

TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE AI ERA

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Abstract: This study explores the urgent need for the digital-intelligent transformation of English literature teaching in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). Although AI offers convenience and innovation to literature teaching, it also gives rise to crises such as the weakening of in-depth reading experiences and the deconstruction of authority in textual interpretation. In response to these challenges, this study investigates the following questions: What constitutes a comprehensive reconstruction pathway for literature teaching? How can teaching objectives, content, teacher/student roles, teaching/learning modes, and evaluation mechanisms be redesigned to exploit AI effectively while mitigating its risks? The proposed framework shifts the core teaching objective from knowledge transmission to human-AI collaborative knowledge processing/creation, and proposes specific digital-intelligent teaching and learning methods, such as human-machine dialogue, comparative analysis of human and AI-generated critiques, and personalized learning pathways for each individual student. It also warns of potential risks, such as the erosion of humanistic spirit and marginalization of emotional education, that may result from excessive dependence on AI technology. The significant value of the framework lies in its balanced blueprint for integrating technology, emphasizing that while this teaching transformation is necessary, it must consciously guard the essence of humanistic education to achieve the holistic development of students.

Keywords: AI; English literature teaching; Digital-intelligent transformation; Humanistic education

1 INTRODUCTION

We find ourselves in an era increasingly approaching a technological “singularity”, with AI developing rapidly [1]. Large language models, represented by ChatGPT, not only extend human intelligence as tools but also profoundly influence various fields of society as a new “Other”, and the field of education is no exception. In the era of AI, education is no longer confined to traditional classroom teaching and paper textbooks; instead, leveraging technologies like big data and AI, it has achieved digitalization, intellectualization, and personalization.

As a crucial component of humanistic education at universities, English literature bears the important mission of cultivating students’ literary appreciation ability, cross-cultural communication skills, and humanistic literacy. Against the backdrop of the digital-intelligent era, AI technology has opened an unprecedented window of convenience for English literature teaching. However, this convenience also harbors profound crises. When the “artistic features” or “thematic ideas” of a literary work can be accurately “extracted and summarized” by AI within seconds, where does the value lie in students’ carefully invested slow reading experience? What is the irreplaceable core value of English literature teaching itself? Can traditional literature teaching modes and methods still meet the diverse and personalized learning needs of students?

Previous research has primarily focused on technological applications, such as automated feedback or student-data analytics, whereas investigations into the systematic transformation of teaching and cognitive paradigms, and the evolving roles of teachers and students, remain comparatively underdeveloped [2-4]. This study argues that English literature teaching in the AI era should not be a simple application of technology or passive defense against it, but rather a proactive and profound transformation and reconstruction. The core of this reconstruction is the shift from the paradigm centered on “knowledge transmission” to a paradigm centered on “intellectual navigation” and “meaning negotiation”. Therefore, this paper will elaborate on the discussion from three aspects: “challenges and crises”, “transformation and reconstruction” as well as “risk reflection and countermeasures”.

2 CHALLENGES AND CRISES FACING TRADITIONAL ENGLISH LITERATURE TEACHING

Traditional English literature classes have long been structured around teacher authority, text-centrism and linear interpretation. This stability, however, is now being systematically dismantled by the rapid advancement of AI, whose capabilities in information processing, text generation and multimodal interaction directly undermine the foundational assumptions of traditional teaching. AI technology first disrupts the classroom’s balance by flooding it with unprecedentedly abundant resources and convenience—advantages that erode the purpose of traditional instruction. Students can instantly access background knowledge, plot summaries, and mainstream critiques about any writer, work, school of thought or trend. They can also receive intelligent learning assistance anytime, anywhere. This convenience eliminates the “knowledge gap” that once justified teachers’ role as information gatekeepers, leaving traditional lectures focused on factual transmission feeling redundant [4,5].

AI’s text generation and dialogue capabilities then shatter the traditional view of texts as closed and stable entities. For generations, literary teaching has revolved around the idea of a “revered classic”, a work whose meaning, while open to

interpretation, was rooted in its original context and fixed textual form. AI, however, transforms these classics into “data material” that can be arbitrarily deconstructed, reassembled, parodied and dialogued with. This poses a fundamental challenge to the traditional mode of literary interpretation, long established on the basis of stable texts [6]. Beyond destabilizing the classroom’s structure, AI technology also threatens the very essence of literature teaching: guiding students to encounter words and emotions through focused slow reading, thereby cultivating deep, personal engagement with texts and gaining personal, private aesthetic experiences and emotional resonance. This “slow reading” is a form of in-depth reading, key to cultivating understanding, imagination, empathy, and critical thinking. However, the AI-driven mode of information acquisition is inherently “instantaneous”, focusing on the rapid extraction of main points and conclusions rather than an immersive process of savoring the text. Over time, students’ patience and capacity for in-depth reading may be weakened. Literary reading could degenerate from a spiritual practice that enriches life into a mere information retrieval task, significantly diminishing its core functions of aesthetic and emotional education [4].

3 THE DIGITAL-INTELLIGENT TRANSFORMATION OF ENGLISH LITERATURE TEACHING IN THE AI ERA

The aforementioned challenges and crises demand a fundamental rethinking of what it means to teach and learn English literature when AI technology is no longer a peripheral tool, but a central force reshaping the classroom. English literary education should, on the basis of upholding the core value of humanistic spirit, actively explore pathways for deep integration with AI technology [7]. It should attempt to carry out digital-intelligent transformation in aspects such as teaching objectives, teaching content, teacher/student roles, teaching/learning modes as well as evaluation mechanisms, thereby bringing new opportunities and vitality to English literature teaching and achieving innovation and optimization of teaching.

3.1 Shift in Teaching Objectives

Within the framework of digital-intelligent English literature teaching, a fundamental shift in teaching objectives is imperative: moving away from the one-way transmission of literary “knowledge”, such as rote memorization of literary historical timelines, fixed interpretations of classic works or rigid application of critical theories, to fostering students’ competence in processing, critiquing, and creating “knowledge” with AI assistance. This paradigm shift redefines the core focus of literature teaching: it no longer prioritizes the mechanical retention of discrete facts or the passive absorption of established critical frameworks. Instead, the emphasis shifts to equipping students with practical, AI literacy skills: for instance, training them to formulate precise, context-aware prompts for AI rather than vague queries that yield superficial results; guiding them to iteratively optimize these prompts based on AI’s initial outputs—adjusting keywords, adding contextual constraints or correcting misinterpretations—to elicit more accurate and nuanced responses; and cultivating their ability to critically evaluate and insightfully dissect AI-generated content [8,9].

This evaluation process involves verifying the accuracy of AI’s claims against authoritative literary sources, identifying biases or oversimplifications in AI’s reasoning, and detecting gaps in AI’s understanding of contextual or emotional nuances. Building on this critical assessment, students are then encouraged to transcend AI’s limitations by posing more probing, original questions—questions that AI might not answer through preprogrammed data. These questions not only demonstrate students’ independent thinking but also push them to synthesize insights from both human expertise (their own textual analysis, class discussions, and scholarly research) and AI’s analytical strengths (its capacity to process large datasets, identify patterns across multiple works, or summarize diverse critical perspectives).

3.2 Change of Teaching Content

In terms of teaching content, English literature teaching involves literary works from different periods, schools, and authors, resulting in a vast and complex knowledge system. Digital-intelligent teaching, supported by digital resource databases and AI technology, can provide students with comprehensive and convenient learning resources and basic information. This can liberate classroom time from knowledge transmission for more in-depth seminars. For example, students can conduct independent analyses of a text while AI also analyzes it, or instructors can guide students to use AI to generate different or even opposing interpretations of the same text [10,11]. Classroom discussions can then be organized to compare the differences in perspective, emotion, and depth between human and AI analyses, to identify flaws or biases in AI interpretations, and to analyze how different AI-generated interpretations enrich the hermeneutic possibilities of the text. In doing so, students learn to integrate the complementary advantages of human and machine intelligence: leveraging AI to handle tedious, data-intensive tasks so they can focus on higher-order cognitive work—interpreting emotional subtext, debating ethical implications, and constructing original arguments—ultimately forming deeper, more nuanced judgments about literary works that reflect both rigor and humanistic insight, and cultivating close reading ability and critical spirit.

Intelligent media-enhanced immersive experience of classic literary scenes constitutes another component of the English literature classroom. Leveraging AI’s image generation and description capabilities, classic scenes from literary works, such as the foggy London depicted by Charles Dickens and the villages and manors described by Jane Austen, can be reconstructed through multimodal interaction. This enables students to gain intuitive sensory impressions and strengthens their perception of the artistic conception in the text. Additionally, AI voice synthesis can be utilized to let students listen to English voices from different eras, allowing them to perceive the historical evolution of the language.

Furthermore, tasks can be designed to enable students to conduct in-depth interviews with AI-simulated literary characters, such as Jane Eyre and Heathcliff, by asking questions about the characters' motivations, choices, and inner conflicts. This process can greatly deepen students' understanding of human nature and human complexity.

3.3 Reshaping of Teacher/Student Roles

Digital-intelligent English literature teaching first demands a profound reorientation of teachers' core role in the instructional process. In traditional classrooms, teachers often centered their work on preparing structured lecture content and transmitting this knowledge to passive students. The teacher's core task now shifts to designing learning tasks and projects that leverage AI to deepen, rather than replace, human engagement with literature. Beyond task design, teachers also take on the role of "AI literacy mentors", responsible for demonstrating how to engage in high-quality critical dialogue with AI. Teachers further guide students in rationally comparing differences between human and AI interpretations. This comparative exercise not only deepens students' textual understanding but also sparks intellectual debate and emotional resonance—outcomes that AI alone cannot foster.

As teachers' roles evolve, students' roles undergo a simultaneous and complementary transformation [11], moving from passive recipients of pre-packaged knowledge to active and critical participants in the learning process—namely, active questioners and meaning builders. In the digital-intelligent classroom, they learn to take ownership of their inquiry by posing key questions that both stimulate AI's deep thinking and guide the direction of their own learning. Students also develop critical information literacy skills, learning to trace the sources of AI-provided information, cross-verify claims across multiple platforms and critically examine AI's potential biases. Finally, students engage in multi-dimensional interactions—with AI, with teachers and with peers—to integrate resources and information from various parties. In this way, students move beyond absorbing others' ideas to building their own unique literary interpretations and worlds of meaning—an outcome that lies at the heart of humanistic literary education.

3.4 Reform of Teaching/Learning Modes

The traditional teaching and learning mode—long characterized by "one-size-fits-all" instruction, where teachers deliver standardized content to entire classes regardless of individual differences in learning pace, interests or proficiency—will undergo fundamental changes in the AI era. This transformation is driven primarily by AI's unique capacity to bridge the gap between generalized teaching and personalized learning: unlike traditional models, which rely on teachers' limited ability to track each student's progress, AI technology can accurately analyze students' learning characteristics and evolving needs by leveraging real-time learning data, and then dynamically formulate personalized learning plans and pathways tailored to each individual [4].

The cornerstone of this personalized transformation lies in intelligent learning platforms, which integrate advanced AI algorithms (such as machine learning and predictive analytics) to move beyond simple data collection toward systematic and in-depth data mining of the diverse information generated throughout students' learning journeys. The scope of this data is comprehensive, encompassing both measurable indicators like students' baseline learning ability, daily study time allocation, learning frequency, historical learning pace and answer accuracy rates, and nuanced preferences such as students' reading preferences and engagement patterns.

By subjecting this multi-dimensional data to algorithmic analysis, the platform can accurately decode each student's unique learning style and pinpoint gaps in knowledge mastery. This insight enables the platform to precisely construct a dynamic student "digital profile" [12]—a living snapshot of each learner's strengths, weaknesses, and preferences that updates in real time as new data is generated. Armed with this digital profile, the platform can deliver personalized learning content recommendations that directly address individual needs. This targeted approach marks a radical departure from the traditional "uniform indoctrination" mode, where all students receive the same worksheets, readings and assignments regardless of their progress. Instead, it achieves a teaching transformation toward "targeted drip-feeding"—a mode where learning content is delivered in small, precise increments aligned with each student's current ability and interests.

3.5 Intelligence and Diversification of Evaluation Mechanism

Finally, teaching evaluation will also undergo a shift towards intelligence and diversification, no longer relying solely on paper-and-pencil tests. Using AI to collect and analyze data of students' learning process enables process evaluation concerning learning attitude, participation and depth. Based on big data, it is possible to assess students' participation, level of thinking activity, and the depth and innovativeness of their viewpoints in the learning process, and to analyze as well their performance in assignments and quizzes, including response time, accuracy rate, error types. Furthermore, intelligent evaluation is built on a large number of data samples and scientific algorithms, so the scientific nature of its evaluation criteria is guaranteed. Its efficiency is also unparalleled compared to that of traditional manual evaluation. And this efficiency does not come at the cost of quality; instead, it allows evaluation to be more timely, targeted, and responsive to student needs [13,14].

This shift toward an intelligent and diversified evaluation mechanism is not just a technical upgrade to assessment; it is a necessary complement to the broader transformation of teaching objectives, content, and roles in AI-era English literature teaching. By leveraging AI to capture process-based insights and expanding evaluation to cover critical, creative and collaborative skills, this mechanism ensures that assessment truly reflects the values of humanistic literary

teaching: fostering deep engagement with texts, critical thinking about technology and the construction of meaningful, personal interpretations.

4 POTENTIAL RISKS AND COUNTERMEASURES

It is essential to accept and embrace AI technology, as it is impossible to live apart from it in our present time [15]. But simultaneously, we must maintain a clear and prudent critical awareness to address its potential problems and risks.

Firstly, the digital-intelligent transformation of English literature teaching faces some technical issues. Technical stability is paramount. If technical failures such as lagging or crashing occur during the operation of the digital-intelligent teaching system, they will inevitably disrupt the normal progress of teaching. If AI algorithms contain biases, it may lead to inaccurate recommendations of learning resources or unfair learning evaluations, which may misguide students' learning directions and fail to achieve the goal of personalized learning. Data security is also an issue that cannot be ignored. If students' learning data and personal information are leaked, it could seriously harm their privacy and rights. Therefore, we must find ways to solve technical challenges in teaching applications, such as continuously strengthening the technical support from computer experts, and promptly identifying and patching system vulnerabilities. This is crucial for promoting the digital-intelligent teaching of English literature [4].

Secondly, digital-intelligent teaching also risks the weakening of humanistic spirit cultivation and the marginalization of emotional education. Literary reading is an immersive activity that requires readers to engage deeply in mental processing, cultural experience, and emotional resonance [16]. If we over-rely on AI technology and lack in-depth reading experiences of works as well as personal emotional insights, the rich humanistic spirit contained within English literary works will fail to be passed on to students, which is not conducive to their holistic development. Therefore, digital-intelligent teaching of English literature must focus on balancing the application of technology and the cultivation of humanistic spirit, and uphold the original purpose of humanistic education. Teachers should give full play to their guiding role: design mandatory in-depth reading and reflection sessions without AI assistance in learning tasks, preserve and create more space for direct emotional and intellectual exchanges among students in classes, so as to cultivate students' ability to learn and think effectively without relying on technology. In addition, clear policies of classroom AI use should be formulated to clearly define what constitutes reasonable use and what constitutes AI plagiarism. Emphasis should also be placed on process-oriented learning assessment to make students' learning processes truly visible [13,14,17].

5 CONCLUSION

In the era of AI, the digital-intelligent transformation of English literature teaching is an inevitable trend in the development of literary education. The future class of English literature will be a dynamic symbiotic ecosystem, where human wisdom, the life experiences of teachers and students, and the powerful computing power of AI will inspire and calibrate each other. Therefore, we should fully recognize the importance of integrating AI technology with humanistic education, continuously explore and refine the development pathway of digital-intelligent teaching of English literature, and propose and refine optimization strategies and solutions for the challenges and risks that arise during this process. While utilizing AI technology to enhance teaching efficiency and quality, it is even more crucial to adhere to the essence of literary education, focus on cultivating students' humanistic literacy and sound personality, and achieve the comprehensive development of students.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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