

English Classroom Discourse Studies: A 10-Year Retrospective Analysis (2015-2024)

Liwei Zou

School of Languages and Literature, University of South China, Hengyang 421001, China

Abstract: Based on 32 articles from core foreign language journals indexed in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) between 2015 and 2024, this study systematically reviews the decade-long progress of English classroom discourse research in China. The findings reveal a shift in research themes from traditional interactional structure analyses to multidimensional explorations, including the reconstruction of dynamic dialogue networks, technology-driven innovation, multimodal synergy mechanisms, teacher development pathways, and an ecological research shift. Methodologically, interdisciplinary integration has emerged as a trend, with technological applications (e.g., corpus analysis and large language model interventions) and multimodal collaboration (from modal superposition to meaning co-construction) becoming research hotspots. The practical knowledge attributes of teacher discourse and its feedback value for professional development have gained increasing attention. Despite notable achievements, current research still faces challenges such as insufficient thematic depth, weak methodological systematization, and a disconnect between theory and practice. Future studies should integrate multidisciplinary theories, construct localized analytical frameworks, enhance the scale and longitudinal depth of empirical research, and explore a “research-teaching-learning” collaborative ecosystem to advance classroom discourse studies from phenomenon interpretation to practice transformation, thereby contributing to the systematic improvement of foreign language education quality.

Keywords: English Classroom Discourse; Teacher Talk; Multimodal Synergy; Technology-Driven Innovation; Teacher Development; Ecological Research Shift.

1. Introduction

Classroom discourse, particularly teacher discourse, has long been one of the most significant areas of inquiry in linguistics, applied linguistics, and educational research. The concept of classroom discourse is broad, encompassing not only teacher and student speech but also teacher-student interactional discourse, classroom casual talk [1], and even “teachers’ blackboard writing, students’ in-class assignments, audiovisual materials used in instruction, and textual materials from textbooks” [2]. In a narrower sense, classroom discourse refers specifically to verbal interactions occurring within the classroom, including both student and teacher utterances. Foreign language classroom discourse differs from that of other subject areas because the target language serves not only as the medium of instruction but also as a critical source of linguistic input for learners. It plays a pivotal role in organizing classroom activities and facilitating learners’ language acquisition[3]. Concurrently, increasing attention has been paid to another function of teacher discourse: guiding and organizing students to actively participate in communicative activities, thereby creating environments and opportunities for learners to exchange information and express ideas. This process fosters language acquisition through communication and negotiation of meaning[4].

Early systematic studies of classroom discourse in Western scholarship focused on analyzing discourse patterns. Bellack et al. [5]proposed a four-phase framework for describing classroom discourse: structuring, soliciting, responding, and reacting. Sinclair and Coulthard’s[6] IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) triadic exchange model—comprising the teacher’s initiating move, the learner’s responding move, and the teacher’s feedback or follow-up move—has exerted

profound influence on subsequent classroom discourse research. In the field of foreign language education, Western scholars have conducted extensive studies on classroom discourse, yielding significant findings across domains such as teacher talk, teacher-student and student-student meaning negotiation, student participation levels and modes, turn-taking, and topic development. Their research demonstrates that choices in discourse strategies, patterns of classroom interaction or negotiation, and feedback strategies directly impact the rate of learners’ second or foreign language acquisition[7].

2. Research Design

To investigate the publication landscape, research hotspots, and frontiers of classroom discourse studies in foreign language education in China, this study utilized the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as the primary data source. We conducted a keyword search for articles published between 2015 and 2024 (spanning the past decade) in core foreign language journals^①, using combinations of “Classroom Discourse” OR “Teacher talk” AND “Foreign Language”, “English”, or “Second Language”. A total of 32 articles were retrieved and categorized into two groups: empirical studies derived from primary data (20 articles, 62.5% of the total) and literature reviews based on secondary data, focusing on theoretical frameworks or methodological reflections (12 articles, 37.5%).

Over the decade, empirical research exhibited sustained momentum, with annual publication peaks of three articles in 2019 and 2020, and three articles in both 2015 and 2022. However, output dipped notably in 2017 and 2021 (1 or 0 articles). Literature reviews peaked in 2024 (3 articles), reflecting intensified theoretical exploration. From 2015 to 2019, literature reviews were consistently published (1-2

articles annually), but declined slightly after 2020, with no publications in 2018 or 2023. Overall, empirical studies dominated (20 vs.12), prioritizing the analysis of teaching practices, while literature reviews emphasized methodological reflections and theoretical critiques. Despite

their smaller proportion, literature reviews surged in 2024, signaling a phase of theoretical consolidation. The two categories complement each other temporally and thematically, collectively advancing the discipline.

Table 1. Annual Distribution of Classroom Discourse Research Publications

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Annual Publication Count	4	3	2	2	5	4	1	4	3	4	32
Number of Empirical Articles	3	2	1	2	3	3	0	3	2	1	20
Number of Literature Reviews	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	1	1	3	12

3. Review of Research Methods in Domestic English Classroom Discourse

Through systematic analysis, this study identifies the past decade as a critical period for classroom discourse research in China. Research themes have diversified from traditional structural analyses to multidimensional investigations of teacher-student interaction, technology integration, and multimodal coordination. Methodologically, the paradigm has shifted from descriptive to interventional approaches, underpinned by multidisciplinary frameworks integrating linguistics, pedagogy, sociology, and artificial intelligence. Building on representative publications from 2015 to 2024, we synthesize research progress across five dimensions: interaction pattern reconstruction, technology-driven innovation, multimodal synergy mechanisms, teacher development pathways, and ecological research shifts, concluding with future research directions.

3.1. Reconstruction of Interaction Patterns: From “IRF Structure” to “Dynamic Dialogue Networks”

Traditional classroom discourse research has centered on the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) model as its core analytical framework[8]. However, recent studies have increasingly focused on the dynamic and generative nature of interaction patterns, emphasizing the “dialogic spirit” of classroom discourse. Qi Yajun and Zhuang Zhixiang[9] proposed the concept of a “life-oriented dialogic classroom,” stressing that teachers and students construct knowledge networks through equal dialogue rather than one-way knowledge transmission. This shift has been supported by empirical research: Du Xiaoshuang and Zhang Lian[10]found that open-ended questions and high-order cognitive interactions significantly enhance students’ thinking quality; Zhang Ge et al.[11] demonstrated through experiments in French second language classrooms that teacher-student interactions are more conducive to lexical synergy than peer interactions. Productive discourse moves[12] can significantly promote the development of students’ higher-order thinking, with their core lying in the alignment of scientific and everyday concepts to drive cognitive restructuring. Future research needs to further explore practical pathways for dialogic classrooms, focusing on how teachers can utilize micro-interaction techniques such as open-ended questioning and wait-time strategies to balance knowledge transmission with thinking cultivation. Furthermore, while current research emphasizes the “processual” nature of dialogue, there is insufficient exploration of implicit dimensions such as power relations

and emotional flows in interactions. Future studies could incorporate critical ethnography[13]to investigate power negotiation mechanisms in teacher-student interactions across different cultural contexts.

3.2. Technology-Driven Innovation: From “Corpus Analysis” to “Large Language Model Intervention”

Technological applications have propelled classroom discourse research from manual coding to intelligent quantification. Yin Ting[14] used AntConc to analyze online classroom response texts and found that teacher questioning strategies significantly impact student engagement. Wu Shiyu and Xiong Ying[15] employed R language text mining techniques to quantitatively analyze classroom discourse relevance through TF-IDF values, discovering facilitative features of teacher feedback. Tan Fang[16] spent three years building a corpus of college English classroom discourse, laying the foundation for large-scale quantitative research. Generative AI technology has begun to infiltrate the research field: Zhang Lian[17] explored the application potential of large language models in classroom discourse analysis and instructional scaffolding design, suggesting they can assist teachers in real-time optimization of interaction strategies. However, Li Ye and Zhao Dongmei[18] cautioned against the “instrumental rationality” risks of technology application. For instance, oversimplification of teacher discourse in micro-courses may weaken input quality and trigger interlanguage fossilization. In the future, a “technology-humanistic” balanced framework needs to be established, integrating AI analysis with teacher reflective practice.

3.3. Multimodal Synergy Mechanisms: From “Modal Superposition” to “Meaning Co-construction”

Multimodal discourse research breaks through the limitations of single linguistic modalities, emphasizing the supportive role of cross-modal synergy in meaning construction, which has become a recent hotspot. Feng Yufang and Shen Fandan[19] discovered that the synergy of oral language, PPTs, and auditory modalities can enhance knowledge internalization; Zhang Delu and Qu Tao[20] proposed that the transcoding from textbooks to classrooms requires dynamic adaptation of modalities, media, and meanings. Zheng Xinmin et al.[12] further refined their research to micro-operations, proposing “productive discourse moves” such as paraphrasing and deduction strategies to promote cognitive restructuring through multimodal interactions. Research generally agrees that multimodal synergy should serve pedagogical goals and avoid formalistic stacking. Teachers need to design “modal grammars,” for example, utilizing gestures to reinforce

lexical concretization or employing visual modalities (mind maps) to assist logical reasoning, avoiding cognitive overload caused by modal stacking to enhance input comprehensibility.

3.4. Teacher Development Pathways: From “Knowledge Transmitters” to “Practical Knowledge Constructors”

Classroom discourse is regarded as the explicit carrier of teachers’ practical knowledge. Zhang Qinghua and Yang Luxin[21] revealed the four-dimensional structure of teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge (content, method, object, context) through narrative discourse analysis; Zhu Yan and Shu Dingfang[22] compared Chinese and foreign teachers’ classroom discourse and pointed out that differences in teacher beliefs directly affect the implementation effectiveness of task-based instruction. In online teaching contexts, teacher identity construction has become more diversified, with Zhang Runhan[23] finding that teachers in online classrooms need to dynamically switch between authoritative and peer-like identities to meet interaction needs. The challenges and suggestions for this field is that teacher development requires strengthening “reflective discourse practice,” such as analyzing their own turn distributions through classroom video retrospectives to optimize discourse strategies, or participating in collaborative action research to transform theoretical insights into actionable interaction strategies. Additionally, pre-service training should incorporate classroom discourse analysis modules.

3.5. Ecological Turn in Research: From “Isolated Analysis” to “Interdisciplinary Integration”

Research paradigms are exhibiting interdisciplinary integration trends. Systemic functional linguistics[24], legitimization code theory[25], etc., provide new tools for discourse analysis; sociocultural theory[10] and affect studies[26] have deepened understanding of the affective dimensions of classroom discourse. Jiang Hui[27], based on rapport management theory, found that metadiscourse can dynamically regulate teacher-student identities and maintain face through dialogic and interactive features, ultimately achieving knowledge transmission and rapport co-presence. Guo Hongwei and Lu Jiawei’s[28] comparative study further revealed that mother tongue background differences lead to varying functional tendencies in teachers’ metadiscourse, with Chinese teachers emphasizing information guidance and English teachers focusing more on interpersonal interaction. An ecological perspective requires researchers to pay attention to the linkage between classroom discourse and broader sociocultural contexts, such as Zhang Youwen’s[29] proposal that foreign language education should cultivate national consciousness through discourse practice. Future directions suggest constructing a “classroom discourse ecological model” that integrates linguistic, technological, affective, and cultural dimensions to explore their dynamic interaction mechanisms in real teaching scenarios.

4. Reflections

As the core medium for knowledge transmission, acquisition, and meaning construction, the research value of classroom discourse has been widely recognized in academic circles. Over the past decade, Chinese scholars have conducted numerous pioneering explorations in the field of

empirical research on English classroom discourse, with both the quantity and quality of research outputs showing a significant upward trend. However, several academic growth points urgently requiring breakthroughs still exist in current research, necessitating deeper exploration from the three dimensions of research content, methodological paradigms, and practical applications.

Firstly, research content needs to be expanded in depth, and theoretical perspectives urgently require multivariate integration. An analysis of research themes over the past decade reveals that interactive discourse mechanisms such as feedback, questioning, and error correction have consistently occupied the focus of research. However, such topics can only reflect partial characteristics of classroom discourse. It is noteworthy that critical discourse types such as teacher narrative discourse, knowledge explanation discourse, and classroom regulatory discourse have long remained in research blind spots. Cheng Xiaotang[2] once warned, “Few studies have focused on the discourse functions and teaching effectiveness in scenarios such as teacher narration, knowledge interpretation, and classroom organization.” Empirical research has shown that narrative discourse can significantly enhance classroom engagement[22], while explanatory discourse achieves teacher-student meaning negotiation and high-quality language input through semantic construction[26]. Future research needs to break through the boundaries of traditional topics, systematically explore implicit types of classroom discourse (such as meta-narratives and cross-cultural mediatory discourse), and integrate multidisciplinary theories such as sociolinguistics and cognitive psychology to investigate their dynamic functions and cognitive mechanisms.

In addition, research methods need to be strengthened systematically, and localized analytical frameworks should be constructed. Despite a significant increase in the proportion of domestic empirical research on classroom discourse, large-scale and longitudinal studies remain scarce. It is recommended to promote methodological innovation in three aspects: First, develop standardized analytical tools adapted to the Chinese classroom context, such as multimodal classroom observation scales, intelligent corpus transcription systems, and semantic annotation systems. Second, establish hierarchical classroom teaching corpus resource libraries, covering diverse levels from basic education to higher education, and from general English to English for specific purposes, to provide multimodal data support for micro-interaction analysis (such as turn-taking and pragmatic strategies). Third, conduct comparative studies and intervention experiments based on corpora, which can not only reveal common discourse patterns across different classroom types but also design customized research plans for specific teaching scenarios (such as online live classrooms and trilingual classrooms). Such methodological innovations can not only deepen theoretical construction but also provide teachers with visualized teaching diagnostic tools, promoting the transformation of research outcomes into practice.

Finally, research practice needs to anchor teacher development and construct a two-way empowerment path of “discourse-teacher”. Although existing research involves the keyword “foreign language teachers,” it mostly focuses on the role of classroom discourse in promoting student learning while neglecting its feedback value to teachers’ professional development. Zhang Lian[17] emphasized, “Classroom discourse analysis should become a core resource for teacher

learning, empowering their teaching reflection abilities.” Future research needs to achieve a dual shift: On the one hand, “starting with teachers,” explore how individual characteristics such as teachers’ educational backgrounds, second language proficiency, and professional identity shape their discourse practices[13]. On the other hand, “using discourse as a window,” deconstruct teachers’ knowledge systems and identity construction processes through classroom discourse analysis, and carry out empirical-based teacher learning research. For example, a “classroom discourse evidence-based training program” can be designed to guide teachers in systematically optimizing teaching strategies through discourse retrospection, collaborative coding, and reflective journals, ultimately realizing the synergistic evolution of teaching practice and professional growth.

5. Conclusion

Research on foreign language classroom discourse over the past decade has formed a trinity development pattern of “technological empowerment, theoretical innovation and practical reflection.” However, how to effectively transform research outcomes into teaching practice remains a core challenge. Future research needs to further break down disciplinary barriers, construct a collaborative ecosystem of “research-teaching-learning,” and promote the development of classroom discourse research from “explaining phenomena” to “reshaping practice,” ultimately serving the systematic improvement of foreign language education quality.

1) Core journals refer to those indexed in the Chinese Core Journal Citation Report (PKU Core) and recognized as top-tier publications in foreign language education. They include *Foreign Language Research*, *Foreign Language Teaching*, *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, *Modern Foreign Languages*, *Foreign Languages in China*, *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, *Foreign Languages Bimonthly*, *Journal of Beijing International Studies University*, *Journal of Foreign Languages*, *Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education*, *Foreign Languages Research*, *Foreign Language World*, *Foreign Language and Literature*, *Foreign Language Education in China*, *Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice*, *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*.

Acknowledgments

This work was financially supported by the fund of 2023 Hunan Provincial Regular Higher Education Institutions Teaching Reform Research Project “A Study on Interactional Discourse in College English Classrooms under the Background of ‘Three Enters’ Initiative” (No. HNJG-2023 0623).

References

- [1] Liu, Y., Wang, B., & Lin, Z. Conceptualization and Design of a Quantitative Research Instrument for English Classroom Teaching[J]. *Foreign Languages in China*, 2009, (3), p.61-67+72.
- [2] Cheng, X. Classroom Discourse Analysis for English Teachers[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. 2009, p.2.
- [3] Nunan, D. Language Teaching Methodology: A Textbook for Teachers[M]. London: PrenticeHall. 1991, p.189.
- [4] Johnstone, B. Discourse Analysis: Third Edition [M]. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell. 2018, p.10.
- [5] Bellack A. A. et al. The Language of the Classroom[M]. New York: Teachers College Press, 1966, p.16-87.
- [6] Small, H. The synthesis of specialty narratives from cocitation clusters[J]. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 1986, (3), p.97-110.
- [7] Ellis R. S. Loewen & R. Erlam. Implicit and explicit corrective feedback and the acquisition of L2 grammar [J]. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. 2006, (28), p.66.
- [8] Li, Z. W., & Liu, Y. A corpus-based study of EFL classroom interaction patterns[J]. *China Foreign Languages*, 2016, (2), p.75-81.
- [9] Qi, Y. J., & Zhuang, Z. X. Paradigm evolution and practical transformation in classroom discourse research: From “conversation” to “dialogue”[J]. *Foreign Language Education*, 2017, (6), p. 52-57.
- [10] Du, X. S., & Zhang, L. Promoting students’ critical thinking through dialogic inquiry: A case study of an English intensive reading course[J]. *Frontiers of Foreign Language Education Research*, 2023, (3), p.56-63, 95.
- [11] Zhang, G., Liu, M., & Shen, H. M. The impact of classroom interaction on lexical synergy in French L2 continuation writing[J]. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, 2022, (2), p. 79-86.
- [12] Zheng, X. M., Xu, J. B., & Yao, Y. Micro-level development of secondary school English teachers: Productive classroom discourse moves[J]. *Foreign Language Research*, 2019,(2), p. 68-72.
- [13] Xu, J. F., & Long, Z. B. Poststructuralist perspectives on international L2 classroom discourse studies[J]. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 2020, (6), p. 854-864.
- [14] Yin, T. Developmental characteristics and causes of student response discourse in online English classrooms[J]. *Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education*, 2020, (4), p. 59-64, 10.
- [15] Wu, S. Y., & Xiong, Y. Learning-promoting features of teacher-student discourse in foreign language classrooms: Evidence from discourse relevance[J]. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research in Practice*, 2024, (5), p.65-77.
- [16] Tan, F. Building a corpus for general English classroom discourse at the foundational stage[J]. *Foreign Language Research*, 2015, (5), p. 42-46.
- [17] Zhang, L. Exploring the application of large language models in foreign language teacher education and development[J]. *Foreign Language World*, 2024, (5), p. 25-32.
- [18] Li, Y., & Zhao, D. M. An analysis of teacher discourse and instructional efficacy in College English micro-courses: Evidence from award-winning entries in the 1st National Foreign Language Micro-teaching Competition[J]. *Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education*, 2015, (5), p. 15-20.
- [19] Feng, Y. F., & Shen, F. D. Multimodal synergy in meaning construction of English classroom discourse: A case study of a sophomore intensive reading class[J]. *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*, 2018, (6), p. 146-153.
- [20] Zhang, D. L., & Qu, T. Transduction in multimodal discourse: A case study of textbook-to-classroom translation in college English teaching[J]. *Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education*, 2015, (6), p. 17-23.
- [21] Zhang, Q. H., & Yang, L. X. Research on English teachers’ practical knowledge through classroom narrative discourse[J]. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 2018, (4), p. 2-13, 147.

- [22] Zhu, Y., & Shu, D. F. Teacher beliefs and teacher-dominated discourse in task-based language teaching[J]. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 2017, (1), p. 125–136, 147.
- [23] Zhang, R. H. Pragmatic identity construction of college English teachers in online classroom contexts[J]. *Foreign Language Research*, 2022, (2), p. 22–27.
- [24] Peng, J. E. Breakthroughs in applying linguistic theories to classroom teaching: A review of Interactive Studies of English Teacher Classroom Discourse: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Perspective[J]. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 2024, (1), p. 76–77, 123.
- [25] Xie, M. Semantic development of foreign language teachers' explanatory discourse: An interdisciplinary perspective[J]. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research in Practice*, 2022, (1), p. 130–141.
- [26] Xu, J. F., & Fu, H. Review of the book *Emotion in Second Language Teaching: Theory, Research, and Teacher Education*[J]. *Foreign Language World*, 2019, (3), p. 93–96.
- [27] Jiang, H. A rapport management-based study of metadiscourse in college English teachers' classroom discourse. *Foreign Language Research*, 2020, (4), p. 45–50.
- [28] Guo, H. W., & Lu, J. W. A comparative study of multidimensional functions of teacher metadiscourse in classrooms[J]. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 2020, (2), p. 248–259.
- [29] Zhang, Y. W. Discursive construction of national consciousness in foreign language education: A practical exploration[J]. *Foreign Language Education*, 2024, (5), p. 67–71.