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Localization of English Teaching and Discipline-Based Education in the EFL Context: An Ecological Linguistics Perspective

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Abstract: English teaching has long focused on the culture of the target language countries as the core content, resulting in insufficient representation of local culture and thus limiting the discipline-based educational function. This study adopts an ecological linguistics perspective to view the English classroom as a dynamic system composed of teachers, students, language, and cultural environment, and examines the theoretical alignment between localized teaching and discipline-based education. It analyzes the appropriate orientation for localized teaching in terms of goal setting and principle construction, and combines the policy orientation of the 2022 version of the "Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards" and the content changes of the new textbooks to examine the progress and constraints in current practice. The study finds that the ecological linguistics perspective helps to eliminate the monotonous tendency of cultural standards in English teaching, promoting the classroom to shift from language skill training to a teaching space that emphasizes both cultural inheritance and value guidance. The integration of local culture is not a burden for language learning, but an important way to restore the imbalance in the classroom ecology and activate students' cognitive resources. The improvement of teachers' cultural literacy and the reform of evaluation methods are necessary conditions for the continuous advancement of this shift.

Keywords: EFL Context, Ecological Linguistics, Localization of English Teaching, Discipline-based Education, Cultural Awareness, Cross-cultural Education.

1. Introduction

Our country's English teaching has undergone decades of development, but a deep-seated problem remains unsolved: the content of classroom culture has long been centered on the social culture of English-speaking countries, and local culture is significantly underrepresented in the textbooks. Dong Hongdan, the vice-chairperson of the Basic Education Foreign Language Teaching Guidance Committee of the Ministry of Education, pointed out that for a long period in the past, the content of foreign language textbooks seriously lacked elements of China's excellent traditional culture, revolutionary culture, and advanced socialist culture. The research on university English textbooks also shows that the theme articles mainly focus on the culture of the target language countries, and the proportion of Chinese culture is relatively low [1]. International research has also found that there are problems such as disconnection from local culture and insufficient integration of textbooks in rural English teaching in China. The imbalance in culture not only restricts students' ability to express local culture in English, but also affects their understanding of their own cultural identity to a certain extent. This phenomenon has attracted continuous attention from the academic community.

In recent years, this situation has improved. The 2022 version of the "Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards" listed cultivating cultural awareness as one of the overall goals of the curriculum and provided an explanation of its connotation. In the new editions of primary and secondary school English textbooks, Chinese cultural elements such as Beijing's quadrangle courtyard, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the bronze standing figure of ancient Shu civilization have appeared in large numbers, and "Chinese style" has become a prominent feature of English textbooks. The localization of English teaching has thus moved from academic discussion to curriculum practice.

However, textbook adjustments are only the starting point. For localized teaching to truly take root, a theoretical framework is necessary, which integrates language teaching, cultural inheritance and value guidance. In the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language), from the perspective of ecological linguistics, language teaching is regarded as a micro-ecosystem, focusing on the dynamic interaction among teachers, students and the environment. It opposes measuring the value of language learning with a single cultural standard and provides a theoretical tool for re-examining the localization of English teaching. This article, from the perspective of ecological linguistics, examines the intrinsic connection between the localization of English teaching and the cultivation of disciplines, analyzes the progress and constraints in practice, and discusses feasible paths for advancement.

2. Core Connotations of the Ecological Linguistics Perspective and the Ecological View

The theoretical foundation of the ecological linguistics perspective can be traced back to Haugen. In 1972, Haugen used "language ecology" to refer to the research on the interaction between any specific language and its environment. Halliday, starting from systemic functional linguistics, regarded language as a way of constructing and reflecting the relationship between people and the world, thereby directing the critical dimension of ecological linguistics towards the ecological awareness issues in language use. This theoretical framework provides important insights for re-examining English teaching. English teaching

is not just the one-way transmission of language knowledge; it itself is an ecosystem composed of various elements such as teachers, students, language content, and cultural environment that interact dynamically.

The core proposition of the ecological linguistics perspective can be grasped from three levels. In terms of the view of language, it opposes regarding English as an abstract symbol system detached from its context and believes that language learning always occurs in a specific social and cultural environment. The mother tongue culture of the learners is not an obstacle but an important cognitive resource for understanding the target language. In terms of the view of culture, it advocates the coexistence of multiple cultures. Kachru's "three concentric circles" model reveals that the number of English speakers who consider English as their mother tongue is far less than those who consider it as a second language or a foreign language. The cultural connotation of English as an international language should not be monopolized by a certain country or region. The ecological linguistics perspective regards the classroom as a micro-ecosystem. Existing research has pointed out that the ecological linguistics perspective of English teaching views the language teaching process as a micro-ecosystem for dynamic examination, which helps to comprehensively understand the interaction between learners and various elements of the teaching environment [2].

The enlightenment of this perspective on English teaching localization lies in: local culture is not an additional content of English teaching, but an indispensable component of the ecosystem. When local culture is absent in the classroom, the teaching ecosystem is in an imbalanced state. The cultural cognitive resources of students cannot be effectively activated, and the channel between language learning and cultural understanding is artificially cut off. Localization is not simply "adding" Chinese culture into English classes. What it truly aims to do is to restore the balance of this ecosystem. When students discuss the origin of the Dragon Boat Festival in English or introduce traditional skills from their hometowns, language learning no longer becomes a mechanical training divorced from real communication needs, but becomes a meaningful cross-cultural expression practice [3]. From this perspective, the relationship between localized teaching and subject-based education has thus gained a theoretical entry point.

3. Alignment of Localization with the Theory of Discipline-based Education

The alignment between the localization of English teaching and the cultivation of disciplines can be examined from three dimensions: cultural ecology, curriculum-based education, and language learning.

From the perspective of cultural ecology, ecological linguistics views the cultural relationships in English teaching as ecological relationships. The traditional English teaching paradigm sets English teaching as the process of approaching the target language culture, with the native language culture being relegated to a subordinate position. This relationship is an ecological imbalance. There are many issues with the localization of Chinese English education, such as the lack of mother-tongue culture, excessive emphasis on standard English, and prejudice against China English. Some studies have pointed out that rural English teaching is disconnected from local culture, and the integration of local knowledge into textbooks is limited. McKay (2002) proposed that the design of EIL textbooks should include the cultures of native English-speaking countries, the culture of the learners, and international culture, and cultural meaning is generated through multiple interactions [4]. When local culture and target language culture obtain equal ecological positions, the classroom cultural ecology can be balanced. The integration of local culture is not a reduction of English learning, but a restoration of the teaching ecology.

From the perspective of curriculum education, the core competencies framework of the 2022 version of the curriculum standards contains the inherent requirements of discipline-based education. The curriculum standards require "cultivating cultural awareness", asking students to "compare the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, and develop cross-cultural communication and communication skills", and "deepening the understanding and recognition of Chinese culture, establishing an international perspective, and strengthening cultural confidence". This goal is not sufficient by relying solely on language training and requires students to experience and reflect in real contexts [5]. The contextualism and interactivity emphasized by ecological linguistics provide methodological support for the cultivation of cultural awareness. Cultural awareness is not cultivated by teaching cultural facts, but gradually formed through the use of language in cultural practices.

From the perspective of language learning, the integration of local culture and the improvement of language ability are not mutually exclusive. When the learning content is related to students' life experiences and cognitive backgrounds, the efficiency of language learning is higher. Studies have shown that integrating local culture into teaching can significantly enhance students' participation, cultural awareness, and language application ability. Another study shows that after integrating local culture into the classroom, students have higher interest and motivation. Localization and discipline-based education are two sides of the same process: local culture provides a real context for language learning, and the improvement of language ability enhances students' ability to disseminate local culture.

4. Reconfiguration of the Goals and Establishment of Principles for Localized Teaching from the Perspective of Ecological Linguistics

The ecological linguistics perspective offers more than just cultural content additions and deletions to the local adaptation of English teaching; it also touches upon the reevaluation of teaching goals and principles. The traditional English teaching paradigm aims to conform to the standards of native speakers, and local culture has no place within this framework.

The goals of localized teaching can be reconfigured at three levels. Language proficiency is the foundation, and students should be able to communicate effectively in English and accurately express topics related to local culture. Cultural awareness is the core, and students should be able to understand the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures and develop a conscious understanding of their own culture and an open attitude towards foreign cultures. The value-based goals are the destination—students should be able to strengthen their cultural confidence through cultural comparisons and form healthy aesthetic tastes and

values. Some studies have proposed that university English courses can adopt a tripartite model of "knowledge, ability, and value shaping". Localized teaching provides a focus for cultivating cultural awareness—students no longer merely "understand Western culture" at an abstract level, but form cultural cognition based on their own cultural experiences and in real comparisons.

Localized teaching should also follow certain principles. The relevance principle requires that teaching content be related to students' life experiences and cognitive backgrounds. When students see their own culture and life in English learning, their learning motivation will increase [6]. The balance principle requires that the proportion of local culture and target language culture in the classroom should be reasonable. As McKay pointed out, relying solely on the cultural content of inner-circle countries to support EIL teaching is far from enough. The design of teaching materials must also include the content of learners' own culture and international culture, and establish a cross-cultural space in the EIL classroom to enable learners to not only deeply understand their own culture but also communicate effectively with English speakers from other cultural backgrounds. The ecological linguistics perspective emphasizes symbiosis rather than substitution. The situational principle requires that cultural content be embedded in real or simulated communication scenarios. The interactive principle requires that localized teaching create multiple interactions to generate cultural understanding through dialogue [7]. These principles all aim at the same goal: to make the English classroom a place for cultural dialogue.

When applied to the course content, these principles prioritize the selection of local materials that are culturally representative, thought-provoking, and capable of evoking emotional resonance, rather than being judged solely based on the quantity of "Chinese elements". The arrangement is organized by themes rather than listing individual knowledge points, integrating cultural content with language learning. The cultural content in the textbooks should not merely serve as decoration for language exercises; it is itself the context for language learning. When culture becomes the context, students' English will not remain detached from real life, and it can be used to express real experiences and emotions.

5. Practical Exploration: From Textbook Reform to Classroom Transformation

From the perspective of ecological linguistics, the practical exploration of localized English teaching has gradually unfolded in recent years, mainly advancing along two paths: textbook adjustment and classroom innovation.

The change at the textbook level is the most intuitive. In the new English textbooks for compulsory education published by the People's Education Press, the opening page of each unit uses illustrations of pasting Spring Festival couplets and hanging lanterns to explain "family", and in the section on family members, grandparents wearing Tang suits hold a zhuazhou ceremony for the little sister, and the reading passages introduce the ancient Shu civilization's bronze standing figures and sacred trees in children-friendly language. Cultural symbols are not simply piled up but embedded in the basic scenarios of language learning, allowing students to naturally come into contact with local culture when learning English expressions. Dong Hongdan disclosed that based on a set of primary and secondary school English reading materials compiled by the Sichuan Provincial Institute of Education Science and published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in 2018, the proportion of Chinese culture in the three stages of primary, junior high, and senior high schools reached 45%, 30%, and 31% respectively. The proportion of local cultural content in the textbooks has moved from the periphery to the prominent position [8].

At the classroom level, a number of localized practices with ecological characteristics have emerged. In June 2025, Tongcheng City, Anhui Province held a "Telling Chinese Stories in English" exhibition, with the theme of "Exploring interdisciplinary integration and promoting all-round education". Students in the primary school group performed dialogues in both Chinese and English to interpret the story of "Six Feet Lane in Tongcheng", conveying the spirit of "Why not give him three feet more?" of courtesy and respect; students in the junior high school group combined English speeches with experimental demonstrations to introduce the "gas-light wave theory" proposed by the Ming Dynasty scientist Fang Yizhi in "Notes on Physics", and compared it with the optical theories of the same period in the West. Yao Lingling, the middle school English teaching researcher from the Education Bureau's Teaching and Research Office of Tongcheng City, commented: "The students' presentations broke the barriers of disciplines and truly achieved 'Learning culture in English and cultivating new people with culture'."

The common point of these practices is to place English learning in a real local cultural context, allowing language application and cultural understanding to mutually drive each other [9]. From the perspective of ecological linguistics, the language, culture, learners, and teachers in the classroom are no longer isolated elements but form an interrelated whole. Students are not "learning English about Six Feet Lane", but are using English to participate in a real expression of the value of local culture. Once there is a real connection between language learning and cultural experience, the English classroom transforms from a closed knowledge transmission system to an open cultural practice space. However, this classroom transformation can only continue if the teacher's quality and evaluation mechanism can keep pace simultaneously.

6. Teacher Quality and Evaluation Mechanism: Key Guarantees for Localized Implementation

From an ecological linguistics perspective, the localization of English teaching has raised new requirements for teacher quality and evaluation mechanisms, which is crucial for ensuring that localization can be transformed from an idea into a routine practice. Teachers are the most active factor in the teaching ecology. Localization teaching requires teachers to possess both language skills and cultural literacy [10]. Existing research has shown that teachers' understanding of their own national culture is relatively weak, and the lack of native language cultural literacy is regarded as the biggest obstacle in the implementation of native language cultural English teaching. The limited Chinese culture courses in the teacher education stage, coupled with the constraints of class hours and examination pressure after entry, result in few opportunities to supplement local cultural knowledge. This situation is more prominent among teachers without a

teacher-education background. To solve this problem, efforts should be made in teacher education and on-the-job training. Teacher education institutions can add courses such as "Introduction to Chinese Culture" and "Comparison of Chinese and Western Cultures"; teaching activities can guide teachers to discover cultural materials that can be integrated into English teaching from local historical figures, traditional skills, and folk customs. The National Training Program for English Teachers already has projects that focus on integrating traditional culture into English teaching, and the training sessions for key teachers also use picture books such as "Cangjie Created Chinese Characters" and "The Lantern Festival" to conduct teaching explanations.

The evaluation mechanism also needs to be re-examined. Currently, English exams still focus mainly on language knowledge, while the proportion of examinations on local culture has increased somewhat, but the overall level remains low. Taking the English exam for the high school entrance examination as an example, Chinese culture-related reading comprehension accounts for approximately 41%, but the output-type questions such as written expression are clearly insufficient. One high and one low indicates that the ability to output local culture has not truly been included in the examination scope. The evaluation of cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication skills cannot rely solely on summative exams. Formative evaluations can be achieved through project-based learning, classroom observations, and work evaluations to see if students can introduce local culture in English, how they think in cultural comparisons, and what level of cultural understanding and expression they have reached. Existing research has shown that formative evaluation can effectively cultivate students' cultural awareness through dynamic testing. The "Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Education Evaluation in the New Era" proposes "strengthening process evaluation," providing a basis for this.

The ecological linguistics perspective does not advocate replacing the target language culture with the local culture, but emphasizes the balance and interaction of the two in the classroom ecology. The goal of localization is not to be closed, but to enable students to acquire the ability to communicate with the world based on understanding their own culture. The realization of this goal depends on the coordinated promotion of teacher quality and evaluation mechanisms [11].

7. Conclusion

This article discusses the integration of English teaching localization and subject-based education. This issue has both theoretical value and is an urgent and unavoidable problem in the reform process. The analysis is based on an ecological linguistics framework and leads to the following judgments.

First, regarding the theory. The traditional English teaching paradigm views the local culture and the target language culture as in a competitive relationship. Ecological linguistics does not view it this way: the two can be placed within the same dynamic ecosystem, and thus there is space for cultural diversity to coexist. Localization reduces concerns about English learning and eliminates the basis for such concerns. Subject-based education also finds a natural foothold here - the power of education comes from cultural experiences and thinking development in language learning, rather than external value labels. Students telling stories about their hometowns and comparing Chinese and foreign customs will mutually enhance their language skills and cultural awareness.

In practice, the shift towards a "Chinese style" in textbooks and the use of local cultural resources in classrooms are positive signs. However, to go deeper, we are still stuck at two points: the lack of teacher quality and the lagging evaluation mechanism. The lack of teacher education and evaluation reforms needs to be continuously strengthened to ensure that localization does not remain limited to textbook adjustments but enters the ecological reconfiguration of the classroom as a norm.

This article mainly focuses on theoretical analysis, with case studies drawn from public reports. No primary research was conducted. The discussion on teacher quality and evaluation mechanisms is mainly based on literature. In the next step, classroom observations and teacher interviews can be conducted in schools to observe the real state of local culture entering the classroom and accumulate empirical evidence for effect judgment.

Ecological linguistics' reminder is not to provide a standard solution. It shows that English classrooms are a complex ecosystem composed of multiple elements. Localization is not so much about adding a cultural element to the classroom as it is about re-adjusting the relationships among various elements to move them from imbalance to balance. English education should aim to cultivate language users who have both an international perspective and a deep-rooted cultural foundation as its basic pursuit.

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