

A Study on Strategies for Developing Vocational English Competence in Applied Universities Based on Core Competencies

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Abstract

With the deepening of global economic integration, China's industrial upgrading and economic restructuring have created an urgent demand for high-quality applied professionals. As the primary force in cultivating frontline technical and skilled personnel, applied universities now face a critical challenge: graduates' professional English proficiency has become a key indicator of their international competitiveness and career development potential. However, many applied universities still struggle with issues such as disconnection between English instruction and professional practice, outdated teaching models, and monolithic evaluation systems, which fail to meet the practical needs of society and enterprises. This study aims to thoroughly analyze the current status and challenges of professional English education in applied universities, while exploring competency-based strategies for cultivating applied English skills. The research seeks to provide theoretical references and practical solutions for achieving deep integration of "English proficiency" and "professional competence," ultimately fostering internationally-oriented applied talents that meet the demands of the new era.

Keywords

Ability development; Applied universities; Industry-education integration; Innovative approaches; Vocational English

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1. Introduction

The educational positioning of applied universities dictates that their talent cultivation must prioritize serving regional socio-economic development while focusing on students' employability and career advancement. Distinct from traditional general English (English for

General Purposes, EGP), English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) refers to students' practical ability to use English effectively in specific professional scenarios for communication and task completion^[1]. Covering three dimensions, language skills, professional knowledge, and vocational competence, EOP serves as a "passport"

enabling students to broaden international perspectives, engage in global collaboration, and excel in cross-cultural roles ^[2].

However, current English education in applied universities faces severe challenges: persistent criticisms of “time-consuming and inefficient” teaching methods, widespread student confusion about “learning without practical application,” and corporate complaints about graduates’ “mute English” and “inability to comprehend specialized English” ^[3]. This supply-demand imbalance highlights the limitations of traditional teaching models, making vocational competency-oriented reforms urgently needed. Against this backdrop, this study explores an innovative cultivation pathway that effectively bridges classroom learning with workplace demands, seamlessly connecting knowledge acquisition with practical skill development.

2. Practical difficulties in cultivating vocational English ability in applied universities

2.1. The teaching objectives are vague and disconnected from the professional needs

Many institutions’ vocational English programs merely extend general English instruction without delving into specific workflows and typical communication tasks across disciplines such as smart manufacturing, international business, hospitality management, and cross-border e-commerce ^[4]. The teaching objectives are vaguely defined as “passing proficiency tests” rather than “completing workplace tasks,” resulting in content that lacks professional relevance and practicality.

2.2. The curriculum system is rigid and the practical link is weak

Curriculum design predominantly emphasizes theoretical instruction, with textbooks that update slowly, lagging behind industry advancements and real-world workplace dynamics ^[5]. The lack of sufficient project-based, case study, and simulation components in practical teaching hinders students from gaining experience in applying English to solve real-world problems within authentic or simulated professional environments.

2.3. The teaching mode is traditional and the subjectivity of students is missing

Classroom teaching remains teacher-centered, with grammar and vocabulary explanations dominating the session, resulting in a typical ‘one-man show’ scenario. This one-way teaching approach neglects students’ initiative, failing to effectively develop core professional competencies such as self-directed learning, teamwork, and intercultural communication. The classroom atmosphere becomes monotonous, and learning outcomes remain suboptimal ^[6].

2.4. The structure of the teaching staff is monotonous, and the quality of “double teachers” is lacking

While most English teachers possess strong language and literary foundations, they generally lack industry experience and practical workplace exposure, making it challenging for them to accurately grasp the specific English application requirements across different professional fields. Meanwhile, although subject teachers are well-versed in their disciplines, their English teaching proficiency often falls short, resulting in a disconnect between language instruction and professional education ^[7].

2.5. The evaluation mechanism is one-sided and ignores the process and application

The current teaching evaluation system overemphasizes a single final exam, primarily assessing students’ ‘memorization of language knowledge points (vocabulary and grammar)’ rather than their practical language application skills and project performance. This one-dimensional, summative evaluation method fails to comprehensively and objectively measure students’ comprehensive professional English competencies, instead creating a negative feedback effect (washback effect) ^[8].

3. Strategies for cultivating vocational English competence in application-oriented universities based on core competencies

In view of the above difficulties, applied universities must carry out a systematic reform and build an innovative

training system with “competency-oriented, output-oriented and industry-education integration” as the core.

3.1. Reconstructing the goal system: From ‘language-oriented’ to ‘career competency-oriented’

The core premise of reforming vocational English education in applied universities lies in completely transcending the framework of traditional general English instruction, achieving a fundamental shift from emphasizing language knowledge transmission to focusing on cultivating comprehensive vocational competencies^[9]. This transformation does not negate language fundamentals, but rather emphasizes that language must serve as a tool for real-world professional tasks and scenarios, ultimately aiming to equip students with effective communication and problem-solving capabilities in international work environments. For a long time, there has been a significant disconnect between vocational English education and professional demands, with teaching objectives often vaguely defined as “improving English proficiency” or “passing certification exams.” This has led to students feeling overwhelmed even when mastering extensive vocabulary and grammar rules when encountering technical documents in specialized fields, international business communications, or cross-cultural collaborations. Therefore, the primary task in reconstructing the goal system is to break down barriers between English education and professional training, driving a strategic transformation from “teaching for language” to “using for careers”^[10].

Achieving this transformation requires establishing a collaborative innovation mechanism. Universities should take the lead in forming a teaching advisory committee composed of English instructors, core faculty members, and industry experts from partner enterprises. The committee’s primary function is to conduct systematic and in-depth industry research and job competency analysis, focusing on regional key industries and the university’s core academic clusters. This enables precise identification of English communication tasks and competency requirements for graduates’ future positions. For example, for the Intelligent Manufacturing program, it’s essential to analyze whether job roles involve reading English technical manuals, operating imported equipment

interfaces, or participating in international technical training. For the International Business program, it’s crucial to clarify whether tasks include drafting English business correspondence, preparing cross-border cooperation agreements, or conducting overseas market sentiment analysis. Through these analyses, the vague concept of “English proficiency” can be transformed into a series of specific, observable, and measurable “professional action competencies”.

3.2. Curriculum refinement: Transitioning from ‘general textbooks’ to ‘project-based modules’

A major obstacle in traditional vocational English education stems from excessive reliance on standardized textbooks. These materials predominantly focus on daily conversations and generic topics, lacking strong connections to specific workplace contexts across different disciplines. This disconnect makes it difficult for students to effectively apply their language skills in future careers. To address this challenge, we must fundamentally optimize curriculum design by breaking free from textbook constraints and developing modular, project-based teaching content aligned with real-world work processes. This optimization doesn’t discard foundational language knowledge but rather restructures and integrates it into simulated, meaningful professional activities.

This approach stimulates students’ intrinsic motivation and achieves immediate integration of “learning” and “application.” Specifically, curriculum development should abandon the traditional organization method based on grammar units or functional topics, instead adopting core carriers like typical professional tasks, complete work projects, or real corporate cases specific to each discipline. This means teaching content evolves from isolated texts or mechanical exercises into comprehensive challenges requiring students to apply integrated skills. For instance, for tourism management majors, a comprehensive project titled “Planning and Promoting a Silk Road Cultural Heritage Premium Tourism Route for European and American Tourists” could be designed.

In this project, students complete a series of modular tasks: To gather information, they must read and comprehend English historical documents and official tourist site introductions (developing professional

reading skills); For route design, they need to discuss in groups and draft English itinerary plans, strategically arranging transportation, accommodations, and attractions (enhancing written communication and logical planning abilities); For promotional simulations, they record English tour guide videos or conduct live streams (improving oral expression and new media skills); To handle client inquiries, they simulate email responses addressing various issues like itinerary changes and special dietary requirements (cultivating intercultural communication and adaptability). Each module seamlessly integrates language skills, professional knowledge, and workplace ethics, allowing students to naturally absorb and apply language proficiency throughout the project process.

3.3. Innovative teaching models and methods: From “teacher-centered” to “student-centered”

To achieve fundamental transformation in cultivating vocational English competencies at applied universities, we must completely abandon the traditional teacher-centered teaching model dominated by one-way knowledge transfer, and fully implement a student-centered teaching philosophy. The core of this philosophy lies in truly returning the classroom’s primary role to students, emphasizing their active construction of knowledge and development of skills through authentic, meaningful language practice activities. Teachers’ roles should shift from being authoritative knowledge transmitters to becoming guides, designers, and supporters in the learning process. To realize this transformation, modern teaching methods such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL), situational simulation teaching, and case-based instruction should be widely adopted. These methods collectively focus on enabling students to “learn by doing” and “learn through application,” allowing them to comprehensively utilize English to solve practical problems by completing tasks and projects closely aligned with professional realities. This approach effectively promotes the coordinated development of language proficiency, vocational competence, and critical thinking.

In practical implementation, the primary initiative involves leveraging modern educational technologies to create highly simulated international professional

scenarios. Educators can utilize virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) technologies, and smart classroom facilities to develop virtual environments such as simulated international trade fairs, cross-border e-commerce negotiations, overseas customer service call centers, and international academic conferences. Students can “immerse” themselves in these scenarios through wearable devices or interactive terminals, assuming various roles, such as foreign trade sales representatives, exhibition interpreters, and international project managers, to complete a series of tasks ranging from product presentations and contract negotiations to dispute resolution.

The development of a blended learning model that deeply integrates online and offline education is the key pathway to supporting student-centered classrooms. Online, teachers should fully utilize platforms like SPOC (Small Private Online Course), Chaoxing Learning Hub, and Zhihuishu to build digital resource libraries aligned with courses. These resources should include micro-lecture videos focusing on key language knowledge, real-world industry case studies, commonly used business language corpora, and international business etiquette animation libraries. Students can independently complete online learning and initial exercises based on their own foundation and progress. The data analysis features of these platforms also help teachers accurately identify common learning difficulties and individual differences. This approach “liberates” offline classroom time, freeing it from inefficient knowledge delivery to focus on cultivating higher-order competencies. Teachers design collaborative inquiry tasks based on real-world problems, organizing group discussions, solution design, debates, and presentation activities.

Ultimately, systematically designing and promoting collaborative learning proves essential, as it mirrors the team dynamics of future workplaces. Educators should craft extended group projects, such as developing a fully English-language international marketing strategy for a domestic sports brand entering global markets. During implementation, students autonomously divide roles (e.g., market researcher, copywriter, visual designer, final presenter) while navigating the entire process: data collection, concept development, content creation, rehearsal refinement, and final presentation. Through this

process, students not only hone their English reading, writing, and translation skills but also gain hands-on experience in communication, compromise, leadership, and accountability through authentic teamwork.

3.4. Reforming the evaluation mechanism: from “single test paper” to “multiple assessment”

Educational assessment serves as the “guiding rod” for teaching reform, with its orientation and methods directly influencing how teachers instruct and students learn. The traditional vocational English evaluation system over-relied on final written exams, emphasizing mechanical memorization of language knowledge and grammatical accuracy while severely neglecting students’ comprehensive ability to apply English in real-world professional scenarios. This “one exam determines everything” approach fails to effectively measure students’ communication skills, teamwork spirit, innovative thinking, and professional competence. It even creates a negative feedback loop in teaching, keeping the focus stuck on exam-oriented training. Therefore, we must fundamentally reconstruct the evaluation system by establishing a diversified and developmental assessment mechanism that combines “process evaluation with summative evaluation, and equally emphasizes competency assessment and knowledge assessment.” This will truly transform it into a powerful tool for promoting students’ comprehensive ability development.

The defining characteristic of a comprehensive evaluation system lies in its expanded and restructured assessment criteria. This requires shifting focus from the narrow metric of “language accuracy” to broader workplace-oriented “task completion quality”. When designing evaluation standards, teachers should prioritize not only lexical and grammatical precision but also: task completion effectiveness, whether students can successfully achieve professional objectives (e.g., delivering a product pitch or drafting a standardized business report); communication effectiveness encompassing fluency, logical coherence, appropriateness, and cross-cultural adaptability; teamwork skills including contribution, role-playing, conflict resolution, and leadership in group projects; and solution innovation that demonstrates critical thinking and creative problem-solving. For instance, when evaluating a project titled

“Developing an English Marketing Strategy for New Product in Overseas Social Media”, assessment criteria extend beyond grammatically correct copywriting to include precise target audience engagement, creative communication strategies, implementability, and efficient team collaboration.

To effectively assess these competencies, we must innovate evaluation formats and methods, moving beyond the dominance of written tests. This requires developing a comprehensive system that integrates multiple assessment tools as outlined:

(1) Project report and portfolio: Students compile a collection of process documents and final outcomes for a complete project, enabling teachers to evaluate their comprehensive capabilities in research, design, execution, and reflection;

(2) Oral presentation and simulation: Through simulated press conferences, business negotiations, customer service and other scenarios, the oral expression, adaptability and professional demeanor are evaluated visually;

(3) Practical operation: In the computer room or training room, the practical skills such as operating cross-border e-commerce platform, processing English orders and making English promotion materials are assessed directly;

(4) Cooperative evaluation: introduce group mutual evaluation and student self-evaluation to cultivate students’ metacognitive ability, and invite enterprise mentors or industry experts to comment on the project results to inject industrial perspective.

This kind of diversified evaluation form is not only more comprehensive and fair, but also a valuable learning experience in itself, which guides students to pay attention to the improvement of ability rather than the score itself.

Furthermore, actively adopting third-party certifications with social recognition serves as a vital strategy to bridge academic education with the external labor market while enhancing the objectivity and credibility of talent evaluation. Educational institutions should establish a “course-certification integration” mechanism, encouraging and guiding students to obtain internationally recognized professional English certifications closely aligned with their academic disciplines. For instance, students majoring in

International Trade could be motivated to prepare for the TOEIC test to demonstrate their English proficiency in global work environments. Those in Secretarial or Administrative Management programs may effectively assess their workplace English application skills through the BULATS certification. For students specializing in Cross-border E-commerce, obtaining professional certifications like the Alibaba Cross-border E-commerce Operator Certificate provides authoritative endorsement of their platform operation and English digital marketing capabilities. Integrating these certification standards and content into daily teaching and evaluation systems not only sets clear learning objectives for students but also validates teaching quality through pass rates. This approach significantly enhances graduates' competitiveness and confidence in the job market, ensuring their competencies receive direct societal recognition.

4. Conclusion

To ensure the effective implementation of competency-based vocational English training strategies in applied universities, institutions must provide support through top-level design, resource allocation, and policy guarantees. Schools should establish clear reform roadmaps, increase investments in smart teaching environments, simulation training labs, and industry-academia collaboration platforms, while improving faculty evaluation and incentive mechanisms to encourage teaching innovation. Looking ahead, vocational English education in applied universities must steadfastly pursue industry-education integration and work-study integration. It should evolve from an isolated language course into a deeply embedded component of talent development, serving as a crucial enabler for students' career advancement. Through systematic innovation and reform, we will cultivate new-era applied talents who master professional skills while possessing exceptional international communication capabilities, providing solid talent support for national strategies and regional economic development.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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