Research Article

PAINTING THE THEMES: ANOTHER WAY TO ACHIEVE EDUCATIONAL GOALS IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

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Abstract

Based on the learning characteristics and needs of college students in the digital age, as well as the purpose of higher education to enhance students' critical thinking ability, the thesis, taking the College English teaching as an example, explores the use of drawing themes to enable students to present the key knowledge and content they have obtained; the form of mind maps or simple strokes can be adopted. The result of the research shows that painting the themes can be treated as another way to achieve educational goals in College English teaching.

Keywords: Painting the theme, Educating students, Critical thinking, College English teaching.

INTRODUCTION

With the development of the times and the arrival of digital age, using intelligent tools has become the main method for people to acquire knowledge. Fewer people are willing to achieve self-improvement through hard work and thinking. Especially for young college students, having a smartphone makes them feel like they have become masters of everything. However, this learning mode is gradually making students become knowledge receivers who cannot think and blindly follow others' opinions, which goes to the contrary of education. Therefore, it is necessary for university teachers to highlight the themes of teaching content, guide students to think and organize learning content, and continuously improve their critical thinking and learning abilities. This article will attempt to explore methods of guiding students to "draw themes" to help them understand the meaning of learning content and achieve the goal of enlightening and educating students.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

According to the value classification system proposed by M. Rokeach, utilitarian values have dominated in the past two to three decades (Pajares, 1992). The manifestation of this value system in higher education is that universities ignore the essence of educating people and cater more to the short-term utilitarian learning needs of students and parents in terms of professional settings and teaching content. Most universities prioritize talent cultivation and neglect their responsibility to educate people. In this environment, most university teachers devote most of their energy to diligent teaching knowledge to students while neglecting the clarification aspect of communicating with students in and out of class, and are unable to timely preach during the teaching process. Therefore, this teaching model is difficult to achieve the educational goal of enlightening and nurturing students. After realizing the problems existing in higher education under the new situation,

the country issued the *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities under the New Situation* in 2017. In the same month, the Ministry of Education issued the *Implementation Outline of the Quality Improvement Project for Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities* to implement the spirit of this document and proposed ten education systems. In the following years, a series of documents such as *Several Opinions on Deepening the Reform and Innovation of Ideological and Political Theory Courses in Schools in the New Era*, *Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of the Ideological and Political Work System in Colleges and Universities*, and *Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Education Evaluation in the New Era* were issued, further emphasizing the importance and urgency of the education responsibility of colleges and universities. At present, universities have generally recognized the importance of educating people, and various disciplines are vigorously promoting ideological and political education in their courses. However, teachers have not yet found practical and feasible methods to stimulate students' learning initiative and enhance their critical thinking abilities in the process of educating them. Therefore, this project will explore the method of drawing themes to guide students to engage in active thinking, delve into the content of the curriculum, turn abstract theories into visual mind maps or simple sketches, and effectively output and communicate what they have gained, thereby achieving the teaching effect of enlightening and educating students.

RESEARCH BASIS

Teaching objectives under the new situation

In order to implement General Secretary Xi Jinping's important instructions on higher education, the country issued the *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities under the New Situation* in 2017. Universities across the country have begun an education and teaching reform from ideological and political courses to curriculum ideological and political education, focusing on exploring and building an education

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system that comprehensively cultivates students. In order to clarify the implementation methods of ideological and political education in courses, the Ministry of Education specially issued the *Guidelines for the Construction of Ideological and Political Education in Higher Education Courses* in 2020, which comprehensively and systematically designed and deployed the ideological and political education work in higher education courses. The promulgation of the *Guidelines for the Construction of Ideological and Political Education in Higher Education Curriculum* not only provides clear guidance for the implementation of curriculum education in universities across the country, but also stimulates a research boom among higher education workers nationwide on curriculum education. This project attempts to shift the focus of research from the teacher's end to the student's end. After each unit, students are required to draw the theme, main content, and logical relationship of the content learned in the unit, fully tap into their learning potential, stimulate their learning initiative, and enhance their critical thinking ability, thus achieving the goal of educating people in the curriculum.

The guiding role of critical thinking theory in education

Einstein once said a famous saying about education: "The value of university education lies not in learning many facts, but in training the brain to think." (Fang Zaiqing, 2022) This sentence by Einstein tells us that although knowledge is important, it is not the entirety of education. The greatest value of education is not to remember a lot of knowledge, but to train the brain's thinking power. Critical thinking education has become a highly valued topic in current university education. Professor Qian Yingyi has also written many times to point out that "Chinese people attach importance to education, but too simply equate education with knowledge. Chinese students, who have accumulated much knowledge, lack critical thinking and creative thinking."(Qian Yingyi *et al.,* 2011) From ancient times to now, many educators and well-known teachers have put forward similar views, which should be an old proposition in the history of education in China. However, due to the widespread use of the internet and smartphones, this issue has become more prominent in modern higher education. Professor Qian Yingyi also provided several feasible suggestions to solve this problem, including: "Making the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability a necessary part of university education; increasing students' interdisciplinary and cross disciplinary knowledge accumulation, such as writing, communication, logic, statistics, ethics, ethics courses, and other disciplines based on logic; etc."(Qian Yingyi, et al, 2011) These suggestions have pointed out the direction for this project. We will try to let students express their thinking results in their own interested ways, grasp the main content learned in each class through drawing themes, and achieve the goal of solidly mastering knowledge and understanding the connotation of the course.

RESEARCH METHODS

Clarification of the research direction

The purpose of this project is not to enhance students' painting ability, nor is it to explore the painting potential of students with painting foundation. Drawing is just a way, a medium, aimed at helping students grasp the learning focus of each unit through the method of drawing themes, and express abstract knowledge in various forms such as mind maps, sketches,

models, knowledge trees, etc. During the drawing process, learners not only become aware of their gains, but also discover knowledge points that they have not yet mastered, which can lead to their doubts. With these doubts, they can delve deeper into learning and thinking, and ultimately achieve the goal of mastering the thematic content of the unit and all knowledge points. Learners persist in using this method to study for a semester, ultimately achieving the ability to automatically present mind maps, models, and knowledge trees in their minds without the need for a paintbrush, and developing the habit of using critical thinking in their learning.

Specific implementation methods

This article will take the course of College English as an example to elaborate on the teaching method of drawing themes in detail. The course of College English usually consists of six units completed within sixteen weeks of a semester. Each unit has a clear theme and corresponding 2-3 reading materials. Teachers usually guide students to carefully read and analyze one article during teaching, and keep the remaining two as post class reading materials. Students usually only focus their attention on the articles that the teacher guides them to read in class, and rarely pay attention to the other two articles. With the method of drawing the theme, it is easy to avoid such phenomenon. Taking the first unit of the first volume of the *New Version of Advanced College English* as an example, this article explains how to achieve the effect of learning and educating students by drawing themes.

1) Utilize the pre-class preview section to help students develop a learning awareness of grasping the theme

To help students grasp the theme, teachers must have clear teaching arrangements before class. The following will take the first unit of the first volume of the *New Version of Advanced College English* as an example to illustrate how to clarify the learning focus of the unit. The teaching theme of this unit is *The Pursuit of Dreams*, which includes three reading articles, namely Text: *Deaf DJ,* Reading1: *Janitor Filipaj, the Dream Pursuer,* and Reading2: *From the American Dream to a Chinese Dream*. The course usually takes eight periods in two weeks to complete one unit of learning, so it is not possible to give detailed lectures on all three articles in one unit during class. Guiding students to preview before class, self-study, and review after class has become an effective teaching method. Faced with such a large amount of information, students are prone to feeling bored. Teachers can assign preview assignments as follows: students should first find the key words of this unit before class - pursuing dreams; then summarize the process of the protagonists pursuing their dreams in the three articles; at the same time, mark the sentences in each article that are related to the protagonists' dreams and struggles.

2) Utilize in class teaching activities to deeply explore language knowledge and ideological and political connotations related to the theme

In order to enhance students' awareness of thematic learning, teachers need to carry out some necessary instructional designs when writing on the blackboard or preparing PPTs. For example, when teaching this unit for the first time in class, only the theme of the unit, *The Pursuit of Dreams*, will be presented on the blackboard or PPT presentation page. The

teacher first explains the learning requirements, content, and objectives of the unit, and then can set some questions related to the theme to introduce the course through questioning. By asking such questions, students can understand that in the new era, college students should establish lofty ideals, have patriotism, and make unremitting efforts for their dreams. After students have a deep understanding of the topic, teachers can group them and clarify the focus of group discussions. For this unit, the topics for group discussion can be viewed in chronological order based on the protagonist's dream chasing experience in the text. This task is exactly consistent with the *Text Organization* task on page 17 of the textbook. After the students have completed the discussion, the representatives in different groups can share the content of the group discussion in the form of a mind map or other pattern of charts. This can successfully help students understand the structure of the text and grasp the main content of the first text with *The Pursuit of Dreams* as the theme. Students will definitely have some questions about vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns during the preview and discussion sessions. Therefore, what the teacher needs to do next is to ask each group to write down the vocabulary, sentences, and questions related to *The Pursuit of Dreams* that they have discovered on the blackboard. The process of students presenting these vocabulary and sentences on the blackboard is also the process of constructing a mind map. The role of a teacher is to further enrich, refine, and expand this map through explanation, so that students can complete a complete mind map based on *The Pursuit of Dreams* through classroom learning, integrating vocabulary, sentence patterns, text structure, and ideological connotations.

3) Utilize homework activities after class to help students reflect on the content they have learned around the main theme

During the post class review session, teachers can include the completion and enrichment of the mind maps outlined in class as part of their assignments to urge students to fully utilize the unit theme as the main thread for thinking and learning, and ultimately take photos of their works and upload them to the homework section of the Cloud Class. Considering the differences in students' English proficiency, teachers can focus on the section 2.1 *Focusing on the main idea* on page 18 of the textbook as a review point, encouraging students with poor English foundations to use keywords as the main theme to draw the logical relationship between each sentence, and find vocabulary phrases related to the theme of pursuing dreams to add to their own mind map. For students with good academic performance, teachers can guide them to write a short essay titled *My Dream* based on this template, using the theme word "pursuing dreams" as the main theme, and fully utilizing the vocabulary and sentence patterns related to pursuing dreams learned in the text.

On the one hand, this allows students to fully understand the theme, main content, and main vocabulary and syntax of the article, and on the other hand, it also provides successful output exercises through thinking.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The project team conducted two semesters of experiments in 2024 using the teaching method of drawing themes as the starting point, and received feedback and very good teaching effect. Firstly, students' learning initiative has been improved. In the study group, each student can use their own strengths to share. In the classroom presentation segment conducted by the group, it is no longer just about reading the text and translating a few sentences, but various forms related to the learning topic such as simple sketches, knowledge trees, and mind maps have emerged. This kind of presentation and sharing not only enriches the classroom content, but also stimulates students' enthusiasm for active thinking and learning. At the same time, because teachers and students keep repeating vocabulary, phrases, and sentence patterns related to the unit's theme during the teaching process, it invisibly increases students' opportunities to learn key knowledge and content, allowing each student to gain a lot in their learning. Especially in the presentation section of homework after class, students will think and recall carefully to form their own personalized works because they want to concretize their learning gains in the form of mind maps. In short, teachers have truly enabled students to understand the theme content of each unit through this method, and successfully guided them to think and explore the deep meaning behind the theme, achieving the ultimate goal of curriculum education.

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