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The Construction of Project-Based Learning in College English Teaching

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the digital transformation of higher education and the shift of foreign language teaching from an "input orientation" to an "output orientation," Project-Based Learning (PBL) offers a systematic pathway to overcoming the "separation of learning and use" in College English teaching and learning. This paper reconstructs the teaching content of College English based on the PBL philosophy: it reorders the teaching sequence according to the logical relationships among units, takes chapter-level output-oriented project tasks as the goal, and replaces the traditional unit system with a project map. Teaching implementation follows a four-phase cycle of "entry—inquiry—production—review" with the help of smart course platforms. By reconstructing teaching content and reshaping the teaching process, the PBL model can effectively stimulate students' learning interest, cultivate integrated language skills and cross-cultural dissemination competence, and provide an operable paradigm reference for PBL in College English.

Keywords: Project-Based Learning (PBL); College English teaching; Output orientation; Instructional reconstruction; Smart course platforms

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1. Introduction

For a long time, College English teaching has largely taken "knowledge-point lecturing + separate skill training" as its basic pattern, with listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation fragmented into mutually independent training modules. Students lack a linguistic "output" in authentic communicative situations, falling into the predicament of "separation of learning and use." The Production-Oriented Approach (POA) and Outcome-Based Education (OBE) emphasize the authenticity and usability of learning outcomes, calling for foreign language teaching to shift from "input-driven" to "output-driven [1]." Project-Based Learning (PBL), characterized by "real-problem-driven" inquiry and "learning by doing," aligns closely with this shift. Meanwhile, the rise of smart course platforms provides technical support for project management, process-oriented assessment, and personalized feedback. Based on this, this paper constructs a PBL model for College English and systematically explores its theoretical construction and implementation

pathways.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant domestic and international literature on PBL in College English and clarifies the research gap addressed here. Section 3 elaborates the theoretical foundation of the proposed model, while Section 4 details its implementation pathways on the smart teaching platform. Section 5 concludes with practical implications and future directions, offering both a coherent framework and an actionable roadmap for classroom practice.

2. Literature review

In recent years, research on Project-Based Learning (PBL) in College English teaching has kept growing, spanning three dimensions—theoretical, empirical, and practical. At the theoretical level, as Li Lanxin and Zhang Chunxiao mentioned, PBL is consistent with an output-oriented, learning-through-use orientation, using authentic tasks to drive knowledge construction and integrating language skills, thinking, and value guidance within a task framework [2-3]. At the empirical level, Li Lanxin also reported, based on a one-semester single-group pre/post questionnaire with 51 first-year non-English majors, that PBL was associated with reduced "aphasia anxiety" and improved expressive confidence and agency, though gains in language application ability remained limited [2]. A meta-analysis by Ye Bixin et al. likewise showed significantly positive effects on vocabulary, listening and speaking, and reading and writing, although the effect on learning literacy and efficiency did not reach significance and technology use showed no obvious moderating effect [4]. At the practical level, Li Xiaofei proposed a dual-teacher collaboration strategy of "co-selecting topics, co-defining goals, co-guiding processes, and co-evaluating outcomes" [5]; Zhang Chunxiao explored pathways for integrating PBL into cross-cultural literacy cultivation from the four aspects of goals, resources, procedures, and assessment [3]; and Li Na constructed an "AI-PBL" model featuring AI-assisted topic selection, process guidance, and diversified evaluation [6]. Taken together, these domestic studies indicate a shift from single-skill language training toward integrated, technology-supported, and interdisciplinary PBL design. Nevertheless, systematic operational frameworks anchored in specific textbooks and smart platforms remain underexplored, and technology integration often stays at the level of instrumental assistance rather than deep coupling with the teaching process.

At the international level, the theoretical and empirical foundations of PBL are relatively mature. Stoller systematically articulated the theoretical foundations of PBL in second and foreign language contexts, emphasizing purposeful language learning and the integration of language, content, and skills through project work [7]. Beckett and Slater proposed the "Project Framework," providing an operable scaffold for the integration of language, content, and thinking skills [8]. From a motivational perspective, Blumenfeld et al. argued that PBL engages students in investigating authentic problems and sustains their motivation and thought through project work [9]; Thomas's review further synthesized evidence on PBL's advantages, including its potential to support deeper understanding and higher-order thinking [10]. Bell highlighted PBL's contribution to cultivating skills critical for success in the 21st century, such as collaboration, communication, and problem solving [11]. Krajcik and Blumenfeld, writing in *The Cambridge Handbook of the Learning Sciences*, situated PBL within the learning sciences and discussed the theoretical and research base supporting project-based approaches to disciplinary learning [12]. These strands of work complement one another: Stoller, together with Beckett and Slater, supplies theoretical and methodological scaffolding,

while Blumenfeld et al., Thomas, Bell, and Krajcik and Blumenfeld provide motivational, cognitive, and skill-oriented evidence. What remains less developed, however, is how such cross-contextual principles can be adapted to localized textbook–platform ecologies and operationalized in semester-long College English instruction.

Building on the above research trajectory, this paper further clarifies its entry point and practical orientation. While existing studies have explored the theoretical foundations of PBL and advanced practical pathways such as interdisciplinary collaboration and AI-assisted design, systematic operational frameworks anchored in specific textbook units and smart teaching platforms remain limited, and technology is often treated as instrumental assistance rather than being deeply coupled with the teaching process. This study therefore focuses on classroom implementation: it anchors its design in textbook units and grounds it on a smart teaching platform, translating the abstract ideals of project-based learning into concrete, teacher-friendly, student-engaging, and process-traceable steps. In doing so, it seeks to bridge the gap between "advanced ideals" and "classroom-ready practice," so that the outcomes of instructional reform can truly take root in day-to-day teaching.

3. Theoretical construction

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a systematic teaching method: it is both an inquiry process into complex, real problems and a process of carefully designing project artifacts and planning and implementing project tasks; in this process, students can master the knowledge and skills they need. Taking this theory as a foundation, this paper designs driving questions around the theme of each chapter, so that learning unfolds within the closed loop of "entry — inquiry — production — review".

In the entry phase, students begin with the chapter title and are led to discuss the chapter's "culminating project" and possible sub-projects to clarify the project's goals and significance. Students activate their prior experience and establish a connection between learning and their life world, thereby providing intrinsic motivation for subsequent inquiry.

In the inquiry phase, the culminating project is decomposed into several ordered sub-projects according to the teaching content, and corresponding knowledge and skill scaffolds are built. The serialization of sub-projects makes grand tasks operable, and students simultaneously acquire vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and cultural knowledge while progressively completing the sub-projects.

In the production phase, based on the sub-project outcomes formed through inquiry, students produce a short-video culminating project artifact, completing the critical leap from language input to language output and obtaining visible, demonstrable learning outcomes.

In the review phase, reflection is conducted after each chapter to assess the degree of project-goal attainment and one's own language growth, cultivating metacognitive ability.

The four phases cycle repeatedly, transforming the traditional unit-based teaching into a "system of projects for chapters with ordered sub-projects", creating a genuine "output" for College English learning.

4. Implementation pathways

Building on the theoretical construction, the author first conducts a structural reorganization of the teaching content. According to the logical relationships among texts and units, the teaching sequence of units was

reordered, breaking the inherent linear structure of the textbook so that knowledge presentation better fits students' cognitive trajectory. Then, anchored in chapter-level output-oriented project tasks, skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation were unified under the common goal of the project artifact, achieving the integrated application of English skills. Besides, the traditional unit system was replaced by a project map on the smart course platform, making teaching objectives visualizable and tasks serialized, so that both teachers and students could clearly grasp the learning path. Finally, textbook tasks were organized. With input skills (listening, reading) as the foundation, they were naturally transformed into output-skill (speaking, writing, translation) project tasks, completing the reshaping of the teaching process.

Second, the effective operation of PBL cannot be separated from technical support. This paper relies on the "Chaoxing Fanya Smart Course Platform" to host College English PBL. The platform's project-map function is used to organize sub-projects and the culminating project, making the task chain clear and controllable. The platform's knowledge graph, English-skills map, and ideological-political education map provide scaffolds for project tasks, transforming the integrated arts-and-sciences knowledge points and curriculum-ideology elements formed during input-skill practice (listening, reading) into support for completing output-skill project tasks (speaking, writing, translation). The platform's task engine decomposes large projects into ordered sub-projects. At each task node, combined with intelligent grading functions (such as read-along/shadowing, AI situational dialogue, and writing), it automatically evaluates, instantly pushes personalized feedback and learning suggestions, realizing the intelligent reshaping of the teaching process.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of learning motivation, real projects and visible outcomes significantly stimulate students' learning interest, shifting English learning from "learning for exams" to "learning for expression." From the perspective of language competence, connecting listening and speaking and reading and writing, and integrating input and output, promotes the overall improvement of students' integrated skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. From the perspective of educational value, project artifacts often involve cultural dissemination and cross-cultural communication contexts; in the process of completing tasks, cultural confidence and cross-cultural dissemination competence are simultaneously nurtured, echoing the educational goal of cultivating "output-oriented practical talents".

Project-Based Learning provides a systematic and feasible pathway for College English to move from "knowledge transmission" to "competence construction." The PBL model of "entry — inquiry — production — review" constructed in this paper demonstrates that textbook content can be entirely reconstructed into real projects that drive students' active output. Further research may refine project evaluation rubrics, deepen the design of AI collaboration in project production, and explore inter-school project-resource sharing mechanisms, promoting the model's progression from "demonstrable" to "promotable".

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