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# Towards an Implicit Model of Curriculum-Embedded Ideological and Political Education for Foreign Language Majors in Chinese Universities: Taking Ecological Civilization Education as an Example



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**ABSTRACT:** Taking “ecological civilization” education as an example, this paper explores an effective model of curriculum-embedded ideological and political education of foreign language majors in Chinese colleges and universities based on the concept of ecological interactive context and ecolinguistic continuum. This paper comprehensively discusses the effectiveness of core values content processing methods for foreign language courses in different contexts from three aspects: “the synergy between ecological civilization education and ecological values”, “the synergy between ecological civilization education and ecological behavior”, and “the synergy between teacher niche and student niche”. Considering the current problems of the curriculum-embedded ideological and political education such as the formalization and the disciplinization of the course content, the influence of explicit and implicit processing of foreign language majors on core values education is investigated to provide a basis for the formulation of relevant policies and theoretical research in colleges and universities.

**KEYWORDS:** ecological interactive context; curriculum-embedded ideological and political education; foreign language teaching; synergy; explicit/implicit learning.

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## 1. THE INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the ecology of education, researchers study education from the perspective of ecology and treat the education system as an ecosystem, which is similar to the metaphor of language ecology that treats the language system as an ecosystem. The research purpose of the ecology of education is to maintain the internal balance of the educational ecosystem, such as the research on the ecological niche of education (Wu, 2020), online open courses (Li *et al.*, 2020), and the exploration of teaching models in the ecological environment of education (Liu, 2013). However, whether education is discussed from the perspective of ecology or not, it lacks multi-level and multi-dimensional studies from the perspective of language-cognition-behavior-environment, and the study of effective teaching models combined with explicit and implicit (conscious/unconscious) is even rarer. The curriculum-embedded ideological and political education or core values education has always been an important part of the education of Chinese colleges and universities. The aim of this article is to provide a new research path, especially for the socialist core values education.

## 2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Language and ecological environment research

It is of great value that “the ecological environment is a major political issue bearing on the Party’s mission and purpose, as well as a major social issue bearing on the people’s livelihood” and that “developing the economy as well as protecting the ecological

## **Towards an Implicit Model of Curriculum-Embedded Ideological and Political Education for Foreign Language Majors in Chinese Universities: Taking Ecological Civilization Education as an Example**

environment is for the people's livelihood" (quoted from President Xi's important speech at the National Ecological and Environmental Protection Conference on May 18-19, 2018). China has always paid attention to environmental construction. Here, the environment not only refers to the natural environment but also involves the social and psychological environment. At the same time, it forms the environment of language use, namely, the context. Therefore, language can construct reality in the interaction with the environment (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999), which has the function of creating a beautiful human environment.

International studies on education from the perspective of ecology are mainly based on ecological game theory (Nisar, 2015), application of the ecological theory (Kong *et al.*, 2021), literature ecology in the background of education (Manan & David, 2014), school bullying (Hong, 2020) and the integration of ecological objectives in campus strategy and spatial planning (Orenstein *et al.*, 2019). Language and context are often separated, and the relationship between language and environment is often isolated. The above problems are concentrated in the views of the external context (Halliday, 1985/1989) and the internal (cognitive) context (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). In this regard, Xiao *et al.* (2018) put forward the concept of ecological context, which was verified in experiments. Ecological context theory draws on ecosophy and the mechanism of interaction between language use and language environment, including natural, social and psychological environment (Stibbe, 2015). It follows the educational ecology law of the overall relevance, dynamic balance, and coevolution (Wu & Zhu, 2000), which believed that the study of context (the environment in which language is used) should deal with the ecological philosophical relations between whole and part, subjective and objective, dynamic and balance. The research on the ecological interaction among context factors is beneficial to the construction of current context, especially in foreign language learning, and to eliminate the differences between traditional context studies. However, the interaction between language and context has not been clarified in detail.

### **2.2 Ecological interactive context**

Based on the current situation of context research, the model of "ecological interactive context" (Xiao, 2017) came into being. It holds that context is a dynamic system of interaction or coordination between subjective and objective factors. The theoretical basis is to follow the law of the unity of opposites of dialectical materialism and unify epistemology, correctly treating the dialectical relationship between experience and reason, subjective and objective, as well as the relationship between context levels. The dialectical study of subjective and objective contextual factors is carried out in an interactive, dynamic, synergistic, and hierarchical manner. In this model, the context is divided into three parts: extralingual context (situational, cultural, social, and geographical environments), intralingual context (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, etc.), and cognitive/internal context (interactive knowledge of linguistic context and extralingual context variables, i.e. personal mental representations, such as schema, including formal schema and cultural content schema). Each of the three contexts contains three levels, which expand outward step by step. The upper level restricts the lower level, the outside restricts the inside, and the latter reflects the former. There are phonology, lexical grammar, and textual semantic levels in the intralingual context. Extralingual context includes three layers, viz. material context, contextual context, and cultural context. The cognitive context also includes three layers: information input, formal schema, and content schema.

In the context of ecological interaction, the ecological environment of language includes internal/cognitive context, extralingual context, and intralingual context. The use and survival of language cannot be separated from its ecological environment. The ecological environment co-exists with language, and the former constrains the latter, and the latter chooses the former. In the interaction between language and its external and internal environment, on the one hand, language plays a positive constructive effect on the social and natural environment, and the time scale is often faster and easier. On the other hand, the social environment and natural environment also exert effects on language and the internal environment (cognitive psychology), but such effects are relatively long and complex in the time scale. From the perspective of the ecolinguistic continuum (Xiao, 2021), one end of the language environment can be objective, such as the natural environment; the other end can be subjective, such as the psychological environment. What connects the two ends is based on language symbols, human cognition, etc. Therefore, the ecolinguistic continuum concept has the characteristics of the ecosystem such as integrity and diversity, dynamics and balance, relevance and continuity, coordination and coevolution (Xiao, 2021). We need to treat the core values education in the process of students' growth dialectically. Language plays an important role in this education because it has

## **Towards an Implicit Model of Curriculum-Embedded Ideological and Political Education for Foreign Language Majors in Chinese Universities: Taking Ecological Civilization Education as an Example**

humanistic attributes, especially the role of the discourse of ecological civilization. Role-playing effectively and subtly enables students to construct a healthy physical and mental world in the context of ecological interaction. However, both explicit and implicit attention and processing are necessary for the context of ecological interaction, because human knowledge can be classified into explicit and implicit knowledge. For example, for children with low cognitive levels, their interaction environment is mostly proximal, material, concrete and immediate in the low-level interaction context. Thus, their cognitive processing is mostly implicit (Xiao *et al.*, 2021; Xiao, 2022).

### **2.3 Explicit and implicit learning**

In the process of learning, explicit and implicit knowledge have different influences on learners. The former refers to knowledge that can be systematically described, such as written or oral knowledge, while the latter refers to knowledge that cannot be described, such as the knowledge system in the brain (Bialystok, 1979). Adults and children have different explicit and implicit learning abilities. Since adult learners only have the explicit learning process (Chen and Chen, 2019), explicit knowledge is more conducive to college students' learning. However, through studies on children's language acquisition, it is found that children can master the language well because of their good implicit processing ability, i.e. unconscious and involuntary cognitive activities (Chen & Chen, 2019; Radford, 1997; Robinson, 1997), thus, implicit processing patterns can promote learning outcomes. The core values education of college students should combine explicit knowledge with an implicit processing model. Implicit processing of explicit core values knowledge in foreign language teaching should be the main model of core values education in foreign language courses at present.

## **3. STATUS OF CORE VALUES EDUCATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM IN CHINA**

### **3.1 Core values education of foreign language majors in China**

Based on CNKI (Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure), this paper uses the method of text mining to clarify the core values construction of foreign language majors. Using "foreign language & core values course" as the search term, and EI, CSSCI, and CSCD as the source categories, we retrieved a total of 60 papers (from 2009 to 2022, up to May/1/2022). The texts were processed by ROSTCM6 text mining software. It is found that the focus of core values teaching in the field of foreign language education is mainly on: 1) the concept, thought, task, and connotation of the teaching; 2) new liberal arts (integrated development); 3) blended teaching (moral education, culture, values); 4) principles and paths (practice); 5) new media (electronic education, integration), etc. There is no "ecological" keyword in the semantic network of "foreign language & core values education", which indicates that the literature focusing on core values education of foreign language majors from the ecological perspective is rare, and provides research space for the explicit and implicit teaching model of core values education and foreign language education from the perspective of ecological interactive context.

### **3.2 Key problems to be solved in core values education**

There are many paradigms based on curriculum theory, which yet lacks research from the perspective of multidimensional and multilevel interaction and collaboration in an ecological context. Curriculum-embedded ideological and political education or core values education in colleges and universities bears the great mission of training qualified builders and reliable successors. In the era of new media with ever-changing internet technology, to innovate the way of core values education in colleges and universities is a difficult problem (Ministry of Education network: focus on core values education in colleges and universities, editor's note). Therefore, the key problem to be solved is to use effective ways to enable students to learn in the osmosis (implicit processing) explicit knowledge, namely the core values content, especially the socialist core values, including prosperity, democracy, civilization, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, legal system, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship.

## **4. TOWARDS AN IMPLICIT MODEL FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECOLOGICAL INTERACTIVE CONTEXT**

Due to the diversity of language and the needs of the times facing international groups, foreign language majors have certain particularity. Then, how to combine curriculum-embedded ideological and political education with foreign language teaching from the perspective of ecological interactive context? President Xi believed that the value orientation of the youth determines the value orientation of the whole society in the future, and the youth is in the period of the formation and establishment of values,

## Towards an Implicit Model of Curriculum-Embedded Ideological and Political Education for Foreign Language Majors in Chinese Universities: Taking Ecological Civilization Education as an Example

so it is very important to cultivate values in this period. The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China has always emphasized that ecological civilization construction should be highlighted. At the same time, ecological civilization education in colleges and universities has also become an important module of curriculum-embedded ideological and political education, and exploring new ideas and paradigms of ecological civilization education has become an important task in colleges and universities today. In the process of ecological civilization education, the traditional ideological and political education is mainly dominated by teachers' explicit "teaching", because the connotation of ecological civilization needs to be deliberately instilled, which is difficult to mobilize students' learning enthusiasm. Core values education should be combined with students' implicit processing learning methods to arouse students' inner ripples. According to the particularity of foreign language majors, it is necessary to create a new core values teaching method for curriculum-embedded ideological and political education for foreign language majors. There are three ways to contextualize explicit knowledge into implicit processing:

(1) Synergy between ecological civilization education and ecological values of foreign language majors. With the continuous improvement of China's international status and the need for foreign exchange, foreign language majors are required to tell Chinese stories. To tell China's stories well, one should first have the right values of ecological civilization and patriotic enthusiasm and have a thorough understanding of China's culture. For students who do not have these humanistic qualities, it is necessary to strengthen the reserve of relevant knowledge. This explicit learning process is the process of consciously learning the explicit knowledge of ecological civilization and then applying it to professional practice implicitly. Many students who are not familiar with the value system of ecological civilization need to access to and sort out materials so as to absorb appropriate knowledge into their own "China stories-telling". This is the interaction and coordination between external social context and individual internal psychological cognitive context.

(2) Synergy between ecological civilization education and students' ecological behavior. Language and behavior have long been proved to have a certain correlation, and the evolution from language to behavior can be divided into the following steps (Fig. 1): "Auditory-Phonological-Syntactic representations" is a linguistic process, while "Conceptual-Perceptual representations" is a psychological process. "Motor representations" is a behavioral process. Generally speaking, it is a process of language-psychological cognition- behavior.

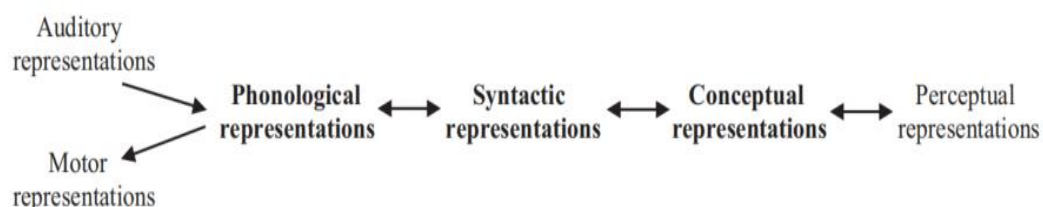


Fig. 1 The path from language to behavior (Jackendoff, 2019)

On the one hand, the purpose of curriculum-embedded ideological and political education for foreign language majors is to make college students love their country and society and have a collective concept, ideal, and morality. To examine whether the education is successful or not is manifested by good social behavior. On the other hand, it is to improve the knowledge and ability of foreign language majors. In addition to the curriculum-embedded ideological and political education mentioned above, college students majoring in foreign languages should also inherit and carry forward the excellent historical and cultural traditions of the Chinese nation and absorb all the excellent achievements of the development of human civilization. Language is the most effective and efficient means to carry out the core values contents, and only in this way can the students tell Chinese stories well. However, how to carry out effective collaborative curriculum-embedded ideological and political education for foreign language majors is very rare. As the literature mentioned above shows, most of the current studies focus on one-way studies and few studies on the effectiveness of combining it with language. Undeniably, the use of ecological discourse in curriculum-embedded ideological and political education is currently neglected by various universities. Exploring the application of ecological discourse skills in different contexts can help find the "obstacles" of the work of education in university courses. Ways and methods should be explored to optimize core values work in colleges and universities according to the above correlation, shape a more appropriate collaborative

## Towards an Implicit Model of Curriculum-Embedded Ideological and Political Education for Foreign Language Majors in Chinese Universities: Taking Ecological Civilization Education as an Example

relationship, and enhance the synergistic effect.

(3) Synergy between teacher's niche and student's niche. Grinnell (1917) was one of the first to use the concept of "niche", arguing that niche refers to the microenvironment occupied by a species. Elton (1927) regarded niche as the position and function of a species in a community or ecosystem. In 1957, Hutchinson expanded the niche concept further. According to Hutchinson, an ecological niche describes all the biological and abiotic conditions that a species needs to survive. Based on this, Hutchinson proposed the concept of N-dimensional niche, i.e. every condition that affects an organism and every resource that an organism can use is regarded as a dimension, to define a possible range of an organism. By introducing the concept of niche into the field of education, the educational system is regarded as an ecosystem, and educational factors are regarded as ecological factors, which maintain balance through material conversion and energy flow. To behave as a model, a teacher should make good use of the platform and campus position, advocate socialist core values with their actions, and ignite students' yearning for truth, goodness, and beauty with their knowledge and experience (People's Daily online at

<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0910/c64094-25629944.html>). The position of teachers in core values work can be seen. In the past teaching, the teachers always repeat what the book says, which made core values education rigid and formalized and affected the effect of core values teaching. Therefore, teachers and students should find their ecological niche and inherit core values elements from the perspective of the mutual positive influence of ecological elements.

In college foreign language classes, teachers can set up knowledge contests, game interactions, debates, film clips, and role plays related to core values. Literature about core values could also be discussed in class. At the same time, students are required to write some relevant comments after class or follow up after reading. In writing/creation and translation/role-playing, students carry out a lot of cognitive processing after reading and writing with the content and "role-based interaction analysis" (Xiao, 2022), which is expected to produce ecological interaction synergistic effect and thus promote the formation of their core values unconsciously (i.e. implicit processing). Taking the combination of English writing and core value teaching at a double first-class university in southern China as an example, in a study of the different understanding of the ecological philosophy of "justice" and the socialist core values of "justice", the majority of students are from the connotation of the associated to deepen understanding the concept of "justice" in the socialist core values. Participating students are well educated in the ecological environment and hold the value of "ecological justice", namely, human beings should be responsible for nature and protect the natural environment we depend on. Inspired by the harmonious relationship between humans and nature in "ecological justice", students believe that: 1) "social justice" focuses on harmonious relationships between people and society; 2) students should take an attitude against the unfair social order, social phenomenon and social behavior, and take corresponding behavior measures; 3) the social justice is the premise of a harmonious society and national stability, just as "ecological justice" is the premise for one to perform environmental action. For example, a person who is indifferent to the environment can hardly participate in environmental protection activities in daily life, and it is difficult for him to persuade others to care for the environment. Students are inspired to think about the concept of "social justice" from the concept of "ecological justice", which deepens students' learning and experience through implicit processing to manifest the knowledge connotation of the latter.

### 5. CONCLUSION

Interdisciplinary research has been a hot issue advocated by the scientific research field in recent years, and the comprehensive research of natural and social science has become the trend of contemporary scientific development (Kang & Zhao, 2018). The foreign language discipline itself also needs interdisciplinary research (Hu, 2007). From the perspective of ecological interactive context and ecolinguistic continuum, this paper discusses the implicit model of curriculum-embedded ideological and political education for foreign language majors in colleges and universities. It holds that the implicit processing model of explicit knowledge in different levels and dimensions is more effective to help students master the explicit knowledge, which provides the basis for the formulation and research direction of such curriculum-embedded ideological and political education, viz. the core values education for foreign language majors in the future.

## Towards an Implicit Model of Curriculum-Embedded Ideological and Political Education for Foreign Language Majors in Chinese Universities: Taking Ecological Civilization Education as an Example

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## Towards an Implicit Model of Curriculum-Embedded Ideological and Political Education for Foreign Language Majors in Chinese Universities: Taking Ecological Civilization Education as an Example

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