

Research on the Blended Teaching of Academic English in College English

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Abstract:

Local engineering colleges generally face the realistic dilemma of significant stratification in students' English proficiency and a disconnection between academic English training and engineering education accreditation requirements. Among these, students with weak English foundations constitute the largest proportion, encountering a triple structural contradiction of ability gaps, content disjunction, and rigid progress within the existing "College English – Professional English" two-stage training system. To address this issue, this study, with the Dalton Plan educational philosophy as its core theoretical support, constructs an "offline guided introduction, online autonomous construction" blended teaching model for academic English. It designs a teaching implementation path from four dimensions: online resource bank construction, flexible task-driven mechanisms, integrated offline supporting instruction, and full-chain effect evaluation. Furthermore, it proposes systematic strategies to address practical challenges such as disparities in autonomous learning ability and inadequate pedagogical during implementation. Without increasing the total class hours, this model provides a learning scaffold for students with weak foundations to transition from general English to academic English. It may serve as practical reference for local colleges to fulfill engineering education accreditation requirements and advance college English teaching reform.

Keywords:

Academic English, Blended Teaching, Dalton Plan, Local Engineering Colleges, College English Teaching

1. Introduction

In the process of popularization of higher education in China, the student composition of local engineering colleges and universities presents significant differentiated characteristics: while the total college entrance examination scores of students from the same province are similar, their English subject scores vary greatly, and individual ability differentiation is particularly prominent. Faced with the significant stratification of entry-level English proficiency, tiered teaching has become a common choice for college English curriculum reform [1].

While tiered teaching achieves the initial goal of individualized instruction, it has also given rise to a large group of students with weak foundations. Most students in these classes still fail to reach the passing level of CET-4 by the end of their college

English courses, generally exhibiting problems such as insufficient vocabulary, lack of sentence structure accumulation, and an incomplete grammatical system. Therefore, college English teaching for this group has long focused on improving general English proficiency, with teaching content centered on vocabulary, syntax, and basic reading training, and assessment highly tied to the CET-4 examination.

Meanwhile, China's engineering education scale ranks first globally, and professional accreditation has become the key measure for ensuring the quality of engineering education and achieving international substantial equivalence. The comprehensive promotion of the engineering education professional accreditation system has put rigid demands on the international communication abilities of talent cultivation [2,3]. According to accreditation principles, the cultivation of academic English proficiency has become an indispensable component of higher engineering education, and its scope has fully extended from research universities to applied undergraduate institutions [4]. With the deepening of international cooperation in the engineering field, applied undergraduate talents also face real international academic communication scenarios.

However, in the current cultivation system, the development of academic English proficiency is usually undertaken independently in the "Professional English" course offered after the completion of college English courses. Based on the traditional division, where "College English is responsible for general English, and Professional English is responsible for academic English," "Professional English" is limited by total class hours and teaching content, making it difficult to systematically cultivate academic English proficiency independently. To address this shortcoming, the reform path of most domestic institutions focuses on students with better foundations: through tiered teaching, the "advanced" students are identified, and academic English content is integrated into the college English stage first [5,6,7], and initial results have been achieved. However, for students with weak English foundations who struggle to pass CET-4, their college English stage still centers on general English. Relying solely on the subsequent "Professional English" course, it is fundamentally impossible to meet the standards for cross-cultural academic communication ability stipulated by engineering accreditation. The existing academic English cultivation model exhibits significant structural exclusion of students with weak English foundations, a problem particularly prominent in local engineering colleges and universities where this group constitutes the majority. How to construct an appropriate academic English cultivation path for the largest proportion of students with weak foundations has become a core issue that local engineering colleges and universities urgently need to solve to fulfill professional accreditation requirements and deepen college English teaching reform.

2. Analysis of Structural Contradictions in the Existing Academic English Training Model

The incompatibility between the existing training model and the student with weak foundations is essentially a contradiction between a homogenized training approach and the diverse foundational levels of students. Drawing on the core principle of "student-centeredness and tiered adaptability" in educational evaluation, the current academic English training system employs a unified standard across objectives, content, and progress. This approach fails to account for the learning pace and initial capabilities of students with varying foundations, ultimately leading to a systemic unsuitability for those with weak foundations. In essence, this structural contradiction manifests as three layers of interlocking discontinuities.

2.1. Lack of Continuity in Instructional Objective Setting

The core logic of tiered teaching acknowledges the objective differences in students' foundational knowledge upon enrollment and establishes stratified instructional objectives in accordance with educational principles. Taking the college entrance examination English score of 150 as a full mark, students scoring 90 points and 120 points exhibit significant disparities in language proficiency and learning pace. Correspondingly, differentiated training objectives should be set for the college English stage: for “advanced class” composed of students scoring around 120 points, integrating academic English content on top of general English is feasible; however, for students with weak foundations, the primary task during the college English stage should remain the systematic reinforcement of general English proficiency.

The central contradiction lies in the fact that when instruction proceeds to subsequent stages such as “Professional English” and “Graduation Project,” all students, regardless of their English foundation, are expected to meet a unified academic English proficiency standard. For students with weak foundations who have not been exposed to academic English content during the college English stage, directly transitioning from general English learning to professional academic English application results in a missing necessary transitional training phase, causing a significant break in the progressive chain of instructional objectives. This discontinuity in objective setting violates the gradual development principles of language ability, directly leading to an excessively high cognitive load for students with weak foundations at the initial stage of academic English learning.

2.2. Insufficient Targeting in Instructional Content Design

Under the tiered teaching model, academic English content is primarily offered to “advanced class” students, while college English courses for other classes remain centered on general English. This arrangement aligns with the basic logic of stratified instruction. However, the contradiction arises when students with weak foundations enter advanced training stages, such as translating foreign literature in “Professional English” or writing English abstracts for graduation projects. The instructional content and assessment requirements they face are identical to those of “advanced class” students—both groups are required to directly engage in academic tasks such as reading professional English literature, writing English abstracts, and presenting research findings in English.

Because students with weak foundations have never been exposed to fundamental academic English knowledge, such as academic discourse structure, academic style characteristics, and citation norms, during the college English stage, their general language proficiency cannot directly support the demands of professional academic contexts. This creates a disconnection where “general English accumulation is difficult to translate, and academic English requirements are hard to achieve.” The discontinuous design of teaching content results in a lack of effective connection between the initial learning and the subsequent application. Students find it difficult to transfer and apply their language skills, ultimately leading to a significant decline in the effectiveness of academic English learning.

2.3. Lack of Autonomy in Teaching Arrangement

The current English proficiency training system sets a unified teaching schedule based on semesters and courses, with each stage corresponding to fixed learning

objectives. This rigid progress design is reasonable for students with a solid foundation. However, for students with a weak foundation, their vocabulary accumulation, syntax mastery, and reading speed lag behind the preset schedule. They are often forced into the next stage of learning before achieving the goals of the previous stage, making “unconsolidated old knowledge and superimposed new knowledge” a learning norm, ultimately leading to cumulative backwardness.

If students could be given a certain degree of autonomy in progress arrangements, allowing them to adjust their learning pace according to their own level, it would effectively alleviate the problem of progress adaptation caused by differences in foundation. However, in the current training chain, the progress of various course segments is intertwined and lacks flexible buffering. Students with a weak foundation are always in a passive state of catching up, unable to internalize knowledge according to their own cognitive patterns, which further exacerbates the difficulty of academic English learning.

The aforementioned three contradictions do not exist in isolation but are superimposed and amplified progressively: the lack of goal continuity creates “discontinuities” in the curriculum chain of academic English training, insufficient content relevance leads to a disconnect between teaching input and students’ proficiency levels, and the lack of autonomy in progress deprives students of the time to make up for gaps. Together, these three factors constitute a structural dilemma for academic English learning among students with a weak foundation: “lagging starting point, disconnected process, and unified terminal assessment.” The root cause is that the design of the entire training chain implicitly assumes that all students enter academic English learning with similar starting points, paces, and ability structures, a hypothesis that seriously contradicts the actual situation in most local institutions after the popularization of education.

3. Constructing a Blended Academic English Teaching Model in College English Based on the Dalton Plan

In response to the structural contradictions mentioned above, a blended academic English teaching model, “offline guided introduction, online autonomous construction,” can be considered with the Dalton Plan as its core theoretical foundation. The Dalton Plan views the school as a “social laboratory for students,” with the core philosophy of “allowing each student to progress at their own pace.” Through clear assignment tasks, progress management charts, and other vehicles, it emphasizes learning autonomy, individualization, and task-driven approaches, which precisely fit the learning characteristics of students with weak foundations, who often have varying progress and require personalized support.

Migrating the Dalton Plan concept to the academic English training scenario: Relying on offline college English courses to provide introductory guidance and learning method instruction for academic English, assisting students in developing personalized learning plans. After students reach a corresponding level in general English proficiency, they can independently engage in academic English learning through online resources at their own pace. Learning content is graded by module, and progress is flexibly adjustable. Students evaluate their learning outcomes through online self-assessments and independently decide whether to advance or reinforce their learning. The specific implementation path of this model includes the following four dimensions.

3.1. Construction of a Graded and Modular Online Teaching Resource Database

The online teaching resource database is positioned in the transitional stage after college English courses and before the commencement of “Professional English” courses. Its core function is to build a learning scaffold for students with weak foundations to transition from general English to academic English, resolving the contradictions of disconnected goals and content jumps. The construction of the resource database is guided by the principles of “clear objectives, stratified content, and adaptable progression.”

Firstly, anchor layered ability training objectives. Starting from the real application scenarios of academic English for engineering students, with English abstract writing as the core entry point, while also covering extended scenarios such as English self-introductions for postgraduate entrance exam retests, writing English resumes for job applications, and reading engineering technical materials, systematically sort out the requirements for achieving academic English proficiency at the undergraduate level. On this basis, break down abilities into five major dimensions: abstract writing, literature reading, academic reporting, academic conference communication, and academic letter writing. In conjunction with professional certification graduation requirements, formulate quantifiable and achievable ability goals for each item, providing clear direction for online learning.

Secondly, integrate and classify the teaching content system. Systematically sort out existing professional English and academic English teaching resources, fully absorbing the mature teaching content of professional English courses, and clarify the knowledge framework and content boundaries of online teaching. Classify and encode materials according to different academic application scenarios, forming a basic corpus corresponding to each ability module. Within each module, further divide into three difficulty levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced, to match the cognitive levels of students at different learning stages, achieving dynamic adaptation of content supply to student abilities.

Thirdly, develop graded micro-courses and a supporting exercise bank. Based on the classified content system, record a series of teaching micro-courses for different modules and difficulty levels, focusing on the core skills and normative requirements of academic English in various scenarios, adopting a “knowledge explanation + case demonstration” presentation format, consistent with the characteristics of fragmented independent learning. Simultaneously construct a stratified exercise bank, with each module supported by three types of questions: basic identification questions, application operation questions, and comprehensive design questions, corresponding to three ability levels: knowledge recall, skill application, and comprehensive transfer, supporting students’ on-demand self-assessment and reinforcement practice.

3.2. Flexible Task-Driven Learning Plan Mechanism

Drawing on the Dalton Plan’s principle of “taking clear task assignments as the core driving force for learning,” a modular and flexible learning plan system is constructed based on an online resource library and competency development goals, thereby resolving adaptation issues caused by rigid progress.

The learning plan takes competency modules as its basic units. Each module sets clear learning objectives, learning durations, core learning resource lists, supporting practice tasks, and self-assessment standards. Students can obtain a complete blueprint of their learning path when they start online learning, grasp the overall

framework of academic English learning and the requirements for tasks at each stage, and form stable learning expectations.

The core characteristic of this mechanism is the flexibility and autonomy of progress. On the one hand, students can autonomously choose the time point to start academic English learning based on their general English proficiency, avoiding learning frustration caused by insufficient foundation; on the other hand, within the same module, students can autonomously adjust their learning pace based on self-assessment results. If they do not meet the self-assessment passing standard, they can repeat the corresponding content until they master it before unlocking the next module. The pre-set accuracy threshold in the exercise bank serves as an objective basis for progress regulation, realizing a shift in learning progress from “teacher-unified regulation” to “student-autonomous regulation,” alleviating the learning predicament of passively catching up for students with weak foundations from an institutional level.

3.3. Embedded Offline Supportive Teaching Reform

Offline university English courses serve the dual functions of guiding students into academic English and adapting to blended learning. They are a critical link connecting classroom teaching and online autonomous learning, which can effectively lower the entry barrier for students’ autonomous learning.

Firstly, academic English cognition and methodology guidance. Set up 2-4 class hours of introductory teaching content in university English courses to systematically explain the conceptual scope, competency composition, and application value of academic English, introduce the basic forms and normative requirements of academic communication, and comprehensively interpret the structure, usage methods, and learning plan of the online resource library. Teaching adopts case-based instruction from real academic scenarios to help students build a perceptual understanding of academic English and stimulate intrinsic learning motivation.

Secondly, blended learning adaptability training. Embed 1-2 practical teaching activities in university English courses, such as hands-on observation of online resources or simple academic abstract identification exercises. This allows students to become familiar with the functions of the online learning platform and the process of autonomous learning through practical operations, master basic autonomous learning methods, and prepare for subsequent in-depth learning freed from classroom constraints.

3.4. Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness Across the Entire Chain

The evaluation of teaching effectiveness breaks through the limitations of a single course, extending to the entire chain of subsequent professional training. It uses performance in real professional scenarios to inversely assess the actual effectiveness of online learning, while also forming a closed-loop feedback mechanism for teaching quality.

Specifically, academic English proficiency assessment projects are set up in professional theoretical courses such as “Error Theory and Data Processing,” “Introduction to Intelligent Control,” and “Machine Vision and Image Recognition,” as well as practical sessions like MATLAB training, comprehensive professional training, and graduation projects. Assessment formats include writing English abstracts for professional literature, presenting research findings in English, and writing English technical reports. The transfer effect of online learning is

comprehensively evaluated based on students' academic English performance during their professional training.

The evaluation results are used for iterative optimization of the teaching system: if students' performance in a certain type of academic task does not meet expectations, a retrospective analysis is conducted to determine if there are deficiencies in the content settings, difficulty gradients, or exercise designs of the corresponding modules in the online resource library, and targeted adjustments are made. At the same time, it provides data support for content optimization in offline teaching, ultimately forming a complete quality improvement closed-loop of "online autonomous learning, professional scenario application, effect feedback analysis, and resource iterative optimization."

4. Practical Challenges and Optimization Strategies for Teaching Practice

While the blended teaching model based on Dalton Plan is well-aligned with the learning characteristics of students with weak foundation, it also faces practical challenges such as students' autonomous learning ability and the connection of teaching links. Based on the actual teaching situation of local engineering colleges, corresponding optimization strategies can be considered to address these core challenges and ensure the implementation effectiveness of the teaching model.

(1) Gap in Autonomous Learning Ability: Build a multi-faceted constraint and support system. The effective implementation of the Dalton Plan relies on students' self-management abilities. However, students with weak foundations generally exhibit poor learning self-discipline. Online learning is prone to superficial learning and plagiarism in exercises, leading to a superficial construction of abilities. To address this challenge, a "challenge-based" learning path can be set up at the platform level, where each micro-lecture video embeds an instant detection session, and students cannot proceed to subsequent learning without completing the questions. Module self-assessments should set a minimum passing rate, and those who fail to meet the standard must relearn the corresponding content and take a make-up test, thereby technically ensuring the effectiveness of the learning process.

(2) Poor Teaching Articulation: Strengthen the situational application of learning outcomes. If there is a lack of organic articulation between online academic English learning and subsequent professional training, students may regard it as an "extra task," lacking the intrinsic motivation for sustained engagement. The Dalton Plan emphasizes the "authenticity and applicability of task objectives," requiring that online learning outcomes must be applied and tested in real learning scenarios. To this end, the core solution is to fully embed academic English assessment into professional training segments, such as the professional courses, practical sessions, and graduation project assessments mentioned earlier, allowing students to intuitively perceive the supporting role of online learning for subsequent professional learning and strengthening their sense of purpose in learning.

(3) Tension between Progress Freedom and Completion Rate: Establish a balanced mechanism of flexibility and constraint. The Dalton Plan grants students full autonomy over their progress, but for students with weaker self-management abilities, excessive freedom can easily lead to procrastination, resulting in a low overall completion rate of learning plans and affecting the articulation with subsequent professional English courses. To address this, a "minimum progress baseline" should

be set on the basis of flexible progress: students are required to complete the learning and self-assessment of the two core modules—abstract writing and literature reading—before the Professional English course begins. The minimum progress requirement provides students with moderate external constraints, preventing indefinite procrastination, while retaining space for autonomous progress within the modules.

5. Conclusions

Cultivating academic English proficiency for underperforming students is a critical issue in fulfilling the requirement of “all students meeting the standards” in engineering education accreditation and in deepening college English teaching reform. In response to the triple structural contradictions in the existing cultivation model, this study, grounded in the Dalton Plan, has constructed a blended teaching model characterized by “offline guidance + online autonomous learning.” Through tiered resources, flexible pacing, embedded evaluation, and closed-loop optimization, this model provides a learning scaffold for students with weak foundations to transition from general English to academic English, expanding the coverage of academic English cultivation without increasing total class hours. Compared with the traditional reform approach of “prioritizing the advanced class,” this model focuses on the adaptive training of the majority of students, and is more in line with the actual situation of local institutions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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