

# Research on the Deep Integration of College English Teaching and Professional Education Based on the CLIL Concept

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**Abstract:** In the context of the construction of new liberal arts, college English teaching is confronting the era's demand for a transformation from instrumental language instruction to a comprehensive language education that integrates humanities education with professional training. However, a significant disconnect currently exists between college English teaching and professional education. This paper introduces the concept of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), systematically elucidates its connotation and the 4Cs core framework, and diagnoses the prominent issues in the integration of college English and professional education concerning training objectives, curriculum system, teaching models, faculty, and textbook resources. Based on this analysis, it constructs a deep integration teaching model encompassing three levels: resetting training objectives, optimizing the curriculum system, and innovating teaching models, with the aim of providing theoretical references and practical pathways for the reform of college English teaching.

**Keywords:** CLIL concept; College English; Professional education; Deep integration; Teaching model

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## 1. Introduction

In November 2020, the Ministry of Education held a conference on the construction of new liberal arts, marking a new stage of systematic advancement in this field. The core of new liberal arts construction lies in breaking through the fixed thinking patterns and disciplinary boundaries of traditional liberal arts, emphasizing interdisciplinary crossover and knowledge integration <sup>[1]</sup>. The "College English Teaching Guidelines" (2020 edition) released in the same year clearly states that one of the important tasks of college English courses is to conduct cross-cultural education and cultivate students' ability to understand and interpret Chinese culture. In 2019, Director Wu Yan of the Ministry of Education pointed out that higher foreign language education should grasp the general trend of higher education development and promote reform and development around the concept of "new liberal arts, big foreign languages." This series of policy documents has pointed the direction

for the reform of college English teaching.

However, upon examining the current state of college English teaching, one can observe a significant gap between traditional teaching models and the requirements for talent cultivation in the new era. For an extended period, college English instruction has primarily focused on language skill training, with minimal integration of professional content. This highlights that the college English curriculum system is severely disconnected from professional education, remaining entrenched in the instrumental stage of “language for language’s sake.” It further notes that the present college English curriculum is lacking in depth, singular in structure, and devoid of interdisciplinary connections, making it challenging to meet the demands of talent cultivation in the new era. In this context, the concept of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) has emerged as a potential solution. This model effectively integrates subject content with language learning, providing an innovative approach to address the “isolation” dilemma of college English. This paper seeks to introduce the CLIL concept and its 4Cs teaching framework into the reform of college English teaching, establishing a deeply integrated teaching model from three dimensions: training objectives, curriculum system, and teaching model, thereby offering a feasible practical pathway for cultivating interdisciplinary talents.

## **2. CLIL concept**

### **2.1. The connotation and core framework of the CLIL concept**

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), which emerged from the multilingual policy advocated by the European Union in the early 1990s, is a pedagogical model that seamlessly integrates subject content learning with language acquisition <sup>[3]</sup>. Its theoretical foundation is primarily derived from Hymes’ theory of communicative competence and Halliday’s functional linguistics theory, emphasizing the enhancement of language development by providing learners with authentic and meaningful subject content input. The defining characteristic of CLIL is its “dual focus”—learners engage with subject content through an additional language, thus achieving the dual objectives of content mastery and language development. Within the CLIL framework, language serves not only as a medium for conveying content but also as a fundamental tool for knowledge construction, embodying a dual nature: on one hand, it prompts the mapping of language forms and functions through the authenticity of thematic contexts; on the other hand, it promotes the structured reorganization of concepts through cognitive engagement.

In the development of the CLIL concept, the most influential theoretical framework is undoubtedly the 4Cs framework, which encompasses four dimensions: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture <sup>[3]</sup>. The content dimension focuses on the transmission and acquisition of subject knowledge; the communication dimension highlights the mediating role of language in knowledge transfer; the cognition dimension pertains to the development of learners’ logical thinking, critical thinking, and innovative thinking; and the culture dimension centers on fostering cross-cultural awareness and broadening international perspectives. These four dimensions are interrelated and synergistic, collectively forming the foundational pillars of CLIL curriculum design and teaching implementation. Furthermore, the CLIL pyramid model offers methodological guidance for curriculum design across four levels: theme determination, media selection, task design, and effectiveness evaluation <sup>[5]</sup>.

### **2.2. The compatibility of the CLIL concept with college English teaching**

The reason the CLIL concept can provide robust support for the reform of college English teaching lies in its

profound structural alignment with the practical challenges and reform demands currently faced by college English education.

First, CLIL addresses the contemporary demand for college English to evolve from ‘instrumentality’ to ‘humanity + instrumentality.’ Traditional college English has overemphasized language skill drills, often neglecting the knowledge and cultural values inherent in the language. CLIL integrates language learning with meaningful subject content, positioning language as a tool for cognition, a medium for communication, and a carrier of culture. Second, CLIL is inherently aligned with the ideological and political education component of college English courses. The cultural dimension within the 4Cs framework naturally encompasses the function of value guidance, enabling students to cultivate cultural confidence and value identification through comparison and reflection while engaging with knowledge content from diverse cultural backgrounds. Third, CLIL offers a viable solution to break the ‘isolation’ dilemma of college English. By utilizing subject content as a medium for language learning, it allows students to ‘learn English while studying professional knowledge, and learn professional knowledge while using English’<sup>[4]</sup>, thereby achieving an organic integration of language learning and professional education. Fourth, CLIL aligns closely with contemporary findings in learning science. When language learning occurs within meaningful content contexts, learners are more motivated and retain knowledge for longer periods. Fifth, CLIL demonstrates significant flexibility and adaptability, facilitating implementation across various levels and types of universities according to local conditions.

### **3. Current status and issues of the integration of college English and professional education**

Despite the multiple rounds of reform in college English teaching, numerous urgent issues remain to be addressed regarding its deep integration with professional education.

First, the orientation of talent cultivation goals is misaligned. Traditional college English teaching has long focused on language skill training, emphasizing the development of fundamental abilities such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This approach remains at the instrumental stage of “language for language’s sake,” neglecting the professional knowledge and disciplinary thinking that language embodies. This misalignment in goal orientation hinders students’ ability to effectively transfer their acquired knowledge to professional studies and future career contexts.

Second, there is a significant disconnect between the curriculum system and professional education. It highlights that the current college English curriculum lacks clear orientation, contains limited content, features a singular structure, and is deficient in interdisciplinarity. Language skills courses occupy a substantial proportion of the curriculum and consume considerable time, while professional knowledge courses are relatively scarce, failing to integrate professional subject content into teaching organically. Furthermore, there is a lack of effective bridging modules between college English and professional English, with each operating independently<sup>[6]</sup>.

Third, the teaching model is monotonous, with content and context being disconnected. Traditional college English teaching typically employs a teacher-centered lecture model, which results in insufficient classroom interaction and limited opportunities for students to practice language in authentic contexts<sup>[4]</sup>. Xinran Zhang and Yunxi Wang (2025) observe a prevalent issue in college English teaching: “emphasizing language form over content depth,” where instructors often restrict their teaching to linguistic aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, overlooking the development of students’ creative expression and critical thinking in

practical applications<sup>[3]</sup>.

Fourth, the interdisciplinary competence of the teaching staff is inadequate. Zhihua Li (2025) notes that while college English teachers generally possess strong language teaching abilities, they are often lacking in specialized knowledge of specific disciplines. Conversely, professional teachers, despite their expertise in their fields, frequently lack systematic language teaching skills. Lingli Zhang (2024) also remarks that English teachers in vocational colleges often lack corporate work experience and industry practice, resulting in a disconnect between educators and the industry.

Fifth, teaching materials and resources lack professional specificity. It is pointed out that existing college English textbooks primarily focus on general English and lack organic integration with specialized courses. Zhihua Li (2025) further observes that most current professional English textbooks still concentrate on imparting language knowledge, lacking adequate support from specialized field knowledge, making it challenging for students to integrate language learning with disciplinary knowledge effectively.

## **4. Construction of a deeply integrated teaching model based on the CLIL concept**

Building on the preceding systematic exposition of the CLIL concept and the diagnosis of current issues in the integration of college English with professional education, this section aims to construct a deeply integrated teaching model for college English and professional education based on the CLIL concept. This model is grounded in the 4Cs framework of CLIL and is developed from three dimensions: the resetting of training objectives, the optimization of the curriculum system, and the innovation of teaching models, striving to achieve a synergistic development pattern of “language empowering the profession, and the profession feeding back into language.”

### **4.1. Repositioning of training objectives**

The training objective serves as the logical starting point for teaching reform. Traditional college English teaching defines the training objective as students’ general English proficiency, focusing primarily on the development of basic skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating. This focus appears too narrow within the context of the new liberal arts construction. According to the CLIL concept, the training objective of college English should undergo a three-level transformation: first, shifting from an emphasis on English language knowledge to cultivating the ability to “do things in English,” thereby prioritizing students’ capacity to use English for professional research, academic communication, and industry practice; second, transitioning from a sole focus on language knowledge to integrating English as a tool and medium, incorporating cutting-edge interdisciplinary knowledge to achieve the goal of “using language as a bridge to learn professional knowledge”; third, moving from mere cultural cognition to cross-cultural innovation guidance, fostering students’ critical thinking and innovative awareness through cultural comparison. The new objective should embody a trinity structure of “composite English language ability + composite disciplinary knowledge structure + interdisciplinary knowledge system and innovation literacy”<sup>[2]</sup>.

### **4.2. Optimized design of the curriculum system**

The curriculum system acts as the vehicle for achieving educational objectives. In accordance with the CLIL concept, the college English curriculum system should establish a four-level progressive structure of “general education courses—foundation courses—core courses—practical courses”. At the general education

level, English general education electives related to professional fields can be offered to assist students in building a macro-level understanding of relevant domains; at the foundation level, professional terminology and industry expressions should be seamlessly integrated into the basic teaching of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; at the core level, specialized “English for Specific Purposes” or “Academic English” courses should be established; at the practical level, project-based practice modules grounded in real-world tasks should be implemented to bridge theoretical knowledge and practical application. The four levels should be progressively connected and seamlessly articulated, with the design of course content consistently adhering to three fundamental principles: a close integration of theoretical instruction and practical training, mutual interconnection of humanistic literacy and scientific competence, and a synergistic promotion of comprehensive abilities and professional qualifications.

### **4.3. Innovative practice of teaching models**

The innovation of teaching models is a critical component in constructing a deeply integrated teaching model. Based on the 4Cs framework of CLIL, classroom teaching reform should be advanced simultaneously across the four dimensions of content, communication, cognition, and culture.

In terms of content, a dual-track driving model of “language + discipline” is established, with disciplinary knowledge serving as the core content of language teaching. Language learning tasks centered on disciplinary themes are designed, incorporating authentic engineering contexts into the English teaching content. Regarding communication, an authentic language use ecology is created, utilizing a three-dimensional task design method of “role-scene-medium” to enable students to complete comprehensive writing and expression tasks in simulated professional scenarios. Concerning cognition, a scaffold for higher-order thinking development is constructed, where teachers consciously design steps for thinking training, guiding students to apply higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and creation. As for culture, cross-cultural comparison and reflection are integrated, guiding students to analyze rhetorical differences between Chinese and Western academic discourses, thereby cultivating cross-cultural communication strategies and achieving the organic unity of language ability cultivation and value guidance. The three levels—training objectives, curriculum system, and teaching model—form an interconnected and progressively deepening organic whole, collectively constituting a comprehensive framework for the deep integration of college English and professional education grounded in the CLIL concept.

## **5. Conclusion and Outlook**

Employing the CLIL concept as a theoretical framework, this paper systematically examines the development of a teaching model aimed at the deep integration of college English and professional education. The study reviews the connotation and core framework of the CLIL concept, identifies the significant challenges in the current integration of college English and professional education, and constructs a teaching model for deep integration that encompasses three levels: redefining training objectives, optimizing the curriculum system, and innovating teaching methodologies. The research posits that the CLIL concept, with its fundamental principle of “equal emphasis on content and language” and the systematic guidance of the 4Cs framework, offers robust theoretical support and practical pathways for addressing the “isolation” dilemma in college English instruction. Under this model, college English teaching undergoes a functional transformation from instrumental language instruction to comprehensive language education, which holds considerable practical

implications for the cultivation of interdisciplinary talents <sup>[5]</sup>.

However, this study also presents certain limitations. The focus of this paper is on theoretical construction, and the proposed teaching model requires validation and refinement through systematic empirical research. Furthermore, the enhancement of teachers' interdisciplinary competence, the development of integrated textbooks, and the reform of the evaluation system are all areas that necessitate ongoing exploration in practice. Looking forward, as the new liberal arts initiative advances and the application of technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data becomes more prevalent in the education sector, interdisciplinary integrated teaching of college English is poised for greater developmental opportunities. Future research can be further advanced in the following areas: strengthening localized practical research on the CLIL concept, conducting systematic teaching experiments across various types of universities; exploring effective pathways for digital technology to enhance CLIL integrated teaching; deepening the establishment of interdisciplinary teaching and research communities, and fostering a long-term mechanism for collaborative education between English teachers and professional educators <sup>[3]</sup>. Only by adhering to the integrated concept of "equal emphasis on content and language" and continuously deepening teaching reform can we truly achieve a synergistic development model of "language empowering the profession, and the profession enriching language," thus contributing to the cultivation of more versatile talents with international perspectives and professional competencies <sup>[6]</sup>.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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