

Reflective Analysis of Instructing Close Reading in Modern English Literature for EFL Medical Learners

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to address the challenges posed by the exponential growth of structured and unstructured data, particularly on platforms like YouTube, where vast amounts of video content are generated and consumed every day. Traditional databases are insufficient for processing unstructured data, such as videos, necessitating advanced solutions. This paper aims to explore the use of the Hadoop framework, with a focus on its MapReduce programming model, to efficiently manage and analyze large-scale unstructured data. The project examines YouTube datasets to extract insights from video metadata, user engagement patterns, and viewing behaviors, demonstrating Hadoop's capability in handling big data and showcasing its potential to improve data-driven decision-making, content recommendation systems, and user experiences on digital media platforms.

Keywords: *Close Reading; Narrative Medicine; Literature Education; Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Medical Humanities; Indian Literature and Pedagogy;*

Introduction

Close reading, understood as “the meticulous examination of the intricate connections and ambiguities (multiple interpretations) within the verbal and figurative elements of a work” [1], is a literary technique that has been highly valued by scholars as a vital element of literature in fostering ethical and compassionate medical practices. Since the 1970s, when literature and medicine emerged as a recognized subfield within medical humanities [2], close reading has been heralded as central to the narrative turn in literature and medicine. In the current era, close reading continues to be regarded as the foundation of narrative competence and is “utilized across all aspects of clinical practice simultaneously” [3], as described by Rita Charon, a leading advocate for narrative medicine as an essential discipline in healthcare. Despite ongoing debates about the legitimacy of literature's role in medicine, the importance of close reading as a means of integrating literary insights into medical practice remains widely acknowledged [4]. The pedagogy of narrative medicine is thus primarily rooted in the instruction of close reading, underscoring its enduring role in nurturing empathy, critical analysis, and reflective practice among medical professionals.

Over the past few decades, China has witnessed the rapid expansion of narrative medicine since its formal introduction to Chinese healthcare practitioners in 2011 [5]. With the growing recognition of Chinese narrative medicine, there is an increasing agreement that narrative medicine should be introduced to medical students as early and as comprehensively as possible [6]. This movement has been reflected in the teaching of College English, a core component of undergraduate medical education. A 2013 review forecasted that narrative medicine would usher in a new era for integrating English literature with medical training [7]. Indeed, in the following decade, an increasing number of English literature educators in medical schools have incorporated narrative medicine into their curricula by teaching

students how to engage deeply with various texts, from textbooks and novels to films, artwork, and real-life events [8-12]. These instructors argue that including narrative medicine as a critical element in medical education will provide future healthcare providers with a more comprehensive understanding of medicine and patient care. This paper contributes to the ongoing conversation by examining a Contemporary English Literature course for medical undergraduates, focusing specifically on the integration of close reading within a core foreign language course. The discussion centers on three interconnected questions: what, how, and why to teach close reading. While it is beyond the scope of this article to address these questions exhaustively, the aim here is to highlight the potential and opportunities for close reading pedagogy from an instructor's perspective, illustrating a possible approach for the integration of narrative medicine into fundamental medical courses.

Interest-First: What to Teach

When I initiated my Contemporary English Literature course about six years ago, the central aim was to prioritize student engagement and foster a genuine passion for reading. Research has highlighted a noticeable lack of enthusiasm for reading among medical students, with many exhibiting a tendency toward superficial reading or reading solely for entertainment purposes [13–15]. This lack of commitment to deep reading has significantly hindered students' ability to perceive medicine as a compassionate and humane practice. Consequently, I designed the course primarily around literature, rather than narrative medicine, to create a stimulating environment that would inspire students to truly enjoy reading. Over time, I have subtly integrated elements of narrative medicine into my lectures, albeit without overtly referencing the field. After several iterations of the Contemporary English Literature course, I still consider it fundamentally a literature-focused course for medical students rather than a strict narrative medicine class. While the boundary between these two areas might seem somewhat blurred in the broader context, the guiding principles of each approach are distinct. Narrative medicine, with its emphasis on medical outcomes in a biomedical context, contrasts with literature reading, which aims to cultivate an appreciation for storytelling and develop students' narrative competence [16]. An overemphasis on narrative medicine during the pre-clinical stage may not represent the most efficient use of limited classroom time. On the other hand, a literature course must maintain student interest and keep them engaged. As a result, it is almost a natural evolution that the guiding principle for this Contemporary English Literature course is “interest first,” a concept that governs the structure and content of each session.

The principle of “interest first” proves to be vital for the students I teach. Most of them are sophomores or juniors who have never read full-length English novels in their original and unabridged versions. At the start of each course, I routinely ask students whether they have ever read an entire English novel. Of the 50 students enrolled each semester, only a small handful respond affirmatively. Despite achieving outstanding scores in the College Entrance Examination, it is understandable that many of them feel daunted by the prospect of reading English literary works. A recent study reveals that more than half of surveyed students find English literature challenging to read, yet over 90% express interest in enrolling in a guided reading course on English literature [17]. To keep the course engaging, less theoretical, and more aligned with the students' reading habits is crucial for maintaining their motivation, enthusiasm, and confidence in learning English. While some might suggest that short stories

could serve as a viable alternative, empirical research has shown that reading novels is the most effective way to improve the reader's theory of mind [18]. Additionally, a novel, in its expansive prose form, offers opportunities to explore character depth, plot intricacies, and ethical dilemmas that closely mirror the complexities found in real-world medical interactions.

With these principles in mind, I crafted the following course description for *Contemporary Novels in English*:

This course is designed for students with an interest in reading contemporary novels in English. As an introductory survey class, it brings together novels from various contemporary genres (such as detective, dystopia, fantasy, memoir, adventure, sci-fi, and graphic novels) and authors from diverse cultural backgrounds (including American, British, African, Canadian, Chinese, Irish, and Japanese authors). Central themes for discussion include, but are not limited to, the relationship between past and present, fiction and truth, contemporary adaptations of classic works, the intersection of media and literature, and the connection between science and humanity.

The emphasis on "interest" in the opening sentence of the course description is deliberate, underscoring the course's primary focus on sparking a genuine passion for reading. I also emphasize to students in the introductory session that the course is driven by their interest. To illustrate the reading workload, I bring all the required novels into the classroom to show students the physical extent of the material they are expected to read. Although some may choose to withdraw, those who remain enrolled typically strive to complete the readings, and the results in terms of narrative competence gradually become evident. As mentioned in the course description, the books I select are primarily "genre fiction," which, according to Diana Tixier Herald, is defined by "a story in which something significant happens" [19]. The intrinsic appeal of genre fiction, with its engaging plots and captivating storytelling, serves as a powerful tool to sustain student involvement. However, I am also aware of the frequent criticism of genre fiction for its perceived lack of aesthetic depth and literary merit. In response, I carefully select works by renowned authors such as Margaret Atwood, Ted Chiang, J. M. Coetzee, Neil Gaiman, Kazuo Ishiguro, Maxine Hong Kingston, Colum McCann, and Art Spiegelman. Over time, the list has expanded to include authors from a wide range of cultural, regional, and ethnic backgrounds, fostering a rich array of narratives that resonate with students on multiple levels.

Finally, the discussion topics proposed in the course encourage students to approach the readings with critical questions in mind, rather than simply skimming for plot details or merely completing the assigned reading. One significant advantage of reading novels is their capacity to explore complex issues in depth, allowing students to uncover insights that may even surpass the instructor's observations. In this way, the classroom environment becomes mutually beneficial, promoting a dynamic exchange of ideas between students and the instructor.

Competence-Centered: The Process of Teaching

Close reading is a skill that must be explicitly taught, a fact that is often overlooked in educational settings. While close reading is crucial for developing narrative competence, it frequently gets overshadowed by the tendency to seek meaning, significance, or moral lessons from a text. This does not imply that close reading and reading for ethical or other purposes are incompatible; however, without a solid foundation in close reading, students may form weak interpretations or rely on emotional reactions—examples of the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy that close reading aims to avoid [20]. A student untrained in close reading may base their judgments on personal prejudices, overlooking the motives, history, or external factors that drive a character's actions. Responses like "I don't think," "I disagree," or "I feel it is wrong to..." often show a reluctance to engage with the text carefully, attentively, and empathetically.

To encourage students to read with greater understanding rather than simply relying on intuition, it is imperative for instructors to teach close reading as an essential skill that benefits all learners. Rita Charon and her colleagues at Columbia University exemplify this process with tools such as "The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University Reading Guide for Reflective Practice" [21], and in their monographs *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* [3] and *The Principles and Practice of Narrative Medicine* [22]. These works provide effective guidelines for beginners to begin close reading. However, it is essential to acknowledge that Charon's approach is tailored for native or near-native English speakers, which may not be suitable for students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, like those in *Contemporary Novels in English*. While Charon's method emphasizes narratological, rhetorical, and contextual elements of close reading, EFL students may need a more specialized approach that also considers linguistic and cultural differences.

For Chinese EFL medical undergraduates, I have developed the following close reading model, specifically tailored to their background and level of English proficiency:

A Close Reading Framework for Chinese EFL Medical Undergraduates

Linguistic Aspects

What connotations arise from specific word choices? How do grammatical elements (such as tense, voice, mood, and case) operate within the text? What is the effect of sentence structures (such as length, punctuation, and complexity)?

Formal Aspects

What are the conventional features of this genre, and how does the text align with them? How is the text structured (beginning, middle, end)? What rhetorical effects do the style and medium of the text create?

Contextual Aspects

Can you identify any culture-specific references, such as names of people, places, or objects? Does the text allude to specific texts, myths, historical events, or communities? How do these contextual markers relate to the text's cultural, historical, or social implications?

In the following sections, I will present some examples to illustrate how this framework operates in practice.

Linguistic Features

The first excerpt is from *Story of Your Life* by Chinese-American science fiction author Ted Chiang:

"Your father is about to ask me the question. This is the most important moment in our lives, and I want to pay attention, note every detail. Your dad and I have just come back from an evening out, dinner and a show; it's after midnight. We came out onto the patio to look at the full moon; then I told your dad I wanted to dance, so he humors me, and now we're slow dancing, a pair of thirty somethings swaying back and forth in the moonlight like kids. I don't feel the night chill at all. And then your dad says, 'Do you want to make a baby?'" [23]

A careful reader would immediately recognize the shifting tenses within this passage. The narrative moves between future, past, and present tenses, creating a fluid portrayal of time. The phrase "now" clearly anchors the action in the present, while the opening line hints at future events, creating a subtle sense of forewarning. This blending of tenses reflects the protagonist's unique ability to perceive time differently after learning an alien language, which changes her perception of events. For many Chinese EFL students, who are accustomed to an analytical language structure, the intricacies of tense usage may present a challenge, as English is a synthetic language that relies heavily on inflections (tense, case, number, etc.). Therefore, it is vital for instructors to highlight these linguistic distinctions and guide students toward a deeper, more intuitive understanding of the text.

Formal Features

Recognizing the formal aspects of a genre is typically the first step in understanding genre fiction. Each genre is defined by specific conventions that shape reader expectations. For instance, detective fiction usually begins with a mystery and concludes with its resolution, while science fiction often explores speculative technological advancements and their potential consequences. Identifying the genre of a text helps students orient themselves to the text's structure and thematic expectations.

To demonstrate how genre shapes the style and meaning of a text, I use two excerpts by Virginia Woolf. The first is a dense and lengthy passage discussing illness and its spiritual implications [26], while the second is a brief opening sentence from *Mrs. Dalloway* [27]. The first excerpt, with its elaborate structure and reflective tone, contrasts sharply with the concise, suspenseful opening of *Mrs. Dalloway*. This stark difference illustrates how the genre influences the style of writing and establishes expectations for the reader.

Contextual Understanding in Graphic Novels

In addition to traditional texts, graphic novels play an important role in contemporary courses. The genre blends textual and visual storytelling, making it an essential medium for today's technology-savvy students. Graphic novels require students to develop the ability to read images as well as words. When teaching *Maus* by Art Spiegelman [29, 30], I often begin

by introducing the formal elements of the graphic novel, encouraging students to pay attention to the interplay between text and images.

For example, I guide students to analyze the structure of individual pages: What are the objects depicted? How are the characters positioned? What do facial expressions convey? How do the use of shadows and the style of lines affect the tone of the page? These visual elements are as significant as the textual content, and understanding them deepens students' overall comprehension of the narrative. By honing these skills in graphic novels, students not only gain a richer understanding of visual storytelling but also develop interpretive skills that can be applied to both traditional texts and real-life situations, such as understanding the dynamics between a patient and their family member in a clinical setting.

Contextual Aspects

Understanding the contextual foundations of literary works is essential, as they are deeply influenced by the historical and cultural contexts in which they are created. Given that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners might not be familiar with the historical and cultural backgrounds of English literature, it is vital for instructors to actively highlight these contexts and assist students in developing a deeper, more nuanced understanding. Consider the following excerpt from *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood:

This excerpt is a partial transcript from the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, presented at the International Historical Association Convention at the University of Denay, Nunavit, on June 25, 2195.

Chair: Professor Maryann Crescent Moon, Department of Caucasian Anthropology, University of Denay, Nunavit.

Keynote Speaker: Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, Director, Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Archives, Cambridge University, England.

PIEIXOTO:

Thank you. I trust we all had a delightful Arctic Char for dinner last night, and now we're enjoying an equally charming Arctic Chair. I use the word "enjoy" in two distinct senses, leaving out, of course, the outdated third. (Laughter.)

At first glance, the initial paragraphs may appear full of trivial names and titles, such as those of institutions, conferences, and individuals. Many students may notice the futuristic year "2195," indicating the future, but they often overlook the deeper significance of the other references in the text. I typically encourage my students to research "Nunavit" and consider the implications of setting a university there almost two centuries from now. I also discuss the cultural meanings behind the names of the two key figures—Maryann Crescent Moon, an indigenous woman's name, and James Darcy Pieixoto, a white male name—and explore how these names reflect societal values. Additionally, the mention of the two departments provides an opportunity to discuss how Caucasian Anthropology came to be recognized as an independent discipline. After skipping a few paragraphs, I focus on the opening remarks of

the keynote address and prompt the students to analyze the joke in the text and understand why it is both sexual and inappropriate for an academic conference addressing women's oppression under a totalitarian regime. This is a valuable example that illustrates the crucial role context plays in shaping how we interpret individual words, phrases, sentences, and entire texts.

Atwood's work does more than merely teach close reading on a contextual level. It also helps dispel the misconception that close reading is a form of over-interpretation, boosting students' confidence in their ability to engage deeply with a text. In 2019, Atwood published *The Testaments*, the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this new book, Atwood revisits a similar section:

This excerpt mirrors the previous one, featuring another Symposium on Gileadean Studies, but now set in Passamaquoddy, Maine, on June 29–30, 2197.

Chair: Professor Maryanne Crescent Moon, President, Anishinaabe University, Cobalt, Ontario.

Keynote Speaker: Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, Director, Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Archives, Cambridge University, England....

PIEIXOTO:

Thank you, Professor Crescent Moon, or should I say Madam President? Congratulations on your promotion, a development that would never have occurred in Gilead. (Applause.) Now that women are assuming leadership roles to such an alarming extent, I hope you will not be too harsh on me. I've taken your feedback about my jokes at the Twelfth Symposium to heart—I admit some were in poor taste—and I will strive not to repeat my mistakes. (Modified applause.)

The development in the sequel is unexpected. When I first introduced *The Handmaid's Tale* to my students, I had no idea that a sequel would emerge. However, upon reading *The Testaments*, I was excited to see how the language, names, cultural references, tone, and overall content had evolved. These changes serve as clear evidence of the benefits of close reading, demonstrating how the text's development is deeply tied to an in-depth analysis. This process mirrors the evidence-based approaches used in fields like medical education, where tangible outcomes are directly tied to careful study. Moreover, the changes in the sequel—driven by the author's response to her previous work—demonstrate that close reading can be systematically taught and assessed, transforming it into a "biomedical technique" due to its structured methodology. As a result, I now use both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* as paired texts, encouraging students to analyze, compare, and interpret the shifts between the two.

This section outlines how I apply the Model in my "Contemporary Novels in English" class to teach EFL medical undergraduates the skill of close reading. While the boundaries between the different aspects of reading are not always clear-cut, this Model acts more as a flexible guide than a rigid rule for analyzing texts. Experienced readers will often find close reading an almost instinctive skill when engaging with a text, while less experienced readers

may occasionally feel lost. For such situations, the Model serves as a supportive tool, offering students something concrete to work with when they encounter difficulty while reading.

Student-Centered: Fostering a Sense of Accomplishment

Narrative drives medicine, while close reading enhances the power of narrative. True empowerment occurs when students dedicate time and effort to engaging with texts and recognizing the intricacies within them. As such, the focus of teaching close reading should not rest on the instructor delivering lectures but on the active participation of the students. A truly empowering close reading class encourages students to turn the pages, apply analytical skills, and uncover the complexities embedded in the text through subtle clues.

Consequently, assignments and assessments in the "Contemporary Novels in English" course are designed to inspire students to read with both depth and attention. A response paper functions as a reading journal, enabling students to document their engagement with the text and provide a means for instructors to offer personalized feedback. Additionally, group presentations create a platform for students to share, discuss, and analyze their readings together. The final paper asks students to synthesize their reading experience and integrate as many texts as possible, focusing on the connections, themes, and contexts that shape these works. An alternative creative option allows students to reimagine a story as their final project, fostering a flexible yet critical transformation of their reading. In-class activities, ranging from debates, group readings, multimedia comparisons, and theatrical performances to reflective and creative writing, complement the after-class assignments. These tasks aim to further empower students by enhancing their command of English, sharpening their reading abilities, and building their confidence in expressing their ideas.

For a course to be truly student-centered, the defining factor should be that students recognize their accomplishments upon completing it. In the final session of the "Contemporary English Novels" course, students typically complete an anonymous questionnaire, serving as both a reflective summary of their reading journey and an evaluation of the course's impact. The questions in the questionnaire prompt students to reflect on key terms such as "reading," "story," "literature and medicine," examine aspects of the syllabus, assignments, and reading materials, and evaluate the course's overall benefits. These questions aim to stimulate thoughtful reflection and foster a long-term interest in reading. The anonymity of the responses encourages honest, constructive feedback.

Students often report a genuine sense of enjoyment from the reading experience. One student shared:

"This semester, I read five English novels, each exploring different themes. Through these novels, I've come to truly appreciate the magic of literature. It's not just a form of art, but a medium through which people express their emotions. Reading a novel feels like embarking on a journey, experiencing the highs and lows of life alongside the protagonist."

This sentiment is common among students, many of whom find this course distinct from other English reading classes. They recall it as a complete and immersive reading experience, one that encourages them to read full-length novels rather than just excerpts. Initially, some students may feel daunted by the prospect of finishing an entire English novel, yet they often end the course requesting more reading material to continue their literary journey beyond the

classroom. The ability to read entire novels in their original English boosts their confidence not only in mastering the language but also in their understanding of literature and life, as the quote above illustrates.

Another key achievement is the recognition of close reading. One student described the experience as “amazing” and “magical,” particularly when reflecting on the cultural meanings embedded in the names within Atwood’s novels. Over time, many students evolve from simply reading for the plot to actively engaging in close, deliberate reading. One student used close reading to analyze the distinct style of the graphic novel *Maus*:

"The meaning of the text and the visual elements work together to create a layer of meaning that goes beyond language. In a graphic novel, the size and shape of the text correlate with the author’s style. In *Maus*, the text is handwritten by the author, and when it conveys surprise or emphasis, the text is either bolded or the font size is adjusted. This visual style is different from traditional novels, as it allows readers to experience the narrator's emotions in a direct, vivid way."

When students engage in close reading, they uncover nuances that even the instructor may overlook, such as the handwritten text, font choices, and layout, all of which contribute to the unique style of the graphic novel. The process of reviewing students' analyses proves to be a valuable learning experience for instructors, as it allows them to once again marvel at the transformative power of close reading in both interpretation and understanding.

Lastly, my personal favorite moment comes from a student who said, "I forget I’m a medical student in this class." This simple remark encapsulates the potential of literature to break down barriers and unite people. Another student articulated a similar sentiment:

"Most literary works offer profound humanistic insight, and such care is essential in today’s world. Human beings are the union of mind and body. Literature not only nourishes the spirit but also illustrates ways of living. It provides readers with a poetic, artistic perspective, warmth, and joy. Through literature, people can find what is missing in their own lives. Some literary works represent a yearning for a better world, offering readers infinite dreams beyond the constraints of reality."

Doctors, like everyone else, read and write to better understand their field and the world around them. The true success of this course lies not only in its academic objectives but in its far-reaching influence on the exploration of humanity and life. The way students integrate fiction with reality, literature with medicine, and story with existence is a source of profound fulfillment for any instructor working in narrative medicine.

Conclusions

The earlier sections of this article have explored the background, methodology, and outcomes of teaching close reading to EFL medical students. By focusing on the “Contemporary Novels in English” course, this article illustrates how to design a narrative-centered curriculum for undergraduate medical students. It also reaffirms the importance of close reading as a core method in narrative medicine, emphasizing its textual, ethical, cognitive, and pedagogical significance. This course serves as an example of an integrated teaching model that blends close reading with other essential subjects, highlighting how

narrative competence is a vital component of medical proficiency and clinical expertise. It goes without saying that close reading as a pedagogical technique is never static or uniform, as educators in narrative medicine worldwide are constantly developing new teaching strategies and adapting existing ones. The intention behind this article is to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing conversation by demonstrating the transformative potential embedded in the teaching approach adopted in the “Contemporary Novels in English” course.

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