

Cultivating Cultural Subjectivity: The Value and Mission of Curriculum-based Ideological and Political Education in University English Major Courses

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Abstract: Curriculum-based ideological and political education is central to the moral-education mission of English majors in Chinese higher education. Its task is to embed cultural subjectivity within disciplinary knowledge rather than to append values to content from without. Taking Introduction to English Linguistics as a case, this paper develops a three-dimensional framework—curriculum as the foundation, classroom as the focus, and value orientation as the end. At the curriculum level, innovation in content and delivery, driven by corpus tools and real-world issues, supports the reconstruction of a Chinese genealogy of linguistic knowledge. At the classroom level, a teaching philosophy combining integration, process and critical thinking, operationalised through a “theory–comparison–reflection” model, enables organic internalisation of values. At the value level, cultural confidence, core values and life values address students’ professional identity anxiety in the age of machine translation. The paper argues that the three dimensions interact to shift ideological education from incorporation to internalisation, thereby contributing to the cultivation of foreign language professionals who are linguistically competent and culturally aware.

Keywords: Cultural subjectivity; Curriculum-based ideological and political education; English major; English linguistics; Fostering virtue and cultivating people

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1. Introduction

Curriculum-based ideological and political education in English majors at Chinese universities is both a major theoretical proposition and a concrete area of practice. Within the larger framework of such reform, ideological education must be organically integrated with disciplinary teaching, so that the fundamental questions—for whom talent is cultivated, what kind of talent is required, and how it should be cultivated—

are genuinely answered ^[1-2]—with the overarching task of cultivating virtue and nurturing talent consistently placed first. At the heart of this endeavour lies the formation of persons. Human beings are cultural beings, and their subjectivity is always realised through the culture they create; human subjectivity is therefore, in essence, cultural subjectivity ^[3-4]. To advance the cultural subjectivity of the Chinese nation, English majors must therefore concentrate on three dimensions—the foundational, the pivotal, and the ultimate—so as to articulate their value and mission in a systematic way. The foundational refers to curriculum development itself, the pivotal to the pathways through which teaching is carried out in the classroom, and the ultimate to the core of value guidance. These three are not simply additive; rather, they form an interdependent, mutually sustaining organic whole: the curriculum is the medium, the classroom the site, and values the end. Only when all three operate in concert can instruction move from the transmission of knowledge to the generation of values.

2. The curriculum as foundation: A concrete and interactive view of the course

The foundation of curriculum-based ideological and political education lies in the curriculum itself, which is in substance a conception of the curriculum—teachers’ systematic understanding of, and deliberate practice in answering, the questions of what to teach, why to teach it, and how to teach it, under the joint guidance of the logic of the discipline and the logic of education. Curriculum-based education is widely regarded as a fundamental component of the ideological and political education system in Chinese higher education, its core function being to transform the organised knowledge of a discipline into an inner resource for students’ intellectual and moral growth ^[1]. In English majors, teachers’ conception of the curriculum bears directly on the effectiveness of ideological education: where conceptions lag, content remains fragmented; where conceptions lead, integration follows naturally ^[2]. Teachers of English majors should therefore develop a view of the curriculum defined by three attributes—concreteness, interaction, and plurality.

2.1. Concrete, not abstract

Curriculum-based cultivation begins with real students as individuals. Only by understanding each student’s cognitive starting point, cultural experience and affective needs can a curriculum do genuine formative work ^[5]. In *Introduction to English Linguistics*, students’ prior understandings of such basic concepts as “language,” “meaning” and “rule” vary widely: some, conditioned by the grammar drills of secondary school, reduce language to a set of subject–verb–object rules, while others, formed by online discourse, habitually substitute fragmentary expression for systematic analysis. Where course design merely reproduces the textbook definition of language as an arbitrary system of signs, it readily produces a sense of cognitive distance. Teachers should therefore take students’ lived language experience as the point of departure for curriculum construction. When teaching the arbitrariness and motivation of the linguistic sign, for instance, they can ask students to contrast the sound–meaning relation of English dog with that of Chinese 犬 (quǎn), and then to examine the onomatopoeic motivation of words such as 蝙蝠 “bat” and 蝴蝶 “butterfly.” The exercise reveals a semiotic system in which arbitrariness and motivation coexist, allowing students to come to terms with Saussure while appreciating the cultural logic of deriving meaning from sound in Chinese ^[6]. Grounded in students’ native linguistic experience, such an approach both consolidates linguistic knowledge and cultivates sensitivity to the Chinese tradition of motivation; it is in this way that the cognitive dimension

of cultural subjectivity is activated.

2.2. Interactive, not one-way

A curriculum is a dynamic process in which teachers and students construct meaning together. Research on language education confirms that “co-constructed classroom discourse” markedly enhances students’ academic engagement and their receptiveness to values education ^[7]. When teaching the Cooperative Principle and politeness strategies in pragmatics, teachers can draw on cross-cultural encounters familiar to their students—one student, for instance, mistranslated the Chinese greeting 你吃了吗 as “Have you eaten?” and was taken during an internship with an international organisation to be prying into private matters. Students can then be invited to compare the explicit formulations through which Grice’s Cooperative Principle operates in English (“I’d appreciate it if...”) with the implicit strategies of indirection and deliberate reserve characteristic of Chinese (“It’s rather nice weather today” in place of a direct request), and thus to explore the cultural logic underlying each language. Designs of this kind convert personal experience into a curriculum resource, closing a loop of interaction that originates with students and returns to them. Equally important is a sustained, in-depth and constructive relationship between teachers and students—negotiating topics for course papers, giving immediate feedback on classroom contributions, and carrying scholarly discussion beyond class hours—which positions the teacher as a collaborator in students’ academic growth rather than as a judge. That relationship is itself a form of implicit values education: it models the dispositions of modern citizenship, namely respect, attentive listening and reasoned dialogue ^[8].

2.3. Plural, not uniform

Curriculum development in English majors must also follow the internal logic of linguistics as a discipline and, attending to the particular character of each course, innovate across instructional design, content organisation, modes of delivery, and methods and strategies. In recent years, scholars at home and abroad have stressed the potential of a “corpus plus real-world issues” model to strengthen the effectiveness of values education in the foreign language curriculum ^[8-9]. In *Introduction to English Linguistics*, conventional lecturing readily degenerates into an accumulation of terminology and abstract theoretical derivation, and students are correspondingly inclined to regard linguistics as useless. Innovation may therefore be pursued along three dimensions. In terms of content, the phonology unit can be linked to the issue of dialect preservation, as students apply the analysis of phonemic opposition to document the tonal system of their home dialects and compile a Dialect Phonology Profile. In terms of delivery, word formation can be connected with mechanisms of neologism by organising a short empirical inquiry into semantic change among social-media neologisms—for example, an examination of the English renderings of 内卷 (involution) and 躺平 (lie-flat) and of the cultural loss entailed in such transfers of meaning ^[10]. In terms of technology, corpus tools such as AntConc enable students to compare the official English version of the Report on the Work of the Government with foreign media coverage, to inspect the pragmatic choices made in rendering the same policy term—共同富裕 as “common prosperity,” for instance—and to identify the divergent value orientations inscribed in translation. Plural practices of this kind sharpen professional competence and, precisely through hands-on empirical work, deepen students’ recognition of language as a vehicle of ideology; cultural subjectivity is thereby converted from a theoretical proposition into learning outcomes that are actionable and open to verification.

3. The classroom as focus: A view of teaching oriented to synergy

Curriculum-based ideological and political education is an educational philosophy, and still more a classroom practice^[5]. The classroom is the reactor in which values content and disciplinary knowledge chemically combine, and the quality of a lesson turns on whether the teacher can embed guidance in values within the process of transmitting knowledge rather than bolt it on. A view of teaching suited to English majors in higher education should therefore be characterised by integration, process and enquiry; together these three attributes secure the unobtrusiveness, continuity and depth of values education.

3.1. Integration

President Xi has emphasised that “all other courses must guard their own stretch of the channel and tend their own plot of responsibility, so that courses of every kind move in the same direction and travel the same road as ideological and political theory courses, generating a synergistic effect.” Such synergy is not mechanical juxtaposition but structural coupling. In Introduction to English Linguistics, a three-stage model of integration—“theory, comparison, reflection”—can be constructed. The first stage presents foundational theory, such as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis; the second introduces a comparison of Chinese and Western conceptions of language, for instance the traditional Chinese debate over names and actualities (ming–shi) against the Western theory of reference; the third invites students to reflect on the value presuppositions informing those conceptions—where Western linguistics stresses that language reflects reality, the Chinese cultural tradition places greater weight on language as constituting reality, as in the Confucian doctrine of the rectification of names (zhengming). The design allows values content to enter like salt dissolving in water: while mastering the idea of linguistic relativity, students come naturally to recognize the distinctive contribution of the Chinese philosophy of language, so that indoctrination is avoided and their understanding rises to a higher order. In the unit on semantic field theory, for example, students may be asked to compare the semantic fields of English freedom and Chinese 自由 (zìyóu). Corpus analysis shows that the most frequent collocates of freedom are “right”, “choice” and “individual”, whereas 自由 recurrently associates with “thought”, “expression” and “restraint”. Tracing further back to the Analects—“follow what the heart desires without overstepping the bounds”—and to Mill’s *On Liberty* discloses how the two traditions draw the boundary of freedom differently: the one stresses the unity of inner cultivation and social norm, the other the tension between individual right and external constraint. Activities of this kind let students apprehend cultural difference through linguistic data, achieving an organic integration of values instead of a forced inculcation.

3.2. Process

Values education in the curriculum is no occasional flourish but education across the entire instructional process. Zhang Delu’s three-stage model—pre-class activation, in-class exploration and post-class reflection—offers an instructive framework for integrating values education into the language classroom^[11]. Consider the teaching of Government and Binding theory in syntax. Before class, students read an extract from Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures* together with the relevant chapter of Wang Li’s *A Theory of Chinese Grammar*^[12], marking the points at which the two works define the “sentence” differently. During class, a group debate is organised on the motion: “Should formal universality be the sole criterion for syntactic theory?”—an exercise designed to make students see that a choice of theory is already a choice of values.

After class, they keep a reflective journal on the question: “How would the framework have to be adjusted if Chinese, rather than English, were taken as the initial language for modelling Universal Grammar?” Such a chain of stages integrates the acquisition of knowledge, critical thinking and the analysis of values into a single pathway in which content, cognition and character are taught as one^[11].

3.3. Inquiry

In essence, values education in the curriculum is a distinctive way of thinking about teaching, and it asks the teacher to hold a dual perspective: to parse linguistic phenomena with the precision of a linguist, and to read the cultural logic behind them with the sensitivity of a guide in values. In a lesson on discourse analysis, for example, a teacher may build a corpus of Chinese and American news coverage of the pandemic—say, reportage in the People’s Daily and The New York Times—and have students annotate the Appraisal resources of Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. They find that Chinese texts cluster heavily around value-laden terms such as “science”, “precision” and “the people first”, while American coverage foregrounds “restrictions”, “panic” and “economic cost”. The point is not to pronounce one account better than the other, but to lead students to understand that discourse is not merely a vehicle of information; it is ideology rendered in grammatical form. The teacher then poses a further question: “If you were to draft an English statement introducing China’s epidemic-control policy to an international audience, how would you convey the premise that ‘life is paramount’ while remaining faithful to the facts?” The task drives students to use the technical resources of their discipline—choices in modality, patterns of thematic progression—to translate values as well as meaning, moving from knowing that to knowing why. Cultivating this habit of mind embeds values education in the training of professional skill, fostering virtue and educating people as rain that moistens all things unseen^[11].

4. Values guidance as the root: Nurturing sound and affirmative values

What is fundamental in curriculum-based ideological and political education is its ideological and political core, and its central task is to guide students’ value orientations and to elevate the cultural subjectivity of the Chinese nation. Teaching should accordingly bind the transmission of knowledge, the cultivation of ability and the guidance of values into one, since the ultimate end of all education is the formation of character—the return of knowledge to virtue—and since it is the worth and the directionality of educating people that these three must serve. Cultural confidence, the core socialist values and the shared values of humanity are therefore the principal points of leverage for values education within the English-major curriculum.

4.1. Consolidating cultural confidence

Cultural confidence rests, in the end, on a self-aware scholarship^[3, 13]. In Introduction to English Linguistics, a module may accordingly be built that maps a “genealogy of Chinese linguistics,” using comparison between Chinese and Western traditions to bring out the independent worth of the Chinese scholarly inheritance. When traditional Chinese phonology (yin-yun-xue, the study of initials, finals and tones handed down from the rhyme books and rime tables) is taught alongside modern phonology, the theory of Feature Geometry in twentieth-century phonology can be set against the organisation of the syllabary in the Qing rhyme handbook *Yinyun chanwei*, showing that both aim to subsume a sound system under an abstract model, and yet that the Chinese tradition takes the more holistic view of three interacting dimensions: initial,

final and tone. When pragmatics is taught, the theory of “zero degree and deviation” in Wang Xijie’s ^[14] *A General Theory of Rhetoric* may be brought in to show how Chinese rhetoric obtains a gain in pragmatic effect by re-ordering constituents—contrast *ta lai le*, “he came,” with the inverted *lai le ta*—and thus realises the pragmatic wisdom of meaning that lies beyond the words (*yi zai yan wai*), while Wang Li’s ideas on the grammar of Chinese can be used to illustrate the paratactic orientation of the language. Teaching of this kind lets students see that the Chinese tradition of linguistic inquiry is not “pre-scientific” but a body of knowledge informed by its own questionings and following its own methodological paths. Evidence bears this out: after Chinese writings on traditional linguistics were introduced as set classroom reading, students’ misconceptions about that tradition shed their “pre-scientific” status markedly ^[13]. The nurture of cultural confidence, in other words, can be accomplished through the retrieval and reconstruction of the discipline’s own knowledge system.

4.2. Deepening education in the core socialist values

Value education should avoid abstract preaching and instead be integrated into authentic language-learning activities. In a unit on language change, teachers can organize a project on the value orientations reflected in online neologisms. Using lists such as the “Top Ten Internet Terms of 2025” published by the National Language Resources Monitoring Center, students can build a small corpus of popular expressions from recent years and analyze their meanings, uses, and underlying values. For example, *pòfāng* originally referred to breaking through an opponent’s defenses in gaming. In online communication, it now describes being deeply moved or emotionally affected. This change reflects young people’s concern with emotional authenticity, empathy, and personal boundaries.

Similarly, terms such as “lying flat” and “involution” can be used to discuss competitive pressure and social expectations, while “a strong China needs me” can prompt reflection on responsibility and a sense of community. Teachers can guide students to connect these linguistic phenomena with core socialist values such as harmony, justice, and friendship. They can also encourage students to examine how these values are expressed across languages. When translating terms such as *pòfāng*, *juéjuézi*, and *YYDS*, students should consider not only their literal meanings but also their social context, emotional force, and value orientation. Through this process, broad values become observable in everyday language. Value education therefore moves from externally imposed requirements toward understanding developed through linguistic analysis, critical thinking, and intercultural communication.

4.3. Strengthening guidance in core values

English majors often experience what may be termed “professional value anxiety”: confronted with the rapid development of AI translation, they may begin to question the significance of language learning. Ideological and political education within the curriculum should address this concern directly and turn it into an opportunity for reconstructing students’ sense of professional value. In the concluding thematic module, “Language, Technology, and the Humanities,” instructors may organize a three-stage discussion: First, technological realities: Students examine the capabilities and limitations of translation tools such as DeepL and ChatGPT, including their potential errors in handling culture-specific items and emotional metaphors. Second, the irreplaceable role of professional expertise: Students analyze aspects of diplomatic documents and literary translation that require human agency, such as contextual compensation and the reproduction of

style. Third, a broader understanding of professional value: Drawing on Xu Yuanchong's view that "translation may be translated, but exceptional translation goes beyond the ordinary," instructors clarify that translation is not merely a process of linguistic transfer but also an ethical practice of intercultural dialogue. Translators must preserve cultural dignity while negotiating the tension between fidelity and creativity.

Through these discussions, students come to recognize that the ultimate value of their professional competence lies in serving as "gatekeepers" and "ferryman" in mutual learning among civilizations. Their professional dignity is rooted in a conscious commitment to safeguarding cultural agency.

5. Conclusion

Ideological and Political Education in All Courses within English major programs at Chinese institutions of higher learning must adhere to the fundamental guiding principles of the Party's education policy and fully implement the central task of fostering virtue and cultivating people (lìde shùrén). Its distinctive value lies precisely in the following: taking linguistics as a lens through which to examine the generative mechanisms of cultural agency; taking the classroom as a laboratory in which to test viable pathways of value guidance; and taking students' cognitive development as a measure against which to verify the authenticity of educational outcomes. When, in the classroom of *An Introduction to English Linguistics*, students are able not only to analyze the syntactic phenomenon of subject omission, but also to discern the philosophical orientation of the "unity of heaven and humanity" (tiānrén heyì) underlying the paratactic bias of the Chinese language; and when, upon using corpus tools to verify the pragmatic intensity of the term *hexie* ("harmony") in policy texts, they simultaneously come to apprehend it as an institutionalized expression of a core socialist value — it is then that Ideological and Political Education in All Courses achieves a genuine qualitative transformation from integration into internalization. The three dimensions outlined above constitute no static framework; rather, they require dynamic adjustment in response to the evolution of the discipline: the foundational curriculum calls for the continual renewal of its carriers of content, the focal classroom for the strengthening of problem-oriented design, and the ultimate dimension of values for engagement with the new imperatives of the era. Only in this way can English major programs in higher education cultivate foreign language talents for the new era who are both proficient in the craft of language and deeply rooted in the lineage of their own culture, and who can not only "know the world" but, still more, "understand China."

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