

Constructing Core Competencies for Foreign Language Majors in Application-oriented Universities of Finance and Economics: Exploring Pathways for Interdisciplinary Integration

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Abstract: *Faced with the rapid changing global trade, it is urgent for higher education in China to carry out interdisciplinary teaching and to construct equivalent core competencies for students. This article aims to explore the core competencies of foreign language learners in application-oriented universities which focusing on finance and economics fields, and to construct a frame of four-tier core competencies: language proficiency, key competencies, interdisciplinary integration, and expanded competencies. This framework emphasizes that interdisciplinary foreign language education in application-oriented institution should prioritize industry needs and do problem-solving in the interdisciplinary integration, to develop talents in structured pathways.*

Keywords: *Foreign Language Majors, Core Competency, Interdisciplinary, Integration, Application-Oriented Universities of Finance and Economics*

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence and global economic trends present both challenges and opportunities for foreign language education in China. In response, higher education must refine its principles and systems to align with national strategies such as “Cultural Power,” “New Liberal Arts,” and the “Belt and Road Initiative,” with the aim of cultivating talents who are both interdisciplinary learned and proficient in foreign languages. Achieving this requires a clear definition of the core competencies of foreign language majors, particularly in terms of the skills, a qualified undergraduate should possess.

In recent years, research on interdisciplinary education has flourished in China, expanding from primary schools to higher education. However, studies on core competencies with interdisciplinary education at the institutional level remain limited. Higher education in China is evolving: from a predominantly academic focus to a more diversified system that includes both research-intensive universities and application-oriented institutions. The latter emphasize preparing industry-ready graduates and have a strong connection to regional economies. In the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (the Greater Bay Area), a key economic hub aiming to lead China's development, application-oriented universities are closely integrated with industry needs.

This study, therefore, focuses on talent development in the application-oriented finance and economics universities in the Greater Bay Area. It aims to identify current challenges in foreign language education and propose solutions for aligning talent development with the demands of the region: What core competencies should foreign language majors possess? How can these competencies be cultivated within the context of application-oriented, interdisciplinary education?

2. Challenges on the Development of Foreign Language Majors

The integration of emerging technologies and alignment with job market demands are pressing challenges in foreign language education [1]. Technology enhances personalized learning, online collaboration, and language acquisition, improving efficiency and international communication [2]. However, these advancements also introduce challenges, as the demand for foreign language talent evolves rapidly. To address this, it is crucial to optimize basic disciplines for interdisciplinary integration and promote interdisciplinary research [3]. Thus, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of

interdisciplinary approaches and adapting strategies accordingly is essential.

Recent academic attention has increasingly focused on the development of foreign language departments, as well as the challenges and limitations within the discipline. A search on CNKI, using keywords such as “foreign language teaching,” “foreign language major,” “foreign language education,” and “foreign languages in university,” revealed a decline in the number of journal articles from 1,649 in January 2020 to 1,103 in December 2023 (data retrieved on October 21, 2024). In contrast, studies on “interdisciplinary disciplines,” “interdisciplinary construction,” and “interdisciplinary integration” have risen significantly in recent years. This shift indicates a transformation in foreign language education research, moving away from traditional focus on literature and linguistics to a broader role as a tool for decoding information across disciplines, highlighting the growing trend of interdisciplinary integration.

2.1. Strategic Goals and Plans for Foreign Language Education

The “New Liberal Arts” initiative emphasizes the cultivation of students with comprehensive literacy, critical thinking ability, and interdisciplinary capabilities [4]. The Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (2019) calls for universities in the Greater Bay Area to nurture talents with strong innovative and entrepreneurial abilities. To implement the plan effectively, universities should prioritize the core function of language communication and leverage foreign languages as tools for integrating interdisciplinary knowledge [5].

Application-oriented universities in the Greater Bay Area target at the cultivation of high-quality finance and economics talents, who could think critically and meet the demands of industrial needs.

While to achieve such goals of foreign language education remains a formidable task, midterm and short-term planning are still unclear [6]. Faced with evolving needs for talent, universities, especially in regions like Guangdong, Hong Kong, China, and Macao, China, should clarify the core competencies required for foreign language majors.

2.2. Problems in Interdisciplinary Integration

The Ministry of Education in China highlights the lack of coordination in curriculum reform between universities and K-12 schools. Rigid teaching models, the evolving role of foreign language teachers, and challenges in talent development hinder effective interdisciplinary education [7].

Firstly, rigid foreign language education models, such as top-down teaching plans and standardized evaluation criteria, emphasize grammar at the expense of individual student needs. While technology enables personalized learning, traditional methods fail to address the diverse requirements of students.

Secondly, the role of foreign language teachers is shifting, but many educators are struggling to adapt. Traditionally as knowledge disseminators, teachers must now focus on fostering students’ autonomous learning skills [8]. Rapid technological advancements have outpaced institutional reforms, creating an imbalance in the teacher-student dynamic. As online media fosters more egalitarian relationships, teachers are increasingly seen as “guides” rather than sole knowledge providers.

Thirdly, foreign language programs face challenges in cultivating versatile professionals. Students must not only master languages but also acquire knowledge in related fields to effectively address interdisciplinary issues. This broadens their adaptability and enhances competitiveness in global contexts [9]. Additionally, students must develop cross-cultural communication, practical skills, and problem-solving abilities [10]. Solutions to these challenges include optimizing resource allocation, refining evaluation systems, training faculty in interdisciplinary skills, and promoting blended teaching models.

In summary, the path of interdisciplinary integration in foreign language education in university remains unclear. Traditional foreign language education models appear rigid, and universities must clarify their educational positioning, refocus on talent development, and accurately identify the core competencies required. By adhering to a goal-oriented approach, universities can strive to nurture interdisciplinary, high-quality talents capable of thriving in diverse fields.

3. Core Competencies of Foreign Language Majors

Core competencies refer to the key abilities students need to thrive in their personal development and meet societal needs [7]. These competencies evolve with talent demands. Foreign language programs must balance promoting Chinese cultural values with integrating language learning across disciplines to

meet the changing socio-economic needs. Thus, foreign language majors must develop multi-layered core competencies.

3.1. A framework of Core Competencies

Based on Bloom's Taxonomy and Competency-Based Education theory, this study proposes a four-layer model of core competencies: core language skills, key competencies, interdisciplinary integration, and extended competencies (see Figure 1).

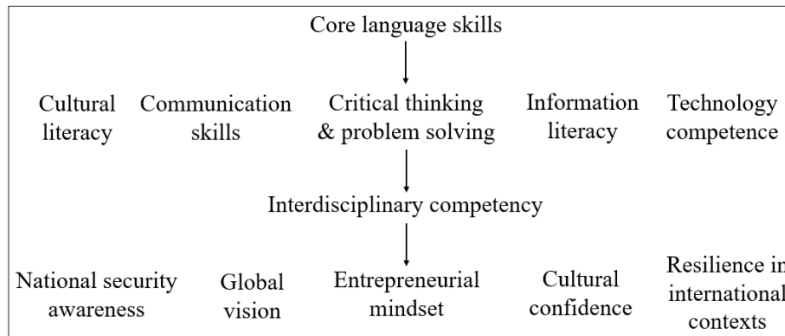


Figure 1: A four-layer model of core competencies.

Core language skills are fundamental, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The primary goal is to enable effective communication, making language proficiency the core element and a prerequisite for other competencies.

Key competencies, the second layer, are the comprehensive abilities of students in practical applications, which include five elements: cultural literacy, communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving, information literacy, and technological competence.

Cultural literacy refers to the cognitive ability to understand the customs, values, beliefs, arts, and language of different cultures [11]. This competency can be cultivated through cross-cultural learning experiences in the classroom or during internships, which help students develop cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Communication skills go beyond language proficiency; they also involve the ability to effectively interact and engage in diverse contexts [12]. Critical thinking and problem-solving entail the ability to analyze, interpret, and address issues by identifying facts versus opinions, evaluating the reliability of perspectives, and employing creative thinking to generate innovative solutions [13]. Information literacy encompasses the ability to acquire, assess, and apply information effectively. It involves skills such as information retrieval, evaluation, application, and ethical use of data. Technological competence is the ability to leverage various technologies and tools. Foreign language students should not only master basic technical skills, such as word processing and spreadsheets, but also effectively use language learning platforms, research tools, and digital communication technologies to enhance learning and facilitate academic and cross-cultural collaboration. In sum, these key competencies reflect the evolving demands on language professionals in today's rapidly changing global learning environment.

The third layer is interdisciplinary integration competency, which combines language skills with other fields like economics, management, law, and political science. This integration enhances students' competitiveness in international contexts, enabling them to apply language skills across disciplines to solve real-world problems [14]. In particular, integrating language with political science is crucial in China for understanding global politics and international relations [15].

The fourth layer is extended competency, which emphasizes developing global perspectives and comprehensive literacy in foreign language learning. Extended competencies include global vision, national security awareness, resilience in international contexts, entrepreneurial mindset, and cultural confidence.

Global vision enables students to understand and analyze national issues from a global perspective. National security awareness encourages students to take responsibility for safeguarding national security, including knowledge of cybersecurity and information security. Resilience in international contexts refers to the ability to adapt, navigate, and overcome challenges in global and cross-cultural environments. An entrepreneurial mindset reflects students' ability to think creatively and embrace entrepreneurial opportunities, such as participating in simulated entrepreneurship competitions. Cultural confidence

includes identifying with China's cultural values, promoting Chinese culture globally, and innovating within the context of cultural heritage. By fostering these extended competencies, foreign language students will not only develop strong language skills but also enhance their adaptability in a dynamic and interconnected world [16].

In conclusion, core competencies for foreign language majors should adopt a student-centered approach, integrating language proficiency with interdisciplinary and global competencies. This framework addresses the evolving talent needs in an era of rapid technological advancement and complex global challenges.

3.2. Core Competencies in Application-Oriented Universities of Finance and Economics

The core competencies of foreign language majors at applied finance and economics institutions differ due to the schools' focus on practical skills rather than academic theory. These institutions cultivate talent in close alignment with local businesses and the economic characteristics of their regions. As a result, foreign language programs at applied undergraduate institutions emphasize financial and economic knowledge and skills needed for finance-related activities. Additionally, language proficiency and competency-based training are essential to meet labor market demands. These competencies are closely aligned with regional industries, supporting their rapid development. Therefore, the core competencies of foreign language majors in these institutions must integrate financial and economic knowledge with language skills.

Furthermore, industry-specific training helps students understand the geographical advantages and regional competitiveness of the Greater Bay Area. Foreign language programs in this region are designed with an industry orientation, and their core competencies are tailored to meet the practical needs of enterprises. As such, these programs prioritize interdisciplinary approaches, integrating economics, management, law, and technology. They emphasize practical learning experiences, including university-industry cooperation, project-based learning, internships, and fieldwork, thereby creating a competency development pathway that combines "financial and economic disciplines + foreign languages + enterprise collaboration."

4. Paths and Methods to Develop Core Competencies in Application-Oriented Universities

To cultivate interdisciplinary talent, application-oriented universities of finance and economics should focus on the needs of regional industries, integrate disciplinary knowledge, and use internship platforms to develop students with multidisciplinary competencies.

4.1. Highlighting Industrial Needs and a Problem-Solving Approach

The Greater Bay Area hosts key industry clusters, including electronics, software and information services, advanced materials, smart home appliances, modern textiles, agriculture and food, automotive, and green petrochemicals. Application-oriented universities must identify industry trends and challenges, adopting a "problem-oriented" approach to develop cross-disciplinary solutions for real-world issues.

By recognizing industry needs, higher education can pinpoint gaps between talent development and labor market demands, addressing these through cross-disciplinary education. Given the complex, interconnected nature of these needs, talent cultivation models in applied business universities should avoid formalism, ensuring flexibility in educational resources through adaptable institutional frameworks. This will foster a mutually beneficial relationship between resources and talent demand, streamline rigid departmental structures, and align more closely with the evolving social environment. Additionally, universities should establish an open, flexible feedback system to continuously improve their approach.

4.2. Establishing an "Industry Cluster—Interdisciplinary Management—Discipline Group" Mechanism

Application-oriented universities in finance and economics must align talent cultivation with state and industry requirements. By leveraging big data and addressing regional needs, universities can optimize training programs for foreign language majors [17].

At the industry level, universities should capitalize on the Greater Bay Area's strengths, collaborating with key industry clusters to produce talent. Establishing digital platforms can facilitate communication

between schools and enterprises, foster collaboration between faculty and industry mentors, and promote project development, research cooperation, and student internships.

At the institutional level, universities should set up interdisciplinary management units responsible for long-term strategic planning, policy formulation, and resource integration. These units will monitor interdisciplinary education and labor market demands, ensuring adequate funding and coordination between departments. A vertical collaboration between “school—labor market—government policies” and horizontal collaboration between departments will ensure the correct direction for talent development.

At the disciplinary level, interdisciplinary education should follow a “problem-oriented” approach, fostering critical thinking. Traditional academic boundaries should be broken down, with project-based learning driving the process. This begins by identifying real-world problems, defining challenges, and using theoretical frameworks to analyze and address them. The interdisciplinary approach is a collaborative effort, engaging peers, mentors, and industry professionals throughout.

4.3. Implementing the “Language and Culture—Interdisciplinary Integration—Practical Skills—Internships” Pathway

To develop core competencies in foreign language majors at applied business universities, it is essential to ensure students gain the foreign language skills required for social and professional demands. The talent cultivation model in China’s higher education is strategic and socially impactful, focusing on foundational knowledge and skills [18].

In the first year, the focus should be on building a strong language foundation, enhancing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, and introducing the cultures of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao and intercultural communication. The second year should expand into professional knowledge in economics, management, law, and emerging technologies like blockchain and IT. In the third year, the curriculum should deepen professional expertise, strengthen practical application, and develop critical thinking skills. The fourth year should prioritize internships, integrating theory with practice, broadening international perspectives, and preparing students to handle global challenges.

Aligned with this layered approach, applied business universities should clarify their talent development goals, integrate interdisciplinary competencies, and establish clear development plans. By refining talent cultivation and management systems, universities can nurture versatile foreign language professionals who are adaptable, communicative, and innovative.

5. Conclusion

This article explores the development of foreign language disciplines in China, considering the growing importance of technology, the demand for interdisciplinary knowledge, cultural confidence, and international security awareness. It aims to construct a framework for the core competencies of foreign language majors and offers recommendations for enhancing foreign language programs at applied universities of finance and economics.

The proposed model advocates for a four-tier competency system, with language proficiency as the foundation, followed by key competencies, interdisciplinary integration, and extended abilities. Given the outward-oriented nature of applied business universities, the development of core competencies should be driven by industry needs, with a problem-solving approach guiding the integration of disciplines. This model emphasizes a structured, tiered approach to talent cultivation, tailored to meet market demands.

It is hoped that this competency framework and development pathway will contribute to the cultivation of versatile, industry-ready talent that can thrive in an evolving global landscape.

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