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Constructing Sustainability in Vocational Education: A Harmonious Discourse Analysis of English Textbooks

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Abstract: Vocational education provides a large share of the global workforce. Its textbooks are key sites for articulating sustainability-related discourse that future professionals will need in their careers. Ecolinguistic research on educational materials has grown, yet vocational English textbooks remain underexplored, with existing studies offering little insight into broader sustainability discourse. Drawing on Harmonious Discourse Analysis (HDA), this study examines how sustainability is discursively constructed across 88 texts from two widely used vocational English textbook series. The findings are threefold: (1) thematic construction, discourses centring on "human-orientedness" predominate, followed by those on conscience and proximity, while discourse resources under regulation remain insufficient. Sustainability is discursively constructed primarily through humanistic empathy and internal self-awareness, with an emphasis on holistic literacy; (2) structural construction, both textbooks employ a dual framework of rational cognition and empathetic edification, establishing benchmarks through authoritative examples and realising value-oriented potential through individual cases. However, notable deficiencies are observed in textual representations of social-conduct guidance and normative awareness; (3) attitudinal construction, positive emotions substantially outweigh negative ones. Only the principle of conscience accommodates both positive achievement-oriented discourse and critical reflection, whereas the other dimensions lack dialectical tension. The overall discursive construction follows a progressive logic of "consciousness awakening–behavioural regulation–value identification", yet it tends to overemphasise behavioural guidance at the expense of theoretical depth, and offers insufficient discourse on human–nature proximity. Future textbook development would benefit from a more balanced genre distribution and greater critical reflectiveness, thereby enriching sustainability-related textual representations.

Keywords: harmonious discourse analysis (HDA); sustainability discourse; English textbooks; ecolinguistics; vocational education

1. Introduction

Over the past four decades, alongside the rapid expansion of vocational education in China, English education has consistently cultivated a substantial number of high-quality technical professionals, contributing its intellectual and strategic contributions to the global community (Chang et al., 2021). In the current era of high-quality educational development, English education is undergoing a paradigm shift from language skills training towards holistic cultivation. As an important vehicle for cultural inheritance and mutual learning among civilisations, English language teaching not only provides a training ground for cross-cultural communicative competence but also serves as a critical arena for value guidance, formation, and reformation, and as a key

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platform for enhancing students' cultural confidence and promoting the international dissemination of Chinese culture (Wen & Zhang, 2021).

Textbooks, as the primary medium of instructional activities, embody the policy orientations of the Chinese state, fundamental national values, and the innovative achievements of human cultural knowledge (Chang & Liu, 2022). They are essential resources for cultivating students' critical thinking, problem-solving orientation, and language-based awareness, and play a foundational and dominant role in the construction of sustainability discourse. It should be noted that the "sustainability" discussed in this study transcends the narrow scope of ecological protection. It is grounded in the "human-orientedness" assumption of the Harmonious Discourse Analysis (HDA) framework (Huang, 2017)—an ecolinguistic approach rooted in the Chinese context—and aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), pointing toward a broad understanding of sustainability that encompasses harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, the sustainable development of society and culture, and the comprehensive development of individuals.

As early as 2011, the Chinese Ministry of Education, in its Opinions on Promoting Reform and Innovation in Higher Vocational Education to Lead the Scientific Development of Technical and Vocational Education and Training, explicitly stated that Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) should enhance students' sustainable development capabilities through reforming training models. In 2026, the Ministry further emphasised, in its Opinions on Deepening Reform of Key Elements in Technical and Vocational Education and Training Curriculum and Instruction, that textbooks should align with the strategy of "TVET Going Global" and adapt to evolving global developments. Sustainability discourse in vocational education English textbooks thus serves as the foundation upon which English classrooms cultivate students' adaptability to emerging developmental demands and personal growth. However, how sustainability is linguistically constructed in higher vocational English textbooks, and what characteristics and logics they exhibit, remain underexplored in empirical research.

To address this gap, the present study constructs a corpus of vocational education English textbook discourses and, based on the HDA framework, develops an analytical model for the discursive construction of sustainability. Employing NVivo 15.5.2 as a qualitative analysis tool and guided by the ecological philosophy of "harmony", this study aims to uncover the themes, structures, attitudes, and strategies of sustainability construction in vocational education English textbooks, and to explore the research pathways through which HDA can inform textbook development and the integration of values education into foreign language curricula.

2. Harmonious Discourse Analysis and Its Application in Textbook Research

2.1. The HDA Framework: Origins, Assumptions, and Analytical Principles

HDA is an ecolinguistic research approach proposed by Chinese linguist Huang Guowen in 2016 within the Chinese context (Huang, 2016). Unlike ecolinguistic and discourse-analytic frameworks originating from Western philosophical traditions, such as Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003); Martin's Positive Discourse Analysis (Martin, 2004); Stibbe's beneficial/ambivalent/destructive classification (Stibbe, 2015; 2021), HDA is grounded in the Chinese philosophical tradition. The theory takes the Daoist concept of "unity of heaven and humanity" (*tian ren he yi*, 天人合一) as its philosophical guide, adopts philosophical perspectives aligned with Chinese characteristics to understand the interrelations between humans and ecology, and follows the methodological principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) from a holistic perspective (Huang, 2025). As a problem-oriented analytical framework, HDA adheres to the philosophy of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature (Huang & Zhao, 2017). This orientation does not replace critical analysis but complements it by providing an analytical lens attuned to the constructive, rather than merely deconstructive, potential of educational discourse. In terms of its developmental trajectory, HDA follows two main threads: from the Chinese context to the global context, and from systematic modelling to diversified application. Its theoretical system comprises three core components—"harmony" as context, "discourse" as object, and "analysis" as approach, embodying a constructive, functional, and evolutionary view of language (Huang, 2018; Huang & Zhao, 2021; Zhao & Huang, 2025).

At the theoretical level, HDA encompasses one fundamental assumption—"human-orientedness"—and three analytical principles: conscience, regulation, and proximity (Huang, 2017). Specifically, "human-orientedness" serves as the core assumption and the point of departure and ultimate goal of discourse analysis, emphasising that analysis should begin with human problems and assess the relationship between humans and ecology from the perspective of human concerns. The principle of conscience pertains to judgments about things or events, comprising three elements—knowing, doing, and good nature—and points to ecological conscience as an individual's intrinsic reverence and love for nature, serving as the voluntary condition for human-orientedness; the principle of regulation addresses the standardisation and institutionalisation of behaviour at the individual, community, and state levels, serving as the limiting condition for human-orientedness; the principle of proximity encompasses multi-dimensional proximity relationships—biological, spatio-temporal, emotional,

cognitive, political, geographical, and physical—and serves as the concrete manifestation of human-orientedness (Huang & Zhao, 2019; Zhao & Huang, 2021).

2.2. Applicability of the HDA Framework to Sustainability Discourse Analysis

HDA has been widely applied to various types of discourse, including media discourse (Cao & Li, 2023; Chen & Tian, 2024; Chen & Wei, 2024; Chen & Wei, 2025; Liao & Lu, 2022; Wei, 2022; Zhu et al., 2024), literary and artistic discourse (Liu, 2024; Lu & Chang, 2019; Sun & Yang, 2020; Wei, 2026; Zeng & Huang, 2022), legal texts (Zhang, 2019), and public signage discourse (Song & Ma, 2025). In recent years, it has also begun to appear in textbook discourse research, with studies examining senior high school English textbooks (Chen, 2022; Long, 2022; Peng, 2024) and college English reading and writing textbooks (Wu, 2025). Existing studies have largely focused on transitivity systems and appraisal theory, revealing harmonious elements and underlying values in texts through analyses of transitivity resource allocation and appraisal strategies.

Beyond the scope of HDA-based analyses, ecolinguistic research on English textbooks has primarily focused on reading texts and environmental themes. Yasmin et al. (2026) examined linguistic and visual patterns in Pakistani EFL textbooks using Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistic framework, identifying a gradual decline in environmental discourse from primary to secondary levels and a predominance of ambivalent and beneficial discourse with limited coverage of contemporary climate issues. Likewise, Iqbal & Lohar (2022) categorised constructive environmental discourse and eco-lexicons to uncover destructive patterns in Pakistani English textbooks, noting human-centred framing and linguistic strategies that conceal agents of ecological degradation. Pratiwi et al. (2021) analysed environmental reading texts in Indonesian BIPA textbooks, concentrating on eco-lexicon distribution and thematic coverage, and found that environmental topics remained largely confined to natural damage and conservation efforts.

While HDA-based studies have examined discourse features in general education textbooks and ecolinguistic research has explored sustainability in non-vocational materials, no study has systematically investigated how sustainability is discursively constructed in vocational English textbooks. Although existing studies have contributed valuable insights into environmental content representation, they have largely centred on environmentally themed texts, with primary attention to lexicogrammatical features, thematic content, and discourse classification. This has left the broader distribution of genres across entire textbooks and the emotional and attitudinal dimensions embedded in different text types largely unexplored. Furthermore, no study has yet examined how sustainability is discursively constructed across the full range of textbook materials. Therefore, guided by the HDA framework, the present study addresses these gaps by analysing all reading texts across two vocational English textbook series—not only those with explicit environmental content—in order to capture a more comprehensive picture of how sustainability is discursively constructed across themes, structures, and attitudes. Moreover, HDA would enable the analyst to identify not only what is missing or problematic but also what forms of harmony are being textually constructed and how they might be pedagogically leveraged.

This study approaches sustainability as a discursively constructed concept that extends beyond the narrow scope of ecological protection. Drawing on Stibbe's (2019) concept of sustainability in education—which centres on intrinsic values such as human wellbeing, equity and justice, and the continuation of all life forms, advocating for the flourishing of life—and integrating the Chinese context, this study follows the ecological philosophical perspective of HDA as proposed by Huang (2016; 2026): to achieve harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, sustainable development of society and culture, and comprehensive human development. Extending HDA framework and its theoretical connotations (Huang, 2016; 2017; 2018; Huang & Zhao, 2017; Huang & Zhao, 2021; Zhao, 2025; Zhao & Huang, 2017; 2021; Zhao & Huang, 2025) to vocational education textbooks, the discursive construction of sustainability is oriented towards holistic cultivation and the orientation of cultivating high-quality technical talents, pointing toward an integrated sustainability that encompasses ecology, economy, culture, technology, society, and professional development.

To enhance analytical transparency, this study operationalises these broad categories through four HDA-grounded dimensions—human-orientedness, conscience, proximity, and regulation—which serve as the primary coding framework for identifying sustainability-related discourse. For example, content merely celebrating personal achievement without addressing collective wellbeing or systemic responsibility was not coded as sustainability discourse unless it explicitly invoked broader social or ecological implications. For instance, the sentence "Zhong had become known to every Chinese household during the SARS outbreak of 2003, and was considered a SARS hero (Textbook B, Volume 3, Unit 3)" was not coded under sustainability discourse, as it solely celebrates individual reputation without invoking broader social or ecological responsibility. By contrast, the sentence "Zhong simply replied that he had been taught to speak honestly and to be an honest man since childhood. His belief was that in science, it is only right to seek truth from facts" was coded under the principle of conscience, as it frames scientific integrity as a form of

social responsibility. Through analyses of word frequency, genre, and sentiment, in conjunction with the four HDA dimensions, the study reveals the themes, structures, and strategies through which sustainability is discursively constructed in the textbooks. (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Mapping the relationship between the HDA framework and textbook analysis.

2.3. Research Questions

This study examines how the four dimensions of HDA are discursively realised in Chinese vocational education English textbooks. The research questions are as follows:

(1) What thematic patterns emerge from word frequency analysis, collocation and concordance-based analysis, and to what extent do they reflect the HDA assumption of human-orientedness?
(2) What genre-based structural features are identified through genre analysis, and how do these genres instantiate discursive resources associated with the HDA principles of conscience, proximity, and regulation?
(3) What attitudinal orientations are revealed through sentiment analysis, and how is sustainability-related value identification discursively constructed within texts across the four HDA dimensions?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Self-Constructed Corpus

The discourse data selected for this study are two sets of "14th Five-Year Plan" TVET National Planning Textbooks published by a domestic foreign language textbook publisher. Textbook A is currently adopted by 266 vocational education institutions across China, (approximately 17% of the national total) and Textbook B is in use in 221 institutions (approximately 14%) (Adoption numbers derive from the textbook publisher's internal, non-public usage statistics. The two textbook series are non-mutually-exclusive: individual institutions may adopt either one or both of the series. The total number of vocational education institutions in China (1540) is based on data from Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2026), as recorded in June 2026.). The selected textual materials are reading texts that embed coherent thematic content. Textbook A is a general English course textbook for higher vocational colleges and vocational undergraduate programmes, comprising two volumes, each containing six units. Each unit includes two Reading Texts—one thematic reading and one on Chinese culture, totalling 24 texts across 12 units. Textbook B comprises four volumes, accommodating higher vocational students with diverse entry backgrounds from secondary vocational schools and regular senior high schools, and covering a complete four-year learning cycle. The course difficulty is benchmarked against the English proficiency standards for undergraduate graduates. Each volume contains eight teaching units, with each unit including Reading A and Reading B, totalling 64 texts across 32 units. Across the two-textbook series, 88 reading texts are selected (see Appendix Table A1), with a total of 41,393 tokens and 5279 word types. The two textbook series systematically embed talent cultivation discourse that serves industrial globalisation and the higher vocational–undergraduate integration, providing sufficient data for this study.

3.2. Coding Procedures: From Inductive Description to Framework-Guided Thematic Analysis

The coding process followed a two-phase design. Phase 1 was inductive descriptive coding, during which the researcher identified salient discursive features without reference to HDA categories. Phase 2 was deductive HDA mapping, during which the inductively derived categories were systematically examined for their alignment with the four HDA dimensions. This design makes the inductive-deductive distinction explicit and avoids the claim that HDA categories were derived solely from data.

Consistent with this inductive starting-point, the study avoids pre-defined hierarchical coding labels. Instead, conceptual categories were generated layer-by-layer from raw textual data (e.g., Shen et al., 2026; Xin & Xiong, 2026; Zhao et al., 2025). Two key considerations underpin this analytical decision: first, to avoid obscuring the diversity of textual features with a priori frameworks, ensuring that the analytical process fully respects the richness and complexity of discursive themes and structures in textbook discourses; second, to better "listen" to the voice of the text itself and reveal the implicit discursive patterns and value orientations embedded within. As Stibbe (2015: 6) points out,

> *"Stories are cognitive structures in the minds of individuals which influence how they perceive the world.*
>
> *Stories-we-live-by are stories in the minds of multiple individuals across a culture.*
>
> *... Importantly the stories-we-live-by influence how we act in the world".*

Researchers ought to uncover the underlying *stories-we-live-by* embedded across textual discourse, which govern how humans interpret and respond to the surrounding world. If overly rigid analytical categories are preset, subtle and crucial discursive clues in the text may be obscured. Therefore, this study approaches the textbook texts with an open attitude, identifying and coding the semantic units that carry value positions, emotional tendencies, preference expressions, viewpoints and judgments, and relational constructions, striving to faithfully present the overall landscape of sustainability in the textbooks.

During the coding phase, the researchers read through 88 reading texts from the two English textbook sets, coding content that manifests explicit values, ecological awareness, social responsibility, professional ethics, cultural identity, and interpersonal care. The coding followed four principles of "salience": (1) value salience, statements that explicitly express a commendable or reflective stance, attitude, or belief; (2) emotional salience, language containing positive or negative emotional undertones such as pride, concern, empathy, or responsibility; (3) relational salience, discourse involving interactions and connections between the self and others, society, nature, or technology; and (4) normative salience, statements that directly or indirectly advocate behavioural norms, action recommendations, or self-management strategies. Each annotation recorded the original statement and its contextual environment to ensure traceability and analytical transparency.

After completing the annotation phase, the study proceeded to open coding, extracting initial conceptual labels (tertiary codes) from the annotated materials. These labels were presented in the form of phrases or short sentences, striving to approximate the original semantics, such as "Guochao products are popular among young people for their cultural and historical connotations", "the Internet takes up too much time that should have been spent on our daily lives", and "Panda Care program in Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding". Subsequently, through constant comparison and cluster analysis, semantically similar or logically related initial concepts were grouped into more general subcategories (secondary axial codes). For example, "Guochao products are popular among young people for their cultural and historical connotations" was grouped into "cultural historical heritage and global adaptability of Chinese manufacturing", "the Internet takes up too much time that should have been spent on our daily lives" and "You're more likely than not to end up in a smart home one day, whether you want to or not". were grouped into "reflection on technological dependence", and "Panda Care program in Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding" was grouped into "nature proximity". During this phase, a small number of subcategories did not map neatly onto a single HDA dimension; for example, "national governance and people's livelihood" contained elements of both human-orientedness and regulation. In such cases, coding decisions were based on the dominant discursive function of each textual instance.

Finally, based on the HDA framework, the subcategories were further integrated into four main categories (primary selective codes): "human-orientedness" (basic assumption) and the three principles of conscience, regulation, and proximity (analytical principles). This coding workflow keeps analysis rooted in source-text evidence. At the same time, it creates systematic links to core HDA constructs, reconciling deductive theoretical framing with inductive qualitative analysis (Figure 2).

Primary coding was conducted by the lead researcher with expertise in Ecolinguistics and discourse analysis. To ensure rigour, approximately 20% of the texts and the preliminary coding framework were independently reviewed by a second trained researcher, with disagreements resolved through monthly team discussion. The codebook was iteratively refined throughout the coding process. Through iterative comparative analysis, conceptual refinement, and the removal of invalid codes, 98 initial concepts and 26 subcategories were identified (see Appendix Table A2).

The four HDA dimensions operate as analytical filters rather than mere descriptive labels: "human-orientedness" identifies the subject of sustainability, "conscience" captures its cognitive-affective basis, "proximity" traces relational distance, and "regulation" identifies institutional governance mechanisms. To further refine the analytical scope, each subcategory was additionally classified by sustainability domain into six subtypes—ecological, social, cultural, economic, technological,

and individual-professional—following the integrative vision of sustainability outlined above. This dual categorisation, by HDA dimension and by sustainability subtype, captures both how sustainability is discursively constructed and in which domain it is constructed (see Appendix Table A2).

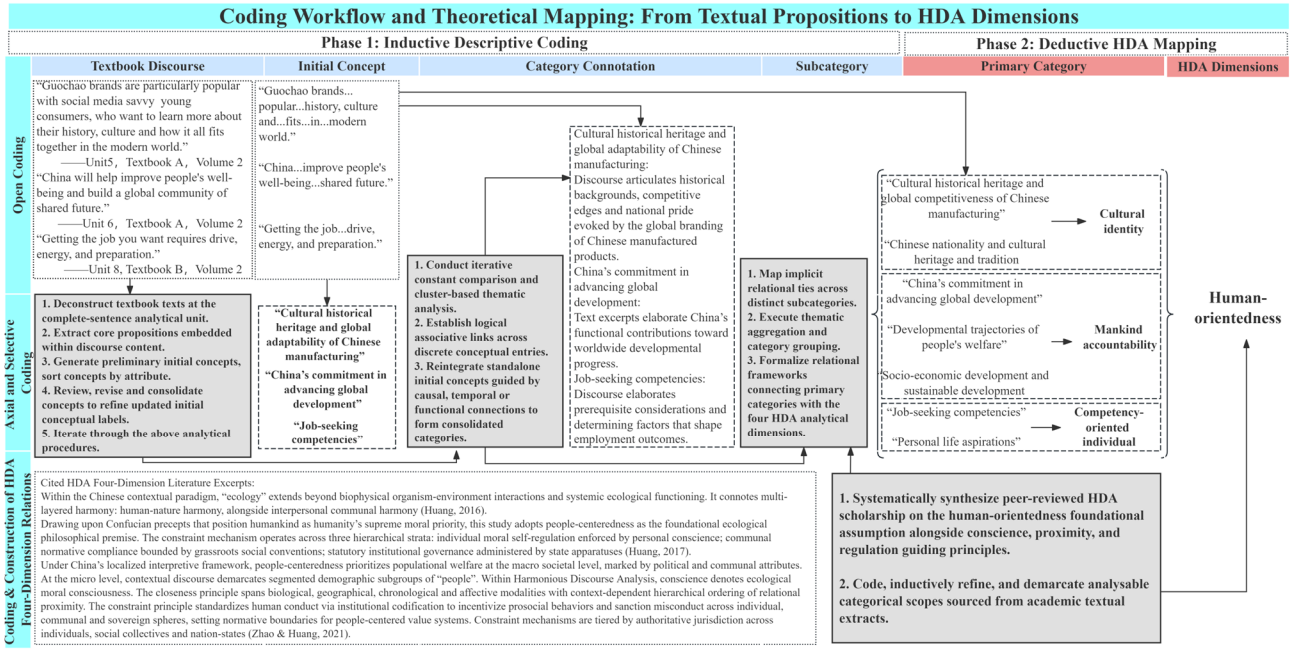


Figure 2. From inductive codes to HDA dimensions: a two-phase mapping process.

3.3. Genre Classification and Operational Criteria

Following Martin and Rose's (2008) classification of genres, texts can be categorised into Stories, Histories, Reports and Explanations, and Procedures and Procedural Recounts. Stories are the most common genre across all cultures, maintaining and shaping social relationships at various levels, particularly in community and kinship contexts, through evaluations of events and behaviours. They encompass new stories constructed through discourse, personal recounts, completed complex narratives, anecdotes, event explanations and exemplums, observations and comments, and complex narratives constructed along temporal progression. In our study, Stories were identified by the presence of a temporal sequence of events with a complicating action and resolution, and by evaluative language that constructs a moral or affective stance.

Histories go a step further in sustaining social relationships, extending to social order and covering broader populations and institutions, including biographies, social and public histories, historical recounts, explanations, discussions, and critiques. Therefore, Histories were identified by chronological organisation of past events with explicit causal or significance marking.

Reports and Explanations, and Procedures and Procedural Recounts represent the manifestation of the material-industrial world and the scientific-natural world in discourse, with the former describing and explaining the world by describing entities, classifying them, and explaining the causes and effects of activities and events, and the latter guiding action through observation, experimentation, and summarising processes. Hence, Reports and Explanations were identified by generic, timeless descriptions or causal explanations of phenomena. Procedures and Procedural Recounts were identified by step-by-step instructions or sequential descriptions of completed processes.

To ensure coding reliability, two researchers independently classified a random sample of 20 texts (approximately 23% of the corpus) using the operational criteria above. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and the criteria were refined where ambiguities arose. The remaining texts were classified by the lead researcher using the same criteria. This procedure ensures that the genre classification is both transparent and replicable.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Thematic Analysis: "Human-orientedness" as the Central Theme of Textbook Discourse

Word frequency analysis directly reflects the patterns of vocabulary use in texts (Figure 3) and serves as a basic indicator for identifying textual features (He, 2010). We used "stemmed words" as the condition for word frequency statistics, eliminating the interference of words sharing the same word root to achieve effective ranking of word frequencies. The results show that in Textbook A, the top three words are *works* (The high frequency of "works" in Textbook A (37 times, 0.98%) is due to NVivo's stemming function, which groups "work,

worked, working" and "works" under the stem "works".) (37 times, weighted percentage 0.98%), *people* (35 times, weighted percentage 0.93%), and *China* (32 times, weighted percentage 0.85%). In Textbook B, the top three high-frequency words are *people* (144 times, weighted percentage 0.82%), *year* (127 times, weighted percentage 0.72%), and *time* (110 times, weighted percentage 0.62%).



Figure 3. Word cloud of the two textbooks.

The word *people* ranks among the highest-frequency terms in both textbooks (total frequency 179 times, weighted percentage 0.84%), highlighting that the textbook content revolves around human daily life, work, interests, and the social, political, economic, cultural, and ecological environment (Table 1). While the high lemma frequency of *people* alone cannot constitute sufficient evidence for human-orientedness under HDA, its collocational patterns and discourse prosody across concordance lines point towards a human-centred orientation within textbook discourse, which aligns with HDA's core assumption of human-orientedness. As shown in the Appendix Figure A1, *people* primarily co-occurs with lexis of human agency, social practice, moral reflection and cultural situatedness, rather than functioning merely as a generic reference to human beings. However, direct lexical co-occurrence of *people* and *nature* is limited, meaning human-nature relational values are conveyed indirectly via sociocultural and ethical discourse.

Table 1. Textbook discourse examples containing the word *people.*

Domains	Discourse Examples	Textbook	Unit (Text Title)
Daily life	Typical participants on the "Double 11" shopping spree are young professional *people*.	Textbook A Book 1	Unit 2 Shopping (Single's Day, Shopping Spree)
Work	A job application letter's sole purpose is to get *people* to read your résumé, and how you write it will be a direct reflection of how suitable you are for the job.	Textbook B Book 4	Unit 2 Job Application Letters and Résumé (Writing Job Application Letter)
Interest	If you go backpacking anywhere in the world, you are going to meet like-minded *people* who are interested in traveling as much as you and who have gone traveling on their own too.	Textbook B Book 3	Unit 5 Travel and Tourism (Three Tips for Solo Traveling)
Society	True, there will be many *people* ready to help you but you will often have to take the first step in whatever you choose to do.	Textbook B Book1	Unit 1 Going to College (How to Be Cool at College)
Politics	I mean that a favorable climate isn't as important as geographical advantages, but that geographical advantages aren't as important as the unity and support of the *people*.	Textbook A Book 2	Unit 3 In the workplace (Geographical advantages plus the unity of the people)
Culture	With this product of clay and fire, *people* around the world are writing a new "China" legend together.	Textbook A Book1	Unit 1 Traveling (The Pride of China)
Economic	As robots are taking over the work of *people* in industry and communications across the globe are becoming faster and more sophisticated, technology will surely create ways of persuading us to work less and enjoy ourselves more.	Textbook B Book 3	Unit 8 Machines and People's Lives (All Play and No Work)
Ecology and Environment	Nevertheless, by carrying forward the famous Yan'an Spirit, the Yan'an *people* fought the harsh natural conditions with determination and courage.	Textbook B Book 2	Unit5 Going Green (Barren Hills Turn Green: A Yan'an Miracle)

4.2. Genre Analysis: Rational Cognition and Empathetic Cultivation as Core Discursive Structures

Across the two textbooks, the overall genre distribution exhibits consistency, with Reports and Explanations and Stories being the most frequent, while Histories and Procedures and Procedural Recounts are relatively less represented (Figure 4). The predominance of Reports and Explanations indicates that both textbook series aim to objectively convey facts, principles, and knowledge to students, reflecting a foundational positioning that emphasises instrumentality and knowledge transmission. Stories constitute the secondary genre type, suggesting that the textbooks achieve educational impact through subtle means—drawing students into the discourse, fostering empathy, and modelling values.

The two textbook series also exhibit certain differences. Genre distribution was measured by calculating the standard deviation of genre proportions across the two sets of textbooks. The results show that Textbook A has a lower standard deviation (SD = 0.156) than Textbook B (SD = 0.195), indicating that Textbook A demonstrates greater diversity in genre selection, with relatively balanced coverage across genres. In contrast, Textbook B exhibits a pronounced skew in genre distribution, with Reports and Explanations and Stories dominating (82.8% combined), while Histories and Procedures and Procedural Recounts account for a much smaller proportion. This distributional difference reflects distinct editorial philosophies in genre selection: Textbook A demonstrates a more balanced genre configuration, while Textbook B places greater emphasis on the emotional cultivation function of discourse, indicating an orientation toward deep integration between knowledge construction and value guidance.

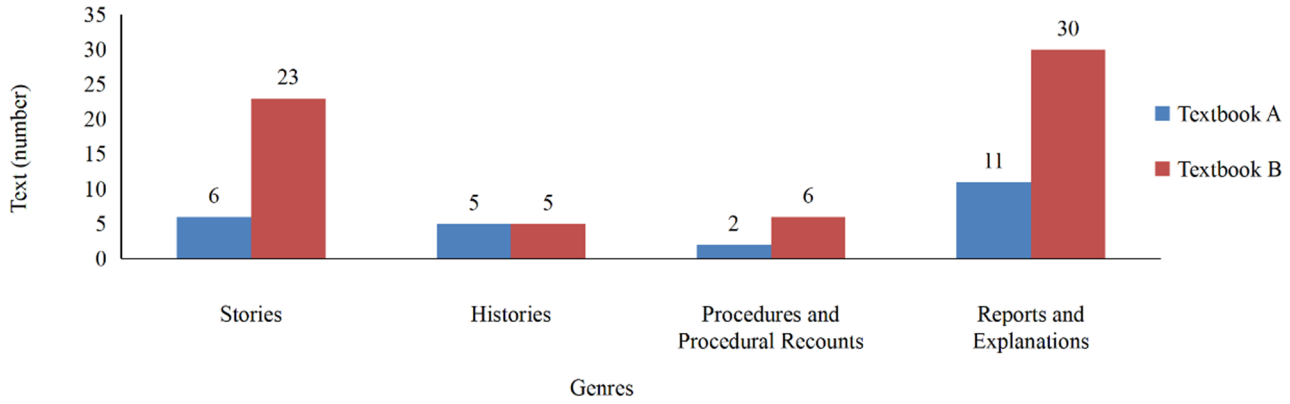


Figure 4. Genre distribution in two textbooks.

Different genres constitute the discursive structure of the textbooks (Figure 5). Stories and Histories tend towards discourse characterised by emotional engagement and value orientation, aligning with the principle of conscience and human-orientedness. Reports and Explanations demonstrate balanced coverage across the four HDA dimensions. Procedures and Procedural Recounts are most strongly associated with the principle of proximity, followed by human-orientedness, with a very low proportion of conscience and no coverage of regulation. These genre-based functional differences directly reflect the textbooks' deployment of three discursive strategies—empathetic, achievement-oriented, and responsibility-oriented discourse—and the progressive discursive structure of "awareness awakening–behavioural regulation–value identification".

Stories function primarily as empathetic discourse, naturally aligning with the individual emotional reflection and intrinsic awareness awakening embedded in the principle of conscience, while simultaneously constructing interpersonal and ecological proximity through relatable characters and nature-related experiences. Through portraying ordinary people's struggles (e.g., Textbook B, Book 2, Unit 4: Life in a Violin Case) and altruistic images (e.g., Textbook A, Book 1, Unit 3: Small Act Big Help), stories construct a human-oriented discourse but rarely engage with institutional or regulatory content, primarily serving an awareness-raising function at the front end of the discursive progression.

Histories are predominantly guided by the principle of conscience, with regulation taking a secondary position. Histories serve as the primary vehicle for achievement-oriented discourse, constructing spiritual value identification through grand historical events in ecological civilisation, technological exploration, and cultural heritage. They deepen ecological and cultural conscience through discourse that link ecological governance with national resilience (e.g., Textbook A, Book 1, Unit 4: The Saihanba Spirit, and Textbook B, Book 2, Unit 5: Barren Hills Turn Green—A Yan'an Miracle), and the development of rural tourism (e.g., Textbook B, Book 3, Unit 5: The Development of "Nongjiale" Tourism), while also complementing responsibility through content on national governance (e.g., Textbook B, Book 2, Unit 5: The

Thames Cleanup: An Incredible Achievement) and social norms (e.g., Textbook B, Book 4, Unit 6: Filial Piety: An Important Chinese Family Value), ultimately achieving value sublimation at the end of the discursive chain.

Reports and Explanations demonstrate the most balanced deployment across the four HDA dimensions, with a substantially higher proportion of regulation compared to other genres. This genre serves as a versatile discursive vehicle, accommodating empathetic, achievement, and responsibility strategies. It not only objectively interprets cultural and ecological issues to awaken conscience and build human-oriented and ecological proximity cognition (e.g., Textbook A, Book 1, Unit 5: Are You Ready for the New Ride; Textbook B: The Benefit of Family Dinners for Kids), but also implements behavioural regulation through texts on laws, professional conduct, and public norms (e.g., Textbook A, Book 1, Unit 6: The Personal Information Protection Law; Textbook B, Book 1, Unit 6: Using Gestures to Communicate). It serves as the core intermediary bridging the three discursive phases, with the three genres collectively completing the full discursive chain of "awareness awakening–behavioural regulation–value identification".

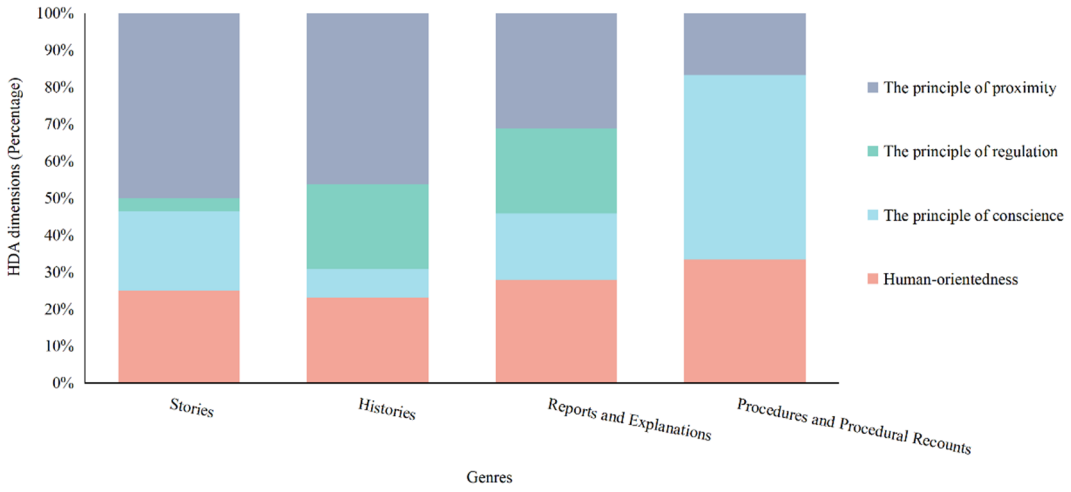


Figure 5. Discursive structures of the two textbooks.

Procedures and Procedural Recounts are dominated by the principles of proximity and human-orientedness, with a very low proportion of conscience. This genre predominantly consists of step-by-step texts on career planning, outdoor ecological practice, and community service operations (e.g., Textbook A, Book 2, Unit 6: Setting SMART Goals), focusing on individual life practices and practical human-nature experiences (e.g., Textbook B, Book 4, Unit 5: How to Control Workplace Stress). It emphasises concrete human development and ecological proximity, serving a supplementary role without directly contributing to the core phases of conscience awakening and behavioural regulation.

The genre-based discursive structure of HDA dimensions reveals that the deeper educational function of value identification is primarily carried by Stories and Histories, which, through lifelike emotional engagement and macro-historical evaluation, explain the intrinsic meaning of "why practice sustainability". The objective cognitive foundation and behavioural regulation constraints are laid by Reports and Explanations, which present sustainability's objective laws through popular science and expository texts on the one hand, while delineating behavioural boundaries through institutional and legal texts on the other, serving as the intermediary normative link in the discursive chain. Concrete action guidance is supplemented by Procedures and Procedural Recounts, providing students with tangible operational instructions on "how to act". The four genres collaboratively construct the sustainability discourse of "awareness awakening–behavioural regulation–value identification", underpinning the overall sustainability architecture of these textbooks.

4.3. Attitudinal Analysis: The Dominance of Positive Sentiment and the Dialectical Function of the Conscience Principle

This section uses "attitudinal" to encompass both positive and negative emotional polarities, consistent with the HDA framework's emphasis on cognitive, volitional, and affective dimensions of conscience. NVivo's automatic emotion coding function was first employed to identify emotional tendencies in the texts at the sentence level. To ensure accuracy, the researchers manually verified the automatic coding results and eliminated inaccurate codes, ultimately identifying 1267 positive emotion codes (199 very positive, 1068 moderately positive) covering 87 texts, and 407 negative emotion codes (394 moderately negative, 13 very negative) covering 64 texts. The subsequent cross-tabulation with HDA dimensions (204 positive and 44 negative codes) applies two additional filters: (a) only codes that were manually verified and (b) only codes that

were also assigned to at least one HDA subcategory. The reduction reflects the fact that not all sentiment-bearing sentences were judged as substantively relevant to sustainability discourse, nor did all such sentences instantiate HDA dimensions. This two-stage filtering ensures that the emotional analysis is grounded in theoretically relevant discourse rather than in general sentiment expression.

Overall, the textbook texts exhibit a highly positive emotional tone and unified positive sentiment, with all dimensions showing positive codes far outnumbering negative codes (Figure 6). Huang (2020), in his HDA studies, proposed that educational discourse assumes the function of value guidance and tends to employ beneficial and neutral discourse to construct harmonious relations. This proposition helps explain the predominantly positive emotional tone of sustainability discourse in these textbooks.

Significant differences exist in emotional discourse across the four HDA dimensions. Human-orientedness relies on gentle positive discourse of struggle, culture, and virtue to shape holistic personalities. The principle of proximity builds a shared emotional foundation through natural and interpersonal warmth. The principle of regulation disseminates behavioural norms through rational persuasive texts. The emotions encompass core expressions such as praise, identification, pride, joy, anticipation, and admiration, constructing a positive emotional space centred on "development–achievement–belonging–happiness". Positive discourse covers all core sustainability discursive domains, including cultural heritage, ecological civilisation, individual struggle, interpersonal goodwill, national development, technological progress, and traditional virtues.

Negative emotional discourse is extremely scarce across all dimensions. Proximity has an exceptionally low number of negative codes. Human-orientedness, regulation, and conscience lack very negative critical texts. The scarcity of negative sentiment does not, by itself, establish an absence of dialectical thinking. However, when examined alongside the limited presence of concessive constructions (e.g., 'although,' 'however') and problematising discourse (e.g., questions, challenges to assumptions), the overall pattern suggests that critical or dialectical perspectives are not prominently featured in the attitudinal construction of these textbooks. Consider, for example, the text "The Saihanba Spirit", which opens with a depiction of ecological degradation: "As the forest barrier was gone, sandstorms became more frequent". This negative clause, however, is immediately situated within a narrative arc that moves from past environmental damage to successful reforestation—culminating in international recognition (UN Champions of the Earth Award, Land for Life Award). The negative sentiment serves not to problematise the causes of deforestation or to invite critical reflection on development practices, but rather to heighten the contrast with subsequent achievements and to reinforce the positive message of ecological restoration through collective effort. The problem-presented-as-past narrative structure, followed by solution-presented-as-achievement, recurs across multiple texts and exemplifies the broader tendency identified here: negative sentiment, when it occurs, is typically deployed to sharpen the contrast with subsequent positive outcomes, rather than to sustain critical inquiry or dialectical tension.

Although regulation contains a small number of negative codes, these are limited to warnings about legal red lines such as cybercrime and information leakage, with narrow critical dimensions and superficial reflective depth, failing to address deeper sustainability contradictions (e.g., in Textbook A, Book 1, Unit 6: The Personal Information Protection Law—"As hundreds of millions of people in China enjoy the benefits of technology, they may not realise their personal information is no longer safe"; and in Textbook A, Book 2, Unit 5: Social Media: Will it HELP or HINDER Your Job Search?—"And another thing which recruiters watch out for is discriminatory comments relating to race or gender").

Among the four dimensions, only "conscience" simultaneously carries the highest proportion of positive achievement discourse and the largest number of negative reflective texts across all dimensions, rendering it the sole dimension with high dialectical emotional tension. From the perspective of HDA theory, the principle of conscience, as the intrinsic voluntary condition of premise, naturally possesses the dual emotional function of establishing value benchmarks through positive achievements and awakening intrinsic reflection through negative self-examination. The critical and reflective discourse in the two textbooks are highly concentrated on the inadequacies of objective understanding and critical thinking, including reflections on life alienation, technological tools, and cultural and public development challenges (e.g., Textbook A, Book 1, Unit 3: Hiding Sickness for Fear of Treatment—"At that stage, I would still have been able to cure it"; Textbook B, Book 1, Unit 3: Are You Ready for the New Ride?—"Will passengers be prepared to do something to avert a fatal accident?"; Textbook B, Book 3, Unit 8: The Machine That Knows Your Face—"Some people, however, are concerned that these machines will mean the destruction of personal privacy"; Textbook B, Book 4, Unit 8: A Healthy World, Healthy People—"Yet, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain a positive outlook on our capacity to sustain healthy and happy populations in the future").

Human-orientedness, which emphasises humanistic empathy in shaping personality; proximity, which focuses on emotional connections to life; and regulation, which prioritises external behavioural constraints—their respective discourse functions limit their capacity to carry reflective discourse. However, this does not mean they should avoid dialectical discourse. The absence of reflective discourse in these three dimensions makes it difficult to guide students toward an objective and comprehensive

understanding of various practical challenges in life and complex societies. The flattening of discursive emotions prevents learners from experiencing the complete intellectual process of "confusion–analysis–reconstruction" at the cognitive level, hindering the cultivation of critical and systematic sustainable development thinking. Dialectical conflict discourse could serve as a buffer within the complete progressive chain of "awareness awakening–behavioural regulation–value identification", helping to create psychological space for students to accept real-world contradictions and confront developmental challenges. There remains room for improvement in how the attitudinal construction in textbooks encourages students to engage with the world's diversity and complexity from inclusive and dialectical perspectives.

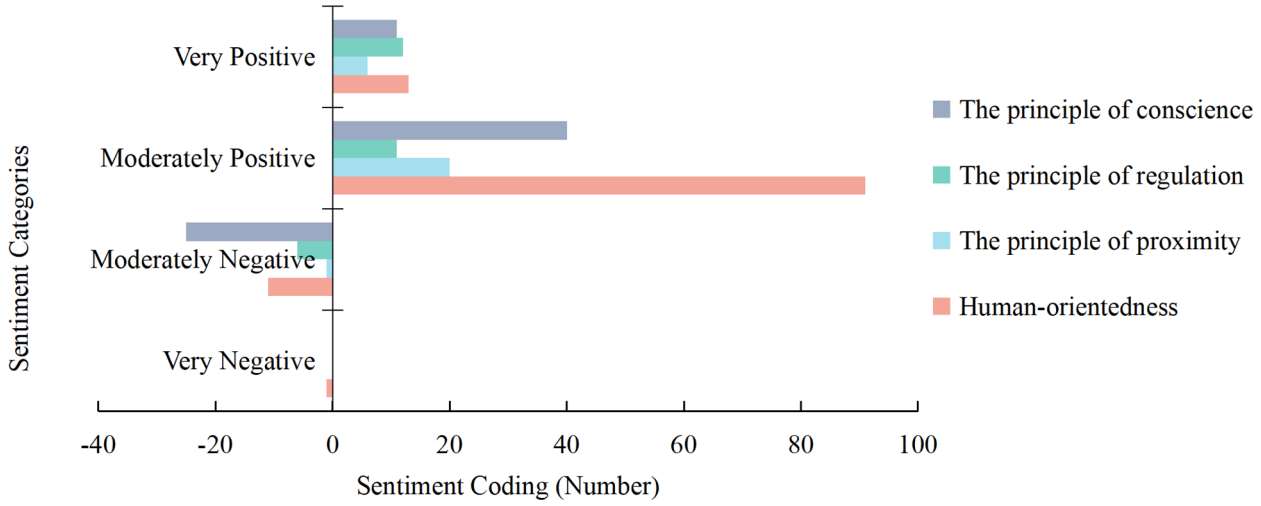


Figure 6. Discursive sentiments in the two textbooks.

When examined by sustainability subtype, the attitudinal asymmetry identified above is even more significant. Positive sentiment predominates across all six subtypes, but the ecological and technological subtypes contain the only instances of negative reflection (e.g., reflections on ecological degradation and technological risks), whereas the individual-professional and cultural subtypes are almost exclusively positive. This suggests that while textbooks offer space for critical reflection on ecological and technological issues, they frame personal and cultural sustainability predominantly through affirmative, celebratory discourse, reinforcing the finding that dialectical perspectives are concentrated in the conscience dimension.

5. Conclusions

Grounded in the theoretical framework of HDA within ecolinguistics, we examined 88 reading texts from two national planning higher vocational general English textbooks as its research object. The study conducts qualitative coding, thematic analysis, genre analysis, and cross-dimensional sentiment analysis to systematically reveal the overall construction characteristics and educational logic of sustainability in contemporary higher vocational English textbooks. The research demonstrates that the two textbook series generally adhere to the HDA core assumption of human-orientedness, forming a sustainability discursive system centred on humanistic empathy, intrinsic conscience, and ecological proximity. Through the functional division of four genres—Stories, Histories, Reports and Explanations, and Procedures and Procedural Recounts—they construct a progressive sustainability discursive chain of "awareness awakening–behavioural regulation–value identification". Via multi-dimensional positive discourse resources encompassing cultural heritage, ecological construction, individual struggle, and social virtues, they operationalise the goals of holistic competence cultivation, social behaviour regulation, and value guidance within foreign language values education, aligning with the contemporary paradigm shift in higher vocational English education from language skills training to comprehensive educational development. Beyond common discursive features, the two textbooks exhibit notable differences. Textbook A demonstrates a more balanced genre distribution and diversified discursive structure, while Textbook B primarily relies on Stories and Reports and Explanations for emotional cultivation, with insufficient complementarity and completeness in its discursive structure.

From the perspective of discursive sentiments, higher vocational English textbooks continue the discursive construction pattern of beneficial and neutral discourse characteristic of educational texts, presenting a unified positive emotional tone overall, relying on achievement and empathetic discourse to accomplish value identification and awareness awakening. However,

a significant imbalance exists in the textbooks' emotional discursive structure. Human-orientedness, proximity, and regulation generally lack negative critical and dialectical discourse, with dialectical reflective discourse highly concentrated in the conscience dimension, which realises the dialectical function of "positive value construction–negative problem self-examination". Both textbooks tend toward a deterministic, positively oriented value inculcation model, rendering their discursive perspectives relatively flat and unidimensional. This tendency is not conducive to guiding students to confront real-world contradictions and engage in critical thinking, leaving room for improvement in creating psychological resilience and cognitive buffer spaces for learners to accept real-world conflicts and embrace developmental challenges, and in cultivating systematic and critical sustainable development thinking through a dialectical understanding of the world's diverse and complex nature.

The eight-domain refinement also reveals a substantive gap: ecological sustainability, despite being the most conventional association of the term, accounts for a smaller proportion of coded references. This finding underscores the need for textbook developers to consider a more balanced distribution of sustainability domains across the four HDA dimensions, particularly by strengthening ecological and economic sustainability content without reducing the existing emphasis on individual-professional and cultural sustainability.

In the new era of high-quality vocational education development, textbooks need to integrate Chinese values and cultural identity, balance innovation and reference in curriculum, teaching, and assessment, and serve national strategies to cultivate talent capable of effectively telling China's story. This study's analysis of the themes, genre structures, sentiments, and representational shortcomings of sustainability in higher vocational English textbooks provides theoretical support and empirical reference for subsequent textbook revisions, sustainability-oriented teaching design, and the deep integration of values education into foreign language curricula. Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. As a discourse-analytic study, this research examines textual representation rather than learner reception or pedagogical effect. The claims made about educational functions (e.g., 'awareness raising', 'value incubation') are therefore textual potentials rather than demonstrated learning outcomes. Future research could investigate how teachers and students actually engage with these texts. Additionally, a keyness analysis against an external reference corpus was not conducted, as no suitable reference corpus was available that matches the present corpus in terms of time of educational level and text type. While this does not undermine the qualitative findings, which are supported by triangulated evidence from genre and sentiment analyses, future research would benefit from constructing a representative reference corpus for vocational English textbook discourse to enable such statistical comparisons. The research sample is confined to two mainstream Chinese higher vocational English textbooks with limited coverage, and no cross-publisher or cross-national comparative analysis has been conducted. Future research could expand the sample size and coverage of domestic higher vocational English textbooks while introducing a comparative perspective between Chinese and foreign English textbooks. Through richer quantitative data and multi-dimensional comparative analyses, a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the overall characteristics and differentiated patterns of sustainability in higher vocational English textbooks could be revealed, further enriching the application system of HDA in foreign language textbook research.

Author Contributions

D.Z.: conceptualisation, methodology, data curation, visualisation, writing—original draft preparation; G.H.: conceptualisation, methodology, supervision; D.Z. and G.H.: writing—reviewing and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest. Given the role as Editorial Board Member, G.H. had no involvement in the peer review of this paper and had no access to information regarding its peer-review process. Full responsibility for the editorial process of this paper was delegated to another editor of the journal.

Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Deepseek and Doubao for linguistic polishing, sentence-level rephrasing, manuscript formatting assistance, and revision guidance in response to reviewer comments. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Appendix A

Table A1. Themes of the two sets of textbooks.

Textbook	Volume	Theme of Units
Textbook A	Volume 1	Unit 1 Traveling; Unit 2 Shopping; Unit 3 First aid; Unit 4 Volunteering; Unit 5 Intelligent vehicles; Unit 6 Cybersecurity
	Volume 2	Unit 1 Looking for jobs; Unit 2 Job interview; Unit 3 In the workplace; Unit 4 Career paths; Unit 5 Social media and career success; Unit 6 Setting smart goals
Textbook B	Volume 1	Unit 1 Going to college; Unit 2 Social activities on campus; Unit 3 Science and technology; Unit 4 I love this game; Unit 5 Celebrating holidays; Unit 6 Body language in communication; Unit 7 New jobs today; Unit 8 Gender differences
	Volume 2	Unit 1 Symbols of culture; Unit 2 Trends and fads; Unit 3 Parent's love; Unit 4 Life dream; Unit 5 Going green; Unit 6 Smart life; Unit 7 Secrets of advertising; Unit 8 Getting a good job
	Volume 3	Unit 1 Home and family; Unit 2 Life experience; Unit 3 A sense of calling and duty; Unit 4 Customs; Unit 5 Travel and Tourism; Unit 6 Seeking a job and career; Unit 7 Human relationships; Unit 8 Smart machines and people's lives
	Volume 4	Unit 1 Career development; Unit 2 Job application letters and resumes; Unit 3 Disaster; Unit 4 Loving books; Unit 5 Stress; Unit 6 Home and family life; Unit 7 Happiness; Unit 8 Human health

Table A2. Coding scheme and reference frequencies for the two sets of textbooks.

Main Categories (Primary Selective Codes)	Subcategories (Secondary Axial Codes)	Sustainability Subtype	Files	References
Human-orientedness			42	104
	Cultural identity	Cultural	10	22
	Cultural inheritance and dissemination	Cultural	2	3
	Competency-oriented individuals	Individual-Professional	19	53
	Community service and identification	Social	1	1
	Voluntary contributors	Social	1	1
	National governance and people's livelihood	Social/Ecological	7	8
	Contributors in science, technology and culture	Technological/Cultural	5	10
	Mankind accountability	Social/Ecological	3	3
	Beneficiaries of social development	Economic/Social	2	3
Proximity			27	36
	Nature and ecology	Ecological	3	3
	Interpersonal connections	Social	16	21
	Cultural affinity	Cultural	3	5
	Professional life	Individual-Professional	2	2
	Community and neighbourhood	Social	5	5
Regulation			8	18
	National laws and regulations	Social/Ecological	3	4
	Workplace norms and ethics	Individual-Professional	2	7
	Public information regulation	Social	1	1
	Cyber conduct regulation	Technological/Social	1	1
	Social and communal norms	Social	3	5
Conscience			27	41
	Ecological and historical awareness	Ecological	4	5
	Reflection on technological dependence	Technological	6	11
	Rational consumption awareness	Economic	4	4
	Cybersecurity awareness	Technological	2	2
	Cultural heritage and renewal	Cultural	4	8
	Shared human nature and self-knowledge	Individual-Professional	9	10
	Ecological civilisation identification	Ecological	1	1



Figure A1. Eight topics from *people* concordance lines (n = 100), derived from BERTopic, illustrating dominant co-occurrence with lexis of human agency, social practice, moral reflection and cultural situatedness.

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