

# Innovations

## A Study on Teachers' Understanding of Hidden Curriculum in China's College English Reading and Writing Course

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**Abstract:** *A hidden curriculum is an important part of a curriculum, together with an explicit curriculum constituting a complete curriculum system, which has a great impact on students' learning. The hidden curriculum in English teaching is not planned, explicit, or sometimes even unconscious. Because of its potential and unexpectedness, it is easily overlooked by teachers. In China, the research on hidden curriculum is mainly based on theoretical research and campus culture construction, while the research on the implementation in college English teaching is rare. This paper selects the English teachers of a university in China as the survey object, conducts a questionnaire survey, interviews and classroom observation to learn about the teachers' cognition about the hidden curriculum, analyse the current situation of the implementation of the hidden curriculum in College English Reading and Writing Course and thus put forward suggestions. The study intends to provide a reference for the implementation of an English hidden curriculum, promote the reform of college English courses, and explore an effective way for the development of college students' comprehensive language ability.*

**Keywords:** *Hidden Curriculum; Teachers' Understanding; English Class*

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### Introduction

The concept of "hidden curriculum" was first formally introduced by American education scholar Jackson (1968) in his monograph "*Life in Classrooms*". According to Vallance (1974), some words characterize hidden curriculum, such as unstudied, covert, or latent curriculum, and it is the "non-academic outcomes of schooling", the "by-products of schooling", the "residue of schooling", or simply "what schooling does to people". Jerald (2006) observed that the hidden curriculum is implicit schooling, in which attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors are conveyed or communicated without conscious intention. The transmission of this message occurs subtly through the words and actions that naturally occur in the everyday lives of individuals within a society.

In China, there are also different definitions of the hidden curriculum. Some consider the hidden curriculum to be the experiences that students unconsciously acquire in the school context (Zheng, 1989) and the educational influences that are indirect and hidden inside and outside the classroom and that act through the unconscious, non-specific psychological reactions of the educated (Ban, 1989). Some believe that the hidden curriculum is the non-academic knowledge of values, attitudes, and beliefs that is intentionally or unintentionally conveyed to students by the social relationship structure of the school, including the classroom and the school's formal curriculum (Tang, 1988). Jin Yule (1993) defines it as the non-public educational experiences (both academic and non-academic) that are intentionally or unintentionally transmitted to students through the educational environment (including the physical, cultural, and social relationship structures).

Although the hidden curriculum has gained widespread attention and discussion in the educational community both at home and abroad, teachers' understanding of the hidden curriculum has not been emphasized. Many teachers are unaware of the existence of hidden curriculum (Rossouw & Frick, 2023; Semper et al., 2018; Bitzer & Botha, 2011; Pitts, 2003). Cornbleth (1984) emphasizes the role of teachers in his research. According to him, it was determined that the hidden curriculum is conveyed through messages from school staff, particularly teachers. Therefore, it is recommended that curriculum designers, superintendents, and school administrators provide teachers with a more thorough understanding of the concept of the hidden curriculum. This will enable teachers to effectively navigate and implement the curriculum in alignment with its underlying messages.

The paper is to study university English teachers' understanding of the hidden curriculum by a questionnaire, interview and classroom observation to find out teachers' understanding and the implementation of the physical and spiritual content of the hidden curriculum in university English teaching. Through the survey, this study will answer three questions: what is the teachers' cognition of the English Hidden Curriculum? What is the implementation of the material and spiritual elements of the hidden curriculum in teachers' perceptions? The study aims to draw educators' attention to the hidden curriculum and to suggest effective ways to create a better English learning environment for students and to find ways to improve teachers' teaching.

## Literature Review

The theories of Dewey and Kirkpatrick are the origin of the idea of hidden curriculum (Shi, 2010). Dewey (1916) proposed collateral learning, which is the idea that the affective and intentional experiences that students have in the course of their "formal" learning experiences or knowledge are even more educationally influential than the formal teaching content under certain conditions. Kirkpatrick further developed Dewey's ideas. He believed that holistic learning should consist of three parts: primary learning (i.e., direct learning), associate learning (i.e., related learning), and concurrent learning (i.e., indirect learning) (Deng & Luo, 2005). These concepts have laid the foundation for an in-depth study of the hidden curriculum. Jackson first put forward the concept of "hidden curriculum" in his 1968 book *Life in the Classroom*. He analyzed the characteristics of group life, the compensation system, and the authority structure in the classroom and believed that these non-obvious school characteristics form a unique school atmosphere, which constitutes the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968).

Hidden curriculum was formally proposed after the 1960s, and then foreign scholars have studied it from different angles. It is generally agreed that the research on the hidden curriculum has gone through three schools of theory, namely, the structural-functionalist school, the phenomenal-interpretive school, and the social critical theory (Ran, 2014). Structural-functionalism focuses on the permeation of social paradigms and social values in schools, such as politeness, order, and respect for teachers. The phenomenal-interpretive school places more emphasis on fostering students' personal agency and sees the acquisition of the hidden curriculum as a process in which students actively explore the school life, its domains, and its meaning. Researchers in the social critical theory school believe that the hidden curriculum reflects changes in the class and economic structure of society (Giroux & Penna, 1979).

Scholars also have different perceptions about the connotations or elements of the hidden curriculum. According to the findings of Cornbleth (1984), various factors contribute to the formation of the hidden curriculum, including teachers, students, society, knowledge, and awareness. Vallance (1991) summarized the hidden curriculum as having three dimensions: contexts of schooling, processes operating in or through schools, and degrees of intentionality or hiddenness of the outcomes. Jerald (2006) emphasizes the importance of teachers in the hidden curriculum. He observed that teachers who understand the significance and impact of the hidden curriculum consistently assess their own attitudes toward the hidden curriculum. He observed that such teachers consistently assess their own attitudes in the classroom with their students. It is of utmost importance to ensure that teachers are equipped with effective methods and strategies to facilitate their students' understanding of the hidden curriculum. The behavior of teachers is a key factor in determining the hidden curriculum (Li, 2019; Bitzer & Botha, 2011; Knowles, 1973; Peters, 1966). Material elements such as textbooks, buildings, classroom design, and the campus environment also contribute to the transmission of the hidden curriculum (Tor, 2015). The spiritual component of hidden curriculum transmission includes ideology, study methods, lecturers' educational philosophies, knowledge perspectives, values, instructional advice, and teaching styles (Li, 2019). The interpersonal interactions between professors and students determine this spiritual component. It is crucial for teachers to acknowledge their crucial role in fostering critical thinking in students and the role that the hidden curriculum plays in promoting it.

Research on the hidden curriculum in China began in the 1980s. After the concept of “hidden curriculum” was introduced to China, it aroused the interest of many educational researchers. The scholar Chen Bozhang (1985) systematically discussed the concept of hidden curriculum in his book. Gu Mingyuan (1990) says the hidden curriculum is the potential curriculum, not the informal curriculum, which, together with the explicit curriculum, constitutes the school curriculum and is mainly characterized by its invisibility and inscrutability. It plays an important role in the teaching and learning of students’ theories, feelings, beliefs, and outlook on life, values, and worldview. Ban Hua (1989) proposes that the hidden curriculum refers to the potential causes of educational effects through the unconscious minds of the students. Jin Yule (1996), on the other hand, holds that the hidden curriculum is the academic or non-academic experience that is subtly imparted to the educated through certain educational media.

Domestic research on the hidden curriculum focuses more on its role and influence in the process of education and teaching. Chen Man and Shuai Bin (2003) studied the role of the hidden curriculum from the perspectives of information theory and psychology, while others emphasized the moral education role of the hidden curriculum (Chen, 2006; Yang, 2023). Some studies focus on the development and specific content of the hidden curriculum. Fu Wenzhong (2006) argues that the construction of implicit curriculum in colleges and universities should optimize the construction of institutional, material, and spiritual cultures in schools. Fang Chengzhi (2006) attempted to build a potential curriculum suitable for higher vocational colleges by dealing with the relationship between implicit and explicit curriculum, focusing on the overall construction of the nurturing environment, and establishing good teacher-student relationships, among other initiatives. Liu Dianzhi et al. (2009) used Bandura’s theory of observational learning to explore the development of hidden courses from the aspects of campus environment construction, the object, and the process of observational learning. Zhang Yanfen (2010) proposed to develop the hidden curriculum from the perspective of focusing on campus culture construction and improving the quality of teachers in teacher training colleges. Tang Fanian (2011) proposed to design the implicit curriculum from the perspectives of material, behavior, system, and activity so as to stimulate the motivation of foreign language learning.

It can be seen through the collation and analysis that in China, the research of hidden curriculum has been in the stage of exploring the practice of hidden curriculum after going through the stage of introducing the concept and discussing the connotation, and the development and construction of hidden curriculum in the classroom and the campus is the focus of the research of hidden curriculum. Previous research at home and abroad has achieved certain results, but there are more interpretations from the macro and qualitative perspectives. As far as the research content is concerned, there is a lack of constructing the hidden curriculum based on specific courses and attention to the teacher’s cognition, which provides space for this research.

## **Design and Methodology**

The research involves quantitative and qualitative analyses, as well as descriptive analysis. The subjects will complete a questionnaire for the Hidden Curriculum in College English Reading and Writing. The questionnaire aims to obtain a picture of the teachers’ cognition and the implementation of hidden curriculum.

### ***Population***

The research chose the teachers of College English Reading and Writing at a university in Henan Province, China, as survey participants. Twenty teachers who teach first- and second-year college English reading and writing courses were given a questionnaire. College English is a public course for students of various majors in the first and second grades at this university. The textbook is *College English Reading and Writing*. The selected teachers cover two grades and teach students of various majors, which can reflect the implementation of the hidden college English curriculum in the school from the perspective of teachers.

### ***Data Gathering***

The research contains three parts: teachers’ cognition of hidden curriculum and the situation of material and spiritual elements of hidden curriculum in college English reading and writing. On this basis, the author designed a questionnaire. On July 18, 2022, the author distributed the questionnaire to 20 English teachers, and 20 were recovered. The recovery rate was 100%. At the same time, the author also collected materials by observing practical teaching and interviewed two teachers who taught first or second grade, respectively, to further understand the teachers’ understanding of the English implicit curriculum.

**Results**

The author collected and analyzed the returned questionnaires, and the data are presented as follows:

**A. Teachers' Cognition of English Hidden Curriculum**

The study first investigated teachers' familiarity with the hidden curriculum. Giroux & Penna (1979) hold that teachers undoubtedly possess a crucial function in upholding the organization of educational institutions and imparting the necessary principles that uphold a broader societal order. English teachers' awareness of hidden curriculum has a direct and very important relationship with the implementation and development of hidden curriculum.

Items	Be very familiar (4 points)	Be somewhat familiar (3 points)	Know little (2 points)	Don't know (1 points)
Number of the teachers	3 persons	5 persons	9 persons	3 persons
Percentage of total	0.15	0.25	0.50	0.10
Total Points	12	15	18	3
Mean Score	2.45			

**Table 1: Teachers' Familiarity with Hidden Curriculum**

As can be seen from Table 1, only 3 teachers, or 15% of the total number, chose "be familiar with hidden curriculum". 5 people are somewhat familiar, and 3 people don't know the hidden curriculum. The mean score is 2.45. This suggests that teachers' evaluation of their own knowledge about the hidden curriculum is positive. But according to the author's interview and observation, most teachers in the study can explain clearly the concept of the hidden curriculum. The main reason is probably that these subjects have different educational backgrounds. Few teachers graduated with English education majors, and most of them graduated with linguistics and literature backgrounds. Therefore, the front-line teachers, although they have rich teaching experience, have comparatively poorer theoretical knowledge of the curriculum. When teachers are less aware of hidden curriculum, they may question the hidden curriculum and negatively impact students (Alsubaie, 2015). From this point of view, English teachers must strengthen theoretical study in continuing education.

The hidden curriculum may have an impact on students' values, competencies, and skills (Rossouw & Frick, 2023). Therefore, the study intends to predict how teachers would perceive the role that hidden curriculum plays in developing students' overall competence and aptitude by examining how they think about the task of teaching language.

English Teachers' Cognition about Teaching Tasks	Percentage
Teach English language knowledge and skills	100%
Cultivate good moral character	90%
Develop interest and learning attitude	95%
Teach learning strategies and develop habits	85%
Cultivate cross-cultural awareness	95%
Teach how to communicate with foreigners	70%
Promote all-around development	75%
Promote students' personality	55%

**Table 2: Teachers' Understanding of Tasks of College English Teaching**

The results revealed the teachers' unconsciousness of the role that hidden curriculum may play in language class. The result (Table 2) shows that all English teachers believe that imparting English knowledge and skills is the primary task. 95% of teachers believe that it is important to cultivate students' interest and learning attitudes in English, as well as their cross-cultural awareness. With the increasing degree of globalization, cross-cultural awareness is very important in foreign language teaching.

85% of teachers believe that teaching students learning strategies and helping them develop good study habits is one of the most important tasks because learning to learn is a necessary skill for students. 90% of teachers believe that it is important to cultivate students' excellent moral character. 70% of teachers believe that teaching students to communicate with foreigners is one of their teaching tasks, and 75% of teachers also believe that it is important to promote the all-around development of students. Only a few teachers believe that English teaching needs to promote the development of students' personalities. It can be seen that most teachers do not realize the significance of the hidden curriculum in English language teaching and learning.

**B. The Material Elements of English Hidden Curriculum**

According to Gair and Mullins (2001), material hidden curriculum is mainly the use of buildings, equipment, and space in schools, etc., and the university's physical environment serves as a medium for conveying a concealed curriculum. The development of a college English hidden course requires attention to the English elements of campus layout, such as English cultural content in the classroom, modern educational technology supporting English teaching, and so on. For example, teachers can decorate the classroom with English elements to play the invisible educational role of the classroom.

Material Hidden Resource	Very Useful (4 points)	Useful (3 points)	Average (2 points)	Useless (1 points)	Mean Score
English element in classroom decoration	36	21	6	1	3.2
Changes of the layout in teaching	8	24	12	4	2.4
Newspaper, Learning Apps	40	21	6	0	3.35
Audio-visual teaching equipment	80	0	0	0	4

**Table 3: The Material Elements of English Hidden Curriculum**

Table 3 shows the teachers' perceptions about the use of material elements of the hidden curriculum, including English elements in class decoration, layout in teaching, learning aids, and teaching equipment. The results reflected that most of the teachers were not very satisfied with the current classroom layout. It suggested that 80% of the teachers either fully affirmed or affirmed the role of English elements in classroom decoration in facilitating language learning. Only 5% of them think it is useless. It can be seen that most teachers recognize the positive role of the classroom environment in promoting language learning. However, college English is not normally regarded as a specialized course and is not taken seriously by non-English major students. Meanwhile, since the classrooms are not fixed at this university, English teachers are unable to design and arrange classrooms freely. Therefore, the hidden resource in the college English classroom is not completely developed.

Vallance (1991) puts classroom structure at the most basic level of the hidden curriculum. Regarding the layout of classrooms in English teaching, the questionnaire suggested only three teachers have made adjustments, and the changes are in the form of combining learning teams or changing the position where teachers stand in lectures. The main reason for the few changes in the layout of the English classroom is that the number of students and desks in the class are too large, which makes it troublesome to conduct moving activities in teaching. Half of the teachers think that the change in desk layout has a positive effect on English learning, while 20% of the teachers still think that it has no effect. Indeed, students may establish a relationship with the teacher in physical space through the arrangement of desks and chairs. The form and position of the desks and chairs determine the size of the classroom space, the form and content of the classroom activities, and ultimately the mode of information exchange between teachers and students and between students and teachers in the space (Zhang, 2010).

In addition, teachers adopt various mediums to convey hidden curriculum. All the media tools that are used to convey and amplify the teaching and learning messages between the educators and the learners can be regarded as the medium of instruction, including the teaching environment, teaching materials, teaching tools, and teachers' verbal and non-verbal behaviors (Li & Yang, 2008). As supplements to the language of instruction, pictures, audio-visual materials, etc., because of their rich expressive power, can effectively supplement or connect the missing parts of the message (Zhang & Cao, 2003). Among the 20 teachers, 19 have once recommended English newspapers or English learning apps. Most of the recommended resources are word-memorization tools, such as Bai Ci Zhan, listening software, etc., mainly aiming at strengthening language skills for CET 4 and CET 6 (the National College English Test). The survey on the application of equipment in teaching shows that 100% of teachers use audio-visual teaching equipment in class. But the frequency and effect of teachers' use are not the same. Some teachers only show PowerPoint to assist lectures, and some teachers play English songs, videos, news, etc. during

breaks or extracurricular activities. But the latter only accounted for 45% of the total. However, all teachers reach a consensus that audio-visual equipment is essential for English learning.

Through the investigation of the material environment, it can be inferred that teachers play a leading role in the hidden resources of college English. They may build an English-language environment and develop a hidden curriculum in terms of classroom layout, extracurricular learning resources, and the use of audio-visual equipment.

**C. The Spiritual Elements of English Hidden Curriculum**

In addition to the construction of the physical environment, spiritual elements function well in the transmission of hidden curriculum. The spiritual elements of the English hidden curriculum include the class atmosphere, learning system, teacher-student relationship, student-student relationship, extracurricular activity resources, etc. Teachers build relationships with students mainly through speech acts in their lessons. Language behavior in educational contexts not only affects the teaching process and educational outcomes but also affects learners' interpersonal relationships as well as their ways of perceiving and thinking, which is manifested in the influence of educational language on learners' motivation, attitudes, and other emotional factors, as well as the educators' concepts of education implicitly implied by the educational language (Liu & Huang, 1992).

Spiritual Hidden Resources	Very Good (4 points)	Good (3 points)	Average (2 points)	Poor (1 points)	Mean
Constructing learning atmosphere	12	12	26	0	2.5
Students' learning atmosphere	20	18	14	2	2.7

**Table 4: The Spiritual Elements of English Hidden Curriculum**

The survey showed that 35% of teachers think they are “very good” or “good” at constructing an English learning atmosphere, while most teachers think they are “average”. As for the learning atmosphere of the class, 55% of teachers think it is “good”, 35% of them think it is “average”, and 10% are “poor”. But all teachers are positive about the impact of the learning atmosphere. The mean score is 2.7 (over 2.5). They believe that the learning atmosphere can be improved by cultivating students' interests, attitudes, and habits, stressing assessment, and appropriately carrying out extracurricular activities.

The last part of the questionnaire is about the teachers' survey of the assessment items of the students in order to find out whether the teachers pay attention to the students' overall development in addition to the language skills and the process assessment.

Assessment system	Scores of the Teachers	Percentage
Attitude	19	95%
Learning Habits	18	90%
Language Skills	12	60%
Test Scores	19	95%
Class Performance	17	85%
Contribution to the class	6	30%

**Table 5: Assessment System**

The results showed that 95% of the teachers have a rewarding assessment system. All teachers attach great importance to English language knowledge and skills in assessment. At the same time, the ratio of teachers who prefer the importance of students' attitudes and habits reaches 95% and 85%, respectively. 45% of teachers hold that the evaluation system focuses too much on the results of exams and fails to comprehensively evaluate a student's learning. In the supplementary interview, some teachers indicated that the formative assessment contains subjective contents such as learning enthusiasm and learning attitude, which are not easy to quantify, so the final test score accounts for a more important weight. The result shows that teachers are very much focused on the development of students' skills beyond language skills, including learning habits, attitudes, and motivation. The development of these competencies requires the involvement of the hidden curriculum, which works alongside the formal teaching and learning process in the classroom. This also reflects the necessity and feasibility of developing a hidden curriculum for this course.

## Discussion and Suggestions

The investigation results show that a lot of teachers do not have a good understanding of the hidden curriculum. Teachers' perceptions about the hidden curriculum are key to its functioning. The cognition about it includes an understanding of the meaning, content and forms of delivery of the hidden curriculum. Teachers' knowledge of the hidden curriculum and the effectiveness of its implementation are uneven because of the limitations of their previous educational experiences and teaching environments. Therefore, improving theoretical cognition and practical ability is what the current teaching administration needs to focus on.

The campus cultural environment in which learners live for a long period of time may seem to be silent and quiet, but under the influence of the environment over a long period of time, learners living in it gradually establish an interactive relationship with the campus cultural environment (Yang, 2002). Therefore, the campus environment is very important. Combining with class observations, the author finds that there are very few English elements in the current classroom layout, even if there are some, only in small size. On campus, English newspapers and magazines that have a positive effect are presented in very few newspaper columns but are updated slowly. Similarly, all classrooms in the university are multimedia classrooms, but the frequency of utilization is not high and the effect of language learning is not obvious. English teachers have a positive attitude towards the significance of the learning atmosphere. However, they lack scientific and systematic guidance to build a good language learning atmosphere.

As for the assessment system, it is also necessary to develop a new mechanism that is more suitable for stimulating students' interest and enthusiasm for language learning in future teaching research. The hermeneutic of the hidden curriculum rejects the view of the student as a totally passive object and sees the educational process as one in which the student actively explores and learns the meaning of things in the living world. The hidden curriculum can stimulate students' imagination, critical thinking, and creativity (Deng & Luo, 2005) and change students' psychological structure, knowledge structure, and thinking structure by influencing learners' motivation, cultural attitudes, and other emotional factors (Huang, 2001). Through observation and interviews, it has been learned that most teachers have done some work in developing hidden resources for cultivating students' emotions and moral qualities.

Based on the above study, here are some tentative suggestions as follows:

For the university, it is necessary to optimize the curriculum design. English implicit and explicit curricula are relatively independent and complementary, and together they constitute a complete curriculum system. In the past, English courses only focused on explicit courses, ignoring the role of hidden factors in language education. Therefore, the English hidden curriculum should be incorporated into the English curriculum system to optimize the curriculum structure.

Secondly, teachers should improve themselves through continuous learning and re-education so that they can coordinate the explicit and implicit courses in teaching and give full play to the leading role of teachers in the hidden curriculum. Teachers' roles in the hidden curriculum are mainly reflected in creating a material learning environment and a good language learning atmosphere. Teachers can arrange English corners and blackboard newspapers on English topics in classrooms and campuses to show vocabulary, proverbs, stories, and foreign cultures to enrich students' extracurricular knowledge. At the same time, classroom layout, multimedia, and modern educational technology are useful hidden resources. Of course, the spiritual elements constitute the core part of the English implicit curriculum. Teachers should pay attention to the students' learning habits and build positive and healthy relationships.

## Conclusion

The purpose of carrying out the research on the hidden curriculum in college English reading and writing courses is to create a better foreign language teaching environment and transform language learning into attractive activities through the coordinated planning and optimal development of explicit and implicit courses. Through the all-around construction of the material and the humanistic environment, we can create a better learning atmosphere to enhance communication between teachers and students and achieve the best teaching effect with the optimized curriculum structure.

## Limitations and Future Studies

Through investigation, it can be concluded that the development and application of hidden curricula in college English reading and writing are still in a spontaneous and unconscious stage, not as purposeful, planned, and step-by-step as explicit courses, and teachers need to be more aware of the hidden curriculum. It can be predicted that the construction of a hidden curriculum will be an important part of promoting college English courses and improving the effect of English teaching and learning. However, due to the lack of theoretical and practical experience and the limitation of research time, this research still has some limitations that need to be further tested in future research.

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