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Research on the Blended Teaching Model for College English Courses in Higher Education in the Context of Smart Education

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Abstract

Online resources are now a routine part of college English teaching, but their use alongside classroom lessons does not, in itself, make learning continuous. This paper examines that problem from the perspective of smart education. It identifies three related weaknesses in blended courses: fragmented content, weak connections between online preparation and classroom activities, and assessment practices that offer an incomplete account of students' development. The discussion considers where digital resources and generative artificial intelligence (AI) may be useful in addressing them. It argues for linking general English with academic, discipline-related and intercultural communication; designing learning tasks that carry forward from preparation to discussion and subsequent practice; and interpreting assessment evidence through both teacher judgment and appropriate technological support. The proposed model keeps teachers responsible for pedagogical decisions and students responsible for inquiry and language use. Its purpose is to support English proficiency, intercultural competence and independent thinking, while offering a basis for making blended college English courses more coherent.

Keywords

Smart Education, College English, Blended Teaching, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Teaching Reform

1. Introduction

As digital learning tools have become familiar in universities, the more difficult questions have shifted from access to instructional use. Teachers can now distribute materials, gather responses and follow the completion of exercises online.

What is less clear is how teachers should use that information to plan the next lesson or support individual learners. In China, discussions of smart teaching increasingly address this link between educational data and classroom decisions. More responsive learning environments, stronger participation and improved teaching quality are among the aims associated with this approach (Gao, 2026). Yet a platform contributes little unless the work it supports has a defined purpose. The selection of resources, the relationship between tasks and the teacher's response to evidence of learning all matter. Technology should be chosen to meet a specific teaching need, not simply because it is available.

College English is compulsory for many university students in China who are pursuing degrees outside English studies. They enter the course with different levels of language proficiency and with different expectations about how English may figure in their academic or professional lives. Nevertheless, the curriculum is expected to develop language skills, intercultural understanding and the ability to communicate beyond familiar contexts. Uniform teaching, few occasions for sustained interaction and narrowly focused assessment make these aims difficult to address together. Additional digital materials offer more opportunities for practice, but do not eliminate differences in students' learning needs. Course design should instead begin with the abilities students are expected to develop. Online work, classroom tasks and evaluation can then be connected to those aims, with teachers interpreting information from intelligent systems and students remaining responsible for their own learning decisions. Attention to development across a course, as well as to final results, may better prepare students for later academic communication (Feng, 2024).

2. Blended Teaching Models for College English Courses

2.1. Current State of Research

An online component and a classroom component are enough to describe the timetable of a blended course, but not its educational design. For college English, the central concern is whether students can carry learning from one setting into the other. For example, a listening task assigned before class has a clearer purpose when students draw on it during discussion or problem solving. That discussion should, in turn, shape what students practice or reconsider afterwards. Decisions about task sequence depend on course objectives, students' backgrounds and the evidence available about their progress. A platform may make such coordination easier; it cannot establish the educational value of the sequence. That value lies in what the activities ask students to do, and in how one experience prepares them for the next.

Recent discussions of blended college English place greater weight on students' opportunities to use English for meaningful work. A project, a collaborative inquiry or a task-based lesson may require learners to interpret evidence, explain a position and respond to their peers. Flipped lessons create additional room for such work by moving some preparation outside class. Digital corpora can supply

examples of language in context, and online platforms can make further practice accessible. Generative AI offers possibilities for rehearsal and feedback, although students and teachers must still evaluate its responses. A single examination cannot fully capture students' progress across these different activities. Drafts, spoken exchanges and performance on tasks can show how students approach difficulties, while summative results describe achievement at a particular point. Both are needed when judging learning (Yan et al., 2024). The educational question is therefore not how many tools a course employs, but what opportunities for language development those tools make possible.

The purposes of college English extend into students' other areas of study. Reading scholarly material, making an unfamiliar technical idea understandable, discussing contrasting cultural interpretations and introducing Chinese culture to international audiences all require English to be used in context. Accuracy in vocabulary and grammar is necessary, but by itself does not ensure that students can complete these tasks. The New Liberal Arts discussion and the internationalization of universities have brought wider academic and cultural aims into the debate about college English (Deng & Chen, 2024). Listening, speaking, reading and writing remain central; what changes is the kind of work through which students develop them. Tasks involving interpretation, argument and intercultural judgment give language skills a purpose beyond the exercise in which they were first practiced.

2.2. Existing Challenges

The expansion of online teaching materials has exposed, rather than resolved, several weaknesses in blended college English. Students may encounter related content in separate parts of a course without seeing the connection. Online assignments may be completed but have little bearing on classroom work. Records of participation can also accumulate without offering much evidence of students' ability to communicate or reason in English. These are not minor organizational matters when a course is expected to support academic and intercultural competence as well as language proficiency. The relevant question is whether a digital activity contributes to those educational aims (Li, 2024). Access to technology alone cannot answer that question.

One difficulty lies in how learning materials are organized. An online course may contain a substantial collection of short videos, readings and pronunciation or vocabulary exercises. Students can work through each item while remaining uncertain about how the knowledge applies beyond it. General English and the language needed in particular disciplines are sometimes planned in much the same disconnected way. Foundational practice is essential, but it offers too few opportunities for transfer when it occupies the course almost exclusively. Completing a grammar exercise successfully does not necessarily mean that a learner can use the same form to explain a disciplinary question. A more integrated curriculum would make the relationship among materials, learning objectives and

contexts of language use visible to students. Increasing the stock of resources without making those links leaves the underlying problem in place.

The connection between online preparation and classroom work is similarly fragile in some courses. Students may watch a video before class, only for the following lesson to make no use of it. A discussion that raises useful questions may then be followed by unrelated online exercises. Each task has its own value, yet students are given little indication of how the sequence advances their learning. Platforms are effective at distributing material, collecting assignments and recording participation; those functions are primarily administrative unless teachers use the information to guide instruction. Responses submitted before class could show which questions need discussion, and the lesson could identify what requires further independent practice. Designing these links would give preparation, interaction and follow-up a shared educational purpose.

Another concern is whether classroom English reflects the situations students may encounter during their studies and beyond. Understanding grammatical forms or recalling facts about another culture does not necessarily prepare someone to explain a disciplinary issue or discuss an unfamiliar perspective. Where academic texts are rarely used, and intercultural teaching remains largely informational, students have few chances to test their knowledge through communication. They may recognize the right terms but have difficulty describing an issue from their own major or explaining a feature of Chinese culture to an audience unfamiliar with it. Discussions and problem-oriented communication tasks can address this gap by requiring students to interpret ideas and make themselves understood. Their purpose is to build on basic language training, not to replace it.

Assessment often makes visible the distance between course activities and the abilities a course is meant to develop. Tests and assignment records can show what students know or have completed. They tell teachers less about the quality of students' reasoning, their intercultural communication or their independence as learners. Online platforms produce additional behavioral records, but a completed discussion task says nothing by itself about whether the student engaged thoughtfully with another viewpoint. Likewise, a score on a language exercise provides limited evidence of communication in a new setting. Teachers therefore need to interpret task performance, evidence from the learning process and feedback in relation to the course objectives. Considering these sources together can make evaluation more balanced and indicate what subsequent teaching should address.

3. Smart Teaching Models for College English Courses

3.1. Smart Teaching Models

Generative AI, language technologies and the growing use of educational data have renewed attention to smart teaching. The underlying pedagogical concern, however, is longstanding: how can instruction respond to differences in students' understanding and the difficulties they encounter? Learning sciences and con-

structivist perspectives describe learning as something students develop through activity rather than receive ready-made. Data analysis or automated feedback may help teachers see patterns in that activity, but interpreting them remains an educational decision. Smart teaching should therefore not be equated with a particular application or with automated marking. In college English, its defining concern is how student activity, teacher guidance and intelligent assistance work together. Three features of this relationship are especially relevant (Zhou, 2024).

1) Establishing a data-driven teaching environment. Teaching platforms make it possible to examine students' work alongside the resources and activities through which it was produced. A set of written responses, for example, may point to recurring problems of expression. Participation in a discussion may indicate whether preparatory work supplied a useful basis for speaking. Such records are meaningful only when a teacher interprets them and considers what to do next: revisit an explanation, change the task or provide another resource. Digital corpora and materials drawn from academic and intercultural contexts also give students a wider range of examples to examine. Used with evidence from students' actual work, these resources may support more informed decisions about instruction. They do not remove the need to pursue shared objectives while responding to individual differences.

2) Developing a human-AI collaborative teaching mechanism. Outside classroom hours, students may use generative AI and speech or language technologies to rehearse a conversation, explore alternative wording for a sentence or practice academic expression. Immediate feedback gives them an opportunity to try again, but it may not reveal the source of a misunderstanding or the reason for hesitation in speaking. An expression can be linguistically correct yet remain unsuitable for its intended audience. Teachers can place a response in the context of the task and the learner, discuss why a change is appropriate and provide encouragement when independent practice is insufficient. The respective roles are therefore complementary. Intelligent systems can extend the time and opportunities available for practice; teachers remain responsible for pedagogical guidance, and students must still examine the feedback and make their own judgments.

3) Facilitating the dynamic optimization of learning pathways. Learners following the same college English syllabus may differ in their language backgrounds, study habits and disciplinary interests. They need not undertake identical tasks at every stage to work toward common objectives. A learner struggling with basic sentence forms may need more guided practice, while a classmate may benefit from discussing an academic text related to their major. Evidence from previous work can inform the choice of task, material and timing of feedback. Student choices about topics and forms of practice matter as well. In this sense, personalized support does not call for a separate curriculum for every student. It calls for enough flexibility within a common course to help learners develop their English proficiency, independence and intercultural communication at appropriate points.

3.2. Existing Challenges

Translating these possibilities into routine college English teaching is demanding. Introducing a new system can be relatively quick; aligning objectives, activities and assessment calls for more sustained pedagogical work. Four difficulties are particularly important: the tendency to select tools before defining learning purposes, the limits of automated feedback in supporting learners, weak coordination across teaching stages, and uncertainty about what assessment results actually measure. Each affects whether intelligent assistance improves the experience of learning.

1) Misalignment between pedagogical principles and technological applications. A course may be described as smart simply because an AI tool has been introduced. Yet the presence of a platform alone says little about what students are expected to learn through its use. When attention settles on operating the system, the design of tasks and the quality of teacher-student interaction can become secondary. Even sophisticated technology contributes little if learners cannot see the purpose of an activity or connect it with what they are studying. Teachers also differ in their familiarity with AI and in their experience of revising established teaching routines. Supporting their professional development is therefore part of implementing smart teaching, not a separate task to be addressed afterwards.

2) Insufficient emotional and cognitive support in instructional feedback. Automated feedback can help a student correct a pronunciation error or improve the wording of a sentence. It is less well placed to understand why a student hesitates, loses confidence or struggles to express an unfamiliar idea. Language learning requires a willingness to take risks in communication as well as a command of correct forms. Feedback focused on accuracy and task completion may overlook that dimension, especially when students must respond to different cultural assumptions. Conversation with a teacher allows a learner to ask why a correction matters, test an interpretation and receive encouragement. Replacing such exchanges with automated responses may reduce both engagement and the depth of learning. Intelligent feedback should make room for human guidance rather than crowd it out.

3) Underdeveloped collaborative mechanisms in teaching practices. AI may appear before, during and after a lesson without giving those stages a common purpose. A diagnostic exercise, a classroom lecture and automated homework comments do not form a coherent sequence merely because all three use technology. Students may then come to see the system as a convenient provider of answers. A course built around linked tasks would use preparation to raise questions, class time to examine them with others and follow-up work to extend or apply the resulting understanding. Teachers would also make explicit which questions students should investigate independently and where an intelligent tool can reasonably assist. Collaboration depends on that educational design and on responsibilities that teachers, learners and systems can each understand.

4) The need to improve the validity and effectiveness of assessment. Intelligent

systems make it easier to collect responses and process learning records. But information that is easy to count is not always sufficient to judge how students have learned. Completion rates or scores for linguistic accuracy reveal little about the strength of an argument or the quality of intercultural communication. Automated evaluations also depend on context and data, so their fairness and interpretation require scrutiny. Numbers cannot replace evidence appropriate to the task or teachers' professional judgment. An assessment becomes useful for learning when students can act on its feedback and teachers can use it to reconsider instruction (Jeon, 2016).

4. Smart Blended Teaching Models for College English Courses in Higher Education

For a blended college English course, smart education is most useful when information and decisions are connected across learning stages. Questions raised in online preparation can shape classroom discussion. Difficulties that emerge in class can, in turn, inform the practice students complete afterwards. Such adjustments make sense only when content, tasks and assessment refer to common learning objectives. The broader aim is not greater exposure to language forms, but opportunities to use English in academic, professional and intercultural situations (Wen, 2022). Curriculum integration, students' participation in constructing knowledge and the support provided by teachers are three closely related aspects of this approach.

1) Promoting curriculum integration and expanding the educational value of language instruction. General English, academic English and intercultural communication can be connected through the work students do with a shared topic. A unit might begin with the vocabulary needed to understand an issue, continue with academic reading and end with a discussion or explanation intended for another audience. The stages involve different kinds of work: recognizing expressions, evaluating sources and communicating across cultural contexts require distinct abilities. Their relationship, however, gives foundational language study a clearer purpose. Themes from students' disciplines, social questions or the international presentation of Chinese culture can offer suitable contexts. Digital resources allow teachers to vary texts and examples according to students' preparation. The result is a course in which language learning can be related more directly to academic study and later communication.

2) Transforming learning approaches and strengthening students' capacity for autonomous knowledge construction. A sequence of tasks is more productive when students know what question carries through it. Independent reading or information gathering can establish a starting point; discussion with classmates can test different interpretations; later reflection or application can reveal what has been learned. Generative AI may offer additional opportunities to practice language or examine alternative phrasing, but it should not settle questions students need to reason through themselves. Teachers still determine when such as-

sistance is useful and when further inquiry or direct conversation would be better. What matters is that learners gradually use English to investigate, interpret and address problems, instead of being confined to receiving and reproducing language knowledge.

3) Restructuring instructional support mechanisms to enable dynamic teaching optimization. Different activities reveal different aspects of students' progress. An online exercise may expose a recurring language difficulty, a classroom exchange may reveal a problem of understanding, and a reflection afterwards may show how the learner interprets the experience. None offers a complete account alone. Taken together, the evidence can guide decisions about further explanation, alternative resources, changes to task demands or a gradual reduction in support. This is where intelligent feedback has a practical role: it may help teachers notice a need in time to respond. Its educational value depends on the decisions that follow and on the connection it creates between independent study and face-to-face work.

5. Innovations in Blended Teaching Models for College English Courses

Changing platforms or moving exercises online does not, by itself, constitute course reform. The starting point is the kind of English use students should become capable of, followed by the activities through which those abilities can be practiced and demonstrated. Materials, classroom interaction, feedback and assessment then need to support one another. An AI tool is worth introducing when it offers a clear contribution to that design. Such a task-oriented view is consistent with calls to relate intelligent teaching platforms more closely to learning purposes (Yan & Liu, 2023). It leads to four areas for change: how course content is organized, how teaching is carried out, how individual learners are supported and how their development is assessed.

1) Innovating curriculum organization to establish an integrated general and discipline-specific English teaching system. One way to connect language foundations with disciplinary study and intercultural communication is to organize a unit around a question worth discussing. Themes drawn from technology, society, culture or professional life could support tasks that gradually become more demanding. Students might first learn the expressions and reading strategies needed to understand the issue, then examine a text, discuss its implications for their field or explain a cultural interpretation to a new audience. Basic skills remain part of the work, but students have an opportunity to carry them into a different context. Teachers can offer extension tasks suited to different majors without losing the common focus of the unit. This makes the transfer of language knowledge a visible part of learning rather than an assumed outcome.

2) Innovating instructional implementation through a human-AI collaborative learning model. What students prepare before class should influence how classroom time is used. A platform could distribute reading material and collect questions in advance, allowing teachers to identify issues requiring discussion. In class,

case analysis, simulated communication and collaborative projects can ask students to explain and reconsider their ideas. Afterwards, learners may revise a text, reflect on an exchange or undertake further language practice with generative AI. The sequence should be adjusted to the purpose of the unit rather than applied as a fixed routine. Teachers remain responsible for task design and guidance, including deciding when intelligent assistance is appropriate. Students must still evaluate suggestions and make judgments themselves. Technology thus broadens opportunities for practice without replacing the human exchange on which much language learning depends.

3) Innovating learning support to establish differentiated developmental pathways. Shared learning goals do not require every student to follow exactly the same route. Some may benefit from returning to foundational language patterns; others may be ready to interpret academic sources or examine a difficult intercultural issue. Teachers can offer tasks with different levels of support while maintaining the broader expectations of the course. Learning analytics may indicate where difficulties occur, but these indications need to be considered alongside the student's work and classroom participation. Giving learners a reasonable choice of topics, materials or forms of extended practice can also strengthen responsibility for their progress. Differentiation should enable students to move forward with growing independence, not assign them permanently to fixed ability groups.

4) Innovating assessment practices through a multidimensional collaborative evaluation framework. No single task can adequately capture all the outcomes expected of college English. Examinations provide evidence about aspects of language knowledge; presentations, written work and discussions may reveal academic application, interpretation, critical thinking and intercultural communication. Evidence gathered during learning should therefore be read alongside summative results. Teachers' judgments, peer responses, student reflection and intelligent diagnostics each have a possible contribution, provided the criteria suit the task and are made explicit. Attendance and completion records alone cannot establish the quality of learning. Automated evaluations likewise require consideration of context. Assessment should inform what students revise next and what teachers adjust in subsequent instruction, rather than remain only a record of performance.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how curriculum content, learning activities and assessment fit together in blended college English teaching. Online resources and AI may give students additional opportunities to prepare, practice and receive feedback. Those opportunities have limited value, however, when learning materials remain fragmented or online work has little relation to classroom activity. The perspective of smart education suggests a more integrated approach. General English can provide a foundation for academic and discipline-related communication; intercultural tasks can give language use a wider purpose; and evaluation can fol-

low development during the course as well as final attainment. Teachers remain responsible for the design of the learning experience and the interpretation of feedback. Students need opportunities to inquire, communicate and make their own judgments. These are proposals for reform, not evidence that a particular technological arrangement has already produced better learning outcomes. Their effectiveness will depend on classroom implementation and on whether the support selected suits the demands of the task. Further inquiry should examine when generative AI is educationally appropriate for feedback and reasoning, together with the digital capabilities teachers need and students' capacity to direct their own learning. The relevant test of a blended course is what students come to understand and communicate in English, not the visibility of the technology it uses.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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