

A Study on Hybrid College English Teaching from the Ecological Perspective

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Abstract: *In the era of information technology, hybrid teaching has become a major trend in college English education. However, numerous ecological imbalances still exist within the current educational system. Based on the ecological system theory, this study explores factors contributing to these imbalances in hybrid college English teaching and proposes corresponding measures to promote ecological balance in college English education, thereby enhancing teaching quality and fostering student development.*

Keywords: *Hybrid college English teaching; Ecological system theory; Ecological imbalance; Factors*

1. Introduction

With the development of modern technology, and the digitalization of information, people's way of obtaining knowledge changes a lot, English teaching and learning is no exception⁷. Hybrid teaching has become the main trend of foreign language teaching reform in colleges and universities which was strengthened since the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic. Hybrid teaching is an educational approach that combines traditional in-person instruction with online learning. Constant use of online teaching platforms and informatized teaching modes becomes popular with college English teachers. The occurrence of hybrid teaching helps to maximize the advantages of both face-to-face interactions with various technological tools and platforms. On the other hand, it also brings up great challenges to college English teaching which urges teachers to improve their way of teaching and come up with creative teaching methods⁴, highlighting continuous efforts and attentions to this field.

Currently, significant imbalances exist between teachers' teaching concepts and the information-based teaching methods employed in today's college English instruction. Many teachers primarily rely on traditional expository methods and lack familiarity with newly updated teaching technologies and useful platforms⁶. Additionally, the allocation of teaching hours is disproportionate. In many universities, English classes are limited to just 2 to 4 sessions per week, and only sophomores are offered English courses, leading to a severely inadequate input of language exposure¹¹. Furthermore, many non-English majors struggle to apply what they have learned in practice, facing challenges in expressing themselves effectively in English¹. These students often lack initiative in learning and demonstrate an imbalanced learning behavior. Most focus solely on passing standardized tests like CET4 or CET6 rather than improving their comprehensive language skills.

Given these challenges, this study aims to analyze reasons behind the ecological imbalances within the current college English teaching ecosystem from perspective of ecological system theory. It seeks to propose strategies for optimizing English instruction by constructing a holistic model of the college English teaching ecosystem.

2. Ecological System Theory

Ecological systems theory is a theoretical framework proposed by American developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, aiming to understand the dynamics between individual development and the diverse environmental system². The current educational landscape is actually an open ecosystem which involves the mutual interactions and influences among teachers, students, universities and even the broad social and educational settings.

According to Bronfenbrenner, the whole environmental system includes five subsystems, namely Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem Chronosystem, and individuals lie in the center of

the system². The microsystem encompasses factors with a direct impact on the individual, such as teachers and their interactions with students. The mesosystem represents the relationships that bridge the microsystems, such as the integration and balance of online learning with offline instruction. The exosystem includes external systems that do not directly involve the individual but still influence them, for instance, the availability of facilities and resources for students. The macrosystem reflects the broader cultural, value-based, and policy-driven context of the educational environment. Lastly, the chronosystem highlights the influence of time-related factors, such as technological advancements and their evolving role in shaping education and individual development⁵.

Based on the connotation of ecological system theory, hybrid English teaching functions can be considered as a microsystem, engaging dynamically with other elements of the educational ecosystem, such as students, teachers, educational stakeholders, universities, families, and broader societal frameworks⁸. To ensure this microsystem function effectively, it's important to achieve a balance between those different elements, including teachers and students, online teaching and offline teaching, textbooks and online teaching materials, mixed English teaching and traditional English teaching. Nevertheless, this microsystem will also be influenced by other subsystems as mentioned above. By delving into the complexities of different level of educational systems, this study hopes to explore factors that help construct a harmonious and vibrant hybrid ecosystem thus to ease the teaching load of teachers and improve the English competence of students. Thus, under such circumstance, it's of great significance to reevaluate the current hybrid college English teaching from a new angle of ecological education.

3. Literature review

Many scholars in the field of education have made efforts to explore hybrid teaching in recent years in order to enhance English teaching and learning in higher education, leading to ultimate improvement of student outcomes.

Cheng (2021) studies hybrid college English grammar teaching from perspective of constructivism³. The “online and offline” hybrid teaching model can reshape college English grammar courses by emphasizing the construction of critical thinking of students, especially in the information age. Through grammar-discourse teaching, multimodal instruction, and an outcome-based education approach, this model helps develop students' grammatical competence and enhance their overall English proficiency.

Yang (2022) explores hybrid English teaching strategies under the guidance of constructivism theory¹³. Based on the constructivism learning principles and supported by information technology, this study proposes ways to enhance traditional in-person classroom instruction with the strengths of the “online and offline” hybrid teaching approach to improve the learning outcomes of college students.

Li (2022) presents a hybrid online and offline approach to teaching spoken English, addressing the imbalance in students' language skills, particularly in listening based on educational technology¹². It emphasizes the importance of context in language usage and proposes a teaching platform that integrates both online and offline methods to enhance language training.

While those studies identify issues in English teaching and propose strategies to enhance hybrid teaching in different aspects of language education to support student learning, they fall short in analyzing the factors influencing the implementation of hybrid teaching. Additionally, they do not address the challenges faced in hybrid English teaching. This highlights the need for further exploration to deepen our understanding of hybrid English teaching and its practical implications.

On the other hand, some scholars have also explored English teaching from perspective of educational ecology. Luo and Chan (2022) analyze the influence of shadow education from perspective of ecology⁸. The study reveals that the great advantages of shadow education on academic performance of students, families, and socioeconomic structures. The ecological perspective provides a fresh lens for exploring how shadow education shapes the immediate environment in which students live and learn. However, this study focuses on education in a broad sense rather than specializing in a specific discipline, such as English teaching.

Ye (2021) explores immersive college English teaching from the perspective of educational ecology through methods of literature review and observation¹⁴. The study analyzes the current status of immersive college English teaching in higher education and proposes strategies to promoting immersive education in Chinese universities from the perspective of educational ecology.

Sun (2022) examines the application of hybrid learning in college English education, emphasizing its

ecological approach to teaching¹⁰. While this study focuses on hybrid college English teaching and highlights issues such as a lack of ecological awareness among some teachers, misalignment between teaching goals and content, and ineffective evaluation systems, it does not further explore the factors contributing to these imbalances, highlighting a clear gap for future research.

Based on the review, most current studies on college English teaching focus primarily on systematic linguistics and constructivism, with limited attention given to ecological systems theory and classroom ecosystems. Furthermore, few studies have applied ecological system theory to explore the factors contributing to imbalances in hybrid English teaching. Therefore, this study is innovative and makes a valuable contribution to the theoretical advancement of research in college English education.

4. Factors contributing to ecological imbalances

Hybrid college English teaching, which leverages the merits of both in-person instruction and online learning, holds great potential to facilitate students' learning. However, despite its merits, the above-mentioned ecological imbalances exist and hinder its effectiveness. By examining reasons through the lens of ecological systems theory, we can gain a deeper understanding of the underlying causes and their interconnected impact on teaching and learning dynamics within hybrid teaching mode.

4.1 Microsystem

From the perspective of microsystem, the ecological imbalances first result from unreasonable allocation of teaching periods for college English. Such lack of teaching time greatly restricts output of teachers and the input of students, able to ensure effective teaching and in-depth learning. Second, the insufficient capabilities of some teachers fail to meet the growing demands of hybrid teaching and the rapidly evolving society. Many teachers struggle to adopt updated teaching strategies and concepts that foster student engagement, and they are unable to effectively utilize online platforms and resources to enhance student learning. Thirdly, students are overly focused on passing the CET-4 or CET-6 exams, which limits their enthusiasm for learning and restricts opportunities to practice practical language skills, such as speaking and writing.

4.2 Mesosystem

Within mesosystem, two factors contribute to the ecological imbalances in hybrid college English teaching. Firstly, the relatively marginal role of language education in universities, especially in science and technology institutions, limits opportunities and resources for English teachers' professional development. As a result, it is challenging for them to gain recognition and advancement, which diminishes their motivation to improve their teaching. Secondly, there is a lack of training seminars aimed at enhancing teachers' technological competence and pedagogical skills. This scarcity increases the difficulty of balancing teachers' ability to effectively utilize digital platforms and tools with the complexities of the hybrid teaching model.

4.3 Exosystem

In terms of the exosystem, the lack of sufficient policy and resource support for students further contributes to the imbalances. With the vast array of online resources and tools available, students can easily become overwhelmed without proper guidance, which leads to suboptimal learning outcomes and reduced effectiveness of hybrid teaching. Furthermore, some universities, particularly those in remote areas, face limitations in technical infrastructure and internet connectivity, which restricts both students' and teachers' access to advanced learning platforms, thus exacerbating the challenges of implementing effective hybrid teaching.

4.4 Macrosystem

The macrosystem encompasses the wider cultural, social, and policy-driven factors that shape the educational environment. In this context, the inherent limitations and challenges faced by language education contribute to the ecological imbalances in education. For instance, many universities are now discontinuing English majors, signaling a sense of crisis within the field. Enrollment trends show that the situation is no longer as favorable as it once was. Specifically, the societal perception of English teaching seems to be declining in terms of its value and importance. As a result, the total number of

credits allocated for college English courses has been reduced. This shift, along with the decreasing financial and resource investments, has further exacerbated the ecological imbalances within hybrid English teaching environments.

4.5 Chronosystem

With regard to the chronosystem, the rapid advancement of modern technology and the continuous emergence of new learning platforms and tools present significant challenges for both teachers and students⁹. These developments complicate efforts to navigate the hybrid teaching environment, often leading to unsustainable practices. Additionally, some universities or schools may struggle to update their facilities to keep pace with technological advancements, resulting in a mismatch between available resources and teaching needs. This imbalance ultimately hinders the effectiveness of online teaching and learning, undermining the potential benefits of hybrid education.

5. Suggestions for effective hybrid English teaching

Based on the analysis of the factors contributing to imbalances of hybrid college English teaching from different levels of ecological system, several suggestions are proposed to enhance hybrid English teaching in university context.

5.1 Intrigue students' intrinsic motivation

Students are at the heart of the educational ecological system and play a pivotal role in interacting effectively with teachers both online and offline. The capabilities of students and their intrinsic motivation to learn actively directly influence their learning efficiency and academic performance. Teachers shall adhere to student-centered ecological teaching concept and adapt their teaching strategies to meet diverse need of students at different levels. The Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) or Project-Based Learning (PBL) can be applied to enhance students learning both online and offline, with the former focusing more on outcome orientation and the achievement of learning objectives of students, while PBL emphasizes students' learning experience and problem-solving skills developed during the process of completing a project. These teaching strategies help arouse students' intrinsic motivation and increase their interactions with teachers so as to strike a balance between online learning and offline instructions.

5.2 Enhance teacher professional development

The professional development of teachers is a lifelong journey that should endure throughout their entire teaching careers. The widespread adoption of hybrid teaching in college English places higher demands on teachers' teaching capabilities and digital competence. Teachers should actively participate in collaborative learning communities and teaching competitions to exchange ideas and enhance advanced hybrid teaching strategies and concepts. This effort will help them effectively allocate teaching materials across online and offline platforms. Meanwhile, educational stakeholders should organize targeted training programs to enhance teachers' digital skills and their proficiency in utilizing various learning platforms, thereby maximizing the benefits of hybrid teaching.

5.3 Optimize assessment system

It's of great significance to optimize the assessment system for both students and teachers. On one hand, the focus for students shall be directed from passing final exams or language proficiency tests like CET 4 or CET 6, to emphasizing students' practical language application and hands-on skills. Process-based assessment or formative assessment is beneficial to help students continuously refine their learning methods and enhance their self-directed learning abilities. On the other hand, it's essential to diversify teacher assessment methods beyond a predominant focus on research achievements. Recognizing and rewarding teaching excellence can motivate educators to invest more in their instructional practices, ultimately benefiting student learning outcomes.

5.4 Establish dynamic ecological educational environment

Teachers, administrators, universities and other relevant educational institutions shall make concerted

efforts to establish dynamic and balanced ecological educational environment for both teaching and learning. Necessary resources and technological support shall be provided to strengthen the collective impact of education and enhance the smoothness of hybrid college English teaching. Besides, the dynamic and positive interactions between technology, curriculum, teachers, and students can be facilitated, thus creating a cohesive effect within the educational system.

6. Conclusion

With the rapid advancement of modern technology and the continuous emergence of new learning platforms and tools, imbalances within the hybrid college English teaching context are becoming increasingly evident. Drawing on ecological systems theory, various factors across the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem levels contribute to these imbalances. To address these challenges, a series of targeted suggestions are proposed to foster ecological balance in hybrid college English teaching, elevate teaching quality, and enhance students' comprehensive language proficiency.

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