

# Integrating Literature Reading Into Unit Topic Teaching as a New Approach to Moral Education in College English

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As a public basic course and the core general course of undergraduate education, moral education (ME) in College English is imperative. It is necessary to design specific teaching programs flexibly and creatively on the basis of fully understanding the ideas, objectives and tasks, basic principles and implementation methods of ME. This paper tries integrating literature reading into unit topic teaching as a new approach to ME in College English. The specific pathways of integration include: expansion of literary reading content, diversified teaching of literary reading, diversified media of literary reading, and diversified assessment system of literary quality. The integration of literature reading and unit topic teaching is conducive to the realization of the teaching goal of cultivating students' language ability, humanistic quality, and correct values.

*Keywords:* College English, literature reading, unit topic teaching, morality cultivation

## Introduction

*The Guidelines on College English Teaching* (2020 edition) (hereafter referred to as *The Guidelines*) (College English Teaching Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education, 2020), as a guiding document for College English teaching, clearly states that “College English instruction should actively integrate into moral education (ME), making it play a crucial role in the fundamental task of fostering virtue and talent in higher education institutions” (p. 2). *The Guidelines* requires that College English courses maintain their instrumental function while also strengthening their humanistic and general education functions, “increasing students’ knowledge reserves in social, cultural, scientific and other fields, broadening their international horizons, enhancing their comprehensive cultural literacy, and establishing correct worldviews, outlooks on life and values” (p. 5). In terms of achieving course objectives, *The Guidelines* requires that the curriculum reflect higher-order thinking, innovation, and challenge by means of increasing the difficulty and expanding the depth of the course, while organically integrating ideological and political education concepts and content into the curriculum.

As a public foundational course in undergraduate education, College English is a significant component of general education in higher education institutions. Given that its nature and positioning differ from those of foreign language major courses, ME within the College English curriculum should not only draw on general ME

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elements from foreign language disciplines but also explore unique approaches aligned with its own characteristics. Currently, based on an analysis of the requirements for ME in *The Guidelines*, some authoritative experts have proposed objectives, basic principles, and teaching designs for ME in College English courses. The main goals are to “subtly cultivate students’ worldview, outlook on life, and values” and to “develop critical thinking and communication skills” (Cai, 2021, p. 28). The principle of integrating ME into College English courses is to highlight the humanistic nature of College English, explore the humanistic materials, cultural functions, and cultural values inherent in College English itself, and at the same time give play to the humanistic education function of College English teaching (He, 2020, p. 5). Xiang Ming-you (2022) discussed the specific dimensions of the teaching design of integrating ME into College English courses—teaching objectives, teaching content, teaching methods, and teaching evaluation, in combination with the positioning of College English courses, providing a reference for the scientific and systematic implementation of ME in College English teaching. In terms of specific implementation methods, integrating ME into College English courses is highly flexible and innovative. Only on the basis of fully understanding the concepts, objectives and tasks, basic principles and implementation methods of ME in courses can teachers flexibly and creatively design specific teaching plans to truly achieve practical results.

### **The ME Value of Integrating Literary Reading Into the Unit Topic Teaching of College English**

Literary creation is an artistic representation of life experiences, and literary works contain rich philosophical insights, value orientations, and ideologies. “The value of literary works in expressing understanding and reflecting on life is irreplaceable by any other form of learning” (Yu, 2002, pp. 7-8). Across both ancient and modern literary works, as well as those from various cultures, the brilliance of human nature shines through, activating the humanistic and aesthetic elements within classic texts, which deeply influences and nurtures students’ minds. This helps students develop a healthy and noble character and a well-rounded personality (Jiang & Yun, 2013, cited in Wang, 2020).

Integrating literary reading instruction into the unit topic teaching of College English can not only enhance students’ language knowledge and skills and stimulate their interest in learning English, but also enable them to subtly acquire cultural knowledge from other countries. This expansion of their humanities knowledge structure helps cultivate cross-cultural communication abilities, thinking qualities, and humanistic literacy, which plays a unique role in ME within the College English curriculum. First, by guiding students to reflect on and question different cultural concepts and value systems, teachers can help them develop independent thinking skills, as well as foster critical thinking and innovation. Second, exposing students to the cultural knowledge of other countries in a subtle manner can broaden their humanistic knowledge framework and enhance their overall humanistic literacy.

### **Pathways of Integrating Literary Reading Into Unit Topic Teaching in College English**

This study attempts to explore the integration of literary reading and unit theme teaching through dimensions such as the expansion of literary reading content, varied teaching methods of literary reading, and a multi-faceted evaluation system for literary literacy, with the aim of achieving the teaching goals of cultivating students’ language skills, humanistic qualities, and correct values.

### Supplementing Literary Reading Materials Relevant to the Unit Topic

The current College English textbooks all focus on informative, interesting, and practical content, with few literary elements included. By collecting and analyzing the data on the number and genres of literary texts in currently widely used College English reading and writing textbooks such as *New Horizon College English—Reading and Writing* (Third Edition, Volumes 1-4), *New College English—Comprehensive Course* (Fourth Edition, Volumes 1-3), and *New Standard College English—Comprehensive Course* (Second Edition, Volumes 1-4), we found that all three sets of textbooks organize the content of each unit by themes, mainly covering language knowledge, history and culture, information technology and social focus, etc. The literary reading content is relatively scarce. Among them, *New Horizon College English—Reading and Writing* (Third Edition) only uses some famous quotes from writers in the unit introductions and texts of some units. Although these quotes from famous writers can well summarize, deepen, and generalize the themes of the units, students, due to the lack of reading and analysis of specific literary works, cannot fully experience the language expression techniques and narrative strategies in literary works, and the “intellectuality” aspect of College English teaching has not been fully presented. The literary content in the latter two sets of textbooks is also limited, and the genres are relatively monotonous, mainly consisting of profound essays.

Teachers can fully utilize the advantages of the existing College English textbooks in teaching, and supplement or expand literary materials based on the unit topics to enrich the teaching content of each unit. Specific measures include increasing the number of literary texts, diversifying text genres, and adding more popular literary texts such as novels and film and television literary works that are closer to students’ lives and easier for them to understand, thereby reducing the difficulty of reading comprehension and enhancing students’ interest in reading literary texts. For instance, in Unit 4 of *New Horizon College English: Reading and Writing (Book 2)*, both reading articles under the topic “Dance With Love” are related to how young men and women should deal with love. This topic, highly relevant to the characteristics of college students and of moderate difficulty, can effectively stimulate students’ reading interest. Based on the theme of love, teachers can supplement the plot summaries or excerpted paragraphs of popular love novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Vanity Fair*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *The Great Gatsby*, which not only enriches the thematic content but also enhances students’ humanistic qualities and plays a significant role in cultivating students’ correct views on love and marriage as well as their dialectical critical thinking abilities.

Taking Unit 6 of *New Horizon College English: Reading and Writing (Book 3)* as another example, the theme of this unit is “War and Peace”. Literary texts related to this theme can be added to the teaching. For instance, the brilliant passages from the American writer Hemingway’s novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which is based on the participation of Americans in the Spanish people’s anti-fascist war, can be selected. Additionally, a brief introduction in English about the plot and creative ideas of the Russian writer Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace* can be added. Through reading the passages and brief introductions to these two literary works, students’ knowledge scope is broadened, and they can better feel the patriotic enthusiasm and heroism demonstrated by the people of Europe, America, and Russia in resisting the invading forces, as well as the cruelty of war, the power of justice and humanity.

Of course, when supplementing literary content, due consideration should be given to the actual language proficiency of non-English major undergraduates. Efforts should be made to reduce reading difficulty as much

as possible, with selections such as English introductions to novels, essays, excerpts from short stories and long novels being made in a gradual manner. Moreover, bilingual annotations of unfamiliar words should be provided to prevent students from losing reading confidence due to overly difficult learning materials. In addition, the materials should conform to the psychological characteristics and emotional needs of college students, allowing them to relax after their busy professional course studies and inspiring them to engage in positive thinking about their values and outlook on life.

### **Implementing Diversified Teaching Around Literary Topics**

As textbook units form the core of teaching content, any added or expanded literary materials related to unit topics should not overshadow the main content. Therefore, teachers can flexibly employ diverse teaching methods such as task-based, cooperative, project-based, inquiry-based, and flipped classroom approaches when teaching a specific literary topic. Teachers can assign literary reading tasks for independent study before class, use diverse teaching strategies to guide students in mastering content and learning methods during class, and assign follow-up tasks to reinforce learning outcomes afterward. These comprehensive teaching links can help students understand the language of the text, articulate their aesthetic experiences of the ideological emotions contained within it, deepen their comprehension of the text's main ideas, cultivate their literary appreciation abilities, and realize the moral education function of literature.

Take the teaching arrangement of Unit 4 in the *New Horizon College English: Reading and Writing (Book 1)* as an example. The topic of this unit is "Heroes of Our Time". The first reading passage, "Heroes Among Us", advocates defining all ordinary people who protect their families and others regardless of danger as heroes. The second article talks about a police officer's inner guilt for failing to save a teenager many years ago, and how he eventually found relief in saving others at the risk of his life. The two articles and the teaching activity design can well direct students to re-think the definition of heroes, appreciate and follow the ordinary heroes around them, such as deliverymen and taxi drivers who risk their lives to save others. To deepen the learning of this theme, teachers can guide students to appreciate literary works with the same or similar themes, and learn more about the stories of ordinary heroes or national heroes, such as the poem "The Hero" by the Indian national poet Tagore. To make full use of the limited classroom teaching time, teachers can guide students to conduct autonomous learning through online learning resources and adopt the flipped classroom teaching model. Teachers can assign tasks in advance, asking students to search for Tagore's life, creative ideas, and the background of the poem through online resources, and then read the poem. During the classroom teaching process, teachers can design group discussions to further understand the meaning and theme of the poem, and design speeches, role-playing, and other activities for emotional expression and ideological exchange. Finally, the teacher can guide the students to "complete a multi-faceted interpretation of the phonetic beauty, imagery and symbolic meaning of the poetic language" through close reading of the text (Sun, 2020, p. 67) through close reading so as to master the text analysis method. After class, students can be asked to write reading reflections or lengthen the poem to strengthen their understanding and admiration of "heroes". This approach to literary reading teaching not only does not take up too much classroom teaching time, but also fully embodies the student-centered educational concept. The entire teaching process can achieve the transformation from "teaching" to "learning", fully stimulating students' learning motivation, effectively mobilizing their learning enthusiasm, improving their autonomous learning ability, and cultivating literary awareness and correct values.

### **Optimizing the Teaching Methods of Literature by Adopting Modern Educational Technology**

First, in literary reading teaching, teachers should adopt modern educational technology to enrich the modalities of literary teaching. In addition to written resources, teachers should be good at quickly and accurately acquiring multimodal online resources to expand unit theme teaching. The realistic visual scenes and the most life-like language materials in movies can effectively promote students' absorption of language information, stimulate their learning interest, cultivate their humanistic literacy, and optimize teaching effects (Guan, 2012, pp. 58-60). For example, the theme of Unit 8 in *New Horizon College English: Reading and Writing Course (Book 3)* is "The Art of Parenting". The two reading articles in this unit and the post-class exercises effectively help students master language knowledge and compare the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western parents' educational concepts. On this basis, teachers can recommend two movies to students: *The Pursuit of Happiness* and *The Dead Poets Society*, guiding students to recognize the different educational concepts of two Western fathers and making students realize that paternalism is not unique to traditional Chinese families.

In *The Pursuit of Happiness*, Gardner, a young father in the new era, is in a situation where everything is going wrong and he is destitute, but he persists in fighting for life and his dream, and educates his son to be independent and stick to his own dreams. In sharp contrast to Gardner's concept of encouraging his son to maintain his individuality, in *The Dead Poets Society*, set in the late 1950s, Neil's father is autocratic, regarding his son as a tool to make up for his own regrets rather than an independent individual, ultimately driving Neil to suicide. By comparing and analyzing the completely different educational concepts of these two American fathers from different eras, students can be well influenced to dialectically view the differences in parents' educational concepts, pay attention to their era characteristics, and think about how they will be parents in the future. Through the input of such multimodal learning materials, not only can students expand their language knowledge and deepen their understanding of the unit theme in the textbook, but also cultivate their critical awareness and dialectical thinking ability.

The article "Audrey Hepburn: A True Angel in This World" from Unit 3 of *New Horizons College English: Reading and Writing Course (Book 3)* provides an introduction to the legendary life of the British actress Audrey Hepburn, who was celebrated both for her acting talent and virtuous character. Prior to the class, the teacher may arrange for students to watch Hepburn's classic film *My Fair Lady* through an online learning platform, and also recommend George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, on which the film is based. The protagonist of *My Fair Lady*, a poor yet independent woman who values freedom, is likely to resonate with students emotionally, sparking their interest in reading Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. By watching the film, students will gain a basic understanding of the plot and characters, which will help them better comprehend the text and boost their confidence in reading. After students have had this reading experience, the teacher can analyze classic dialogue excerpts from *Pygmalion* in class, encouraging students to appreciate Shaw's sharp and witty language style, as well as the intense emotional conflicts displayed by the characters. The teacher can guide students in appreciating Hepburn's portrayal of Shaw's creative ideas in the film, and evaluate the article's depiction of Hepburn. The introduction to audiovisual resources can effectively promote students' understanding of the content of teaching materials and broaden their thinking.

Secondly, modern educational technology can be utilized to expand students' self-study after class and promote interactive communication. Teachers can create a multidimensional teaching platform through the

internet, using online information systems and data technologies to allow students to stay updated on the latest developments in the field of foreign literature, as well as the newest works by renowned writers and poets. This can enrich and expand the content of classroom teaching, providing students with reading materials that cater to their individual needs for self-study.

Additionally, an online interactive learning platform can be established to “provide a complete teaching system that covers curriculum content design, teaching method design, teaching process design, and teaching outcome evaluation, thereby strengthening classroom interaction, teacher guidance, student practice, assignment feedback, and learning assessment” (College English Teaching Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 35). The high timeliness of information transmission through the internet facilitates discussions and exchanges between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves. Teachers can make full use of self-reading platforms such as “Foreign Language Teaching and Research Reading (University Edition)” to arrange for students to read extracurricular literature, and combine students’ extracurricular self-reading with classroom literature reading teaching.

However, it should be noted that the selection and application of modern educational technologies, online resources, and other tools should be based on the premise of improving teaching quality and promoting comprehensive quality education. Online resources should be carefully selected according to the teaching content and objectives, with a focus on “the integrity of the teaching content, the rationality of teaching organization, the dynamism of teaching methods, the standardization of teaching management, and the timeliness of teaching monitoring” (Zhang, 2019, pp. 115-117), thereby optimizing the teaching process. Otherwise, overly digitalized or entertainment-oriented teaching methods may become superficial distractions, failing to achieve educational objectives. Furthermore, it is necessary to combine traditional teaching methods with modern teaching techniques, “paying attention to the appropriate interpersonal interactions and emotional exchanges between teachers and students, offering guidance on students’ thoughts, as well as nurturing and influencing their emotions, character, and aesthetics” (College English Teaching Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 36).

### **Building a Diversified Evaluation System to Reflect the Assessment of Humanistic Qualities and Critical Thinking Abilities**

Evaluation and testing are essential tools for assessing teaching quality and can also have a feedback effect on both teaching and learning. Traditional College English tests often focus on assessing students’ language knowledge and skills, but lack an emphasis on evaluating students’ literary literacy, resulting in a lack of motivation for students to engage in literary reading. In College English teaching evaluation, teachers should follow *The Guidelines* and build a diverse evaluation system that combines formative and summative assessments. This system should evaluate students’ literary reading behaviors inside and outside the classroom, their knowledge of literature, and their ability to appreciate literature.

Formative evaluation methods include:

- Organizing students to create personal learning portfolios and using self-assessment and peer-assessment to record and analyze their regular reading behaviors.
- Using modern educational technology, such as the “FLTRP Reading (University Edition)” platform, to track and evaluate students’ reading behaviors and reading effectiveness.
- Arranging a day for oral testing before the course ends, where students verbally report their reading experiences to the teacher, assessing their reading effectiveness.

The specific operations can be arranged as follows: first, divide students into small groups of 4-6 members based on the content they have read, ensuring the works are the same or similar for each group; then, arrange for group reports, during which the teacher may ask questions, call on students to answer individually, or facilitate discussions or debates on particular questions to assess the students' reading comprehension; finally, assess students' performance to determine their oral test scores, which will be included in the final evaluation. Summative assessment is mainly reflected in the final exam. When designing the content of the final written test paper, it is appropriate to include literary knowledge and maintain a certain amount of literary content in reading comprehension sections, designing value judgment questions to test students' value orientations. The writing section is designed with open-ended topics that combine reading and writing to assess students' literary reading proficiency and critical thinking skills.

### Conclusion

Under the background of fostering virtue and nurturing talent, constructing of new liberal arts and promulgating the *New Guidelines*, it is imperative to integrate moral education into College English courses.

Literature contains rich elements of moral education, and integrating literary reading into the unit topic teaching of College English courses reflects the "Being based on the textbook but exceeding the textbook" principle of curriculum-based moral education (Liu, Xu, & He, 2021, p. 32). The two aspects complement each other in the process of cultivating students' moral character. By incorporating literary reading into thematic unit teaching, and highlighting the cultivation of literary literacy through appropriate content selection, teaching methods, and evaluation, it not only improves students' English proficiency, intercultural communication skills, and autonomous learning abilities, but more importantly, it trains students' aesthetic and critical thinking abilities, enhances their overall cultural literacy, and cultivates their humanistic spirit, thus achieving the goal of developing students' character and emotional depth.

Integrating literary reading into the thematic unit teaching of College English courses requires certain literary literacy from teachers. Teachers need to find and read relevant literary works related to each unit topic.

A teacher team for literature reading can be formed, with College English teachers as the main members. Teachers who teach English major literature courses and postgraduate students majoring in English literature can also be invited to join. Team members work in collaboration, constantly enriching the literary reading resources for unit topic teaching. The team regularly prepare lessons collectively and explore ways to integrate literary reading teaching into unit topic teaching.

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