

Exploration of Digital Reform and Innovation Models for College English Teaching under the New Liberal Arts Context

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Abstract: From the perspective of the new liberal arts construction, this paper follows the pace of the national strategy for educational digitalization, takes the promotion of educational digitalization as an opportunity, and, in light of the current realities of foreign language education and teaching, analyzes the significance of college English education. It explores the necessity of digital reform and innovation in college English teaching under the new liberal arts context, aims to create a new ecology for foreign language teaching, drive the new development of foreign language education, cultivate high-quality and versatile talents suitable for the digital age, and promote the innovative and sustainable development of higher vocational education.

Keywords: New Liberal Arts; College English; Digitalization; Teaching Reform

1. Research Background

1.1 The Core Concept of the New Liberal Arts and Its Development

The concept of "New Liberal Arts" was first introduced by Hiram College in the United States in 2017, emphasizing the reorganization of traditional liberal arts disciplines and advocating for interdisciplinary integration. The initiative is dedicated to incorporating new technologies into humanities and social science courses such as philosophy, literature, and language, offering students comprehensive interdisciplinary learning opportunities to foster diverse and innovative talents of excellence.

Subsequently, the construction of the New Liberal Arts has also begun in China.

In April 2019, the Ministry of Education, the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and other departments jointly initiated the "Double First-Class" initiative version 2.0, comprehensively promoting the construction of new engineering, new medicine, new agriculture, and new liberal arts. [1] Thus, 2019 became the starting year for the construction of the New Liberal Arts. In November 2020, a working meeting on the construction of the New Liberal Arts was held at Shandong University. The meeting discussed innovation and development measures for higher liberal arts education in the new era and released the "New Liberal Arts Construction Declaration," which made comprehensive arrangements for the construction of the New Liberal Arts. [2]

The Ministry of Education formally started promoting the construction of new liberal arts programs in universities since 2021.

"The New Liberal Arts are proposed against traditional liberal arts with the aim of breaking through the traditional liberal arts thinking patterns, inheriting and innovating, intersecting and integrating, coordinating and sharing as the main approaches. It promotes the transition of traditional liberal arts from a single disciplinary orientation to a demand-oriented one, from a unidirectional discipline specialization separation to an integrated approach." [3]

The construction of the New Liberal Arts in China is gearing up and proceeding vigorously.

1.2 The Inevitability of Digital Reform and Innovation in Foreign Language Education

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly stated, "Promote

educational digitalization and build a learning society and a learning country for all citizens. During the fifth collective study session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, the leader emphasized that "educational digitalization is an important breakthrough for our country to open up new tracks for educational development and shape new advantages in educational development. Further advancing digital education provides effective support for personalized learning, lifelong learning, expanding the coverage of quality educational resources, and modernizing education." [4] The notice of the Ministry of Education on deeply learning, publicizing, and implementing the spirit of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasizes the need to deeply advance educational digitalization.

The digital transformation of foreign language education is a trend for promoting innovation and development of higher education and training talents suitable for the era of big data. To keep pace with the national strategy for educational digitalization, foreign language education must focus on digital reform and innovation to create a new ecology for foreign language teaching and drive the new development of foreign language education.

1.3 The New Requirements of the New Liberal Arts Construction for College English Education Reform

The construction of the New Liberal Arts starts with breaking down the barriers between traditional liberal arts and other disciplines, advocating for interdisciplinary and integrated development, attempting to break away from the traditional liberal arts' single talent training model, and constructing interdisciplinary majors and directions that meet social development and demand. This direction of development is timely for the foreign language discipline, which has been plagued by single discipline issues and has gradually been relegated to a "skill and tool" status in humanities.

Firstly, the construction of the New Liberal Arts in China is demand-oriented, aiming to cultivate diversified and compound talents. The fundamental goal is to construct philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics and enhance the soft power of Chinese culture. The development strategy of the New Liberal Arts confers a new pattern and mission on college English education. [5] "Under the guidance of building a culturally strong country and the goals of the New Liberal Arts, college English education needs to enhance its sense of responsibility to the era and cultivate internationally-oriented, excellent composite talents proficient in Chinese and foreign cultures, skilled in various fields, and capable of multiple specializations." [6]

Secondly, the construction of the New Liberal Arts emphasizes "integrating new technologies into courses such as philosophy, literature, and language." [7] Applying data and intelligence in the teaching process promotes the reform and innovation of educational teaching. In today's society, with continuous breakthroughs and innovations in science and technology, the widespread application of information and digital technologies in the field of education has accelerated the pace of knowledge updating and diversification of knowledge acquisition methods. "Digital transformation has become the core engine driving the reform and development of higher education globally, with an irreversible trend."

At present, the construction of the New Liberal Arts in China is in full swing, and the pace of educational digitalization is accelerating. The training of foreign language talents and foreign language teaching are facing transformation and innovation. Meeting new development opportunities and responding to new requirements for foreign language education and teaching in the new situation has become the rightful duty of foreign language education and teaching.

2. The Current Dilemmas of College English Teaching

College English is an integral part of the new liberal arts, as well as a strong support for the construction of new engineering, new agriculture, and new medical sciences. As a compulsory public foundational course, College English is a general education course offered to almost all first-year students who are not majoring in English. However, as times have progressed, College English teaching has not changed accordingly. The course content is still inseparable from exam preparation and grading, which is disconnected from the requirements of social practice. The existence of the College English course has begun to be questioned by the public, including students, parents, and even some non-English teachers. University English teachers are also beginning to doubt their profession amidst the criticisms, taking for granted the instrumental and technical nature of the English courses.

In vocational colleges, due to the practical nature of their talent training goals, this phenomenon is

particularly prominent. Over the past decade, the majority of vocational colleges have begun to reduce the number of College English class hours, from 6 class hours per week to 4, and now to the commonly set 2 class hours. Especially in the vocational engineering colleges or comprehensive colleges with engineering programs, the reduction or even disappearance of College English class hours has become the norm, facing an unprecedented severe situation. From "replacing exams with certificates" to "separation of certificates and exams," English proficiency tests have become optional, with the number of students registering for and passing CET-4 and CET-6 declining year by year, all of which signify the gradual decline of College English in vocational colleges.

2.1 The Disproportionate Teacher-Student Ratio in College English Courses Hinders the Achievement of Student-Centered Teaching Goals

According to the "Standards for English Courses in Higher Vocational Education (Specialty)" (2021 edition), the core literacy of the English discipline in the stage of higher vocational education mainly includes four aspects: workplace foreign communication, multicultural exchange, enhancement of linguistic thinking, and improvement of autonomous learning. Traditional English classes, dominated by didactic teaching, have students whose English reading and writing abilities far exceed their listening and speaking abilities (that is, communication and exchange literacy), not to mention expressing their thoughts and ideas spontaneously in English (enhancement of linguistic thinking literacy). Under the traditional teaching model, it is difficult to achieve the core literacy of the English discipline; English teaching still prioritizes theory over practice, making it unable to meet the real needs of students in life and work, leading to its inevitable decline.

However, at its core, the main reason why didactic teaching cannot be replaced is that College English teaching is offered to all non-English majors in the entire university, including some upperclassmen (mostly vocational college degree-bridging classes), with a large student population and a limited number of teachers, which does not meet the needs of small-class English teaching. According to preliminary understanding, taking Guangdong as an example, the number of teachers in the College English teaching and research offices of most vocational colleges is between 10 and 20. However, with the expansion of vocational colleges since 2019, the number of students has surged in recent years, with about 5000-7000 students enrolled in College English classes, and in some schools, the number of new students has even reached as many as 10,000. This means that this course, which most requires teacher-student interaction, student-centered activities, and ample time and space for free expression, can only succumb to the constraints of reality, with most of the time spent on teacher-led explanations, and individualized teaching becomes mere lip service.

The huge disparity between the number of College English teachers and the number of students makes it difficult to achieve student-centered teaching goals, and the effective integration and unification of the instrumental and humanistic aspects of College English is difficult to implement, making it hard to achieve the core literacy of the English subject.

2.2 The Instrumentality of College English Courses Far Exceeds Their Humanistic Aspects, with a Single Discipline Feature Prominent

Deng Yingling pointed out: "If we do not reform the traditional didactic teaching model, only focusing on the mechanical imparting of humanistic knowledge while ignoring the construction of the humanistic significance of the student subjects themselves, humanistic education will ultimately become empty talk." [8]

In China, college English education has shifted from focusing on skill training (the five major skills of English listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating) to aiming at training compound talents with foreign language skills and professional knowledge guided by vocational demands. Moreover, English itself is a cultural form, carrying a rich variety of human cultures and humanistic spirits. College English, as a general education course, theoretically combines both instrumentality and humanism. However, in the actual teaching process, humanism is often overlooked due to the demands of exams, which is one of the reasons why English courses have long been criticized and reduced to "tools," contrary to the connotations of the new liberal arts construction.

2.3 The Digital Construction of College English Courses Lags Behind, Failing to Meet Developmental Needs

Most vocational colleges take engineering programs as their leading edge, focusing on connecting

with the pillar or characteristic industries of the province or locality, with large social demand, high recognition, and great development potential, resulting in significant effects, thus showing a clear preference for engineering programs, with strong support. In contrast, liberal arts programs are more theoretical than practical and have a weaker integration with industry and industry, resulting in a much lower rate of conversion of scientific research achievements compared to engineering programs, hence receiving less support from all sides. As one of the basic courses in the liberal arts college, College English is even more neglected. Priority in funding is given to professional development and professional group construction, followed by course construction, etc. The digital construction of College English courses, whether in terms of hardware or software, lags far behind other courses, with very limited conditions, making it difficult to carry out comprehensive reforms.

3. Pathways to Digital Reform and Innovation in College English Teaching under the New Liberal Arts Construction

The Deputy Director of the Department of Higher Education at the Ministry of Education, Wu Shixing, pointed out in the theme report "Deepening the Construction of New Liberal Arts under the Strategy of Educational Digitalization" that "educational digitalization is a prerequisite for the modernization of education. It is a major strategic issue that affects and even determines the quality of higher education, with strong foresight and guidance." In the digital era, to achieve high-quality development of foreign language education, it is essential to progressively promote from the aspects of educational concepts, organizational forms, and content innovation.

3.1 Inter-university collaboration to advance the joint construction and sharing of digital resources for college English teaching

Taking the Guangdong Construction Vocational Technology Institute, where the author is based, as an example, the school is located in Guangdong Provincial Vocational Education City in Qingyuan City. There are nearly 10 higher vocational colleges with distinct characteristics advancing side by side. To solve the practical problems of outdated digital hardware and software in college English courses, scarcity of digital resources, and difficulty in implementing digital courses, it is only through inter-university collaboration to advance the joint construction and sharing of digital resources for college English teaching that these real dilemmas can be resolved. Governments and educational management departments should first establish inter-college specialty English elective courses at the vocational education city level, enabling mutual credit recognition. They should also fully utilize existing teaching platforms, online resources, and the high-quality online and offline courses offered by various colleges to facilitate student course selection, while promoting faculty and student exchanges and resource sharing among colleges. Secondly, they should encourage inter-collegiate cooperation among the English teaching and research departments of colleges within the vocational education city. Teachers should fully rely on the application of digital technology to form deep alliances in areas such as project applications, textbook compilation, teacher-student competitions, and horizontal projects, complementing each other's advantages.

Inter-university collaboration and joint construction are not only the inevitable trend of the development of digital foreign language education, but also the internal requirement of responding to the national call, practicing the construction of new liberal arts, breaking through the limitations of a single discipline, and widening disciplinary boundaries.

3.2 Enhancing teachers' digital literacy and improving teachers' ability to integrate digital resources

The digital transformation of foreign language education cannot be separated from the digital transformation of the teacher workforce. Under the driving concept of the construction of new liberal arts, the digital transformation of the college English teaching team is urgent. Only by greatly enhancing the digital literacy of teachers and improving their ability to integrate digital resources, can we better integrate "tool-oriented" college English with other disciplines, and cultivate compound talents with international perspectives who possess workplace foreign communication skills, multicultural exchange capabilities, language thinking enhancement abilities, and the capacity for autonomous learning and improvement. Teachers can use virtual digital platforms to connect classroom teaching with extracurricular self-learning, make up for the deficiencies in classroom teaching time and space, improve the status quo of didactic teaching, expand disciplinary boundaries, and make English learning more real-time and practical.

3.3 Creating a diverse evaluation system, innovating college English assessment methods with digital means

With societal development and the demands of the times, the evaluation system for college English courses is also being continuously updated. The college English curriculum should be based on the fundamental principle of moral education, student-centered, and outcome-oriented, to make the evaluation system diversified and digital, and to achieve all-staff, all-process, and all-dimensional education. In the process of teaching practice, led by the teacher team, a valid cyclical process evaluation system is gradually established to promote the benign and orderly development of the educational and teaching process.

4. Conclusion

The new liberal arts is a new disciplinary paradigm and professional construction path proposed in contrast to the traditional liberal arts. Driven by the core concept of the construction of new liberal arts, the digital reform and innovation of college English teaching cannot be delayed. The construction of digital resources, the enhancement of teachers' digital literacy and practical skills, the promotion of a diversified evaluation system with digital means, and the innovation of teaching models bring new vitality to foreign language teaching, creating a new ecology for the cyclic development of foreign language teaching.

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