

Original Paper

A Study of English Teaching in China from Perspective of Ecological Linguistics

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Abstract

This study adopts an ecolinguistic theoretical framework, viewing the process of English language teaching as a micro-ecosystem, which emphasizes a comprehensive and dynamic approach to instruction. It focuses on the interactive relationships among learners, teachers, language, and the learning environment, aiming to enhance English teaching methods and improve learners' outcomes.

Keywords

Ecological linguistic, English teaching

1. Introduction

In the context of the new century, as we revel in the joys bestowed by the swift advancement of industrial civilization, humanity also confronts increasingly pervasive and profound ecological challenges. An escalating number of voices advocate for a shift away from relying solely on technological solutions to isolated problems, urging instead a profound reflection on the social and cultural dynamics spurred by uneven development, climate change, and biodiversity loss. As Thomas Berry (1988) puts it, "We are in trouble just now because we don't have a good story. We are between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effectiver. Yet we have not learned the new story."

Hence, from an ecological standpoint, it is imperative to continuously explore and forge new narratives, and expressing to the public in an accessible manner: by sequentially presenting authentic and vivid stories through language; by transforming abstract and impersonal concepts into concrete and metaphorical forms; and by systematically aiding humanity in analyzing the merits and demerits, fostering critical thinking, and achieving a balance between civilization and development.

On this foundation, education should be served as a pivotal tool to nurture students' critical thinking

skills and explore beliefs and practices through a multi-faceted ecological lens. Considering the current educational landscape in China, it is essential to adjust existing curriculum standard and syllabus according to the educational level of students across different age groups. Taking English education as a starting point, we can utilize stories as a medium to construct a robust language education development model from an ecological linguistic perspective, thereby reinvigorating English education in China.

2. Overview of Ecolinguistics

2.1 The Meaning of Ecolinguistics

In the 1970s, the American scholar Haugen introduced the concept of "ecology" into the study of language and coined the term "ecolinguistics" to describe research on language interaction and linguistic diversity (Arran, 1995). He pointed out that ecolinguistics should investigate the interaction and interrelationship between different languages and their surrounding environments, drawing metaphorical comparisons between the linguistic environment and the ecological environment, and making these accessible and acceptable to the public through storytelling. In 1995, Arran argued that ecolinguistics uses linguistic analysis techniques to reveal the stories we believe in and practice, and to question and challenge them from an ecological perspective in his book . In his linguistic framework, "stories" are the fundamental building blocks of everything, existing not only in individual minds but also within broader cultures, as Van Dijk (2009) described in terms of social cognition. Furthermore, the origins of ecolinguistics lie in understanding and perceiving the world through metaphors. Therefore, it is crucial to observe and explore ecolinguistics from the perspective of metaphorical cognition, using metaphorical cognitive concepts to express the forms of ecolinguistics. In summary, ecolinguistics is a specific method based on ecology used to analyze linguistic knowledge, principles, and other aspects, aiming to achieve a comprehensive understanding and mastery of language. The exploration of ecolinguistics first views linguistic diversity as a whole composed of different language structures, similar to organisms in ecological terms, with unique growth characteristics and developmental laws. Secondly, in the real linguistic world, all languages are associated with the characteristics of ecosystems rather than linguistic details. For example, some individualistic tendencies lean towards hierarchical and central languages that lack ecological characteristics. Meanwhile, inherent viewpoints accepted through metaphors need to be endowed with new ecological values through storytelling. Finally, considering the interaction between language and its surrounding environment as a micro-ecosystem aims to analyze the internal structure and components of the system, as well as the harmonious relationships among various elements.

2.2 The Characteristics of Ecolinguistics

Ecolinguistics is an emerging comprehensive discipline that encompasses the basic characteristics of both ecology and linguistics. Firstly, it emphasizes the unity of language, arguing that language does not exist by region, time, or individual but has its own laws of generation and development, akin to life.

In other words, the language system itself is an organic whole composed of various elements interconnected across different times and spaces, and the interconnected elements ultimately form a harmonious ecological language system (Shen Jing, 2019). Secondly, it emphasizes the individuality of language, believing that the occurrence or change of any language is directly related to the environment. For example, language is influenced by social development, the natural ecological environment, and traditional culture. Additionally, with the integration of cultural exchanges, language takes on different forms. Therefore, the stories we live by are taken as a method for the dissemination and promotion of ecolinguistics.

3. Basic Views of Ecolinguistics

American linguist Haugen (1972) defined ecolinguistics as "the study of the interaction between any given language and its environment" (Han Jun, 2017), revealing the ecological origins of metaphorical and biological ecological environments. Ecolinguists view language and the real world as a dynamic interactive process with the following ecological characteristics.

3.1 *Language Possesses Meaning*

It refers to a complex group phenomenon that transcends the rules of complex systems under a few simple interaction rules. The world discussed with individuals who have a desire to communicate constitutes a complex system composed of ecological dialogues. Expressionists believe that the learning and use of language is a complex and dynamic process. The development and use of language interact with the environment of the speech act subject. This aligns with sociocultural theory. For language learners, the language learning process is an active participation in meaning construction within sociocultural communication. Therefore, language learning is a social activity that primarily possesses social attributes and secondarily individual behavior. In this social activity, language learners and language instructors (including parents, teachers, and peers) are the builders of the learning environment. They choose learning goals and operate specific learning processes (Lin Meizhen, 2017: 31-39).

3.2 *Language Learning is "Fluidity"*

"Fluidity" refers to things that change over time. The fluidity of language learning manifests in multiple aspects. For example, native language learning patterns influence the current status of foreign language learning, and ways of thinking formed by past social experiences influence future ways of thinking. The impact of these factors on foreign language acquisition changes with learners' social experiences and psychological development. Therefore, the current experiences and abilities of language learners have a decisive influence on their future psychological capabilities. Language learning is not a change in learners' sociocultural environment but a reproduction of their growth experiences and language learning experiences. Changes in language and cultural environments, i.e., language acquisition, are the result of multidimensional changes in time and space in language learning. In other words, language learning is a dynamic process. Language acquisition not only expands linguistic knowledge but also

alters psychological structures and ways of thinking.

3.3 The Concept of Environmental Affordance in Learning

Proposed by Gibson, it can be understood as the relationship between animals and their living environments, i.e., the physical properties of all substances in the natural environment correspond to the environment. When the environment possesses these physical characteristics, animals can achieve specific functions through specific behaviors. Organisms can judge these functions and adapt to the environment. Ecolinguists believe that language has an ecological connection with the people who use it and the surrounding material world. In terms of language acquisition, the language environment in which learners are located has "affordance," which makes language acquisition possible. In other words, teachers and schools should provide a suitable language ecological environment for language acquisition.

4. The Essence of English Teaching from the Perspective of Ecolinguistics

In the process of language learning, ecolinguistics views language learning as a micro-ecosystem encompassing learners, language instructors, language, and the language learning environment, examining the systems within the system and their impact on language acquisition. In other words, teaching English is not a simple act but rather a language teaching ecosystem. Learners engage with English culture and knowledge through learning English and interact with various elements within the system. The ecolinguistic perspective on English teaching emphasizes dynamic and interactive teaching of communication, establishing a micro-system for English language knowledge and cultural exchange. In the process of participating in the construction of this system, language instructors impart existing language and cultural knowledge to language learners; learners acquire and implement language and culture by engaging in the construction of the system. The process of English learning involves acquiring English and cultural knowledge, communication styles, and adapting to English culture under the guidance of educational institutions and within a specific language environment.

Learners not only acquire language knowledge but also participate in the construction of a micro-English cultural system, promoting the enhancement of knowledge literacy and cultural competence to meet the demands of global economic integration for new talents. Ecological English teaching is a dynamic and unified process for instructors to determine teaching objectives, create an ecological teaching environment, and utilize ecological teaching methods; for learners, it is a process of adapting to English culture within a specific teaching cultural context.

5. Difficulties in College English Teaching from the Perspective of Ecolinguistics

5.1 Limited Teaching Staff

To alleviate the shortage of teachers, many universities have gradually implemented large-class teaching, but this issue still persists and has not been effectively resolved. The scarcity of teachers remains a major problem for universities. Therefore, universities urgently need to address the issue of

hiring an English teaching team to complete English teaching tasks and provide students with good teaching services. Additionally, English teachers in some university are still providing supplementary tutoring for their students, which makes these teachers take on a heavy workload, naturally leading to stress. These factors directly affect the improvement of English teaching quality and the overall quality of teachers, hinder the progress of some research projects in universities, and bring many inconveniences to English teaching.

5.2 Differences in Family Education, English Learning Ability and English Knowledge Base

There are significant differences in students' English proficiency. Upon entering university, the number of students increases while the number of teaching staff remains limited, which leads to the use of large-class teaching formats. This mode is a major reason why students cannot address their problems effectively. It fails to meet the diverse needs of students in English learning, which contradicts ecological language teaching in the humanistic principle. The lack of corresponding teaching practical activities prevents students from getting sufficient exercise. Therefore, knowledge is difficult to apply in real life, affecting the overall quality of college English teaching. Furthermore, in large-class teaching, teachers often face a large number of students with limited teaching time, and cannot ensure that students' questions can be answered in time. There is no effective communication between teachers and students, and classroom order is chaotic. In such a classroom atmosphere, teachers cannot take care of every student, resulting in inattentiveness, sleeping, chatting, using mobile phones, and even skipping classes.

5.3 Unreasonable Design of the Syllabus

The syllabus serves as a "product specification" provided by the school to its audience (teachers, students, parents, society), providing information for those purchasing courses and educational services, and also serving as a "teaching contract" established between teachers and students regarding teaching and learning commitments (Guo Wenge, 2016: 58-64). It is an indispensable part of the teaching ecosystem. Under the impact of systematic teaching design and online teaching trends, college English courses have gradually shifted from a vague "experience"-based arrangement centered on teachers to a systematic and standardized design centered on learners. This requires the construction of a sustainable and dynamically developing English teaching ecosystem that promotes mutual learning. Considering the current status of college English teaching in China, there is a lack of targeted and systematic teaching design, as well as a comprehensive syllabus system. Some existing syllabi for English teaching in Chinese universities mainly introduce the course knowledge structure based on textbook chapter structures, lacking clarity and key elements such as teaching activities, evaluation schemes, and teaching schedules. This has led to misunderstandings in the positioning and design of college English courses in China.

5.4 Monotonous Teaching Forms

In ecological language teaching, the arrangement of college English courses plays a crucial role, and the quality of the course process will directly affect the actual ecological balance of English teaching.

At the same time, it will also affect the improvement of students' English abilities and their actual mastery and application. Currently, many college English classes only offer excellent reading courses, lacking speaking and listening training, severely neglecting these two key aspects of English learning. During the teaching process, teachers only focus on language input without paying attention to language output and students' actual comprehension. This teaching method and the sad state of teacher-student relationships have led to the disruption of the ecological chain in college English teaching.

6. Strategies for College English Teaching from the Perspective of Ecolinguistics

6.1 Establishing an Ecological Teaching Philosophy

Universities should promptly establish an ecological English teaching model, emphasizing the ecological exploration of teaching philosophies and comprehensively fostering an ecological English teaching mindset. Firstly, college English teachers must maintain their own ecological balance, namely, a fundamental equilibrium between comprehensive professional competence and teaching proficiency (Zhang Qiwen, 2021). Secondly, to better enable students to apply their learned knowledge in real life and enhance their overall abilities, English teachers must first possess such capabilities. Therefore, from an ecolinguistic perspective, teachers' comprehensive English abilities directly influence the cultivation of students' comprehensive abilities and lead to imbalances in students' language skills. In the college English teaching ecosystem, apart from teachers' professional and teaching level, teachers' professional attitude and working psychology are also important components of the system, which directly affect students' learning status and learning efficiency. Teachers should actively shift traditional teaching concepts, reform teaching models, break away from the current classroom paradigm, strive to build equal, free, and harmonious teacher-student relationships, respect differences among students, adopt psychological teaching methods suited to contemporary college students, capture their attention, heighten their interest in English learning, stimulate their subjective initiative, genuinely implement quality education throughout the entire teaching process, integrate teaching with learning, and apply linguistic knowledge and theoretical language knowledge in practice.

6.2 Clarifying Ecological Teaching Objectives

From an ecolinguistic perspective, language is not only an effective carrier of culture but also an ecological phenomenon. For a long time, people have regarded language as a communicative tool from the perspective of social phenomenology. However, conclusions about language have not clearly elucidated its essence. To effectively transform people's perceptions and deepen their understanding of language, we can attempt to integrate language into a comprehensive system ecology, re-examine, deeply analyze, and explore language. Only in this way can citizens comprehend their social and family ecosystems. During the educational process, college English teachers should not only enable students to correctly use English knowledge but also acquaint them with English culture. This teaching objective should be made clear in teaching and implemented in specific teaching segments.

6.3 Standardizing Ecological Syllabus

Universities should prioritize the standardization of ecological syllabi in teaching construction, gradually transforming the syllabi of Chinese universities into highly targeted, sustainable, and systematic "teaching instructions." From an ecological teaching perspective, this involves compiling instructions that emphasize both theory and practice, focus on knowledge and skills, keep abreast of the times, implement constructivism, general education, and critical thinking, and integrate ecological concepts into ideological and political education to reconstruct students' cognition. In this process, it is also necessary to continuously incorporate the ecolinguistic concept, as articulated by Arran Stubbe, of seeking alternative narratives to the most common and dangerous story of economic growth as society's primary goal. By integrating ecolinguistic concepts into ideological and political education, where students' social responsibility can be cultivated cognitively (Arran Stubbe, 1995).

6.4 Adopting Ecological Teaching Content

Ecological teaching primarily encompasses listening comprehension, oral expression, reading analysis, and English writing instruction. Ecolinguistics focuses on language and emphasizes that the meaning of language is determined by the environment. After completing basic teaching tasks, college English listening instruction can, within a few minutes, play the most popular and inspiring English songs to soothe students' emotions. Simultaneously, conducting simple listening training for students can effectively enhance their interest in English learning and change their perceptions of English. During this process, college English teachers can encourage students to sing along with the music or listen for keywords in the lyrics. After explaining the significance to students, they can fully embody the interactivity of ecolinguistics through subsequent lessons. Domestic students lack a good English environment and atmosphere during their English learning. Therefore, college English teachers should create a strong English learning atmosphere, fostering an ecological environment closer to the local language, allowing students to freely communicate in such situations, enabling them to master more English communication skills, and thereby improving their English abilities.

7. English Teaching Design from the Perspective of Ecolinguistics

From an ecological perspective, language studies should consider four aspects: holism, dynamism, interactivity, and contextuality. English language teaching models, incorporating ecological linguistics, have established a comprehensive and harmonious ecological language teaching model by integrating English teaching, language, language learning, and learners' psychological environments. Interactive ecological language teaching is divided into two levels: teachers use communication methods to foster understanding and guide students to actively participate in teaching interactions, thereby enhancing their learning motivation; learning themes should be clear, with learning content matched to proficiency levels, and actively engaging in interactive teaching activities.

In terms of teaching objectives, from an ecological linguistic viewpoint, English teaching is no longer solely about acquiring language knowledge with a specific purpose. Rather, it aims at nurturing

students' language skills, expanding their linguistic knowledge, cultivating emotional attitudes, mastering learning strategies, fostering cultural awareness and critical thinking, and enhancing cultural literacy. In cross-cultural communication, teachers should respect the differences and ways of thinking between Chinese and Western cultures and help students express their thoughts. On the other hand, when cultivating students' international perspectives, stories should be cleverly utilized as a medium for transmission, and cultural imperialism must be terminated. While embracing Western culture, attention should be given to the export of Chinese culture.

Regarding teaching content, the expansion of English knowledge has always been the core of English teaching. From an ecological linguistic perspective, language teaching content not only encompasses narrowly defined linguistic knowledge such as phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar but also includes cultural knowledge such as history, geography, and literature. In terms of form, it not only covers official written language and literary language but also informal verbal communication, providing students with a more diverse learning experience. Textbooks are merely the carriers of teaching content. Actual teaching content should be based on textbooks but transcend their content. English teaching content not only provides students with language knowledge and skills but also integrates language knowledge, skills, emotional attitudes, learning strategies, and cross-cultural communication skills to cultivate new talent in the international arena. When selecting English knowledge, attention should be paid to the integration of Chinese and Western cultures. Learning English is not only about understanding British society, culture, and customs and enhancing understanding of Western culture and values but also about using the language as a medium to disseminate China's excellent traditional culture, promote Sino-Western cultural exchanges, and enhance China's cultural soft power. However, for a long time, Chinese and English textbooks have rarely covered Chinese landscapes and traditional culture, making it difficult for students to provide Chinese cultural insights in cross-cultural communication. Cultural exchanges are unbalanced, with Western cultural imports outweighing Chinese cultural exports. Therefore, in classroom teaching, teachers should compare Chinese and Western cultures and guide students to focus on Chinese culture. This not only shortens the distance between students and textbooks but also stimulates students' interest in learning English, making English a bridge for cross-cultural communication.

In terms of teaching methods, teaching methods must escape monotony and absoluteness, and teaching capabilities should reflect teaching concepts. In specific teaching, traditional methods such as grammar-translation, modeling, immersion, task-based language teaching, and ecological language teaching can be adopted. Firstly, for the imparting of language knowledge, the classroom teaching method is a teacher-centered information transfer method and the most effective way to teach language knowledge. It suits the actual situation of college English teaching in China. Based on grammar-translation, classroom teaching has certain advantages in college English learning. This method requires students to have a certain language foundation and is more suitable for college students. This teaching method has low organizational demands and can achieve ideal English

classroom teaching effects. However, the drawback of this teaching method is that students may not actively participate in classroom teaching, and the process can become dull. Secondly, for acquiring cultural knowledge, teachers should actively create a classroom atmosphere. By placing students in the context of English language and culture through the following means: firstly, creating a harmonious and equal teaching atmosphere is a prerequisite for cultural immersion. Only in a harmonious English cultural teaching atmosphere can students dare to try actively and express themselves boldly in English. In a given socio-cultural atmosphere, students use cultural and linguistic knowledge to actively participate in teaching activities, learn cultural knowledge through personal experience of Anglo-American culture, learn to understand and tolerate through stories, and simultaneously use stories. Additionally, teachers should enrich cultural knowledge in classroom teaching, organically combine language with ecology, and tell "good stories." Most textbooks are based on cultural knowledge. While fully utilizing textbooks, teachers can use modern multimedia teaching technology to guide students in understanding cultural differences in different contexts, cultivate their critical thinking, and conduct timely cultural comparisons. This not only enriches teaching content but also enriches teaching methods and fosters a positive classroom atmosphere. Thirdly, training in thinking development. The most effective method for training in thinking development is task-based language teaching, which involves setting specific learning tasks. Fourthly, integrating an ecological perspective into ideological and political education subtly reconstructs students' perceptions of language and ecology, enhancing the social responsibility of contemporary university students.

8. Conclusion

From an ecological linguistic perspective, universities should deeply recognize the difficulties in current teaching, actively face and re-examine their teaching work, and comprehensively reform English teaching. However, reform is not an opportunity but a prolonged battle. Therefore, university teachers should establish an ecological teaching perspective, clarify ecological teaching objectives, improve English teaching quality using ecological teaching content, promote students' reception through storytelling methods, comprehensively implement ecological English teaching for students, establish an ecological teaching system in the English classroom, and cultivate students' ability to "tell stories" at different levels. This can effectively increase students' interest in English courses, enhance their ability to make English in use, make college English classrooms vibrant and energetic, and promote the sustainable development of education.

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