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Original Paper

Constructing and Implementing an Integrated Model of Tiered Instruction and ESP for College English

Xiya Wang

Guangdong University of Science and Technology, Dongguan 523668, Guangdong, China

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Abstract

The marked individual differences among learners and the insufficient cultivation of language application ability are long-standing problems in College English teaching at application-oriented undergraduate universities in China. Existing reforms have usually treated tiered instruction and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as two independent measures: tiering is implemented at the teaching-management level, while ESP is added as a separate course. Neither has addressed the fundamental issue of differentiating course content. Drawing on differentiated instruction, needs-analysis-based ESP course design, and blended learning, this study constructs and implements an integrated model that combines offline tiered College English with online tiered ESP courses. With differentiation, disciplinary alignment, and process orientation as its guiding principles, the model organizes online ESP courses for two proficiency tiers (A and B) by discipline cluster and incorporates a multi-dimensional assessment mechanism. Three preliminary observations are presented. First, without corresponding differentiation in course content, tiering remains formal. Second, online ESP courses provide a bridge linking English instruction with disciplinary training and impose higher interdisciplinary requirements on teachers. Third, platform-based records provide a foundation for implementing process-oriented assessment. The model can serve as a design-level reference for application-oriented undergraduate institutions seeking to advance the integration of tiered instruction and ESP.

Keywords

individual differences, tiered instruction, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), blended learning, course design

1. Introduction

English is a basic tool for students to complete their studies, enter the workplace, and participate in

international communication. The quality of College English teaching is directly related to graduates' career development. In Chinese universities, however, English teaching for non-English majors has long adopted a one-size-fits-all approach: all students within one grade follow the same syllabus and teaching arrangements, textbooks are taught sequentially volume by volume, and learning outcomes are measured through uniform written examinations. Such practice presupposes a homogeneous student population. In reality, students at application-oriented undergraduate universities exhibit substantial gaps in college-entrance examination scores, prior learning experiences and learning motivation.

Policy-level responses have unfolded along two parallel lines. The College English Teaching Guide (2020 Edition) advocates classified guidance and tiered instruction[1]. The advancement of application-oriented talent cultivation has made ESP a practical pathway connecting language learning with disciplinary needs. Both starting points are reasonable, yet in practice they proceed along separate tracks. Administrative departments carry out tiered placement through class grouping, while academic departments introduce ESP by revising course offerings. Seldom are the two incorporated within a unified curriculum framework.

This separation creates concrete difficulties. If tiered instruction adjusts only class composition without adjusting course content, differentiation is reduced to simple regrouping. Tier labels originally intended to provide appropriate learning opportunities may then become symbols of students' status ranking. ESP presupposes a certain language proficiency, which not all students have reached. When this prerequisite is absent, ESP content is often treated as vocabulary translation. To integrate the two, a course must be designed with tier and discipline cluster as its two organising coordinates. Based on an institutional teaching reform project at Guangdong University of Science and Technology, this paper addresses three questions. In which respects do existing tiered arrangements prevent College English from responding to student differences? According to what principles, and in what manner, should tiered instruction and ESP be integrated? What constraints arise when the model is implemented at the level of individual disciplines?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Individual Differences in Second Language Learning

Individual differences are one of the variable domains that have received the longest attention in second language acquisition research. Chinese studies show that stable and systematic individual differences are prevalent in both first-language and second-language processing[2]. Learning motivation is the most extensively explored construct among them, and its shaping effect on learning behaviour has been continuously confirmed: the motivational system composed of the ideal second language self, the ought-to second language self, and learning experience has a stable influence on university students' English proficiency and demotivation[3], and its composition also shows systematic variation across learning contexts[4]. With regard to learning behaviour, engagement has likewise been confirmed to be jointly influenced by individual and environmental factors[5].

Language proficiency is therefore only one dimension of difference. Students placed in the same tier on the basis of the same score may differ greatly in motivational intensity, expectations regarding the future use of English, and autonomous learning ability. Tiering based solely on proficiency is merely the starting point of differentiation.

2.2 Differentiation and Tiered Instruction

Tomlinson[6] defines differentiation as intentionally adjusting content, process, and product according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, and emphasizes that it is a way of thinking about teaching rather than a technical checklist to be copied. The distinction between differentiation and tiered class placement is crucial. Tiered class placement is an administrative act, and its result is that learners are assigned to different tracks. Differentiation is a teaching act, and its result is that the course changes within existing groupings. A programme may well have tiered class placement with no differentiation at all. This combination is tiering in name only, most commonly seen when class placement is introduced without revising objectives, materials and assessment.

The basis for tiering is usually traced to the theory of the zone of proximal development: if learning is most effective when task difficulty is slightly above the level students can complete independently, then no single level of difficulty can be optimal for a heterogeneous group. This is also the theoretical foundation commonly invoked in China's tiered instruction practice[7]. Nation and Macalister[8] add a further qualification: needs analysis and environment analysis determine objectives, content, and sequencing. Tiering responds to environment analysis and does not determine content. Content depends on what learners need to accomplish with language, which is precisely the domain of ESP.

2.3 ESP: Needs Analysis and Course Design

According to Hutchinson and Waters[9], ESP should be understood as an approach: decisions about course content and teaching methods are based on learners' reasons for learning, rather than treating ESP as a special variety of English. This orientation has been continued in Chinese research. Zou et al.'s[10] needs analysis of interdisciplinary Business English course design shows that courses must be based on learners' target situations and learning needs. Zhang and Chen's[11] examination of ESP textbook development trends in the context of the new liberal arts likewise shows that ESP content is shifting from general language training toward alignment with disciplinary genres and communicative situations.

Needs analysis is the methodological cornerstone of ESP and often the source of course failure. Research on tiered instruction course systems also shows that if course arrangements are detached from students' proficiency and needs, it is difficult to meet the requirements of individualized learning[12]. Compared with questionnaires asking learners about their own needs, analyzing the tasks they actually perform yields more valid information. Courses based on teachers' assumptions tend to degenerate into glossaries appended to a general syllabus. By contrast, courses based on disciplinary tasks and genres[13] can lead learners into recognizable disciplinary communicative situations. Cai Jigang[14] accordingly argues that ESP should become the direction of College English development, while examinations of

tiered instruction suggest that this shift is constrained in practice by students' language foundations[15]. This divergence points to the threshold problem: the same ESP course may be appropriate for Tier A students but may be ineffective for Tier B students.

2.4 Blended Learning, Assessment, and Research Gaps

A review of domestic research on blended College English teaching shows that research hotspots have moved from macro-level model discussion toward classroom application[16], and empirical studies in the context of tiered instruction have also reported positive effects[17]. For the present design, blended learning thus assumes two functions: the online component releases ESP provision from the hard constraints of class hours and teaching staff; at the same time, it continuously generates records of learners' behaviour, which is precisely the prerequisite for process-oriented assessment. Wu Xuefeng's[18] learning-oriented writing assessment path based on the China Standards of English also indicates that such process information must be combined with summative assessment and used to adjust teaching before it can be transformed into learning gains.

Three gaps can thus be identified: tiered instruction research emphasizes class placement structures but neglects differentiation of course content; ESP research rarely refers to learners' proficiency distribution; and blended learning is mostly regarded as a mode of course delivery rather than as the infrastructure enabling process-oriented assessment. The present design lies precisely at the intersection of these three areas.

3. Current Teaching Situation and Problems

3.1 The University and Student Foundation

Guangdong University of Science and Technology is an undergraduate institution positioned to cultivate application-oriented talent, with programmes concentrated in economics and management, science and engineering, and the arts. Within the same cohort, the difference between the highest and lowest college English examination scores often exceeds 60 points (out of 150). Differences are even more pronounced in the continuity of prior learning and expectations regarding the future use of English. A uniform supply therefore inevitably provokes dissatisfaction at both ends. Students with a stronger foundation report that they are not sufficiently challenged, while students with a weaker foundation report that they "cannot keep up."

3.2 Nominal Tiering

The School of Foreign Languages previously implemented a reform called "three categories and two tiers". Students were divided by broad discipline category into economics and management, science and engineering, and the arts. Within each category, they were further divided into Tiers A and B according to entrance scores. The two tiers did differ. Tier A began with Volume 2 of New Progressive College English Integrated Course, while Tier B began with Volume 1. Final examinations were also separately prepared, with the two papers differing in difficulty and item weighting. But the differences stopped at starting point and test paper. The two tiers shared one syllabus and the same teaching

schedule. Objective statements, task specifications, and scoring standards were not separately formulated. Teacher assignment did not refer to tier, and teachers rarely received guidance on how teaching should differ. Starting one volume earlier changed the scope of content coverage, not the types of language tasks students needed to complete. The reform changed class composition but did not change what happened in the classroom. Tier A students became distracted because tasks lacked challenge, Tier B students gave up catching up because progress was too fast, and tier labels acquired status connotations that in turn suppressed learning motivation.

3.3 Courses Disconnected from Disciplinary Needs

The curriculum consists mainly of general College English and listening and speaking courses, all organized around general topics, with no ESP provision linked to students' disciplines. Students therefore receive no systematic training in the use of English in authentic disciplinary situations, such as reading a technical specification or writing a project report. This is difficult to reconcile with the institution's application-oriented mission, and it also explains a phenomenon repeatedly observed by subject teachers: some students with acceptable College English scores cannot understand a short English text in their own field.

3.4 Traditional Teaching Methods and Single Assessment

Teaching remains dominated by teacher exposition, centered on text explanation and vocabulary processing. Task-based and cooperative methods depend on individual teachers' preferences rather than project design. Assessment adopts a 50%-50% split between continuous assessment and the final examination. Formally there is already a process component, but continuous assessment mainly consists of attendance, classroom performance, and homework completion, recording whether students attended and submitted work rather than the trajectory of change in their language performance. The final 50% is a separately prepared written examination, still dominated by discrete item types such as vocabulary, reading, and translation. Students receive almost no diagnostic information that can be used to adjust their learning before the end of the semester. Each of the above problems corresponds to a design task. The course must be differentiated in content rather than only in class placement. It must connect with disciplinary practice and assess process while attending to outcomes.

4. Construction of the Integrated Model

4.1 Overall Design

The model consists of offline tiered College English and online tiered ESP courses, supported by a multi-dimensional assessment mechanism. The offline component undertakes language foundations and face-to-face interaction, which is necessary for oral development. The online component undertakes disciplinary application and generates the process data on which assessment and tier adjustment depend. Structurally, the model is a two-track and two-tier grid. The vertical axis is language proficiency (Tiers A and B), and the horizontal axis is discipline cluster. Each student occupies one cell. Its essence is to treat tier and discipline cluster as two coordinates of the same decision rather than two separately

advanced tasks.

4.2 Design Principles

Differentiation requires that objectives, content, task difficulty, and assessment standards match students' proficiency and zones of proximal development at each tier. This means that tiers cannot share the same syllabus, the same task specifications, and the same scoring standards. Each tier should have its own independent objective statements, material selection criteria, task specifications, and scoring rubrics.

Disciplinary alignment requires that ESP content derive from an analysis of the communicative tasks and genres actually involved in students' disciplines, and that it articulate with disciplinary courses rather than run parallel to them. ESP cannot be reduced to a glossary attached to a general course. Needs analysis should be conducted separately for each discipline cluster, with professional texts as the object of analysis and, where possible, subject teachers participating.

Process orientation requires continuous recording of learning behaviour for formative purposes, so as to regulate student learning and support teachers' teaching decisions. The final grade cannot be left solely to a final examination, nor can attendance and homework completion serve as process-oriented assessment. Process indicators should be specified in advance, carry predetermined weight, and be visible to both teachers and students during the semester.

The three principles are interdependent. With differentiation but without disciplinary alignment, the model will lose its content foundation. With disciplinary alignment but without differentiation, ESP will be open only to the higher tier. Only when the three are combined can "teaching according to aptitude" become a curricular fact rather than a class-placement technique.

4.3 Offline Tiered Instruction System

Students are placed into Tiers A and B according to college entrance English examination scores, and those near the cutoff are confirmed through a diagnostic writing task. The existing textbook starting points are retained. Tier A begins with Volume 2 of New Progressive College English Integrated Course, and Tier B begins with Volume 1. What the reform adds is objective differentiation corresponding to the volumes. Tier A is oriented toward academic English and intercultural communication, adding academic text comprehension, structured writing, and extended monologue beyond the integrated course. Productive tasks require synthesizing more than two sources and citing them properly. Tier B consolidates integrated competence around intermediate vocabulary, complex structures, and integration of the four skills. Tasks are broken down more finely, and writing is limited to a single argument with evidence-based explanation, enabling students to experience success within one class session.

Differentiation goes beyond vocabulary. The two tiers differ in the proportion of time given to receptive and productive tasks, in text length and complexity, and in assessment criteria. For the same writing task, Tier A students must integrate two sources and cite them properly, while Tier B students develop a single argument from personal experience and justify it. For the same listening passage, Tier A students

summarise the main points and identify the speaker's stance, while Tier B students locate key information and complete gaps. These differences are set out in a tier-objective matrix, which serves as a reference for lesson preparation and materials review. A rolling mechanism reviews each student's tier every semester, so that students can move between tiers instead of being locked in by an early placement.

In terms of pedagogy, both tiers can adopt the production-oriented approach[19] and its motivating-enabling-assessing sequence: the difficulty of the productive task can be set by tier while the teaching procedure stays constant, so that teachers need not prepare two methodologies for two tiers.

4.4 Online Tiered ESP Course Development

The ESP component is organised by discipline cluster rather than by single discipline, keeping the number of courses manageable while maintaining disciplinary specificity. Each discipline cluster offers one course at two tiers. Development proceeds through five stages. The team first analyses representative professional texts and the tasks graduates actually perform at work, then sequences genres by frequency and difficulty to determine the syllabus. Tasks and materials are written for each tier, chapters are deployed on the platform with one assessment task per unit, and the first round is reviewed and revised.

Material design addresses three dimensions simultaneously. The disciplinary dimension provides vocabulary, terminology, rhetorical conventions, and communicative situations in the field. The tier dimension determines text difficulty, scaffolding intensity, and expected independence. Tier A students may need to analyze authentic reports and write summaries with limited support, while Tier B students complete writing within a structured report template and indicate information sources. The competence dimension targets workplace transfer and intercultural situations, requiring students to use the language communicatively rather than merely understand it. Such materials are difficult for language teachers to develop independently, so the model presupposes collaboration with disciplinary teachers.

4.5 Multi-dimensional Assessment Mechanism

Assessment consists of process-oriented and achievement components. The process-oriented component draws on platform records and classroom observation and includes four indicators: participation, measured by the regularity and quality of online learning; progress, measured by the trajectory of unit test scores; assignment quality, judged against tier-specific rubrics; and discussion engagement, together with the quality of peer assessment. This component is redesigned within the institution's existing 50% continuous-assessment allocation, so that sustained engagement is recognised rather than treated as an optional bonus.

The achievement component is assessed at the end of the semester, separately for the two courses. Offline, the existing tier-specific written papers are retained, with item types and weightings redrawn against the tier-objective matrix. Online, papers are set by discipline cluster. Holding the two side by side shows whether a difficulty lies in the language foundation or in disciplinary application.

Assessment data serve three further purposes. They inform instructional adjustment during the semester, they identify units whose difficulty was poorly calibrated so that the curriculum can be revised, and they supply the comparable evidence on which tier management depends.

Four conditions are presupposed. The team must have clearly divided responsibilities, the timetable must treat the two components as one course, the platform must support deployment and data export, and the course must be reviewed for quality before it opens.

5. Implementation and Preliminary Observations

5.1 Implementation Design

The reform was implemented in four classes, with two classes at each of Tiers A and B. Within each tier, one class adopted the integrated model and the other continued with the existing arrangement as a control class. The control classes were included so that any change observed in the experimental classes could be read against ordinary progress under the existing arrangement. They were not designed to support a comparison of effects at this stage. The intervention lasted one academic year, during which a team composed of the author and colleagues held regular discussions to review progress and record decisions.

Data came from four sources. Questionnaires covered learning experiences, needs and career plans. Teacher interviews addressed difficulties in implementing differentiation and in material development. Student interviews addressed acceptance of the online courses. Platform records supplied participation, completion and unit scores. Standardised proficiency test scores and CET-4 pass rates were recorded under both conditions for analysis at the comparison stage. This paper does not report effect comparisons. At this stage any judgement of effectiveness can only rest on impressions rather than evidence.

5.2 Preliminary Observations

Three observations recurred with sufficient consistency across classes and teaching-research seminars to warrant reporting here.

The first concerns the relationship between class placement and curriculum. Fine-grained tiering must be supported by substantive differentiation of content; otherwise it remains merely formal. Evidence emerged early in the semester. Tier B teachers reported that reduced class size and changed group composition did not change what happened in the classroom. Students who had been silent remained silent, and a pace that had been too fast stayed too fast. Changes appeared only after materials and task specifications were revised, and took the form of shorter texts, more practice, and success criteria calibrated to what can be achieved in a single session. Most of the workload of tiering therefore falls on materials rather than on class placement.

The second concerns the function of the online component. Online ESP courses serve as a fulcrum for linking English instruction to disciplinary training, because they free course provision from the constraints of class hours and teacher availability. At the level of individual disciplines, it is precisely

these two constraints that make discipline-specific classroom English courses hard to offer. A single teacher cannot offer three types of courses within a fixed weekly timetable, whether in economics and management, science and engineering, or the arts, whereas the platform can deliver them in parallel, with students grouped by discipline cluster and tier. This observation also points to a further constraint. The interdisciplinary competence that developing ESP materials requires is one that most language teachers have had few opportunities to develop.

The third concerns assessment. Process-oriented assessment changes learning behaviour more directly than any other element of the model. The platform's continuous records and immediate feedback provide first-year students with external structure, making the consequences of "non-engagement" visible early in the semester. Teachers reported that conversations with students shifted from final grades to behaviour that can still be changed. In other words, the actual impact of process-oriented assessment may exceed its weight in the final grade.

5.3 Challenges

Four aspects remain unresolved. First, ESP materials have not reached a stable state. Professional genres shift as industries evolve, so materials have to be revised in step. A sustainable model therefore requires a rolling revision mechanism, yet the institutional arrangements for such a mechanism are not yet in place. Second, teacher capacity is a further constraint. Some teachers have little experience of ESP teaching, and the interdisciplinary judgement needed to select authentic materials cannot be developed quickly. Third, the operational details of tier management, such as review cycles, adjustment thresholds and how adjustment results are communicated, are handled case by case at present. This is workable at the pilot stage but risks inconsistency once the scheme is scaled up. Finally, the division of labour between the offline and online components rests on practical feasibility rather than explicit principles, and needs further theoretical justification.

6. Discussion

6.1 Tiering as a Curricular Rather Than an Administrative Act

The first contribution of this paper is to show where tiered instruction is liable to break down. The literature has long argued that differentiation is a curricular matter rather than a question of class placement[6]. What this case shows is what follows when the two are separated. The tier structure had been in place for several years, and placement procedures and tier labels were fully established, yet learning outcomes improved little, because both tiers continued to share the same objectives, tasks and standards, and the gap between the two textbook volumes never translated into a gap between the tasks set at each tier. The reform described here did not introduce tiering. It supplied the curriculum that the existing tiered structure lacked.

This distinction also has a bearing on equity. Tiering does not by itself produce inequity. Inequity arises when tiers exist but curricular differentiation does not. The lower tier then receives not a different curriculum but a reduced version of the same one, moving through the same content at a slower pace

and under lower expectations. What should have been a means of supporting students becomes a device for ranking them. Where, by contrast, each tier has its own objectives and rubrics, the difference between tiers is a difference in developmental trajectories rather than in status.

6.2 ESP as the Articulation Mechanism

In the existing literature, ESP and tiering are usually treated as two separate agendas. ESP is advocated as a direction for curriculum development, while tiering is discussed as a response to learner heterogeneity. This design treats the two as interdependent. ESP gives tiering a content basis, so that tiering becomes more than class placement. Tiering in turn makes ESP accessible, so that ESP does not become the preserve of the upper tier. The threshold problem discussed above is therefore not an argument against ESP but an argument for tiered ESP. Left undifferentiated, a course offered to a heterogeneous group will tend to serve the upper end of the ability range and leave the lower end behind. Differentiated by tier, the same approach can serve learners at different stages of development by adjusting text difficulty, the amount of scaffolding and the degree of independence expected of them, while keeping the disciplinary orientation intact.

6.3 The Platform as Assessment Infrastructure

Blended learning is often justified by flexibility or resource efficiency, and the platform does enable ESP provision on a scale that classroom delivery cannot support. But its more substantive function is infrastructural. Continuous records of learning behaviour make process-oriented assessment feasible at the disciplinary scale, and process data make tier management rest on evidence rather than impression. Assessment, tiering, and curriculum are thus connected through the same data stream, and the model gains the feedback loop that Nation and Macalister[8] regard as essential to curriculum evaluation.

6.4 Transferability and Limitations

This paper offers a transferable reference rather than a template to be copied. What is transferable are the three principles and the architecture that locates provision along two coordinates, tier and discipline. What is not transferable is the specific set of tier definitions, discipline-cluster divisions and assessment weights, which depend on the student profile and conditions of the home institution. Transfer presupposes the four conditions listed in Section 4.5, two of which are often underestimated. The material-development capacity of the team determines the quality of the endeavour, and institutional arrangements determine whether students actually enrol in ESP courses.

This study has three main limitations. First, it is based on a single institution, and effect comparisons have not yet been carried out, so this paper makes no claim about effectiveness. Second, teacher effects could not be separated from the effect of the new design. The experimental classes were taught by team members who took part in its design, and their commitment may well have exceeded that of teachers implementing a course designed by others. Any future comparison between the experimental and control classes will need to be interpreted in the light of this limitation. Third, the observations reported in Section 5.2 rest on implementation records and interviews rather than systematically coded analysis, and they need to be triangulated through more systematic qualitative analysis before firmer conclusions

can be drawn.

7. Conclusion

This paper describes the process of constructing and implementing an integrated model of tiered instruction and ESP at an application-oriented undergraduate institution. It addresses two common failures. Tiering is often introduced as an administrative measure without corresponding differentiation of course content, and ESP is often introduced by adding a course without regard to the proficiency distribution of the learners. Three conclusions follow. First, tiering is a curricular project whose main cost lies in materials and task design rather than in class placement. Second, ESP gives differentiation its content, while tiering makes ESP accessible. Third, process-oriented assessment connects assessment, curriculum revision and tier management in a single loop. The next stage will compare the experimental and control classes on ESP proficiency tests and CET-4 pass rates, with teacher effects treated as an acknowledged interpretive limitation.

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