

Theoretical Implications of the *Understanding Contemporary China* Textbook Philosophy for University English Teaching Reform

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Abstract: *As the internationalization of higher education deepens and ideological and political education (IPE) becomes increasingly embedded across the curriculum, the role of foreign language instruction in talent cultivation demands urgent reconfiguration. Positioned as a flagship English-language textbook designed for international communication, the series of textbooks Understanding Contemporary China (UCC) presents a pedagogical framework that integrates Chinese cultural narratives, contemporary realities, and global perspectives. Its distinctive approach foregrounds not only linguistic proficiency but also the imperative to articulate China's stories and enhance its international discourse power through English. This study takes the pedagogical philosophy embodied in the UCC textbook as a starting point to examine its theoretical significance and practical implications for the reform of college English education in China. By analyzing the textbook's conceptual orientation, thematic structure, and instructional logic, the paper explores how its guiding principles may inform the restructuring of curriculum objectives, content design, classroom practices, and evaluative mechanisms. The study ultimately proposes a culturally grounded foreign language teaching model that fuses communicative competence with value-oriented education, aiming to advance the deep integration of language instruction and ideological-political formation. This reform vision expands both the reach and the depth of IPE in college English instruction, offering a blueprint for cultivating globally competent, culturally rooted communicators in the new era.*

Keywords: Understanding Contemporary China (UCC), College English teaching reform, Textbook pedagogy, Cultural expression, Ideological and Political Education (IPE), International communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background: The Emergence of the *Understanding Contemporary China* (UCC) Textbook Series

As China continues to strengthen its national capacity and expand its international presence, the imperative to “tell China’s stories well” through education has become central to the higher education agenda. Responding to this need, the UCC textbook series—initiated by the Department of Higher Education under the Ministry of Education and published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press—was developed. Targeting undergraduate and graduate students majoring in foreign languages, as well as international students studying in China, the series offers a comprehensive account of China’s development trajectory, governance system, and cultural values. It aims to deepen learners’ understanding of contemporary China and foster informed cultural identification. Structured around themes such as political systems, economic development, social governance, ecological civilization, technological innovation, and traditional culture (Qiu et al., 2025), the textbook adopts a discursive style that blends linguistic clarity with ideological engagement. It represents a paradigm shift from skill-focused language instruction to an integrated model that combines language learning, national narrative, and value education. Beyond improving students’ language proficiency, the textbook uses English as a medium for critical reflection on Chinese society and cultural expression, thus enhancing learners’ intercultural awareness and global communicative competence (Chang & Bi, 2025).

Drawing upon the pedagogical vision embedded in this series, the present study explores how its underlying educational philosophy may serve as a theoretical and practical framework for reforming College English teaching in China. It seeks to contribute to the integration of foreign language education with national discourse development in the context of educational modernization.

1.2 Challenges in Current College English Instruction

College English is one of the most widely taught general education courses in Chinese universities. Over the past decades, the curriculum has undergone multiple waves of reform, shifting from test-driven instruction to communication-oriented pedagogy. These efforts have improved language acquisition and diversified teaching

practices. However, amid new national imperatives—namely, the cultivation of moral character and the enhancement of China’s global communication capacity—College English still falls short in three key areas: value orientation, cultural depth, and international discourse competence (Li, 2025). First, existing curricula remain largely reliant on British and American teaching materials, with limited inclusion of contemporary Chinese contexts. As a result, students often struggle to develop a meaningful understanding of their own society through the lens of English (Zhang, 2025). Second, although students may possess basic language skills, many lack the ability to convey Chinese perspectives effectively in cross-cultural settings—an issue often described as “being fluent in English but speechless about China” (Liu & Zhang, 2025). Finally, College English instruction has long been guided by a utilitarian approach that prioritizes language tools over ideological function. This separation of skills training from value formation has led to an underdeveloped capacity for cultural identity construction and national narrative output. Consequently, current models are no longer adequate to meet the strategic goals of ideological education or the broader objective of cultivating globally aware citizens with strong cultural confidence.

1.3 Pedagogical Implications of the UCC Textbook Concept

Within this context, the curriculum philosophy articulated in UCC offers an instructive model for reimagining College English education. Although the series primarily targets language majors, its underlying pedagogical logic and communicative orientation hold broader relevance. First, the textbook departs from ideologically neutral language instruction and foregrounds cultural stance and national identity, encouraging learners to develop a distinctive worldview and expressive agency (Tong, 2025). Second, its content design integrates topic, language, and culture into a cohesive framework, positioning Chinese realities as the focal point of language instruction and addressing the cultural aphasia prevalent in traditional EFL curricula. Third, the textbook emphasizes project-based and task-driven pedagogy, promoting critical thinking and student-centered expression through context-rich assignments. Lastly, its discourse model draws upon multilingual interpretations of Chinese experiences to offer a localized approach to global communication, thereby enriching the expressive ecology of College English (Li & Huang, 2025). This study contends that the curriculum concepts embedded in UCC can serve as theoretical resources for the reform of public English education in China. Through a comprehensive analysis of the textbook’s structure, content, pedagogical design, and discourse system, the research aims to inform the reshaping of College English teaching objectives, content strategies, classroom practices, and educational values.

1.4 Research Significance and Innovative Contributions

This study seeks to bridge the gap between textbook-based curriculum research and pedagogical reform by integrating the value-laden instructional logic of UCC into the framework of College English teaching. Its contributions are fourfold. Theoretically, it moves beyond the traditional boundaries of ideological education—typically confined to political science or Chinese-language courses—by embedding value formation within foreign language instruction. In terms of textbook studies, it demonstrates a bottom-up research approach that connects instructional content to pedagogical concept formation, offering a new perspective on textbook analysis and utilization. Practically, it provides both conceptual justification and empirical grounding for the structural realignment of College English curricula toward greater cultural expression and national narrative capacity. From an intercultural communication standpoint, the study contributes to constructing a China-centered discourse system that enables students to articulate Chinese stories in globally intelligible terms.

2. IMPLICIT CURRICULUM PHILOSOPHY EMBEDDED IN THE UCC TEXTBOOK

Although the *Understanding Contemporary China* (UCC) textbook series does not overtly articulate a formal curriculum philosophy, a close reading of its thematic selection, narrative organization, and pedagogical scaffolding reveals a coherent set of guiding principles. These principles are neither incidental nor purely editorial; rather, they reflect deliberate ideological and pedagogical choices informed by China’s national development priorities and its aspirations for international discourse participation. The implicit philosophy of the UCC can be distilled into four interconnected orientations: a China-centered content focus, a value-oriented educational logic, an expression-driven competency framework, and an emphasis on cross-cultural discourse competence. Each of these dimensions aligns with broader trends in foreign language education while also addressing the specific communicative demands of China’s global engagement.

2.1 China-Centered Content Orientation

One of the most salient features of the UCC is its unequivocal China-centered stance in content design. In contrast to many conventional English-language textbooks that predominantly feature Western socio-cultural contexts, the UCC foregrounds topics drawn from China's governance model, developmental trajectory, historical legacy, and contemporary innovations. This approach is more than a mere shift in thematic emphasis—it represents a paradigmatic reorientation of English learning from “studying the West through English” toward “explaining China through English,” echoing the policy directive to “tell China's stories well”.

From a curriculum studies perspective, such a reorientation challenges the long-standing hegemony of Anglo-American cultural paradigms in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) materials, a phenomenon extensively critiqued by scholars such as Phillipson (1992) in his work on linguistic imperialism. By systematically embedding Chinese case studies—ranging from poverty alleviation campaigns to high-speed rail development—the textbook asserts the legitimacy of local knowledge within the global communicative arena. This “re-centering” not only strengthens learners' familiarity with domestic topics but also affirms the epistemic authority of Chinese narratives in international discourse.

Importantly, the China-centered approach does not result in insularity. The UCC strategically juxtaposes domestic developments with global phenomena, allowing learners to draw parallels and contrasts that deepen their analytical capabilities. For example, a unit on “Ecological Civilization” may invite students to compare China's environmental governance strategies with those of the European Union, thereby situating local practices within transnational frameworks. Such design both resists uncritical adoption of external models and cultivates the skills needed for cross-contextual analysis.

Nevertheless, the implementation of a China-centered content orientation is not without challenges. Teachers accustomed to Western-oriented materials may require substantial professional development to effectively mediate Chinese topics in English without oversimplification or overgeneralization. Additionally, students may initially find it difficult to engage with domestically rooted topics in English due to gaps in topic-specific vocabulary or limited exposure to related discourse conventions in English-language media. Addressing these challenges necessitates both teacher training and supplementary resources that bridge the linguistic and conceptual gaps.

2.2 Value-Oriented Educational Logic

Closely linked to its content orientation is the UCC's integration of a value-laden educational logic. Beyond the transmission of linguistic knowledge, the textbook embeds key ideological concepts and policy frameworks such as “people-centered development,” “innovation-driven growth,” and “ecological civilization,” which are central to China's contemporary governance philosophy. This aligns with the broader shift in Chinese higher education toward “curriculum-based ideological and political education”, which calls for the infusion of value guidance into all disciplines, including foreign language teaching.

From the perspective of the “hidden curriculum” (Jackson, 1968), the UCC's thematic and lexical choices operate as a medium of value transmission. The recurring emphasis on collective well-being, sustainable development, and cultural confidence encourages learners to internalize these orientations as part of their communicative repertoire. In this sense, English learning becomes a conduit for moral and political formation, aligning with Apple's (2004) view that curricular content inevitably reflects and reproduces particular ideological positions.

Pedagogically, this value-oriented logic shifts the objective of English learning from a narrow focus on communicative competence to a more holistic goal encompassing intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2008). Students are not merely equipped with the linguistic means to express themselves but are also guided toward constructing arguments and narratives consistent with China's developmental discourse. This repositioning addresses the gap noted in previous research, where Chinese EFL learners could competently discuss Western cultural norms but struggled to articulate domestic priorities in value-infused, globally intelligible terms.

However, embedding values into language teaching also raises pedagogical dilemmas. The fine balance between value orientation and critical engagement must be maintained to avoid the perception of indoctrination. Effective implementation requires dialogic pedagogies that encourage students to interrogate, contextualize, and reframe these values in relation to their own experiences and global perspectives. This approach ensures that value

transmission is not merely top-down but negotiated, fostering both national identity and critical thinking.

2.3 Expression-Oriented Competency Framework

A distinctive hallmark of the UCC is its emphasis on expressive, output-oriented skills, which moves beyond the receptive bias of many EFL materials. The textbook's design reflects an understanding that linguistic proficiency alone is insufficient for meaningful participation in international discourse; what is required is the ability to craft coherent, persuasive, and contextually appropriate narratives.

To this end, the UCC integrates communicative tasks that require high-order thinking and multimodal expression. For instance, students may be tasked with simulating policy briefings on China's carbon neutrality goals, debating the merits of different poverty alleviation strategies, or delivering keynote-style speeches for imagined international forums. These activities demand not only accurate grammar and vocabulary but also strategic discourse planning, audience awareness, and rhetorical adaptability.

The emphasis on productive competence aligns with Swain's (1985) "output hypothesis," which posits that language production promotes deeper processing and internalization of linguistic structures. Yet, the UCC extends this premise by linking output to identity performance—students are not only speaking English but are performing the role of informed representatives of China. This dual function of expression—linguistic and representational—creates a complex learning space where language and persona are co-constructed.

Nevertheless, fostering such expression-oriented competence entails significant scaffolding. Without adequate modeling, students may default to literal translation from Chinese, leading to discourse patterns that are syntactically correct but pragmatically awkward in international contexts. Teachers must therefore be trained to provide models of authentic yet culturally aligned English discourse, potentially drawing from diplomatic speeches, international media, and bilingual policy documents.

2.4 Cross-Cultural Discourse Competence

Finally, the UCC underscores the development of cross-cultural discourse competence, recognizing that effective global communication requires both cultural literacy and the ability to navigate diverse interpretive frameworks. The textbook's comparative approach—positioning Chinese experiences alongside those of other nations—encourages learners to adopt a dual perspective, simultaneously affirming local identity and engaging in intercultural dialogue.

From an applied linguistics standpoint, this aligns with Kramsch's (1993) notion of the "third place," a space where language learners mediate between their native culture and the target language culture to construct new, hybrid forms of meaning. For example, in discussing the Belt and Road Initiative, students may analyze both Chinese and foreign media representations, thereby developing an awareness of narrative framing and potential points of contention in cross-cultural perception.

This competence is particularly critical in the context of globalized communication, where misinterpretation can stem not only from linguistic gaps but also from differing cultural schemas. By engaging students in role-play scenarios, comparative case analyses, and cross-cultural simulations, the UCC equips them with the pragmatic and discursive flexibility necessary to represent China in ways that are both authentic and audience-sensitive.

Yet, as with the other orientations, the cultivation of cross-cultural discourse competence is contingent on the teacher's ability to facilitate nuanced discussion. Over-reliance on scripted comparisons may reduce intercultural engagement to tokenism. Thus, the textbook's potential is maximized when paired with pedagogies that foster genuine curiosity, empathy, and reflexivity.

3. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE UCC TEXTBOOK CONCEPT FOR COLLEGE ENGLISH REFORM

The twin challenges facing contemporary college English education in China are how to align foreign language instruction with the national agenda of ideological education, and how to indigenize English curricula to reflect Chinese realities. In this context, the curriculum concept embodied in UCC provides a valuable theoretical and practical blueprint for reimagining the goals, content, organization, and mechanisms of college English instruction.

Drawing on the textbook's pedagogical logic, this section identifies four theoretical implications for comprehensive reform.

3.1 Reconstructing Curriculum Objectives: Integrating Language Proficiency with Value Identification

Traditional college English curricula have prioritized instrumental language goals—grammar, vocabulary, and communicative skills—often at the expense of cultural content and value transmission. The UCC series, by contrast, redefines instructional aims to include articulating national narratives, enhancing cultural identity, and cultivating international communicative competence. It encourages students not only to speak in English but to speak for China, with clarity, conviction, and contextual awareness.

This reorientation demands a fundamental recalibration of college English objectives. Instead of a unidimensional focus on accuracy and fluency, the new paradigm calls for a multidimensional framework encompassing linguistic ability, cultural cognition, value judgment, and critical thinking. English instruction should empower students to participate in global dialogues with a Chinese voice, transforming the classroom into a site *for* discourse generation rather than passive language acquisition.

3.2 Reorganizing Curriculum Content: Embedding Chinese Topics in English Contexts

Curricular content is the most tangible expression of educational values. Yet current college English textbooks remain largely Western-centric, with limited integration of Chinese sociocultural realities. UCC counters this trend by selecting themes that reflect China's governance, traditions, scientific achievements, and social transformations. Its content design exemplifies how English materials can be localized without sacrificing global relevance.

For college English reform, this has several implications: First, English content should be strategically realigned to include both global and local topics, achieving a hybrid narrative that respects both international norms and national concerns. Second, content selection must serve not only communicative needs but also cultural representation and value transmission. Third, topics should be chosen not for their language complexity alone but for their capacity to stimulate reflection, dialogue, and ideological engagement. In this way, content becomes a conduit for shaping worldview and identity, not just a linguistic tool.

3.3 Reframing Instructional Design: Shifting from Language Training to Expressive Construction

The structural design of the UCC textbook moves beyond the traditional “text–vocabulary–exercise” model by adopting a “thematic unit + task chain” structure. Each unit begins with knowledge input and progresses through interpretive analysis to expressive output, such as writing, presentation, or debate. This pedagogical design centers not on linguistic forms, but on the development of discourse capability.

For college English classrooms, this means that instruction should be reorganized around thematic coherence and expressive purpose. Teachers must guide students not only to understand English texts but to use English to express perspectives rooted in Chinese realities. Tasks should stimulate inquiry, argumentation, and storytelling. Moreover, the evaluation of student performance should evolve from linguistic correctness to rhetorical effectiveness and ideological clarity.

In doing so, college English becomes a platform for developing “expression-centered” competencies: the ability to observe, analyze, and articulate ideas in English while maintaining cultural fidelity. This approach supports the development of globally literate citizens who can function effectively as cultural translators and narrative builders.

3.4 Redesigning Educational Mechanisms: Integrating Moral Education and International Communication

Perhaps the most innovative contribution of UCC lies in its holistic educational mechanism, which unifies language training with moral development and international perspective-building. By constructing a pedagogical sequence from cultural narrative to value construction, identity recognition, and global communication, the textbook models how English instruction can serve national ideological goals without compromising linguistic integrity.

This suggests that college English programs must rethink the function of ideological and political education. Rather than treating it as an auxiliary or supplementary module, value education should be organically embedded

within the entire learning process—from text selection to task design to classroom discourse. Instruction should encourage students to not only express themselves, but to understand *why, for whom, and to what effect* they speak.

Moreover, college English should embrace its role as a seedbed for international communication talent. As the first formal exposure to global discourse systems for many students, English courses must plant the seeds of confidence in Chinese thought, understanding of Chinese logic, and ability to communicate across cultures. In this light, the college English classroom is not merely a linguistic training ground but a site of ideological preparation for future global engagement.

4. DILEMMAS AND REFLECTIONS IN THEORETICAL IMPLEMENTATION

Amid ongoing reforms in higher education, college English instruction has assumed a dual imperative: to fulfill traditional goals of language acquisition while actively incorporating ideological and political education (IPE). In particular, the introduction of the UCC textbook has sharpened the curriculum's value orientation—namely, to “tell China's stories” and “amplify China's voice” through foreign language instruction. Yet despite the clarity and urgency of this new pedagogical vision, implementation remains fraught with structural and conceptual tensions. These difficulties do not stem from superficial oversight but reflect deeply embedded contradictions in the institutional logic of foreign language education. A sober reflection on these issues is vital for meaningful reform.

4.1 Conceptual Lag and Implementation Inertia

The most immediate challenge is the sluggish transformation of pedagogical concepts. Although the UCC textbook advocates a China-rooted and globally oriented teaching philosophy, many university English instructors still struggle to internalize this approach. Years of entrenched emphasis on language form, communicative competence, and standardized assessment have left many teachers underprepared to engage with national discourse, cultural narrative, and ideological positioning in their classrooms. In the absence of systematic training and theoretical scaffolding, efforts to apply the textbook's values often degenerate into superficial sloganizing or disjointed content insertion. Without genuine understanding and belief in the pedagogical underpinnings, even the most innovative concepts risk becoming pedagogically inert.

4.2 The Dual Dilemma of Content and Expression

A more complex challenge lies in the “content-expression” dilemma. The UCC textbook encourages students to articulate China-themed content in English, but both teachers and students frequently lack the discursive resources and expressive proficiency to meet this demand. Topics such as China's political system, development model, and cultural values are cognitively demanding and culturally dense. Translating such content into English requires more than linguistic competence; it demands rhetorical precision, cultural insight, and critical thinking. Many students experience a bifurcation: they understand the substance of Chinese ideas but cannot express them in English, or they speak fluent English devoid of Chinese perspective. This results in a “silent zone” of expression—students either wish to speak but cannot, or can speak but say little of substance. This disconnect undermines the integrative goals of the textbook and exposes a deeper misalignment between the cognitive depth of content and the superficiality of language training in current curricula.

4.3 Structural Constraints within the Curriculum Ecosystem

The reform efforts are further hindered by structural limitations in curriculum design and institutional practice. In many universities, college English remains oriented around general English skills and test-based benchmarks. Courses are divided by language level rather than content depth, leaving little space for issue-based, value-laden instruction. Under such conditions, expecting a single course or textbook to shoulder the burden of ideological education or national discourse dissemination is unrealistic. Moreover, some institutions fall into formalism, treating IPE as a bureaucratic requirement or symbolic add-on, rather than a pedagogical goal. Course evaluations become compliance checklists, and textbooks are employed to fulfill quotas rather than stimulate genuine learning. This structural inertia restricts teacher autonomy and stifles classroom innovation, widening the gap between conceptual aspiration and educational reality.

4.4 Challenges to Student Agency and Expressive Ownership

Another obstacle lies in the development of student initiative and agency. The traditional foreign language

classroom is still largely teacher-centered and knowledge-transmitting. By contrast, the UCC textbook advocates for a learner-centered approach grounded in expression, reflection, and cross-cultural communication. However, many students lack the cultural literacy and cognitive maturity to tackle complex political and societal topics. They frequently encounter “knowledge gaps” and “emotional detachment,” making it difficult to connect with or internalize the textbook’s themes. Even when students are motivated, their expressions often remain formulaic, superficial, or ideologically unmoored. This reflects a broader pedagogical challenge: fostering student voices that are both critically informed and emotionally resonant.

4.5 Toward a Constructive Path Forward

Confronted with these multi-layered challenges, reform efforts must shift from aspirational slogans to systemic solutions. First, it is crucial to recognize the temporal lag between conceptual introduction and pedagogical internalization. The vision embedded in the UCC textbook requires time, training, and experimentation. Instead of imposing uniform timelines, institutions should adopt differentiated implementation models based on local conditions and teacher readiness. Second, curriculum reform must avoid instrumentalizing educational philosophy. If the textbook’s values become mere performance indicators, they will breed cynicism and ritualism. A more sustainable strategy is to embed these values into teacher development—through interdisciplinary collaboration, workshops, and shared teaching communities—to foster authentic pedagogical transformation. Third, curricular integration requires structural redesign. IPE should not be appended to existing language instruction but embedded within thematic, project-based, and interdisciplinary modules. UCC may serve not only as a core resource in elective English courses but also as a foundation for modules like “English for Chinese Narratives” or “International Communication and National Discourse.” Most importantly, the reform agenda must cohere around a shared educational philosophy. The ultimate goal of college English is not merely to teach a language, but to shape minds—to develop learners capable of critical thinking, cultural empathy, and expressive clarity. Only by reaffirming this foundational principle can reforms move from surface compliance to deep transformation.

5. CONCLUSION

UCC is more than a textbook series; it represents a pedagogical paradigm shift and an epistemological reorientation. In an era defined by shifting global narratives and contested discourses, questions of how China is perceived and represented have moved from the margins of diplomatic rhetoric to the core of educational praxis. The integration of national narratives into foreign language curricula is thus not a political expedient, but a necessary response to the growing complexity of global engagement.

This paper has attempted to explore the theoretical implications and practical tensions involved in introducing the UCC textbook into college English teaching. By analyzing its core values, structural logic, and instructional philosophy, we have sought to derive a set of pedagogical insights relevant to broader foreign language education reform. In particular, the textbook foregrounds three critical shifts: from language neutrality to value integration, from linguistic competence to expressive construction, and from foreign-centric content to China-centered narratives.

The central contribution of the UCC textbook lies in its integrative and constructive vision. It integrates linguistic training with ideological formation, and it constructs a mode of expression that is locally grounded yet globally intelligible. This is not a superficial repositioning of content but a substantive redefinition of the epistemic goals of language education. In a field long dominated by Anglo-American norms and value-neutral instruction, UCC prompts a radical question: what kind of subjectivity should foreign language education cultivate in the Chinese context?

Nevertheless, conceptual innovation must be matched by institutional support and pedagogical capacity. As this paper has emphasized, the road to implementation is strewn with obstacles: conceptual inertia, linguistic bottlenecks, curricular constraints, and uneven student engagement. Overcoming these requires a comprehensive rethinking of the goals, structures, and methods of college English instruction. It demands collaboration among administrators, textbook developers, course designers, and frontline teachers, all aligned by a common commitment to building a foreign language education system that reflects China’s voice in the world.

Finally, the promise of UCC lies not in its content alone, but in its provocation: it challenges us to rethink what it means to teach English in China, to move beyond transactional models of communication toward transformational models of expression, and to see language not merely as a skill, but as a medium for constructing identity,

articulating values, and participating in global dialogue.

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