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Using British Literature to Teach Empathy to the Chinese University Students Majoring in English

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Abstract

This paper aims to strengthen Chinese University English Majors' (CUEMs) capability in understanding, analyzing, and appreciating British Literature. This research focuses on the effective pedagogy applied to make CUEMs compassionate and empathetic. The participants were 65 students who were in their third year of study at the School of Foreign Languages, in Sichuan University of Science & Engineering, a Chinese University and could sympathize with feelings and emotions expressed by British authors, showing mastery of British literary writings. Facing exotic literature, CUEMs usually feel perplexed and stressed, then they give the cold shoulder to the course as well their teaching staff. The empathy empowerment program adopted a qualitative research design, acquiring textual data gained from the learners who were asked to hand in their essays particularly assigned by the researcher to perceive whether the learners become empathetic after learning some British literary writings. After the collected data were coded and analyzed, the program testified that learners became empathetic after taking British literature classes through thematic analysis. This research can be valuable for literature academics both in and outside of China who are frequently confused, helpless, and even frustrated in teaching literature and are eager to get more responses from their learners in class by learning to assign meaningful and thought-provoking, empathy-arousing essay questions highly associated with literary texts to their learners and scrutinizing their essays, then an active communication between academic and learners can be successfully made.

Keywords: Chinese University English Majors (CUEMs), The Empathy Empowerment Program, British Literary Writings

Introduction

It is an acknowledged fact that all students at primary, senior, and tertiary levels who study English as a foreign language should study literary texts in English to promote English learners' literacy skills and intercultural competence (Calafato & Simmonds, 2022).

Other noticeable plentiful reasons why they must study exotic literary writings include improving their English proficiency, strengthening their abilities in understanding, analyzing, and appreciating foreign literary texts, knowing about foreign cultures and customs, acquiring gripping and spectacular stories, familiarizing some classic protagonists, broadening their horizon, changing their fixed mindsets, preparing themselves for being a part of a world citizen and so on (Fan & Rui, 2005; Lǚ, 2005; Keshavarzi, 2012; Tevdovska, 2016).

Particularly, Schools of foreign languages from higher institutions with the responsibility of promoting advanced research and study should prioritize British and American literature courses because the courses can cultivate learners' humanistic spirit and make them highly respectable, knowledgeable, perceptive and noble with aesthetic taste (Yu, 2010). However, compared with the bright vision curriculum designer and academics have for the courses, learners who take British literature courses are faced with a series of issues, for example whenever a new semester begins, the researcher would ask those who have finished reading English novels or poem anthology from A to Z to raise their hands. They gave the same answer—most students barely have tried reading English literature before they enter English departments. They only read translated foreign literature. Therefore, there is no surprise to find that English, as a major foreign language in China, has not been mastered by many CUEMs who lack the proficiency to comprehend canonical texts written by British and American authors, particularly English poetry (Liu, 1999). Similarly, Bangladeshi students who became English majors held the belief that literature is highly difficult to deal with, these students were incapable of understanding literary texts, and exotic cultures, and had no linguistic proficiency, because they had no opportunities and resources to familiarize themselves with literature at the Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary levels (Farida & Sinha, 2013). Students in Turkey mentioned that they found it difficult to choose and read literary sentences, understand and conceptualize literary texts and figures of speech (Yavuz, 2014).

In addition, with the advent and popularity of social media platforms, people tend to mainly rely on the internet to acquire information, including contemporary students who are living in an information-rich age, an increasing number of students regard literary texts are out of date, and take the internet as a major information channel to showcase their independent and distinctive spirit (Anghel, 2012). The consequent saddening and dreaded result is that numerous students feel stressed and even disturbed when they find it challenging to understand the contents delivered in canonical texts courses, let alone respond actively to the academic's class.

Literature Review

"The capacity to empathize is one of the great hidden talents possessed by almost every human being" (Krznaric, 2014, p 13). Gordon and Siegel put it in their book about empathy, the mean of cultivating empathy is "to understand a situation from another person's point of view, and that ability goes hand in hand with a sense of how our innate temperament determines our responses to particular situations" (Gordon & Siegel, 2009, section two).

This program followed the conception that empathy means that students can identify with the difficult situation that characters of the literary world are in, can actively respond to their predicaments, and can think out measures to relieve others' sufferings and pains.

Particularly, in the medical field, nurses, doctors, and other social workers should prioritize empathy with their clients, therefore the ways to effectively cultivate social workers' empathy have been discussed frequently.

Furman (2005) vividly illustrated how exercises relative to poems and putting oneself into others' shoes can be instrumental in empowering people who occupy helping professions to become compassionate by giving first-hand examples to predispose readers to learn the effective and fruitful methods (Furman, 2005). Özcan et al (2011) adopted expressive arts to improve the empathetic skills of nursing students (Özcan et al., 2011). Qualitative data confirmed that, after the intervention, medical students had a more profound comprehension of how studying literature could help them understand their clients better and become better doctors. They were more likely to rely on literature to help them deal with pressure in their professional life (Shapiro et al., 2004).

Altman et al (2017) found that social workers can also be included as one of the beneficiaries of literature. In their article, adopting empirical evidence, they detailed various excellent literary works to illuminate how preeminent literature abounds with indispensable factors that can motivate readers to identify themselves with what they read and gradually grasp critical thinking capability. In addition, reading literary works enables readers to develop sympathy by arousing their feelings and improving their minds (Altman et al., 2017).

In the education field, teaching faculty should also stress the importance of improving students' empathetic abilities. Şahin (2012) delineated that 38 sixth graders with aggressive and bullying behaviors in primary school as the subjects in the experimental group can decrease their violent actions after being trained empathetically, compared with others in the control group. Kidd and Castano (2013) testified their hypothesis that reading literary fiction, particularly novels that won literature-related awards rather than popular ones like best-selling books, can improve Theory of Mind (ToM). ToM generally refers to empathy (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Thus, some like-minded scholars believed the potential to become empathetic, which is inherent, can be cultivated through training, and empathy can be taught and will have an everlasting positive impact on subjects (Tanrıdağ, 1992; Bodenhorn & Starkey, 2008; Ozcan et al., 2011; Şahin, 2012).

However, some scholars expressed different voices. Junker and Jacquemin (2017) revealed that "the students' empathy did not change over time; students left class no more empathetic than when they began the semester" through both qualitative and quantitative analysis. What is worthy of mention in their article is that the difficulty and complexity of literary texts have a bearing on decreasing learners' sympathy. Besides, various reasons can cause textual difficulty (Junker & Jacquemin, 2017. p 86). Some researchers showed their concern about their country's peace and people's safety in their articles, believing that students who have been trained to learn empathy and sympathy will help build a peaceful and stable society. Numanee et al (2020) carried out a project of immersing ten first-year students of tertiary education in empathy through document analysis and semi-structured interviews for lessening social crises in Bangladesh society (Numanee et al., 2020).

Porto and Zembylas (2020) carried out a project lasting nine months for cultivating their 45 undergraduate learners' "action-oriented empathy and solidarity" (p. 361), companionship, friendliness, and inclusion towards maltreatment of underprivileged groups who are suffering from social, historical and economical and racial injustice by involving their participants in reading novels and short stories and watching films that deal with civil rights issues that covered people from all walks of life and different places, the results of the project were manifested through multi-modal ways (Porto and Zembylas, 2020).

Cohen (2021) differentiated low-level, simple empathy from a more complicated, self-critical comprehension of empathy by reading and teaching *The Tortilla Curtain* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* respectively. The research result was that teachers and students should not be satisfied with the first type of empathy, but rather can and should work for more critical and doubtful investigations of the power of the written word to educate towards empathy (Cohen, 2021). In research about the degree of adolescent students' empathy, self-esteem and satisfaction influences their personal and academic performance. One of the conclusions from their research is that women, compared with men, are more likely to strike a chord (Supervía et al., 2022).

After analyzing the above-mentioned literature review, it was found that there is insufficient research that focuses on CUEMs' writing (essay) competence to test the effectiveness of the empathy project. Therefore, it is paramount for the faculty of English literature courses to take measures to motivate learners to help them build confidence in taking the courses, and even show passion for literature class. This empathy empowerment program is trying to answer the following questions:

- How can the faculty of English literature test whether their learners become compassionate after taking British literature lectures within the academic calendar and by the end of the semester?
- What concrete measures have been taken in and after class to arouse students' empathy in British literature lectures?
- What are the effective suggestions and lessons that this programme will provide for academics who occupy themselves in the teaching of British literature?

Methodology

Constructivism would be suitable for using literary texts to teach empathy. According to constructivism, learners construct knowledge by connecting new information with pre-existing knowledge, and learners actively engage in constructing meaning through meaningful discussions and problem-solving. Using literary texts in the classroom can provide opportunities for learners to connect with characters and events in the text, build empathy and understanding, and explore perspectives and experiences that are different from their own. Through constructive discussions, students can construct meaning, develop empathy, and learn from each other. This project adopted the six steps as the useful methodological framework for the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study employed qualitative research to involve 65 learners to write down 6 essays centering on answering essay questions particularly designed by their lecturer. These essay questions were highly associated with what they learned from the British Literature courses. The project lasted for 16 weeks when students took 2 British Literature courses per week with each course lasting 45 minutes. The program adopted qualitative research to gather textual data collected from the written essays finished by 65 students. After studying *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, *Of Studies* by Francis Bacon, *London* and *The Chimney Sweeper* by William Blake, and *A Red Red Rose* and *My Heart's in the Highlands* by Robert Burns. The participants were selected purposefully (purposive sampling) as they were believed to provide in-depth information about the research questions of this study.

The 65 participants in their third-year study of English as a foreign language at the university level willingly took part in the project because their daily performance largely depended on their essays. The other deciding factors of daily performance included the presentation or performance of given novels by British writers that the 65 participants were

responsible for, and the frequency with that they volunteered to answer the lecturer's questions in class. The total grade for every essay was 5 score. There would be 6 essays that they should hand in to the lecturer who gave a score to every student's essay according to their writing proficiency, the readability and understandability of essays, relevancy to the given essay questions and noticeable empathy-related words.

Given the fact that all participants knew their essays will have a close bearing on their daily performance, they submitted their assignments to the lecturer punctually every time.

Data Collection and Analysis

In total, the lecture collected six essays to perceive whether her disciples could understand the indescribable sufferings that Hamlet encountered, and realize the importance of studies that Francis Bacon documented.

The third essay question, to some degree, would encourage learners to show their concern and reflect on the real world with various social issues yet to be dealt with, and therefore fulfill their duty to decrease the social injustice and to show their reasoning, critical, and compassionate viewpoints on hot topics, such as marriage, child labor, war, futility of religion and the underprivileged plight and so on.

The fourth essay question aimed to arouse learner's focus on vulnerable children who have been maltreated by adults and society, more importantly, to prompt them to figure out effective and practical solutions to the unfairness those children have been compelled to face, and to greatly involve themselves in the real world that is replete with miserable people so that participants would realize the importance of shouldering the responsibility to attend to and even offer kind help to those people to get them out of their predicaments.

The fifth question was to make students have a deep love and nostalgia for their motherland by asking them to imagine that one day if they would be in a foreign country, would they become homesick.

The sixth essay question was to motivate learners to search for other romantic love poems written by English poets to cultivate students' ability in studying and appreciating a poem through their effort. The six detailed requirements for students to get themselves involved in the project are listed as follows:

1. You need to write down a short essay about yourself, now you are Hamlet, you need to tell what you have been through to the world. You are required to write at least 200 words.

2. After learning *Of Studies* by Francis Bacon, what do you think the impacts of studies on you, you may write down an article related to the content of the essay and your own life experience. You are required to write at least 200 words.

3. William Blake wrote down a poem, named *London*, in which he described what he witnessed and experienced to his readers. Is there any image that strikes you the most? If the answer is yes, please write down an essay to talk about it by giving vivid and real examples (stories, data, and research results) from your life. Your essay should be no less than 200 words.

Some hints

- You can write about casualties caused by wars; you can particularly use some wars that happened in the past.

-You can explore the reasons why current adults feel sorrowful and weak.

-You can write about your opinion about Child labor.

- You can analyze the reasons why there are so many issues in marriage.

Your writing should be closely linked to the poem, *London*. This essay should be a study combining the past and the present.

4. If you were the adult in *The Chimney Sweeper* from *Songs of Experience*, would you help the child you are speaking to?

Some hints:

Do you know some children surrounding you or those kids who you know from the Internet might also live a miserable life and cannot get out of their sufferings by themselves? Please give me at least one example. And write down the things you can do to alleviate their worries and concerns, or write down other kind and selfless people who already have offered their helping hand to them to make their life better.

5. In *My Heart's in the Highlands*, the poet expresses his deep love and nostalgia for Scotland. What if you were in a foreign land, would you miss your motherland? Could you please talk about the feelings you might have? Or you could write about the real stories of others.

6. You know *A Red Red Rose* is a romantic and loving poem written for the poet's lover at the moment of their departure. Can you try finding other poems like this written by English poets? You should at least find one poem like this. And you will score higher if you can analyze the poem you find out.

Results

Hamlet

The themes reflected in their reflective writings include a) Hamlet's miserable life; b) Hamlet's philosophy on life and death; c) Hamlet's reaction to his mother's remarriage; d) Hamlet's contemplation on revenge.

All students could correctly document the plot of the drama. Most learners could witness Hamlet's change from a pure and kind idealist and perfectionist who only sees the beauty and goodness of the world to a revengeful, critical, suspicious, and gloomy one. Participants perceived the vicissitudes befalling Hamlet, "the carefree prince of Denmark" who "had affectionate parents and wonderful life." Then many students focused on the misfortunes the prince must face up, detailing the painful and suffering abyss he is plunged to. All students used derogatory terms to describe Hamlet's hatred toward Claudius such as "cruel", "ridiculous", and "Claudius was guilty not only of murder but also of incest and adultery with my mother."

Facing the unexpected, mysterious and tragic death of Hamlet's loving and respectable father, who is "a perfect and wise representative of human beings", Hamlet is overpowered by confusion, incomprehension, indecision, shocks, conflict, contradictions, fear, anxiety, resentment, panic, disillusionment, pressure, evil, sorrow, depression, hopelessness, misery, anger, rage, weakness, madness, extremeness, doubts, tragedies and dissatisfaction that "the reality and darkness of the society" and "the ugliness of the world" impose upon the prince. The frequent word used by learners about the death of Polonius is "sad" and "sorry". About Ophelia's death, they used "distraught" and "stumble upon the funeral of my love, Ophelia. I cry, my love, why do you leave me?"

In terms of Gertrude's remarriage, some students used some negative words to describe his mother, such as "a poor, cowardly and dissolute woman" and "a vain creature". They discerned Hamlet's viewpoints on the queen's new hasty marriage, "I couldn't help hating her infidelity" and "my mother's remarriage plunged me into deep sorrow." and "I indulged in the grief of my father's death." Many of them used "humiliation", "shame",

“misunderstanding” and “betrayal” to show Hamlet’s disapproval of Gertrude’s hasty matrimonial option, expressing the embarrassing and uncomfortable dilemma Hamlet is in.

Students expressed “relief” and “satisfaction” Hamlet experiences after avenging his father’s death despite his own death. Being asked to write an essay from the perspective of Hamlet, all learners put themselves in Hamlet’s shoes, all of them, more or less, sympathized with Hamlet, most learners perceived Hamlet’s profound philosophical thoughts on the world, his weak ability in avenging his father before he makes his final decision, and the self-fulfillment of Hamlet’s humanistic values after conquering trials and tribulations.

Of Studies

The themes in their essays include a) the influences of studies; b) the interplay between studies and practice; c) reading methods; d) the purposes of studies.

Most of them elaborated on how and why books could benefit them. About the advantages of books, such as “having insight” “reading makes a full man” “self-development” “broadening people’s horizon” “lasting benefits or effects” “getting more opportunities” “having a sober mind and strong will”.

Some students gave vivid examples of the precious lessons they could learn from reading different books. Two students mentioned Yu Hua, a famous Chinese writer who has written a lot of stories about the cruel reality facing common Chinese people. His works taught them to learn to be strong and optimistic. One student talked about *The Dream of Red Mansions*, the masterpiece of Cao Xueqin, she had sympathy for the miserable and desperate life that the characters could not avoid. As she put it, “They cannot choose how to live, they don’t have basic human rights, they cannot have the real happiness and freedom. So, as an adult, I think it was not a world of ‘dream’, but a world of ‘jail’.”

A girl uncovered how a book has cured her psychological disorder. “What brought me to a new world was that I read a book called *The courage to be hated*. After reading the book, I forgave myself and solved a psychological problem that had been bothering me for years.” Similarly a girl believed that books served as a prophecy and made her realize sufferings facing all human beings. From a broader term, the student could relieve the pain she suffered because she is not the only person who encounters it. She feels support from allies when facing difficulties. She can get strength from characters in novels to become mentally and emotionally powerful and unconquerable. Besides, one girl believed that reading more books might prevent girls from getting married too early and from living a miserable life without financial and emotional support.

The sixty-two students who could wisely realize the pivotal importance of choosing a good book to read according to their will and interests, perceivably knowing how to distinguish a helpful book from a lousy one, therefore preventing themselves from being poisoned by corrupt books. Some of them reflected that their past improper reading or studying habits hampered them from remembering effective and useful knowledge, let alone putting knowledge into practice.

Many of them emphasized the importance of putting theory acquired from books into practice, equally stressing the importance of practice.

They concur with the idea that study can help them in “more job opportunities, career promotion, getting a higher diploma, and accumulating wealth” “becoming a person who can contribute to the society”.

Except for three students who wrote their essays off-topic, sixty-two participants approved the viewpoints on studies. Students knew its pith. To conclude, the thoughts and

reflections on studies from the essay resonated with these participants. However, a dreaded fact that cannot be ignored is that a lot of students showed their concern about the reality that they are easily distracted by explosive information characteristic of internet-based applications and social media platforms that would reduce their time spent reading books. Thankfully, they agreed with the fact that among pastimes, only reading can have an everlastingly beneficial effect on them.

London

The themes in the sixty-five students' essays include a) war; b) child labour; c) marriage; d) life stresses; e) Social ills in British society; f) Social ills in Chinese society;

Concerning war, students could list data on death tolls, casualties and economic losses collected from the internet and could give detailed facts about the cruelty, atrocity, and violence of wars, showing their sympathy for people who died in wars, and for survivors who survived but suffered post-traumatic stress disorder and calling for hard-won peace. Students wrote about wars that took place, such as the World Wars, particularly repeatedly mentioning wars relating to China, such as unscrupulous crimes committed by the brutal and inhuman Japanese army—the Nanjing Massacre, one girl wrote this in her essay, “Even the thought of it sends chills down my spine, how desperate the people must be!”, few students mentioned the Eight-Nation Alliance invaded China, and United States bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.

A girl shared her feelings about *There was no news at Auschwitz*, an article about Auschwitz concentration camp, and gave detailed gruesome information to show how monstrously the Nazis committed these crimes, how heartbroken she was when she read sentences about how both adults and children's lives were taken away violently and inhumanely. After many years, the girl could still remember some sentences from the book, which shows that these appalling events recorded in this article leave an imprint on her mind. In addition, some students mentioned the miserable life of Jewish people who were massacred by the Nazis. And they described Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two Japanese cities, on which two atomic bombs inflicted irreversible and indescribable pains, the Korean War (North Korea was supported by China), the Vietnam War, the American Civil War, the Battle of Verdun, the Soviet-German War, the French Revolutionary Wars.

In addition, students also paid attention to wars that are happening in some other countries, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War. And they cared about some countries and regions that have been afflicted by wars, for example Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. The next heatedly discussed topic is child labour.

All students opposed child labour. After learning about *London*, in which small chimney sweepers' pathetic life was briefly mentioned. One student wrote, “In my personal opinion, it is wrong to employ child labor, which is simply brutal and inhuman.” She showed her disapproval of child exploitation, calling for the protection of children's well-being and criticizing the overwhelming harm to these children.

Participants gave data collected from the United Nations, the International Labor Organization, UNICEF and *the Economist*, and talked about vivid examples at home and abroad to explain that child labour is still an international crisis facing children across the world, calling for protecting children's interests and well-being, ensuring that they are free from being exploited. One girl found out a cruel fact about “2 million child laborers under the age of 15” being exploited as free laborers working in chocolate factories in Africa through the internet. And then she thought out two solutions to stop this from happening. From this, it is

obvious that the girl cares about the harsh reality in which some people are treated unfairly and tries her best to save these kids. They called for treasuring happy life. And they worried about these children living in untold pain. "Moreover, child laborers may be exposed to the dark side of society at an early age, which distorts their values and outlook on life."

Physically healthy child laborers may also have psychological problems in adulthood, which will affect social security probably. One student thought of another classic novel *Oliver Twist*, describing the miserable life the little boy suffers. In turn, the poverty forces some children to enter society prematurely to survive, and to become exploited and enslaved child labor. Some analyzed some reasons why child laborers were commonly exploited: survival needs; lower wages paid for children; shortage of adult workers. In addition, one student analyzed the hidden reasons behind child laborers.

First, parents need children to work for money. Second, parents who are not educated cannot afford their children's education tuition, nor can they realize the importance of education, thus passing down poverty generation after generation. There is no doubt that many of them believed that education serves as the best way of saving children from being oppressed.

Speaking of marriage, some students analyzed why some divorce. In the past, arranged marriages led to women's tragedy. At present, women become financially and emotionally independent, and issues in marriage are increasingly noticeable, yet it is a complicated question, she did not detail more rational reasons to explain marital issues. A boy showed his negative attitude toward marriage, believing that marriage serves as only a system that makes it easy for the ruling class to control its people.

One girl analyzed prostitutes in Britain and China. The girl said it is of vital importance to guarantee that those women who might become prostitutes have ways of making a living, instead of only resorting to the one contemptible and immoral way of survival. By law and people's opposition, she believed that the anti-prostitution movement will be successful.

Some of them elaborated on life stresses facing Chinese people, such as people feeling that they cannot be understood by people around them, lacking emotional and spiritual support; overwhelming expectations imposed upon adults by society causing much pressure; adults cannot help but compare with others, burdening themselves with unnecessary worries; rat race is commonly seen, and students called for healthy competition; pressure from study, work, economy, marriage and children overpowers people; constraints, deceit, self-interest, absence of law, repression and hypocrisy predominate in people's world; they don't have time and money to do what they are interested in; life is full of intractable problems. Helplessness overwhelms people. The death of close friends and family members saddens people. Covid-19 worsens people's hard life. Due to three years lockdown, China faces economic dislocation. The unemployment rate was increasing. Factories and companies were forced to close. In addition, the number of people committing suicide was rising significantly due to overwhelming pressure relating to loans and subsistence. Students also express how inconvenient and uncomfortable it was for them to wear a mask. One student used figurative language, "The COVID-19 seems like a war without smoke" to describe the hardships all Chinese people have been through. Chinese live sped-up lives. Yet they suggest that people should adjust to the world and look at and solve problems from a new perspective.

Regarding social ills in British society, a boy illustrated the reasons why the British Society was facing miserable and serious problems, such as "industrial pollution and class oppression" "miseries and ills in economics, the religion, and the politics of London". He knew the real intention of William Blake when he wrote this poem. He observed that no one is

immune from the above-mentioned social ills, and anxiety and depression overwhelmed Londoners with the death of Queen Elizabeth II. Brexit and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic serve as two predominant factors leading to people's mixed feelings. And the energy crisis derives from the conflict between Russia and Ukraine; homeless people are widespread; shortage of laborers and food shortages become increasingly serious; insecurity of international students worries every citizen. People begin to be concerned about personal safety, and critical of the government that fails to fulfill its duty to prioritize its citizens' safety and interests.

Concerning social problems in China, one girl used vivid examples from Chinese society to show how disappointed she was toward social injustice, and the miserable life women must bear, such as discrimination against women in their careers for their pregnancies, and unfaithful husband. Besides, serious environmental problems have been repeatedly mentioned by participants. About political corruption in China, a few students give a vivid example of a heroic government official who endeavored to crack down on high-level officials and local civil servants for bribery and corruption, showing their hatred for corrupt officials who only "exploit people without power and do harm to our country".

To conclude, this famous poem strikes a chord with all participants who express viewpoints that are highly compassionate and associated with the current real world to ponder some serious social problems and even come up with feasible solutions to make the world a better place.

The Chimney Sweeper

The themes in the participants' essays include a) sympathy to the pains chimney sweeper suffered; b) views on the backdrop; c) quintessential examples from life; d) solutions to the thorny problem.

All students expressed their deep sympathy for those children who were forced to sweep chimneys. Most of the students thought about their own lives and society after learning this poem in broader terms. Many students thought that these children should have been in a state of being "innocent", "happy" and "carefree" rather than being forced to work at such a young age. The words they used to express their feelings about these children include "sorrowful", "painful", "suffering", "miserable", "poor" and "pathetic". They also used words like "false", "dark", "sick", and "cruel" to express their censure and disdain for the dark decay of the church and society. When asked, "If you are the adult in *The Chimney Sweeper* from *Songs of Experience*, would you help the child you are speaking to?" Fifty-nine students said they were willing to help the wretched child. Their heartfelt sympathy went out to the woe of these children. They were willing to provide aid in support of poor children like little chimney sweepers.

By contrast, four students said they were unwilling to help others because they learned about that in the 18th and 19th centuries, a chaotic era of child labor, they thought this phenomenon was widespread, so they were indifferent to it and would not intend to help them. Two students said whether to help the boy depended on their own situation at the time. If they were living a miserable life, experiencing food shortages and lack of money, then they would not help the child. But if they were wealthy, then they would faintly help this child.

All the students who studied this poem were able to associate the tragic experience of chimney sweepers with some examples from their own lives, such as "the children in Liangshan area of China". Students could realize that people here are still suffering economic hardship. Children here may have taken on the burden of life early, doing laborious work that

overwhelms them; some children are discriminated against, abused, and even trafficked on account of their congenital mental and physical defects. In addition, they thought about those children plagued by ongoing armed conflicts, believing that those suffering kids are even more miserable and vulnerable, thinking that they do not have enough food and clothing, and knowing that they are even frequently threatened by death and cannot lead a normal life at all, let alone a safe and carefree childhood. This made students feel how lucky they are and will never treat their happiness for granted.

Regarding solutions to the thorny problem, some students understood the necessity of legislating to safeguard children's interests. Besides, some students wanted to strengthen the protection of poor children by sending emails to the government and giving advice. Some students planned to participate in various meaningful volunteer activities, such as writing letters to children from mountains, teaching children in mountainous areas, playing with children in orphanages, donating money and materials to children living in difficulties etc. Some students saw how strong and optimistic the chimney sweeper was in such a miserable situation, so there is "no reason to idle away our time". Some students think that even though human nature is to be self-centered, "people should have faith and act motivated purely by altruism".

To sum up, all students were able to empathize with the heartrending experience of the chimney sweeper and extend it from the classroom to real life, hoping to help others and build a harmonious and bright society with joint efforts.

My Heart in Highland

The themes in their essays contain a) affection for the motherland; b) nostalgia for being away from motherland or hometown; the reasons why participants become homesick and nostalgic; d) methods to ease homesickness.

After learning the poem, students could understand the poet's profound love for his motherland and meanwhile can express their love for their motherland by recording their own experiences. All students in the study of this poem could perceive the poet's attachment to Scotland and the nostalgia for his past happy days in his homeland. All of them were dearly touched by the poem, which greatly inspired their devotion to their hometown as well as their motherland. When asked "If you were in a foreign land one day, would you miss your motherland?", sixty-four students answered firmly yes to this question, except that one student was uncertain because she had never been far from home.

Based on this question, students elaborated on the topic of motherland and nostalgia. They came up with some patriotic, nostalgic and homesick poems (such as Yu Guangzhong's *Nostalgia*, Ai Qing's *I Love This Land*), songs (such as *My Motherland and Me*), movies (such as *A Journey of a Thousand Miles*, *Wolf Warriors*), and those patriots who have gone through all sorts of difficulties and dangers to return to their motherland (such as Qian Xuesen, Meng Wanzhou). They used these sentences to express their affection for their homeland: "Motherland has long been engraved in our flesh and blood", "Patriotism is the noblest human sentiments" and "No matter how far we go, there is always a place in our hearts for our motherland and hometown", "Pure love and nostalgia for the motherland, which will never waver".

Few of the students even used poetic sentences to express their deep love for their motherland, such as "As people will never realize how deep their affections are to their homeland until they step on an alien land, just as they never confide in how much they will miss their loved ones until they separate from them." "Our hometown abounds in the

beautiful scenery that we never get tired of viewing. All about our hometown has been deeply imprinted on our memory. My hometown is a seashore. My hometown is a high wall. My hometown is a firm shoulder to lean on." "Motherland is not only a piece of land, but also the most touching note among all songs."

Most of the students said that when they first set foot in a foreign country, they might be full of anticipation and novelty without homesickness. But as time goes on, loneliness, uneasiness, and fear would set in and would commence to build up. The cultural differences between China and foreign countries gradually stand out in every aspect of their lives, which would make them feel that they cannot really accustom themselves to the alien environments. Consequently, they would begin to miss their homeland. Particularly when they see loving families or friends talking to each other on the street, they will think of their own family members and buddies. When they see steak salad in a restaurant, they will miss a wide variety of cuisines and snacks in their hometown. When they are enjoying the glorious scene in a foreign country, the splendid vistas of the native land will also come into their minds. At this time, the yearning for the motherland turns strong. They wrote these: "The land where we grow up is part of our lives", "Homesickness will seize me for a long time" and "My body is right here, but my heart is in the motherland". Some students shared their experiences of leaving home, describing in detail how much they miss their hometown after leaving home. They used to look forward to growing up, hoping to leave home and gain freedom. However, when it's time to leave home, live in an unfamiliar environment, meet new people, and have to deal with numerous trifles and worries in life by themselves, they indeed realize that leaving home is a hard choice to make in that loneliness and desperation creep in. It makes them realize that "home is the warmest harbor".

A Red Red Rose

The themes in their writings contain a) the analysis of literary features of love poems; b) attitudes toward love.

Through the analysis and appreciation of *A Red Red Rose* and other love poems, students learned about the thoughts of diverse poets on love from the aesthetic perspective and the impressive stories described by these poets, which significantly influenced students' views on love and enabled them to consider love in a more rational and objective attitude. They associated the poem with other love poems and tried to appreciate these poems from various angles, such as the poet's writing background, writing style, genre, rhythm, structure, theme, diction rhetorical techniques, etc. The poems mentioned by participants can be found in Table 1. The students' viewpoints on love are as follows:

"We must learn to love ourselves before we can love others. When we fall in love with someone, we may feel that we are not good enough, we may feel inferior, and try to be compatible with each other to keep the relationship in good shape. However, we should understand that love is a spice of our life, not a necessity. Each of us is an independent individual. Do not lose yourself because of loving others."

"True love overcomes all obstacles. We have sweet moments in love, when just a hug or a kiss makes us feel happy. And of course, when you're in love, you're in trouble, but if two people love each other, they can't be afraid of any difficulties. After all, as the poem says, love can transcend time, space, and love is eternal."

"The process of love is more important than the result. Love should not be shallow, communication, compatibility in the soul, understanding, support, and mutual progress

matter instead. If one day two people cannot continue to love each other, then choosing to break up and move on is also a wise choice.”

In conclusion, through the study of this poem and the appreciation of the related poems, all students will further comprehend the essence of love. In love, participants realized that self-sacrifice should not be encouraged, instead two people should support each other. Love should not just be about the sweetness of two people, but also about the responsibilities that both parties should shoulder in life, about the determination to face difficulties together.

After the end of the program, the researcher distributed a questionnaire to the 65 participants to collect data to double check whether the program achieved a favorable result, 55 students filled in it. When asked “Do you think after taking parting in the writing program to strengthen your empathy, you can become more empathetic and compassionate”, 60% of students said yes, whereas 40% of them said no. When asked “When you find yourself are empathetic to a novel in the British literature class, can you read them from A to Z?”, 65.45% of students said yes, whereas 34.55% of them said no. When asked “When you find yourself are empathetic to a poem in the British literature class, can you continue reading other poems written by the same poet?”, 36.36% of students said yes, whereas 63.64% of them said no. At last, when asked, “Do you think that after taking part in the writing program to enhance your empathy to literary works, you can have a better understanding of literary works and can be more compassionate and empathetic to them?”, 60% of students said yes and 40% of students said no. According to the data gained from the questionnaire, though the number of students who agreed that the program helped them enhance their empathy via literary works is less than what the researchers has expected, the contents reflected in the six essays say a lot about the fact that they indeed became empathetic and compassionate to the sufferings described in poems, and therefore showed their concern to the social injustice and even put forward workable solutions to help people out of predicaments. When they were asked to imagine that when they have to separate themselves from their motherland, all of them showed how homesick and nostalgic they would be.

Conclusion

This article is to uncover the CUEMs’ study of English literature by British authors, to carry out pedagogy to make students more empathetic, and the results achieved by using reflective writing as textual data to testify students’ improvement in empathy.

This article mainly adopted qualitative research—thematic analysis that was conducted to code and interpret the 65 participants’ reflective writing after they took literature courses. Reflective writing serves as a good way of understanding students’ reflections and feelings about their experiences (Lin et al., 2022). As most of participants who major in English prepare themselves for being English teachers in primary school, lower secondary school and upper secondary school, or even institutes of higher education, it is of vital importance for those future teachers to be highly compassionate and empathetic because their students’ needs and feelings should be taken into consideration, only a teacher with empathy can be in others’ shoes. Besides, a person with higher emotional quotient (EQ) will always stand out and conquer difficulties with unremitting efforts and unconquerable spirits. And EQ includes self-awareness, empathy, social competency, motivation, self-control, and self-confidence. People having the characteristic activity of reflective writing have better EQ. (Kadam et al., 2022) Therefore, this project functions as a worthwhile endeavour to perceive the participants’ empathetic competence, and meanwhile enhance their capability in reflecting on complicated and tricky issues that happened around the world, looking at these problems

from different angles, figuring out solutions to these problems after learning literary texts that are filled with unsolved enigmas.

Discussion

The collected textual data, after being coded and interpreted, testifies that the 65 students become empathetic and compassionate, reflecting on the world, and acting to perfect the world after taking British literature class. The conclusion of the research is in line with some previous studies. (Furman, 2005; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Porto & Zembylas, 2020) However, that contrasts with the conclusion of some other studies. (Junker & Jacquemin, 2017) There are some limitations in the article. Firstly, with regard to essay questions, it is pitiful that some classic novels were not included in the project. Considering the complexity and connotation of fiction, participants would contemplate them and can provide insightful and fabulous feedback to make the project more complete and persuasive. Secondly, the participants include both female and male students, yet the research does not distinguish the perceived gender differences between them regarding the degree of empathy to the same literary texts. And the project does not provide demographic details. Third, the research only focuses on the empathy-themed information reflected in students' essays, ignoring students' writing proficiency, though the researcher gave each participant a justifiable and objective score based on criteria that empathize writing skills. Given the above-mentioned shortcomings of the research, the later researchers can strengthen researches on ways of using novels to improve students' empathy.

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Table 1

The poets and the poems mentioned in the essay question 5 and the frequency of the poems being mentioned

Poets	Poems	Times
George Gordon Byron	<i>She Walks in Beauty</i>	7
	<i>When We Two Parted</i>	4
	<i>The First Kiss of Love</i>	1
	<i>Maid of Athens</i>	1
	<i>I Saw Thee Weep</i>	1
	<i>To M. S. G.</i>	1
William Butler Yeats	<i>The Rose in the Deeps of His Heart</i>	1
	<i>He Wishes for The Cloths of Heaven</i>	1
	<i>Down By the Sally Garden</i>	1
	<i>When you are old</i>	1
William Shakespeare	<i>Sonnet 1</i>	1
	<i>Sonnet 18</i>	1
	<i>Sonnet 98</i>	1
	<i>Sonnet 116</i>	3
John Donne	<i>A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning</i>	9
	<i>The Good Morrow</i>	1
	<i>Bright Star</i>	4
Elizabeth Barrett Browning	<i>How Do I Love Thee</i>	11
Percy Bysshe Shelley	<i>Love's Philosophy</i>	5
Robert Browning	<i>You'll love Me yet</i>	1
Edgar Allan Poe	<i>Annabel Lee</i>	2
Walt Whitman:	<i>A Glimpse</i>	2
Emily Dickinson:	<i>Summer for Thee</i>	1
	<i>Grant I May Be</i>	1
Wystan Hugh Auden:	<i>Funeral Blues</i>	1

Xi Murong	<i>A Blooming Tree</i>	1
Wang wei	<i>Love Seeds</i>	1
Jorge Luis Borges	<i>What can I hold you with</i>	1
Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin	<i>I loved you</i>	1
Rabin Dranath Tagore	<i>Sorrow of separation</i>	1

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