

An Exploration to the Integration of Public English with the PCCC System In Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges

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ABSTRACT

After five years' exploration on the integration of the "Post-Class-Competition-Certificate" (PCCC) system with public English course, few successful models have been established. This paper provides constructive suggestions on this integration based on front line research and practice. May it pioneer a solution to bring vocational features to Public English teaching in higher vocational colleges.

KEYWORDS

PCCC module; 2021 Curriculum Standards; Higher Vocational Public English

1 Public English in Chinese higher vocational colleges

Public English is a compulsory course in the basic public course series for non-English majors in various Chinese higher vocational colleges.

In the 1980s of China, shortly after the Reform and Opening-up policy, Public English is subject-oriented which means Public English shall focus on grammatical systems in teaching design. While effective for word bank and reading comprehension, it lacked practical training, especially on oral communication. Then, influenced by international models like CBE (Competency Based Education) and MES (Modules of Employable Skills), the competency-oriented concept overwhelmed. Teaching methods like CBT(Communicative Language Teaching) and TBL(Task-based Language Teaching) have gained great popularity from 1990s to nowadays.

However, following the strengthening of self-consciousness of being higher vocational schools, the fact that Public English teaching in vocational colleges still followed the academic way in universities seems unbearable. May the methods be good, vocational colleges still have to find features on its own public courses; Public English is no exception.

A typical theoretical guidance is the new "Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational English" (2021 Curriculum Standards), published in 2021. On the one hand, this guiding file still stressed traditional requirements like "Teachers should organize instruction based on students' cognitive characteristics and ability levels, respect diverse student backgrounds and individual differences....."^[1] On the other hand, it advocates for English teaching to "prioritize vocational characteristics and align content with professional practices and workplace demands."^[1]

To achieve this goal, in march 2021, there also published another important term: PCCC.

2 PCCC and Problems in integrating

The "Post-Class-Competition-Certificate" (PCCC) model, introduced at the 2021 National Vocational Education Conference in China, can be seen as a meaningful shift from Competency Based Education to Outcome Based Education. In October of 2021, the authority issued a file named the Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education. The document emphasized "To improve the 'post-class-competition-certificate' integrated education mechanism, design and develop curricula based on real-world production scenarios and job requirements, and implement a vocational skill tiered certification system"^[2] and "To support students in actively participating in social practice, innovation and entrepreneurship, and competitions".^[2]

In general, the major concept of PCCC emphasizes the combination of industry norms, post requirements, and professional identification or certification. It aligns with the above-mentioned requirement: "prioritize vocational characteristics and align content with professional practices and workplace demands." So naturally, integration of PCCC system with Public English is worthy to have a try. Nevertheless, though PCCC has indeed been widely adopted in specialized courses, its integration with Public English is quite limited. A CNKI search (as of February 18, 2025) yields 2,672 results for PCCC but only 11 are related with Public English.

This result is not unpredictable. Since PCCC approach requires the integration of industry cases, professional competitions and certification training, it will conflict with the diversified situations of Public English. In China, Public English is typically taught to hundreds of students from various majors. English levels and professional backgrounds of students vary significantly. Therefore, integrating Public English with PCCC in the way specialized courses do comes with

a presumption that teachers have already possessed English teaching abilities, interdisciplinary professional knowledge, practical business experience and even competition guidance experiences. It is possible for a superman but unrealistic for an ordinarily English teacher. Consequently, we cannot simply replicate the PCCC integration in specialized courses. For the same reason, we failed in our previous trial and have started to customize the PCCC system for months. Now, let's take the liberty to show some of our ideas and practices for your reference.

3 Our Customized Solutions

3.1 Focus on Professional Clusters to design workplace scenarios

First and foremost, Public English is essentially a language course for general purposes. In consideration of the average English levels of higher vocational students, it shall be basic English. Therefore, its integration with PCCC in post should focus on general workplace scenarios rather than specific professional knowledge application. On this foundation, we shall not take post as a certain job position but a cluster instead. It is also unrealistic for teachers to familiar with different posts and draft the textbook for them respectively. In practice, using general job clusters to form different Public English classes and integrating each class with different typical working scenarios seems to be more practical. Problems leaving for us to solve are the following two. How to classify these majors into clusters? How can we ensure teachers are familiar with the professional clusters assigned to them?

To divide clusters needs to ensure the coordination and alignment among standards. In the past, professional standards were developed by teachers individually. From the perspective of English teachers, to collect and analyze the standards of different professions has been tough. It will turn to be a nightmare if we need to update them against career policy, industrial development, etc.

Luckily, in February 2025, Ministry of Education of China has released of the new edition of 471 higher vocational specialty standards. "The updated Catalog shows 60% overall modifications across many majors including additions, renames, mergers, and cancellations" ^[3], which means for diversified Public English class, we have finally got norms to follow, to categorize majors and design specialized scenarios under its guidance.

For the second problem, our solution is dual-qualified teachers. In higher vocational colleges, from 2019, teachers are required to obtain dual-qualification. For English teachers, it means teaching qualification plus a professional qualification. Dual-qualified English teachers are born to design classes aligned with professional standards. They are capable of analyzing professional materials and designing teaching activities that mirror typical workplace scenarios. Certainly, to cultivate enough dual-qualified teachers for different clusters still needs time. We can firstly set up pilot zones for clusters with suitable dual-qualified teachers.

After this customization, one Public English class will only hold one professional cluster. The English teacher conducting this class shall have the correspondent professional qualification. During his lesson, basic English is taught as before, but explained and practiced under the typical workplace scenarios. Students are not applying professional knowledge, but getting used to using English to communicate in general workplace scenarios. Compared with traditional one, we are aiming to form a career-preparing English class.

3.2 Leverage AI tools, build personalized scenarios

Formation of a class has been set to be cluster-based, will students buy this form? It is more difficult in China to instruct students to follow their career-designed class. Since 1978, China has implemented the paralleled education system of vocational education and academic education. Many students will go to vocational schools after they graduated from junior or senior high schools. However, up to now, the mainstream Chinese people still persist that vocational school graduates face restricted career prospects and lower social status. This bias has contributed to a huge disadvantage on students enrollment for vocational education. Consequently, in Chinese higher vocational colleges, students of Public English course are weak and negative in study. To arouse their interest and initiative to study is a great challenge.

Our traditional approach to deal with this situation has been tiered-teaching. As early as 2006, the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education issued "the Basic Requirements for English Curriculum Teaching in Higher Vocational Education (Trial)". This document proposed "unified requirements with tiered guidance" as a fundamental principle. In our practice, dividing students into different classes according to their English levels is beneficial for upper-level classes. Yet, it faces persistent criticism over education equality and neglecting lower-level classes. Meanwhile, dividing students within a class according to their diversified features like interests, being theoretically promising, has not yet formed an accredited and universally effective module. The major reason lies in the oversized student number (usually exceeds 100 students in a class). Teachers are overburdened to provide individualized guidance.

Meanwhile, following the rising of "Internet+" and MOOCs, online-offline teaching models have infused Public English classrooms with smart and digital elements. By integrating online and offline teaching, traditional classrooms are closely

integrated with digital teaching.^[4] However, constrained by student number and diversity, learning has remained a self-motivated one.

The AI language models like ChatGPT emerged in 2023, with human-like language comprehension and interaction capabilities, quickly attracted our eyes. With time passing by, AI tools have evolved with low threshold, low cost and higher efficiency. AI tools can eliminate traditional barriers by providing user-friendly interfaces and adaptive learning paths tailored to individual English levels, majors and interests, and learning styles. For instance, platforms like Duolingo use game-like lessons and bite-sized exercises to encourage learners to start from ABC. Without a real man's supervision, AI tools can create a safe, judgment-free environment for students to try freely and patiently. More importantly, while using, AI tools can create an accurate user image, and optimize challenges with learners' capabilities. Through analyzing retention rates, AI tools will adjust strategies to effectively maintain students' enthusiasm.

Compared with immersive technologies like VR/AR (e.g., IBM's cognitive immersion rooms), many of the AI tools like Deepseek are free of charge, which is essential for poor students or colleges. So, it's high time for Public English to adopt AI in teaching in a wide and large-scaled way. As during the Internet+ era, AI assisted teaching shall be pioneered, standardized and formulated. Under PCCC concept, we shall gradually use AI tools to design personalized scenarios aimed for typical workplace needs, develop customized training schedules, and enhance teacher's ability in accumulating different corpus for different majors clusters.

Additionally, using big data and platforms to realize dynamic curriculum updates will be essential. By monitoring labor market shifts—such as the rising demand for English in China's semiconductor and robotics sectors—we can annually revise teaching materials to include relevant case studies and popular terminology. For platforms, this approach can be illustrated by the success of the "Smart Vocational Education Cloud Classroom," which has accumulated abundant resources for us to tailor learning modules. Teachers can use the resources on the platform to build courses, create interactive teaching activities, monitor students' learning progress, and provide personalized guidance and feedback.^[5]

3.3 Simplify Industrial Competitions into diversified extra-curricular activities

The competition in PCCC system serves as a bridge between theoretical education and actual application. It also acts as a quality control mechanism, encouraging instructors to update teaching materials and teaching methods to meet the latest industry standards. Through the competition, students will also be trained to build teams, share experiences, and become more interested in English study. But as for our Public English teaching, we have set professional clusters as background, focusing on basic workplace communication. Therefore, it is not suitable for our Public English class to link with industrial competitions. Then, to achieve similar functions, we have to firstly replace standards of industrial competitions into 2021 Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational English. Then, all extra-curricular activities that meet the 2021 Curriculum Standards can be adopted into our course. Considering the benefits of the original PCCC system and the features of Public English, we have currently thought of the following types of extra-curricular activities for your reference.

Firstly, we can make use of existing school resources by collaborating with the Youth League Committee and Student Union. At the beginning of a term, according to their plan, we can sort out suitable group activities for different professional clusters. During the activity, we can inspire students to select English application scenarios and activities in teams or independently. For instance, during the "Three Rural Initiatives" program, based on their English abilities and interests, students can record their experiences through English writings, shoot English short videos, or even conduct cross-border e-commerce live stream sales to aid rural areas. Utilizing existing activities can reduce costs and complexity in organizing, we can also get previous chances to combine our Public English with activities outside school. On the other hand, these activities are naturally centered on their original objectives; English practice is just a side product. Therefore, potentially this kind of combination will lead to a superficial performance. Additionally, designing tiered and customized tasks can be time-consuming and requires significant efforts from teachers. To implement this kind of activity, we must select carefully and obey the rule "less is more". It can be held only once or twice a term, but we must make an example to form a sustainable module, to practice and perfect it year by year.

There are various English competitions inside a college. We can also customize them to suit the 2021 Curriculum Standards and exhibit characteristics of higher vocational education. Here are three recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Lower registration requirements and expand participation by inviting all students and conducting class-level selections. Don't forget to show students' competition bonus from time to time and add the bonus into final academic assessments. If possible, we shall allow students to choose events based on their proficiency and attribute different bonus by difficulty levels to foster competitive awareness.

Recommendation 2: Emphasize teamwork and workplace communication in competitions. For example, replace oral English solos with cross-team play, like group brainstorming to form a sales campaign solution. This form can foster students' real-world problem-solving abilities and improve their team-building awareness.

Recommendation 3: If we have suitable professional competitions, we can try to deepen integration of competition with specialized knowledge. For instance, add events like "English technical manual writing for equipment operation" in mechanical engineering programs or "cross-border e-commerce simulated negotiations" in business programs, enabling mutual reinforcement of language skills and vocational expertise. For this kind of specialized competition, we can invite industry experts as judges, and establish a school-enterprise joint evaluation mechanism to update scoring criteria with actual job requirements.

4 Certificate can be PRETCO but don't be limited to it

Certificate in PCCC system not only serves as a tangible representation of learning objectives but also as a formal recognition of academic achievements. Moreover, relevant certificates can significantly enhance students' competitiveness in the job market. However, in the 2021 Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational English, no specific certificate is designated for Public English. In consideration of the popularity and advantages, we recommend Practical English Test for Colleges (PRETCO). "The Practical English Test for Colleges (PRETCO) is a teaching-proficiency examination designed to assess whether students in higher vocational colleges meet the prescribed English teaching requirements."^[6]

PRETCO has many benefits. First of all, it completely follows the 2021 Curriculum Standards. Nearly all the textbooks for Public English take PRETCO as the designated test. Encompassing general language content as well as material related to workplace communications (the latter constituting approximately 60% of the test), this examination assesses both foundational linguistic knowledge and practical language skills, meets the demands of vocational education.

The biggest disadvantage of PRETCO lies on its degree of difficulty. It is much easier compared with College English Test Band Four (CET-4), the most accredited English exam in China. Take listening tasks for example, PRETCO is slow-paced workplace dialogues while CET4 begins with original news. This leads to lower public recognition and acceptance, which in turn significantly undermine the competitiveness of its holders in job application. If we take CET-4 as the certificate, the difficulty level will be much high for higher vocational students. Furthermore, CET-4 does not relate to 2021 Curriculum Standards, and lack of vocational background. The balance is hard to maintain. Maybe we can take PRETCO as a criteria to assess our teaching and enhance students' practical training. Meanwhile, we shall encourage students to pass CET-4 like exams to improve their competitiveness.

5 Conclusion

The integration of the PCCC model with Public English teaching in Chinese higher vocational colleges represents a critical step toward integrating basic language teaching with vocational features and national standards. But in view of the different learning needs of different groups of student, to realize it still need our research and practice. We have to optimize PCCC module to suit our specific teaching environment. Following the fast development of our society and technology, it is especially important for us to adopt new theories, standards, tools and other resources to establish multi-dimensional learning environment and provide comprehensive support to students. So far, we are still in a tough search of perfect integration between Public English and PCCC, but horizon is there now.

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