

Original Paper

From Input to Interaction: Reconstructing College English Classroom Discourse through Sociocultural Theory

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Abstract

In Chinese college English education, traditional teacher-centered, input-focused instruction has been widely criticized for limiting student engagement and communicative skill development, often resulting in “deaf and dumb” English where learners struggle with real-life dialogue. This conceptual paper argues for a shift from such monologic discourse to a dialogic, interaction-driven model. Drawing on Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory—especially the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding—it reconceptualizes classroom discourse as a collaborative process where learning is co-constructed through social interaction. The study critiques the prevalent input-only approach and proposes a dialogic classroom discourse framework that foregrounds student–teacher and peer–peer interaction. In this model, teachers act as facilitators who provide scaffolded support within students’ ZPD, and students actively participate as co-constructors of knowledge. This forward-looking approach aims to enhance learners’ communicative competence and critical thinking by creating interactive learning environments aligned with contemporary educational reforms and international best practices. The paper advocates for dialogic teaching practices to transform passive English classrooms into vibrant communities of practice, better preparing students for real-world communication.

Keywords

dialogic teaching, sociocultural theory, Zone of Proximal Development, scaffolding, communicative competence, classroom interaction, Chinese EFL education

1. Introduction

Chinese college English classrooms have traditionally been dominated by a one-way, teacher-centered discourse, emphasizing linguistic input and accuracy over interactive communication (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2022). Under the influence of Confucian heritage culture and decades of grammar-translation pedagogy, teachers often assume an authoritative lecturer role, while students listen passively (Sun & Zhang, 2022). Such “input-only” practices have been critiqued for limiting student engagement, critical reflection, and communicative skill development (Wu et al., 2025; Sun & Zhang, 2022). The outcome has been described as “deaf and dumb” English, where learners may read and translate but struggle to participate in authentic dialogue (Sun & Zhang, 2022). Recent studies confirm that in many Chinese tertiary English classes, teacher talk still dominates and student talk remains minimal, reflecting a persistent didactic model ill-suited to developing communicative competence (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Wu et al., 2025).

Against this backdrop, there is growing recognition of the need to shift from monologic, teacher-centered discourse to a more dialogic, interactive classroom model (Bi, 2023). The Chinese Ministry of Education’s reforms—from the College English Curriculum Requirements (2007) to the updated guidelines in 2020—explicitly call for communicative, student-centered approaches that foster interaction and real-world language use (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2022). However, implementing these changes requires a theoretical reorientation in how classroom discourse is understood. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT) provides a robust conceptual framework for this reorientation, as it emphasizes the social nature of learning, the role of interaction in cognitive development, and the importance of scaffolding within learners’ Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Bi, 2023). Grounded in SCT, this paper critiques the traditional input-driven discourse and proposes a dialogic discourse model for Chinese college English teaching that foregrounds student–student and teacher–student interaction.

The following sections present the theoretical framework of SCT (with a focus on scaffolding and ZPD), analyze the limitations of the prevailing teacher-centered discourse, and then build a conceptual model of dialogic classroom discourse. The model highlights how interactive dialogue, guided by scaffolding techniques, can transform classroom communication and better support language development. Drawing on recent literature (2019–2025) and empirical findings, we illustrate the pedagogical benefits of dialogic teaching and consider practical implications for Chinese higher education. By reconstruing classroom discourse from input to interaction, English instruction in China can more effectively mediate learning and align with international best practices for communicative competence (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2022).

2. Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory, ZPD, and Scaffolding

Sociocultural theory, originating from the work of L. S. Vygotsky, posits that human learning and cognition are fundamentally social and mediated by cultural tools, with language being a primary tool

of mediation (Sun & Zhang, 2021). In the context of second language development, SCT asserts that interaction is not just beneficial but essential for learning: cognitive development occurs through participation in social dialogue and the internalization of socially mediated experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). A key construct of SCT is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—defined as the gap between a learner’s current independent ability and their potential development with guidance or collaboration (Bi, 2023). Learning is maximized in this zone, as learners perform beyond their solo capacity by relying on support from a more knowledgeable other (e.g., a teacher or peer). Crucially, what a learner can do with assistance today, they can do alone tomorrow (Vygotsky, 1978), highlighting how social interaction drives individual competence.

Scaffolding refers to the tailored support provided to learners within the ZPD to help them accomplish tasks they cannot yet do independently. Initially introduced by Wood, Bruner and Ross in the 1970s, scaffolding in modern SCT is viewed as the process by which an expert “mediator” (teacher or capable peer) temporarily assists learners, enabling them to achieve a higher level of performance until they gain autonomy (Zhang & Zhang, 2020; Bi, 2023). Effective scaffolding involves breaking tasks into manageable parts, asking guiding questions, modeling strategies, or providing feedback—all withdrawn gradually as learners internalize new skills (Zhang & Zhang, 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). In other words, scaffolding is adaptive support: it is intentionally temporary and designed to be faded as students’ competence grows, preventing over-reliance on help (Zhang & Zhang, 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). The end goal is for learners to perform independently, having had their ZPD “stretched” by assisted interaction. Recent research emphasizes that scaffolding can be provided not only by teachers but also through collective scaffolding among peers (Bi, 2023). Donato’s seminal study demonstrated that groups of language learners working collaboratively can scaffold each other, jointly solving linguistic problems and co-constructing knowledge that no individual member initially possessed (Bi, 2023). In such collaborative dialogues, peers serve as reciprocal facilitators, each at times the “expert” and at other times the “novice”, effectively creating a socially shared ZPD for the group (Bi, 2023). This dialogic scaffolding harnesses the power of multiple perspectives and mutual support, aligning with a core SCT insight: learning is distributed across people in interaction, not confined within individual minds (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2021).

Within an SCT framework, classroom discourse itself is a cultural tool that mediates learning. How teachers and students interact—the classroom talk—shapes opportunities for development. A sociocultural perspective shifts focus from viewing language instruction as the transmission of knowledge to viewing it as a process of co-construction of knowledge through dialogue. The teacher’s talk is not merely for delivering content, but for prompting, guiding, and negotiating meaning with students (Bi, 2023; Linlin et al., 2024). Meanwhile, students’ talk (in response to teachers or with peers) is not “off-task” noise, but rather the very medium through which learners articulate understanding and engage in higher mental functions (reasoning, hypothesizing, self-regulation) with social support (Bi, 2023; Sun & Zhang, 2021). Dialogic instruction, a term used in SCT-informed pedagogy, refers to

classroom dialogue that is mutual and open-ended, where teacher and students build on each other's ideas and genuinely interact to construct knowledge (Alexander, 2020). This stands in contrast to authoritative or monologic talk, where the teacher controls the discourse tightly (e.g., through lecture or closed questioning) and students' contributions are minimal or strictly evaluated. According to sociocultural theorists, dialogic talk creates richer learning affordances: it externalizes students' thinking, allowing the teacher to gauge understanding and provide contingent scaffolding; it also enables learners to appropriate language and strategies through collaborative use (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2021).

In summary, sociocultural theory provides a powerful lens for reconceptualizing classroom discourse. It suggests that an interactive, dialogic approach—wherein teachers scaffold students within the ZPD and peers engage in collaborative dialogue—is more conducive to language development than a one-way “input” approach. By situating learning in social interaction, SCT-aligned pedagogy leverages the idea that knowledge emerges through dialogic processes. The next section applies these theoretical insights to critique the prevalent teacher-centered discourse model in Chinese college English education.

3. Critique of Traditional Teacher-Centered Classroom Discourse

Despite policy changes and theoretical advances, many Chinese college English classrooms still operate on a traditional discourse model that can be described as teacher-fronted, input-heavy, and monologic (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2022). In this model, often rooted in the Grammar-Translation and audio-lingual methods, the teacher is the primary (sometimes sole) speaker for most of the class time. Lectures, teacher explanations of vocabulary and grammar, and initiator–response–feedback (IRF) sequences dominate the communicative pattern, while students listen, take notes, and respond only when called upon for right answers. This “teaching as telling” paradigm assumes that language acquisition occurs through absorbing teacher input and explicit correction, with student output largely limited to rehearsed answers or translation exercises. From a sociocultural perspective, such a discourse environment is problematic: it severely restricts the dialogic engagement through which meaningful learning occurs (Bi, 2023; Sun & Zhang, 2021).

Limited Student Participation and Agency: Research indicates that traditional English lessons in China allocate very little time for student talk or interaction. For example, classroom observations have found that teachers monopolize talk time, sometimes upwards of 80% or more, leaving students largely silent except when answering display questions (yes/no or recall questions) (Wu et al., 2025; Rezaee & Farahian, 2012). This teacher-dominated pattern reflects an assumption that knowledge flows in one direction—from teacher to student—which marginalizes students' active role in constructing understanding. As Clark-Gareca and Gui (2019) note, Chinese EFL teachers historically have believed in maintaining tight control to ensure content coverage and accuracy, which corresponds to a deficit view of learner ability (i.e. students “don't know enough” to contribute). Consequently, learners

become habituated to passivity, and their opportunities to practice language in meaningful contexts are scant. This runs counter to SCT's principle that learners develop higher-order functions (like speaking or critical thinking in L2) by performing them socially with support. Without chances to articulate ideas, negotiate meaning, or ask questions, students remain at a surface level of comprehension and often lack confidence in using English communicatively (Wu et al., 2025). Wu and Chen (2024) observe that a predominantly teacher-centered approach "limits student engagement and reflective learning," leaving learners unprepared to use English actively outside the classroom. In sum, the traditional discourse stifles learner agency and investment, which are crucial for language acquisition.

Focus on Form over Meaningful Communication: The input-centric classrooms often emphasize linguistic form (grammar rules, vocabulary accuracy) at the expense of meaningful communication. Teachers carefully present language points and correct errors, but rarely organize authentic discussions or tasks requiring students to express their own ideas. This approach has been effective in helping students read and pass written exams, but has notoriously failed to develop spontaneous speaking and writing skills (Sun & Zhang, 2022). As one analysis bluntly concluded, Chinese learners taught in this manner "could recite grammar rules but failed to speak or write appropriately, resulting in only 'deaf and dumb' English" (Sun & Zhang, 2022). The lack of communicative practice is a direct consequence of discourse patterns that treat the teacher's utterances as the valid knowledge and students' utterances as mere responses to prompts. There is little room for students to initiate topics, ask genuine questions, or engage in extended dialogue – all of which are needed to develop pragmatic competence and fluency. Moreover, by focusing on accuracy in a decontextualized way, the traditional model tends to neglect the sociocultural contexts of language use. Students may learn about English (metalinguistic knowledge) but not how to use English to collaborate, problem-solve, or express complex ideas. This form-focused, monologic discourse is misaligned with the goals of College English curricula that now stress communicative competence and critical thinking (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2022).

Lack of Scaffolding and Responsiveness: In many teacher-centered classrooms, the interaction that does occur follows scripted IRF patterns (teacher Initiation, student Response, teacher Feedback) that leave little room for contingent scaffolding. Teachers ask questions (often display questions with known answers), a few students respond (usually the stronger ones), and the teacher evaluates or moves on. Such interaction, while giving an illusion of participation, is essentially a closed dialogue – it tests students on what has been taught rather than exploring what students think or need help with. As a result, teachers may not attune to students' actual ZPD. If a student fails to answer correctly, the teacher typically either supplies the answer or calls on another student, rather than probing the misunderstanding or providing hints that could scaffold the student toward the answer. The absence of responsive scaffolding means teachable moments are lost. Students who do not immediately know the answer remain unsupported, and those who do know are not challenged to explain or elaborate (which could deepen their learning). This pattern aligns with what Sun and Zhang (2021) identified as an incongruence between teachers' stated beliefs and practices: teachers recognized the value of

form-focused interactive methods, yet in actual classrooms they reverted to safer, teacher-led methods due to perceived time constraints and institutional pressures (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2021). The result is a discourse that tells rather than guides. In SCT terms, such classrooms provide limited mediated learning experiences – interactions that connect new knowledge to students’ existing frames of reference. The one-size-fits-all lecturing approach cannot address the diverse developmental levels in a typical class, leaving both advanced and struggling students unengaged.

Cultural and Institutional Constraints: The resilience of the input-only, teacher-centered model in China is also reinforced by broader socio-educational factors. Large class sizes (often 40–50 students) make interactive management challenging, and fixed seating in lecture halls physically discourages group work (Sun & Zhang, 2021). High-stakes exams (like CET-4/6) traditionally emphasized reading and grammar, which led teachers to prioritize coverage of textbook content over interactive activities. The cultural expectation of teacher authority and student respect (rooted in Confucian educational values) can also make teachers and students alike hesitant to adopt a more egalitarian dialogue in class (Zheng & Zhang, 2014). These factors create a “dialogue deficit” in classroom culture, where open student expression is unfamiliar and even unwelcome. Teachers may fear that encouraging discussion could lead to loss of control or wasted time, and students may be reticent to speak out, worrying about face or lacking experience in voicing opinions in class. Indeed, prior studies have noted that even when communicative language teaching (CLT) or task-based language teaching (TBLT) methodologies are introduced, they are often “watered down” in implementation or resisted because of such entrenched attitudes and systemic barriers (Sun & Zhang, 2022). The result is a surface adherence to new curricula but a deep continuity of old discourse practices.

In sum, the traditional teacher-centered discourse in Chinese college English education is theoretically and empirically flawed. It contradicts the sociocultural view that learning is co-constructed through interaction, and it produces outcomes (students with high passive knowledge but low active skills) that are increasingly recognized as insufficient in today’s globalized environment. As Zheng and Shi (2025) highlight in their systematic review, purely lecture-based approaches fail to cultivate many of the cognitive and social gains that dialogue-based interventions have shown, such as improved critical thinking, motivation, and confidence in language use. To address these shortcomings, a fundamental shift in classroom discourse is required—one that moves from input to interaction, repositioning both teacher and students as collaborators in the learning process. The next section outlines a conceptual model of such dialogic discourse, grounded in sociocultural principles and recent research evidence.

4. A Dialogic Discourse Model for Interactive English Classrooms

Reconstructing the college English classroom discourse requires reimagining the roles of teacher and students and the patterns of communication that unfold. We propose a Dialogic Discourse Model centered on interaction, where classroom talk becomes a two-way (indeed, multi-way) street rather than a unidirectional lecture. In this model, learning is seen as a dialogic accomplishment: knowledge is

built through questioning, discussing, and negotiating meaning among teacher and students. The teacher's role shifts from authoritative knowledge-transmitter to facilitator and co-communicator, and students transform from silent recipients to active contributors. Below, we describe the key features of this dialogic model and explain how each is supported by sociocultural theory and recent empirical findings.

1. **Teacher as Mediator and Scaffolder:** In a dialogic classroom, the teacher actively guides learning through responsive dialogue, providing scaffolding in the moment of interaction. Instead of delivering long monologues, the teacher employs strategies such as open-ended questions, prompts, feedback, and revoicing of student contributions to propel thinking forward. The teacher's talk is used deliberately to elicit students' ideas and then build on them, rather than only to evaluate or correct. This aligns with what Alexander (2020) terms "oracy as pedagogy," where the teacher's skilled use of talk mediates student learning. For instance, a teacher might ask, "How did you arrive at that answer?" to prompt a student to articulate their reasoning, then paraphrase the response and pose a further question to deepen analysis. Such practice not only checks comprehension but also encourages metacognition and keeps the student in their ZPD by gently stretching their ability. It is supported by evidence that mediated interaction improves learning outcomes: Zou et al. (2024), in a review of teacher talk, found that classrooms where teachers used dialogic moves (clarifying questions, encouragement of elaboration, etc.) saw better student language gains and even socio-emotional development compared to those with purely directive talk. The teacher in this model is constantly diagnosing the classroom ZPD—identifying what kind of help is needed – and adjusting their discourse accordingly (a process Tharp & Gallimore called "assisted performance"). Importantly, scaffolding is not limited to cognitive support; it also includes affective support (creating a safe atmosphere for risk-taking in speaking). Wu and Chen (2024) emphasize that a comfortable, safe learning environment, combined with a student-centered approach, significantly enhances engagement and learning effectiveness in college English classes. Thus, the mediator-teacher also attends to rapport and encouragement, reducing students' fear of mistakes so they can participate more freely.

2. **Active Student–Student Interaction:** A cornerstone of the dialogic model is enabling peer interaction as a regular and valued part of classroom discourse. Rather than each student only speaking to the teacher (and only when called upon), students regularly converse with each other in pairs or small groups to discuss ideas, complete tasks, or solve problems using English. These student–student dialogues create rich opportunities for collective scaffolding, wherein learners jointly tackle linguistic or conceptual challenges, pooling their strengths and supporting one another (Bi, 2023). Recent studies highlight the benefits of small-group talk for language development. Li and Zhang (2022) conducted a quasi-experimental study in a Chinese university writing class where one group of students engaged in structured small-group discussion before individually writing, while a comparison group planned alone. The results were striking: the students who had collaborative pre-writing discussions produced essays with significantly higher argumentation quality, and the improvement was sustained even on a delayed

post-test(Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2021). The collaborative talk acted as a form of peer scaffolding that helped students generate ideas, clarify their stances, and organize arguments together, effectively extending each writer's ZPD by tapping into peer knowledge (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2021). Similarly, Yawiloeng (2021) found that peer scaffolding during EFL reading activities (e.g., students discussing a text in small groups) led to better comprehension and strategy use, as learners explained vocabulary and asked questions to each other, thus mediating learning in a way a teacher-fronted explanation alone could not. Under the dialogic model, teachers would routinely design tasks that require interaction—such as information-gap activities, debate on a topic, jigsaw reading, collaborative writing, or problem-solving tasks—and explicitly teach conversation skills to help students engage in productive dialogue (listening actively, responding, asking follow-up questions, etc.). Over time, this builds a classroom culture where students see each other as resources, not just the teacher. The notion that “every learner can be a teacher” in peer interaction echoes Johnson’s observation that through collective scaffolding, learners become “each other’s learning resources” (Bi,2023). Importantly, student–student talk also shifts some control away from the teacher, decentralizing the discourse. This can increase learners’ sense of responsibility and investment. Shi et al. (2021), who implemented dialogic teaching in a Chinese middle school social studies class, observed that students produced more argumentative and elaborated discourse during peer discussions than in teacher-led Q&A, indicating deeper engagement and critical thinking when they took charge of the conversation

3. Dialogic Teaching Strategies: To operationalize dialogic discourse, teachers can employ a repertoire of specific strategies anchored in SCT. One key strategy is “asking authentic questions,” i.e. questions for which the teacher does not have a predetermined answer, thereby inviting students to think and contribute original ideas. Authentic questions (e.g., “What do you think the author is implying here?” or “How might this grammar rule apply in a real situation you’ve experienced?”) encourage exploratory talk rather than recall of memorized information. Research by Yang and Wang (2022) on secondary EFL classrooms in China found that teachers who incorporated more open-ended questions and encouraged multiple students to respond created a more dialogic environment, with students feeling more motivated to speak up. Another strategy is uptake, where the teacher deliberately takes up a student’s response and asks a further question or gives a prompt based on it, rather than moving to the next planned point. This shows students that their contributions drive the lesson forward and that the dialogue is responsive. For example, if a student uses a vocabulary word incorrectly during discussion, the teacher might ask another student to gently correct or might reformulate and ask the class to reflect on the usage, turning it into a learning opportunity (rather than simply saying “wrong”). In doing so, the teacher is scaffolding understanding at the point of need. Revoicing is another dialogic move – the teacher repeats or paraphrases a student’s complex statement for the class, sometimes elevating a quiet student’s idea to be heard by all, which validates the student and also clarifies content. Mercer et al. (2019) note that such dialogic techniques can significantly deepen students’ conceptual understanding

and ability to reason in the L2, because they create a cumulative discourse where ideas are extended and integrated through talk. In a dialogic model, even feedback is handled differently: instead of simply “correct/incorrect,” feedback becomes conversational. Teachers might say, “I see your point. Can you explain further?” or “That’s an interesting perspective. Does anyone have a different view?” – turning evaluation into an opportunity for more dialogue. By doing so, feedback serves to keep students within their ZPD, offering either validation or gentle challenge to push their thinking.

4. Integration of Content and Interaction: A practical concern among teachers is that interactive methods might sacrifice content coverage or grammatical accuracy. The dialogic discourse model addresses this by integrating explicit input within interactive frameworks. For example, a teacher might begin with a brief input (mini-lecture or demonstration) – say, introducing a set of useful phrases or a grammar structure – but immediately follow with an interactive activity where students must use those forms to communicate (e.g. a role-play or group problem-solving task that naturally elicits the target language). This reflects a focus on form within meaning-focused interaction, consistent with task-based language teaching principles and SCT’s notion that attention to language form can occur as learners attempt to convey meaning (Long, 1991; Gao et al., 2020). Sun and Zhang (2021) report that Chinese university teachers are increasingly aware of the need to blend form-focused instruction with communicative practice, moving away from pure lecture. In a dialogic model, the teacher remains attentive and can interject brief clarifications or “micro-lessons” as needed during activities (for instance, if many students struggle with a phrase, the teacher pauses the discussion to quickly teach that point, then resumes the activity). This dynamic approach ensures that accuracy and fluency develop in tandem, rather than sequentially. Students receive input and corrective feedback in context, which research has shown to be effective for retention and transfer (Li & Zhang, 2021a). Moreover, by engaging with content through discussion, students deepen their understanding. Dialogic teaching can be applied to not just language practice but also topical content: for example, discussing cultural readings or social issues in English class (Shi et al. 2021 used a controversial public issue for dialogic teaching). Such discussions not only practice language but also train students in critical thinking and expressing opinions – skills emphasized in China’s College English Curriculum for the new era. In this way, the model aligns with broader educational goals of developing well-rounded communicators.

5. Reciprocity and Co-Construction: At the heart of the dialogic discourse model is a change in classroom ethos: a shift to horizontal communication where every participant’s voice is valued in constructing knowledge. Teacher–student and student–student interactions become more symmetric. This does not mean the teacher abdicates authority or expertise, but that the teacher shares intellectual control to a greater degree. The class proceeds as a joint inquiry: for instance, in discussing a text, the teacher might genuinely ask for students’ interpretations and build the lesson around comparing those interpretations, rather than simply imparting a “correct” interpretation. When students ask questions (something strongly encouraged in this model), the teacher might sometimes turn the question back to the class for input, promoting a culture where students learn from peers (and not solely from the

teacher). Collective knowledge-building is evidenced when, for example, multiple students contribute sentences to jointly write a paragraph on the board, or when a student initiates a topic or example that the class then explores. This collective dimension is exactly what sociocultural theorists refer to when they say cognition is distributed: learning resides in the dialogue of the group as much as in any one individual. Empirical support for this comes from small-group research: McDonough and De Vleeschauwer (2019) found that students who collaborated in planning their writing not only produced better texts immediately, but also showed greater improvement in subsequent individual writing tasks than students who never collaborated, suggesting that the knowledge constructed in collaboration carried over to individual ability (Sun & Zhang, 2021). Similarly, Zheng and Shi's (2025) review of dialogue-based interventions reports "promising cognitive and non-cognitive effects," such as improved argumentation skills and greater learner confidence, when classrooms adopted dialogic, discussion-rich activities. These outcomes underscore that when learners are given the chance to think together, they perform beyond what each could do alone – a testament to the ZPD at work on a communal level.

In implementing the dialogic model, teachers may face a learning curve and need to develop skills in classroom discourse management. They will need to balance dialogic and authoritative talk: research by Shi et al. (2021) noted that an effective dialogic teacher in their study judiciously interwove monologic segments (to ensure key content was understood) with dialogic segments (to allow student exploration), switching stances as needed to guide discussion without shutting it down. This suggests the model is not about abandoning all teacher-led instruction, but about using it strategically and always in service of richer interaction. Over time, as students grow accustomed to this mode, one can expect increased student initiation – students posing questions, expressing confusion (thus inviting teacher scaffolding), or building on each other's points spontaneously.

5. Implications for Practice in Chinese College English

Adopting the dialogic discourse model in Chinese higher education entails systemic and pedagogical changes. Here we outline several practical implications and recommendations for stakeholders—including teachers, teacher educators, and administrators—to foster a successful transition from an input-centered to an interaction-centered classroom.

Professional Development for Teachers: Teachers need concrete training and support to shift their classroom discourse practices. Many current college English instructors were themselves educated in teacher-centered systems and may not have experiential knowledge of dialogic teaching. Professional development programs should focus on classroom talk skills: how to ask open-ended questions, how to scaffold student responses, how to manage group discussions, and how to handle errors constructively in conversation. Workshops could involve micro-teaching sessions where teachers practice these skills and reflect on their discourse moves (for example, reviewing video recordings of their lessons to analyze the balance of talk). Peer coaching can also be valuable—teachers observing each other's

classes and providing feedback on dialogic techniques used. As Sun and Zhang (2022) observed, teachers' cognitions can evolve when they see new methods succeeding in context; reflecting on positive outcomes (e.g., noticing that students spoke more or seemed more engaged when the teacher relinquished some control) can reinforce teachers' belief in the efficacy of interactive approaches (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2021). It is important to address teachers' concerns directly: for instance, managing large classes. Training can introduce strategies such as dividing the class into stable small groups or pairs that work together regularly (learning teams), using think-pair-share routines even in big lectures, or employing technology (like online discussion forums or mobile apps for in-class polling and questions) to amplify student voices. Additionally, teachers may worry about covering syllabus content; professional development should emphasize quality over quantity, showing that depth gained through discussion often leads to better retention and skill development than breadth through rushed lecture. Sharing empirical evidence (like the improvements in student writing and speaking from studies cited above) can persuade teachers that the outcomes are worth the pedagogical shift.

Curriculum and Material Design: Textbooks and curricula should be adapted to incorporate dialogic elements. Traditional textbooks that are reading-translation oriented could be supplemented with communicative tasks and discussion prompts for each unit. For example, after a reading passage, instead of just comprehension questions, include a debate topic or problem-solving task related to the passage's theme that students can tackle in groups. Materials should explicitly encourage various discourse roles for students (like "summarizer," "questioner," "clarifier" in group discussions) to scaffold their engagement. The College English curriculum designers might include guidelines or examples of interactive lesson plans. For instance, a sample lesson could demonstrate how to teach a grammar point via a discovery activity: students in groups induce the rule from examples and then have a teacher-led Socratic dialogue to refine understanding, rather than the teacher explaining first. Another aspect is integrating content-based instruction or projects that naturally require talk—such as mini-research projects or presentations on culture—which force students to use English communicatively. When tasks are meaningful and require collaboration, even quieter students have a reason to speak. Moreover, aligning assessments with interactive skills is crucial: if all exams remain discrete-point grammar tests, teachers will feel pressured to stick to lecture. Thus, including some form of spoken assessment, group presentation, or classroom participation in the grading system can incentivize the interactive approach. The new College English Test guidelines in China already hint at assessing listening and speaking; institutions could go further by implementing their own oral exams, debate contests, or portfolio assessments of communicative tasks. This sends a message that communication counts, thereby motivating both teachers and students to invest in dialogic practices.

Classroom Management and Infrastructure: Large class sizes and physical space constraints in Chinese universities are non-trivial barriers to interaction (Sun & Zhang, 2021). Administrators should consider scheduling and classroom arrangements that facilitate dialogic teaching. If possible, classes can be capped at a lower number for language courses, or split large cohorts into smaller tutorial groups for

speaking practice. Where class size cannot be reduced, teachers can still manage effective interaction by structuring the class smartly: e.g., using the “station rotation” model where groups rotate through different activity stations (one might be with the teacher for focused instruction, others doing peer work). Fixed seating can be mitigated by having students turn around to form mini-clusters of 4-6 for discussion. Although noise is a concern, establishing clear norms (like using moderate voices, and the teacher using a signal to regain attention) helps maintain order. In fact, once students are accustomed to the routine of group work, classes often run more smoothly than teachers fear, as students become engaged in tasks. It is also helpful to assign roles within groups (e.g., discussion leader, note-taker, reporter) to ensure accountability and prevent chaos. Another implication is the need for time management – interactive activities can be time-consuming, so teachers must learn to pace lessons, perhaps doing fewer activities but with more depth. Over a semester, covering slightly fewer texts or units may be acceptable if students achieve greater communicative competence; this trade-off should be recognized and supported by departments.

Cultivating a Dialogic Culture: Changing discourse patterns involves changing deep-seated attitudes for both teachers and students. It’s important to foster a classroom culture of trust, openness, and equality in communication. Teachers should explicitly communicate to students the value of interaction: explain that making mistakes in English is a natural part of learning, that their ideas and questions are valued, and that everyone is expected to contribute. Initially, teachers may need to scaffold the social aspect of interaction—for example, teaching phrases for agreeing or disagreeing politely, or doing team-building exercises to help students feel comfortable with each other. Building rapport is essential: a teacher who shows genuine interest in student opinions and displays patience when students struggle to express themselves will encourage more participation. As Mercer and colleagues (2019) note, dialogic pedagogy also has a social-emotional dimension—it can increase students’ confidence and willingness to communicate, but only if the environment is supportive. Peng’s studies on willingness to communicate in China have shown that perceived teacher support and a non-judgmental classroom atmosphere significantly correlate with students speaking up. Therefore, teachers should celebrate student contributions (e.g., “That’s a great point” or by using student ideas in summaries), and handle errors gently (focusing on communication first, then addressing errors collectively rather than singling out or shaming individuals). Over time, as students witness their own improvements—for instance, noticing they can speak more fluently or write more coherently as a result of class discussions—their mindset shifts from viewing English as an academic subject to a living language for expressing thoughts. This is a crucial transformation for sustainable language development.

Addressing Institutional and Cultural Factors: On a larger scale, university administrators and policy-makers should align assessment and evaluation systems with interactive teaching goals. Teacher performance evaluations, for example, could include peer or supervisor reviews that pay attention to innovative pedagogy and student feedback on classroom environment, rather than solely student test scores. If a teacher implements dialogic methods and students subjectively report higher motivation or

confidence, that should be recognized as a positive outcome. Additionally, reducing overemphasis on norm-referenced exams will free teachers to teach more communicatively. Some universities in China have begun incorporating speaking tests or project-based assessments in their College English courses; these initiatives should be expanded. Culturally, it is about finding a balance: respecting the positive aspects of Chinese educational traditions (like valuing the teacher's expertise and deep study of texts) while infusing a spirit of inquiry and dialogue. It can be communicated that interactive learning is not a Westernization per se, but an effective pedagogy compatible with Chinese contexts – after all, the ancient Socratic or Confucian dialogues were themselves interactive question-and-answer forms. Research has even suggested using translanguaging and Chinese discussion strategically in lower-level English classes to bridge to English dialogue (e.g., allowing brief planning in L1 before an English discussion, to lower anxiety and ensure meaningful content to discuss) (Wang & Kabilan, 2025). Such transitional strategies can help students gradually build the skills and confidence needed for full English interaction.

In implementing these changes, challenges will arise – not all students will immediately participate, and not all teachers will be comfortable relinquishing some control. It is important to approach the shift incrementally. Teachers might start by adding one interactive segment to each class and gradually expand, or pair up with a colleague to jointly design and reflect on dialogic lessons. Persistence is key: as Li and Zhang (2021b) argued in their research agenda on collaborative learning, the benefits of dialogic approaches accrue over time, and initial discomfort gives way to improved outcomes as participants adjust to new norms. By staying the course, universities will likely observe the same trend documented in research: students becoming more autonomous, communicative, and metacognitively aware learners, which is precisely the aim of higher education.

6. Conclusion

In re-envisioning college English classroom discourse in China, from input to interaction, we draw on Vygotskian sociocultural theory to argue that meaningful learning thrives on dialogue. The traditional teacher-centered model, with its one-way transmission of knowledge, falls short of developing students' communicative competence and higher-order thinking. It neglects the fundamental insight that language learning is not merely the accumulation of input, but a process of participation—of using language in concert with others to make meaning. By critiquing the prevailing discourse practices, we highlighted how they isolate learners from the very social processes that could accelerate their development. In contrast, the proposed dialogic discourse model places interaction at the heart of the classroom: teachers and students engage in a collaborative dance of scaffolding within the ZPD, co-constructing knowledge through questions, discussions, and feedback.

Grounded in sociocultural principles, the model emphasizes the teacher's role as a facilitator who nurtures a supportive dialogic space and the students' role as active thinkers and interlocutors. We saw that recent empirical evidence—from improved student writing through peer talk (Sun & Zhang, 2021;

Sun & Zhang, 2021), to heightened engagement and critical thinking in dialogic discussions—substantiates the academic and practical value of this approach. The shift to an interactive classroom is not without challenges, but it is both feasible and urgently needed. As China's higher education English curriculum pivots towards communicative and critical skills for the 21st century, the form of classroom communication must likewise change to realize those objectives (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Sun & Zhang, 2022).

Importantly, moving to a dialogic pedagogy does not mean abandoning respect for teachers or linguistic rigor. Rather, it means harnessing the full potential of the classroom community to mediate learning. When properly implemented, dialogic teaching can actually enhance mastery of language forms by situating them in purposeful use and giving learners feedback in context. It can also foster “soft skills”—confidence, collaboration, flexibility of thinking—that traditional methods often overlook. Zheng and Shi's (2025) review of dialogue-based interventions in Chinese classrooms attests to benefits ranging from improved academic outcomes to growth in students' interpersonal skills and motivation. These are precisely the outcomes that align with China's educational vision of producing innovative, communicatively competent graduates who can function in a global environment.

In conclusion, reconstructing classroom discourse through sociocultural theory is both an academic imperative and a practical pathway to better learning. Vygotsky's legacy teaches us that learning is a social journey. By transforming the college English classroom into a genuinely interactive setting, we allow students to embark on that journey—to traverse their Zones of Proximal Development with the guiding hands of peers and teachers, to find their voices in a new language, and to ultimately become autonomous communicators. This conceptual paper has outlined the “why” and “how” of such a transformation. The next steps involve continued research and practice: educators should pilot dialogic approaches in diverse university contexts, and researchers should document the outcomes, refining the model as needed. Through iterative innovation and reflection, the Chinese college English classroom can evolve from an input-fed lecture hall into a vibrant dialogic community of learners, fulfilling the promise of sociocultural theory in practice.

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