Stillar, 2013). This lesson seeks to draw on these affordances as learners write about themselves with a keener awareness of the fictive modes of characterization now available to them.

Accordingly, the instructor will give the following prompt:
Analyze yourself: your description, action, thoughts, exposition (or what you can tell us about your history), and dialog. Write a thesis-driven description that tells us who you are.
Create an artistic visualization that conveys to others who you are.

The instructor should provide publication opportunities on learning management systems, on free open-source blog platforms, or on a classroom announcement board. Most important, learners should convey themselves through modes of characterization as vividly as possible.

Benefits of the Lesson

The following question guided my lesson: To what degree does engagement with fictive modes of characterization impact learners' ability to understand themselves and others? Though work is underway to modify this lesson to better answer this question, reflections from a teacher's perspective are possible. First, after being scaffolded toward artistic drawing and writing, as well as through analysis of a short story's modes of characterization, learners were able to more easily explain the motives of another person. This teacher reflection resembles earlier findings on narrative writing for language learners (Early & Norton, 2012; Lee, 2013; Stillar, 2013). Second, learners seemed to quickly become engrossed in these activities, seeming to confirm Chamcharatsri's (2013, 2015) observation that learners find it relatively easy to write when the topic is personally meaningful in the sense that it engages autobiographic selves (Hanauer, 2010; Ivanič, 1998).

Conclusion

In a recent volume of *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching*, Collins (2014) reported on the impact that poetry reading had on exploration of universal human themes. Similarly, Stillar (2013) found that Japanese learners of English writing were able to assume new points of view and identities more fluently after being asked to write stories from the viewpoints of marginalized or vilified members of their own culture. Hanauer (2003), too, has written that poetry as data in applied linguistics can help to disseminate humanizing discourses that combat racist generalizations by giving readers chances to vividly experience another person's artistic self-understanding. The short-story assignment detailed in this paper aimed at similar ends. In addition to asking learners to explore themselves according to

Hanauer's (2010, 2012) approach, this assignment involved learners exploring human dimensions of politicized discourses through fictive modes of characterization, and seemingly expanding their capacity to contextualize themselves and others beyond simple guesswork.

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