

A Systematic Review of Critical Discourse Analysis on Textbooks in China (2015-2025)

Wu Jialu¹, Mazlin Azizan^{2*}, Aini Akmar Mohd Kasim³

¹Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia;
School of Foreign Languages, Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology, 525000 Guangdong, China.

Email: 2024141697@student.uitm.edu.my

²Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: mazlinazizan@uitm.edu.my

³Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.

Email: ainik695@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This article conducts a systematic review of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) research on textbooks in China published between 2015 and 2025. Based on 72 studies screened through rigorous criteria, it explores the development of the field by examining publication patterns, textbook and disciplinary coverage, methodological means, theoretical trajectories, thematic and ideological configurations, and publication contexts. The findings reveal that English language textbooks obtain disproportionate attention, while STEM textbooks remain understudied. Methodologically, qualitative CDA prevails with Fairclough's model most frequently adopted. There are additional contributions from Wodak's and van Dijk's approaches, multimodal discourse analysis and corpus-assisted methods. Thematically, ideology, power, nationalism, cultural representation, and pedagogy dominate, whereas neoliberalism, gender and ethnicity are marginal. Saliently, although studies in both domestic and international contexts are predominantly authored by Chinese scholars, their divergent research emphases reflect differing academic and institutional contexts rather than disparities in academic capacity.

CORRESPONDING

AUTHOR (*):

Mazlin Azizan
(mazlinazizan@uitm.edu.my)

KEYWORDS:

Critical Discourse Analysis
China
Systematic review
Textbook Discourse

CITATION:

Wu, J., Mazlin, A., & Aini, A. M. K. (2026). A Systematic Review of Critical Discourse Analysis on Textbooks in China (2015-2025). *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 11(4), e003836. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i4.3836>

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a systematic review of Critical Discourse Analysis on textbooks in China from 2015 to 2025. It is one of very few studies which have investigated research trends, themes, and methodologies comprehensively, and documents key gaps and future directions in this field.

1. Introduction

In the world, textbooks play a central role in transmitting officially sanctioned knowledge, values, and subjectivities in formal education reflecting the comprehensive changes of an era and the integration of multiple values. Despite the vibrant emergence of digital learning resources, school textbooks remain authoritative curricular artifacts that coordinate state ideology, pedagogical goals, and social-cultural norms (Fuchs & Bock, 2018). As a result, they have assembled sustained scholarly attention from critical perspectives (Anselmo et al., 2020; Chen, 2016; Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018). The field of textbook research is currently drawing considerable attention, with an increasing number of research outcomes and a growing diversity of research methods. However, the methodological issues within textbook research have yet to be systematically and thoroughly examined. Wang (2019a) pointed that traditional textbooks research in China has been detached from the social context of textbook text production and dissemination. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a new theoretical perspective and methodological approach for contemporary textbook studies, driving a discursive turn in the field of textbook research. Among various methods to textbook research, scholars have proven CDA to be productive in revealing how power relations, ideologies, and social inequalities are discursively constructed and legitimized in educational materials (Pan, 2023; Pujiantono, et al., 2025; Sitio, et al., 2023). In China where education is closely integrated with national ideology, moral governance, and global engagement, CDA offers a powerful lens for interrogating textbook discourse.

While a growing number of CDA studies have examined textbooks in China, there is still a lack of a systematic synthesis that maps the scope, patterns, and limitations of this research. Existing reviews of CDA on textbook studies tend to have a global emphasis and regard treated as only one of many national contexts. This article addresses this gap by providing a systematic review focusing on CDA-based textbook research in China. Specifically, this review pursues four objectives:

- i. To map the publication landscape and developmental trajectory of CDA research on textbooks in China.
- ii. To examine methodological patterns and analytical practices, with particular attention to the balance between qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches.
- iii. To analyze the theoretical frameworks employed, identifying the relative dominance of specific CDA paradigms (e.g., Fairclough's three-dimensional model) and the emergence of adjacent critical approaches.
- iv. To investigate the thematic distribution of research issues and explore how topic selection varies across publication contexts, especially between China-based and international outlets.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis in Education

The publication of Gee's (1990) *Social Linguistics and Literacies* introduced critically focused discourse analysis into field of education. Since then, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has gained prominence in education, especially in classroom discourse, textbooks analysis, and policy papers. A principal goal of CDA is to "describe and explain how power abuse is enacted, reproduced or legitimized by the text and talk of dominant groups or institutions" (van Dijk, 2013:85). Accordingly, researchers have committed themselves to

the study of how national identities language, social ideologies, and power relations and processes of empowerment are embodied in teaching materials.

According to Foucault's (1972:49) conception of discourse as practices that "systematically form the objects about which they speak", CDA foregrounds the role of discourse in constructing institutional classifications, social hierarchies, and subject positions. Fairclough's (1989) methodology offered a text-centric approach to discourse analysis in conjunction with sociological ideas of culture, and social life. As Luke (1995) observes, Foucault's work alters analytical focus from viewing text and discourse as manufactured artifacts explicable by the inherent traits of their creators and conditions of production, to examining how texts shape social formations, communities, and individual social identities. Within educational research, discourse-analytical approaches have therefore been applied to the areas of curriculum requirements, school knowledge transference and physical classroom contact (e.g., Dahl et al, 2014; Lee & Kim, 2019; Singh, 1993; Ruane & Lee, 2016).

CDA provides researchers with powerful analytical tools to uncover the social, cultural, and ideological dimensions of educational texts. For instance, Ansary and Babaii (2003) explore the gender representation in two English coursebooks and discover that there exists a biased and partial representation of woman in the textbooks. Similarly, Saleh et. al (2006) utilize van Leeuwen's (1996) framework and Halliday's (as cited in Halliday & Matythiessen, 2004) transitivity model to examine language use in high school English teaching materials in Iran, finding that female characters are severely underrepresented in these textbooks. In Malaysia, Mukundan and Nimehchisalem (2008) explore gender representation in some secondary school English textbooks. Together with Tietz (2007), they conclude that there was a clear gender bias, with males being more frequently depicted as aggressive, exiled, disorderly, and unruly than females. However, males predominated over females in terms of frequency of speech. Taken together, these studies illustrate how textbook discourses contribute to the reproduction and naturalization of ideological dominance within educational contexts

2.2. Textbook studies in China

Textbooks are designed in line with the curriculum to systematically present the knowledge to the students in an educational manner (Fuchs & Bock, 2019). Textbook research is not defined by a single distinct theory or a specific set of methods. Instead, it often relies on hermeneutic, comparative, and critical text analysis to systematically examine content and address diverse research questions. In China, over its 70-year development, textbook research methodology has evolved from "single-disciplinary" research to "multi-discipline" research (Wang, 2019b). Initially, textbook research was conducted within the framework of education, and its methods were borrowed and applied from educational research methods. Beginning in the 1990s, multidisciplinary methodologies began to influence the field of textbook research. Multidisciplinary research broke away from single, static research methods, gradually forming a diverse and hybrid approach. These theories and methods include discourse theory, media theory, structuralist methods originating from sociological backgrounds, media practice in cultural studies, communication research on media influence, and constructivist learning theory from pedagogy (Wang, 2019b). Scholars (Liu, 2005; Lu, 2022; He, 2012; Fan, 2019) have integrated and applied these to the field of textbooks, aiming to address the unique challenges of this area and develop a research methodology suitable for textbook research.

Despite there are diverse research perspectives, quantitative and mixed-methods studies remain limited. Methodologically, qualitative approaches dominate existing research (Liu, 2010; Wang & Li, 2025; Xiong, 2012), including discourse analysis, value analysis, and theoretical discussion. And these literature mainly examine textbook content selection and organization, cultural representations, and embedded values and ideologies. By contrast, there exist small number of quantitative studies relying on frequency analysis and basic statistical techniques to explore such issues as the pace and scale of textbook development. This methodological imbalance constrains the comprehensiveness of the study and, to some extent, limits the robustness and depth of existing research findings.

In the Chinese context, textbooks enjoy such functions as pedagogical tools and key instruments of ideological governance (Chen et.al, 2025; Li et al., 2025; Fang & Tuo, 2025). They are produced under strict state supervision and are expected to be in line with official discourses on nationalism, socialism and moral education. Currently, the rapid globalization and the popularization of English education have given rise to competing discourses concerning global citizenship, individualism, and neoliberalism.. This interaction between official narratives and global influence makes Chinese textbooks a particularly rich site for CDA research. Consequently, scholars have more interest in examining how global discourses are selectively chosen, recontextualized, or contested in Chinese educational materials, which is a process that reveals complex ideological negotiations.

3. Research Methods

The survey is based on publications on Critical Discourse Analysis on Textbooks, collecting 72 articles published between 2015 and 2025 (December). The studies were retrieved from five main online databases (Taylor and Francis, Sage publications, Web of Science, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Scopus) where some prestigious journals are published, in addition to Google Scholar. Due to the large number of sources identified, Table 1 presents a representative selection of journals, conferences, and books, along with the corresponding number of publications retrieved from each. Entering the search terms 'critical discourse analysis'+ 'textbooks'+ 'in China', the targeted literature was first filtered to exclude articles published before 2015 to guarantee the desired time range of the literature on the topic. Then, the database was filtered further to make sure that all the articles use and mention CDA explicitly as their -or one of their- approach to textbook analysis to ensure a high level of relevance between the selected studies and the search terms. Furthermore, to ensure the comprehensiveness and integrity of the review and to minimize language and database bias, this study retrieved relevant Chinese-language publications indexed by CNKI, which constitutes the primary academic database for educational and linguistic research in China.

A two-stage screening process was applied. First, all results were filtered to exclude publications prior to 2015. Second, to ensure methodological relevance, the remaining records were screened to include only those studies that explicitly adopted CDA (or Critical Discourse Studies) as a primary or secondary analytical framework for textbook analysis. This screening was based on a sequential review of titles, abstracts, and keywords. When relevance was uncertain, the full text was examined. Two researchers independently conducted the selection process, with disagreements arising resolved through discussion. A total of 72 publications met the inclusion criteria, including 66 journal articles, 4 conference proceedings, and 2 book chapters.

Data extraction was based on the following descriptive variables, including publication year, data source (e.g., textbook type, subject), publication venue tier (categorized as SSCI/SCI-indexed, CSSCI/core Chinese journals, or other), analytical frameworks (e.g., Fairclough, Wodak, Van Dijk), and key investigated issues. We adopted a pragmatic classification approach to address the heterogeneity of the studies. Studies utilizing multiple CDA frameworks were categorized as “Diverse”. Although Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) constitutes the dominant theoretical framework, this review adopts an inclusive stance by adopting allied approaches such as ecological discourse analysis, critical content analysis, and Foucauldian discourse analysis. We do not regard them as external to the core inquiry but are treated as theoretically close and epistemologically compatible traditions within the broader field of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). This inclusive approach ensures a comprehensive mapping of the research landscape. Subsequently, descriptive statistical analysis and data visualization were performed using Microsoft Excel. Furthermore, to enhance analytical clarity and synthesize findings, investigated issues were systematically grouped into broader thematic categories through content analysis to enhance analytical clarity.

Table 1. Distribution of studies across Journals, conferences and books (total number of studies=72)

Category	Number of Journals	Number of Publications	Representative Journals (Examples)
International Top-tier Journals	12	18	Race Ethnicity and Education; (1) Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education; (1) Journal of Language, Identity & Education; (1) International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning; (1) Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education; (1) Language, Culture and Curriculum; (3) Journal of multilingual and multicultural development;(3) Linguistics and Education; (1) Politics and Governance; (1) Journal of Moral Education; (2) Discourse & Communication; (1) Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education; (2) Asian Ethnicity; (1) International Journal of Chinese Language Teaching;(2)
ESCI / SSCI-indexed Journals (Q2,Q3)	7	11	Sex Education; (1) International Critical Thought; (1) Sage Open; (4) Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition; (1) Cogent Education; (1)
Core journals of China	11	11	Foreign Language World; (1) Academic Monthly; (1)

			Social Scientist; (1)
			Foreign Languages and Literature; (1)
			Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China); (1)
			Educational Research; (1)
			Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education; (1)
			Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies (1)
			Foreign Languages Research; (1)
			Theory Monthly; (1)
			Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines; (1)
			International Journal of Emerging Trends in Social Sciences; (1)
			Education Journal; (1)
			Journal of Education Culture and Society; (1)
Other journals	23	26	Creative Education Studies; (1)
			Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics; (1)
			Advances in Education; (3)
			International Journal for Research in Education; (1)
			Journal of Language Teaching & Research; (1)
			Modern Linguistics; (2)
Conference and book chapter	6	6	Language, ideology and education;(1)
			2021 2nd International Conference on Information Science and Education;(1)

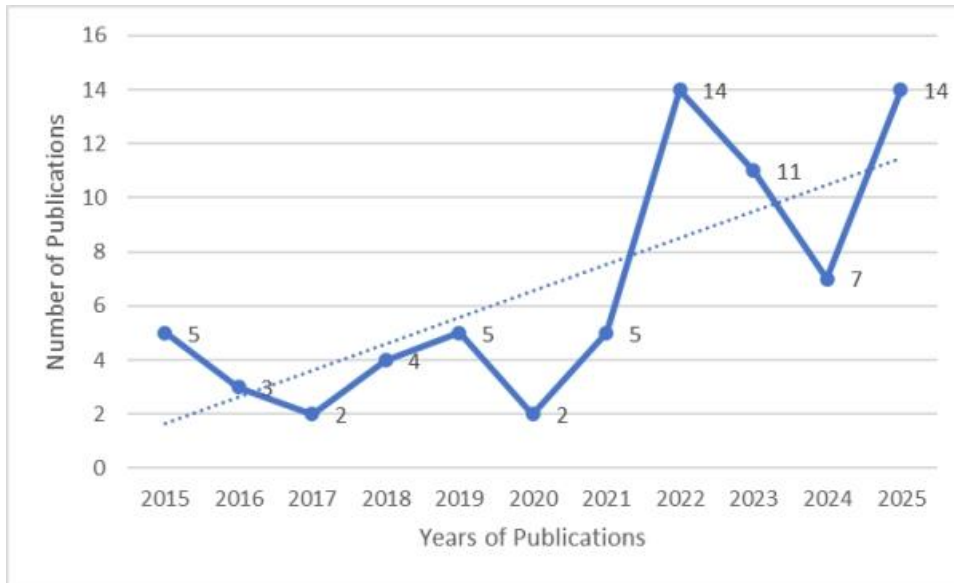
4. Results

This section proceeds to present the findings of the analysis. We had data entered into spreadsheets which became the basis for our quantitative and qualitative analysis. First, we discuss the diachronic trend of number of research publications. Next, we examine the distribution and the venue tier of the publications, the types of textbooks that were analyzed and the frameworks that were drawn upon. We sorted across columns to identify the trends and correlations of different variables. Finally, we give a brief overview of the issues and findings of the articles.

4.1. The diachronic trend of number of research publications

As shown by Figure 1. the trend changes can be broadly divided into four phases. Between 2015 and 2020, the overall number of articles was relatively low, with an average of 3.5 articles per year and minimal fluctuations. From 2020 to 2022, there was a rapid increase, with the number of articles reaching 14 in 2022. Subsequently, from 2023 to 2024, the field entered an adjustment phase, with a slight decrease in numbers but still maintaining a high level. In 2025, the number of articles returned to 14. It is noteworthy that nearly 64% of the data set consisted of publications from between 2022 and 2025.

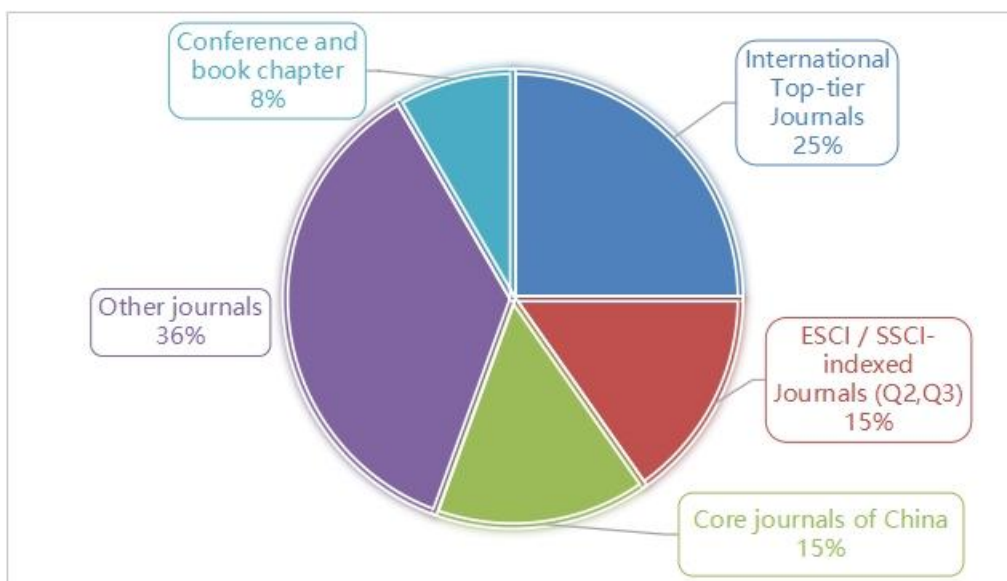
Figure 1: The diachronic trend of number of research publications



4.2. Distribution of Publications and Overall Trend

In this review, 72 studies were published in venues with various academic visibility and impact, which demonstrated a stratified and more internationalized publication pattern in CDA research on textbooks in China, see Figure 2. Specifically, 18 articles (Chu, 2015; Li et al, 2023; Sun & Kwon, 2020; Xiong & Yuan, 2018) (25%) were published in 12 international top-tier journals (SSCI Q1), such as *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, Language, Culture and Curriculum, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, Linguistics and Education, and Compare*. In addition, 11 studies (Ji & Reiss, 2022; Lee, 2023; Tan et al., 2022; Zhang & Cuo, 2021) (15.3%) were published in ESCI- or SSCI-indexed journals ranking in Q2–Q3, such as *SAGE Open, International Critical Thought, Asian Ethnicity, and Cogent Education*.

Figure 2: Distribution of publication venue tier

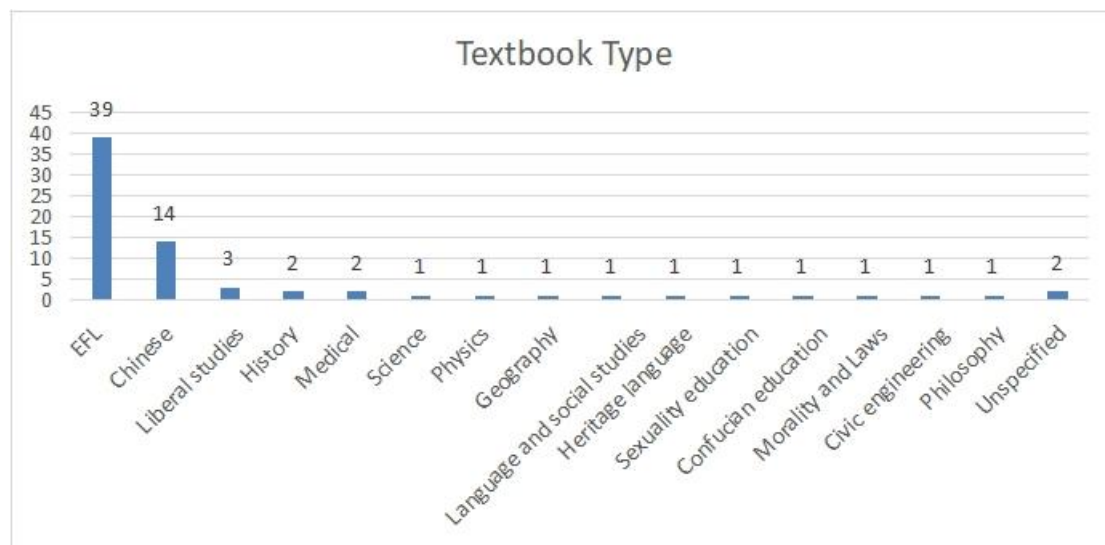


At the domestic level, 11 articles (Liao & Zhou, 2017; Liu, 2024; Liu et al, 2015; Wang, 2019) (15%) were published in Chinese core journals (CSSCI or equivalent), such as *Journal of Moral Education (Chinese edition)*, *Foreign Language World*, *Education Research*, and *Contemporary Foreign Language Studies*. Beyond these journals, the largest proportion of studies, 26 articles (He et al, 2023; Ji & Wang, 2016; Zhao & Chao, 2019; Wu & Li, 2022; Wu & Wu, 2025) (36%), were published in other domestic and international journals, many of which are non-core, regional, or pedagogically focused publications (e.g., *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, *Modern Linguistics*, *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, *Creative Education Studies*, *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *Advances in Education*). The remaining publications include four conference papers and two book chapters.

4.3. Types of Textbooks Studied

In Figure 3, the review revealed a highly uneven disciplinary distribution in the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to Chinese textbooks. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook is dominant, accounting for 39 studies (54%), followed distantly by Chinese language textbooks (n=14, 19%). All other subjects combined make less than one-third of the literature, with history, science, moral education, and specialized domains such as medicine or engineering each represented by only one or two cases.

Figure 3: Frequency distribution of textbook types



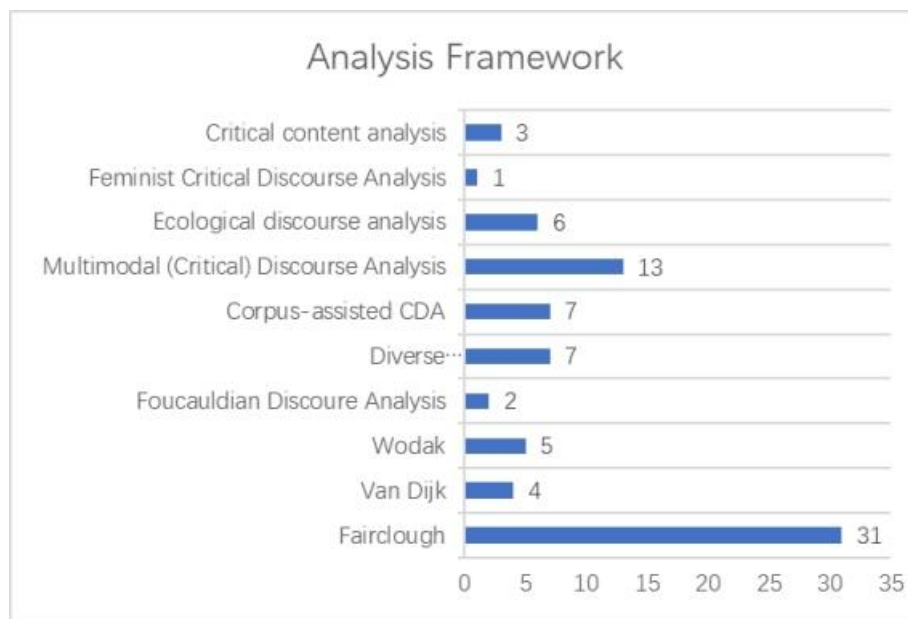
4.4. CDA and frameworks

In terms of CDA approaches, Figure 4 shows the frequency of theoretical frameworks used, with traditional linguistic CDA appears in 47 out of 72 studies (about 65%), far surpassing all other approaches combined. There are 6 publication employing ecological discourse analysis, 13 multimodal (critical) discourse analysis, 3 critical content analysis and 1 feminist critical discourse analysis. The figures show a trend of CDA application in China, starting from the single to the integrated with CDA as the Core, Multimodal and Ecological Discourse as the Two Wings.

Over the past decade, Fairclough's three-dimensional model (text, discourse practice, social practice) has performed as the most mainstream theoretical framework, occupying 43% (n=31) of the research (Chu, 2018; Fan, 2019; Ji & Wang, 2016; Lu & Jin, 2025; Sun

& Kwon, 2020; Zhao & Cao, 2019). Additionally, only 5 studies (Hua et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2022) included Wodak's discourse-historical approach and 4 studies (Chu, 2015; Vu, 2017) included Van Dijk's social cognitive path. Two studies (Li & Wu, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022) adopted Foucault's power/knowledge perspective. Thirteen studies (18%) employed multimodal (critical) discourse analysis (Song & Mei, 2023; Xiong and Peng, 2021; Zhang & Smith, 2024), of which two explicitly identified their approach as multimodal critical discourse analysis. In terms of emerging perspectives, Ecological discourse analysis has seen itself as a strong interdisciplinary force since 2017 with 6 studies adopting this approach (Liao and Zhou, 2017; Wei, 2024), focusing on ecological protection and sustainable development values in textbooks. One study focusing on Feminist CDA (Ji and Reiss, 2022) offers more nuanced critical perspectives.

Figure 4: Frequency distribution of CDA frameworks

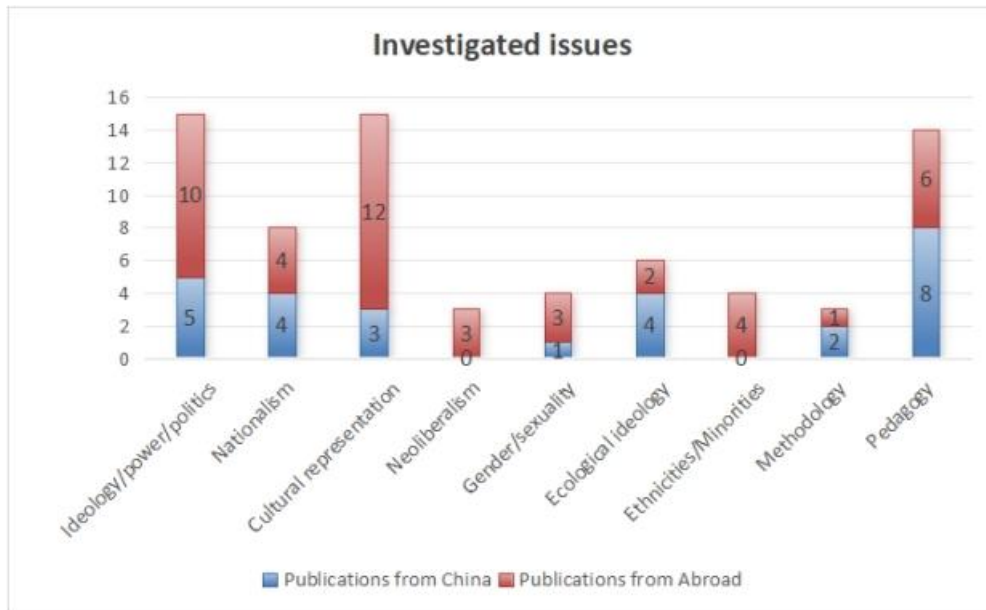


4.5. Investigated issues

In Figure 5, the analysis reveals a highly uneven thematic distribution across the reviewed studies. Three issue categories of ideology/power/politics ($n=15$, 21%), cultural representation ($n=15$, 21%) and pedagogy ($n=14$, 19%) emerged as the most frequently investigated topics, together accounting for 61% of the total publications. A second tier of topics, including nationalism ($n=8$, 11%) and ecological ideology ($n=6$, 8%), received moderate attention. In contrast, gender/sexuality ($n=4$), ethnicities/minorities ($n=4$), neoliberalism ($n=3$), and methodological reflection ($n=3$) were comparatively underrepresented.

Clear differences emerged between publications from China and publications from abroad with regard to thematic focus. Overseas publications predominated in studies targeting cultural representation (12 abroad vs. 3 China-based) and ideology/power/politics (10 vs. 5). Only overseas venues published literature examining neoliberalism and ethnic minorities. By contrast, China-based publications were more interested in studies focusing on pedagogy (8 China-based vs. 6 abroad), ecological ideology (4 vs. 2), and methodological issues (2 vs. 1). The topic of nationalism enjoyed a balanced distribution between China-based and foreign publications (4 each).

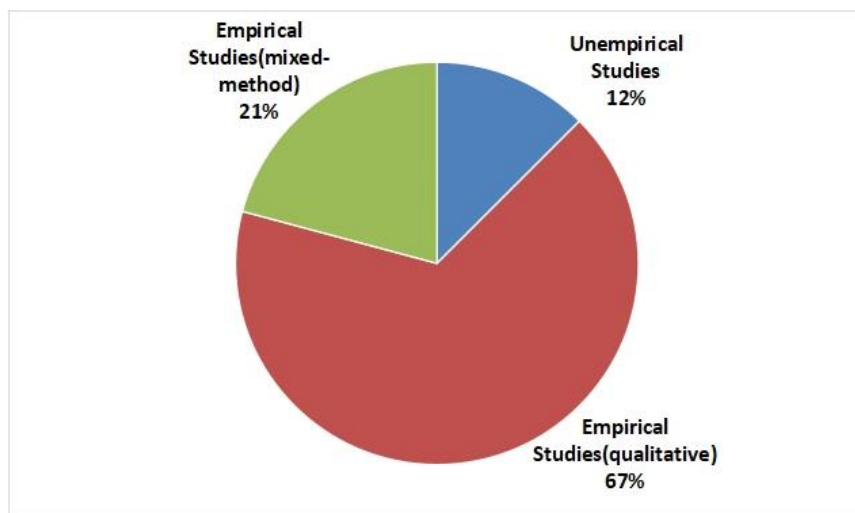
Figure 5: Frequency of investigated issues



4.6. Research Paradigm

As shown in Figure 6, there are 9 studies (12%) non-empirical in essence (Chang, 2018; Fan, 2019; Lu and Jin, 2025; Zhu, 2016), mainly focusing on theoretical explorations, conceptual discussions, or methodological reflections on critical discourse analysis of textbooks. The remaining 63 studies (88%) are empirical investigations.

Figure 6: Distribution of research paradigm



Within the empirical literature, qualitative approaches clearly take the lead. A total of 48 studies rely exclusively on qualitative analysis, mostly drawing on frameworks from Fairclough, Wodak and Van Dijk, and multimodal discourse analysis. Conversely, 15 studies adopt mixed-methods designs that combine qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative techniques. However, the quantitative component remains relatively limited in scope. 7 of these mixed-methods studies employ corpus-based approaches to support qualitative interpretations.

5. Discussion

This systematic review collected 72 studies on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of textbooks in China, published ranging from international top-tier journals, SSCI/ESCI-indexed sources, Chinese core journals to general academic journals, conference proceedings and book chapters. We examined such variables as publication distribution, textbook types, methodological approaches and investigated issues, finding the consolidation as well as the structural constraints of CDA-based textbook research in the Chinese context.

5.1. Publication Distribution, quality and Academic Positioning

Research on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of textbooks in China shows distinct publication phases. There were relatively fewer publications annually between 2015 and 2021. It was followed by a marked surge starting in 2022, when annual publications peaked at 14 and remained high through 2024 and 2025. This upward trend follows China's national textbook policy developments. The nationwide implementation of unified compulsory education textbooks for three subjects (Chinese, history, and moral and rule of law) came into force in 2017 (Ministry of Education, General Office, 2017), then conducted full implementation and evaluation from 2021 to 2022. Afterwards, scholars started systematically exploring the ideological and power construction, discourse strategies, and cultural orientation of these textbooks, with CDA becoming a key analytical tool.

We can see a pyramidal pattern in across venues, with a obvious presence in top-tier international journals (approximately 25%), a solid middle layer of other SSCI/ESCI-indexed journals (15%) and Chinese core journals (15%), and a broad base of general domestic and international journals, together with conference papers and book chapters (36%). Importantly, there is a co-existence of high-impact global publications and a substantial body of domestically oriented work which demonstrates a dual trajectory. The scholars engage themselves simultaneously with global theoretical debates and locally embedded educational concerns. It should be noted that many internationally published studies are authored by Chinese scholars, indicating that venue disparities cannot be due to academic incompetence. Instead, international journals tend to favor topics such as ideology, cultural representation, power relations and minority issues, while Chinese journals prioritize pedagogy, curriculum reform, moral education and ecological values. Topic selection is thus influenced by journal expectations, evaluation systems, and socio-institutional contexts.

5.2. Textbook Types and Disciplinary Concentration

In terms of the types of textbooks, EFL textbooks grabs most attention with a share of more than a half of the studies, followed by Chinese language textbooks. Just a few studies examine science, geography, history, medical and philosophy textbooks. This disciplinary imbalance reflects the institutional grounding of CDA within applied linguistics and EFL education in China, where English textbooks provide scholars with an accessible and relatively low-risk site for critical inquiry. Researchers may examine English materials to critique Western cultural dominance, neoliberal values or global inequalities while simultaneously publicizing cultural confidence and national identity. Moreover, scholars notice that the linguistic nature of EFL materials is in line with current CDA

methodologies, particularly corpus-assisted approaches, making them methodologically convenient.

On the other hand, the limited non-language subjects indicate a significant weakness in the current scholarship. Disciplines such as history, geography, and moral and rule of law are important for student to build state-led identity and construct historical memory but they remain underexplored through a CDA lens. People usually regard the STEM subjects as “value-neutral” and they incorporate subtle discourses such as technological nationalism, environmental governance, and epistemic authority (e.g. Knain, 2001; Mnguni, 2019; Mudaly & Chirikure, 2023), which need systematic scrutiny. This disciplinary imbalance may risk making CDA in the Chinese context a form of “cultural critique at the periphery,” then the mechanisms of ideological reproduction in core curricular domains are broadly unstudied. Additionally, the broadened scope of textbook studies will not only help achieve analytical comprehensiveness but also meet CDA’s emancipatory goal in a context where textbook is a critical site of political pedagogy (Fairclough, 2013).

5.3. Methodological Patterns and Epistemological Commitments

Methodologically, a strong qualitative orientation emerges in CDA research on textbooks in China. Of the 72 studies reviewed, 63 are empirical, and approximately 76% of these rely exclusively on qualitative analysis. This pattern reflects the epistemological commitments of CDA, which prefer interpretive depth, contextualization, and ideological critique to statistical generalization. Qualitative approaches follow the established traditions in linguistics and education, especially in the process of analyzing textbooks as institutionalized, policy-guided, and ideologically shaped products.

Although there are 15 studies adopting mixed-method designs, the quantitative component remains modest. Only seven studies use corpus-based approaches to triangulate qualitative analysis. The limited uptake of corpus-assisted CDA indicates that methodological triangulation is still underdeveloped in this research area. Several structural constraints contribute to this pattern, including restricted access to digitised textbook corpora, the labour-intensive process of corpus construction, and the dominance of small-scale close reading traditions. As a result, quantitative analysis is typically used in a supplementary rather than integrative manner, reinforcing rather than challenging qualitative interpretations.

5.4. Theoretical Frameworks, Dominance, and Expansion

In terms of analytical frameworks, there are 65% studies employing traditional CDA in which Fairclough’s three-dimensional model overwhelmingly dominates the field and Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive framework are marginal. A moderate proportion of studies (10%) adopt ‘diverse CDA’ frameworks, which reflects the interdisciplinary nature of CDA and demonstrates that different theoretical perspectives can function as a form of triangulation (Baker, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Fairclough’s model’s dominance can be understood in relation to the institutional and academic context of Chinese textbook research, which enables scholars to conduct critical analyses of state-sanctioned educational materials while remaining aligned with local academic discourse norms. In this sense, his model has been transformed from a Western critical theory into a productive and context-sensitive analytical resource within China’s educational research landscape.

The inclusion of non-canonical CDA approaches (15%) reflects that critical discourse study is characterized by constant change and diversity. Ecological discourse analysis and critical content analysis help expand CDA's focus on ideology and power to areas such as environmental governance and value representation. Foucauldian discourse analysis shares CDA's core interest in discourse as a site of power, subject formation, and social regulation. The employment of these approaches doesn't weaken the analysis; instead, it shows how CDA has been selectively adapted to the Chinese textbook context. The utilization of multimodal CDA further expands the analytical scope of textbook research. Visual Grammar laid the theoretical foundation for multimodal discourse analysis by integrating social semiotics and systemic functional linguistics (Kress, 2009). In recent years, numerous researchers in China have applied the multimodal critical discourse analysis method to study topics in fields such as interpreting, aesthetics, and education (Wu & Wang, 2024). However, these approaches are often employed in a descriptive or policy-aligned manner. They critique issues such as consumerism or environmental pollution, while at the same time reinforcing state-endorsed values such as harmony, sustainability and patriotism.

5.5. Thematic difference and the logic of “acceptable” critique

This study indicates a clear thematic difference within CDA research on textbooks in China. Ideology, power and politics, cultural representation and pedagogy dominate the scholarly literature, totally accounting for 61% of the analysed studies. Nationalism and ecological ideology occupy a secondary tier (19%), while neoliberalism, gender and sexuality, ethnic minorities, and methodological reflection remain marginal. This distribution is not incidental. After the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the new ideological focus on “Chinese modernization” and the “modern civilization of the Chinese nation” has delivered a salient discursive context for textbook research. In this context, cultural representation and pedagogy emerge as an analytically policy-aligned field, making scholars engage in critical discussion while keeping up with educational development goals, curriculum reform agendas, and dominant policy discourses. This pattern is also evident in empirical research. Dong and Adamson (2022) discussed how China's modernization is coordinated with the conservation of traditional values in the teaching materials for College English of China.

Thus, CDA is often presented as a constructive tool to improve textbook quality, build cultural confidence, and support moral, civic, or ecological education. While such studies do contribute to teaching practice, they show a tendency to keep critique within normatively accepted limits. In contrast, structurally sensitive issues—such as marketisation, neoliberalism, gender politics, and ethnic inequality—remain saliently underrepresented. This neglect is not due to a lack of academic relevance, but because of a “critical ceiling,” beyond which research risks being seen as institutionally or politically acceptable. This pattern suggests that critique in this field is often selective rather than comprehensive. Critical methods are used to highlight ideologically permissible concerns while avoiding deeper engagement with macro-level socio-economic structures and enduring power relations.

6. Conclusion

Our study offers a comprehensive review of critical discourse analysis (CDA) research on textbooks in China. It maps out publication trends, research subjects, methodological

approaches, and key themes. The findings show that the field has made significant progress—especially in applying CDA to textbook studies, diversifying analytical frameworks, and gaining recognition in top international journals. However, we also point to several structural imbalances that invite further attention. These include the dominance of language textbooks, a lack of methodological reflection, and the relative neglect of issues like neoliberalism, gender, and minority representation. These gaps highlight important areas for researchers to conduct future theoretical and empirical development.

A key point of this review is that it challenges the view of Chinese CDA scholarship as lacking or deficient. We should view the differences between domestic and international publications as the result of different academic environments and publishing systems, not as a gap in scholarly ability. Recognizing this helps us better understand CDA on textbooks in China as a field that is context-sensitive and strategically positioned. The critical practices are adapted to different institutional and epistemic settings. Future research would focus on: (1) applying CDA to underexplored areas like STEM and vocational textbooks, (2) using more mixed methods and audience-focused research designs, and (3) engaging more with global critical discussions while staying grounded in local educational realities. By doing so, CDA research on textbooks in China can further strengthen its theoretical contributions, methodological rigor, and international relevance.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a systematic review of Critical Discourse Analysis on textbooks in China from 2015 to 2025. It is one of very few studies which have investigated research trends, themes, and methodologies comprehensively, and documents key gaps and future directions in this field.

Acknowledgement

Part of this article was extracted from Wu Jialu's doctoral thesis submitted to Universiti Teknologi MARA.

Funding

This study received no funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

References

- Ansary, H., & Babaii, E. (2003). Subliminal sexism in current ESL/EFL textbooks. *Asian EFL journal*, 5(-), 0-0. <https://sid.ir/paper/597272/en>
- Anselmo, D. H. A. L., Hidalgo, J. M., & Queiroz, D. M. (2020). Pascal's principle revisited: A critical review of physics undergraduate textbooks. *European Journal of Physics*, 41(6), 063001. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1361-6404/aba646>

- Chang, Y. (2018). On the ecological evaluation of textbooks for college English courses. *Foreign Language and Literature*, 34(5), 147–154.
- Chen, A. C.-H. (2016). A critical evaluation of text difficulty development in ELT textbook series: A corpus-based approach using variability neighbor clustering. *System*, 58, 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2016.03.011>
- Chen, Y., Bai, G., & Zhou, F. (2025). National image construction of senior high school English textbooks: A case study of the People's Education Press series. *Educational Measurement and Evaluation*, (04), 30–44. <https://doi.org/10.16518/j.cnki.emae.2025.04.003>
- Chu, Y. (2015). The power of knowledge: A critical analysis of the depiction of ethnic minorities in China's elementary textbooks. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 18(4), 469–487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2015.1013460>
- Dahl, B. M., Andrews, T., & Clancy, A. (2014) Contradictory discourses of health promotion and disease prevention in the educational curriculum of Norwegian public health nursing: A critical discourse analysis. *Scandinavian journal of public health*, 42(1), 32-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494813502585>
- Dong, L., & Adamson, B. (2022). Culture in Textbooks: A Content Analysis of College English Teaching Materials. In: Xiong, T., Feng, D., Hu, G. (eds) *Cultural Knowledge and Values in English Language Teaching Materials* (pp. 345–359). Springer, Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1935-06>
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London, England: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Language and power*. Routledge.
- Fan, X. (2019). Functional dimensions of discourse practice in Chinese language textbooks and the dissemination of China's image. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 41(10), 72–76.
- Fang, Z., & Tuo, L. (2025). A Study on the Construction of National Image in the PEP Junior High School Geography Textbook. *Teaching Reference of Middle School Geograph*, (19), 48-52.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Flowerdew, J., & Richardson, J. E. (Eds.). (2018). *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies*. Routledge.
- Fuchs, E., & Bock, A. (2018). *The algrave handbook of textbook studies*. Springer.
- Gee, J. P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London, England: Falmer Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar (3rd ed.)*. Hodder Arnold.
- He, J., & Buripakdi, A. (2023). Unequal Englishes in a Chinese college English textbook: A critical discourse analysis. *International Journal for Research in Education*, 47(2), 101–135. <https://doi.org/10.36771/ijre.47.7.23-pp101-135>
- He, X. (2012). Writing strategies of secondary school geography textbooks under structuralist pedagogy. *Geography Teaching*, (08), 25–26.
- Hua, X., Yu, Y., & Chan, T. F. (2025). A critical discourse study of cultural and national identity (re)construction in Taiwanese high school EFL textbooks. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 46(4), 433–448. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2024.2412596>
- Ji, Y., & Reiss, M. J. (2022). Cherish lives? Progress and compromise in sexuality education textbooks produced in contemporary China. *Sex Education*, 22(4), 496–519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2021.1955670>

- Ji, W., & Wang, W. (2016). The 45 Years' Evolution of a Genre: Commodification of the University Textbook Prefaces in China. *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 8(1), 1-22. <https://ugp.rug.nl/cadaad/article/view/41964>
- Knain, E. (2001). Ideologies in school science textbooks. *International Journal of Science Education*, 23(3), 319–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095006901750066547>
- Kress, G. (2009). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge.
- Lee, D. B. (2023). Critical Analysis of the Portrayal of Environmental Issues in Chinese Language Textbooks for Ethnic Koreans. *Sage Open*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231181590>
- Lee, J. A., & Kim, C.J. (2019) Teaching and learning science in authoritative classrooms: Teachers' power and students' approval in Korean elementary classrooms. *Research in Science Education*, 49(5), 1367-1393. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-017-9659-6>
- Li, J., Boonwanna, T., & Chansanam, W. (2025). The representation of Xi Jinping in Chinese high school ideology and politics textbooks. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 15, Article e2025124. <https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2025.15.124>
- Li, Y., & Wu, Y. (2022). Why are the liberal studies textbooks that stigmatized China spread in Hong Kong? A textual analysis from Foucauldian order of discourse. *International Critical Thought*, 12(1), 116–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2022.2027805>
- Liao, B., & Zhou, B. (2017). A critical discourse analysis of English textbook text. *Social Scientist*, 32(10), 125–129.
- Liu, Y. (2010). The construction of cultural values and beliefs in Chinese language textbooks: A critical discourse analysis. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 26(1), 15–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300500039716>
- Liu, Y. (2024). Neoliberal personhood as exception: A critical analysis of textbooks of China's moral education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 53(2), 307–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2185596>
- Liu, Y., Zhang, L. J., & May, S. (2022). Dominance of Anglo-American cultural representations in university English textbooks in China: A corpus linguistics analysis. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 35(1), 83–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2021.1941077>
- Liu, Y., Zhang L. J., & May, S. (2023). A Corpus-based study on cultural representations in College English textbooks. *Foreign Language World*, 10(3), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.26971/j.cnki.flw.1004-5112.2015.06.011>
- Lu, Z. (2022) *Research on public opinion support of textbooks in China* [Master's thesis, Hunan Normal University]. <https://doi.org/10.27137/d.cnki.ghusu.2022.002372>
- Lu, Z., & Jin, T. (2025). The establishment of a discourse order for textbook criticism: reflections on public opinion discourse in the development of Chinese language textbooks. *Theory Monthly*, (10), 134–143. <https://doi.org/10.14180/j.cnki.1004-0544.2025.10.013>
- Luke, A. (1995). Text and Discourse in Education: An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis. *Review of Research in Education*, 21(1), 3-48. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X021001003>
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, General Office. (2017). Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education on matters concerning the use of teaching books for compulsory education in Morality and Rule of Law, Chinese, History, and Primary School Science in 2017.
- Mnguni, L. (2019). An investigation into the curriculum ideology that foregrounds the presentation of HIV/AIDS content in selected South Africa Life Sciences textbooks.

- International Journal of STEM Education*, 6(1), 25. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-019-0179-y>
- Mukundan, J., & Nimehchisalem, V. (2008). Gender representation in Malaysian secondary school English language textbooks. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 4(2), 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.25170/ijelt.v4i2.1570>
- Mudaly, R., & Chirikure, T. (2023). STEM education in the Global North and Global South: Competition, conformity, and convenient collaborations. *Frontiers in Education*, 8, 1144399. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1144399>
- Pan, Y. (2023). Research on ideological-political education in foreign language courses from the perspective of critical discourse analysis. *Creative Education Studies*, 11(3), 457–462. <https://doi.org/10.12677/CES.2023.113075>
- Pujiantono, R., Rifari, B., & Tatan, Z. M. (2025). Analyzing language ideology, power, and culture in Indonesian EFL textbooks: A critical discourse analysis of the Merdeka Curriculum textbooks for junior high school. *INFERENCE: Journal of English Language Teaching*, 8(3), 177–187. <https://doi.org/10.30998/v2348t56>
- Ruane, R., & Lee, V. J. (2016). Analysis of discussion board interaction in an online peer mentoring site. *Online Learning*, 20(4), 79–99. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v20i4.1052>
- Saleh, E. A., Sajjadi, S., & Yarmohammadi, L. (2006) The Representation of Social Actors in the EFL High School Textbooks in Iran. *MEXTESOL Journal*, 30(1), 9-23.
- Singh, P. (1993) Institutional discourse and practice. A case study of the social construction of technological competence in the primary classroom. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 14(1), 39-58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569930140103>
- Sitio, I. T., Sinar, T. S., & Rangkuti, R. (2023). Textbooks as value-laden: A critical discourse analysis of moral values representation in primary school EFL textbooks. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 8(2), 95–11. <https://doi.org/10.21093/ijeltal.v8i2.1515>
- Song, X. & Perry, M. S. (2023). Multimodal discourse analysis of communicative English for Chinese learners (integrated course) from the perspective of ecosophy. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 46(03). <https://doi.org/10.1515/CJAL-2023-0308>
- Sun, W., & Kwon, J. (2020). Representation of monoculturalism in Chinese and Korean heritage language textbooks for immigrant children. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 33(4), 402–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2019.1642346>
- Tan, D., Wu, L., & Huang, R. (2022). Improving the Representation of Cultural Diversity and Inclusiveness in Chinese Textbooks through Critical Discourse Analysis—Experience, Reflection and Prospect in Teaching with Integrated Chinese. *International Journal of Chinese Language Teaching*, (2).
- Tietz, W. M. (2007). Women and men in accounting textbooks: Exploring the hidden curriculum. *Issues in Accounting Education*, 22(3), 459–480. <https://doi.org/10.2308/iace.2007.22.3.459>
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2013). *Discourse, power and access*. Routledge.
- Van Leeuwen T. (1996). *The representation of social actors*. Routledge.
- Vu, C. (2017). Representation of World War II in Vietnam, China, and the USA: Political ideologies in secondary history textbooks. In C. Roofe (Ed.), *Intercultural studies of curriculum: Theory, policy and practice* (pp. 165–189). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60897-6_8
- Wang, P. (2019a). The Methodological Construction of the Discourse Analysis of Textbooks. *Educational Research*, 40(5), 51-59.
- Wang, P. (2019b). *Textbook research methodology*. Guangdong Education Press.

- Wang, Q., & Lee, D. B. (2025). Chinese nationalism portrayed in textbooks designed for ethnic Korean students. *Cogent Education*, 12(1), Article 2456439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2456439>
- Wei, R. (2024). Value orientations in college English textbooks under ideological education: An ecological discourse analysis. *Foreign Language Research*, 41(6), 14–19. <https://doi.org/10.13978/j.cnki.wyj.2024.06.005>
- Wu, L., & Wu, L. (2025). Values education in China: A critical discourse analysis of the People's Education Press's seventh grade English textbook. *JOLLT Journal of Languages and Language Teaching*, 13(2), 632–647. <https://doi.org/10.33394/jollt.v13i2.13753>
- Wu, Y., & Li, Y. (2022). How China and Chinese people are visually represented: The case of a series of liberal studies textbooks in Hong Kong. *Journal of Education, Culture and Society*, 13(1), 403–417. <https://doi.org/10.15503/jecs2022.1.403.417>
- Wu, Q., & Wang, X. (2024). A Review of Critical Discourse Analysis Research at Home and Abroad Over the Past Five Years Based on CiteSpace. *Modern Linguistics*, 12, 119. <https://doi.org/10.12677/ml.2024.128669>
- Xiong, T. (2012). Essence or practice? Conflicting cultural values in Chinese EFL textbooks: A discourse approach. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 33(4), 499–516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2012.692958>
- Xiong, T., & Yuan, Z. (2018). “It was because I could speak English that I got the job”: Neoliberal discourse in a Chinese English textbook series. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 17(2), 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2017.1407655>
- Zhang, Q., & Cuo, Y. (2021). A multimodal approach to attitudes towards Tibet in Chinese language textbooks. *Asian Ethnicity*, 23(4), 741–761. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2021.1976059>
- Zhang, L., & Smith, C. A. (2024). Neoliberal, trouble free worlds for an aspirational middle class in Chinese EFL publications: A multimodal critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Communication*, 18(4), 592–612. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813241237377>
- Zhang, L., Zhang, Y., & Cao, R. (2022). “Can we stop cleaning the house and make some food, Mum?”: A critical investigation of gender representation in China's English textbooks. *Linguistics and Education*, 69, Article 101058. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2022.101058>
- Zhao, J., & Chao, Z. (2019). A critical analysis of gender-discriminatory discourse in primary Chinese language textbooks: A case study of model characters. *Data of Culture and Education*, 30.
- Zhu, R. (2016). Discourse analysis and transformation of paradigm in Chinese philosophical studies. *Academic Monthly*, 48(9). <https://doi.org/10.19862/j.cnki.xsyk.2016.09.009>