

From Lexical Chunks to Aesthetic–Critical Literacy: A Corpus–Informed Framework for English Newspaper Reading in Chinese EFL Teacher Education

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Abstract: English newspaper reading in Chinese tertiary education is often reduced to vocabulary explanation, sentence translation, and factual comprehension, while the aesthetic and evaluative functions of journalistic language remain underexplored. This article proposes a corpus-informed pedagogical framework that integrates lexical chunk instruction with aesthetic education in EFL teacher preparation. It introduces *aesthetic-critical literacy* as the ability to perceive, analyze, evaluate, and creatively use recurrent lexical patterns in relation to formal economy, structural harmony, evaluative subtlety, cultural resonance, and discourse effects. The framework moves from lexical noticing to functional classification, aesthetic-discursive interpretation, critical response, intercultural output, and portfolio reflection. Positioned as a framework article rather than an effectiveness study, it also outlines future empirical validation.

Keywords: lexical chunks; English newspaper reading; aesthetic-critical literacy; EFL teacher education; corpus-informed pedagogy; aesthetic education

I. Introduction

English newspaper reading occupies a distinctive position in Chinese tertiary English education, especially in English teacher preparation programs. Unlike general reading courses, it introduces students to public issues, journalistic discourse, argumentation, and culturally situated representations of social reality. Ideally, the course should not only improve reading comprehension but also cultivate future English teachers' ability to understand how news language constructs authority, stance, responsibility, risk, and public value.

In practice, however, newspaper reading is still commonly taught through background information, difficult-word explanation, sentence translation, and comprehension checking. Such instruction leaves recurrent phrase-level patterns underexplored. Multi-word units such as *according to official figures*, *a growing concern*, *has sparked debate*, *is expected to*, *called for greater efforts*, and *in the wake of* are not marginal ornaments. They organize information, attribute claims, encode stance, signal logical relations, and provide ready-made resources for summarizing, commenting, and participating in public discussion.

At the same time, teacher education increasingly emphasizes aesthetic cultivation as part of students' humanistic development. In language education, aesthetic education should not be limited to literature, art, or performance. It also involves sensitivity to form, rhythm, implication, value, cultural resonance, and creative expression. For English education majors, this broader understanding is important: they are not only language learners but also future teachers who will need to teach language as a medium of cultural understanding and value formation.

This article connects these two concerns by arguing that corpus-informed lexical chunk instruction offers a practical pathway for integrating aesthetic education into English newspaper reading. The article is a pedagogical framework paper rather than a report of completed large-scale empirical research. It asks three questions: What aesthetic and critical properties are embedded in recurrent lexical chunks in English news discourse? How can lexical chunk instruction move beyond fluency training toward aesthetic-critical literacy? How can such a framework be implemented and evaluated in Chinese EFL teacher education?

II. Formulaic Language and Lexical Chunk Instruction

Formulaic language research has shown that fluent language use depends heavily on prefabricated or semi-prefabricated multi-word units. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) described lexical phrases as conventionalized form-function pairings that support discourse organization and pragmatic action. Lewis (1993) argued that language pedagogy should move beyond the grammar-vocabulary divide and treat chunks as central units of learning. Wray (2002) further emphasized the importance of formulaic sequences in processing, fluency, and social interaction.

Corpus linguistics has deepened this insight by showing that recurrent multi-word units are register-sensitive. Biber et al. (2004) found that lexical bundles perform functions such as stance expression, referential framing, and text organization. Hyland (2008) similarly showed that lexical bundles are closely tied to disciplinary and rhetorical practices. In English newspaper reading, chunks such as *officials said*, *critics argue that*, *has raised concerns*, *in response to*, and *as part of efforts to* help readers navigate attribution, stance, causality, and evaluation.

Yet classroom treatments of chunks often remain instrumental. Chunks are frequently taught as memory units, fluency devices, or expressions to imitate. This is useful but incomplete. In news discourse, chunks do more than facilitate comprehension: they frame public events. *Experts warned that* lends urgency and authority to the following proposition, while *a controversial decision* pre-classifies an event as publicly contested. Lexical chunks therefore deserve attention as discourse resources as well as vocabulary items.

III. Noticing, Corpus-Informed Pedagogy, and Critical Discourse Awareness

The pedagogical value of explicit chunk instruction can be explained through Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis, which stresses the importance of conscious attention in second language learning. Learners may repeatedly encounter a pattern without converting it into intake unless instruction directs attention to its form, function, and context. In newspaper reading, guided noticing helps students see that meaning is often carried by phrase-level patterns rather than isolated words.

Corpus-informed pedagogy provides tools for making these patterns visible. Data-driven learning encourages learners to observe repeated patterns in concordance lines, compare contexts, and infer usage principles. Boulton and Cobb's (2017) meta-analysis suggests that corpus use can benefit language learning when tasks are carefully scaffolded. In low-technology classrooms, corpus-informed instruction need not require students to operate complex software. Teachers can prepare short concordance samples, compare textbook examples, or use printed pattern charts.

Critical discourse studies further show why lexical chunks matter in newspaper reading. News language often appears neutral and factual, yet journalism constructs social reality through patterned choices of vocabulary, grammar, sourcing, sequencing, and framing (Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991; van Dijk, 1988). *Officials confirmed that* frames information as authoritative; *activists claimed that* may subtly distance the report from a claim; *amid growing fears* creates an atmosphere of public anxiety; and *is expected to* distributes responsibility through prediction rather than direct assertion. Teaching such patterns can develop students' discourse awareness and help future teachers guide learners to read news as rhetorically organized representation rather than unmediated fact.

IV. Aesthetic Education in EFL Teacher Preparation

Aesthetic education in language learning should be understood broadly as the cultivation of sensitivity to form, rhythm, proportion, tone, implication, ethical value, and expressive possibility. Although news texts may seem less obviously aesthetic than poetry or fiction, they still contain patterns of concision, balance, subtle evaluation, and cultural resonance. These qualities can be taught when students are guided to notice how language works.

For English teacher education, this broader view is especially valuable. Future teachers need linguistic sensitivity, critical judgment, intercultural awareness, and pedagogical imagination. Newspaper reading provides a suitable site because it already combines language learning, public knowledge, cultural interpretation, and value judgment. Lexical chunks make aesthetic education concrete: students learn to perceive how recurrent patterns create density, rhythm, stance, and resonance.

V. Theoretical Framework: Aesthetic-Critical Literacy

This article proposes *aesthetic-critical literacy* as the core construct. In English newspaper reading, it refers to learners' ability to perceive, analyze, evaluate, and creatively use recurrent lexical patterns with attention to their formal, structural, evaluative, cultural, and discursive effects. It is aesthetic because it involves sensitivity to linguistic form, rhythm, concision, balance, and resonance; it is critical because it asks how language choices construct stance, authority, responsibility, risk, and public value.

The construct has three interrelated components. Receptive competence refers to the ability to recognize chunks and identify their discourse functions. Analytical competence refers to the ability to explain how chunks generate rhetorical, aesthetic, and evaluative effects. Productive competence refers to the ability to use chunks appropriately and creatively in summaries, commentaries, oral briefings, and intercultural expression. Together, these components link input, interpretation, and output.

The framework follows a progression from noticing to classification, interpretation, response, output, and reflection. Newspaper texts provide input rich in recurrent phrase-level patterns. Guided noticing makes these patterns visible. Functional classification links them to attribution, stance, causality, contrast, evaluation, topic framing, and cultural expression. Aesthetic-discursive interpretation examines formal economy, structural harmony, evaluative subtlety, and cultural resonance. Critical response and intercultural output then require students to use chunks in informed and responsible English expression. The goal is not the memorization of expressions but the development of aesthetic-critical literacy.

VI. Corpus Protocol and Aesthetic Dimensions of Lexical Chunks

The proposed framework is situated in English newspaper reading courses for English education majors in Chinese normal universities. It is inspired by two lines of teaching reform: lexical chunk instruction in newspaper reading materials and the integration of aesthetic education into English teacher preparation. Future classroom research should make the corpus procedure transparent, including textbook titles, editions, publishers, publication years, number of volumes, number of reading passages, total word count, and the distinction between main reading texts, notes, exercises, and teacher materials.

A feasible corpus protocol includes five steps. First, digitize and clean textbook reading passages while storing titles, captions, notes, and exercises separately. Second, extract recurrent 3- to 5-word sequences using frequency thresholds appropriate to the corpus size. Third, manually screen the automatically generated list to remove incomplete strings, proper-name sequences, number strings, and accidental repetitions. Fourth, code selected chunks by discourse function, including attribution, stance, causality, contrast, topic framing, evaluation, and cultural expression. Fifth, annotate their aesthetic potential in terms of formal economy, structural harmony, evaluative subtlety, and cultural resonance.

Table 1

Corpus Protocol for Textbook-Based Lexical Chunk Analysis

Step	Procedure	Purpose
Corpus preparation	Digitize and clean reading passages; separate notes and exercises.	Define the analyzable textual basis.
Automatic extraction	Extract recurrent 3- to 5-word sequences with corpus-sensitive thresholds.	Identify candidate chunks.
Manual screening	Remove incomplete strings, names, numbers, and accidental repetitions.	Improve linguistic validity.
Functional coding	Code attribution, stance, causality, contrast, evaluation, topic framing, and cultural expression.	Connect chunks to discourse work.
Aesthetic annotation	Annotate economy, harmony, subtlety, and resonance.	Connect chunks to aesthetic-critical literacy.

Four aesthetic dimensions are especially relevant to newspaper reading. First, formal economy refers to the beauty of concision. A chunk often compresses temporal, causal, emotional, or evaluative meaning that would otherwise require a longer paraphrase. *In the wake of* means not simply “after” but “after and partly because of”; *amid growing concerns* compresses situation, emotion, and escalation; *called for immediate action* combines agency, urgency, and institutional register.

Second, structural harmony refers to rhythm, balance, and textual predictability. Expressions such as *has sparked debate*, *is expected to rise*, and *under increasing pressure* support oral fluency. Parallel patterns such as *not only ... but also*, *on the one hand ... on the other*, and *from X to Y* create balance, while transitional chunks such as *as a result*, *in contrast*, and *at the same time* organize textual flow.

Third, evaluative subtlety refers to the understated judgment embedded in journalistic language. *A controversial decision* marks disagreement as significant; *has sparked debate* suggests unsettled public discussion; *under fire* signals intense criticism; *widely praised* legitimizes positive evaluation. Students who learn to perceive such subtlety develop sensitivity to tone and awareness of reader positioning.

Fourth, cultural resonance refers to the capacity of chunks to package culturally recognizable meanings. Expressions such as *public responsibility*, *sustainable development*, *shared future*, *cultural heritage*, and *common development* resonate with global public discourse while helping students articulate Chinese perspectives in accessible English. For teacher candidates, this dimension connects language learning with intercultural expression and cultural representation.

Table 2

Aesthetic Dimensions of Lexical Chunks in Newspaper Reading

Dimension	Core quality	Example chunks	Teaching focus
Formal economy	Density and concision	<i>in the wake of</i> ; <i>amid growing concerns</i>	Compare compressed meanings.
Structural harmony	Rhythm, balance, and coherence	<i>not only ... but also</i> ; <i>as a result</i>	Read aloud; identify patterns.

Dimension	Core quality	Example chunks	Teaching focus
Evaluative subtlety	Nuanced judgment and implied stance	<i>under fire; has sparked debate</i>	Analyze tone and positioning.
Cultural resonance	Shared values and cross-cultural readability	<i>public responsibility; shared future</i>	Adapt chunks for intercultural expression.

VII. Six-Stage Pedagogical Model

The pedagogical model translates the framework into classroom practice. It extends traditional chunk instruction by adding explicit aesthetic and critical stages, but it can be embedded in an existing newspaper reading course without a separate aesthetic education module.

In the pre-reading activation stage, the teacher selects several frequent and pedagogically rich chunks from the article. Students read them aloud and predict the topic, tone, and possible stance of the text. Questions such as “Which expression sounds formal or forceful?” and “What kind of event do these chunks frame?” activate both content schemata and aesthetic attention.

In the guided noticing stage, students mark chunks in the text using simple symbols: underlining for attribution, circles for stance, boxes for causal or contrastive relations, and stars for expressions they find aesthetically striking. The teacher first models the process with a short excerpt, and students then work independently or in pairs. This stage shifts attention from isolated lexical difficulty to phrase-level patterning.

In the functional and aesthetic classification stage, students organize the marked chunks according to two schemes. The functional scheme includes attribution, stance, causality, contrast, evaluation, topic framing, and cultural expression; the aesthetic scheme includes economy, harmony, subtlety, and resonance. Students must justify why a selected chunk fits a category, thereby transforming impression into articulated judgment.

In the aesthetic-discursive interpretation stage, class discussion focuses on how selected chunks shape meaning, tone, and value. The teacher may ask: Whose voice is introduced by attribution chunks? Which evaluative chunks appear, and how strong are they? What changes if *officials said* is replaced by *officials claimed*, or if *has sparked debate* is replaced by *has caused disagreement*? Such questions show students that formal choices have rhetorical consequences.

In the critical response and intercultural output stage, students use chunks in productive tasks. They may write a 120-word news summary using selected attribution and causality chunks, compose a short commentary on whether a report gives fair weight to different voices, rewrite a paragraph about a Chinese educational or cultural topic in an international news style, or deliver a 90-second oral briefing. These tasks move students from recognition to controlled use.

In the portfolio reflection stage, students keep an aesthetic-critical chunk portfolio. Each entry includes the chunk, meaning, discourse function, aesthetic quality, a contextualized example, and one original sentence. Instead of organizing entries alphabetically, students group them by function and aesthetic reason. Periodic “most powerful chunk” or “most elegant chunk” discussions make aesthetic judgment visible and sustained.

The model can be adapted to low-resource classrooms. Teachers may use textbook sentences rather than software-generated concordance lines, compare three to five manually selected examples rather than large concordance sets, or ask students to build mini phrase banks from their own reading. The goal is not technological sophistication but patterned attention. Pair work, group classification, and portfolios also make the approach manageable in large classes.

VIII. Assessment and Future Empirical Validation

The framework requires empirical validation. A future quasi-experimental study could compare the aesthetic-critical chunk approach with traditional vocabulary-based newspaper reading instruction. The intervention could last one semester, with an experimental group receiving the six-stage model and a comparison group receiving instruction focused on word explanation, sentence translation, and comprehension questions.

Assessment should reflect the multidimensional nature of aesthetic-critical literacy. A chunk recognition test can measure receptive competence. Reading comprehension tests can assess factual and inferential understanding. Short-answer discourse analysis tasks can ask students to explain the function and evaluative effect of selected chunks. Summary writing and intercultural rewriting tasks can evaluate productive competence. Questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and teacher reflection journals can capture students' perceptions, engagement, and developing aesthetic awareness.

For transparency, instruments should be piloted and reliability and validity evidence should be reported. Writing tasks can be rated with rubrics assessing accuracy, appropriateness, discourse function, and aesthetic-critical awareness. Qualitative data can help explain how students experience the shift from word-centered reading to phrase-level aesthetic and critical interpretation.

Table 3

Assessment Plan for Aesthetic-Critical Literacy

Construct	Instrument	Evidence
Chunk recognition	Recognition test	Identification of recurrent multi-word patterns.
Reading comprehension	Factual and inferential tests	Understanding of content and implied meanings.
Analytical competence	Short-answer discourse analysis	Explanation of function, tone, and evaluation.
Productive competence	Summary and intercultural rewriting tasks	Accurate and appropriate chunk use.
Aesthetic-critical awareness	Questionnaires, interviews, observations, journals	Perception of form, stance, value, and cultural expression.

IX. Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion

The framework has three implications for English teacher education. First, it offers a low-threshold way to embed aesthetic education in an existing language course. It does not require a separate art module or major curriculum restructuring; instead, it uses the language of news texts as material for aesthetic cultivation. Second, it helps future teachers develop aesthetic-critical pedagogical competence. When teacher candidates learn to treat chunks as carriers of rhythm, evaluation, authority, and cultural meaning, they become better prepared to guide their future learners beyond literal comprehension. Third, it supports intercultural expression by helping students use conventional yet flexible English resources to present Chinese experiences and cultural values in accurate, natural, and rhetorically appropriate ways.

Several limitations remain. The framework has not yet been tested through large-scale classroom experimentation. Its effectiveness for reading speed, comprehension, writing quality, and aesthetic-critical awareness therefore requires further evidence. Not all news genres are equally suitable: hard news, features, editorials, and opinion columns differ in chunk density, stance, and rhetorical patterning. Students with limited vocabulary or discourse awareness may also need substantial scaffolding. Finally, mechanical imitation of chunks can lead to overgeneralization, so instruction must always connect pattern learning with contextual sensitivity.

Future research may proceed in three directions. First, quasi-experimental studies can test whether the framework improves chunk recognition, reading comprehension, summary writing, and critical interpretation. Second, researchers can develop and validate a scale for aesthetic-critical reading of news discourse. Third, teacher development studies can examine how pre-service and in-service English teachers learn to implement the model and how their own aesthetic-critical literacy shapes classroom practice.

In conclusion, this article has proposed a corpus-informed framework that integrates lexical chunk instruction with aesthetic education in English newspaper reading for Chinese EFL teacher education. By reframing chunks as linguistic, aesthetic, critical, and intercultural resources, the framework moves beyond word-centered instruction and beyond the instrumental view of chunks as fluency devices. Properly taught, newspaper reading can become a site where future teachers learn to perceive language, judge discourse, and express culture responsibly. Lexical chunks are therefore not merely items to be memorized; they are small but powerful units through which learners enter the aesthetic, critical, and intercultural life of English discourse.

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