

Research on the Construction and Development of the School-Based English Curriculum *Zhanjiang Marine Culture*

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Abstract: *This study takes the school-based curriculum Zhanjiang Marine Culture, offered by Zhanjiang Preschool Education College, as a case study to explore the development and design of the course, summarize its experiences, and reflect on its shortcomings. The survey results confirm that the course has achieved certain outcomes in meeting students' developmental needs, showcasing the distinctive educational features of the institution, and preserving local marine culture. As a result, school-based curricula in coastal vocational colleges can make full use of local marine resources and institutional advantages, incorporating additional course modules to reflect the unique characteristics of marine culture in teaching, while fostering marine awareness and marine science education. Based on these findings, this research provides a valuable reference for coastal vocational colleges to develop school-based English curricula and explore interdisciplinary talent cultivation pathways for English majors.*

Keywords: *Vocational colleges; English school-based curriculum; marine characteristics*

1. Introduction

In 2021, the Ministry of Education of China issued The English Curriculum Standards for Vocational Colleges (2021 Edition) (hereinafter referred to as the Standards), which articulated that “the English curriculum for vocational colleges is an integral component of the curriculum system for higher vocational education. As a public foundational course required or conditionally elective for students across disciplines, it embodies both instrumental and humanistic attributes.” In 2022, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China released the Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Modern Vocational Education System, further advocating for “the establishment of a modern vocational education structure and regional layout aligned with market demands and industrial structures,” while encouraging regions to leverage their unique characteristics and advantages to pioneer and explore pilot reforms in modern vocational education. Against the backdrop of expanding and accelerating industrial internationalization in China, the demand for technical and skilled talent with foreign language proficiency has surged, placing the English curriculum in vocational colleges at the forefront of the era's imperative to cultivate high-quality, globally competent technical professionals.

However, at the current stage, English education in vocational colleges in China has yet to adequately meet the genuine demands of society and the long-term developmental needs of students. Critical issues remain unresolved, such as the “low compatibility between supply and demand” and the “imbalance in the dual attributes of the curriculum” (Li et al., 2023: 88). Many vocational colleges' English courses are “rooted in a narrow perspective of subject knowledge, making it challenging to establish synergies with other public or specialized courses, and have not entirely overcome the constraints of emphasizing the transmission of theoretical knowledge while neglecting the cultivation of professional competencies” (Li et al., 2023: 88). Given the current state of English curriculum in vocational colleges, institutions should align with the strategic priorities of national education reform, develop a nuanced understanding of contemporary societal and industrial needs, and comprehensively explore the feasibility and practical outcomes of English curriculum reform at multiple levels.

In advancing the construction and reform of English education in vocational colleges, the development of school-based curricula serves as a pivotal breakthrough. Unique school-based courses can significantly enhance a school's overall distinctiveness, facilitate its transformation toward a specialized development path, and aid students in cultivating autonomous learning capabilities while

improving the institution's professional visibility and academic reputation. The construction of highly practical and broadly applicable English school-based curricula requires careful consideration of how to reflect regional characteristics, respond to national strategic imperatives, align with regional socio-economic needs, and fully leverage the institution's unique attributes and faculty strengths. This study takes as its case the school-based course *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* offered by Zhanjiang Preschool Education College (ZPEC), a vocational institution located in the coastal city of Zhanjiang. Through an analysis of the course's content framework, development process, and current implementation, the study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the construction practices and a critical reflection on its shortcomings, with the ultimate goal of offering a valuable reference model for the development of distinctive English school-based curricula in vocational colleges.

2. Feasibility

2.1 Urban resources

Located at the southernmost tip of Chinese mainland, Zhanjiang is a city embraced by the sea, bordered by the South China Sea to the east and the Beibu Gulf to the west. With a total coastline of 2,325.9 kilometers and 101 harbors (Bai et al., 2014), the city's coastal geography is integral to its identity. Archaeological evidence indicates human activity in Zhanjiang's coastal areas as far back as 6,000 years ago during the Neolithic era (Bai et al., 2014). Since the Qin and Han Dynasties, Zhanjiang's fishermen have been actively engaged in marine harvesting. During the Han Dynasty, Xuwen Port, under Zhanjiang's jurisdiction, became one of the starting points of the Maritime Silk Road.

In 1956, Zhanjiang witnessed the birth of New China's first independently designed and constructed modern deep-water harbor, Zhanjiang Port. By 1984, the city was included among the first 14 coastal cities opened to international trade in China. Entering the 21st century, Zhanjiang was further positioned as a pivotal city in China's Belt and Road Initiative for maritime cooperation and designated as a national demonstration zone for marine economic development. By 2023, Zhanjiang had embarked on initiatives to establish itself as a leading modern marine ranching demonstration city. Achievements included the inauguration of an intelligent fisheries big data center, the establishment of China's first comprehensive industrial chain standards for golden pompano, the commencement of construction on "Haita No. 1," the world's first fully submersible, depth-stabilized, high-typhoon-resistance aquaculture platform, and the launch of "Haiwei No. 2," the largest semi-submersible truss-type intelligent aquaculture platform in Guangdong Province. As a renowned maritime city rich in historical and cultural heritage, Zhanjiang embodies unique marine cultural characteristics and offers abundant cultural resources. These attributes ensure a dynamic and distinctive reservoir of marine cultural content, providing a sustainable foundation for the development of marine-themed school-based curricula.

2.2 Institutional advantages

Founded in 1925 and administered by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Education, ZPEC is a public full-time teacher-training higher vocational college. The school primarily serves the employment needs of Zhanjiang, encompassing urban and suburban areas as well as five counties or county-level cities under its jurisdiction: Wuchuan, Suixi, Lianjiang, Leizhou, and Xuwen. Additionally, its influence extends to the regions surrounding the Beibu Gulf. Since 2019, ZPEC has actively participated in the national initiative to expand enrollment in higher vocational education, introducing several new non-teaching-oriented programs and achieving balanced, comprehensive development. This strategic growth has significantly enhanced the institution's academic diversity, expanded its scale, and strengthened its role as a multidisciplinary institution. In 2020, ZPEC articulated a vision of "establishing a distinctive marine culture education identity," embracing the ethos of "embracing inclusivity and pursuing self-transcendence" as its guiding cultural philosophy. To this end, the college has prioritized integrating marine cultural elements into its campus identity, aiming to create a distinctive educational environment rooted in marine cultural heritage.

The Foreign Languages Department of ZPEC boasts a highly qualified and experienced faculty team, consisting of 61 full-time teachers, among whom 7 hold senior professional titles, 46 possess intermediate professional titles, and 3 are foreign instructors. Additionally, the department benefits from the expertise of 12 adjunct professors and associate professors. The teaching team responsible for

the school-based course *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* has consistently prioritized the dissemination of marine culture, conducting comprehensive and meticulous data collection efforts and amassing an extensive archive of primary-source materials. In recent years, the team has undertaken in-depth exploration and systematic research on the integration of marine culture into English curricula, yielding notable achievements. These include contributions to the English translation and compilation of marine professional textbooks, the authorship of the Marine English dictionary, and the publication of several academic papers on the incorporation of marine cultural elements into English classrooms in renowned domestic and international journals or core academic periodicals.

3. Assessment and evaluation

Based on the concept of interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum development (Kelley & Knowles, 2016), the English school-based curriculum of *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* innovates its teaching assessment philosophy. By leveraging big data media, a diversified linear teaching evaluation mechanism is established. The evaluation method integrates both formative and summative assessments, with the goal of assessing students' learning progress while dynamically recording and evaluating the teaching and learning process. The evaluation is conducted from a perspective that considers both teacher and student development, offering a comprehensive and dynamic view of the teaching activities.

3.1 Formative assessment

The formative assessment constitutes 50% of the total course grade, and includes three components: attendance, classroom performance, and online autonomous learning.

3.1.1 Attendance

Students are required to attend classes on time and are prohibited from arriving late or leaving early without a valid reason.

3.1.2 Classroom performance

Students will be graded based on their level of participation in class activities, language proficiency, and teamwork skills throughout the semester. This assessment will primarily involve classroom exercises, group discussions, or responses during class, with active participants eligible for additional points.

3.1.3 Online autonomous learning

The teacher will post materials online based on the content of each unit. Students will be required to log into platforms such as China's University MOOC, Chaoxing, or the Wenjuanxing mini-program to complete online learning tasks and after-class assignments. The teacher will monitor the learning process and grade assignments on these platforms, using students' online learning records to assess and supervise their progress. The data collected from autonomous learning follows the principles of process-based data (Aryee et al., 2004), being the average of multiple periodic results.

3.2 Summative assessment

The summative assessment accounts for the remaining 50% of the total course grade, and takes the form of a final exam. This exam evaluates the students' comprehensive application abilities across multiple dimensions, covering both the teacher's instructional content and the students' self-learned material from designated online platforms. The assessment methods are flexible and varied, including oral examinations, written tests, performances, and creative projects. Students may submit their responses in paper form, or through video or audio recordings.

The final course grade will be the sum of the formative and summative assessment scores. The specific breakdown is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Grading and Assessment Methods for the School-based Curriculum of Zhanjiang Marine Culture

Composition	Indicators	Evaluation	Basis	Proportion
usual performance	Attendance (10%)	class roll call	The monitor takes regular attendance for each lesson and keeps detailed records.	50%
	classroom performance (20%)	practices	textbook exercises or off-campus practice	
		group discussion	Students will freely form groups to present reports on marine-related topics. Before the class, each group will prepare key points related to the ocean, such as the current development status of major marine powers, the overview of China's coastal provinces, island religious culture, the culture of the Marine Silk Road, and the culture of marine ethnic minorities.	
		classroom participation	The teacher assigns tasks and poses questions.	
	online autonomous learning(20%)	online self-study (materials on different topics are posted weekly, with a one-week deadline for each task)	read the English translation materials on the basic overview of Zhanjiang's marine folk customs watch online live broadcasts, documentaries, or short videos to learn about the various forms, characteristics, and historical evolution of marine folk customs in Zhanjiang, particularly in the areas of marine fisheries such as seawater aquaculture and marine fishing	60%
		online assignments (5 in total, with a one-week deadline for each assignment)	assess the comprehensive application of the knowledge learned (such as introducing Zhanjiang's marine tourist attractions in a tour guide script, Chinese-English translation of marine cultural heritage materials, and creating marine poetry in English)	
		extended learning	Students, based on their personal interests, gather and organize online marine resources, presenting personalized learning outcomes from multiple perspectives in an innovative manner (such as the "Leizhou Peninsula Cultural Tour" design plan).	
	final results	exams(50%)	Students can voluntarily choose any assessment form, such as written exams, oral presentations, performances, or creative works, all of which must be answered in English. The written exam mainly consists of objective questions to assess the content from the textbook and class handouts, including: listening comprehension, vocabulary explanations, cloze tests, sentence translation, and reading comprehension. Other assessment forms are subjective and evaluate students' ability to apply the knowledge they have learned to ocean-related tasks. These include: narrating Zhanjiang's ocean legends in English; planning the Zhanjiang Marine Week and writing a bilingual opening speech; designing seafood culinary tourism routes, etc.	60%
	total scores	/	usual performance+ final results	100%

4. Effectiveness

To evaluate the effectiveness of the school-based course *Zhanjiang Marine Culture*, this study conducted a questionnaire survey involving 200 students who opted for the course. Pre-course and

post-course assessments were administered, and a comparative analysis of the data obtained was performed. The evaluation results demonstrated that the course achieved satisfactory teaching outcomes.

Firstly, the course successfully addressed students' differentiated cognitive and learning style needs while enhancing their comprehensive English skills. The spatiotemporal flexibility and diversity of the teaching methods employed in the course *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* provided students with pathways to design personalized learning plans and strategies, thus catering to individual needs to a significant extent. This approach effectively increased students' enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation for learning. By carefully selecting and integrating teaching materials that align with students' interests and cognitive capabilities, the course cultivated students' comprehensive abilities across language, cultural understanding, and practical skills necessary for engaging with maritime culture. Notably, students demonstrated substantial improvement in their autonomous learning abilities, learning attitudes, and strategies, accompanied by an enhanced sense of achievement. Furthermore, they developed the capacity to use English to address specialized issues within the domain of maritime culture. A significant indicator of the course's success was the marked increase in the proportion of students passing the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) during their sixth semester, with the pass rate consistently exceeding that of vocational colleges of the same tier within the province over the past five years.

Secondly, the course effectively reinforced students' cultural confidence and pride in regional heritage while promoting the preservation and transmission of Zhanjiang's maritime culture. Approximately 50% of the students at ZPEC come from non-Zhanjiang regions. This demographic often exhibits fragmented knowledge of Zhanjiang's marine culture, making it challenging for them to articulate informed opinions or develop a sense of regional belonging. The school-based curriculum *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* addresses this gap by systematically integrating distinct elements of Zhanjiang's maritime resources into its teaching framework. These resources include literary masterpieces, historical figures, myths and legends, famous landmarks, traditional craftsmanship, and cutting-edge technologies, all of which vividly reflect the city's unique cultural identity. The curriculum adopts a structured teaching approach that follows the steps of "theme introduction, theme reading, and theme practice," allowing for a gradual and progressive deepening of knowledge. Through this methodology, students are guided to recognize and appreciate the intrinsic value of Zhanjiang's marine culture. They gain a comprehensive understanding of the city's rich heritage while cultivating an emotional connection to it. Immersed in this knowledge, students are inspired to develop a genuine affection for Zhanjiang's marine culture, enabling them to more effectively advocate for the profound depth and unique charm of the region's cultural legacy.

Furthermore, the course has stimulated teachers' enthusiasm for developing school-based curricula, promoting the localization and personalization of such curricula. Currently, domestic explorations of distinctive school-based curricula tend to focus on relatively broad theoretical perspectives, with few vocational colleges engaging in practical explorations from a more micro-level perspective. The concept and teaching model of integrating local maritime culture into English instruction are particularly innovative within the context of Chinese vocational colleges. ZPEC, taking into account the local maritime economic and trade needs and drawing from the essence of its regional maritime culture, has developed an English curriculum with distinct maritime characteristics. This initiative has significantly inspired other peers to develop localized curricula. In the development of the school-based curriculum *Zhanjiang Marine Culture*, the teachers at ZPEC have transformed their educational perspectives, enhanced their understanding of theoretical knowledge, and gradually strengthened their awareness and capacity for curriculum development through the process of exploration and research. By fully exploring the school-based curriculum in conjunction with students' actual circumstances, teachers in ZPEC have been able to experiment with a variety of teaching methods, reflect on the organic integration of English with other disciplines, and investigate diverse teaching modes that blend practical and literary courses. This approach has effectively fostered the personalization and diversification of the school-based curriculum.

5. Reflection and insights

5.1 Market demand-oriented approach to curriculum planning

Through interviews and questionnaire surveys, it was found that the primary motivation for students to study the school-based course *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* was to accumulate credits, leading to a

mechanical learning process. This has resulted in low student engagement, a lack of authentic participation, and a limited sense of experiential learning. Consequently, students have not been able to genuinely develop the ability to use language as a tool to address specific issues related to maritime culture. Therefore, the course should adhere to a market demand-oriented approach, with teaching objectives based on actual communication needs. Real-world maritime-related professions, such as translation, tourism, management, reception, and trade, should be integrated into the curriculum and teaching practice, allowing students to understand the connection between the course content and career development. This approach will better align the curriculum with industry needs and provide a solid foundation for students' future professional careers.

5.2 Institutional support for development time and class hour allocation

The development of *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* has undergone a series of complex and meticulous processes, including data collection, literature review, information organization, and feedback analysis, which require significant time and effort from the participating faculty members. Therefore, the school administration should provide policy support to reduce the workload of the instructors, such as reducing the standard teaching load from an average of 14 hours per week to 10 hours, thereby ensuring that faculty can dedicate more time and energy to the development and delivery of the course. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure that adequate class hours are allocated to the school-based course *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* through thoughtful curriculum planning. This should include enforcing strict policy standards and educational oversight, reinforcing the non-negotiable requirement for the course's delivery, and explicitly stating that no other courses should encroach upon or repurpose the class hours allocated to this curriculum for any reason, thus safeguarding the integrity of the course's teaching schedule.

5.3 Cultivating interdisciplinary teaching faculty

The school-based course *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* not only requires instructors to have a strong command of English language skills but also necessitates a comprehensive understanding of maritime science and technology, marine literature, and marine arts. Consequently, there is a pressing need for faculty members who possess both a solid foundation in English and extensive knowledge of marine humanities. The current teaching team primarily consists of English educators, most of whom have received higher education in English studies, but only a few have specialized in maritime-related fields. In response to this need, ZPEC should strategically integrate its educational goals, teaching characteristics, and faculty expertise to diversify its teaching staff. For instance, the institution could provide professional development opportunities, including training sessions and academic exchanges, to foster or recruit seasoned scholars in marine culture research, offering specialized guidance to the teaching staff and encouraging them to expand their knowledge of marine disciplines. Furthermore, based on the school's current academic offerings and teaching requirements, it should facilitate collaboration between English language instructors and faculty from maritime-related disciplines, allowing them to complement each other's strengths and establish an interdisciplinary teaching model, thereby ensuring the faculty team is well-rounded, scientifically supported, and effectively equipped to deliver the curriculum.

5.4 Establishing school-enterprise joint practice bases

Based on the development plans and needs of cooperating enterprises, it is essential to foster a positive interaction between industry and education, further exploring new pathways for cultivating high-level marine talent, and creating a high-quality talent "supply chain" for the marine culture industry. The school should prioritize the cultivation of practical skills and output capabilities, deepening school-enterprise cooperation with industries such as fisheries, and establishing joint training bases between schools and enterprises. This collaboration will enable students to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned through hands-on practice, thereby enhancing their practical abilities. For example, the school could regularly organize students to engage in practical training at internship bases, including teaching observations and course internships, or arrange for students to participate in off-campus practical projects, offering services such as English translation and foreign trade reception to employers. This approach would not only enhance students' ability to apply marine-related knowledge and provide services but also contribute to the development of the marine economy in Zhanjiang and surrounding areas.

6. Conclusion

“Diversified student sources, differentiated English proficiency, personalized needs, and the cultivation of international technical and skilled talents that align with the development needs of national industrial clusters are the current challenges and new demands faced by many vocational colleges in China regarding English language education” (Cao et al., 2022: 50). The school-based course *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* is a groundbreaking achievement in the context of the new liberal arts, where ZPEC has successfully integrated the emerging discipline of marine science with the traditional field of English language and literature in an interdisciplinary manner. The unique characteristics of the course are fully reflected in the textbook, faculty, and training processes. The successful implementation of this course demonstrates that the foreign language discipline, through its integration with knowledge from other fields, can cultivate specialized, multifaceted talents, thus gaining unprecedented developmental momentum. The aforementioned practical outcomes show that the school-based course *Zhanjiang Marine Culture* can lead the reform direction of English education in vocational colleges along China’s coastal areas, while also providing a model for the construction of school-based curricula.

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