Cultivation of Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking in the Teaching of Selected Readings in American Literature

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Selected Readings in American Literature is a required course for the third year of English major, and it is also a compulsory course for the Bachelor Degree of English Language and Literature at School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University. The course uses the combination of English literary reading and course paper writing to develop students’ English reading and writing skills, while focusing on the cultivating critical thinking skills of English majors.

Keywords: literary reading, course thesis writing, critical thinking skills

Introduction

This article comes as one of the research results of Key Research Project on the Reform of Education & Teaching in Leshan Normal University: The Cultivation and Practice of Students’ Critical Thinking Ability in Core Courses of English Majors (JG2015-ZD02). Selected Readings in American Literature is one of the required courses in the English B.A. program, and it takes as long as one-semester compulsory course for juniors of English majors at School of Foreign Languages, Leshan Normal University. This course focuses on cultivating students’ ability to read, appreciate, and understand original English literature, mastering the basic knowledge, methods of literary research and literary criticism, providing students with a new reading perspective, and cultivating students’ reading, analysis, critical thinking, and English writing ability. Through this course, we’d like to enhance students’ understanding of American literature and culture, initially master and apply for the basic methods of literary research, write reading reports, complete course papers, improve students’ comprehensive humanistic quality, broaden their horizons, and improve literary appreciation and aesthetic taste in order to cultivate foreign language talents with humanistic qualities.

In the course of Selected Readings of American Literature, we combine English literature reading and course essay writing to conduct academic training for students to cultivate students’ reading and writing skills, focusing on training the speculative ability of English majors at the same time. 363 English major students from Grade 2014 to Grade 2017 (January 2016-December 2019) at the School of English of the School of Foreign Languages participated in the teaching experiment and practice of the key research project of teaching reform. After nearly four years of exploration and research, the teaching has achieved good results.

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Critical thinking is the ability to make theoretical and objective assessments based on sound reasons and facts. Critical thinking is mainly a skill, not a knowledge system. It is generally believed that the development of speculative skills can help improve students’ ability to analyze and solve problems. Strengthening the cultivation of students’ speculative ability, innovation ability, and practical ability, and improving the comprehensive quality of students have become the core tasks of higher education. However, in our English teaching, the combination of speculative ability and teaching still remains a weak link. It is particularly urgent and important to cultivate the reading, writing, and critical thinking ability of English majors.

**Reading and Writing: Effective Practice**

The practical focus of combining literary reading with English writing is to cultivate students’ ability to read, appreciate, and understand original English literature, master the basic knowledge and methods of literary research and literary criticism, provide students with a new reading perspective, and train and improve students’ reading, comprehensive ability in English thinking and writing. Students are required to write a reading report and complete a dissertation on optional courses in English literature to improve their comprehensive humanistic qualities in order to broaden their horizons and improve their literary appreciation and aesthetics. To this end, we specially designed and conducted the “English Literature Reading and Course Essay Writing Project” training.

**Training objectives:**
1. Students master the reading method, so as to improve the accuracy of understanding and speed up the reading of original English books.
2. Students master the basic requirements and writing methods of the course thesis.

**Training content and requirements**
1. Teachers introduce reading methods and related skills, and through classic literature reading training, help students master reading methods and enhance their reading comprehension of English originals.
2. Introduce students to the structure, content and specific writing methods and steps of the course.
3. Introduce the search and application of books and network resources.
4. Introduce literature retrieval and literature review methods.
5. Require students to choose one English novel after class and complete the reading task within the prescribed time.
6. Require students to write a literary review of about 2,000 words—course paper (in English) based on the American classic literature reading (fiction, poetry, drama, etc.) of the semester, and complete their own thesis.

In order to help students to improve rapidly their literature reading and course essay writing, teachers provide students with the following further reading and writing guidance. And introduce reading methods and related skills, and help students master reading methods through classical literature reading training to improve reading comprehension of English originals. Then, inside and outside the class we conduct a lot of reading training and practice for students. First of all, we briefly introduce students to the history of American literature up to the first half of the 20th century, so as to help them increase their interest in English, and hope to develop a habit of reading extensively, help them read literary language, and by reading various literature works to consolidate their English fluency.

Through interaction with literary texts, we consolidate students’ English knowledge and fluency, enable them to understand the literary methods or tools used by British writers, and enhance students’ critical reading,
critical thinking, and communication skills. Effectively discuss and write. Critical reading is the judgment of the assertion of the text. Reading outside the class is a way to learn a language. Students have greatly improved their vocabulary, expression, writing, and understanding through a lot of reading. Reading opens up a whole new world and enables students to understand different people, their cultures, traditions, customs, and perspectives. Skills learned through extensive reading will be transferred to other areas of language such as writing, speaking, and listening. Students build and increase their vocabulary through reading, which is important for effective discussion, writing and communication. English thinking is the basis for expressing oneself in English. To achieve this, one of the most effective ways relies on doing a lot of reading and good reading habits. Through extensive reading, students have the opportunity to read and write on topics of interest to them. The activity helps improve students’ writing skills, expressing themselves freely. Good reading lays the foundation for English writing. In English writing training, students are actively guided to analyze and think from multiple angles, develop and cultivate students’ ability to think, and help students develop good thinking habits.

Examinations and Evaluation of the Course

The examination and evaluation method of “Selected Readings in American Literature” is one of the important results of the research topic “Reform of Teaching Models and Teaching Evaluation Methods”, which has received great attention and support from school leaders and relevant functional departments. Our specific method is as follows:

Course Exam Form and Content

This course requires students to write a literary review of about 2,000 words—a course paper (in English) based on the classic American literature (fiction, poetry, drama, etc.) they read during one semester. Thesis topics are chosen and decided by the students themselves. The “literature reading, literature retrieval, text translation, reading report, literary text research” and other learning projects and practical content carried out in the Selected Readings in American Literature course can also be used as materials for writing course paper. The course thesis aims to assess students’ ability to comment and analyze the subject, character image, human history, and literary narrative of American literature. It focuses on assessing students’ ability to judge and analyze, logical reasoning, evaluation and discussion, and the practicality of mastering literary criticism methods. and assessing students’ ability to apply literary criticism and English writing ability.

Exam Requirements

1. Students complete within the required time: selection of classics of American Literature, reading of literary texts, establishment of course paper topics, retrieval of literature, and basic series of essay writing.

2. Specific requirements for the course thesis: write a literary review of about 2,000 words—the course thesis (in English), the preliminary work, and writing of the thesis are completed outside the class.

3. Course thesis check: After the course essays are completed, they will be submitted to the library for essay checking in the system. The review rate of the paper (the compliance standard) is less than 12%.

4. Binding and printing the course thesis in strict accordance with the requirements and specifications of the course thesis, including a copy of the “thesis check and inspection report” (original, color printing, standard), and submitting it at the end of the period.
Composition and Proportion of Course Achievement

Course scoring is 100 points. The course grades are strictly in accordance with the syllabus, teaching plan, and examination plan. Students’ usual assignments, American literature reading, literature retrieval, literature review, reading reports, text research display, PPT courseware production, classroom notes, group discussions, attendance, etc., are included in the final grade. In the assessment, the usual score is 70% and the final assessment score is 30%. Through the study of this course, students can master and apply the basic methods of literary research and literary criticism, complete course thesis, and improve students’ comprehensive quality and critical thinking ability of English majors.

Results

A total of 363 English major students from Grade 2014 to Grade 2017 participated in the teaching experiment and practice of the key research project of teaching reform. Through nearly four years of exploration and practice, the project has achieved good results by means of diversified reading activities and writing training both inside and outside the class. Students all have made rapid progress in reading and writing. TEM-8 is the national standard test for English majors, which has been increasingly recognized at home and abroad in recent years. The TEM-8 certificate is the most widely recognized and most popular certificate of English proficiency in China. English majors must pass the exam to prove their English proficiency. The TEM-8 is designed to test students’ language skills and proficiency in listening, reading, and writing. All the concerned students took part in the nationwide standardized English proficiency CET-8 of the English major, and 100% of the students passed the test. At the same time, the students who took part in the teaching experiment project, participated in all kinds of national and provincial professional English competitions, such as speech contest, oral contest, interpretation contest, translation contest, all got excellent results, fully reflecting their advantages and great progress. The combination of literary reading and course paper writing in the teaching of Selected Readings in American Literature plays an important role in developing students’ English reading and writing skills, while focusing on the cultivating critical thinking skills of English major students.

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