HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2025, 9(12), 2267-2272
https://www.hillpublisher.com/Journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

The Application of Critical Discourse Analysis in Text Reading Teaching

Xinli Li

School of Foreign Languages, Taishan University, Tai'an 271000, Shandong, China.

How to cite this paper: Xinli Li. (2025) The Application of Critical Discourse Analysis in Text Reading Teaching. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 9(12), 2267-2272.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2025.12.009

Received: November 12, 2025
Accepted: December 8, 2025
Published: January 6, 2026

***Corresponding author:** Xinli Li, School of Foreign Languages, Taishan University, Tai'an 271000, Shandong, China.

Abstract

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a dynamic linguistic sub-discipline emerging in the late 1970s, has primarily centered on systematic analyses of concrete discursive practices in various social and cultural contexts. This study integrates CDA into college English text reading instruction, aiming to cultivate English learners' critical thinking competence and explore the positive implications of this theory for English reading pedagogy in higher education settings. Guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional model as the core analytical framework, an empirical study was conducted among non-English major college students over a semester to systematically validate the effectiveness of CDA in enhancing learners' critical awareness and analytical abilities. The results demonstrate that CDA empowers learners to break free from the constraints of traditional textual analysis, interpret texts from multi-dimensional and critical perspectives, and develop a rational stance towards the ideological connotations embedded in different types of discourses. This research enriches the application scenarios of CDA in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching and offers actionable insights for the in-depth reform of college English reading instruction in the new era.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); college English reading instruction; critical thinking

1. Introduction

English education in China covers diverse learners across ages, occupations, and regions, serving as a key bridge for cross-cultural communication and personal development. With the deepening of economic globalization and the boom of internet technology, English application scope has expanded remarkably, boosting learners' motivation and diversifying their objectives—from academic and career needs to daily cross-cultural interactions. This transformation raises higher requirements for English teaching and challenges the traditional teacher-centered, knowledge-oriented model dominating domestic classrooms. In such a context, the cultivation of learners' critical thinking and cross-cultural competence has become a core goal of modern English education, which cannot be fully achieved by the traditional teaching model.

Traditional English reading instruction focuses on surface-level analysis, including vocabulary, grammar, and explicit information extraction. Teachers prioritize literal comprehension and basic language points, neglecting the cultivation of implicit meaning interpretation and critical thinking. Consequently, most learners passively accept textual content, lacking the ability to question, analyze or evaluate embedded ideological tendencies, cultural values and power relations—a risky tendency in cross-cultural contexts.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which centers on the interplay between language, power and ideology, offers

a novel perspective for optimizing English reading teaching. CDA explores the inherent connection between language and social reality, revealing how language constructs and reflects social relations, power structures and ideological connotations. By applying CDA to reading teaching, learners can be guided to go beyond the surface of the text, understand the deep meaning of discourse.

Recent studies highlight CDA's practical value in language teaching: Wodak (2015) noted CDA-based teaching enhances learners' awareness of language-power-ideology interactions, helping them recognize the hidden biases in discourse. Flowerdew (2018) emphasized its role in equipping EFL learners with tools to decode implicit ideological meanings, improving intercultural competence. This study conducts an empirical investigation to verify CDA's effect in college English reading teaching, providing empirical support and actionable references for the integration of CDA into EFL teaching practice.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA emerged in Western Europe in the late 1970s, responding to mainstream linguistics' overemphasis on formal structure while ignoring language's social and ideological attributes. At that time, structural linguistics and transformational-generative linguistics dominated the field of linguistics, focusing on the internal structure of language and ignoring the social functions and ideological implications of language. Scholars like Michel Foucault, Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, Gunther Kress and Roger Fowler argued that language is inseparable from social contexts, so linguistic research must link with practice to uncover hidden power relations and ideological connotations in discourse.

As an interdisciplinary field, CDA integrates findings from linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology and ethnography, enabling multi-dimensional analysis of language-society relations. M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is its core foundation: register theory (language-context-meaning) and metafunction theory (ideational, interpersonal, textual) provide tools to interpret how language constructs reality, conveys relations and organizes discourse, forming a systematic framework. Register theory holds that language variation is closely related to context, and different contextual factors (field, tenor, mode) determine the choice of linguistic forms. Metafunction theory points out that language has three meta-functions: ideational function (constructing objective reality), interpersonal function (establishing and maintaining social relations), and textual function (organizing discourse coherently). These theories provide important analytical tools for CDA to explore the relationship between language and social context.

Critical linguistics differs from mainstream linguistics in focusing on texts' social-political nature and the language-power-ideology relationship. It holds that discourse is not a neutral carrier of information but a product of social practice, shaped by social power structures and ideological factors while reproducing and shaping social reality. Scholars like Fairclough advocate integrating critical language awareness into school education, enabling learners to recognize the intrinsic link between language and power.

Fairclough (2023) noted in Language and Power that language functions through ideological "consent"—achieved via dominant language norms—rather than "threat". Grasping language's "complicit" role broadens learners' cognitive perspectives, laying a foundation for promoting social equity. Recent CDA developments include Wodak's (2015) Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which emphasizes dynamic discourse analysis by integrating historical and situational contexts. These advances enrich CDA's analytical framework and expand its application in language teaching.

3. Research Design and Implementation

3.1 Research Subjects

This study selected 58 freshmen majoring in Biological Sciences from a local university as the research subjects. Freshmen were chosen for their consistent traditional English foundation and no prior CDA exposure, avoiding prior knowledge interference. As biology majors need to read and analyze a large number of English academic papers in their future study and research, they have a strong demand for critical reading skills, which enhances the practicality and pertinence of the study. The selection of subjects from the same major and grade also ensures the relative consistency of their learning background and cognitive level, reducing the impact of irrelevant variables on the research results.

All subjects had six-plus years of traditional English learning experience, hailing from urban and rural regions.

Pre-experiment tests (including vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and critical thinking ability tests) showed minor differences in their vocabulary (2,500-3,500 words, above the university's 2,300-word freshman average) and grammar proficiency. Their reading scores were at the medium-to-upper level, indicating that they had mastered basic reading skills but lacked sufficient critical awareness and the ability to interpret the deep meaning of texts. This situation is consistent with the research needs, providing a good basis for verifying the effectiveness of CDA in improving learners' critical thinking ability.

The experiment ran for seven months, from the autumn semester of 2022 to the spring semester of 2023, including a 40-day winter vacation. Before the experiment, the subjects were randomly divided into nine groups with 6-7 students in each group, and each group elected a group leader to coordinate the group's learning and research activities. During the experiment, one student dropped out due to personal reasons, resulting in 57 valid participants, which was sufficient to ensure the reliability and validity of the research data.

3.2 Research Methods

This study adopted a mixed research method combining qualitative and quantitative research, integrating classroom observation, questionnaire survey, semi-structured interview, and text analysis to collect and analyze data from multiple perspectives, ensuring the objectivity and comprehensiveness of the research results. The author taught the English reading course of the class, conducted in-class observations to record the verbal and non-verbal behaviors of the learners during the learning process, such as their participation in group discussions, the depth of their questions, and their ability to analyze texts.

Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were administered to students before and after the experiment. The questionnaire included closed-ended and open-ended questions, focusing on learners' attitudes towards CDA, changes in their critical thinking ability, and difficulties encountered in the learning process. The semi-structured interview selected 15 students with different learning levels to conduct in-depth interviews, exploring their in-depth experiences and perceptions of CDA learning. In addition, the researcher also interviewed three other English teachers who taught the class to collect multi-dimensional feedback on the teaching effect and learners' changes.

Questionnaire data were analyzed quantitatively using statistical software, and interview content and classroom observation records were transcribed, coded, and analyzed qualitatively. Triangulation (combining classroom observation, questionnaire survey, and teacher interview) was adopted to compare and verify the research data from different sources, which effectively improved the validity and reliability of the research.

3.3 Research Procedures

The class had three 90-minute weekly English courses: reading, audio-visual speaking, and online reading-writing. The experiment had three stages with clear objectives and tasks to ensure systematic, orderly research progress:

Theoretical Preparation Stage (2 months): This stage focused on systematic CDA theoretical input. The researcher taught CDA's origin, core concepts, analytical models, and classic cases, covering Fairclough's three-dimensional model, Wodak's discourse historical approach, and systemic functional linguistics' application in CDA. Extracurricular interviews and one-on-one tutoring were provided to track progress and address learners' CDA learning difficulties. A final quiz assessed basic CDA mastery, with most learners meeting requirements to advance.

Theory Application Stage (4 months): As the experiment's core, it guided learners to apply CDA theories to text analysis. In groups of 6-7, learners compared different texts (textbook passages, news, speeches) from easy to difficult, using traditional reading and CDA methods. Each group chose an interesting theme for in-depth analysis under the researcher's guidance.

In group analysis, each group discussed in depth, shared analytical ideas and findings, and received timely researcher feedback. They then submitted a report with a text introduction, analytical process, findings, and reflections. Over winter vacation, learners were assigned an independent CDA report, with self-selected texts approved by the researcher for feasibility and relevance. All reports were submitted at the start of the 2023 spring semester for centralized evaluation.

Feedback Stage (1 month): It focused on feedback collection and analysis to evaluate teaching effectiveness and learners' changes. The researcher interviewed 15 students individually, surveyed 57 valid participants (covering learning experience, critical thinking changes, and CDA teaching suggestions), and consulted three other English teachers on learners' reading and critical thinking improvements. The collected data were sorted and analyzed to inform subsequent results discussion.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The experiment used Fairclough's three-dimensional model (text, discursive practice, social practice) as the core analytical framework, offering a systematic way to explore text-context relationships. It involves three interrelated dimensions: text analysis (description of linguistic features like vocabulary, grammar, and structure), discursive practice analysis (interpretation of discourse production, distribution, and consumption), and social practice analysis (explanation of discourse's links to social structure, ideology, and reality).

Fairclough (2003, p. 42) viewed discourse as a social communication product, emphasizing that language as a social practice is constrained by ideological factors, and lexical and grammatical choices can not only reflect social dynamics but also shape social reality. Guided by this model, the author designed a series of analytical questions to facilitate learners' text analysis and help them form systematic analytical thinking:

1. Text source and target audience positioning: What is the source of the text? Who is the target audience? How does the text position the target audience and convey information to them?
2. Language strategies adopted by the author: What language strategies does the author use to convey his views and attitudes? How do these strategies affect the readers' understanding and perception?
3. Use of euphemisms, metaphors, or lexical transformations and their effects: Does the text use euphemisms, metaphors, or lexical transformations? What ideological connotations and communicative effects do these expressions have?
4. Experiential values conveyed by grammatical features: What grammatical features are prominent in the text? What experiential values and ideological tendencies do these grammatical features convey?
5. Employment of nominalization, voice (active/passive), and polarity (affirmative/negative): How does the text use nominalization, active/passive voice, and affirmative/negative expressions? What effects do these usages have on hiding or highlighting information?
6. Application of hedging language and sentence patterns (declarative, interrogative, imperative): Does the text use hedging language? What sentence patterns are mainly used? How do these choices reflect the author's attitude and the power relationship between the author and the reader?
7. Features of voice expression, logical connectives, and reference devices: What are the characteristics of the voice expression in the text? How are logical connectives and reference devices used? How do these features affect the coherence and persuasiveness of the discourse?
8. Communicative conventions followed and macro-structural features of the text: What communicative conventions does the text follow? What are the macro-structural features of the text? How do these conventions and structures serve the ideological expression of the text?

Group discussions on these questions helped students master CDA analysis methods, form systematic analytical thinking, and gradually improve their ability to interpret texts from multi-dimensional perspectives.

4. Results and Discussion

Analysis of 9 groups and 57 independent reports shows CDA significantly enhances learners' multi-dimensional thinking. Compared with traditional reading, learners in CDA-based teaching actively explore hidden ideological connotations and power relations in texts instead of passively accepting information; they apply the CDA framework to analyze linguistic features, interpret the deep meaning of discourse, and offer critical views, demonstrating preliminary mastery of CDA analysis methods. Specifically, one group analyzed a cross-cultural communication article and found the author used numerous positive adjectives for Western culture and negative ones for non-Western cultures, thereby revealing hidden Western-centric bias. Another group studied a news report, linking the extensive use of passive voice to the concealment of the event initiator and noting this usage aimed to weaken a specific subject's responsibility and uphold Western ideological dominance—an observation that fully reflects their in-depth text interpretation and critical thinking.

Group discussions effectively facilitated peer learning and mutual assistance. Learners exchanged analytical ideas and findings, complemented each other's strengths, and jointly solved analytical difficulties, improving text analysis efficiency and quality while fostering cooperative learning skills. However, independent reports revealed a common issue: most learners over-relied on lexical and grammatical analysis, neglecting the connection between text and sociocultural context, leading to superficial analysis results.

Interview and questionnaire results aligned with report analysis. Of 57 valid participants, 38.6% (22/57) exhibited overcorrection of critical awareness—excessively questioning all text parts and even rejecting reasonable information—indicating immature critical thinking that requires further guidance and training. However, 92.9% (53/57) recognized the value of integrating CDA into reading teaching, as it helped break traditional reading limitations and enhance in-depth text interpretation ability.

Even 12.3% (7/57) of learners with limited CDA theoretical grasp acknowledged its role in fostering critical thinking, noting that CDA changed their reading methods and highlighted the importance of critical text analysis. All learners confirmed the necessity of critical text evaluation, with 16 pointing out that CDA also improved their English writing ability: focusing on language choice and ideological expression made their writing more in-depth and logical, and significantly strengthened their ability to convey views and attitudes.

CDA empowers learners to identify power relations hidden in discourse, understand the social functions of language, and construct discourses that conform to their own values (Hart, 2022). Flowerdew (2018) noted that CDA bridges the gap between textual analysis and practical application, helping learners apply the knowledge and skills learned in class to real-life communication scenarios. Wodak (2015) stressed its role in fostering critical language users, who can not only understand and interpret discourse but also critically evaluate and resist the misleading information and ideological penetration in discourse. This is highly consistent with the goal of modern English education to cultivate high-quality cross-cultural talents.

5. Conclusions and Limitations

This study explores the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in college English reading teaching via empirical research and arrives at the following key conclusions: Integrating CDA into teaching can effectively enhance learners' critical thinking ability, help them transcend the limitations of traditional text analysis, and foster competence in multi-dimensional text interpretation. It also strengthens their awareness of cross-cultural communication, enabling them to identify the ideological connotations and power relations embedded in texts, develop a rational cultural attitude and independent cultural identity, and thereby boost cross-cultural communication competence. While this study offers valuable insights into the application of CDA in this field, it has limitations, including a small sample size, relatively short experimental cycle, and scope for optimizing teaching design—all of which point to directions for future research. Subsequent studies will expand the sample scope by including learners from different majors, grades, and universities to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

In conclusion, integrating CDA into college English reading teaching effectively advances English teaching reform and enhances learners' comprehensive quality. It boosts critical thinking, text interpretation, and cross-cultural communication abilities, while helping learners construct an independent cultural identity. As English teaching reform deepens, the optimized CDA application model will better serve high-quality cross-cultural talent cultivation. It will also provide new ideas for addressing key challenges in modern EFL teaching, contributing to the sustainable development of China's English education and the cultivation of intercultural communicators with independent thinking.

References

Chouliaraki, L., & Fairclough, N. (1999). Discourse in late modernity: Rethinking critical discourse analysis. Edinburgh University Press.

Fairclough, N. (1989). Language and power. Longman.

Fairclough, N. (2003). Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research. Routledge.

Fairclough, N. (2023). Critical discourse analysis. In J. Flowerdew (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 11-22). Routledge.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1993). Explanations in the functions of language. Edward Arnold.

Hart, C. J. (2022). Critical discourse analysis: A review of recent developments and future directions. *Journal of Language and Politics*, *21*(2), 213-230.

Kress, G. (1996). Texts and practices: Reading in critical discourse analysis. Routledge.

Marín-Arrese, J. (2021). Stance and intersubjectivity in academic discourse: A critical perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *179*, 89-102.

van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, *4*(2), 249-283.

Wang, P. F. (2008). Critical discourse analysis: A new perspective in contemporary educational research. *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, (5), 112-116.

Wodak, R. (2015). Methods of critical discourse analysis (4th ed.). Sage Publications.