Reforming the Curriculum System for Applied Undergraduate English Majors: Bridging Theory and Practice

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Abstract: Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, Chinese universities have seen a significant growth in the study of foreign languages, with a focus on English majors. Nonetheless, ongoing difficulties compromise this educational system's efficacy. It is often acknowledged by experts that, despite substantial expenditure, English majors struggle to satisfy societal demands because of curricular structures that are out of date and were inherited from earlier times. To address these issues, this paper suggests extensive changes to the applied undergraduate English major curriculum. The suggested changes, which stress the development of practical skills in line with the demands of the modern labor market, seek to close the gap between theory and practice by drawing on theoretical frameworks and real-world experiences. The theoretical structure for curriculum design includes refining traditional language proficiency courses, incorporating a variety of professional modules, creating career-focused vocational courses, enhancing comprehensive practical training. By aligning curriculum content with evolving industry demands and fostering a holistic approach to talent cultivation, these reforms strive to equip English majors with the necessary skills and competencies to succeed in today's dynamic global landscape.

Keywords: Applied Undergraduate Education; Curriculum Reform; Foreign Language Majors; Practical Skills; Vocational Training.

1. Introduction

Since the policy of reform and opening-up, the education of foreign language majors in colleges and universities in China has gained great development. According to statistics, there are more than 900 colleges and universities with English undergraduate programs in China (Sun, 2010). However, the problems behind the development are becoming more and more acute. It has become a common understanding among experts and scholars that English undergraduate programs in colleges and universities have much input, little output and poor results. The reason for this is that the curriculum system's efficacy. It is often acknowledged by experts that, despite substantial expenditure, English majors struggle to satisfy societal demands because of curricular structures that are out of date and were inherited from earlier times. To address these issues, this paper suggests extensive changes to the applied undergraduate English major curriculum. The suggested changes, which stress the development of practical skills in line with the demands of the modern labor market, seek to close the gap between theory and practice by drawing on theoretical frameworks and real-world experiences. The theoretical structure for curriculum design includes refining traditional language proficiency courses, incorporating a variety of professional modules, creating career-focused vocational courses, enhancing comprehensive practical training. By aligning curriculum content with evolving industry demands and fostering a holistic approach to talent cultivation, these reforms strive to equip English majors with the necessary skills and competencies to succeed in today's dynamic global landscape.

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1. Introduction

Since the policy of reform and opening-up, the education of foreign language majors in colleges and universities in China has gained great development. According to statistics, there are more than 900 colleges and universities with English undergraduate programs in China (Sun, 2010). However, the problems behind the development are becoming more and more acute. It has become a common understanding among experts and scholars that English undergraduate programs in colleges and universities have much input, little output and poor results. The reason for this is that the curriculum of undergraduate English program in colleges and universities in China is single and rigid, and since the founding of the country, it has been applying the curriculum mode of English majors in the former Soviet Union (language skills training plus English professional knowledge), and the teaching of professional knowledge of English majors has been aimed at elite education with literature as the main subject and linguistics and translation as the supplementary subject (Hu & Sun, 2006). The foreign language talents cultivated by this traditional professional curriculum mode are more and more out of touch with the needs of the society, forming the strange phenomenon of difficult employment for English majors and lack of English talents. Under the impact of the reform of university English education and the development of special-purpose English, the pessimistic argument of "no specialization" of English majors has appeared.

The problem of English majors in newly upgraded colleges and universities is even more serious. The talent cultivation mode and professional curriculum settings of the new colleges and universities are copied from the old undergraduate colleges and universities, due to the weak English teachers, poor hardware conditions, the quality of students is not as good as the old undergraduate colleges and universities, the students' language skills are weak, the professional knowledge is not solid, the comprehensive qualities are not high, and the cultivation of other skills is only in the form. According to the actual situation of local colleges and universities, it is a major issue in front of many local colleges and universities to build a special English professional training system.

In 2014, the vice minister of education explicitly pointed out at the China Development High-Level Forum that a revolutionary restructuring of China's higher education was going to take place, and that more than 600 local undergraduate colleges and universities would gradually be transformed into vocational and technical undergraduate colleges and universities (Liang & Liu, 2014). Applied undergraduate colleges and universities take application-oriented as the school orientation, cultivating high-level applied talents who serve regional economy and local development. The Monitor Report on the Construction of National Applied Undergraduate Colleges and Universities (Year 2022) issued by Ministry of Education of China shows that 633 applied undergraduate colleges and universities have obvious construction effects. Therefore, according to the regional characteristics and school positioning, combined with the current situation of professional development, it is of great significance and value to discuss the reform of English major curriculum in applied undergraduate colleges and universities, and to build an applied English major curriculum system.

2. Current Challenges in Foreign Language Education

The cultivation goal of foreign language professionals in China's colleges and universities has gone through the stage from cultivating applied talents with language skills to cultivating compound talents with language skills and
professional knowledge, and now to cultivating compound talents with innovative qualities (Wen, 2002).

Curriculum development is a core component of the talent training model (Wang, et al, 2005). The question to be solved by curriculum development is "What should students learn?" It usually refers to the program of school or other institutions at all levels and in all types of schools on the arrangement of the curriculum, including what courses are offered, at which stage of study they are offered, and when they are offered, etc., reflecting the overall structure of the school curriculum. Sometimes, the curriculum also refers to the subject of the school curriculum. Curriculum setting for English majors refers to the process of breaking down the teaching contents into courses according to the educational objectives and cultivation modes, the requirements of English majors on the knowledge structure and ability structure of the learners, and the laws and practice of foreign language learning, and arranging these courses to make a scientific, reasonable, and mutually compatible curriculum system (Wang, 2011).

The curriculum of English majors should not only meet the requirements of the Syllabus, but also satisfy the needs of the society for the training of talents (Yan, 2006). The main basis for the construction of the curriculum system of English majors in domestic colleges and universities is the module theory. Module theory is based on the basic theory of college curriculum system construction according to the nature and function of the courses will be involved in the English professional curriculum system of the many courses into a number of modules, approved by the national implementation of the “National Standards for Quality of Undergraduate Teaching of English in Colleges and Universities”, which set up general education courses, professional core courses (including language skills courses and professional knowledge Courses), cultivation orientation courses, as well as Practical and Dissertation Sessions.

Curriculum modules for English majors have theoretically facilitated the integration of language skills and language knowledge, and have also provided the possibility of introducing specialized vocational knowledge, improving practical learning, and exploring the integration of foreign languages with other professions. However, in terms of actual teaching and talent cultivation, these reforms in curriculum construction have been formal and have produced a series of problems.

First of all, the curriculum of English majors has an obvious tendency of "systematization of disciplines and intellectualization of teaching", and "a greater proportion of class hours is given to professional courses; the training of various skills courses is biased in favor of the training of a single skill, etc." (Dai and Zhang, 2007). Secondly, the curriculum of non-language knowledge courses lacks careful research and analysis of vocational positions and professional directions, which not only fails to cultivate applied composite talents, but also crowds out the language learning hours, resulting in students' weak basic skills in foreign languages. Furthermore, the characteristics of applied vocational education are not obvious, and there is no distinctive vocational curriculum module. The construction of practice and practical training courses is still insufficient. The teaching hours of public and theoretical courses still account for a large proportion. In addition, the construction of practical training simulation sites and off-campus internship bases is weak, and outdated teaching means and methods for courses also limit the development of teaching.

3. Theoretical Framework for Curriculum Setting

Although there are many problems in the curriculum setting and reform of applied foreign language majors, the development of foreign language teaching theory provides theoretical support for the curriculum reform of applied foreign language undergraduate majors.

3.1. Integrated Curriculum

Integrated Curriculum with a holistic, connected, dialectical point of view to understand, study the relationship between the various elements of the educational process. Curriculum integration in the narrow sense usually refers to the original organic synthesis between the courses that are divided from each other. Curriculum integration in the broader sense refers to the interpenetration and mutual supplementation of the objectives of the curriculum, the teaching and operational content (including examples, exercises, etc.), the means of learning and other elements of the curriculum (Jia, 2011).

Hong Xiaocui and Xiao Longhai (2023) proposes a curriculum integration scheme that goes beyond the polarity theory of subdiscipline and synthesis, i.e., discipline-based curriculum integration. This kind of curriculum integration can construct a coherent curriculum cluster based on the broad concept of disciplines and achieve high quality teaching practice. In the age of information technology and artificial intelligence, curriculum integration also includes the integration of information technology and artificial intelligence with the curriculum.

3.2. Learner Needs Analysis

Need Analysis is a pedagogical theory that opposes the traditional "teaching"-centred theory of foreign language teaching. In the 1970s, needs analysis, which began to be a concern in foreign language teaching, explored how to meet the communicative needs of learners in future language-using environments (Nunan, 1998). The theory holds that only on the basis of a large number of needs analyses (including individual learners and society) can the curriculum be made scientific, practical and socially acceptable, and it provides a theoretical and practical basis for adjusting the strategies and directions of foreign language teaching.

There are diversified needs for English learning at university level, so the curriculum should respond to the needs of students' professional and personal development, scientifically configure diversified courses, and adjust the focus of the courses with reference to the needs of professional talent cultivation (Pan & Ma, 2020).

3.3. Content-Based & Task Based Language Teaching

The Content-Based Instruction (CBI) has changed the "skill-training oriented" philosophy of language teaching. It advocates the use of content or information that students need to acquire instead of organizing instruction around language or other forms of syllabus, so that content and language instruction can be mutually reinforcing and improving. The Content-Language Integration Learning (CLIL) approach also focuses on the integration of meaningful content and language instruction to improve students' language skills, expand their knowledge and develop their cognitive abilities (Chang, 2014).
Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is also a theory of language teaching that focuses on meaning. It pays attention to information communication and cultivates students to participate in and complete real-life tasks in real life. Driven by colorful tasks, students can use their own thinking to actively acquire foreign languages by completing specific tasks, and actively participate in various tasks, truly "Learning by doing". The knowledge and skills learnt by students through completing tasks are transformed into the ability to use the foreign language in real life.

CLII-TBKT interface (Gao & Chang, 2023) is the combination of Content Language Integration Instruction (CLII) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) that creates a new model of foreign/second language teaching, which greatly facilitates the incorporation of meaningful content in language learning and interaction in teaching and learning, and truly realizes the organic integration of content and language in language teaching.

Additionally, the development of modern education technology, especially the development of computer and Internet-assisted education, and even artificial intelligence-assisted teaching and other technological means has greatly promoted the development of language teaching and spawned a series of technologically based teaching innovations, such as flipped classroom, mobile learning, ubiquitous learning, intelligent education, etc., which provide the basis and conditions for the changes in the curriculum of foreign language teaching.

4. Practical Initiative in Curriculum Reform

Pedagogical reform of the English language program is not only necessary but has already begun. Since the 1980s, the innovation of teaching methods based on the development of modern linguistics is the innovation of foreign language teaching concepts, methods and means. In the 1990s, the proposed goal of cultivating compound and innovative foreign language talents with the background of quality education is a reform of the goal of cultivating foreign language talents (Nuan, 1998). The exploration of market-oriented diversified education model after the second millennium started the prelude to the comprehensive reform of the professional setting, curriculum system and talent cultivation mode of foreign language majors, especially English majors.

4.1. Exploration of Specialized Applied English Programs in Polytechnic Colleges and Universities

Many local polytechnic colleges and universities focus on engineering and reform their traditional language learning programs. They set up a series of new courses, such as English for Science and Technology, English for Economy and Trade, English for Automobile, and English for Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, and adjust the teaching contents. They also set up the "Professional 10 English" talent cultivation mode within the discipline of English, or explore the possibility of cooperating with other faculties and departments to set up different English majors in different disciplines. (Yang & Ke, 2009)

Agricultural colleges and universities rely on their strong agricultural knowledge education platform to reform their English professional programs. For example, Yunnan Agricultural University combines the local economic characteristics of Yunnan as a major export province of flowers and agricultural products processing, and sets up the direction of Business English which focuses on the processing and export of agricultural products. It also guides students to take special English courses in other agricultural directions, such as professional English (horticulture) in the College of Landscape Architecture and Horticulture, professional English for food, and professional English for animal and plant quarantine. Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University set up the direction of agricultural science and technology English; Northeast Agricultural University focuses on cultivating agricultural science and technology English translation of agricultural trade and economic English translation talents. (Wang & Yuan, 2010).

Art colleges and universities also combine their own characteristics to explore the reform of foreign language courses. For example, the School of Foreign Languages of the Communication University of China, guided by the needs of students and relying on the school's advantages, has explored the reform of foreign language film and television curriculum, and established a teaching mode that combines language skills training and theoretical knowledge of film and television. (Lv et al., 2014).

4.2. Undergraduate Business English Programs Implementation

Since 2006, the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) has offered an undergraduate Business English programme for the first time. Many local business colleges followed suit. They have structured their foreign language curriculum system according to the curriculum model of "English + Business Orientation (Bilingual)" or the module of "Basic Language Courses + Core Business English Courses + Specialised Business English Courses + Practical Training Courses in Business English". The construction of this "language ability + business knowledge + comprehensive skills" curriculum system fundamentally optimises the students' knowledge structure module, emphasizing the organic combination of students' English language skills and business knowledge. The curriculum of business English theory and practical training courses strengthens the cultivation of students' application ability, practical ability and innovation ability, and enables students to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for international business-related positions. According to the needs of the employers, we can cultivate business talents who have both profound English skills and extensive business knowledge, and who can take charge of their own business (Zhao, 2007).

4.3. Reform of "Work Process Systematization" Practical Course System in Vocational Colleges

In 2004, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor jointly issued the Guidance Program for the Training of Skilled and Shortage Talents in Vocational Colleges and Universities, which put forward the curriculum design concept that "the development of vocational education curriculum should be linked to the work process to a certain extent", and required that the construction of the curriculum system of all higher vocational colleges and universities should be guided by the actual work tasks of enterprises, and that a "work-process systematic" curriculum system should be constructed. It is required that the construction of the
curriculum system of all higher vocational colleges and universities should follow the actual work tasks of enterprises and build a "work process systematic" curriculum system. Based on the work process based on the work process of the professional curriculum system development approach to give China's vocational education a new connotation, breaking the traditional professional curriculum system discipline-based thought of the bondage, enhance the vocational education pointing to vocational adaptability of professional curriculum system construction concepts to adapt to China's market economy on the objective requirements of skilled personnel, has become China's 21st century, the most advanced vocational education thought and the construction of professional curriculum system method.

5. Framework for Curriculum Setting

Compared with general undergraduate programmes, applied undergraduate programmes have distinctive characteristics of technical application. Applied undergraduate training is not discipline-based, academic, research-oriented talents, but to adapt to the needs of production, construction, management and service of the front line of higher technical application of talents. Applied bachelor's degree is also different from higher vocational speciality, although it is to cultivate the technical and applied talents needed in the first line, but the higher vocational speciality mainly cultivates the technical talents needed in the first line of general enterprises and institutions. Applied undergraduate programmes should cultivate high-quality applied talents, i.e. senior technical applied talents in technology-intensive industries. (Qian & Xu & Ying, 2007)

A scientific curriculum system can ensure the systematic and standardised curriculum. The curriculum system of applied undergraduate foreign language majors requires that the concepts of talent, quality and education reflecting the spirit of the times and the requirements of social development should be the forerunner, so as to build a new disciplinary direction, professional structure and curriculum system that can satisfy and adapt to the needs of the economic and social development under the new situation of higher education, and to update the contents of teaching, teaching links, teaching methods and teaching means. We will also update the teaching contents, teaching links, teaching methods and teaching means, improve the teaching level in an all-round way, and cultivate high-quality applied foreign language talents with strong social adaptability and competitiveness.

5.1. Optimizing Traditional Language Skill Course

Using the concepts of enquiry learning and task-based teaching, there is a shift from a focus on the language itself to a focus on language acquisition. This will lead to the acquisition of the ability to use the language rather than just mastering ready-made language knowledge points. The whole process of language learning becomes increasingly automated and autonomous. Directly through classroom teaching, students will be able to use English to complete a variety of real life, study, work and other tasks, so as to cultivate students' ability to actually use foreign languages.

Information technology is effectively integrated into the foreign language teaching process to create a new type of teaching environment that can both play the leading role of the teacher and fully reflect the students' subjective status, and to give fuller play to students' initiative, enthusiasm and creativity. For example, mobile learning methods and the flipped classroom model are used to strengthen teacher-student and student-student interaction and communication, promoting students' use of the language and ultimately achieving the goal of language mastery.

In addition, the tasks and contents of language skills training and language knowledge are based on the real communication problems in students' life and study, social communication and future career, which not only can stimulate students' interest in learning, but also can make the theoretical learning, language skills training and practical vocational operation really combined and improve students' practical ability.

5.2. Integrating Diverse Professional Course Modules

In setting up specific courses, multiple integration of the curriculum is carried out so that each course complements the others, so that the knowledge of one course can be used to consolidate the knowledge acquired in the other courses and lay a good foundation for the other courses. This is reflected in the curriculum so that one course can achieve multiple goals, multiple courses can achieve the same goal, and all courses can achieve the overall training goal. All courses are linked together, and each course contributes to the learning of the others, that is, the Syllabus proposes that attention be paid to the inherent systematicity of each course.

Attention should also be paid to the linkages between the courses in order to meet the requirements of the overall knowledge structure of the students.

Curriculum integration can rely on the theory of curriculum integration, using comprehensive language skills, courses instead of individual language skills courses, such as using comprehensive English courses to integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing course training. Using the concept of content-dependent teaching, integrate language knowledge courses with language skills courses. Hu Wenzhong and Sun Youzhong (2006), when talking about strengthening humanities education in English majors, proposed to advocate the intellectualisation of skills courses and the skilling of knowledge courses. For example, integrating reading skills courses with British and American culture and literature courses.

Curriculum integration is not simply to open a few composite courses, but to make all the courses interact with each other, and to integrate the cultivation of competence into the courses to improve the effectiveness of the courses, so that even the integration of a composite course will have an unexpected effect. Curriculum integration should be based on the needs of the times, delete the content of the vague, old, and outdated courses, replaced by practical and targeted courses to avoid cross-repeat, highlighting the application of knowledge and comprehensive ability. Under the restriction of limited class time, we cannot rely on the simple increase of vocational courses and application courses to achieve the goal of vocational education, but through the comprehensive integration of vocational education and English education to build an application-oriented English curriculum system.
5.3. Establishing Employment-Oriented Vocational Courses

The market demand for graduates of pure language and literature majors is gradually decreasing, and there is a great need for complex talents combining foreign languages with other disciplines, such as diplomacy, economics and trade, law, journalism, and so on. Applied undergraduate foreign language majors can set up vocational course modules for the purpose of serving a specific industry. The vocational curriculum should be employment-oriented and designed from career analysis. Vocational courses should be combined with language skills and knowledge courses as far as possible. Vocational courses are special-purpose English written in English, using English textbooks, and taught in English, so that students learn special-purpose English and acquire a series of vocational knowledge.

The choice of vocational courses should be fully justified, scientific research, and must consider the characteristics of the school, and its content and depth should be based on the language students learn, different sources of students, teachers, and other specific factors to determine. Curriculum can be a foreign language to open the professional, professional tendency or professional knowledge courses, can also be a professional course in English each school also according to the characteristics of the profession and the market demand for students to open the related disciplines or other disciplines of the curriculum for elective, to expand the knowledge of the students, to improve the market adaptability of the profession.

In addition, the actual demand of the society for talents is constantly changing, the vocational curriculum should always grasp the market dynamics, through social research, graduate visits, listen to the opinions of industry insiders and employers, etc., to understand the latest requirements of the market for the ability of talents, adjust and revise the teaching plan and syllabus in a timely manner, test and integrate the curriculum and teaching content, enrich the connotation of the curriculum, and offer courses that meet the social requirements and learners' needs, and finally achieve the goal of cultivating applied foreign language talents. We will adjust and revise the teaching plan and syllabus in a timely manner, examine and integrate the curriculum and teaching content, enrich the content of the courses, and offer courses that meet the requirements of the society and the needs of the learners.

5.4. Enhancing Comprehensive Practical Training

The English curriculum of "focusing on theory and not on practice" can no longer meet the needs of the new era. The system of applied foreign language courses should appropriately increase practical training, internship, and other practical aspects. Internship is an important part of the teaching activities of English majors, students can go to enterprises and institutions to experience the process directly, but also through the simulation software purchased by the school, the use of English for business operations in a full range of simulation, the whole process of participation, so that the theoretical learning and practical operation of the real combination. So that the internship has a plan, step by step, regular, fixed-point regular. At the same time, teachers in the teaching process, should focus on highlighting the "practice" principle, so that students become the main body of the classroom.

We will make use of a variety of channels to get in touch with enterprises and participate in their practical work, and at the same time, we will also allow the staff of enterprises to go up to the podium of professional teaching. Increase efforts to build practical teaching bases and teaching sites that can be adapted to the teaching of courses based on the work process, especially comprehensive simulation-based practical training bases, to provide teachers and students with a real production and living environment, to promote the improvement of their ability to use the language in practice. Adhere to the concept of school-enterprise co-operation in running schools, and cooperate deeply with employers, to create internship opportunities through order training or other means.

Through the practical activities of traditional foreign language courses, the improvement of vocational language skills courses, and vocational practice in simulation training bases and cooperating enterprises, we construct an all-round practical course system, so that practical activities and the cultivation of students' application ability can be carried out in the whole undergraduate teaching process, and the comprehensive practical ability of students can be comprehensively improved.

6. Conclusion

Applied undergraduate education belongs to the higher level of technical education, and is an important part of vocational education in China's colleges and universities. With the goal of adapting to the needs of society and the main line of cultivating technical application ability, applied undergraduate education designs the structure of students' knowledge, ability and quality as well as the training program, and builds the curriculum and teaching content system with the main theme and characteristic of "application", attaching importance to the cultivation of the students' technical application ability. (Wu & Xing, 2011)

The construction of the curriculum system of foreign language majors in applied undergraduate schools should be set and adjusted according to the actual situation of applied undergraduate schools and the needs of the society. Optimize the teaching of traditional language skills and language knowledge courses to improve students' comprehensive language application ability. Integrate the professional course modules, highlight the application-oriented curriculum, and cultivate students' practical language application ability. Take practical teaching as the core link of curriculum reform and construction, improve the all-round practical course system, and cultivate students’ practical ability. Putting vocational skills cultivation in the first place, establishing employment-oriented vocational course modules, cultivating students' foreign language vocational quality and vocational skills.

In conclusion, the construction of the curriculum system of applied undergraduate foreign language majors should be closely combined with the local characteristics, school-specific and foreign language professional characteristics, focusing on the word "application", and based on the "practice-oriented vocational education curriculum development" and "vocational competence systematic curriculum and development method", to implement the reform of the curriculum system of competence-based curriculum system and cultivate applied foreign language highly skilled talents. Based on "practice-oriented vocational education curriculum development" and "vocational competence systematic curriculum and development method", we should implement the reform of the curriculum system.
with competence-based curriculum system to cultivate applied foreign language high-skilled talents (Wu & Xing, 2011).

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