

Building Ideological and Political Education in College Foreign Language Courses through the Third Classroom: A Perspective of the “Great Ideological and Political Course”

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Abstract: As the “Great Ideological and Political Course” initiative advances, the Third Classroom has become an important extension of ideological and political education in college foreign language courses beyond the First and Second Classrooms. Although it has considerable theoretical value, its practical application remains exploratory and faces several challenges. To tackle these challenges, the ideological-political construction of foreign language courses via the Third Classroom needs systematic promotion. In theory, it is imperative to clarify concepts and establish a clear cognitive framework. In practice, the implementation efficiency should be enhanced through goal guidance, resource development and institutional guarantee. In resource integration, efforts should be made to break down inter-departmental barriers within colleges, deepen college-community cooperation, and promote the linkage among the three classrooms. These measures can help integrate the three classrooms, improve the “Three All-Round Education” pattern, and enhance the educational effectiveness of college foreign language courses.

Keywords: Curriculum-based Ideological and Political Education; The Third Classroom; Great Ideological and Political Course; Foreign Languages

1. Introduction

As higher education reform deepens, curriculum-based ideological and political education has become a core means of carrying out the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, and its importance is increasingly evident^[14]. During the 2021 Two Sessions, General Secretary emphasized that “ideological and political theory courses should be taught not only in the classroom, but also in social life,” formally introducing the era-wide concept of the “Great Ideological and Political Course” and pointing the way for reform in ideological and political education in the new era. The statement extends ideological and political education from classroom teaching to social practice and provides the theoretical basis for exploring the Third Classroom. Because foreign language education combines linguistic training with cultural and humanistic learning, it provides a distinctive space for ideological and political education^[11].

Although research on ideological and political education in foreign language courses has yielded a number of findings, its limitations remain clear. Existing studies have focused primarily on teaching reform in the First Classroom and campus-based activities in the Second Classroom. Some studies stress coordination between the two to achieve the educational goals of foreign language courses^[7].

However, the role of the Third Classroom in foreign language ideological and political education has not been sufficiently examined. As an extension that pushes classroom teaching and on-campus activities into the social dimension, the Third Classroom provides authentic scenarios where students can combine language application, cross-cultural communication, and value practice. Rooted in this educational model, students can translate theoretical knowledge into action, respond to the requirements for ideological and political education reform, and fill the gaps in the current construction of foreign language curriculum-based ideological and political education. Rooted in the Third Classroom, this educational model responds to General Secretary Xi’s requirements for ideological-political education reform and remedies existing defects in foreign language curriculum construction. It facilitates the integration of on-campus and social ideological-political resources, advances the “Great Ideological and Political Course” initiative, and improves educational outcomes.

2. Connotations

2.1 Conceptual Definition of the Third Classroom from the Perspective of Curriculum Ideological and Political Education in College Foreign Language Courses

As an emerging concept in education, the Third Classroom extends the First Classroom (course instruction) and the Second Classroom (extracurricular activities) into the dimension of social practice, with a focus on practical education in authentic settings^[9]. It breaks the physical boundaries of campuses and expands education to a broad real-world society. For foreign language curriculum-based ideological-political education, the Third Classroom mainly takes two forms: student-led foreign-language-related social practices such as volunteer services for international events and foreign-language-assisted education; and college-organized internships and practical training at off-campus bases. It integrates language training, competence development, and value education in authentic social settings, thereby connecting classroom learning with social practice.

2.2 The Highlighting of Students' Subjective Role

The core logic of foreign language curriculum-based ideological and political education based on the Third Classroom is to uphold a “student-centered” approach, highlighting students' subjectivity^[12]. Compared with the First and Second Classrooms, the Third Classroom endows students with greater autonomy and more room for practice. Instead of passively receiving knowledge, students become active participants who explore, experience, and shape values in social practice. For instance, in Nankai University's “Foreign-Language Drama for Rural Areas” project, students took full charge of script writing and teaching delivery, growing into active narrators and disseminators of Chinese culture. Experience-oriented ideological-political education can better respond to students' real-life concerns and resolve value-related dilemmas in their growth. It strengthens the appeal and effectiveness of ideological-political education and helps students internalize social responsibility and translate it into practical actions.

2.3 The Reform of Universities' Educational Functions

For universities and teachers, the Third Classroom brings about a profound transformation in the educational model. Teachers' role expands from “the one who speaks in class” to “the one who teaches by example” in practice. When guiding students in Third-Classroom activities, teachers integrate knowledge delivery with role-modeling, rendering ideological-political education more vivid and persuasive. Meanwhile, the Third Classroom effectively breaks the bottleneck of curriculum ideological and political evaluation in foreign language teaching: traditional ideological and political guidance embedded in language learning is usually implicit and difficult to quantify^[10], while in the Third Classroom, students' observable practical performance, completed language service outputs and post-practice reflective outcomes can form clear and verifiable evidence for educational effect evaluation, making the assessment system more operable. Developing the Third Classroom means that universities must “open the doors to ideological and political education,” actively integrate social resources from government, enterprises, and communities, and build a collaborative education community. This strongly promotes the shift from a relatively closed educational system to an open and shared “Great Ideological and Political Education” pattern, in line with the reform and development needs of foreign language ideological and political education.

2.4 The Response of National and Social Needs

University foreign language curriculum ideological and political education based on the Third Classroom is an important way to implement the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education and responds to the strategic requirements for talent cultivation in the new era. “What kind of people to cultivate, how to cultivate them, and for whom” are fundamental questions that foreign language education must answer. While developing students' language skills and expanding their international horizons, foreign language education must also strengthen cultural confidence and a sense of national responsibility^[8]. The practice-oriented nature of the Third Classroom fits this requirement well: it extends value guidance from knowledge transmission in the classroom to habit formation outside it, enabling students to move from “knowing” to “doing” in real social contexts and avoiding ideological and political education remaining at the cognitive level without reaching deeper value identification. Goals including the “organic integration of socialist core values^[5]” proposed in the *College English Teaching Guide*, and

the requirement in the *National Standard for Assessing the Quality of Teaching in Undergraduate Programs* to cultivate foreign-language professionals serving national and local socioeconomic development^[6], can be concretely fulfilled within the Third Classroom. By participating in practice responding to national and social demands, students polish foreign-language capabilities and gain deeper insights into China's development path and institutional advantages. They can link personal growth to national development and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and grow into new-era talents equipped with global competence and solid national identity.

3. Predicaments

Against the backdrop of comprehensively advancing the construction of the “Great Ideological and Political Course,” although the construction of foreign language curriculum-based ideological and political education based on the Third Classroom has broad theoretical prospects, it faces numerous challenges in reality.

3.1 Theoretical Predicaments

Although the Third Classroom has attracted increasing scholarly attention, its definition remains unsettled. Existing studies variously associate it with dormitories, cyberspace, or off-campus social practice^[4]. This study adopts the social-practice perspective defined in Section 2 and focuses on organized off-campus activities that integrate foreign language learning with ideological and political education. The main theoretical problem is not merely definitional disagreement, but the tendency to reduce the Third Classroom to simple off-campus activities while overlooking its educational objectives, organizational design, and evaluative functions.

Even in the academic view that defines the Third Classroom as social practice, there are still widespread cognitive deviations: a large number of studies simply equate the Third Classroom with scattered off-campus activities, only emphasizing the change of physical space, but ignoring that it is a standardized educational link embedded in the foreign language talent training system with clear training objectives, supporting plans, and evaluation mechanisms. This superficial cognition directly leads to the blurring of the conceptual boundary between the Third Classroom and the Second Classroom, making its core characteristics of deeper social embedding, higher student autonomy, and a more direct value realization path often ignored, which restricts further improvement of relevant theoretical systems.

3.2 Practical Predicaments

In practical implementation, most universities lack proactive awareness and systematic planning when applying the Third Classroom to foreign-language curriculum-based ideological-political education. Most existing projects remain spontaneous and scattered, without systematic exploitation of ideological and political resources embedded in the Third Classroom.

First, ideological-political goals remain ambiguous. Many foreign-language internships, international exchanges, and volunteer services prioritize the application and improvement of professional skills. Many internships, international exchanges, and volunteer projects prioritize professional skill development while neglecting their ideological and political objectives. Without explicit goals and corresponding task design, value education remains incidental rather than systematic. Second, resource development is weak. For one thing, universities have not fully integrated existing on-campus resources, such as multilingual reading materials in libraries and foreign language student associations, into Third-classroom activities. For another, the use of off-campus resources remains basic. Cooperation with external practice bases is mostly limited to providing venues or matching positions, with little effort to explore deeper resources suited to the foreign language curriculum's ideological and political education. In addition, the support system is weak. Universities lack institutional support and teacher training for Third-classroom ideological and political development, leaving teachers with multiple difficulties, including insufficient motivation and limited guidance capacity when organizing such activities. Finally, the evaluation mechanism is absent. Because Third-Classroom activities take place across diverse settings, universities have not established clear criteria for assessing students' participation, language performance, social responsibility, and reflective growth. As a result, these activities are rarely recognized in course assessment or teacher evaluation.

3.3 Resource Integration Predicaments

Resource development concerns the identification and transformation of educational materials, whereas resource integration concerns coordination among the institutions that provide and use those materials. The latter remains particularly weak in current Third-Classroom practice. The Third Classroom is consistent with the concept of the “Great Ideological and Political Course” and essentially requires universities to extend educational resources beyond campus and establish stable cooperation with external institutions^[2]. At present, foreign language curriculum ideological and political education based on the Third Classroom has made some initial progress in resource integration, but it remains at an early stage overall. A sound operational mechanism has yet to take shape, and there are clear shortcomings, especially in multi-stakeholder collaboration and the linkage between on-campus and off-campus classrooms.

Stakeholder collaboration in the Third Classroom remains underdeveloped, as universities have yet to establish effective coordination mechanisms. Internally, coordination among the School of Foreign Languages, the School of Marxism, the Academic Affairs Office, and the Youth League Committee remains inadequate. In particular, the School of Foreign Languages contributes foreign-language expertise and multilingual practice resources, whereas the School of Marxism provides expertise in ideological and political education. However, these complementary strengths have not been translated into sustained joint programs. Externally, cooperation with revolutionary history museums, foreign-related enterprises, and other social institutions remains largely superficial and project-based, limited to occasional foreign-language volunteer interpreting or one-off university–enterprise placements rather than sustained, substantive partnerships.

In addition, three classrooms are also poorly connected. Third-Classroom tasks are rarely linked to First-Classroom content or Second-Classroom activities, leaving students unable to integrate theoretical learning, campus practice, and social engagement.

Overall, the main obstacles form a chain: conceptual ambiguity weakens goal design; unclear goals limit resource development and evaluation; and weak institutional support prevents sustained collaboration among the three classrooms. The following section therefore proposes improvement measures from the perspectives of students, universities, and society.

4. Pathways for Improvement

The above analysis suggests that the Third Classroom should be developed through coordinated action by students, universities, and social partners. Targeted and systematic solutions should be proposed in response to the existing issues in theory, practice, and resource integration.

4.1 Students: Giving Full Play to Subjectivity and Initiative

In earlier studies centered on the First and Second classrooms, foreign language curriculum ideological and political education was often treated as a “supply-side” teaching reform, while relatively little attention was paid to students as the “demand side”^[1]. Breaking the time-space constraints of traditional classrooms and campuses, the Third Classroom brings such education into real-world social practice and stresses students’ independent exploration. Under this model, teachers still perform important functions yet give up dominance; they offer guidance in a more implicit manner, while students’ subjectivity and initiative are emphasized.

In terms of cognitive construction, students do not need to participate in professional theoretical argumentation, but should establish clear practical value cognition through two channels: on the one hand, understand the value orientation of relevant practical activities through the thematic explanation carried out by the university; on the other hand, form a perceptual understanding of the educational attributes of the Third Classroom in the process of participating in social services and professional internships, avoiding regarding practical activities as a simple task of language skill exercise. In this way, they can learn through doing, turn abstract theory into concrete value judgments, and deepen their understanding of the ideological and political significance of the Third Classroom.

In practice, addressing the underutilization of ideological and political resources in the Third Classroom requires students to explore diverse pathways autonomously. First, they can draw on the First and Second Classrooms, which are distinct yet interconnected components of an integrated educational system. Courses, college-organized activities, and student associations can provide starting points for

extending foreign-language ideological and political education beyond campus and broadening its participants and forms. Foreign language majors may build on their disciplinary learning and campus experiences, whereas non-foreign-language students can make use of public foreign-language courses, related activities, and language-oriented associations instead of being limited to formal classroom instruction. Second, students can identify the ideological and political significance embedded in their own practical experiences, such as internships and volunteer services. For instance, internships in foreign-invested enterprises may deepen their understanding of intercultural communication, while volunteering at international exhibitions can encourage them to explore effective ways of presenting China's image and thereby enhance their cultural confidence and national identity. Finally, students should take advantage of the contemporary new media environment to produce high-quality multilingual content and engage in public-oriented cross-cultural communication. This would create an online extension of the Third Classroom that corresponds to the conditions of the new era.

In terms of resource integration, students, as the most direct participants in the Third Classroom, play an irreplaceable role as feedback providers. After taking part in practice projects offered by universities or by society, they should offer specific feedback based on their firsthand experience, such as the suitability of the practice base and the effectiveness of guidance, to help universities improve resource supply. More proactively, students can identify and develop new practice opportunities and resources from their own internships or social practice. For example, experts contacted in international exchanges or internship projects can be transformed into learning resources and practice cases for subsequent students. Such bottom-up resource expansion and feedback help break resource barriers, facilitate dynamic updating of the "university-society" resource pool, and realize students' transformation from passive receivers to co-constructors.

4.2 Universities: Giving Full Play to the Leading Role

Curriculum-based ideological and political education originates from the concepts of "Great Curriculum" and "Great Ideological and Political Course". Different from traditional ideological-political theory courses, it embeds ideological-political guidance into the whole process of teaching and all dimensions of social life, acting as a vital approach to fulfill the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education in the new era. As the main site of talent cultivation, universities not only impart knowledge and develop competencies, but also play a core role in guiding students' value formation. They hold an irreplaceable position in curriculum ideological and political education^[3]. In foreign language curriculum ideological and political practice based on the Third Classroom, universities should take the lead, focusing on platform building, resource integration, and process guidance to ensure that ideological and political education takes root in social practice.

At the theoretical level, universities should establish a research-and-practice mechanism that responds to concrete problems and implementation needs. They can form a research group comprising internal and external experts, administrators, and frontline teachers in foreign language teaching and ideological and political education. Through questionnaires, interviews, and field research, the group can examine the main conceptual and practical problems in the Third Classroom. It should then focus on the connotations of the Third Classroom, the disciplinary features of foreign-language curriculum-based ideological and political education, and the educational value of social-practice activities, thereby developing a practical framework suited to different disciplines, courses, and practice settings. The framework should be tested through pilot courses and small-scale social-practice projects. Existing foreign-language courses, practice bases, revolutionary-cultural resources, and foreign-related institutions can provide settings for testing the Third Classroom's functions and implementation procedures. Feedback from these pilots should be used to revise the framework and support its wider application. This process should address three practical questions: how to extend the First and Second Classrooms, integrate ideological and political goals into language and cultural practice, and balance language instruction with value guidance. Finally, the results should be compiled into a guidance document, supported by case materials, and disseminated through teaching and research sessions, teacher training, and demonstration courses.

At the practical level, universities should improve goal design, resource development, and evaluation. They should provide clear ideological and political objectives for practice tasks, directing students' attention to cultural differences, national image, and professional ethics in settings such as internships at foreign-related enterprises and international volunteer services. Supervising teachers should also receive concise manuals to support the implementation of these objectives. To strengthen resource development, universities should connect three types of practice resources. First, they should link the activity plans of Youth League organizations, student unions, and foreign-language associations with social-service projects, creating institutional support for students' engagement in society. Second, they should deepen

university–society cooperation. Rather than merely signing agreements, universities should work with museums, foreign-related enterprises, and communities to co-design localized projects that combine language services with ideological and political education. Third, they should use digital platforms to showcase multilingual practice outputs, such as vlogs and translations, and convert exemplary work into teaching cases. Universities should also establish a process-based assessment system centered on practice reports, reflection logs, and outcome presentations. Outstanding projects, students, and supervising teachers may receive public recognition, scholarships, or preferential consideration in relevant evaluations, thereby strengthening institutional incentives.

At the institutional level, universities should build an integrated operational mechanism to improve internal coordination, external cooperation, and the linkage among the three classrooms. Internally, a task force composed of representatives from the Academic Affairs Office, Student Affairs Office, Youth League Committee, and relevant departments should coordinate planning and resource allocation. Externally, universities should develop long-term practice bases with selected high-quality partners, clarify the educational responsibilities of each part, and invite industry experts to serve as practice mentors. Universities should also promote the organic linkage of the three classrooms through differentiated credit recognition. After review and assessment, standardized university-organized activities, such as fixed internships, may be incorporated into the training program and replace part of the practical-course credits. Flexible student-led projects, such as long-term foreign-language social-media operations or in-depth social research, may receive credits under a separate recognition procedure. This differentiated approach formally integrates the Third Classroom into talent cultivation while preserving its flexibility.

4.3 Society: Giving Full Play to the Guiding Role

The practical attribute of the Third Classroom determines that social institutions are indispensable core participants in foreign language curriculum ideological and political construction: different from the ideological and political materials inside the campus, front-line scenarios such as the international exchange projects of foreign-related enterprises, the multilingual cultural dissemination work of museums, and the cross-cultural interaction of communities gathering foreign residents contain a large number of vivid, real and unplanned ideological and political education elements, which cannot be completely obtained from classroom teaching, and constitute a unique and continuous source of educational resources for the Third Classroom^[13]. Enterprises, communities, and foreign-related institutions are not only providers of real practice settings for foreign language learning, but also vivid transmitters of ideological and political elements. By closely integrating industry needs, social issues, and intercultural practice, they move value guidance away from abstract preaching and turn it into concrete experiences students can perceive. As an extension and complement to the educational function of universities, the deep involvement of social actors brings practical vitality to the Third Classroom and is a key guarantee for building a collaborative “university–student–society” education mechanism and for realizing the social value of curriculum ideological and political education.

In theory, the lack of conceptual understanding and theoretical consensus at the social level is the primary obstacle to collaborative education. For this reason, relevant industry associations, leading enterprises, and influential cultural institutions should take the initiative to summarize and promote successful cases of their participation in university education. For example, they can document the process and outcomes of projects such as “multilingual enterprise open days” or volunteer foreign-language interpretation programs at revolutionary history sites, and present and promote these cases through industry journals, social responsibility reports, or joint seminars. This not only affirms universities’ theoretical construction and practical exploration, but also helps spread the idea and value of “practice-based ideological and political education” more broadly in society, gradually creating an atmosphere that values practical education and fully recognizes the ideological and political function of the Third Classroom.

In practice, to address the current lack of distinctive university-society cooperation and weak ideological and political awareness, social institutions should design and open up practice positions and projects suited to foreign language majors based on their own core business and social resources. For example, foreign-related enterprises can establish internship positions involving intercultural communication and international rules; museums and memorial halls can develop structured training and service programs for multilingual interpreters; neighborhood communities can organize community integration services for foreign residents or local culture outreach activities for overseas audiences. On this basis, they should sign long-term agreements with universities and jointly build ideological and political practice bases, clarifying the responsibilities of both sides and providing stable, in-depth practice

platforms. To further improve the quality and standardization of such cooperation, relevant industry associations or representative institutions may take the lead in research and issue a practical guide or certification standard for the construction of university-enterprise/society collaborative ideological and political practice bases. Such documents can provide framework-level guidance in areas such as project design, mentoring procedures, and outcome evaluation, helping Third-classroom foreign language curriculum ideological and political education move from spontaneous exploration to standardized development.

In terms of resource integration, effective resource matching is the foundation for sustaining collaborative relations and stimulating innovation. On the one hand, social institutions should establish flexible mechanisms to support students' autonomous exploration. For example, they can set up small-scale practice funds to provide modest financial support and expert guidance for student-initiated multilingual social research or cultural communication projects of genuine value. They can also open selected non-sensitive data and case libraries for use as research materials. On the other hand, they should establish regular communication and feedback mechanisms with universities, participate in talent development seminars and reviews of practice outcomes on a regular basis, and engage in two-way exchanges on social needs, student performance, and project improvement. Such cooperation, built on deep resource co-construction and continuous information sharing, can help transform the relationship from one based on individual project matching into a strategic partnership embedded in daily operations.

5. Conclusion

The Third Classroom is a key bridge between the "small classroom" of ideological and political education and the broader social classroom. Its development directly affects the completeness and effectiveness of ideological-political education in foreign language curricula. Yet current efforts to develop it are hindered by vague conceptual understanding, limited ideological-political awareness, weak practical planning, and inadequate resource integration. These problems call for clearer definitions, stronger coordination among stakeholders, and improved institutional design.

In practice, the Third Classroom's educational function depends on a tripartite coordination mechanism: students take the initiative in exploration, universities take the lead in implementation, and society empowers through openness. This mechanism keeps educational activities properly regulated and oriented while preserving openness and innovation. It also prevents individual actors from working in isolation and avoids weak collective synergy. A differentiated credit transfer mechanism can embed the Third Classroom into the main channel of talent development, linking the three classrooms systematically and providing sustainable institutional support for ideological-political education in foreign language curricula.

Future research should further deepen the theoretical construction of the Third Classroom, especially the transformation of ideological-political elements in cross-cultural contexts and the scientific evaluation systems for practical outcomes. As digitalization advances, how to use new media technologies to expand the boundaries and forms of the Third Classroom will also become an important research direction. Only through sustained theoretical innovation and practical exploration can the system of ideological-political education in foreign language curricula, grounded in the Third Classroom, be steadily improved, truly integrating knowledge transmission, competence development, and value guidance.

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