The Reform of Foreign Literature Course for General Education in Agriculture and Forestry Colleges: A Perspective of Postmodern Course Theory

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Abstract. Foreign literature is an important media for college students to get to know foreign culture and a means to cultivate their humanistic spirit. However, there are many problems in current foreign literature course for general education, especially in Agriculture and Forestry Colleges. This paper explores the ways for the reform of this course under the framework of postmodern education theories, with the hope to foster interdisciplinary talents with an ability to think analytically, critically and rationally.

Introduction

Since 21st century, as an educational ideal, general education has been widely agreed and accepted in China’s higher education and has become a trend of its reform and development. In order to broaden and deepen students’ knowledge, and cultivate the all-round people with both humanistic and scientific spirits, universities devote to the construction of general education curriculum. As an important way for college students to get to know foreign culture, foreign literature is listed as a general education course of Humanities and Social Science. Because of its particularity in students, teachers and majors, Agriculture and Forestry Colleges should have their own textbooks and curriculum provision. Citing Huazhong Agricultural University as an example, in this paper, I will try to explore a reasonable, effective and scientific way for the reform to reform of “Foreign Literature” course for general education in Agriculture and Forestry Colleges under the framework of postmodern educational theories, hoping to foster interdisciplinary talents with an ability to think analytically, critically and rationally.

The Current Situation of Foreign Literature Course for General Education in Agriculture and Forestry Colleges

In recent years, under the influence of Utilitarianism, literature is regarded as useless in and out of universities. Students are biased towards those practical courses such as Economic and Trade English, IELTS Speaking, Computer Programming etc., and gradually lose interest in literature. Some even haven’t read any English classics during four years college life, which is more common in Agriculture and Forestry Colleges. The reasons are as follow:

Firstly, compared with the comprehensive universities, Agriculture and Forestry Colleges have a higher percentage of rural students. They read less and have a relatively narrow range of knowledge. As a carrier of heterogeneous culture, foreign
literature is different from Chinese culture in many aspects such as custom, tradition, expression and etc. Inevitably, cultural barrier will appear between the aesthetic subjects and objects. When these students are suddenly exposed to the profound works of foreign literature, their first impression is “difficult”, especially the classical. Difficulty breeds scary and retreat. Gradually, most of them lose their interest in this course. Attending classes is merely a means of getting credits.

Secondly, there are higher requirements for the teachers of foreign literature course. On the one hand, a good command of foreign language is necessary for them to better read and understand the original. On the other hand, a solid foundation in literary theories is essential for them to guide students to appreciate the classics. However, the current situation is: teachers are either Chinese major with poor master of foreign language, or English majors who are weak in literary theory foundation. It’s difficult to perfectly combine both. Such a problem is especially apparent in Agriculture and Forestry College where the humanistic disciplines are not so strong.

Lastly, restricted by the factors of teachers and students, there are some problems in the teaching methods of this course. Many teachers just convey knowledge to students by listing works, writers and biographies, lacking adequate analysis with width and depth. What’s more, currently there is no textbook suitable for Agriculture and Forestry College students to stimulate their interests. What the teachers can do is to give out reading material before class. While most students find it difficult to handle. If they don’t make full preparation, classroom interaction, teaching effects and course schedule will be greatly affected.

Facing the challenge of diversified society and market economy, considering the special mission of Agriculture and Forestry College students, how to set up a practical foreign literature course favored by students becomes a serious issue for both teachers major in English and Chinese.

Reform Program of Foreign Literature Course for General Education in Agriculture and Forestry Colleges

Taking the features of Agriculture and Forestry College students into consideration, I think this course should be designed to stimulate their interest, guide them to appreciate literary works. So the reform should be carried out from the aspects of ideas, contents and methods. The 4R criteria constructed by American post-modern curriculum expert Doll will be of great help. [1] On the basis of his ideas, the reform of contents and methods can be as follows:

Firstly, the choice of texts should be well-directed. For the present textbooks of this course, such as Introduction to the foreign literary masterpieces (Ren, 2005), [2] Introduction to foreign literature classics (Luo, 2013), [3] most texts are classics. Some of them are quite obscure, only with the knowledge of religion, philosophy or aesthetics, can we understand them better. This is really tough for nonprofessionals. One of the Doll’s “4R” criteria is “Richness”. [4] It refers to depth, layers of meaning, and multiple possibilities or interpretations of a curriculum. Therefore, as a general selected course in Agriculture and Forestry Colleges, for the richness in depth, the texts must be further screened. We should choose the ones that accord to student reception psychology and are enlightening to their life. Especially for the popular masterpieces, students will know something about characters, plots and themes, which will reduce the difficulty in reading. Generally speaking, people will be more curious about the things they have half knowledge, hoping to gain a deeper understanding under the teacher’s guidance. In this way students’ initiative will be greatly motivated.
Secondly, classroom teaching should be students-oriented. Another one of the “4R” criteria is “Rigor”. It "keeps a transformative curriculum from falling into either 'rampant relativism' or sentimental solipsism." [5] In the postmodern curriculum it is defined in terms of mixing-indeterminacy with interpretation. "In dealing with indeterminacy, one can never be certain one ‘has it right, -not even to the 95th or 99th percentile of probability.’"[6] It is particularly applicable for literary works which are perceived as “Response-inviting structure”. [7] Currently the teaching of this course is mainly the input of the former scholar’s viewpoint, which restrains students’ initiative to a certain extent. So I think it should be transformed from teacher-oriented to students-oriented. The teacher should encourage students to express their own ideas. No matter profound or shallow, as long as they reason correctly. Gradually, the students will have more confidence and enthusiasm in reading those classics. Furthermore, classroom participation is also a very important means to cultivated students critical thinking.

Thirdly, teaching modes should be diversified—a combination of intensive teaching, close reading and multimedia application. The objects of this course are nonprofessionals who lack the knowledge and perspectives of literature appreciation. So the teacher’s teaching is necessary. But it should be brief and explicit rather than exhaustive. While for those sentences, paragraphs and chapters which demonstrate the artistic value of the works, the teacher should guide student to close reading, which will greatly improve their literary tastes. Lastly, many classics have been adapted as films. Despite of the minor changes, they are faithful to the original. During the classroom teaching, I often show some movie fragments, which provide students with more visualized and vivid experience. This not only adds interests to classroom teaching but also deepens students’ comprehension of the texts.

Fourthly, teaching feedback should be highly stressed. Feedback has always been an indispensable part of teaching. In the criterion of “recursion”, [8] Doll points out that it is the reflective interaction with the environment, others, a culture, and with one’s own knowledge. It will be important because, like Bruner's concept of the spiral curriculum, a rich curriculum grows in richness and sophistication by reflecting back on itself and providing opportunities. [9] The general education course has its own specialty: teachers and students are from different departments, and they know nothing about each other. Therefore, feedback and reflection are of vital importance. Through continual communication, the teacher will be much clearer about students’ foundation and passion in foreign literature, and the master of teaching contents. I also find that although students are uneven on literary attainment, they all love foreign literature very much. To make such enthusiasm long-lasting, the teacher should reflect actively and recur effectively.

Conclusion

As the core concept of modern higher education, the humanistic spirit not only penetrates throughout the humanistic education in colleges and universities but also plays an indispensable part in the construction of the whole higher education. In China, Agriculture and Forestry College students bear great mission in the process of agricultural modernization. It stands to reason that they have a solid grasp of professional skills. However, in the rest part of higher education, literature courses play a critical role in cultivating their moral self-discipline, independent personality and a healthy ideal sentiment.

Foreign literature course for general education are open classes. It not only imparts
knowledge but also develop students' independent thinking, cognition and humanity quality. Therefore, the direction for the reform of this course should be student-oriented. It's also suggested that new teaching concepts, content and methods be more positively explored in order to foster students' competence in literature appreciation. Hence, they can read more good books in their future life. Whereas the current theoretical research on the reform of this teaching curriculum is rather deficient. What's more, there is still large room to develop for the construction of textbooks and research perspectives which is also one of the major targets for future research.

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References