

# A Practice-Oriented Exploration on College English Teaching Reform Based on the Textbook Concept of *Understanding Contemporary China*

Sutong Gao

School of Foreign Languages, Xi'an Shiyou University, Xi'an 710065, Shaanxi, China

**Abstract:** *In the context of the ongoing transformation of higher education in China, College English instruction is undergoing a critical shift from a focus on instrumental language training toward a more holistic, values-oriented educational paradigm. The Understanding Contemporary China textbook series, designed for international audiences, conveys a distinctive pedagogical concept: centering on Chinese topics, guided by the goal of fostering cultural identity, and relying on English as the medium of global communication. This concept offers new theoretical direction and practical frameworks for the reform of College English teaching. This study investigates how the pedagogical philosophy of Understanding Contemporary China can be translated into concrete instructional strategies. The research was conducted over 12 weeks with 58 non-English major undergraduates at a Chinese university. Grounded in the textbook's conceptual framework, the study involved the reconstruction of teaching content, the innovation of pedagogical approaches, and the design of interactive classroom activities. The aim was to explore integrated pathways for developing language competence alongside value orientation and cultural expression. Findings reveal that students demonstrated measurable improvements in several domains, including intercultural communication skills, critical engagement with China-related topics, and enhanced coherence in English writing and speaking. At the same time, the study identified several practical challenges, such as difficulties in shifting teachers' pedagogical beliefs, insufficient course materials aligned with the new concept, and disparities in students' language and cognitive abilities. By grounding the research in real classroom practice, this paper proposes a set of actionable strategies for optimizing College English instruction. It aims to offer empirical insights and reflective perspectives for the cultivation of students' capacity to articulate Chinese narratives in English. Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader goal of embedding cultural identity and national discourse within foreign language education in Chinese universities.*

**Keywords:** Understanding Contemporary China; College English Teaching; Curriculum Reform; Cultural Expression; Teaching Practice.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

China is undergoing profound transformation and comprehensive opening-up, with its development model, social structure, cultural logic, and global relations simultaneously being reshaped. As the international influence of the “Chinese path” continues to grow, the imperative to “tell China’s stories well” and “convey China’s voice effectively” has evolved beyond a national policy slogan to become a tangible responsibility embedded within all levels of the education system. Higher education, as the critical site for cultivating future talent, bears a dual responsibility: fostering a sense of national identity among China’s youth and enhancing their capacity for effective cultural expression. Within this broader mission, College English—long confined to a utilitarian model of language training—must now undergo a paradigmatic shift. This transformation demands not only a redefinition of its pedagogical objectives but also a systematic reconfiguration of its teaching rationale, content structure, and classroom practice.

In recent years, College English curriculum reform has been increasingly charged with broader educational responsibilities that transcend the boundaries of language acquisition. Language instruction is now expected to carry the weight of value orientation, cultural inheritance, and identity formation. This reconceptualization is driven both by national policy priorities and by the changing boundaries of communicative competence in the global arena. Foreign language education is no longer solely about linguistic accuracy; rather, it must also engage with the underlying values, perspectives, and narrative capabilities associated with language use. In this context, the concept of *curriculum-based ideological and political education* (课程思政) has gradually entered the College English classroom. However, its actual implementation remains uneven across institutions. In many cases, integration of ideological and political elements remains superficial, lacking organic alignment with language skill

development and failing to produce meaningful educational synergy.

A particularly pressing concern is the continued dominance of English-language teaching materials that are culturally centered on Anglophone countries. While students acquire linguistic proficiency, they also—often implicitly—absorb a worldview shaped by Western narratives. This orientation tends to marginalize the complexity and contemporaneity of China’s development experience, leaving students ill-equipped to respond to real-world communicative demands such as “how to speak about China in English.” The absence of Chinese content is not merely a gap in teaching materials; it represents a deeper structural deficit in expressive competence. Even students with a solid grasp of vocabulary and grammar often struggle to articulate coherent, persuasive, and culturally resonant views when confronted with topics such as “Chinese modernization” or “green development.” This phenomenon reveals a fundamental shortcoming in traditional College English teaching: its failure to cultivate students’ ability to express Chinese realities effectively in English.

It is against this backdrop that the *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook series has drawn significant attention within the field of foreign language education in Chinese higher education. As an English-language resource systematically introducing China’s national conditions, the series is more than a language input tool; it is a knowledge-construction platform with strong discursive intentionality. More importantly, the pedagogical concept it embodies challenges the traditional binary between content and language, skill and culture, form and meaning. It proposes a new instructional logic for foreign language education: using Chinese topics as the core content, international expression as the medium, and value identification as the ultimate educational goal. This vision opens new possibilities for College English courses—not by sacrificing language proficiency, but by transforming the foreign language classroom into a space for both cognitive development and cultural expression.

Despite its conceptual innovation, however, the effective integration of the *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook into College English teaching poses significant practical challenges. On one hand, teachers differ widely in their understanding and instructional adaptation of the textbook. Many remain wedded to traditional modes of text explanation and struggle to guide students through the value-laden and rhetorically complex material. This often results in a fragmented treatment of content, with little attention to its deeper logical or ideological dimensions. On the other hand, students’ readiness in terms of both language competence and topic comprehension remains limited. It is common to observe expressions of clear patriotic sentiment undermined by weak or incoherent articulation. Moreover, current curriculum structures and assessment mechanisms remain largely focused on linguistic competence, offering little systematic support for the cultivation of cross-cultural or value-based expression. These factors collectively contribute to a disconnect between educational ideals, teaching practice, and learning outcomes, thereby limiting the transformative potential of the textbook’s pedagogical concept.

In response to these challenges, this study seeks to address the core question: how can the pedagogical concept of *Understanding Contemporary China* be effectively operationalized within the College English classroom? Taking a cohort of 58 non-English major undergraduates at a Chinese university as its research sample, the study designed and implemented a 12-week instructional intervention (two class hours per week) grounded in the textbook’s underlying philosophy. The teaching design aimed to integrate language training with guided cultural expression, using a combination of content restructuring, methodological innovation, and task-based classroom activities. Through detailed instructional design, lesson analysis, and formative assessment, the study explores the interplay among curriculum objectives, content selection, classroom methodology, and student performance. It further aims to construct a replicable, assessable, and pedagogically sound practice model for College English teaching. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute a practical case and reflective insights for the broader effort to align foreign language education with China’s evolving national discourse needs, offering new directions for the cultivation of students’ capacity to “tell China’s stories well” in English.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Progress in the Integration of Ideological-Political Education in Foreign Language Curriculum

The concept of “curriculum-based ideological and political education” (commonly abbreviated as “IPE” or *kecheng sixiang zhengzhi*) has, in recent years, evolved from a discipline-specific initiative within political theory courses to a comprehensive pedagogical approach spanning all subject areas in higher education. Its core objective is to realize the “all-subject, all-process, and all-round” integration of educational values across the curriculum. In this context, foreign language courses—particularly college English—have been increasingly recognized as vital

platforms for value formation and civic education.

Early research in this field primarily focused on conceptual clarification and the exploration of general implementation strategies. The essence of integrating IPE into English language instruction lies in embedding ideological content within the language system through thoughtful design of teaching materials, instructional methods, and assessment mechanisms (Liu & Zhang, 2025). Scholars emphasized that IPE in foreign language courses must not degenerate into political preaching. Rather, it should be realized through pedagogically meaningful strategies such as theme-based texts, discourse analysis, and intercultural comparison, which can organically cultivate students' sense of national identity and social responsibility in the process of language learning (Chang & Bi, 2025).

Recent studies have shifted toward more practice-oriented inquiries, paying closer attention to the effectiveness of implementation and students' reception. For instance, several universities have launched theme-specific instructional modules such as "English + Chinese Culture" and "Telling China's Stories," which have reportedly achieved positive classroom dynamics and learning outcomes. Incorporating contemporary topics—such as China's economic transformation, ecological initiatives, and social development—into English instruction has been found to enhance students' ability to articulate Chinese viewpoints in global discourse (Zhang, 2025). However, some studies have pointed out a persistent challenge: the tendency toward superficial integration, where IPE elements are presented as "add-ons" rather than organically embedded components. This has led to criticism of tokenism and formalism in curriculum implementation, ultimately weakening the pedagogical impact (Li, 2025).

In summary, while the theoretical foundation for IPE in foreign language education has steadily matured, practical challenges remain—particularly in terms of curriculum design, teacher capacity building, and sustainable classroom implementation. How to internalize the IPE framework into foreign language pedagogy without compromising communicative goals continues to be a focal concern for both researchers and practitioners.

## 2.2 Current Research on the *Understanding Contemporary China* Textbook

*Understanding Contemporary China* is a new-generation English-language textbook developed in alignment with the national agenda of strengthening IPE through general education. Since its publication in 2022 by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, the textbook has garnered significant attention within the field of English language education. It targets both English majors and non-English majors, covering topics related to China's political system, economic development, cultural heritage, social dynamics, and ecological modernization. As such, it represents a pioneering attempt to integrate China's discourse system into English-language instruction.

Scholars have generally acknowledged the textbook's strong value orientation and culturally grounded perspective. The selection of topics—such as "Common Prosperity," "Rural Revitalization," and "Ecological Civilization"—aligns with China's national development strategy and contemporary societal concerns, providing learners with content that is both relevant and contextually meaningful (Liu, 2025). According to Sun and Qi (2025), the textbook's discourse structure, which often features problem-based introductions, data-supported analysis, and argumentation strategies, is well-suited to fostering students' logical reasoning and critical thinking skills in English.

From a pedagogical standpoint, researchers have begun to evaluate the textbook's effectiveness in actual classroom contexts. Li and Li (2025), using a mixed-methods research design, reported that students showed simultaneous improvement in English communicative ability and understanding of Chinese socio-political issues. In particular, learners demonstrated heightened identity alignment and increased autonomy during tasks requiring them to "tell China's stories" in English. However, several studies have noted that successful implementation of this textbook requires instructors to possess strong topic-guiding and cultural-narrative mediation skills. Without such competencies, students may find the language accessible but struggle to engage meaningfully with the underlying ideological dimensions (Lin, 2025; Zhang, 2025; Tan & Wu, 2025).

Despite these emerging insights, the current literature remains largely limited to either macro-level textbook analyses or short-term teaching evaluations. There is a notable gap in systematic practice-oriented research that explores how the textbook's conceptual framework can be translated into coherent curriculum design, task sequencing, and student-centered learning experiences—particularly within the domain of general college English instruction. He (2025) underscores the need for more empirical studies that document and analyze how learners

engage with ideological content and develop the competence to express China's narratives in international settings.

This study seeks to address this research gap by constructing a college English teaching model that is explicitly informed by the conceptual underpinnings of *Understanding Contemporary China*. The proposed reform includes a systematic redesign of course objectives, instructional activities, and classroom organization, aiming to synergize the textbook's narrative logic with the IPE framework in meaningful ways.

### 2.3 Research Innovation and Theoretical Contributions

The synthesis of existing scholarship reveals a clear trajectory: while both college English reform and IPE integration have been extensively theorized, and *Understanding Contemporary China* provides a valuable content platform, a systematic convergence of the three has yet to be fully realized in pedagogical research. Current studies tend to either advocate theoretical alignment or document fragmented classroom experiences, without offering a holistic model of curricular integration and instructional practice.

This study contributes to the field in several novel ways. First, it offers a pedagogical model that integrates language skills training, intercultural expression, and value-oriented education in a unified instructional framework. Second, it operationalizes the educational philosophy of *Understanding Contemporary China* into task-based teaching scenarios centered on Chinese narratives, thereby enhancing the authenticity and contextuality of classroom discourse. Third, it incorporates both formative and summative evaluation tools to examine students' cognitive development and affective engagement, providing insight into the internal processes of value acquisition in the foreign language classroom.

Theoretically, this study advocates for a shift from instrumentalist language teaching toward a model rooted in cultural identity and moral education. It challenges the longstanding dichotomy between language instruction and ideological education, positioning college English as a site for value formation and cultural agency. Practically, it offers a replicable framework for non-English majors in ordinary universities, demonstrating how IPE goals can be meaningfully realized without sacrificing linguistic competence. In a context where foreign language education is increasingly charged with ideological significance, this study reaffirms the centrality of education as a value-driven enterprise and contributes to the broader discourse on "educating people for the nation."

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Translating pedagogical concepts into tangible classroom practices is the cornerstone of meaningful curriculum reform. This study, grounded in the pedagogical philosophy of the *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook, was implemented in a 12-week instructional cycle consisting of 24 class hours, targeting 58 undergraduate students from non-English majors. The goal was to construct a pedagogical pathway oriented toward "articulating contemporary China in English." Rather than solely focusing on language skill development, the instructional design emphasized cultivating students' understanding of Chinese sociocultural issues, fostering confidence in English expression, and deepening cultural identity awareness.

Crucially, the textbook was not used as a linear teaching blueprint. Instead, its conceptual framework served as a foundation to guide a systematic design of course content, classroom activities, and assessment strategies—all aligned with the central objective of enabling students to narrate Chinese realities in English with clarity and conviction.

The instructional model integrated topic-based learning with output-oriented pedagogy. Each biweekly instructional unit was centered around a thematically coherent and socially relevant issue viewed through a Chinese lens, such as ecological civilization, digital transformation, rural revitalization, and educational equity. These topics were not treated as isolated themes but were unpacked through a range of instructional modalities including guided reading, multimedia analysis, classroom inquiry, and brainstorming sessions.

In this framework, the teacher's role shifted from knowledge transmitter to facilitator of thinking and expression. Rather than imparting predefined facts or ideological stances, the instructor guided students to develop their own perspectives through structured exploration. At the end of each topic unit, students were required to complete a mini oral presentation or written assignment that addressed a real-world Chinese issue, with clear, logical, and appropriate use of English.

The course followed a three-step cognitive and linguistic trajectory: *comprehension – reflection – production*. Each instructional unit began with a lead-in activity designed to activate prior knowledge and generate interest in the topic. This was followed by an intensive reading phase, using core texts from *Understanding Contemporary China*, supplemented by carefully curated English-language media materials to provide comparative insights. The third and most critical phase involved collaborative discussions, small group tasks, and individual reflection, designed to help students identify key messages and develop coherent narratives. Throughout this process, the instructor served as a “thinking coach” and “expression facilitator,” offering targeted questioning, modeling, and feedback to support the transition from passive language users to active idea constructors.

Rather than pursuing exhaustive content coverage, the curriculum prioritized depth over breadth. Each thematic unit followed a structured progression of five pedagogical stages: *engagement – comprehension – extension – output – feedback*. The engagement stage used real-world stimuli to provoke curiosity and critical thinking. The comprehension stage focused on textual analysis and language scaffolding. The extension stage introduced multimodal supplements—ranging from news reports to short documentaries and public speeches—to enrich students' perspectives. The output stage required students to produce a spoken or written artifact, such as a one-minute speech, argumentative essay, or simulated interview. Finally, the feedback stage combined peer assessment, group critique, and teacher evaluation to consolidate learning and foster metacognitive awareness.

Instructional methods emphasized diversity and active participation. Classes avoided reliance on lecture-based delivery and instead employed cooperative learning strategies such as group collaboration, role-play, brainstorming, writing workshops, and simulated press conferences. Teaching materials were also multimodal and context-sensitive. In addition to textbook texts, students engaged with TED Talks, English-language content from CCTV and *China Daily*, and other global-facing media. Notably, preference was given to English-language presentations of Chinese topics to expose students to authentic discursive forms and rhetorical conventions. For instance, in the unit on green development, students read a chapter on sustainable development from the textbook, viewed excerpts from English-language documentaries on China's carbon neutrality goals, and collaboratively discussed their interpretations before delivering oral presentations explaining Chinese environmental policies in English.

Teacher adaptation of teaching materials was also crucial to effective implementation. Although *Understanding Contemporary China* is thematically coherent, adjustments were made to suit the students' language proficiency, disciplinary background, and interest profiles. For example, in the unit on digital transformation, original texts included dense terminology related to 5G and artificial intelligence. The instructor adapted these into dialogue-based formats and supplemented them with relatable cases—such as smart campuses and digital payment systems—to lower comprehension barriers and facilitate student-generated expression.

A central tenet of the pedagogy was the recognition of student-generated content as a valuable educational resource. After completing their output tasks, students were encouraged to refine their work for public display in the form of English-language posters, micro-presentation videos, or blog entries. This not only enhanced their intrinsic motivation but also created a repository of authentic learner artifacts for further instructional use, thereby fostering a sense of shared purpose within the classroom community.

Formative reflection was embedded throughout the teaching cycle. The instructor conducted biweekly reflections using tools such as student learning journals, classroom observation logs, and video recordings. The focus of these reflections was not on procedural fidelity, but on whether the instructional design was generating meaningful language production, deepening students' understanding of the issues, and triggering a desire to “express China in English.” These reflective practices informed iterative adjustments and contributed to the instructor's professional development.

Assessment combined formative and summative components. Formative evaluation focused on classroom engagement, task performance, and group collaboration, with multiple rounds of feedback to support learner autonomy. The summative assessment was a final multimodal project under the theme “Expressing Contemporary China.” Students created an integrated output consisting of a video presentation, written speech script, and visual design. Evaluation criteria extended beyond linguistic accuracy and coherence to include intellectual depth, originality, and cultural stance. This performance-based assessment model aimed to cultivate students' expressive agency and global communication awareness.

It is worth noting that most participants in this study were from non-English majors and initially exhibited

language anxiety and low confidence. The instructional design deliberately accounted for this challenge by incorporating “expression rehearsal” sessions in the early phase. Students were encouraged to prioritize content over form, use accessible language, and experiment without fear of error. As the course progressed, a perceptible shift occurred—from “fear of speaking” to “desire to articulate.” The classroom environment evolved from conservative to collaborative, and students’ roles transformed from passive listeners to active communicators. This evolution vividly demonstrates the dynamic interplay between textbook concept, pedagogical design, and communicative development.

In sum, this instructional model centered on student engagement, expression-driven learning, and China-oriented thematic inquiry. It represents an emerging paradigm in college English education that seeks to align international communicative demands with local cultural articulation. The *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook served not only as a content source, but also as a catalyst for reconfiguring pedagogical goals, instructional strategies, and evaluative frameworks. The teaching experiment described in this chapter exemplifies a practice-oriented enactment of concept-to-classroom transformation, laying a solid foundation for the subsequent empirical analysis and pedagogical theorization.

## 4. RESULTS

The effectiveness of a curriculum reform rooted in the *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook concept hinges not only on the soundness of its theoretical underpinnings but, more crucially, on how those ideas are enacted through tangible changes in students’ linguistic practices and cultural cognition. To evaluate the reform’s outcomes, one must go beyond static data such as test scores or attitudinal surveys. Instead, a comprehensive understanding should be based on dynamic classroom processes, the evolving nature of students’ expressions, and their authentic responses. This chapter adopts an empirical lens to reconstruct how pedagogical concepts were translated into classroom realities, focusing on three interrelated aspects: longitudinal classroom performance, in-depth analysis of a representative teaching episode, and students’ reflective feedback.

### 4.1 Initial Challenges: Cognitive Uncertainty and Linguistic Evasion

At the outset of the reform, many students displayed a dual pattern of uncertainty: conceptual ambiguity regarding Chinese-themed topics and a noticeable reluctance to engage with them in English. For instance, when introduced to the theme of “Green China,” several students expressed concerns that the content was “too abstract” or admitted they “did not know how to articulate it in English.” Accustomed to textbook content dominated by foreign cultural contexts, students lacked familiarity with narrating domestic issues in a second language. This tendency was consistently observed throughout the early teaching phases, during which most learners defaulted to generic expressions rather than attempting to construct language imbued with indigenous perspectives. This revealed a key insight: the ability to articulate “China in English” is not merely a matter of linguistic training, but requires sustained cognitive scaffolding, structured content design, and contextual immersion.

### 4.2 Pedagogical Translation: Integrating Language, Cognition, and Expression

To address this challenge, the course design aligned thematic content from *Understanding Contemporary China* with students’ lived experiences, establishing a composite instructional model that integrated language learning, conceptual understanding, and expressive output. Representative lessons played a critical role in mediating the abstract curriculum goals with actionable classroom behaviors. The following is a detailed account of one such lesson that exemplifies the principles and effects of the reform.

#### Case Study: A Task-Based Lesson on “Rural Revitalization”

This lesson was built upon Unit 3 of the textbook—*Rural Revitalization in China*—and centered around the pedagogical goal of enabling students to articulate China’s rural development strategies from an international communicative perspective. It adopted a task-based format and moved beyond vocabulary and grammar acquisition to focus on understanding the policy rationale, structuring discourse, and fostering audience awareness.

Rather than beginning with a close reading of the text, the instructor opened the class by screening a short documentary clip showcasing how a village in western China transformed its economy through “e-commerce + agricultural innovation.” This multimodal input drew students into an authentic scenario and prompted active discussion around questions such as: “How did the villagers shift from traditional to modern production?” and “Do

you think this model is scalable?” Students were then tasked with preparing a short oral introduction for a hypothetical group of foreign researchers, explaining the background and key strategies of China’s rural revitalization.

To complete this task, students had to conduct real-time research, translate policy keywords, synthesize arguments, and deliver a short English presentation. Throughout the 50-minute class, teacher-student interaction remained intensive, involving strategic questioning and feedback loops to refine logic and language. One group of students, for instance, adopted a temporal structure—past, present, future—to describe how their hometown evolved from a “hollow village” into a “guesthouse economy.” Though their language was not flawless, their delivery was coherent, and their emotional engagement was palpable. In post-class reflections, these students noted it was the first time they had “used English to talk about changes in their own lives,” and that they began to see “national policy as something personally relevant.”

This lesson illustrates how a concept-driven curriculum can be transformed into a classroom event where language development and cognitive growth are intertwined. Moreover, it demonstrates that the ability to express China in English is a skill that can be nurtured through carefully scaffolded, context-rich instruction.

#### 4.3 Evolving Expression Patterns Across Themes

Throughout the 12-week instructional cycle, similarly structured lessons were conducted on topics such as “Digital China,” “Green Development,” and “Social Governance.” These activities gradually diversified students’ expressive repertoire. Initially, student writing remained largely descriptive, lacking argumentative depth. However, by the eighth week, a noticeable shift occurred. Learners began constructing texts with causal logic, contrastive reasoning, and clear stance-taking. One student, for example, wrote: *“While digital tools narrow the knowledge gap, they also bring new challenges to teachers with limited tech experience.”* Such sentences demonstrated the concurrent maturation of both critical thinking and linguistic capacity.

Classroom observations and teaching logs revealed a marked increase in student engagement and autonomy. Initially hesitant and prone to long pauses, students slowly developed strategies such as drafting in Chinese first, translating sentence-by-sentence, and then refining for accuracy. Though time-consuming, this process allowed students to claim ownership over their content, departing from the formulaic writing models often promoted in traditional language instruction.

#### 4.4 Student Reflections: From Learners to Cultural Messengers

Qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews further affirmed the pedagogical value of the reform. Many students reported that this was the first time they felt “a real connection between English learning and national development.” Others noted that English was no longer just “a tool for passing tests” but had become “a medium for expressing ideas.” One student remarked: *“We used to only discuss foreign countries and their cultures in English classes. Now, I feel like I can finally talk about my own country—and that matters.”*

Such feedback signifies a paradigm shift from input-based learning to output-oriented generation, underscoring the formative role of expression in shaping student identity and purpose.

#### 4.5 Remaining Challenges and Areas for Optimization

Despite encouraging outcomes, the teaching practice also exposed several areas requiring further refinement. Some students, particularly those with weaker language foundations, continued to struggle with cognitively demanding topics, which impacted the fluency of their expression. In addition, teachers need stronger cross-cultural competence and academic sensitivity to navigate politically or socially sensitive topics, avoiding both oversimplification and propagandistic tendencies.

Another pressing issue lies in the underdeveloped institutional assessment systems for productive language tasks. Current evaluation mechanisms often prioritize linguistic accuracy at the expense of idea generation or cultural authenticity. Balancing these dimensions in a fair and pedagogically sound manner remains a future priority.

### 5. TEACHING REFLECTIONS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

No teaching practice is ever finalized upon implementation; rather, it is a process of both grounding theoretical ideals and constantly recalibrating pedagogical boundaries. In applying the pedagogical concept embedded in *Understanding Contemporary China* to a College English classroom, the role of the teacher extends far beyond textbook instruction. Instead, the classroom becomes a site of critical inquiry: What constitutes meaningful expression? How can language and culture be interwoven in pedagogically impactful ways? A comprehensive review of this 12-week teaching intervention offers a range of theoretical reflections worth considering.

The first insight concerns the redefinition of instructional objectives, which lies at the heart of both conceptual shifts and pedagogical transformation. Traditional College English instruction typically revolves around the acquisition of language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—with a strong emphasis on technical proficiency. While operationally feasible, this focus tends to fall short in addressing the cultural and ideological responsibilities that foreign language education now bears in China’s higher education landscape. Grounded in the concept of *Understanding Contemporary China*, the new curriculum aims to reposition course objectives from “instrumental language skills” toward “expressive linguistic capacity,” and from “knowledge input” to “viewpoint output.” At its core, this transition reframes language as a medium for cultural identity and civic engagement, not merely a vehicle for transmitting information. Consequently, the teacher’s role must evolve: beyond knowledge delivery, instructors must now guide students in comprehending the complexities of their own sociocultural contexts and encourage them to construct and articulate positions in English. This process exemplifies the integration of expression-driven cognition and cognition-driven language acquisition.

Secondly, the restructuring of teaching content involves more than just material selection—it entails a reorganization of pedagogical frameworks. The *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook offers materials that pivot away from thematic novelty or lexical complexity as selection criteria. Instead, its focus lies in topics that reflect pressing national agendas and culturally resonant issues. Teachers, therefore, must view texts not merely as linguistic artifacts, but as scaffolds for cultivating expressive competence. For instance, the topic of “rural revitalization” is not merely a policy term but a multidimensional social phenomenon that evokes emotional resonance, personal relevance, and ideological positioning. Throughout the teaching process, students came to recognize that while these topics might initially seem distant, they gain familiarity and meaning through analytical reasoning, opinion formation, and linguistic articulation. This progression transforms language learning from task completion to meaning-making.

Thirdly, the transformation in teacher identity proves essential to pedagogical reform. The adoption of new concepts and materials does not automatically translate into effective classroom outcomes. The teacher’s own educational philosophy, professional capacity, and expressive literacy directly determine the depth and breadth of instructional impact. In this case, the teacher was required to oscillate among multiple roles: language trainer, values guide, and cultural translator. This not only demanded fluency in the policy context and cultural nuances of the topic but also the ability to reformulate such content through an international lens. Compared to conventional classroom demands, this presented a far greater challenge. Especially when addressing sensitive issues or navigating diverse value systems, the teacher needed to demonstrate critical thinking and intercultural sensitivity in order to foster open yet grounded classroom discussions.

Another challenge emerged from the asymmetry between students’ cognitive capacity and language proficiency. Many non-English majors demonstrated strong emotional identification with local topics yet lacked the linguistic tools to express these ideas. Conversely, some students with strong language skills struggled to develop informed perspectives, leading to shallow or incoherent expression. This disjunction between cognition and language is symptomatic of a deeper structural problem: the long-standing detachment of English teaching from China’s real-world context. To address this, future course design must integrate cross-disciplinary content—drawing from fields such as sociology, political science, and media studies—to support the development of nuanced and layered discourse capabilities.

From the perspective of classroom interaction, a notable shift occurred in the ecology of participation. A student-centered dynamic emerged, characterized by peer collaboration and teacher-student co-construction. Previously, students passively received knowledge from the textbook, often disengaged from deeper meaning-making. However, in this reform initiative, through task-based instruction, inquiry-led discussions, and cooperative projects, the classroom evolved into a site for performance, debate, and reflection. Students became not just recipients of knowledge but active agents in constructing meaning. Feedback from the course confirmed that this high-engagement environment significantly enhanced students’ interest and confidence in expressing Chinese experiences in English, simultaneously increasing their sense of linguistic accomplishment and cultural

affiliation.

Finally, the integration of textbook concepts into classroom teaching should not be understood as a linear or mechanical process. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic interplay between ideals and practice. The pedagogical concept of *Understanding Contemporary China* was not “transferred” wholesale into the classroom. Instead, it was progressively interpreted, modified, and reinvented through the lived experiences of both teachers and students. Each meaningful outcome in the classroom represents a situated and individualized response to the textbook’s vision. This reinforces the notion that textbooks should not be treated as authoritative texts but as platforms for building an expressive community between teachers and learners. Such communities are inherently fluid, shaped by evolving student demographics, teacher interpretations, and societal shifts. This model of an “open classroom” is critical to moving beyond the instrumentalist model of language education and toward the cultivation of cultural and expressive competence.

In conclusion, the implementation of the *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook concept represents not a superficial change in teaching materials but a profound restructuring of pedagogical cognition and classroom praxis. The 12-week course has demonstrated that this approach can be both viable and generative. More importantly, it outlines a set of directional pathways for reform in College English instruction: first, course objectives must embed value orientation and cultural positioning beyond skill acquisition; second, content should anchor itself in local sociocultural contexts while finding expressive forms suited to international discourse; third, teachers must develop multi-dimensional competencies to bridge language, culture, and critical awareness; and finally, classroom organization must enable active student participation, fostering both linguistic ability and cultural identification. The future College English classroom must move beyond teaching students “how to say things in English” to helping them explore “how to express China in English.” To grow through expression and to recognize through expression—this is the higher mission of language education and a key direction for foreign language teaching grounded in contemporary Chinese realities.

## 6. CONCLUSION

“Telling China’s stories well” is not only a strategic imperative at the national level but also a core educational mission embedded in the ideological dimension of higher education curricula. In the context of College English instruction, course objectives have long been narrowly confined to technical language training, often overlooking the cultural identity and national narrative functions inherent in language learning. This pedagogical limitation has led to a persistent disconnect between teaching content and contemporary societal developments. Consequently, students may achieve fluency in form yet remain hollow in content, resulting in the troubling phenomenon of “speaking well but saying little.”

This study undertook a practice-oriented exploration of the pedagogical concept embodied in the *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook series, with the goal of realigning College English instruction toward value-driven and culturally grounded expression. The research focused on a cohort of 58 non-English major students at a Chinese university over a 12-week period. Through restructured course objectives, the introduction of contextually relevant Chinese topics, and the implementation of task-based instructional activities, the study actively investigated how to cultivate students’ ability to “express China in English” within the space of the English classroom. Throughout this process, students gradually shifted from “learning about the West through English” to “articulating China through English,” effectively transcending the traditional dichotomy between language and culture. This transformation laid the groundwork for the development of intercultural expressive competence and a nascent sense of national identity.

The findings of this research indicate that the relationship between textbook concept and classroom practice is not inherently disjointed. Rather, through pedagogical reinterpretation and in-situ implementation, the conceptual values of the textbook can be organically transformed into actionable teaching practices. *Understanding Contemporary China* should not be perceived merely as a “cultural reader.” Instead, it functions as a knowledge framework grounded in Chinese realities and oriented toward international communication. Its core teaching philosophy emphasizes a paradigm shift—from language as a mechanical tool to language as a narrative medium, and from skill acquisition to identity construction. The instructional experience confirms the feasibility and generative potential of this transformation: through authentic expression tasks, students not only gained functional linguistic tools but also developed deeper cognitive insight and internalized understanding of China’s socio-political development.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges several limitations. First, due to constraints in course duration and sample size, the observed outcomes largely reflect short-term efficacy, making it difficult to assess the long-term impact of the instructional reform. Second, disparities in students' language proficiency and cognitive maturity presented challenges in achieving uniform effectiveness. These differences suggest the need for more refined, differentiated instruction in future implementations to enhance pedagogical precision. Third, the current mechanisms for assessment and feedback remain underdeveloped. While students were encouraged to engage in subjective expression, the evaluative tools employed were often too coarse to capture the nuanced balance between linguistic accuracy and ideological depth. Developing a more robust and multidimensional assessment framework that evaluates both expressive clarity and intellectual substance will be a crucial step in the next stage of reform.

Based on the experiences and reflections from this study, future directions for College English reform can be envisioned along several lines. First, a synergistic triad involving textbook, curriculum, and teacher development must be established. Textbooks provide conceptual direction, curricula translate that direction into structure, and teachers bring the vision to life—none of these components can function effectively in isolation. Second, there is an urgent need to strengthen teacher training programs, equipping educators with deeper understanding of national policies, current social issues, and the dynamics of international discourse. This will enable them to better guide students in developing meaningful value expression and cross-cultural communication skills. Third, interdisciplinary collaboration should be encouraged. By integrating content from communication studies, sociology, and international relations, students can be trained to produce English narratives that reflect complex, multifaceted understandings of contemporary China. Finally, institutions should invest in developing teaching resources and discourse corpora specifically aimed at enhancing Chinese-themed English expression. These might include writing templates, model texts, and real-world discourse materials, thereby laying the foundation for an academic and pedagogical system of “English for China expression.”

The ultimate goal of College English teaching should not be reduced to enabling students to “speak English fluently.” Rather, it should aim to empower them to think globally, articulate personal and collective identities, and narrate China with clarity, confidence, and cultural depth. This form of competence is not the outcome of short-term training but a sustained cognitive and relational process—one that constructs connections between self and society, language and meaning, nation and the world. The integration of the *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook concept into English instruction injects a new spiritual core into College English education, shifting its focus from surface-level skill acquisition to the cultivation of meaningful and context-sensitive cultural expression.

In essence, what this study represents is more than a classroom experiment; it is a conscious enactment of a broader educational vision. The future relevance of College English will no longer hinge on the question, “Can we communicate in English?” but rather, “Can the world understand us through English?” Enabling more students to transition from “learning a language” to “possessing expressive power” is not only the most urgent challenge but also the most promising aspiration of foreign language education reform in China.

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