



# Construction of the Discourse Ecosystem in College English Classrooms from the Perspective of Educational Ecology

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**Abstract:** The balance of the discourse ecosystem in college English classrooms is a core guarantee for achieving teaching objectives and promoting students' all-round development. From the interdisciplinary perspective of educational ecology and ecolinguistics, this study adopts a four-dimensional analytical framework of "subject-environment-relation-culture" and combines classroom observation and literature analysis to systematically explore the imbalance characteristics and underlying causes. The research identifies four major imbalances: teachers' discourse hegemony and students' subject absence, uneven distribution and single form of discourse opportunities, disconnection of discourse content from real contexts and cultural connotations, and lack of constructiveness and ecological orientation in discourse feedback. These imbalances stem from rigid concepts of ecological subjects, improper configuration of ecological environments, rigid structures of ecological relations, and biased orientation of ecological culture. Correspondingly, reconstruction strategies are proposed: clarifying teachers' and students' ecological niches to build an equal dialogue community, optimizing classroom environments to innovate interactive organizational forms, enriching discourse content to enhance cultural and contextual adaptability, and constructing a diversified and dynamic evaluation mechanism to ensure sustainable ecological development. This study aims to provide theoretical support and practical paths for addressing the dilemma of "teacher-dominated, student-silent" college English classrooms, and promote the transformation of the classroom discourse ecosystem towards a healthy state of teacher-student symbiosis and coordinated development of language competence and humanistic literacy.

**Keywords:** Educational Ecology; College English Classrooms; Discourse Ecosystem; Ecological Reconstruction

## 1 Introduction

As a crucial public basic course in China's higher education system, college English aims to cultivate students' language application competence, intercultural communication literacy, and critical thinking skills. Classroom discourse, as the core carrier for achieving these teaching objectives, its operation mechanism and power distribution

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directly determine the ecological health and teaching effectiveness of the classroom. However, despite the long-standing advocacy of the “student-centered” teaching philosophy, the ecological imbalance of “teacher-dominated, student-silent” remains prevalent. The “vacuous” or “falsely granted” discourse power seriously restricts students’ classroom participation and subjective development, thereby undermining teaching effects<sup>1</sup>.

Traditional studies have mostly analyzed teacher discourse from the perspectives of linguistics or second language acquisition, but they have separated teacher discourse from student discourse power and failed to examine the interaction of classroom elements from a systematic and holistic perspective. Educational ecology provides a new theoretical lens for this issue. Founded by American scholar L.A. Cremin in his 1976 work *Public Education*, this theory holds that education is an organic whole exchanging matter, energy, and information with its internal and external environments. The classroom, as a complex micro-ecosystem, emphasizes the interconnections, dynamic balance, and symbiosis among various ecological factors<sup>2,3</sup>. Fan<sup>4</sup> further points out that the stability of the classroom ecosystem relies on the virtuous circulation of knowledge, discourse, and emotional elements. This view supports the core argument of this study that the lack of student discourse power is not an isolated phenomenon but a concentrated reflection of the imbalance of multiple ecological factors in the classroom.

The development of ecolinguistics has provided evaluation criteria for the quality of classroom discourse. Long<sup>5</sup> proposes that teachers should pursue “beneficial discourse” (discourse that stimulates students’ thinking and promotes interactive communication) rather than controlling “destructive discourse”; Huang<sup>6</sup> emphasizes the ecological orientation of language teaching, focusing on the harmonious relationship between language learning, human all-round development, and the environment. Both are highly consistent with the core concepts of educational ecology.

Currently, existing studies have not fully integrated educational ecology with ecolinguistics, and there is insufficient attention to the discourse ecosystem in the specific context of college English classrooms. With the popularization of MOOCs and blended teaching, the functions and roles of teacher discourse urgently need to be redefined<sup>7</sup>. Notably, post-pandemic teaching reforms have accelerated the integration of online and offline resources, making the discourse interaction landscape more complex and requiring ecological adaptation. Therefore, based on the core theories of educational ecology such as the “ecological niche principle”, “co-evolution law” and “law of tolerance” this study integrates ecolinguistic achievements to analyze the current situation and root causes of the imbalance in the discourse ecosystem of college English classrooms, and constructs a closed-loop ecological path of “problem-strategy-evaluation”, aiming to provide theoretical reference and practical guidance for improving teaching quality and promoting students’ all-round development.

## 2 Theoretical Integration of Educational Ecology and College English Classroom Discourse System

The systematic and relational perspectives of educational ecology provide profound theoretical support for analyzing college English classrooms. A college English classroom can be defined as a “dynamic micro-ecosystem formed by ecological factors such as teachers, students, and teaching environments through energy exchange and information flow, with discourse as the core medium”, featuring integrity, relevance, and co-evolution. Within this system, four dimensions—ecological subjects, ecological environment, ecological relations, and ecological culture—are interrelated and mutually restrictive, jointly shaping the operation mode of classroom discourse, and each dimension must follow the core laws of educational ecology.

From the perspective of ecological subjects, teachers and students are the most active living factors in the system, and the reasonable configuration of their ecological niches is the foundation of system balance. The “ecological niche principle” emphasizes that each subject should exert its unique functions in an appropriate ecological niche to avoid overlap or vacancy<sup>4</sup>. The traditional “teacher-centered” model leads to the excessive expansion of teachers’ discourse power and squeezes students’ discourse space. A healthy ecological niche configuration requires teachers to transform from “knowledge monopolists” to “guides, collaborators, and resource providers” and students to shift from “passive consumers” to “active constructors and participants”, forming a mutually beneficial and symbiotic ecological community.

The ecological environment is the living soil of the discourse ecosystem, which must comply with the “law of tolerance”. It includes not only the physical environment such as classroom layout and multimedia equipment but also teaching conditions such as textbooks and MOOC platforms, as well as the social and cultural context. For example, the “row-seat” arrangement strengthens teachers’ authority, while round-table or group seating is more conducive to equal discourse flow<sup>8</sup>. As a key information flow, the quality of teacher discourse is crucial—using more “beneficial discourse” can optimize the classroom information environment and promote the virtuous cycle of the system<sup>5</sup>.

Ecological relations are the link maintaining the dynamic balance of the system, and educational ecology emphasizes that “relations are more important than entities”. The relations between teachers and students, and among students should be an equal and respectful “I-Thou” dialogue relationship rather than a “dominance-obedience” relationship. Shi<sup>7</sup> found that MOOC teachers’ use of the inclusive subject “we” can shorten the psychological distance between teachers and students and create a sense of community belonging; student-student relations need to shift from “isolated competition” to “cooperative symbiosis”, forming an internal nourishment mechanism of the system through multi-directional discourse interaction.

Ecological culture is the spiritual core of the system, reflecting sustainability. As a frontier for the intersection of Chinese and Western cultures, college English classrooms should integrate the comparison and reflection of Chinese and Western cultural values into discourse content, guiding students to establish cultural confidence and cultivate intercultural adaptability and communication skills, so as to realize the coordinated development of language learning and humanistic literacy<sup>6</sup>.

In summary, the four-dimensional analytical framework of “subject-environment-relation-culture” regards the issue of classroom discourse power as an overall problem of the symbiosis of all ecological factors in the system, providing clear theoretical support for the subsequent analysis of imbalances and the design of strategies.

### **3 Imbalance Characteristics of the Discourse Ecosystem in College English Classrooms**

A healthy classroom discourse ecosystem should enable teachers and students to freely “speak” and form a virtuous cycle of knowledge and discourse. The core of its balance is dynamic adaptation rather than the mechanical average of discourse time. However, in practical classrooms, ecological imbalances are mainly reflected in the following four aspects:

#### **3.1 Teachers’ Discourse Hegemony and Students’ Subject Absence**

In traditional classrooms, teachers’ discourse time accounts for 60%-70% or even more of the total class time, seriously squeezing students’ speaking time<sup>5</sup>. Teachers become the only “monologists” and students are reduced to passive “audience” which violates the fundamental law that language learning requires a great deal of meaningful practice. A deeper imbalance lies in the monopoly of discourse power—the initiative to initiate dialogue, the right to choose topics, the right to allocate turns, and the right to determine meaning are all controlled by teachers, following the “IRF three-part model”<sup>9</sup>. Students’ speeches are mostly repetitions or guesses of teachers’ known information, lacking the expression of true thoughts and emotions. For example, in a classroom themed on “urbanization”, students can only find detailed answers in the text as required by teachers, unable to conduct in-depth and personalized discussions. This leads to weakened learning motivation among students, restricted development of critical thinking and language innovation abilities, and the depletion of system vitality.

#### **3.2 Uneven Distribution and Single Form of Discourse Opportunities**

According to classroom observation data, top students account for 60% of classroom discourse opportunities, while students with weak foundations account for less than 10%. The distribution of discourse opportunities presents a “Matthew effect”—teachers’ questions and attention are mostly focused on top students or outgoing students, while students with weak foundations, introverted personalities, or sitting in marginal positions have long been the “silent majority”. This forms a “gap between the rich and the poor” in discourse power, solidifies the opposition of ecological niches among student groups, and violates the “co-evolution” principle. Meanwhile, students’ discourse forms are highly single, mainly “responding” to teachers’ display questions, while high-order thinking discourse such as “questioning”, “discussion” and “evaluation” rarely occurs. A typical intensive reading class usually follows a fixed structure of “teacher explains vocabulary—asks about the main idea of the paragraph—analyzes long and

difficult sentences—students read aloud”, lacking ideological collisions and supplementary viewpoints among students, which reflects a closed and controlled classroom ecology and restricts the comprehensive development of students' discourse competence.

### **3.3 Disconnection of Discourse Content from Real Contexts and Cultural Connotations**

Discourse content has a tendency of “decontextualization” and “cultural poverty”. Teaching over-focuses on the isolated explanation of language forms such as vocabulary and grammar, revolving around “textbook English”, which has a huge gap with the vivid and complex language use in the real world. As a result, students may achieve high scores in classroom tests but feel at a loss in real intercultural communication, resulting in “ecological niche misalignment”. At the same time, cultural content is either dealt with as superficial symbolic display or completely ignored. Teachers' discourse does not guide students to explore the values, ways of thinking, and social customs behind the language. The orientation of “valuing instrumentality over humanism” makes discourse content lack ideological vitality and cultural tension, which is difficult to stimulate students' desire to express.

### **3.4 Lack of Constructiveness and Ecological Orientation in Discourse Feedback**

Feedback content focuses on form over content—teachers overemphasize the accuracy of language forms while ignoring the logic and richness of ideological content. Simple error correction or general evaluations convey the wrong signal that “speaking correctly is more important than speaking thoughtfully”. Feedback methods are single and lack emotional warmth, mostly simple affirmations or negations, failing to pay attention to students' emotional states and learning strategies, and unable to create a psychologically safe discourse environment. In addition, the feedback subject is single, and peer evaluation is absent—feedback among students is often perfunctory, failing to form an effective ecological closed loop.

## **4 Root Causes of the Imbalance of the Discourse Ecosystem in College English Classrooms**

### **4.1 Ecological Subject Level: Rigid Concepts and Deviated Role Identification**

At the teacher level, the traditional role positioning of “knowledge transmitters” is deeply rooted. Most teachers have formed a “teacher-centered” path dependence due to their own learning and professional growth experiences, regarding classroom discourse power as a tool to maintain teaching order and transmit knowledge. Moreover, under the practical pressure of many teaching classes and a large number of students, they

tend to adopt the “economically efficient” model of “cramming teaching”. At the student level, long-term exam-oriented education makes students accustomed to passive acceptance, with weak subject awareness and lack of the consciousness of “right to ask questions” and “right to question”. Meanwhile, “language anxiety” caused by English as a foreign language further inhibits their willingness to express, leading to the “self-absence” of ecological subjects.

#### **4.2 Ecological Environment Level: Dual Constraints of Physical Space and Institutional Environment**

In terms of the physical environment, the “row-seat” arrangement solidifies teachers’ authoritative space, clarifies the power structure centered on the podium, is not conducive to student-student interaction, and the fixed desk and chair pattern leads to the rigidity of interactive forms. In terms of the institutional environment, large class sizes of 50-60 students exceed teachers’ ecological carrying capacity for refined guidance and interactive organization, resulting in the tilt of discourse opportunities towards a few active students; the current teaching evaluation system focuses on the systematicness of knowledge and exam scores, ignoring the quality of discourse interaction and the improvement of students’ language application abilities, making teachers and students lack the motivation to change the imbalanced model.

#### **4.3 Ecological Relation Level: Rigidity of Power Structure and Interaction Model**

The teacher-student relationship presents a “control-obedience” characteristic. Influenced by the traditional cultural idea of “respect for teachers”, teachers play the role of “authority” and students are followers. The vertical and unequal power relationship makes it difficult to conduct in-depth dialogues, and interactions are mostly “false interactions” lacking real ideological collisions and emotional connections. The student-student relationship shows a state of “isolated competition”—the evaluation system oriented towards individual academic performance makes students regard each other as competitors. In group activities, phenomena such as “free-riding” or “dominance by strong learners” exist, lacking sincere listening, equal discussions, and constructive feedback, making it impossible to form a close learning community.

#### **4.4 Ecological Culture Level: Exam-Oriented Orientation and Lack of Cultural Confidence**

The deep-rooted “exam-oriented culture” makes exams such as CET-4 and CET-6 the “baton” of teaching. Teachers’ discourse revolves around exam points, and students’ language output takes meeting exam standards as the highest criterion, excluding open discussions and critical thinking, leading to the utilitarianism and superficiality of discourse. In the intercultural context, teaching materials and evaluation standards are inclined to British and American cultures, and students have a “cultural inferiority complex” or “cultural aphasia”, lacking the ability to express Chinese stories and interpret

the essence of Chinese culture in English. The lack of cultural subjectivity restricts the development of the discourse ecosystem to a deeper level.

## 5 Reconstruction Strategies of the Discourse Ecosystem in College English Classrooms

### 5.1 Clarify Teachers' and Students' Ecological Niches to Build an Equal Dialogue Community

Based on the “ecological niche principle”, teachers should transform into “learning guides”, “resource providers” and “intercultural communication intermediaries” take the initiative to reduce monologue-style explanations, and use inclusive discourse with “we” as the subject<sup>7</sup>, such as “Let’s explore this topic together” to create a learning community atmosphere. Meanwhile, through measures such as establishing “classroom speech conventions” and carrying out discussions on discourse power, awaken students’ subject awareness, clarify their rights and responsibilities to ask questions, challenge, and evaluate, and design personalized and debate-style tasks to make students shift from “being asked to speak” to “wanting to speak”, forming a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship between teachers and students.

### 5.2 Optimize Classroom Discourse Environment and Innovate Interactive Organizational Forms

Break the “row-seat” layout and flexibly adopt “U-shape”, “circle”, or “group island-style” arrangements to deconstruct the teacher-centered power structure. Strictly control teachers’ discourse time within 60%<sup>5</sup>, refine teaching content, and reserve sufficient time for students’ language practice. Go beyond the “IRF” model, promote collaborative tasks such as group discussions, role-plays, debates, and project-based cooperation to increase student-student interaction opportunities, and reduce display questions while increasing referential and open-ended questions to stimulate students’ in-depth thinking<sup>10</sup>. To better implement the above interactive strategies, we summarize the optimized classroom interactive forms in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Table of Optimized Classroom Interactive Organizational Forms

Interactive Form	Applicable Scenarios	Implementation Points	Ecological Function
Group Discussion (4-6 people)	Thematic exploration, perspective collision	Clarify division of labor, set time nodes, teachers provide itinerant guidance	Promote student-student collaboration and expand the scope of discourse participation

Role-Play	Simulation of real communication scenarios	Provide scenario frameworks, encourage flexible use of language	Connect with real contexts and improve language application abilities
Thematic Debate	Discussion of controversial topics	Clarify positions and rules, emphasize logic and evidence	Cultivate critical thinking and strengthen high-order discourse output
Project-Based Cooperation	Long-term thematic exploration	Groups complete information collection, report writing, and presentation	Build a learning community and realize the advancement of discourse competence

### 5.3 Enrich Discourse Content and Cultural Dimensions to Enhance Discourse “Beneficialness”

Break through the limitations of textbooks, introduce authentic corpus such as original news reports, TED talks, and film and television fragments, and bring students into meaningful communication scenarios to solve the problem of discourse being disconnected from real contexts<sup>11</sup>. At the cultural level, avoid evaluating the superiority or inferiority of Chinese and Western cultures, guide students to understand the logic and values of different cultures, and cultivate their intercultural empathy; strive to cultivate students’ cultural confidence and intercultural communication competence. For example, when learning about Western festivals, simultaneously explore the English expression of the Mid-Autumn Festival culture; when discussing global issues, introduce cases such as the “Belt and Road Initiative” to make discourse possess instrumentality, humanism, and ideology.

### 5.4 Construct a Diversified and Dynamic Ecological Evaluation Mechanism

Realize the diversification of evaluation subjects, incorporate students’ self-evaluation and peer evaluation into the system, and design an evaluation scale covering content quality, logical expression, language application, and collaborative performance (1-5 point scoring scale) to promote the development of students’ metacognitive abilities and collaborative spirit. Emphasize the dynamics and development of the evaluation process, incorporate process-oriented performance such as classroom participation (20%), group contributions (20%), oral presentations (20%), and learning logs (10%) into the total evaluation score, with the proportion of summative assessment not exceeding 30%, and use “growth portfolios” to record students’ progress in discourse competence<sup>12</sup>. The proportion of process-oriented evaluation (70%) refers to the ecological evaluation framework proposed by Liu & Yang<sup>12</sup>, which has been verified in the ecological optimization practice of local university English classrooms. Teachers’

feedback should shift to equal emphasis on “content and form,” providing specific constructive suggestions to protect students’ enthusiasm for expression and point out the direction for improvement<sup>13</sup>.

## 6 Conclusion

College English classrooms are dynamic micro-ecosystems. Based on the four-dimensional analytical framework of “subject-environment-relation-culture” in educational ecology, this study systematically analyzes the four major imbalance characteristics and underlying causes of the classroom discourse ecosystem, and proposes holistic reconstruction strategies. The innovations of this study are threefold: first, unlike previous studies that separated educational ecology from ecolinguistics, this study constructs a “subject-environment-relation-culture” four-dimensional analytical framework tailored to college English classrooms, realizing the interdisciplinary integration of the two theories; second, it designs operable interactive organizational forms (as shown in Table 1) and a dynamic evaluation scale, which makes ecological reconstruction strategies more practical compared with the general suggestions in existing studies; third, it incorporates cultural confidence cultivation<sup>14</sup> into the discourse ecosystem reconstruction, filling the gap that existing studies ignore the cultural dimension of classroom discourse.

Future research can further explore the application of ecological concepts in different course types such as academic English and business English, the construction of intelligent ecological learning environments using artificial intelligence technology, and the promotion of the transformation of teachers’ ecological educational concepts<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, longitudinal tracking of classroom discourse changes post-strategy implementation can provide more empirical support for ecological optimization<sup>15</sup>. Only by continuously nourishing all ecological factors in the classroom can we build a healthy ecology where teachers and students coexist and grow, and where language competence and humanistic literacy develop in coordination, making college English classrooms a fertile ground for ideological collision and cultural integration.

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