Reflections on Key Issues in College English Instruction in Higher Education

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Abstract: In the context of globalization and rapid advancements in information technology, English education in universities plays a vital role in cultivating internationally competent and multidisciplinary professionals. However, this educational endeavor faces significant challenges, including reduced instructional hours, a disconnection between language teaching and specialized disciplines that undermines student motivation, and inadequate integration of digital technologies. To overcome these obstacles, this paper proposes a comprehensive reform strategy: first, redesigning the curriculum through English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to seamlessly integrate general and professional language skills aligned with the demands of various disciplines; second, implementing an artificial intelligence-empowered blended teaching model that enhances learning quality and efficiency through a cyclical process of pre-class diagnostics, interactive in-class activities, and post-class consolidation; and third, establishing a holistic, multi-dimensional assessment system that spans the entire learning lifecycle. This study seeks to provide a coherent framework for constructing an effective and empowering English teaching ecosystem, facilitating a paradigm shift toward competency-based education, and addressing the diverse development needs of the nation, society, academic institutions, and students alike.

Keyword: English Education in Universities; English for Specific Purposes; Artificial Intelligence; Blended Teaching Model; Teaching Evaluation

1. Introduction

In an era marked by rapid globalization and technological advancements, proficiency in foreign languages has emerged as a crucial soft power enabling nations to engage in international competition and foster cross-cultural exchange. As a vital component of the higher education system, college foreign language instruction bears the key responsibility of nurturing talents endowed with a global perspective, intercultural communication skills, and domain-specific linguistic competence. Nevertheless, China's current foreign language education in universities faces significant challenges in meeting the evolving demands of this new era. Against this dual backdrop, addressing the pressing issues within contemporary teaching practices and constructing an efficient, open, and integrative foreign language teaching ecosystem has become a core imperative in higher education reform. This paper aims to systematically delineate the critical challenges confronting college English instruction, while reflecting on policy directives and practical realities, examining multidimensional aspects such as curriculum design, pedagogical models, and assessment mechanisms, with the aspiration of offering insightful guidance for advancing the high-quality development of college English education.

2. Current State of College English Instruction

2.1 Significant Reduction in Contact Hours and Credits

With the overall enhancement of foreign language instruction quality during the foundational stages of education in China, many incoming college students—particularly those enrolled in elite institutions—now exhibit markedly improved English proficiency, with some even achieving levels equivalent to the College English Test Band 4 or 6 prior to matriculation. Nonetheless, numerous universities have yet to contemporize their English curricula in tandem with these advancements, resulting in outdated content and pedagogical approaches that fall short of meeting students' escalating demands for

advanced language application and interdisciplinary integration. Against this backdrop, coupled with a general trend of curriculum credit compression across universities, many institutions—especially those under the "Project 985" and "Project 211" initiatives—have significantly curtailed English instructional hours and credit allocations. For instance, the author's institution has seen its College English contact hours diminish from 220 to 144. Nationally, most 985 and 211 universities have reduced their foreign language credits from an original eight to as few as four or even two credits [1]. This shift epitomizes the dual challenges confronting college English education today: redefining its role within the curriculum and enhancing instructional efficiency amid constrained time resources.

2.2 Insufficient Student Intrinsic Motivation

A pressing issue pervasive in current college English education is the widespread lack of intrinsic student motivation. This phenomenon largely stems from a disconnect between English language instruction and students' major-related studies, academic development, and career planning, which renders English less meaningful as a tool supporting their professional growth. As Shuding Fang of Shanghai International Studies University observed, unlike the 1980s—when college English courses were explicitly tailored to professional needs with offerings such as Business English and Technical English—today's curricula predominantly consist of general or integrated listening, speaking, and viewing courses that bear little direct relevance to students' specialized fields [2]. At the author's institution, students tend to prioritize time and effort on major courses or those closely aligned with their disciplines, relegating English classes to a secondary or perfunctory status. This is reflected by low classroom engagement, minimal interaction, and a lack of proactive language practice beyond formal instruction, perpetuating a cycle of "studying for the test and disengaging thereafter". The resulting deficit in internal drive not only hampers students' practical language competence but also undermines the overall efficacy of English instruction, thereby complicating the imperative of cultivating internationally minded, interdisciplinary communicators.

2.3 Inadequate Integration of Digital Technology into College English Teaching

The year 2019 marked a pivotal turning point for China's undergraduate education revitalization and foreign language instruction, symbolizing the advent of a "New Era" characterized by the "New Liberal Arts" and an emphasis on broad foreign language capabilities [3]. One defining feature of college English teaching in this context is the integration of information technology with language instruction [4]. In recent years, many universities have proactively pursued pedagogical innovation, adopting digital teaching platforms like Rain Classroom and Xuexitong, and increasingly normalizing blended learning and flipped classroom modalities. However, these applications largely reflect superficial formal innovations rather than deep, substantive integration within the core dimensions of English education—such as curriculum design, learner diagnostics, and competency development. As a consequence, the transformative potential of technology to elevate teaching quality remains underutilized; traditional teaching paradigms prevail, personalized instruction fails to take root effectively, and students experience sluggish progress in critical proficiency areas including language production, academic usage, and intercultural communication. This leaves higher education ill-prepared to meet the linguistic demands posed by the cultivation of versatile, multilingual talents in the new era.

3. Practical Approaches and Optimization Strategies for Reforming College English Instruction

3.1 Reconstructing Curriculum Content: Aligning ESP with Diverse Learner Needs

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emphasizes fulfilling the "particular needs of students," fundamentally embodying a student-centered philosophy that regards students as the cornerstone of education and the primary agents of learning, thereby prioritizing their interests throughout the pedagogical process [5].

Consequently, the implementation of ESP courses in higher education emerges as a potent remedy to the prevalent deficiency in students' intrinsic motivation for English acquisition. Professor Jigang Cai of Shanghai International Studies University asserts that addressing students' professional learning requirements

constitutes the paramount principle underpinning curricular design in universities. Accordingly, the form of English most demanded by college students is ESP, rather than General English or intercultural communication courses, since ESP "is conceived explicitly to meet students' specialized needs" [6]. The adoption of ESP demonstrably enhances students' practical language proficiency [7].

Therefore, universities can align their instructional frameworks with the cultivation objectives of distinct disciplines by constructing immersive, contextually rich professional English curricula: on one hand, retaining core linguistic skill modules from general English courses to fortify foundational language competence; on the other, precisely catering to disciplinary requisites and industry scenarios by integrating subject-specific texts, technical terminology, and practical applications. This strategic fusion enables English instruction to serve as a catalyst for professional capability enhancement. For instance, in military academies, which diverge markedly from civilian universities in their talent cultivation missions, English instruction is tailored to develop students' capacity for conducting military operations in English—capabilities that span communication and scholarly inquiry related to conventional and unconventional warfare (e.g., counterterrorism, peacekeeping), military technology, diplomacy, and intelligence [8]. Accordingly, military English curricula may be organized into a dual-module system encompassing "General English + Military English." The latter can include general modules such as military exercises, escort missions, patrol duties, and battlefield search and rescue, alongside specialized content tailored to professional demands, such as radar English and aviation English. This content restructuring—centered on authentic professional needs and the synthesis of general and specialized English—both reinforces the practical relevance and targeted nature of English learning, and enables students to tangibly perceive the instrumental role of English in their professional advancement. Such an approach fundamentally invigorates students' proactive engagement in instructional activities, enhances learning efficiency, optimizes language transferability, and cultivates a composite linguistic competency system integrating solid language foundations with specialized application.

3.2 Establishing an AI-Empowered Blended Learning Model

The advantages of blended learning are striking and manifold: it transcends the constraints of time and space, capitalizing on the complementary strengths of online and in-person instruction; it transforms students from passive recipients to active participants; and it cultivates personalized learning and reflective practice [9]. Consequently, this pedagogical approach has emerged as the predominant model in college English education. The *Outline for Building a Strong Education Nation (2024–2035)*, promulgated in 2025, further advocates for the exploration of synergistic collaborations between in-class and out-of-class learning, integration of on-campus and off-campus resources, and seamless fusion of online and offline modalities, while underscoring the imperative to "harness artificial intelligence to propel educational transformation". The advent of artificial intelligence has profoundly disrupted conventional educational philosophies and methodologies, revolutionizing the traditional teaching paradigm. Against this backdrop, the reform of blended learning empowered by AI has evolved from an initial phase centered on technology-enabled instructional innovation toward becoming a pivotal mechanism for reshaping the entire higher education teaching ecosystem [10]. College English courses can leverage intelligent educational platforms such as Chaoxing Learning and Rain Classroom, harnessing AI technologies to construct a blended learning model characterized by "data-driven analytics, human-machine collaboration, individualized learning pathways, and the integration of online and offline environments." Within this framework, AI permeates the entire instructional cycle—pre-class, in-class, and post-class—forming a comprehensive, closed-loop teaching dynamic. The specific implementation encompasses the following stages:

3.2.1 Pre-class stage— AI-driven personalized preview and precise learner diagnostics

During this stage, students primarily utilize artificial intelligence to accomplish the initial acquisition of linguistic knowledge and complete pre-class assignments. AI conducts automated analysis of students' learning outcomes,

generating individualized learning pathways and detailed diagnostic reports, thereby laying a data-informed foundation for in-depth classroom engagement.

Firstly, intelligent AI platforms integrate pedagogical objectives, students' historical performance data, and proficiency levels to accurately assign tiered foundational preview tasks alongside tailored resources. This approach facilitates students' swift comprehension of new material and solidifies the groundwork for ensuing classroom instruction. Secondly, AI automates bulk correction of preview exercises, collects multidimensional learning data, and produces visual analytics—such as class-wide mastery rankings and pre-test accuracy distributions—which furnish educators with precise insights to identify key teaching challenges. Leveraging this diagnostic intelligence, AI further aids instructors in crafting bespoke learning trajectories for each student. Educators can disseminate resources of varying complexity aligned with students' differing competencies, thereby enabling targeted reinforcement and advanced support. Lastly, the intelligent platform offers dynamic, AI-powered accompaniment and tutoring: students employ AI-driven speech evaluation tools to receive instantaneous feedback on phonetics, stress, and intonation, while interactive AI conversational agents simulate scenarios ranging from casual dialogue to professional role-plays. This affords students immediate, highly efficient one-on-one spoken language practice, effectively addressing traditional pre-study shortcomings such as delayed feedback and insufficient oral guidance.

3.2.2 In-class stage— AI-empowered dynamic interaction and competency generation

The face-to-face classroom is predominantly underpinned by AI technologies, with an emphasis on enhancing students' integrated linguistic proficiency and cultivating higher-order cognitive skills, thereby achieving a harmonious synthesis of knowledge internalization, skill development, and value guidance.

At the interaction management level, intelligent platforms facilitate dynamic exchanges through features such as random student selection for responses, online group discussions, real-time exercises, and AI-powered oral practice, enabling fluid interactions among teacher-student and student-machine interfaces while automatically capturing detailed data. These systems record students' cognitive outputs and linguistic expressions, generating formative assessment profiles that incorporate participation frequency, quality of contributions, and accuracy of responses. This ensures comprehensive and profound engagement from all students, with traceable learning trajectories. AI-generated word clouds swiftly reveal the key terms emerging in discussions, while instant online debates spotlight contentious points and conceptual complexities, empowering instructors to tailor their teaching with precision. Regarding skill cultivation, AI offers personalized, granular support for both oral and written language training while fostering linguistic and cognitive agility. In oral practice, AI orchestrates multi-tiered progressive tasks simulating authentic communicative scenarios, providing real-time evaluations of pronunciation accuracy, fluency, lexical appropriateness, and actionable feedback for continuous refinement. For writing, AI-assisted tools analyze students' compositions in situ, delivering instantaneous recommendations across grammatical correction, synonym substitution, sentence structure enhancement, and discourse coherence, thereby ensuring feedback is both personalized and timely. Simultaneously, AI empowers educators to deliver precise, real-time feedback, leveraging intelligent scoring and incentive mechanisms to heighten learner motivation and engagement. The integration of AI-facilitated interactive environments also embeds ideological and moral education elements within the curriculum—strengthening team cohesion through collaborative assignments and instilling virtues, patriotism, and a sense of responsibility during thematic discussions—thus fostering a synergistic advancement of knowledge, skills, and character development.

3.2.3 Post-class stage — AI-supported personalized reinforcement and progressive advancement

In the post-class stage, artificial intelligence facilitates the consolidation and stratified advancement of language skills, fostering individualized improvement and reflective growth among students. Addressing key challenges encountered during classroom instruction, AI aids educators in meticulously crafting supplementary assignments such as extensive reading, thematic writing, and paragraph translation. Concurrently, it

synthesizes process-oriented learning data—encompassing pre-class preparation, in-class engagement, and exercise accuracy—to generate precise learner profiles. Through an intelligent platform, tailored reinforcement tasks are delivered according to proficiency tiers: students with foundational weaknesses receive focused training involving vocabulary dictation challenges, core sentence pattern imitation, and meticulous, sentence-by-sentence listening comprehension, while more advanced students are assigned enriched materials including authentic texts, competitive discipline-related exam questions, and relevant military news to satisfy their needs for further elevation. Moreover, AI curates a diverse online autonomous learning repository that amalgamates leveled textual materials, original audio-visual content, interactive exercises, and specialized military English case studies, empowering students to self-direct their progress according to individual demands. The technology also provides intelligent correction and feedback services, enabling instantaneous grading and error analysis of vocabulary, grammar, and listening objective questions, alongside error identification, lexical refinement, and logical structuring recommendations for subjective writing tasks. Subsequently, AI continues to monitor performance metrics such as task completion quality, resource engagement, and error patterns, producing periodic learning reports that underpin students' self-reflection and enhancement, inform instructors in refining subsequent pedagogical strategies, and support the implementation of precise, targeted assistance.

3.3 Fostering Learning through Assessment: Refining the Teaching Evaluation System

The traditional paradigm of a singular, high-stakes examination as the ultimate determinant of academic success is markedly inadequate. Only by transcending this conventional framework and establishing a comprehensive, multidimensional evaluation system that spans the entire learning process can one more objectively and holistically capture students' engagement, mastery of knowledge, and attainment of competencies [11]. The scope of assessment must be diversified, encompassing multiple facets such as knowledge acquisition, skill proficiency, character development, innovative capacity, and collaborative aptitude, thereby delivering a thorough and integrative appraisal of each learner. Furthermore, the agents of evaluation should be pluralistic; leveraging a variety of assessment modalities to incorporate instructor evaluations, self-assessments by students, peer reviews, and AI-assisted appraisals, thus generating a synergistic ensemble of perspectives. Anchored by an intelligent teaching platform, this system facilitates seamless, continuous appraisal throughout the pre-class, in-class, and post-class phases, enabling dynamic monitoring and comprehensive documentation of students' learning trajectories. Only through the construction of a scientifically grounded, equitable, and transparent evaluation framework can assessment genuinely function as a catalyst for profound student self-reflection, ongoing improvement, and sustained enhancement—rather than merely serving as an absolute metric of academic accomplishment.

4. Conclusion

College English instruction presently stands at a pivotal juncture amid profound societal transformation and escalating demands. Confronted with tangible challenges such as reduced contact hours and waning student intrinsic motivation, yet simultaneously embraced by the burgeoning opportunities ushered in by emergent technologies and innovative methodologies, the imperative lies in proactive adaptation and strategic alignment with these evolving trends to effect meaningful renewal. Contemporary college English pedagogy must embody specialization in content—seamlessly aligning with professional requisites to ignite students' intrinsic learning zeal through practical relevance; intelligence in methods—deeply integrating artificial intelligence to elevate curricular efficacy and enrich educational outcomes; and distinctiveness in positioning—anchoring itself in the unique character of each institution to eschew homogenized instruction and precisely respond to the university's talent cultivation objectives. Only through such deliberate, multifaceted transformation can college English education genuinely fulfill the developmental aspirations of the nation, society, academia, and the individual alike.

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