

Design and Practice of College English Curriculum Structure Reform in Application-Oriented Undergraduate Institutions: A Case Study of Chongqing Institute of Engineering

Xiaoxiao Wang*

Chongqing Institute of Engineering, Chongqing 400900, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: College English teaching in application-oriented undergraduate institutions faces multiple problems: course objectives are vague, course content is disconnected from students' majors, and assessment lacks evidence based on student learning outcomes. Also, online and offline instruction integration is superficial. We are a project team from Chongqing Institute of Engineering. Based on the OBE concept and the *College English Teaching Guide* (2020 edition), we take professional needs as guidance and center on students' diverse needs to design a curriculum structure reform plan. It includes the "1+X course system", the "three major teaching modules", the "3+1 blended teaching model", and the "diversified collaborative assessment system". In fact, this paper examines the structural configuration logic of this reform, discusses its core elements and internal interrelationships, and presents a complete chain from needs analysis to structural design that illustrates how the entire system operates. The project team has completed phased work, including preliminary research, elective course piloting, course streaming, and blended teaching in the first semester, which means we have preliminarily validated the application value of the structural configuration and it can provide a reference for similar institutions.

Keywords: Application-oriented undergraduate institutions; College English; Curriculum structure reform; Outcome-based education (OBE); Online-offline blended teaching

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1. Problem statement

Economic globalization is developing fast. Society now has higher requirements for college students' practical English skills and cross-cultural communication ability. The *College English Teaching Guide* (2020 edition) puts focus on practical application ability. It highlights listening and speaking skills. Also, vocational

English and cross-cultural communicative competence should be strengthened. But college English courses in current application-oriented undergraduate institutions still face structural problems. Course objectives are not clear and the general English model is used for a long time, so it can be hard to meet the talent cultivation goals of application-oriented education and students' diverse needs. Also, teaching content does not match actual needs because modules like oral communication and workplace English are missing, and discipline-specific foundational English is also absent ^[1]. This results in “mute English” phenomenon. The assessment system is summative. Formative assessment is not thorough and it lacks effective evaluation of oral communicative competence. Online-offline blended teaching can be reduced to “offline instruction plus online tasks” and it fails to achieve deep integration, adding to students' burden. In fact, the key point of above problems is that most reforms are just small patches. They lack systematic structural restructuring. Therefore, the project team of Chongqing Institute of Engineering started a college English curriculum reform oriented toward practical application ability in November 2024, and they try to solve the structural problems by systematic reconstruction of the curriculum system.

2. Overall framework and theoretical foundation

We base this project on the *Guidelines for College English Teaching* (2020 Edition) and the *College English Curriculum Requirements* as policy basis, and we use OBE (Outcome-Based Education) as the method. In fact, we design instruction from learning outcomes backward, which can establish a closed loop including goal setting, instructional implementation, effectiveness evaluation, and continuous improvement ^[2]. Also, we use blended learning theory to combine online learning and in-person interaction. Based on this, we build a three-tier system. The Needs Analysis Tier finds the starting point through research, and the Structural Design Tier reconstructs the curriculum including course objectives, framework, content, teaching models, and assessment methods, while the Resource Support Tier provides backing through developing online and offline resources and expanding extracurricular activities. These three tiers work progressively, where needs drive the design, design leads resource development, and resources support the implementation.

3. Core elements of the preliminary structural design

3.1. Adjustment of course objectives: Dual needs anchoring

We shift the course objectives from general English training to application-oriented skills. We make several adjustments to the course design. First, we establish a dual objective combining foundational and applied skills, and it is worth noting that listening and speaking abilities are emphasized together with cross-cultural communication training while students should build a solid language foundation and this can help them in future study. Second, we align with needs of academic departments and in fact applied listening and speaking skills are prioritized in this stage and we balance foundational academic English with exam preparation requirements because we think that students should be prepared for both academic study and practical use. Also, we adopt a student-centered approach in curriculum design. The curriculum is divided into two tracks. These tracks are “applied skills” and “full skills”. This can offer differentiated options to meet different needs.

3.2. The “1+X” curriculum system: Hierarchical and classified design

We do not use the old “one-size-fits-all” structure now. Instead, we build a “1+X” curriculum system. The “1” means the core required courses for all first- and second-year students, and these courses are divided into two parallel tracks that students can select according to their needs ^[3]. The “College English (Applied Skills Track)” focuses on communication in everyday situations. It also covers workplace oral expression. The “College English (Comprehensive Skills Track)” focuses on systematic deepening of language knowledge and the enhancement of integrated reading, writing, and translation skills, while it also addresses the requirements for the CET-4 and CET-6 exams and graduate school entrance exams. Both tracks carry same number of credits. Students can choose between them at beginning of their studies based on their foundational skills and academic plans. “X” represents elective courses, including exam-prep electives such as “CET-4 Special Topics” and “Graduate Entrance Exam English Special Topics,” as well as applied electives such as “Situational Conversation English,” “Business English,” and “Basic IT English” for technical fields. It is worth noting that students with strong foundation and self-directed learning abilities can apply for exemption from core courses. This system can ensure basic learning objectives through required courses. Also, it should meet diverse needs through electives, and in fact tailored instruction is implemented through track differentiation.

3.3. Three major teaching modules: Application-oriented content structure

We focus on “real-world application scenarios” in this curriculum design. The core curriculum is restructured into several modules that can meet different needs. It includes the Everyday English module, which uses daily life scenarios as context, and we use communicative tasks to cultivate spoken expression and listening comprehension skills. Also, the Business English module covers business hospitality, telephone communication, and meeting organization, which are common workplace activities, so it can help develop workplace English communication skills and business etiquette. Then, the IT Fundamentals English module, including AI Fundamentals English, uses the information technology industry as a professional context to reflect the university’s distinctive focus on information technology, and college English is expected to support the cultivation of professional talent. In fact, we also add a specialized English variant for art-related majors and this can enhance the program’s structural flexibility.

3.4. The “3+1” blended teaching model: Restructuring of temporal and spatial structure

Traditional blended learning has one misconception we should note. In many cases, the in-person class hours remain unchanged and teachers add more online assignments, so students have a heavy burden. We propose to use a “3+1” model. 75% of total class hours can be used for in-person classroom instruction, and 25% for online self-directed learning; this ratio can be adjusted to 50-50 in implementation based on actual conditions. It is expected to change the teaching relationship. In fact, online instruction is for knowledge-based and foundational content, including vocabulary, grammar, spoken language imitation, and basic listening skills. We present these through micro-lectures and online quizzes. AI-powered speaking practice can be done on the “ZhixueChonggong” and “iFlytek Smart Teaching” platforms. We use the FIF system. This approach can provide automated assessment and real-time feedback in multiple dimensions. It is worth noting that in-person instruction is for higher-order interactive activities such as scenario simulations, role-playing, group discussions, project presentations, and teacher feedback ^[4]. It can serve as a training ground

for applying knowledge and demonstrating skills. Online “knowledge input” can reduce the workload for in-person classes, while in-person “skill transformation” can support online learning. Then a closed-loop cycle of “pre-class self-study—in-class practical training—post-class consolidation” is formed.

3.5. Diversified assessment and evaluation system: Design of feedback mechanisms

We optimize the system from three different aspects. In fact, these are evaluation subjects, content, and also the methods can be improved. For the subjects, we build a multi-subject structure that includes teacher evaluation, peer evaluation, and AI assessment so that different perspectives can be covered, and in principle, evaluation results can be more objective and reliable. This structure is expected to work better than single-subject evaluation. About the content, practical application ability is added as a core dimension. There is a dedicated oral application ability assessment section. It includes AI assessment, topic presentations, video assignments, and also dubbing performances and drama performances. For the methods, we form a cross matrix. It uses online and offline modes, and combines formative assessment with summative assessment. An OBE closed-loop mechanism of “data feedback—goal adjustment—teaching improvement” is embedded. It is worth noting that we analyze learning behavior and performance data in a regular manner so that continuous improvement can be achieved and the teaching process can be adjusted accordingly, and this, in principle, helps improve overall quality.

3.6. Co-construction of online and offline resources: Construction of support structure

We construct resources for both online and offline use, and in the offline part we develop OBE-based course syllabi and teaching plans; also, courseware is made ^[5]. Online, the “ZhixueChonggong” platform is used to build the course framework (including micro-lecture videos and task engines, also test question banks), while the “iFLYTEK Intelligent Teaching” platform is used to construct corpora and question banks, and we plan to build a student work repository so resources can accumulate dynamically. Online and offline resources can support each other. In fact, online resources provide pre-learning and consolidation materials for offline teaching, while new materials generated offline can feed back into the online resource repository.

3.7. Extension of second classroom activities: Extracurricular practice supplement

We include the second classroom in the whole curriculum design. This forms a relay relationship between the “learning” in the first classroom and the “practice” and “display” in the second classroom, which means students can first learn the knowledge in class and then practice it outside, so the two parts can work together. The second classroom includes several different levels. Regular English corners are organized to provide high-frequency oral practice opportunities for daily training. Also, competition activities such as micro-video contests, dubbing contests, and speech contests can promote learning through competition. At the same time, display activities such as situational drama performances and project work exhibitions provide space for showcasing achievements, and this can help students build confidence. It is worth noting that we also use information technology to expand participation, and selected outstanding achievements can be included in the student works repository, so that we can realize the interconnection of in-class and out-of-class resources.

4. Implementation path and stage achievements

We divide project implementation into three main stages. In the first stage (November 2024–August 2025),

four-dimensional investigations and pilot offerings of four elective courses were completed, and policy study and syllabus revision were also finished. Then, the second stage (July 2025–July 2026) can advance course implementation and resource construction. In fact, the third stage (July 2026–November 2026) is expected to summarize achievements, and we can improve teaching materials and research papers at the same time.

By October 2025, the preliminary investigation was finished, and the project entered the second stage. About pilot electives, we opened four courses—*Situational Conversational English*, *CET-4 English Special Topic*, *Business English*, and *Computer English Special Topic*—to the 2024 students in the 2024–2025 academic year. Enrollment was good. In fact, this shows there is a strong need for practical courses. For course streaming, we finished two-way selection for the 2025 first-year students in September 2025: about 3,063 students (67 teaching classes) chose the Application Ability Track, and about 2,054 students (43 teaching classes) chose the Comprehensive Ability Track, so we realized classified teaching on a large scale. In blended teaching, both tracks use an online-offline combined model; online parts include video learning, practice tests, and staged tasks, and we achieved initial integration. For resource construction, basic frameworks of two courses were built on the “ZhixueChonggong” platform and supporting syllabi and teaching plans are now in use. For the second classroom, we finished campus-level and municipal-level selections for the “FLTRP Cup”. English club activities started. Also, the speech contest publicity is in good progress.

We found some problems during the implementation. Teaching feedback is not consistent because some students in the Comprehensive Ability Track report that the difficulty is great, while some in the Application Ability Track find the challenge is not enough, which indicates that the design of difficulty gradients should be refined in principle. Some students have not adapted to the model combining online self-study and offline face-to-face instruction and this reflects the tension between learning habits and structural transformation. In fact, under the non-examination assessment method of the Application Ability Track, the fairness and operability of scoring standards can be improved. Resource construction involves a heavy workload. Also, the recording of micro-lectures and the building of question banks can place demands on the team’s time and technical capabilities.

5. Characteristics and discussion

5.1. Integrity of structural design

This reform has one key feature. It uses a full approach. Unlike previous reforms that focused on only one dimension and were piecemeal, we can restructure the curriculum across seven dimensions, including curriculum objectives, curriculum framework, instructional content, teaching models, assessment methods, resource development, and extracurricular activities, and these elements can support each other to create a good structural relationship. It is worth noting that curriculum objectives provide directional guidance. The curriculum framework provides institutional structure. Instructional content is a vehicle for knowledge. Teaching models ensure process integrity. We can use the assessment system for feedback. Resource development gives material support. Also, extracurricular activities offer opportunities for further learning.

5.2. Integration of school-specific characteristics into the curriculum structure

The curriculum structure does not simply copy a common model, but it includes some special features of this school in a general framework. It is worth noting that we can add the “Basic IT English” among the three

main modules to match the school's focus on information technology, so college English is not an "isolated island" separated from the professional training system. The "X" elective courses are also designed for the school's students, and they include exam-oriented courses and application-oriented courses, so we can see the curriculum structure can be adapted to the school's specific learning context.

5.3. Deep structural integration of technology and instruction

Different from many reforms where technology is just a "garnish" for traditional instruction, we included the technology platform function into instructional design at the beginning: The AI assessment feature of FIF system can help with oral practice and it is also an important part of the formative assessment system, serving two functions of giving real-time feedback and collecting student performance data; The "ZhixueChonggong" platform is not just a repository for content and it can serve as the hub connecting instructional processes before class, in class and after class and in fact the integration of technology and instruction is a structural fusion with complementary functions and workflow integration can be seamless.

5.4. Challenges and areas for improvement

Although the initial structural design was logically consistent, issues that arose during implementation point to several areas for improvement:

We examine alignment between the predefined structure and generated structure. Pre-design cannot anticipate conditions in the classroom. In fact, feedback from students can indicate that the structure should remain flexible and can allow for minor adjustments based on actual student performance, and we should avoid just following the predetermined plan. How to institutionalize and systematize this process of real-time adjustment is a question that can require more exploration.

We examine the tension between student adaptation and structural transformation. Some students resist blended learning. This is caused by the conflict between traditional "teacher-centered" practices and new "student-centered" structure. It is worth noting that solving this problem can require learning strategy guidance and orientation for new students; we also need ongoing incentive measures, and these can help students adapt to the new learning approach over time.

Technical Support for Assessment Framework. The main reason why we can hardly refine assessment schemes for applied competencies is that evaluating oral communication skills is subjective and depends on context, and it can be difficult to measure by standard tools. Then, we can introduce more assessment evidence types such as self-assessment reports, peer evaluations, and also portfolios to build a multidimensional model for evaluating applied competencies.

Transferability of the Structural Design. It is worth noting that this project was designed based on our specific situation, and the content can not apply to all application-oriented undergraduate universities. But its structural design approach—"assessment of needs→repositioning goals→curriculum restructuring→reorganizing teaching content→new teaching models→optimization of assessment system→supporting resources and activities"—has universal methodological significance.

6. Conclusion

We describe the design logic and implementation framework of the preliminary structure for College English curriculum reform at Chongqing Institute of Engineering. We anchor the course objectives in two ways.

Also, we use the “1+X” hierarchical curriculum system, three application-oriented teaching modules, the “3+1” blended teaching model, and a multi-subject collaborative evaluation system, and we build online and offline resources together and extend the second classroom so that the reform can respond at the systemic level to the structural contradictions in College English teaching at the application-oriented undergraduate institutions. The preliminary implementation shows that the structure has reasonable directional choice and path design. But it also faces challenges. In fact, the feedback is divergent, the adaptability is insufficient, and the resource construction is under pressure. Then we focus on empirical verification of implementation effects, continuous refinement of evaluation schemes, and iterative optimization of the structure, so that we can provide more complete practical evidence and theoretical references for reforms at similar institutions.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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