

# Organizing the Course Content of China's English Curriculum Standards for Vocational Colleges – An Attempt Based on Work Process

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## Abstract

Issued in 2021 by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the "English Curriculum Standards for Vocational Colleges (2021 Edition)" specifies six components of the course content, including theme categories, discourse types, language knowledge, culture knowledge, vocational English skills and language learning strategies. How to organize such rich contents poses a significant challenge in implementing the course content of the new standard. The characteristic of vocational education as an education type and the vocational nature of the new standard make it necessary to explore ways of organizing the course content of vocational college English based on work process. Following a brief recapitulation of the course content and the characteristics of the new standard, this paper proposes procedures for organizing and operationalizing the course content of vocational college English, on the basis of the work process-based curriculum development idea and the workplace scenarios and content framework provided by the new standard. At the same time, it is proposed that work process-based course content organization of vocational college English should be integrated with teaching methods.

## Keywords

"English Curriculum Standards for Vocational Colleges (2021 Edition)"; Vocational college English course; Organization of course content; Work process.

## 1. Introduction

On April 9, 2021, the General Office of the Chinese Ministry of Education officially released the "English Curriculum Standards for Vocational Colleges (2021 Edition)" (hereinafter referred to as the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards"), developed under the organization of the Ministry of Education. This is the third guiding document formally issued by the state for college English education at college level in China, serving as the national standard for college English education in vocational colleges for the foreseeable future. It marks 28 years since the "Basic Requirements for the English Course in Colleges" formulated by the former State Education Commission in 1993, and 21 years since the "Basic Requirements for the English Course in Vocational Colleges (Trial)" issued by the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education in 2000 (Ma Junbo & Chang Hongmei, 2020), signifying that China's college English education in vocational colleges has entered a new stage of development.

According to the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards", the course content consists of a basic module and an extension module. The extension module only categorizes the content into three types: Career Enhancement English, Academic Enhancement English, and Competence Enhancement English, without specifying the content explicitly, leaving the selection to teachers based on school requirements and student needs. For the basic module, the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" provide clear stipulations, including six elements: theme categories, discourse types, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, vocational English

skills, and language learning strategies. Language knowledge is further divided into vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and pragmatic knowledge. How to organize such rich course content is a difficulty faced when implementing the curriculum content of the new standards.

## 2. Organization of Course Content

Literally understood in Chinese, "Kecheng" means "subjects, coursework, and their progression". The English word "curriculum" originates from the Latin "currere", meaning "the running", which can be interpreted as "the school's arrangement of courses and their progression". Therefore, the lexical explanations of curriculum in Chinese and English are essentially the same, referring to what students learn and the arrangements and progression made for it (Xia Jimei, 2003). Thus, the core elements of a curriculum include two aspects: the selection of content and the organization of content (Jiang Dayuan, 2003). Curriculum at the macro level refers to the training plan or course program, which is the general term for all courses included in the teaching plan of a major and their positions and sequence within the teaching plan. Macro-level curriculum organization refers to the arrangement of the curriculum system, which is reflected in the curriculum structure section of the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards". Curriculum at the micro level refers to the subjects of teaching, which are systems of knowledge and skills organized according to certain teaching theories, constituting the basic units of school teaching content. Micro-level curriculum organization refers to the organization of teaching content, which is reflected in the course content section of the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards".

Foreign language curriculum organization at the micro level centers on the curriculum standards and plans the course content and teaching sequence. Generally, there are two methods: Method one emphasizes pre-set language content, represented by structural syllabuses, situational syllabuses, topical syllabuses, skill-based syllabuses, and functional-notional syllabuses; Method two advocates learners learning in authentic communication, emphasizing the learning process and teaching procedures, represented by process syllabuses and procedural syllabuses. The former category is based on linguistics, while the latter is based on psychology and pedagogy (Chen Jianlin, 2000). The course content of the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" highlights the application of English language ability in workplace environments, defines the course content as "Workplace General English", and requires "integrating workplace situations and reflecting vocational characteristics". Therefore, the organization of college English course content in vocational colleges can take the language discipline as the main thread, or it can take authentic work processes as the main thread, theoretically.

In January 2019, the State Council issued the "National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan", clearly stating that "vocational education and general education are two different types of education, possessing equally important status." As a type of education, the main differences between vocational education and general education exist in two aspects: First, the education objectives are different; vocational education is employment-oriented education. Second, the curriculum connotation is different; vocational education adopts a dynamic curriculum structure based on work processes, while general education uses a static curriculum structure based on disciplinary knowledge (Jiang Dayuan, 2008). The "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" fully reflect the vocational type characteristics of college English teaching in vocational colleges. Over the nearly 30 years of historical development, the main connotation of college English in vocational colleges has gradually evolved from discipline-based foundational English to vocational English that integrates language and work (Ma Junbo et al., 2021). Given that highlighting the vocational nature of higher vocational English is one of the three distinctive features of the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" (Wen Qiufang

& Zhang Hong, 2021), exploring methods for organizing college English course content in vocational colleges based on work processes is not merely to change the traditional method of organizing course content based on linguistics, but is an inherent requirement of the laws of vocational education, and should become one of the key directions for effort.

### **3. Organization of College English Course Content in Vocational Colleges**

#### **3.1. Course Content in the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards"**

According to the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards", the course content consists of six elements. Theme categories provide teaching themes related to vocations for the college English curriculum in vocational colleges. Discourse types include oral, written, new media, and other multimodal discourses, covering different genres and providing materials for language learning. Language knowledge is an important foundation for workplace cross-cultural communication, emphasizing applicability. Cultural knowledge includes international culture and Chinese culture, especially workplace culture and corporate culture, serving as the knowledge source for students to develop cross-cultural communication skills and strengthen cultural confidence. Vocational English skills specify requirements for students' oral and written communication skills in the workplace, including comprehension skills, expression skills, and interaction skills, specifically covering listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing, and preliminary translation skills between Chinese and English. Language learning strategies are means to achieve autonomous learning and lifelong learning, specifically including metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communication strategies, affective strategies, etc.

The "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" adopt essentially the same course content elements as the "General High School English Curriculum Standards". These six elements form an interconnected organic whole. Their interrelationship is expressed in detail in the "General High School English Curriculum Standards": All language learning activities take place under certain themes. Students, centered around a specific theme and based on different types of discourse, use language skills to acquire, sort, and integrate language knowledge and cultural knowledge in the process of solving problems. Simultaneously, they use the learned language to express personal intentions, views, and attitudes, and by employing various learning strategies, improve the effectiveness of comprehension and expression, ultimately enhancing their core English competence. Therefore, these six elements are integrated and intersect with each other (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2020). Theoretically, the teaching content can be organized using any of these elements as the main thread. For example, using language knowledge as the thread allows for organizing course content using a structuralist language teaching syllabus.

#### **3.2. Organization of College English Course Content in Vocational Colleges Based on Work Process**

Vocational education is employment-oriented education, aiming to cultivate applied talents who work on the front line of vocational positions engaged in operation, service, or management. From the perspective of specialized disciplines, a major becomes a profession because it has a disciplinary knowledge structure different from other majors; From the perspective of vocational science, the very reason a profession qualifies as such lies in its distinctive work process that sets it apart from other professions. Therefore, developing curricula according to the sequence of work processes is a breakthrough in curriculum development that highlights the characteristics of vocational education (Jiang Dayuan, 2007), and has become a consensus on the direction of vocational education curriculum reform (Wu Quanquan et al., 2021).

Learning from the successful experiences of vocational education curricula worldwide, especially drawing on Germany's work process-based curriculum, the work process-based curriculum development theory has been widely adopted in China's vocational education field (Jiang Dayuan, 2009). The starting point of work process-based curricula is not knowledge, but work tasks derived from enterprises and job positions (Liu Yaqin, 2009). Broadly defined, work process refers to the sequence of production activities and service activities aimed at achieving defined goals (Jiang Dayuan, 2007). Work process-based curricula need to design learning scenarios based on typical work tasks, applying pedagogical processing to these typical work tasks (Zhao Zhiqun, 2009).

The "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" does not provide a detailed list of course content for the College English curriculum in vocational colleges; it only provides a framework of course content elements. How these content elements should be organized to form specific learning materials or learning tasks cannot be found readily in the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards". However, users of the standards can, based on the type characteristics of vocational education and the actual work tasks of various industries, use the workplace scenario tasks suggested in the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" as reference, identify and sequence the general workplace scenarios common to those industries, and use this as a clue to organize the content of the college English curriculum in vocational colleges. For example, "Job Application" is a typical scenario in general workplace situations, which can be further subdivided into typical sub-work scenarios such as obtaining recruitment information, preparing personal information, interviewing, and receiving interview results. These scenarios can serve as clues to organize language learning tasks and select the required language, cultural knowledge, and strategies for these tasks.


The course content of the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" is Workplace General English, intended for use by vocational college graduates in general work situations across various industries. For instance, typical work scenarios in a business environment often include job hunting, office work, meetings, reception, travel, products, sales, service, etc. As the general work scenarios may differ across industries, the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" provides 17 workplace scenarios for reference, while also noting that these workplace scenarios are open, and institutions can determine their own workplace scenario tasks based on their program offerings. Each workplace scenario can be subdivided into multiple sub-work scenarios. For example, the "Visit and Reception" workplace scenario can be subdivided into typical sub-work scenarios such as "Invitation, Itinerary, Welcoming, Banquet, Send-off".

When organizing the content of the college English curriculum in vocational colleges, one can base it on the suggested workplace scenarios provided by the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards", appropriately add or remove scenarios according to the characteristics of the specific industry, and determine a suitable number of workplace scenarios as the themes for each unit. The sequence in which these scenarios appear in actual work can serve as the sequence for the unit themes. On this basis, the learning tasks for each unit can be arranged based on the typical sub-scenarios of each workplace scenario. Course content organized in this way reflects the language requirements of real work tasks, situate language learning within authentic work contexts, and integrate language learning with the work process, thereby aligning with the principles of vocational education. Therefore, the organization of college English course content in vocational colleges based on work process can roughly undergo the following steps (as shown in Table 1): 1) Determine unit themes and their sequence based on typical work scenarios. 2) Determine learning tasks and their sequence within units based on typical sub-work scenarios. 3) Select discourse types according to the characteristics of the learning tasks, while also selecting theme categories based on educational goals. 4) Within the framework of themes and discourse, select appropriately sufficient skills, language, culture, and

strategies according to the learning tasks, to ultimately achieve the goals of the four core English competences.

**Table 1.** Steps for organizing course content

Typical Workplace Scenarios	Sub-workplace Scenarios	Theme & Discourse	Alternative Content	Target Competences
Job Application	1) Obtain recruitment info 2) Prepare personal info 3) Interview 4) Receive result	1) Theme categories 2) Discourse types	1) Skills 2) Language (vocabulary, grammar, discourse, pragmatics) 3) Culture 4) Strategies	1) Workplace communication 2) Multicultural exchange 3) Linguistic thinking 4) Autonomous learning
Visit & Reception	1) Invitation 2) Itinerary 3) Welcoming 4) Banquet 5) Sending-off			
Feedback Handling	1) Greet client 2) Offer help 3) Complain 4) Handle complaint 5) Coordinate internally 6) Follow up			
.....	.....			
Unit Theme	Learning Tasks	Material Carrier	Language Elements	Course Objectives



After sequencing, the course content needs to be transformed into operational course content, becoming learning content that can be implemented in the classroom. Taking the "Job Application" unit as an example (see Table 2), based on the characteristics of the four learning tasks, six skill training tasks can be designed and decomposed into three types: listening & speaking, reading, and writing, with corresponding learning materials prepared. These materials involve three themes: humanistic foundation, career planning, and professional spirit, corresponding to the main topics of aesthetic appreciation, career choice, and professional ethics respectively. The learning materials are mainly in practical writing styles, including company introductions, job advertisements, resumes, cover letters, etc. The arrangement of language elements should directly aim at completing work tasks and ultimately aim at improving the four core competences, while also comprehensively considering students' language foundation and teaching conditions. The workplace scenarios in teaching are abstractions of actual work situations, highlighting the core English competences within these work contexts. Successfully acquired competences can be transferred to new situations and more complex similar situations.

**Table 2.** Operational organization of course content

Unit Theme	Learning Tasks	Operational Course Content			
		Learning Materials	Theme & Discourse	Language Elements	Core Competence Points
Job Application	1) Obtain recruitment info 2) Prepare personal info 3) Interview 4) Receive result	Reading: 1) Company intro 2) Job ad Writing: 1) Resume 2) Cover letter Listening & Speaking: 1) Interview 2) Answering result call	1) Career & personal (humanistic foundation/aesthetic appreciation, career planning/career choice, professional spirit/ professional ethics) 2) Mainly practical discourse	1) Skills 2) Vocabulary 3) Grammar points suited to learners' level 4) Genre features, etc. 5) Pragmatics (formal relations) 6) Company culture	1) Language skills related to job hunting 2) Similarities/ differences in Chinese/foreign company culture 3) Differences in thinking structure of cover letters 4) Scanning strategy, features of resume/cover letter discourse

### 3.3. Integration of Work Process-Based College English Course Content Organization and Teaching Methods

Organizing course content using work processes and their typical work scenarios as clues can relatively well achieve the integration of language and work (Ma Junbo, 2010). Under the premise of generally weak foundations and limited in-school study time, it can cultivate the core workplace general English competence needed by students upon graduation. This method of organizing course content is based on actual work processes, but the language course ultimately appears before learners in the form of skill modules, and appropriate teaching methods are still needed for classroom presentation. Therefore, for the organization of work process-based vocational college English course content, while using the work process as the main thread to organize language learning content, it is also necessary to consider which teaching methods can more effectively present this integration of language and content, and to combine these methods with teaching methodologies that fully reflect the characteristics of vocational education, such as the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). In other words, it is necessary to coordinate the work process thread and the teaching process thread on the skill modules. Additionally, factors such as class hour allocation and the readability of teaching materials must be considered to achieve the best effect of the course content.

For example, the Production-Oriented Approach aims to overcome the drawback of "separation of learning and use" in Chinese foreign language teaching, advocating the close integration of input learning and productive use, with organic linkage between the two and no obvious time interval (Wen Qiufang, 2020; Cao Xiaoyu, 2021). This aligns very well with the work process-based curriculum development philosophy of vocational education and should have good application prospects in college English courses in vocational colleges. Because POA emphasizes selective input, the language input in the enabling phase should prepare for the subsequent production in terms of content, language form, and discourse structure, creating a closer connection between the input and output phases. Therefore, the teaching process of "Reading → Writing → Listening → Speaking" shown in Table 2, which moves from input to output and switches between several skills, needs to be restructured according to the requirements of POA into three basic phases: motivating, enabling, and assessing (including producing), and the teaching tasks in Table 2 need to be decomposed into micro-activities grouped by these three phases (as shown in Table 3).

**Table 3.** Integration with teaching methods (using POA as an example)

Work Process Thread	Skill Module Thread	Teaching Process Thread (POA)	
		Motivating	Assessing
Determine job position interest	Reading (stories about career choice, narrative)	Enabling	
Refer to others' resumes	Writing		
Create personal resume	Project 1 (writing)	Producing	
		Motivating	
Screen job information	Reading (job ads, practical writing)	Enabling	
Consult/Discuss cover letters	Listening		
Write cover letter for position	Project 2 (writing)	Producing	
		Motivating	
Learn from others' job-hunting experiences	Reading (stories about job hunting, narrative)	Enabling	
Observe interview recordings	Listening		
Simulate interview	Project 3 (speaking)	Producing	

#### 4. Conclusion

Compared with historical curriculum standards, the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" have richer course content. Each of the six elements involved is a systematic field of study, yet the standards themselves do not specify the concrete content of any element. Furthermore, these six elements are integrated and intersect with each other, making it impossible to use all of them simultaneously as the organizational thread for course content. Therefore, when implementing the requirements of the standards regarding course content, it is necessary to explore appropriate methods to organize the college English course content in vocational colleges. The method based on the disciplinary system of language was the common approach for organizing college English course content in vocational colleges in the past. Under the premise that the type positioning of vocational education is clear and the work process-based vocational education curriculum theory is gradually maturing, exploring methods for organizing college English course content in vocational colleges based on work processes should become one of the key directions for effort among vocational English teachers.

The method for organizing college English course content in vocational colleges based on work processes uses the workplace scenarios suggested by the "Vocational English Curriculum Standards" as a foundation, determines the typical workplace scenarios for Workplace General English and their typical sub-scenarios according to the characteristics of various industries, uses these as unit themes and learning tasks within units, and defines the themes and discourse types of learning materials based on specific learning tasks. It also involves selecting the types of language skills and learning strategies, and choosing appropriately sufficient language and cultural knowledge based on actual work needs. On this basis, operational course content for each unit is formed. Simultaneously, to adapt to teaching methods, the work process thread needs to be coordinated with the teaching process thread to achieve better teaching outcomes.

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