

Study on Curriculum Reform of Ideological and Political Construction Based on Improving Students' Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract

As a required core course for seniors of English major, the course called Reading and Writing II is featured by wide coverage in content, large span in difficulties, much more credits, comparatively much more class hours and many others. Against the background of promoting ideological and political construction in all courses, especially in specialized courses, it's of great significance for teachers to redesign this course. Based on the existing problems, the paper puts forward the following countermeasures: (1) Enriching the teaching content and transforming the emphases and difficult points in the classroom teaching; (2) By adhering to the "student-centered" teaching concept, designing such teaching activities aimed at "cultivating students' critical thinking skills" as video-output presentation according to POA theory and tracking students' learning process by punching the clock; (3) Establishing a full-chain teaching content in terms of ideological and political aims; (4) Making full use of modern information technologies to perfect course evaluation methods.

Keywords

Ideological and Political Construction; The Improvement of Students' Critical Thinking Skills; Curriculum Reform.

1. Introduction

Reading and Writing II is a required course for senior undergraduates majoring in English and translation in an independent college. The textbook for this course is the third edition of A New English Course, Book 6, edited by Professor Li Guanyi and published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 2013, which covers 12 units with two texts in each unit.

Featured by wide coverage in content, large span in difficulties, much more credits, comparatively much more class hours and many others, it's one of the courses most susceptible to foreign cultures and values, letting English majors have the closest contact while face the most violent conflict with western ideas and cultures. In the process of learning, students will naturally build up a deeper understanding of western history and culture and inevitably have a contrastive study between the two cultures, and even be blindly assimilated. Therefore, in addition to imparting knowledge and improving students' language skills in class, it's significant for teachers to carry out ideological and political education in specialized courses and exert the formative influence on students by osmosis by digging out the ideological and political elements involved in the textbook and then integrating these elements organically into the whole teaching process in various forms. By doing so, the students can hold an objective and inclusive attitude towards the two cultures. Meanwhile, the students can realize the advancement and uniqueness of Chinese culture more comprehensively, contributing to introducing Chinese culture to the world. Besides, the students can understand the advantages and practical significance of Chinese culture and socialist core values through studying the cultural

differences so as to help them establish their due cultural self-confidence and cultural consciousness, as well as a correct value system.

2. The Main Problems in the Conventional Way of Teaching

2.1. The Proneness to the Absence of Developing Students' Critical Thinking Abilities

The teaching process of Reading and Writing II in its conventional way has such shortcomings as relatively simple teaching mode, and emphasizing imparting knowledge instead of cultivating students' independent thinking abilities. The teachers, as the main body in the teaching process, spend a large amount of time on explaining and analyzing language points and difficult sentences during the class hour, ignoring the elaboration of text genre, structure, language features, stylistic effects, and the thematic significance embodied in the text. In such a kind of learning environment, students are always passive learners without the teachers' effective guidance from the ideological or discourse aspects of the text. Gradually, the students can't make any obvious progress in developing critical thinking abilities over a long stretch of time, therefore, resulting in the severe absence of developing students' critical thinking abilities.

2.2. A Detriment to the Improvement of Students' Independent Learning Abilities and Language-output Ability

Compared with other English major students in the first-tier and second-tier universities, those in the third-tier universities or colleges (The third-tier universities or colleges, also called Independent Colleges, usually are private undergraduate institutions, which have been the integral part of the higher education in China since 2003.) face a big gap between their levels of knowledge acceptance and the difficulties of teaching materials. That is why the students rely more on the traditional lecturing method. Although it takes teachers less time to apply this method, it's difficult to take students at different levels into consideration because of the singleness of this teaching mode. Moreover, it's also difficult for teachers to find how much students can really absorb what is taught in the classroom and how much they can use them flexibly.

In addition, the texts from the textbook enjoying a great length, large vocabulary, especially some new ones, and broad background information are very difficult to be understood. Meanwhile, because of the limited class hours, after imparting the language points involved in the texts, there is little time left for teachers to do some training related to critical thinking abilities and integrated skills of using language, resulting in the low language output and bad logical ability. Therefore, under the premise of ensuring the quality of classroom language input, how to improve students' independent learning ability and ensure the quality of classroom language output with the student-centered teaching concept is another major challenge for this course.

2.3. The Tendency to Focus More on the Delivery of Professional Knowledge and Skills Than on Ideological and Political Education.

In the classrooms where the conventional teaching methods are adopted, some concepts and ideas against the nature of language education still exist, such as the utilitarian teaching aims, i.e. exam-oriented or certificate-oriented practices, which only pay attention to the intensive training of students' knowledge and skills, against the nature of foreign language teaching, i.e. cultivating students' communicative ability by applying language comprehensively, let alone combining "ideological and political education" with foreign language teaching.

Because various cultural elements are accessible to students in this course, they are easily to be affected by some negative or unhealthy ideas from western world. Therefore, in the process of

language teaching, attention should be paid not only to the cultivation of students' language ability, but also to the cultivation of students' cross-cultural communication ability. Through the comparative study of Chinese and foreign cultures, we can improve students' self-confidence in Chinese culture, enhance their senses of patriotism, and finally answer the questions of "for whom students should be trained" and "what kind of men should be trained". Conclusively, it's necessary and feasible to integrate the "ideological and political theories" into foreign language courses.

3. Measures for Curriculum Reform

3.1. Enriching the Teaching Content and Transforming the Emphases and Difficult Points in the Classroom Teaching

Belonging to the category of advanced English, this course is to train students' integrated English skills, including listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation, similar in function to the course of Comprehensive English for freshmen and sophomores but with different focuses. Based on the newly revised Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Universities, the main task of advanced English is to have a high-level research about English language, so as to qualitatively improve students' understanding of English discourses, and achieve a leap in writing and finally the students' cultural consciousness can be formed and their overall quality could be improved in an all-round way. In order to realize this, the course with the "quaternity" teaching orientation intends to build up a cultural teaching system by integrating numerous cultural elements, enhancing students' cultural insight and cross-cultural communication skills. The "quaternity" teaching orientation refers to the realization of teaching aims on four aspects, respectively, (language) skills, cognition, emotion and appreciation, which requires students not only to be adept at linguistic knowledge and skills, but also to have an enlightened mind, a broad horizon, a wide range of interest, good artistic appreciation. Noticeably, the realization of teaching aims should run through the whole teaching process, including pre-class research, in-class learning and after-class expansion.

3.2. Designing Such Activities Aimed at "Cultivating Students' Critical Thinking Skills" as Video-Output Presentation According to POA Theory and Tracking Students' Learning Process By Punching the Clock;

3.2.1. Video-output Presentation Based on POA Theory

Based on the POA Theory (Production-oriented Approach) put forward by Wen Qiufang (2015), the author proposes to substitute the video-output presentation for the traditional PPT presentation. The former mainly has the following advantages: (1) With videos, the output tasks can be more scene-based and students could have enough time and space to make the tasks be of more value in communication. (2) Such unfavorable factors as stage fright and lack of scenes in an on-site presentation can be avoided in video-output presentation so that the listeners can get higher-quality inputs and presenters are allowed to effectively improve their output ability. (3) When evaluating, teachers can decide the focus for evaluation and select typical samples so as to propose more specific suggestions by watching the videos repeatedly. According to the POA theory, the video-output presentation requires students in groups, with 3 or 4 students in each group, to submit an about 10-minute video (preferably with subtitles) and each group will be responsible for two units for presentation during the whole semester. At the beginning of each semester, students will be grouped and the specific unit for which each group should be responsible will be determined by drawing lots. According to the number of students, each unit will be presented by two or three groups. In this way, it can be ensured that each unit will have a reference team for a comparative study and the "quality" of the tasks can also be guaranteed.

After submitting the videos, teachers need to evaluate them from three aspects with content, spoken English and videos included, and for each aspect, evaluations shall be conducted from three dimensions: key points, highlights and problems. Among them, the evaluation of key points intends to check whether it's closely around the topic, the spoken English is clear and fluent and the video meets the basic requirements (such as subtitles and the duration) or not; As for the highlights, it focuses on the students' innovation and some bonus with an upper limit of 5 points will be awarded for outstanding performance; the last dimension is to list the problems in the video, and the maximum deduction is also 5 points. By watching the video repeatedly, the teachers record the problems in grammar, pronunciation, presentation skills and others, give a final mark based on their overall performance as well as the feedback shall be delivered to students as soon as possible.

3.2.2. Tracking Students' Learning Process By Punching the Clock

The learning-tracking system is one of the features of this course. Considering the poorly-disciplined students with weak self-learning ability, the teachers are required to track the students' learning process after class as "overseers". The specific method is to organize students to memorize words through Bai cizhan app, to have a test every two weeks, and to check them every month. The WeChat Groups or a Mini program called Xiao Daka on Wechat are used for students to punch in for a TEM4 review work according to the specific requirements every day. After punching in, the teacher needs to sort out the existing problems, make comments, and explain them to students. In addition, students are required to adopt mind maps to do some summaries.

3.3. Establishing A Full-Chain Teaching Content in Terms of Ideological and Political Aims or the "1+2+3+4" Mode

In order to achieve the goal of "Ideological and Political Construction in All Courses, Especially in Specialized Courses", a three-dimensional teaching system in terms of political and ideological construction or the "1+2+3+4" mode has been set up in an all-round, full-chain and integrated way, including 1 goal, 2 levels, 3 links and 4 stages, where the goal refers to the integration of ideological and political elements into the whole teaching process so as to influence the students by osmosis; the two levels refer to the macro (such as curriculum objectives, teaching content, teaching methods, and evaluation, etc.) and the micro levels (like specific measures); three links refer to pre-class, in-class and after-class, forming a full-chain teaching procedures; and the four stages refer to the preparatory, start-up, implementing and summarizing stages respectively.

When preparing for lectures, the teachers should explore ideological and moral educational elements involved in the teaching materials and the matching point between English teaching and socialist core values, consciously integrating the concept of "cultivating people" into the process of "imparting knowledge" with three steps, including: A. Textual Mining: to find out the value-related content in texts of each unit, which is of some humanistic significance. B. The Selection of Supplementary Materials: to select relevant Chinese and English bilingual corpus mainly centering on Socialist core values as well as English corpus about western values. Accesses to materials include official media and English versions of Chinese classics on the side of bilingual corpus and on the side of English corpus, it can obtained through some news reports of great influence, journals or magazines, classic works and historical materials. C. The Integration of Textual Content and Supplementary Materials: by creating situational tasks, the value-related elements involved in the textual content shall be integrated organically with the corpus in the supplementary materials, as is shown in Figure 1.

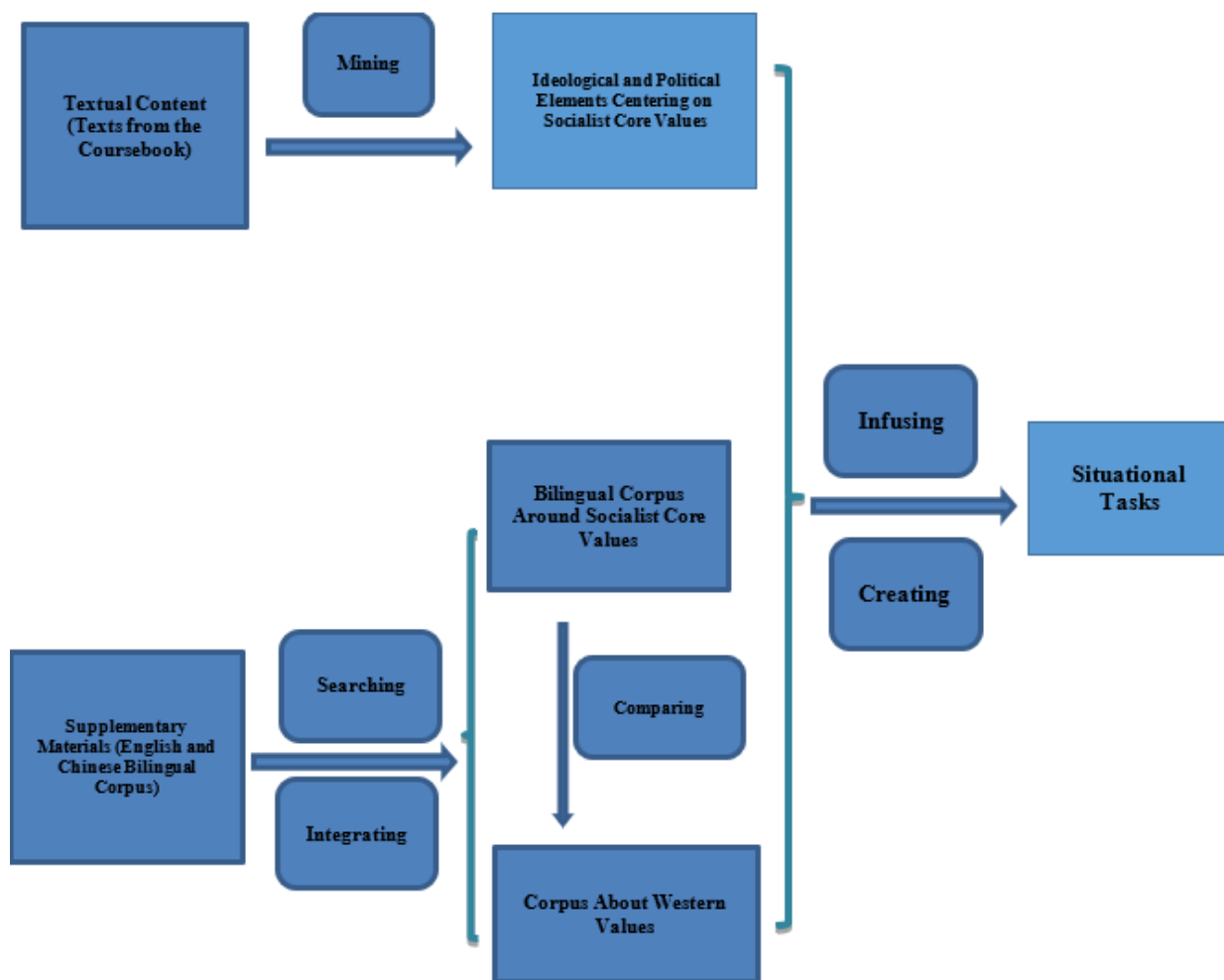


Figure 1. The Pre-class Process of Integrating Ideological and Political Elements into the Course

When dealing with the texts in class, teachers can consciously guide students to compare Chinese thoughts and values with that of the west, so as to help students understand the differences in social values, moral ethics and others between China and Western world. Teaching methods adopted in this course include group discussion and a compound teaching method named “lecturing plus discussing plus presentation”. After class, teachers provide students with a broader learning platform by establishing QQ groups and WeChat groups for specific classes, and using network resources such as online courses, real-time reports, keynote speeches on ideological and political construction and so forth. Moreover, The forms of the assignments can be diversified, which can be individual work or group work.

3.4. Making Full Use of Modern Technologies to Perfect Course Evaluation Methods

In terms of course assessment and evaluation, the evaluation system of this course focusing on results over process has been improved, which adopts a new evaluation system that integrates formative evaluation with final evaluation. Each student is required to make presentations in English and to finish some tasks, including mind maps, punching for a TEM4 review work and vocabulary learning, using online resources such as Pigai.org. and Hujiang Forum, which serves as an important index for teachers to evaluate students’ performance so as to encourage students to get rid of the mechanical learning mode like cramming or simply repeating what

the book says. Among them, the formative evaluation accounts for 40%. The final evaluation mainly refers to the final exam, accounting for 60%, as is shown in Figure 2.

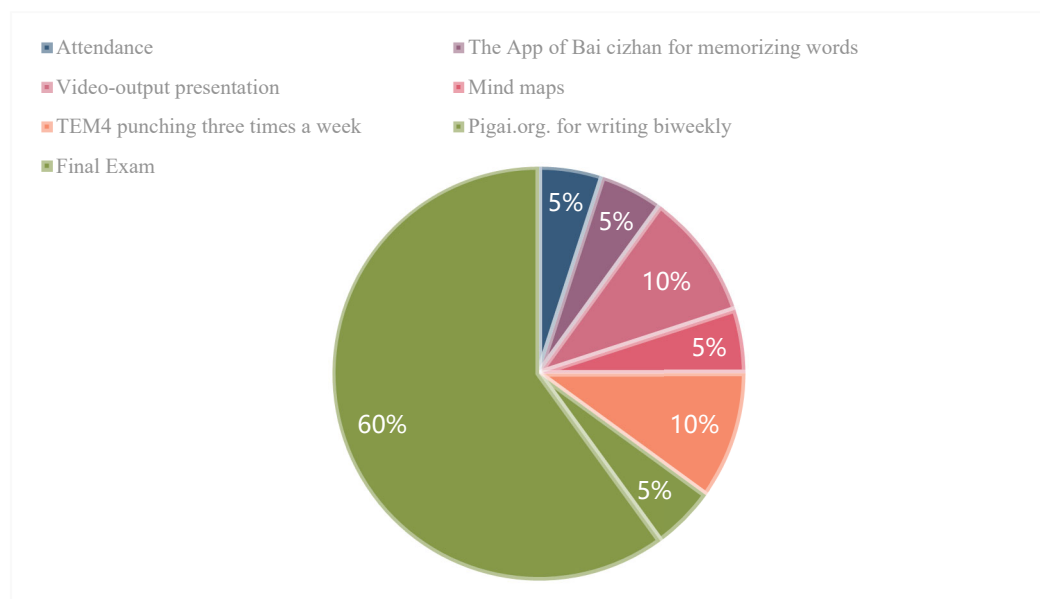


Figure 2. The Pie Chart of Different Contents Involved in the Course Evaluation

4. Conclusion

Although some achievements have been made in the reform and construction of Reading and Writing II, there are still some problems to be solved such as limited teaching hours and the under-utilization of the extracurricular activities. The online resources need to be further enriched, and the complementary teaching mode combining classroom teaching, online teaching and independent learning needs to be further improved. Teachers devoting to this course will continue to explore and try new methods, learn and use advanced teaching concepts, as well as make full use of multimedia, networks, English learning apps and other forms of language materials to support this course. Meanwhile, teachers should further try to expand the second classroom by making micro-courses, MOOC or introducing high-quality teaching resources, and use the process-oriented evaluation system to reasonably guide classroom teaching, online teaching and independent learning, so as to form a joint force to promote the further development of Reading and writing II.

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