

Research on the Abridgment Strategies of Classic English and American Literary Works for High School Students

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Abstract: *This paper, considering the limitations of high school students, proposes a systematic abridgment strategy for English and American literary works. It outlines three fundamental principles of abridgment, along with various methods for condensing plot and language, as well as criteria for selecting suitable works.*

Keywords: *English and American literature, abridgment strategies, high school English*

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the new college entrance examination reform, high school English teaching emphasizes the development of students' reading comprehension skills and cross-cultural literacy. As carriers of language and culture, classic English and American literary works hold significant value in enhancing students' abilities. However, the original texts are often lengthy and linguistically complex, which contradicts the fragmented study time and cognitive development level of high school students. To address this issue, abridged versions have become a crucial supplement in teaching practice. Based on students' language proficiency and cognitive characteristics, this study proposes abridgment principles centered on "maintaining integrity, highlighting key points, and aligning with students' levels." By employing strategies such as omitting secondary plots, simplifying language structures, and preserving classic passages, the research explores adaptation pathways for classic literary works.

1. The Importance of Abridging Classic English and American Literary Works

1.1 The Background of the Emergence of Abridged Classic English and American Literary Works

With the in-depth advancement of China's new college entrance examination reform, the structure, teaching methods, and evaluation systems of high school English education are undergoing profound transformations. According to the document China's College Entrance Examination Evaluation System released by the Ministry of Education, the modern examination-oriented education system requires high school students not only to master linguistic knowledge but also to develop competencies in reading practice, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. For example, reading comprehension questions often include descriptions and analyses of American and British cultures, assessing students' understanding and cross-cultural communication skills.

However, original versions of classic English and American novels are typically lengthy and complex, posing significant comprehension challenges, especially for high school students. Reading unabridged versions may present numerous difficulties due to students' limited time and cognitive abilities. To alleviate the dual pressures of time constraints and academic workload faced by modern high school students, abridged versions of classic English and American literary works have emerged. This paper analyzes the strategies for abridging English and American literary works and explores their integration with high school English teaching.

1.2 The Role of Abridged Classic English and American Literary Works in Modern Teaching Models

1.2.1 Adapting to High School Students' Learning Characteristics

1.2.1.1 Limited Time Availability

Modern high school students face immense pressure from college entrance exams, resulting in a heavy academic workload and highly fragmented time resources. Wang Feng, a professor at the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University and deputy director of the Chinese Linguistics Research Center, published the Survey Report on the Reading and Writing Status of Primary and Secondary School Students (2019) (hereinafter referred to as the Report). The Report indicates that 89.4% and 90.4% of respondents, respectively, expressed interest in reading and extracurricular books, with 81.8% stating that they have access to a diverse range of reading materials. Additionally, 78.9% of respondents reported having a substantial home library, 86.8% had the freedom to choose their reading materials, and 69.4% frequently purchased books.

However, the report also reveals concerning trends in students' reading time: 19.6% of respondents read for less than 30 minutes per day, while 50% read for 30 to 60 minutes (excluding 60 minutes). Moreover, as students grow older, the proportion of those reading for less than an hour per day increases significantly, with nearly 70% of primary and secondary school students reading for less than an hour daily [4]. In contrast, reading an unabridged novel such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* requires a minimum of 7 hours and 40 minutes, far exceeding the average daily reading capacity of primary and secondary school students. Abridged novels enable students to engage in in-depth reading of classic works within a shorter time frame.

1.2.1.2 Cognitive Development and Reading Ability

High school students' abstract thinking and critical reading skills are still in development. At this stage, cognitive characteristics and linguistic experience present certain limitations, making it challenging for students to comprehend high-level English vocabulary and complex sentence structures. Furthermore, due to a lack of sufficient cultural background knowledge, students often struggle to accurately interpret the implicit meanings conveyed through metaphorical and symbolic rhetorical devices.

1.2.2 Enhancing English Proficiency and Literary Literacy

1.2.2.1 Expanding Reading Horizons

By simplifying the language, abridged versions reduce the time investment required to complete a book, allowing students to explore a wider range of classic English and American literature across different genres and historical periods. This process fosters the development of literary literacy and broadens their reading perspectives. Additionally, the cultural annotations included in abridged versions provide students with valuable insights into English and American cultural contexts, enriching their understanding during the reading process.

1.2.2.2 Increasing Vocabulary and Language Proficiency

Original literary works contain a vast number of advanced vocabulary words. Abridged versions selectively retain high-frequency core vocabulary, reinforcing natural language acquisition through repeated contextual exposure rather than traditional rote memorization. Furthermore, vocabulary usage examples embedded in abridged texts help students grasp word meanings, grammatical roles, and applications. Additionally, by preserving the linguistic style of classic literature, abridged versions serve as writing models for students, allowing them to accumulate rhetorical techniques and enhance their logical thinking and writing skills.

1.2.2.3 Improving Reading Speed and Comprehension Skills

By removing redundant information, abridged texts optimize the density of textual content, making it more suitable for high school students' attention spans and enhancing their reading efficiency. Moreover, the interpretations of classic English and American literary works in abridged editions are tailored to high school students' cultural background and knowledge base, further improving their comprehension levels.

2. Principles of Abridgment

When abridging classic English and American literary works, it is crucial to maintain the original essence of the texts while ensuring they are suitable for high school students' English reading proficiency. To achieve this goal, editors must adhere to specific principles during the abridgment process. This section outlines a systematic framework of abridgment principles from three key dimensions.

2.1 Maintaining the Integrity of the Work

When abridging a literary work, editors must ensure the structural completeness of the text. Classic literary works often feature carefully crafted structures and profound themes, which are the core of their literary value. If essential structural elements are arbitrarily removed during the abridgment process, it may make comprehension more challenging for high school students.

For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the pivotal encounters between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy directly drive the development of their relationship and shape the novel's central conflict. If these scenes were omitted, the emotional tension of the story would be significantly diminished. Therefore, in the abridgment process, editors must accurately identify and preserve key components and thematic threads of the work. This involves distinguishing between core and secondary plot points while maintaining the main storyline, the logical connections between chapters, and the fundamental narrative structure of cause-development-climax-resolution. A complete structure helps high school students grasp the central ideas of the work.

2.2 Highlighting Key Content

Abridgment is not merely about compressing content; it also requires emphasizing key plot points and character development. Classic English and American literary works often contain multiple layers of narrative and richly developed characters. Since key plot points are essential for advancing the story and revealing its themes, it is crucial to retain and highlight them during abridgment.

For instance, the famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy in *Hamlet* is central to Hamlet's internal struggle. This scene not only serves as a pivotal moment in the play's dramatic progression but also provides deep insight into the character's complex psychological state. While some details may be omitted in an abridged version, this crucial scene must be preserved and given significant weight in the storyline. Ensuring the prominence of such key moments allows high school students to grasp the essence of the work.

Character development is another critical aspect. A character's inner world and growth trajectory often serve as the emotional core of a literary work. During abridgment, editors should retain the defining personality traits and developmental arcs of main characters, particularly their reactions and transformations in key events. This ensures that the characters' roles in the narrative remain well-defined and impactful.

2.3 Aligning with High School Students' Cognitive and Reading Levels

To help high school students better understand and appreciate classic literary works, abridged versions must consider their linguistic comprehension abilities and life experiences. The complexity of the language should be appropriately reduced to match students' reading levels. Traditional classic literature often employs intricate language, rich metaphors, and rhetorical devices, which may present reading challenges for high school students. Therefore, a key step in the abridgment process is to reasonably adjust vocabulary usage, simplify sentence structures, and avoid overly obscure grammar.

By carefully balancing these elements, an abridged version can make classic literature more accessible while retaining its literary essence, thereby fostering students' engagement and appreciation for these timeless works.

3. Selection of Classic English and American Literary Works Suitable for High School Students

3.1 Consideration of Literary Classicism

When selecting classic English and American literary works suitable for high school students, editors

must first consider the literary significance and artistic value of a work in literary history. Generally, well-known masterpieces or widely recognized classic works are preferable choices. Classic works have stood the test of time and hold educational value, being highly acclaimed for both their artistic expression and content. By reading abridged versions of these literary classics, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, students can appreciate the charm of classic literature while enhancing their literary literacy. Therefore, selecting works with high literary value and historical significance is a crucial step in ensuring a high-quality reading experience for students.

3.2 Consideration of Historical Context

Furthermore, the historical context of a work should not be overlooked. Some classic works, due to their age, employ archaic language, which may create reading difficulties. Thus, editors should prioritize works that use language closer to modern English expressions, allowing students to engage more easily with the text and reducing linguistic barriers to comprehension.

3.3 Relevance to High School Students' Interests

Finally, the themes of selected classic works should resonate with high school students' emotions and interests. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, learners are more likely to acquire and comprehend new information when they encounter engaging and relevant input, as it lowers their affective filter. The level of interest and relatability of reading materials is strongly linked to students' enthusiasm for reading ^[1]. High school students are at a crucial stage in life, experiencing intense emotions and showing keen interest in themes such as love, friendship, and personal growth. Choosing works that explore these themes helps stimulate their reading interest and increase their engagement. For instance, literary works featuring love stories, struggles, and personal breakthroughs often evoke emotional resonance in young readers, enabling them to learn in a more natural and enjoyable environment.

4. Methods and Techniques for Abridgment

In the abridgment of classic English and American literary works for high school students, plot processing and language optimization are key aspects. By simplifying lengthy plots and refining the language, we can ensure that the essence of the original work is preserved while enhancing readability and educational value. The following sections will specifically discuss how to efficiently handle plot and optimize language during the abridgment process to meet the reading needs of high school students.

4.1 Plot Processing

4.1.1 Eliminating Minor Plotlines

4.1.1.1 Criteria for Determining Minor Plotlines

When reducing minor plotlines, it is essential to identify which parts drive the main storyline forward and which serve as supplementary or secondary narratives. Minor plotlines generally provide additional details or expand upon the main story but do not directly influence the primary conflicts or character development. After reviewing and organizing the story's progression, editors can determine which plotlines are unrelated to character growth or conflict resolution and consider them for removal.

4.1.1.2 Techniques for Abridgment and Case Analysis

Eliminating lengthy background descriptions. Some background descriptions are overly detailed and not essential for high school students to understand the main storyline. Instead, they may increase reading difficulty. Therefore, abridgment should focus on simplifying or removing background information that does not contribute to the story's progression. For instance, in *Oliver Twist*, the details of Oliver's birth can be condensed, reducing the extensive depiction of London's lower-class life while emphasizing the protagonist's adventures and growth.

Removing subplots of minor characters. Classic English and American literary works often contain multiple characters and their respective subplots. Many minor character stories do not directly impact the understanding of the main storyline or character relationships. By removing subplots unrelated to the protagonist, the focus remains on the main character and their development.

4.1.2 Summarizing the Main Plot

4.1.2.1 Criteria for Identifying Main Plotlines

The main plot consists of core events that drive the story forward, usually involving major conflicts and turning points for key characters. When determining the main plot, editors should focus on events that significantly impact character relationships, emotional development, or the presentation of the central theme. For example, in *Jane Eyre*, Jane's evolving relationship with Rochester and her self-realization are the novel's core plotlines, whereas interactions with minor characters are secondary. Therefore, when summarizing, editors should prioritize these essential story elements.

4.1.2.2 Methods for Summarizing Paragraphs and Chapters

After identifying the main plotlines and removing minor ones, editors should summarize each major plot section or chapter, extracting key information while omitting unnecessary descriptions and details. This method helps readers quickly grasp the core meaning of each part of the story. Editors should ensure that the essential plot and character development remain intact while streamlining the narrative.

4.1.3 Ensuring Narrative Coherence

Maintaining the coherence of the storyline is crucial throughout the abridgment process. Although some details and plotlines may be removed, editors must ensure that the story's logical structure remains clear and that there are no abrupt gaps in character emotions or major events.

4.2 Language Optimization

4.2.1 Principles of Grammar Simplification

Classic English and American literary works often contain long and complex sentences with intricate grammatical structures, such as relative clauses and subjunctive moods. Additionally, authors frequently use numerous modifiers, further increasing reading difficulty for high school students ^[2]. Therefore, a major challenge in reading these texts is deciphering these complex sentences. When optimizing language, editors should remove redundant modifiers and excessively complicated sentence structures to make the text more concise and comprehensible. Long sentences can be broken into shorter ones, and subordinate clauses can be rewritten as simple sentences to improve readability.

Example:

Original: "I can no longer help thanking you for your unexampled kindness to my poor sister. Ever since I have known it, I have been most anxious to acknowledge to you how gratefully I feel it."— *Pride and Prejudice*

Abridged: "I can't thank you enough for your kindness to my sister. Since I learned of it, I have been eager to express my gratitude."

4.2.2 Replacing Complex Words with Simpler Alternatives

Classic literary works often contain sophisticated or archaic vocabulary, many of which exceed the typical high school students' vocabulary range and are not included in standardized exam word lists. To enhance comprehension, editors can replace complex words with simpler synonyms that align with students' existing vocabulary. This approach not only improves readability but also reduces the cognitive load for students.

Example:

Original: "The plethora of societal conventions that one must adhere to in order to achieve success is overwhelming."— *The Great Gatsby*

Abridged: "The great number of social customs that one must abide by in order to achieve success is extremely overwhelming."

4.3 Retaining Classic Passages

4.3.1 Criteria for Identifying Classic Passages

Classic passages are often the most representative parts of a literary work and are widely quoted and discussed in both academic and general readership circles. These passages are highly valued for their profound ideas, emotional depth, or artistic language ^[3]. For instance, Shakespeare's famous line "To be,

or not to be, that is the question” is one of the most recognized quotes in Western literature. Editors can refer to literary critiques, academic research, and general reader feedback to determine which passages hold significant influence. If a passage is frequently cited, analyzed, or plays a vital role in literary studies, it is typically considered a classic.

4.3.2 Strategies for Retaining Classic Passages

Once a passage’s literary significance has been established, editors should preserve it in its original form. Altering classic passages can diminish their depth and impact. Additionally, high school students should have the opportunity to engage with the original text and experience the power of literature firsthand. However, given students’ limited language proficiency, editors can provide appropriate translations or explanations in Chinese to help them better understand the content.

Conclusion and Prospects

This study establishes a strategy system for abridging English and American literary classics, focusing on maintaining the integrity of the works, highlighting key plot developments and character portrayals, and aligning with the cognitive and linguistic levels of high school students. By streamlining redundant content, simplifying language structures, and preserving classic passages, this approach aims to adapt literary classics while ensuring their accessibility. The selection process emphasizes the literary significance, historical context, and thematic relevance of the works.

Although this research fills a gap in the field and proposes practical methods, it has yet to validate the universality of the strategies due to a lack of empirical studies. Future research should incorporate teaching practice to evaluate the effectiveness of these abridgment strategies and further refine them to accommodate regional variations in students’ language proficiency. Additionally, more targeted approaches for adapting classic literature should be explored.

Fund Project

This project is funded by the project “Exploring the application of the game-based teaching mode of XIVO Whiteboard in secondary school English teaching”, project number 2024XJ19, which is a 2024 university-level project of the South China Business School of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

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