# College English Curriculum Reform and Practice in Mainland China's Institutions of Higher Learning: A Case Study of Hohai University

Yilin Cao

College of International Languages and Cultures, Hohai University, Nanjing, China

## Abstract

**Since the 1990s, China has adhered to the strategic thought of "revitalizing the nation through science and education." The development strategy of education has become an important part of China's national development strategy, with educational policy serving as the main avenue to achieve strategic objectives in education. In recent years, the State Council and the Ministry of Education of China have issued a series of programmatic documents, delineating the direction for the advancement of educational undertakings. This paper, taking one of China's top 100 universities, Hohai University, as the case study, explores the overall strategy, practical pathways, and achievements of college English curriculum reform and practice in mainland China's institutions of higher learning guided by educational policy. Hohai University has established a smart classroom based on platforms such as "Superstar Learning," "U-Campus," and "IWRITE," facilitating multifaceted interactions among teachers, students, and between humans and computers. By designing a new college English curriculum system that deeply integrates language knowledge, disciplinary content, and cultural communication. Through the construction of a network resource sharing course, an online-offline blended teaching model is implemented. Personalized teaching has been realized by developing college English online course resources. Additionally, a formative and developmental evaluation system based on data observation has been constructed to achieve process-focused assessment.**

## Keywords

**Smart classroom; Multilateral interaction; Blended learning; Personalized teaching; Formative assessment.**

## 1. Introduction

In the 1990s, China proposed the strategic concept of "revitalizing the country through science and education," emphasizing education as the foundation and deepening educational reforms. The development strategy of education has become an integral part of China's national development strategy, with educational policy serving as the primary means to achieve educational strategic goals. The purpose of formulating educational policies is to rectify existing issues in the field of education and guide the development direction of educational undertakings. Currently, the main problem with undergraduate education in mainland China is the outdated philosophy, characterized by the lack of timely response to new scientific and technological advancements, insufficiently innovative teaching modes and methods, and content updates lagging behind the times of change. To actively respond to the developmental demands of the era, in recent years, the State Council and the Ministry of Education have issued a series of programmatic documents, including: "*The 2.0 Action Plan for the Informatization of Education*" in 2018, "*China's Education Modernization 2035*" in 2019, "*The Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Educational Evaluation in the New Era*" in 2020, and "*The People's*

*Republic of China 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives for 2035*" in 2021. These documents offer several insights for the development of China's education: (1) to develop smart education innovation actions, construct a smart learning support environment, use intelligent technology to accelerate and promote the reform of teaching methods, and integrate science and technology with education; [1] (2) to leverage the advantages of online education, incorporating high-quality online course resources into the public teaching system; [2] (3) to focus on teaching according to students' aptitude, emphasize integrated development, and stress co-construction and sharing; [3] (4) to reform the educational evaluation mechanism, conduct process evaluations of students' learning situations, and develop an intelligent teaching evaluation system. [4]

Guided by a series of national macro-level policy directives, the Ministry of Education issued "*College English Curriculum Guidelines (2020 Edition)*" (hereafter referred to as *The 2020 Guidelines*) in 2020, which sets forth new requirements in terms of curriculum setup, teaching methods and means, evaluation and testing, and teaching resources. *The 2020 Guidelines* aims to cultivate students' abilities for "active learning" and "autonomous learning," fully reflecting the basic characteristics of College English teaching in the Internet plus era, such as interactivity, shareability, openness, intelligence, collaboration, and autonomy.

This paper takes Hohai University (one of China's top 100 key universities) as a case study to explore how mainland China's universities carry out college English curriculum reform and practice guided by *The 2020 Guide*. The research primarily revolves around the following questions:

(1) How to construct a smart classroom for university English and innovate and practice a multilateral interactive teaching model between teachers and students?

(2) How to reform the university English curriculum system and innovate and practice a teaching model that integrates university English with professional knowledge?

(3) How to utilize online course resources to innovate and practice a blended teaching model of online and offline modes?

(4) How to use online teaching platforms to innovate and practice a customized teaching model based on teaching according to students' aptitude and needs?

## 2. Overall Approach to College English Curriculum Reform

This study conducted a current status survey of college English classroom teaching at Hohai University, using survey research and class observation methods to understand the interaction between teachers and students in English classes, the setup of English courses, the application of information technology, the construction of online course resources, and students' learning needs. This established the overall approach of the study, which is to construct a new college English teaching model that is "interactive, integrated, intelligent, and needs-based." This model includes four aspects:

(1) Building a smart classroom based on online platforms: By Utilizing platforms such as "Superstar Learning," "U-Campus," and "IWRITE" to build a smart classroom, three-dimensional teacher-student interaction, intelligent teaching resources, data-driven classroom management, and personalized teaching content are achieved.

(2) Offering a variety of college English extension courses: In order to enrich the content of English teaching, professional knowledge is integrated into the teaching of English language knowledge. By offering English for general purposes courses (hereafter referred to as EGP courses), English for specific purposes courses (hereafter referred to as ESP courses), and intercultural communication courses, a new college English curriculum system that combines language foundations, disciplinary content, and cultural communication is formed.

(3) Optimizing shared course resources: Based on self-built shared course resources, combined with high-quality educational resources shared among universities nationwide, as well as a series of micro-courses produced by teachers, the shared resources of college English courses are optimized. The practice of a blended online-offline teaching model deepens the reform of online teaching. Process evaluations are improved through the use of learning records on online course platforms, homework completion, and online test scores.

(4) Guiding students based on "differentiated instruction and teaching according to aptitude": Teachers are expected to orient students to a needs-based curriculum system that supports differentiated instruction and autonomous learning. Students are advised to choose courses and learning content that suit their English foundation and learning abilities, to gradually and continuously improve their comprehensive English application skills. The overall approach of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.
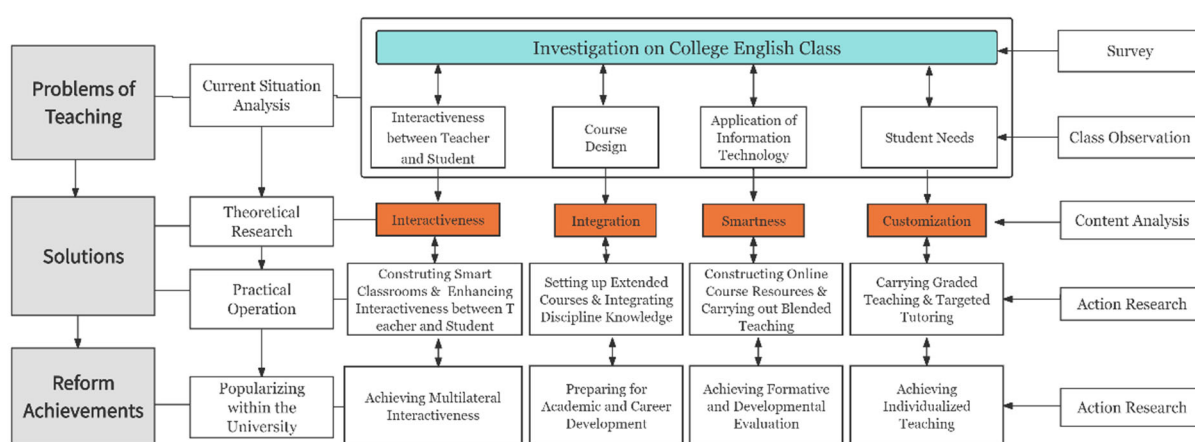


**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework for Innovation and Practice in College English Teaching Model: Interactive, Integrated, Intelligent, and Needs-based

## 3. Practical Pathways for College English Curriculum Reform

### 3.1. Constructing a Smart Classroom Based on the "Superstar Learning," "U-Campus," and "IWRITE" Platforms

Teachers rely on the Superstar Learning and U-Campus online platforms to require students to preview lower-order knowledge before the class. The platforms record the duration of students' self-study and their completion of tasks. During classroom teaching, teachers use these platforms for smart attendance to track students' attendance records. They then check students' pre-class preparation of lower-order knowledge through questioning and practice. Teachers explain any problems encountered during this process to help students resolve doubts and solidify the effects of pre-class preparation. Since students have already absorbed and internalized lower-order knowledge in advance, teachers can spend more classroom time explaining higher-order knowledge, encouraging students to think and inquire deeply into the class content, and facilitating students' language output based on their mastery of lower-order knowledge. Post-class, teachers assign homework on the "IWRITE" platform, requiring students to write a written report using the unit content. The IWRITE grading system provides detailed feedback on students' assignments, including language accuracy, content relevance, coherence of discourse, viewpoints and attitudes. By integrating feedback from the IWRITE grading system and the teacher, students can clearly understand the strengths and weaknesses of their work to make targeted and purposeful improvements. At the end of each unit, teachers post unit tests on U-Campus to assess the learning outcomes. Students can immediately see

their scores and test details on the student page, while teachers can view any student's test scores and details on the teacher page, enabling them to understand students' learning status and identify problems. This completes a learning loop. The entire teaching process reflects the interactive features of the Internet plus era, where interactions between teachers and students, and among students, extend beyond face-to-face classroom dialogues and exchanges through various online platforms, innovating the ways and enhancing the effectiveness of interaction.

## 3.2. Establishing a New College English Curriculum System Integrating Language Foundation, Disciplinary Content, and Cultural Communication

The college English curriculum is not just about basic reading and writing or speaking and listening courses but represents a new curriculum system. In the first semester, freshmen uniformly study basic college English courses, and in the second and third semesters, students can choose courses freely based on their CET-4 (College English Test Band 4) scores, with the principle that students who score below 425 (out of a total of 710) on the CET-4 continue to take basic college English courses. According to the requirements of *The 2020 Guidelines*, the current college English curriculum system consists of three types of courses: EGP courses, ESP courses and intercultural communication courses. [5] Hohai University offers EGP courses including *College English I, II, III*, *Advanced Comprehensive English*, *Intermediate Spoken English*, and *English Writing*, among others. ESP courses include *Business English*, *Academic English*, *Applied translation*, and *Foundation Course of Interpretating*. Intercultural communication courses cover topics such as *English Public Speaking Course*, *Readings in Chinese Culture*, *Selected Readings in American Literature*, and *Survey of English-speaking Countries*. The new curriculum system emphasizes integrating disciplinary knowledge into language knowledge, highlighting English as a medium and tool serving other disciplines, thereby not only emphasizing the instrumental nature of the English language but also its humanistic qualities. In various courses, emphasis is placed on expressing specialized knowledge in English, requiring students to produce higher-order language content, especially emphasizing the dissemination of Chinese culture, telling Chinese stories, and conveying Chinese strength. The new college English curriculum system, comprising EGP courses, ESP courses and intercultural communication courses, is based on disciplinary knowledge, uses the English language as a carrier, and is oriented by output-driven principles. It constructs a multi-module, multi-level curriculum system, achieving innovative integration of college English and specialized knowledge.
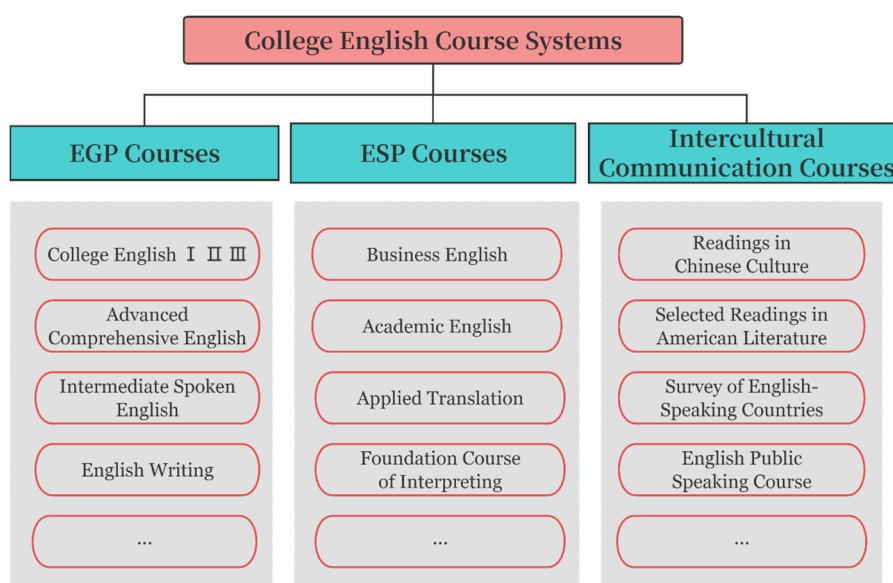


**Figure 2.** New College English Curriculum System

### 3.3. Actively Developing Networked Resource Sharing Courses, Implementing a Blended Online-Offline Teaching Model

In recent years, many universities in mainland China have reduced the credits of college English courses, far from meeting students' needs for knowledge acquisition, skill cultivation, and social adaptation. The key to maximizing students' learning within such limited time and space lies in the maximum sharing of high-quality teaching resources. High-quality resources in the Internet plus era include not only textual materials (reference books, teaching plans, exercise books, etc.), courseware, audio, and animations but also quality micro-courses and shared courses. Micro-courses, compatible with text, animations, audio, and video, present multi-modal characteristics, meeting the learning preferences of various learners. They are short, efficient, vivid, and in line with the learning habits and behaviors of young learners, thus having excellent learning effects. Based on the sharing of high-quality teaching resources, teachers can fully expand and extend textbook content within limited classroom time, facilitating effective interaction and communication between teachers and students, significantly improving classroom efficiency. It is under the premise that students have pre-studied micro-courses and shared courses before class that discussions in class can be targeted and purposeful, truly based on course content rather than irrelevant dialogues.

College English classes are divided into three teaching phases: before the class, during the class, and after the class. Before the class, teachers post preview materials on the " Superstar Learning" or "U-Campus" platforms and design a list of pre-class tasks. During the class, teachers and students interact, with teachers implementing flipped classroom blended teaching to construct a blended online-offline smart classroom. After the class, students selectively and targetedly review and consolidate course content on online platforms. Based on students' completion, teachers replan and make rational use of offline classroom teaching time to fulfill teaching tasks. Figure 3 shows the specific teaching steps of the blended online-offline teaching model.
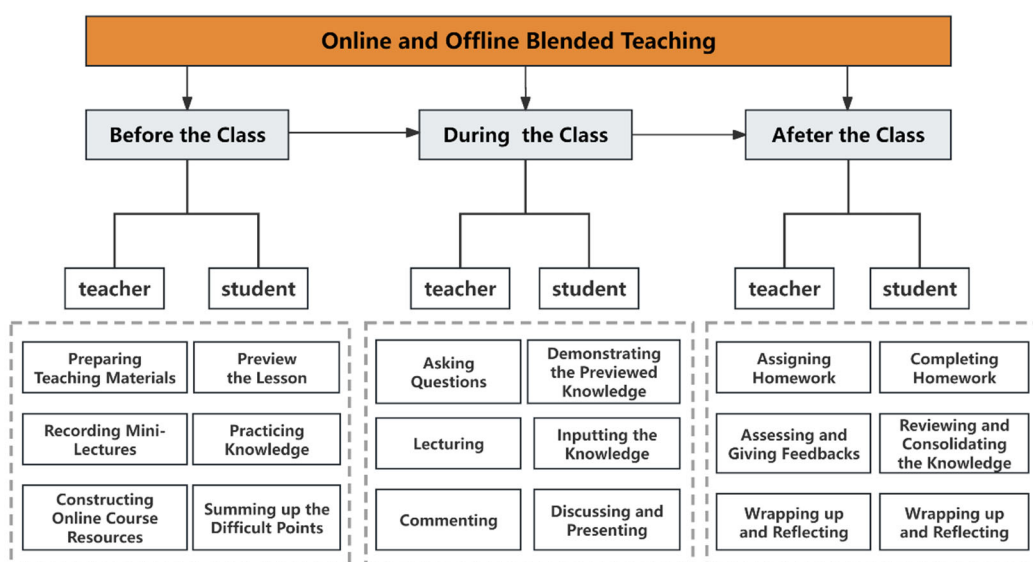


**Figure 3.** Blended Online-Offline Teaching Model

### 3.4. Fully Utilizing Online Teaching Platforms, Actively Innovating and Practicing a Customized Teaching Model Based on Differentiated Instruction

Hohai University, a university directly under the Ministry of Education with students from all over the country, faces significant differences in English foundation and levels among students due to regional development disparities. Therefore, the university adopts principles of graded

teaching and teaching according to students' aptitude. Freshmen undergo an English placement test upon enrollment. The top 15% of students in the placement test enter Class A (advanced class), the bottom 10% enter Class C (preparatory class), and the rest enter Class B (regular class). In the second and third semesters, students can freely choose college English courses and extension courses, with the prerequisite for selecting extension courses being an English CET-4 score of over 500. Teachers encourage students with excellent English performance to actively participate in various English contests and provide individual guidance. For Class C students, a CET-4 remedial class is offered to help them prepare for the CET-4 exam, aiming for "precise improvement" and "targeted support."

The Superstar Learning and U-Campus online platforms can be installed as mobile APPs, characterized by ease of operation, mobility, and monitorability. Students can choose materials that fit their level and needs anytime, anywhere for learning, while teachers can record and monitor students' learning processes through the mobile APP, providing feedback. Moreover, students' learning records on the online platform can objectively and accurately reflect their learning processes, strengthening the role of "process-oriented" evaluation, enhancing the motivational effect of learning evaluation. Classroom management data, derived from detailed records of students' learning situations on the online platform, including study duration, chapters covered, homework completion, test results, etc., provide an important reference for formative assessment. Based on these data records, students can also create personal learning profiles. The "needs-based" teaching model teaches students to learn proactively, autonomously, and self-reflectively.

## 4. The Effectiveness of College English Curriculum Reform

### 4.1. Personalized Teaching Achieved Through College English Online Platform Course Resources

Traditional college English teaching, which taught the same content to students of different language foundations and levels, ignored individual differences among students. In the "interactive, integrated, intelligent, and needs-based" teaching model, teachers select, create, develop, and share high-quality online course resources, forming a relatively complete "student-centered" and "micro-course group resource-based" online course system to meet students' diverse learning needs. Teachers utilize information technology to provide students with a wealth of learning materials and organize and guide students in learning these materials. By studying extension materials, students gain a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the courses. Unlike traditional classroom teaching where a teacher lectures the same content to dozens of students, online course resources accommodate the extensive and broad characteristics of college English courses, providing a solid foundation for personalized autonomous learning. Moreover, precise teaching, diagnostics, talent cultivation, and targeted assistance are achieved by fully utilizing the course management data on the online platform.

The rich multimedia resources of online classrooms present teaching content in a more visual and dynamic manner, deeply expanding course content, extending classroom teaching, compensating for the current reduction in college English credits and limited classroom teaching time, bridging formal and informal learning, and increasing the breadth and depth of knowledge students acquire.

Support from online platform course resources is the foundation for transforming classroom teaching. The deep integration of information technology and education relies on the support of massive resources, and sharing these resources is a primary factor in this integration. Only by constructing targeted, high-quality, abundant, and shareable massive online resources can

intelligent, needs-based teaching practices be realized, meeting students' needs for personalized, active, and developmental learning.

## 4.2. Multilateral Interaction Among Teachers, Students, and Computers Through Deep Integration of Information Technology and English Teaching

Students are always the core element of the classroom, with teachers acting as facilitators of classroom activities. Teaching has evolved from traditional unidirectional and bidirectional interactions to multilateral interactions among teachers, students, and computers in the Internet plus era. The "interactive, integrated, intelligent, and needs-based" teaching model embodies a "student-centered, outcome-oriented" teaching philosophy. "Teaching online, learning offline" allows students to selectively continue learning content online after the class. Pre-class learning of online open course resources, based on information technology platforms, enables students to complete autonomous learning and achieve online interactivity; meanwhile, teachers effectively integrate modern information technology and teaching skills to organize classroom activities, helping students master professional knowledge through diverse and multi-dimensional offline interactions.

The teaching philosophy that combines information technology with foreign language teaching features high-level teaching goals, need-based teaching resources, project-based learning tasks, flexible teaching processes, precise teaching management, process-oriented teaching evaluation, collaborative teaching activities, and immediate feedback in its application. Traditional foreign language teaching was a one-way transmission process between teachers and students, where teachers dominated the teaching activities, and students were passive. In the "interactive, integrated, intelligent, and needs-based" teaching model, teachers implement various teaching methods like task-based, cooperative, and inquiry-based learning through Internet technology, becoming facilitators of classroom teaching, allowing students to participate more actively, cooperatively, and enthusiastically in teaching activities. Teachers can monitor students' learning progress in real-time, and students can ask questions anytime, anywhere, significantly enhancing interaction between teachers and students through Internet teaching platforms.

## 4.3. Achieving Formative and Developmental Evaluation Through a Data-focused Evaluation System

*The Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Educational Evaluation in the New Era* calls for "improving outcome evaluation and strengthening process evaluation," [4] reflecting the shift from outcome-oriented to process-oriented educational evaluation. Formative evaluation, which more accurately reflects the value demands of educational and teaching reforms, faces many operational difficulties in real teaching assessment practices, making it challenging to implement its philosophy at the measurement level.

Against the backdrop of the deep integration of information technology and college English teaching, an evaluation system focused on data and processes transforms the traditional paper grading method into an "Internet+-based" big data evaluation method. Precise diagnostics and analysis based on big data help teachers conduct scientific diagnostic analysis, implement precise teaching, and achieve developmental, normative evaluation. Specifically, by recording students' online time, task completion, and exercise responses on the U-Campus or Superstar Learning platforms, teachers can objectively assess students' attitudes and effectiveness in online learning and provide fair scoring. The network system can intelligently process students' responses, including answer time, scores, and corrections, not only saving teachers' time in grading but also providing precise feedback for homework review.

To motivate students' daily learning, Hohai University's English course evaluation system emphasizes both formative and summative evaluations, highlighting the importance of the learning process and outcomes. Formative evaluation, which accounts for 50% of the total score, assess students' learning process and development based on teaching goals and competency standards. Formative evaluation includes classroom performance (attendance, participation, online learning, discussion, homework, reports, writing, presentations, etc.), unit tests, and midterm exam scores. Summative evaluation, which also accounts for 50%, is based on students' final exam scores and provides a comprehensive evaluation of various competencies at the end of the semester.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper, through the innovative measures taken by Hohai University in the reform of its college English curriculum, explores the practical pathways for the integrated development of "smart plus education," "discipline plus language," and "resources plus teaching." Specifically, it involves designing classroom activities that "rely on high-quality teaching resources for interaction," constructing a curriculum system where "language skills and disciplinary knowledge are integrated," implementing "flipped, mixed, resource-sharing, intelligent" teaching methods, and setting up course content that "guides students to actively learn on a needs-based basis." In the future, curriculum and teaching reforms, resource sharing, teacher-student interaction, intelligent education, and teaching according to students' aptitude will continue to be focal points for exploration and practice.

## 6. Funding

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