

# On Humanistic Values in College English Reading Teaching from the Perspective of Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract:** For years, college English education across China has prioritized the training of basic language competencies. Educators mainly focus on improving learners' listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation skills, yet pay insufficient attention to the humanistic education embedded in discourse teaching. The prevailing practice of prioritizing instrumental functions over humanistic cultivation makes it hard for college English courses to cultivate learners' comprehensive humanistic literacy. These essential qualities include value orientation, cross-cultural awareness and critical thinking, even though language proficiency gets improved in the process. Based on the theoretical framework of discourse analysis and grounded in authentic classroom teaching cases, this research paper systematically sorts out humanistic connotations inherent to college English reading curricula. Textual analysis and instructional practice jointly verify that discourse analysis transcends its conventional positioning as a linguistic teaching technique and serves as a reasonable and practicable teaching path to advance humanistic education within college English classrooms.

**Keywords:** Discourse analysis; college English reading teaching; humanistic value.

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## 1. Introduction

Issued in 2020, *Guidelines for College English Teaching* clarifies that college English is a crucial component of higher humanities education, which carries both instrumental and humanistic attributes. The humanistic orientation puts people in the first place, advocates positive human values and targets the all-round development of learners' personal traits. In this context, understanding the profound humanistic implications of college English course and balancing its instrumental and humanistic functions has become a core task for teaching reform.[1] Humanistic education stands as a core task of university education. Its primary goal is to shape sound individuals by nurturing their inner world, value beliefs, aesthetic taste and critical thinking. Different from vocational skill training that serves specific careers, humanistic education devotes itself to fostering well-developed whole persons.

In college English reading classes, humanistic education can be divided into four interrelated and complementary dimensions. First of all, reading helps learners broaden their scope of knowledge. Reading materials covering different themes and cultural backgrounds enable learners to acquire knowledge in history, philosophy, art, religion, science and other fields. Secondly, reading facilitates the formation of personal values. High-quality texts for college English course deliver the ideas of pursuing truth, kindness and beauty, advocating justice, caring for the weak and respecting inclusiveness. Learners will gradually establish their own value standards during reading these texts. Thirdly, reading activities help improve learners' thinking capacities, especially abilities of critical thinking, reflective thinking and creative thinking. Instead of passively accepting textual information, learners are required to raise questions, analyze content and evaluate authorial standpoints to form judgments. These targeted textual analysis tasks will effectively consolidate learners' cognitive competences. Fourthly, reading generates unique aesthetic experiences and elevates learners' aesthetic literacy. Excellent works feature beauty in

lexical selection, paragraphic arrangement and ideological depth. Aesthetic insights accumulated through repeated reading excellent works constitute an irreplaceable pillar of undergraduates' humanistic quality. The four dimensions elaborated above comprehensively interpret practical humanistic value embedded within college English reading.

## 2. Theoretical Connotations and Humanistic Orientations of Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis came into being in the late 20th century. Breaking the limits of traditional linguistics that takes sentences as the basic research unit, this field of research regards discourse as a linguistic unit beyond single sentences, including dialogues, essays, speeches and various language activities. Its main research direction is to explore how people create meanings, build interpersonal bonds, express values and realize communication goals via language in real-life situations. This study is built on three major theoretical foundations. The first one is Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. This theory lays more stress on language's social functions rather than rigid grammatical rules and puts forward three major metafunctions: the ideational function that explains human experience, the interpersonal function that maintains social relations and the textual function that connects language with specific contexts.[2] According to this theory, reading a text requires readers to understand not only the information itself but also the implied interpersonal relations and text organization. The second theoretical support is Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. It explores the intrinsic nexus uniting discourse, power and ideology, asserting that discourse reflects and shapes social reality at the same time.[3] Lexical options, syntactic architectures and rhetorical devices in texts all carry certain standpoints and values. For this reason, readers need to develop critical thinking to recognize hidden power relations and value tendencies. The third theory is Gumperz's Interactive Sociolinguistics. It centers upon contextual clues

and communicative tactics and points out that people from diverse cultural backgrounds adopt divergent discourse modes to express the same idea. Mastering such differences is key to cross-cultural communication.[4] It guides learners to analyze the standpoints, communication tactics, power relations and values in texts. It finally helps learners grow into critical, culturally competent and responsible people. These systematic theories of discourse analysis not only teach learners professional terms and analytical skills but also help learners form a new understanding: language is not just a communication tool but also a social activity for meaning creation.

### 3. Case Analysis Practice of Discourse Analysis as a Pathway to Humanistic Education

Discourse analysis and humanistic education share deep internal consistency. Such connection is not artificially attached, but inherent and essential. In fact, discourse analysis works as both a language teaching method and an effective approach of humanistic education. It leads learners to explore the nature of language and think over core humanistic topics including meaning, value, power and responsibility. In this way, language learning becomes a process of spiritual improvement.

*The Legacy of the Silk Road*, an article from *New Generation College English Integrated Course 2 (Advanced Level)* is chosen as the teaching case for this research paper. In this article, the author puts forward a completely new idea that the most valuable heritage of the Silk Road is not commodities trade, but cross-cultural exchange and the spirit of civilizational inclusiveness. Limited communications along the route enable different civilizations to reach deep mutual recognition. With immense potential for humanistic education, this article reveals that openness, inclusiveness and communication are the key motivations for human civilization to progress. It also inspires college learners to think positively that the prosperity of a civilization relies on embracing and learning from different cultures instead of large-scale material trade. This viewpoint effectively cultivates learners' cross-cultural awareness and humanistic literacy.

#### 3.1. Cultivating Critical Awareness

The emphasis discourse analysis places on speaker identity serves to enhance learners' capacity for critical thinking. According to theories of Critical Discourse Analysis, all discourses have their speakers and they carry unique standpoints, interests and value tendencies. When college learners learn to read articles from English textbooks, they are guided to think over several core questions: Who is the author of the text? What is the writing purpose? Who are the target readers? These questions involve the analysis of power relations and interest demands and they also form the core of critical thinking.

Using *The Legacy of the Silk Road* as both a teaching and research case, we will investigate methods for fostering learners' critical thinking awareness through guided instruction. Throughout the whole text, the author adopts an objective third-person narrative stance. At the beginning of the text, the author illustrates the twin reasons for the significance of the Silk Road in the history of mankind and one reason that trade and inclusiveness are closely linked

along the route is clearly highlighted. In the following narration, the author stresses from time to time that the Silk Road is primarily a channel for cultural communication rather than a trade passage. The examples can be found in the original text such as "While not much of a commercial route, the Silk Road became the planet's most famous cultural artery for the exchange between East and West of religions, art, languages and new technologies." (Para.2) and "The most important legacy of the Silk Road is the atmosphere of tolerance fostered by rulers of small oasis kingdoms strung along the northern and southern Taklamakan." (Para.12) [5] Actually, these narrations form a unique historical view that weakens the Silk Road's economic function but highlights its value in cultural exchange and peaceful coexistence. During reading, teachers can guide learners to reflect on questions such as: Why does the author put more emphasis on inclusiveness than trade? Does this viewpoint correspond to the value pursuit in today's globalized world? Besides, the author uses refugees instead of invaders to describe migrating groups, which shows positive attitudes towards these people. With such critical thinking exercises, learners will understand that historical description is not always objective. All historical texts are shaped by the author's personal perspective and writing intention.

#### 3.2. Nurturing Strategic Awareness

Discourse analysis focuses on the ways of expression, so it can cultivate learners' awareness of text strategies. Based on contextual clue theory in Interactive Sociolinguistics, this method guides learners to analyze writers' expression techniques, including contrast, citation, narration and emotional appeal. Mastering these skills can improve learners' comprehensive ability in reading, writing and oral expression.

The author of *The Legacy of the Silk Road* adopts diverse text strategies to make the content more convincing and readable. First and foremost, plenty of real cases and specific statistics are used. In the 7<sup>th</sup> paragraph, the writer lists 350 kinds of goods recorded in Turpan market in 743 AD, such as ammonium chloride used for dyeing and leather processing, spices, sugar and brass products. These specific figures and cases make abstract historical records more reliable. In addition, contrast is a typical style in the text. The author makes multiple contrasts such as the primary purpose vs. cultural influence of the Silk Road; local goods vs. foreign imports along the Silk Road; limited trade vs. extensive cultural exchange and child language acquisition vs. adult language learning. Moreover, the author tells stories about individuals. In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> paragraphs, college learners read the desert exploration experience of Swedish explorer Sven Hedin and the unfortunate death of his two partners. The vivid personal story strikes an emotional chord with readers and makes historical events more impressive. What's more, comparative description and progressive layout are used. For instance, the article compares people who learned foreign languages from an early age with those who started learning in adulthood, guiding learners to think about the difficulties and purpose of language learning. Recognizing and understanding these discourse strategies enable college learners to polish their writing skills and improve their communication competence.

#### 3.3. Refining Contextual Awareness

Discourse analysis focuses on communicative contexts, which is helpful for learners to build contextual awareness.

Systemic Functional Linguistics emphasizes discourse exists within a background. Language activities are produced under specific historical, social and cultural environments. Putting texts into corresponding contexts for analysis is the basic skill for cross-cultural understanding.

Historically, *The Legacy of the Silk Road* focuses on the prosperous cultural exchanges on the Silk Road around 1000 AD. Meanwhile, the article is written against the background of global integration and the development of the Belt and Road Initiative. Therefore, the discussion on inclusiveness, cultural communication and technology spread implies reflections on current social situations. Academically, the author collects evidence from multiple sources: cultural relics unearthed in Niya, Loulan, Kucha and other ancient sites; market price documents of Turpan in 743 AD and exploration records of Sven Hedin. Such diversified evidence conforms to the research norms of modern history and archaeology. Culturally, the article lays stress on language interaction. It introduces how Buddhist missionaries worked as translators, the absorption of 35,000 Chinese loanwords and the coexistence of multiple languages. These contents show the vital role of language integration in cross-cultural communication. Analyzing texts combined with multiple contexts enables learners to go beyond literal meaning and understand the author's writing motives and academic backgrounds.

### 3.4. Fostering a Sense of Responsibility

Discourse analysis analyzes the influence brought by texts in order to cultivate learners' sense of language responsibility. According to Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse is not only a tool to express ideas, but also a way to create meanings. It can reshape people's cognition, identity, interpersonal relations and power relations. After learning this theory, learners will realize the importance of proper language use and think about the influence their words may bring to others.

The narrative methods adopted in *The Legacy of the Silk Road* produce multiple guiding effects. Firstly, it builds a clear cognitive framework for readers, stating that cultural communication rather than commodity trade is the core heritage of the Silk Road. Learner can obtain a wealth of information such as migrants as important disseminators of culture, paper-making technology spread to the West, glass-making skills introduced to the East and nearly 35,000 new words emerging from language fusion. The above contents form readers' unique understanding of the Silk Road. Secondly, the article conveys the idea that inclusiveness drives the progress of civilizations. The whole passage takes the combination of trade and tolerance as the starting point and regards the inclusive atmosphere created by local rulers as the most precious heritage. The complete structure connects inclusiveness closely with the prosperity of civilizations. Thirdly, the article shapes learners' identity as cross-cultural communicators. It describes the difficulties of foreign language learning in ancient times, reminding modern learners to cherish learning conditions and treat diverse cultures with an open mind. When learners understand how discourse shapes public cognition, they will reflect on their own language use. As language learners, they will learn how to choose words, organize content and deliver values when introducing domestic and foreign cultures in English. Such thinking is exactly the embodiment of the sense of responsibility cultivated by humanistic education.

## 4. Humanistic Value of College English Reading Teaching

### 4.1. Expansion of Knowledge Horizons

*The Legacy of the Silk Road* involves knowledge in history, geography, archaeology, religion, linguistics and technology, which greatly broadens learners' vision. From a historical and geographical view, the Silk Road is known as a world-famous cultural channel. It connects China with Central Asia, West Asia, Africa and Europe, and witnesses the peak of cultural exchanges. From the perspective of archaeology, the 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph records many excavation sites including Niya, Loulan, Kucha, Turpan and Khotan in Xinjiang, Dunhuang in Gansu and ancient Chang'an. The unearthed documents discovered in tombs, with abandoned post stations, temples and residential houses, offer first-hand original materials for Silk Road research. In terms of religion and technology, the text records that papermaking technology spread from China to Samarkand and later entered Europe through Sicily and Spain. It also introduces Buddhist monks' translation work and the integration of languages, with about 35,000 Chinese words absorbed by other languages. Such interdisciplinary knowledge vividly enriches learners' knowledge reserve and greatly deepens their understanding of the exchange and inheritance of human civilization.

### 4.2. Construction of Values

While delivering historical knowledge, *The Legacy of the Silk Road* also imperceptibly shapes learners' values. First of all, the article advocates the spirit of inclusiveness. The article starts with the combination of trade and tolerance and takes the inclusive atmosphere created by local regimes as the most precious heritage of the Silk Road. It also mentions that local rulers accepted foreign migrants and allowed them to keep their own religious beliefs. Furthermore, the article calls for care for the vulnerable groups and respect for migrants. It points out that migrants are key promoters of cultural communication, who bring advanced technologies from their hometowns. This view breaks the traditional stereotype and recognizes migrants as active disseminators of civilization. Last but not least, the text highlights the importance of learning and language acquisition. It describes the tough conditions for ancient people in learning foreign languages. Facing greater difficulties than modern learners due to limited learning materials, adult learners serve as a reminder for us to cherish current learning opportunities. These positive values can be acquired subtly when learners are immersed in reading the article. In the meantime, teachers can also inspire learners to sense the value concepts and ideological implications of the text.

### 4.3. Cultivation of Thinking Quality

*The Legacy of the Silk Road* contains rich resources to train learners' critical, reflective and creative thinking abilities. To develop learners' critical thinking and break most learners' superficial understanding of the Silk Road, teachers can guide learners to focus on unconventional views that the Silk Road was built mainly for tolerance instead of trade and The Silk Road is more a complex transportation network than a single passage. Following the author's stream of thoughts, teachers can instruct learners to think about questions: If trade was not the major goal, why was it named the Silk Road? Who created this name and what ideas does it carry? For reflective thinking, the story of Sven Hedin's desert exploration is a typical case.

Hedin refused to turn back even when he realized he did not have enough water because he did not want to admit failure, so was his persistence a sign of great determination or reckless stubbornness? Based on the fact that two of Hedin's men died during the expedition, teachers can motivate learners to reflect: What lessons can modern explorers, leaders, or even students learn from this tragic outcome? How should we balance ambition with responsibility for the people who depend on us? In terms of creative thinking, the article introduces the two-way spread of technologies. Papermaking moved westward while glass-making skills spread eastward. The two-way communication model helps learners abandon one-sided views and form a comprehensive understanding of mutual learning between different civilizations. Guided by these questions, teachers can effectively train learners to make independent judgments.

#### 4.4. Generation of Aesthetic Experience

This article shows unique aesthetic value in three aspects: language, structure and ideological connotation. It also brings good aesthetic experience to readers. In terms of language, the writer uses many vivid metaphors. For example, cultural dissemination is compared to exotic seeds spreading to faraway lands, and desert travel is described as walking across a sea of sand. Such vivid expressions bring strong sensory experience to readers. In terms of text structure, the whole text has a tight beginning and ending. It starts with the relation between trade and inclusiveness, and takes inclusive spirit as the core heritage in the conclusion. The eighth paragraph creates a contrast between limited trade and widespread cultural exchanges, and then expands on the spread of technology and language. The clear layout and natural transitions make the whole text smooth in rhythm. In terms of ideological connotation, the article writes that creators of excavated documents never thought their works would be read by later generations, but these records truly reflected ordinary people's real life at that time. Here we can find the article embodies the humanistic care for every individual from ancestors to descendants and from creators to

beneficiaries. The aesthetic feelings gained from reading are essential parts of learners' humanistic literacy.

## 5. Summary

Taking discourse analysis as the theoretical framework and *The Legacy of the Silk Road* as the research case, this paper systematically discusses the humanistic value of college English reading teaching. The research results prove that the four core analytical perspectives of discourse analysis including speaker, expression method, context and communication effect, correspond well with four major parts of humanistic education: expanding knowledge horizons, shaping values, training thinking ability and cultivating aesthetic taste. Discourse analysis is not only a practical language teaching method but also an important way to carry out humanistic education. In college English teaching, teachers should actively apply discourse analysis theories. They can guide learners to analyze language and further think over humanistic values including meaning, value, power and responsibility. This teaching mode combines the instrumental function and humanistic function of college English perfectly and makes discourse teaching an important platform for learners' all-round development.

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