

From Language Instrument to Strategic Interface: The Contemporary Rationale and Practical Pathways for Reforming Economic and Trade English Education

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Abstract: Under the twin pressures of the profound restructuring of global digital trade ecosystems and the accelerating infiltration of artificial intelligence technologies, Economic and Trade English education is undergoing a fundamental epistemological transition—from a “language-as-instrument” perspective to a “strategic-interface” paradigm. This paper systematically examines the contextual background and real-world predicaments confronting the reform of Economic and Trade English instruction. It then elaborates on reform pathways along five dimensions: upgrading program objectives, restructuring curricula, innovating pedagogical models, deepening industry-education integration, and embedding values-oriented education. Drawing on reform practices from dozens of Chinese universities during 2025–2026, the study argues that the core direction of reform lies in achieving a triple integration—empowering business through language, enabling instruction through digital technologies, and shaping talent development through industrial demands—so as to construct a compound-talent cultivation system suited to the digital economy. Successful reform requires bidirectional interaction between top-level design and grassroots experimentation, a dialectical balance between technological application and educational principles, and synergistic progress in theoretical research and practical innovation.

Keywords: Economic and Trade English; Pedagogical reform; Digital-intelligent empowerment; Industry-education integration; Compound talent cultivation

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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of China’s full-scale implementation of its high-level opening-up strategy and the vigorous expansion of global digital trade, Economic and Trade English—serving as the crucial nexus between linguistic competence and commercial practice—has made its instructional reform a central concern in the connotative development of higher education. In 2025, the Ministry of Education issued 758 newly

revised vocational education program standards, explicitly advocating a compound “language + business + skills” training model aligned with the imperatives of the digital era. Concurrently, the intelligent language service sector surpassed RMB 248 billion in total output, with AI penetration reaching 72%, intensifying market demand for talents who combine linguistic proficiency, technical acumen, and business expertise.

Against this macro backdrop, reforming Economic and Trade English education is no longer a marginal adjustment of course content or teaching techniques; it is a holistic, systemic transformation encompassing educational philosophy, curricular architecture, instructional strategies, and assessment frameworks ^[1]. Since 2025, dozens of institutions nationwide have initiated revisions to their undergraduate programs in Economic and Trade English or Business English. The 2026 versions generally adopt the guiding tenets of “value orientation, digital-intelligent empowerment, industry-education integration, and multidimensional innovation,” exhibiting a marked shift in objectives from “application-oriented” to “internationalized language service” training.

This paper aims to systematically articulate the contemporary rationale and practical trajectories of this reform. Through a comprehensive analysis of the latest policy documents, scholarly research, and institutional case studies, it seeks to map the current reform landscape and offer theoretical insights and practical references for peer institutions.

2. Contextual drivers and practical challenges

2.1. Industrial transformation and policy imperatives: External forces for change

The urgency of reforming Economic and Trade English teaching derives first and foremost from profound changes in the external environment. At the industrial level, the surging tide of global digital trade, together with emerging business forms such as cross-border e-commerce, AI-assisted business analytics, and digital marketing, imposes entirely new demands on talent knowledge structures and competency portfolios. Traditional curricula centered on language skill drills can no longer satisfy industry requirements for graduates who are “proficient in foreign languages, knowledgeable in business, and adept in technology.” Some scholars have observed that under the dual impetus of a restructuring global trade ecology and a paradigm shift in technological systems, Business English education is undergoing an epistemological reorientation from a language-instrument perspective to a strategic-interface perspective ^[2].

At the policy level, the state has consistently signaled the need for reform. The 2025 edition of the vocational education program standards underscores “integrated design across secondary, higher vocational, and undergraduate levels” and “digital teaching transformation,” mandating that practical teaching hours account for no less than 50% of total instructional time. In response, universities have launched comprehensive program revisions; the 2026 plans generally adopt the core concepts of “value guidance, digital-intelligent empowerment, industry-education integration, and multidimensional innovation.” At the same time, deeper regional economic cooperation—exemplified by the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership—has raised the bar for business English professionals in terms of internationalization and cross-cultural competence.

2.2. Deep-seated predicaments of traditional instruction: Internal drivers for change

Viewed from the standpoint of instructional practice, conventional Economic and Trade English teaching confronts three structural difficulties.

First, a disconnect between curriculum design and industrial requirements. Many programs continue to emphasize language skill development while allocating insufficient weight to core business subjects, leaving limited space for emerging areas such as cross-border e-commerce, digital marketing, and AI-assisted business analytics. Curricular content lags behind industrial evolution, creating a substantial gap between graduate knowledge structures and job-role expectations.

Second, inadequate practical teaching resources. Resources such as virtual simulation platforms and digital case libraries remain underdeveloped, depriving students of authentic business scenario exposure during their studies. A systematic review of Chinese Business English teaching research from 2007 to 2023 reveals that curriculum development, language acquisition, technology-assisted language learning, and learning assessment constitute the most frequently addressed topics, yet there persists a notable deficiency in methodological investigations and multilevel research designs. This finding implies that deeper reform requires not only practical experimentation but also robust theoretical grounding.

Third, insufficient integration of technology and innovation education. With artificial intelligence reshaping international trade communication modes, conventional teaching falls short in cultivating AI tool application and data literacy. In many institutions, instruction still relies on “chalk-and-talk” or basic PowerPoint presentations, failing to translate digital tools into tangible pedagogical gains^[3].

3. Practical pathways for teaching reform

3.1. Upgrading program objectives: From “application-oriented” to “internationalized language services”

The redefinition of talent development objectives constitutes the logical starting point of reform. A notable trend in the 2026 program revisions across multiple universities is the elevation of objectives from “high-quality application-oriented talents” to “high-quality application-oriented internationalized language service talents.”

This upgrade adds three key dimensions—internationalization, language services, and AI technologies—thereby expanding the educational focus from purely linguistic ability to a composite “language + business + technology” competency profile. For example, Jiangxi Institute of Fashion Technology’s 2026 Business English program explicitly targets capabilities in international trade, cross-border e-commerce, and AI-assisted business analysis, establishing a four-dimensional “English + Business + Garment + AI” training orientation^[4]. Hanshan Normal University has constructed a three-pillar curriculum matrix that “consolidates English foundations, strengthens business cores, and highlights digital empowerment,” promoting three fundamental transitions: from pure language learning to language-enabled business practice; from traditional foreign-trade knowledge to digital trade skills; and from knowledge input to integrated practical competence.

Behind this upgrading lies a fundamental rethinking of the role of Economic and Trade English graduates—transforming them from mere “providers” of language services into “participants” in business decision-making and “bridges” for cross-cultural communication. Some scholars have pointed out that the training model for compound foreign-language talents is shifting from discipline-based to discipline-integrating paradigms, aligning with the demands of the New Liberal Arts era and the evolution of foreign language disciplines.

3.2. Restructuring curricula: Modularization, interdisciplinarity, and digitalization

The curriculum system is the primary vehicle for realizing talent development goals. Current reforms exhibit

three salient features in curriculum construction ^[5].

Modular curriculum design is one of the most prominent characteristics. Guangdong Vocational College of Foreign Languages and Arts, through systematic graduate job-role analysis, has dynamically developed courses in collaboration with enterprises, restructuring its program into a “dual-core and triple-extension” modular system—covering vocational core competencies, professional core skills, and emerging foreign-trade business directions. This design achieves dynamic alignment between jobs, competencies, and course offerings, enabling the curriculum to adapt responsively to industrial changes. Such modular architecture endows the curriculum with greater flexibility and responsiveness.

Interdisciplinary integration is another major direction. Under the New Liberal Arts initiative, multiple universities are actively exploring cross-disciplinary fusion. Jiangxi Institute of Fashion Technology has devised a four-dimensional “English + Business + Garment + AI” track; Hanshan Normal University has added frontier modules such as cross-border e-commerce, AI skills application, and local-industry English; Shanghai University of Finance and Economics has systematically planned its curriculum around four core clusters: language and humanities, area studies, international communication competence, and digital-intelligent technology application. This interdisciplinary approach breaks down traditional disciplinary barriers, enriching Economic and Trade English education with broader intellectual resources and competency support.

Digital curriculum transformation is also accelerating. Jiangxi Institute of Fashion Technology’s 2026 plan includes ten AI-empowered courses, covering digital-intelligent Business English audio-visual and oral training, AI-assisted applied translation, and digital-intelligent comprehensive business English practice. These courses embed AI technologies throughout the teaching-learning process, enabling students to acquire digital tool application skills alongside language and business knowledge.

3.3. Innovating pedagogical models: Deep AI integration and human-machine collaboration

The deep integration of artificial intelligence is the most distinctive hallmark of current instructional innovation. Reform explorations exhibit a progression from mere “tool utilization” to “data-informed evidence-based practice.”

At the classroom level, the “AI + specialization-innovation integration” practice grounded in the BOPPPS teaching model offers a replicable paradigm. Researchers embed AI technologies into each BOPPPS phase, designing innovative business communication tasks to achieve a three-dimensional teaching objective that combines “professional norms, technological application, and innovative thinking.” In terms of whole-process instructional optimization, the Business English faculty at Wuhan College has developed an AI-closed-loop model spanning pre-class, in-class, and post-class stages: before class, AI delivers multimodal micro-lectures and data tables, and uses pre-tests to pinpoint student weaknesses in vocabulary and grammar; during class, AI generates interpretation materials covering special trends in business scenarios and difficulties in digital terminology, and facilitates multi-version translation comparisons and business negotiation role-plays; after class, knowledge graphs are used to push personalized exercises, with students required to upload interpretation audio and write reflective journals—combining AI-assisted grading with targeted teacher feedback ^[6].

In specialized course empowerment, AI applications are even more diverse. In vocabulary teaching, AI extracts key terms from each unit and generates business-context dictation and multiple-choice exercises.

In situational dialogue teaching, AI custom-generates scenario materials such as business negotiations and price quotations, and the system quantitatively scores pronunciation accuracy and fluency while offering improvement suggestions. In writing instruction, AI tools assist students with vocabulary and grammar correction, as well as essay structure optimization. At Shandong Electronic Vocational College, teacher Geng Weisi addressed three major bottlenecks in the “Business English” course—low retention of professional terminology, insufficient class time for personalized oral practice, and a disconnect in business context perception—by constructing a “three-dimensional-one” intelligent teaching system that forms a closed loop through “deep AI integration, gamification, and scenario-based output.”

Notably, reformers maintain a prudent attitude while embracing AI. Some teachers point out that AI can handle foundational tasks like vocabulary and grammar proofreading, but core evaluations—including argumentation and logical structure—must remain under teacher supervision. Teachers should adopt a human-machine collaborative teaching philosophy and act as leaders of instructional system design, leveraging AI tools to streamline teaching processes while ensuring that the ultimate objective is the enhancement of students’ higher-order thinking, not merely the provision of standard answers. Concerning the risk of over-reliance on AI and diminished independent thinking, teachers concur that AI assistance should be combined with teacher grading and personalized guidance to safeguard teaching quality. This principle—“AI as tool, student as center”—is gaining widespread acceptance among reform participants.

3.4. Deepening industry-education integration: From “school-enterprise cooperation” to the “factory-on-campus” model

Industry-education integration runs as a consistent thread throughout Economic and Trade English reform, with its depth and breadth continuously expanding.

In terms of model innovation, the “factory-on-campus” approach is particularly noteworthy. The Business English Department of Hunan University of Information Technology’s International Business School, in collaboration with Changsha Weiyang Network Technology Co., has innovatively launched a “factory-on-campus” practical teaching model, using the “Cross-border E-commerce Customer Service and Communication” course as its vehicle. The university-enterprise partnership has formed a mixed teaching team, with the enterprise sending senior operations supervisors to reside on campus and participate in course development, integrating real-world cases, communication techniques, and platform rules into the curriculum. Together they designed eight teaching modules covering the full business process—pre-sale inquiries, order processing, and dispute resolution. Participation has expanded from about 20 students initially to over 80, and the practice space has grown from a single on-campus training room to an entire floor. Weiyang has granted access to some of its cross-border e-commerce platform accounts, allowing students, under teacher guidance, to handle real customer inquiries and order issues. This model achieves the “four-chain integration” of the education chain, talent chain, industrial chain, and innovation chain—placing the specialization directly on the industrial chain and relocating the classroom to the enterprise site.

In practical teaching, more and more institutions are taking students out of the classroom and into enterprise settings. The School of Foreign Languages at Quanzhou Normal University extended the classroom to industry events, organizing faculty and students to visit the Quanzhou Cross-border E-commerce Supply Chain Renewal Conference, engage with enterprises, and participate in thematic sessions—integrating learning tasks with industry activities. Guangdong Vocational College of Foreign Languages and Arts has created a progressive practice field aligned with changes in the foreign-trade industry: simulation learning

through digital-virtual scenarios, project training in the Digital Trade Industry College, trial participation in large-scale trade fairs, and authentic job practice in cross-border e-commerce industrial parks—forming a closely linked and advancing “learning-practice-trial-combat” continuum. Tianjin College of Commerce and Tianjin Liyun Technology Co. have launched a “customized order-based” talent cultivation program, with the first cohort of 52 Business English majors embarking on a “foreign language + cross-border e-commerce” targeted training track.

In course development, Guangdong Vocational College of Foreign Languages and Arts has systematically advanced a “works-based” curriculum reform, designing progressive creative tasks across academic stages so that students gain a sense of competence through producing visible outputs such as multilingual short videos; enterprise and school mentors provide full-process guidance and design ceremonial industry-school interaction activities such as enterprise fieldwork. Over the past three years, the program’s graduate employment rate has exceeded 98%, with enterprise satisfaction surpassing 97%.

Industry-education integration is also reflected in regional economic service. Many universities closely align talent development with local specialty industries: Hanshan Normal University serves Chaozhou’s ceramics and garment industries; Chongqing Urban Management College aligns with Chongqing’s strategy of building an inland opening-up comprehensive hub, integrating new demands from the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor; Ningbo University of Finance and Economics collaborates with the Ningbo Home Furnishing Industry Association, introducing AI-empowered global trade advantages. This “locally grounded, industry-serving” orientation provides reform with solid practical soil and sustained momentum.

3.5. Embedding values education: Unifying value guidance and competence cultivation

Alongside competence development, values education (curriculum ideology and politics) has become an important reform dimension. Economic and Trade English courses naturally integrate business knowledge and language skills across a wide range of business scenarios, making them an ideal platform for values-oriented instruction.

The core task of current values-education reform is to achieve an organic unity between value guidance and competence cultivation ^[7]. Professor Zhu Xiaozhen at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, using the “Economic and Trade English” course as an example, elaborated on how to integrate the requirements of the New Liberal Arts initiative into course content. Specific measures include restructuring the syllabus to embed ideological-political elements such as Chinese economic theories, exemplary Chinese enterprise cases, and “Belt and Road” trade cases into classroom teaching and innovation reports—achieving a three-dimensional integration of “language teaching, professional knowledge, and Chinese discourse.”

At the practical level, various institutions have explored distinctive pathways for integrating values. Zhejiang Vocational and Technical College of Communications’ Business English program implements the three-in-one concept of “value shaping, knowledge imparting, and competence cultivation,” forming a holistic education pattern that permeates every stage, teaching students not only how to negotiate in English but also how to tell Chinese stories effectively in international exchanges. Some institutions have embedded ideological-political elements from the very beginning of classroom lead-ins, infused value concepts throughout task implementation, and adopted dual-dimension “skills + values” assessments at each evaluation stage—creating a full-chain values-education system. Others are exploring AI-assisted pathways to precisely incorporate values-based content into Business English courses.

These practices demonstrate that values education is not an “add-on” to professional teaching but a “deepening” of the educational mission—cultivating students’ international perspectives and business acumen

while nurturing patriotism and cultural confidence. As one study has noted, the values-education reform pathways for core courses such as Economic and Trade Translation include reorganizing course content, excavating ideological-political elements, optimizing instructional design, constructing quality evaluation systems, and developing open online courses—aiming to cultivate high-quality international business talents with “professional thinking, language skills, cross-cultural communication, value orientation, and global vision.”

4. Reform trends and future prospects

Looking across the diverse reform practices currently underway, several noteworthy trends emerge.

First, the paradigm shift from “language instrument” to “strategic interface” is deepening. Economic and Trade English education is moving beyond traditional language teaching boundaries and increasingly becoming a strategic interface linking linguistic competence, business practice, and technological application. This transition requires teachers to evolve from “language specialists” to “interdisciplinary mentors,” and students to grow from “language users” to “business participants.”

Second, systematic cultivation of teacher digital literacy is being placed on the agenda. The proliferation of AI tools imposes new capability demands on instructors. Some scholars have proposed a four-tier progressive framework—“tool operation, classroom integration, data-based evidence, and teaching feedback”—emphasizing that improving teacher digital literacy needs systematic institutional design and sustained professional development support. Since 2025, numerous universities have organized AI teaching practice exchange meetings, digital-era Business English high-quality development forums, and other thematic events to enhance faculty competence in information-based instruction.

Third, diversified reconstruction of assessment systems is accelerating. Traditional summative assessment is giving way to process-oriented, multidimensional evaluation. Blended approaches combining AI-assisted grading with teacher manual marking, dual “skills + values” assessment, and formative evaluation of project-based learning all point to a deeper logic of assessment reform—shifting from testing knowledge to testing competence, and from outcome-based to process-based evaluation.

Fourth, industry-education integration is moving from “point-based cooperation” toward “ecosystem building.” From isolated enterprise visits to diverse forms such as “factory-on-campus,” “order-based classes,” and “industry colleges,” the depth and breadth of industry-education integration are continuously expanding. Guangdong Vocational College of Foreign Languages and Arts, leveraging platforms such as the Greater Bay Area Cross-border Digital Trade Industry-Education Community, has explored an evolutionary pathway from curriculum co-construction to platform sharing and ultimately to ecosystem symbiosis.

Fifth, AI applications are shifting from “auxiliary tools” to “deep embedding.” Some scholars have called for systematic planning and sustained deepening of AI applications, avoiding superficial adoption, and integrating AI tools into intelligent course design, personalized learning planning, cross-border communication simulation, and the entire talent development pipeline. This implies that AI is no longer a mere “ornament” in teaching but will become an organic component throughout the educational process.

5. Concluding remarks

Reforming Economic and Trade English education is a systemic endeavor, encompassing multiple dimensions: updating educational philosophy, restructuring curricula, innovating pedagogical models,

deepening industry-education collaboration, and embedding values education. The core direction of current reform can be distilled into three integrations: empowering business through language—ensuring that linguistic competence genuinely translates into business practice ability; empowering instruction through digital technology—ensuring that technical means truly enhance teaching quality; and empowering talent development through industry—ensuring that industrial needs become the genuine orientation of talent cultivation.

In this process, people need both top-level policy guidance and grassroots practical exploration; both rational application of technological tools and conscious adherence to educational principles. Deeper reform must also address several key issues: systematic enhancement of teacher digital literacy; sustained investment in and updating of practical teaching resources; clear delineation of the boundaries for AI application in teaching; and establishment of robust long-term mechanisms for industry-education integration.

Some researchers have noted that the deep integration of smart classrooms and Business English is driving a paradigm shift from traditional language teaching to vocational competence cultivation. Only by adhering to an organic unity of problem-orientation, demand-orientation, and quality-orientation can Economic and Trade English education truly accomplish the fundamental transition from “teaching language” to “cultivating talent,” thereby providing solid human resource support for China’s high-level opening-up and high-quality digital economy development.

Disclosure statement

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