
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Integrating ESP, Value Education, and AI-Enhanced Pedagogy in Chinese Vocational Colleges: A Theoretical Construction of the “Three-Chains, Four-Dimensions, Five-Contexts” Teaching Model for Workplace Communication English Course

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ABSTRACT

The increasing demand for workplace-oriented English proficiency, value education, and technological integration has posed new challenges for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula in Chinese vocational colleges. Addressing the need to meaningfully integrate Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE) into professional English instruction, this conceptual paper proposes a theoretically grounded “Three-Chains, Four-Dimensions, Five-Contexts” teaching model for the Workplace Communication English Course. Drawing on ESP theory, sociocultural learning, moral education, and AI-enhanced pedagogy, the model conceptualizes learning as a developmental process that links linguistic knowledge acquisition, situated workplace practice, and professional identity formation. It further integrates knowledge, values, skills, and application within authentic communicative tasks, supported by AI-mediated interaction and multidimensional assessment. By embedding value formation within workplace communication rather than treating it as an external addition, the model addresses critiques of superficial CIPE implementation in ESP. This study contributes a coherent conceptual framework for vocational English curriculum design and offers directions for future empirical research and pedagogical innovation.

KEYWORDS

English for Specific Purposes (ESP); Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE); vocational English education; workplace communication; AI-enhanced language learning; value-integrated pedagogy; professional identity development

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The rapid expansion of China’s vocational education sector has intensified the demand for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curricula with the aim of preparing students for increasingly globalized and technologically mediated workplaces. Vocational graduates in fields such as international trade, hospitality, cross border e-commerce, and exhibition management should only possess language proficiency but also exhibit professional literacy and cross-cultural awareness required by the industry expectations. In parallel, the Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE) of China’s educational policy has posed higher requirements for course development by requiring ESP to contribute to the holistic cultivation of students’ moral, civic, and cultural values (Mei, 2024). This convergence of linguistic, professional, and ideological demands presents a profound challenge for ESP curriculum designers and educators.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the effectiveness of competence in using AI technology has been emphasized, universities have not yet developed a systematic approach to explore and map the AI literacy of the Chinese vocational EFL students due to infrastructure. The gap between the AI-oriented market requirement and EFL learners’ AI literacy for EFL learning has been the main agenda in the Chinese vocational education system. Despite increasing emphasis on CIPE across academic disciplines, integration within ESP remains

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under-theorized, often reduced to superficial “value add-ons” that neither enhance communicative competence nor contribute meaningfully to identity development (Cui, 2025; Li, 2020). The CIPE’s policy documents emphasize moral education, cultural confidence, and civic consciousness, little guidance exists on how to operationalize these frameworks within task-based, career-oriented ESP pedagogies. The lack of a coherent conceptual foundation often leads to fragmented classroom practices such as brief ideological digressions, patriotic examples inserted into reading passages, or moral slogans appended to assessments. Simultaneously, the emergence of AI-assisted language learning technologies has introduced new affordances that are transforming second-language education worldwide. As the advancement of AI-driven technologies progresses, researchers have found that these tools offer personalized and adaptive learning experiences, facilitate social interactions, and create less-threatening digital environments for language learners. Digital tools have the capacity in creating a supportive learning environment and providing psychological support and foster creativity for learners (Busso & Sanchez 2024; Yan 2024). Empirical studies indicates that such digital tools arouse learners’ interest and enjoyment in speaking activities, with conversation durations ranging from minutes to months between students and chatbots (Ruan et al., 2021; Ebadi & Amini, 2022). While this has generated a growing attention of empirical evidence, the theoretical implications for value-integrated ESP pedagogy remain underexplored. Therefore, the intersection of ESP, CIPE, and AI-mediated language learning necessitates a new conceptual architecture for the Workplace Communication English Course, integrating disciplinary knowledge, workplace literacy, and value formation within a coherent pedagogical system. To address this need, this paper proposes a theoretically grounded reconstruction of the “Three-Chains, Four-Dimensions, Five-Stages” teaching model for the Workplace Communication English Course, originally developed through curriculum innovation in a Chinese vocational college. The present article does not report empirical data; instead, it situates the model in broader theoretical conversations in ESP, sociocultural learning, value integration, and AI-enhanced pedagogy, articulating its rationale, structure, and implications for future research.

2. Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in vocational education has long been recognized as a pedagogical approach grounded in authentic workplace communication, especially targeting at language proficiency for professional settings. ESP instruction should be needs-driven and aligned with the discursive practices of specific industries (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Basturkmen, 2010). In vocational settings, this requirement becomes even more salient, as learners are required to be prepared for communication tasks in fields such as hospitality, cross-border e-commerce, and foreign trade field. when ESP tasks relate to workplace settings such as customer service interactions, complaint handling, negotiation turns, or promotional briefings, learners could develop stronger professional competence and improve future employability (Evans & Morrison, 2021; Chan, 2014; Charles, 2013). ESP scholars increasingly argue that vocational English must extend beyond linguistic competence to include professional ability, interpersonal communication norms, and digital multimodal abilities relevant to modern work environments (Newton & Chan, 2022). Despite this emphasis, the vocational ESP curricula in China often lack systematic integration between linguistic learning, professional ethics, and broader value formation.

Meanwhile, the rapid institutionalization of Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE) has brought higher expectations for all university courses in China, including ESP. CIPE’s mandate requires that teachers cultivate students’ moral character, civic responsibility, and cultural confidence through discipline-based instruction (Mei, 2024). Language learners need to get engaged with identity, intercultural encounters, and communicative ethics at the same time, so there are difficulties in integrating CIPE within English classrooms. Research have shown that educators insert ideological content superficially through brief political discussion points or patriotic examples, without integrating values meaningfully into communicative pedagogy (Li, 2020; Cui, 2025). Values education must be embedded within disciplinary contexts (Huang et al., 2024). For English courses, this means that values such as cultural awareness, empathy, professionalism, and honesty should be well embedded within communication tasks and discourse practices rather than through didactic lecturing. A core issue is that CIPE scholarship tends to be conceptual and policy-driven, offering limited guidance on how ideological and civic values should be enacted within ESP curriculum and task-based frameworks. Consequently, teachers lack structured models for balancing linguistic goals with value-oriented learning outcomes. Technology enhancement offers opportunity for complementing these developments, particularly the use of AI tools in language learning such as conversational agents and large language models to support L2 speaking development. AI systems are now capable of simulating workplace scenarios, offering contextually relevant feedback, and modeling pragmatic strategies such as politeness mitigation, negotiation moves, and appropriate customer service routines (Warschauer & Liaw, 2023). Yet AI’s role in value formation has not been conceptually theorized: existing studies focus largely on linguistic benefits, overlooking the potential of AI interactions to prompt ethical reasoning, promote professionalism, or scaffold reflective decision-making. This conceptual gap is important because vocational ESP involves situations where values intersect with communication. Learners sometimes face problems such as whether to exaggerate product benefits in marketing, how to respond ethically to customer complaints, or how to balance honesty with persuasion. AI’s ability to generate multiple response options, offer reflective prompts, and present moral dilemmas positions it as a potentially powerful mediation tool for CIPE-integrated language learning.

The intersection of ESP, CIPE, and AI therefore presents both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, teachers must achieve diverse teaching objectives like improving learners’ communicative competence, preparing them for industry-specific tasks,

cultivating ethical and civic values, and leveraging AI technologies effectively. On the other hand, these domains share important theoretical synergies. Value development, according to moral education research, arises from contextualized interaction, reflective reasoning, and social participation (Nucci, 2014). Sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning is mediated through tools, signs, and collaborative activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Task-based language teaching (TBLT) positions authentic tasks as central units of meaning-making (Ellis, 2017). Genre pedagogy argues that communication patterns encode social power, identity, and value orientations (Hyland, 2006). Taken together, these theories provide foundation to design value, cultural narratives, and reflective stages into learning tasks to foster holistic learning aligned with CIPE goals. However, the theoretical bridge between ESP pedagogy and value-oriented education is weak, when ESP emphasizes communicative tasks, pragmatics, and workplace authenticity and CIPE emphasizes national identity, civic responsibility, moral reasoning, and value transmission. Without a systematic model that organizes these domains cohesively, ESP teachers struggle to design lessons for the Workplace Communication English Course that achieve both communicative and ideological goals without compromising either. Therefore, this article addresses that gap by integrating ESP, value education, and AI-Enhanced pedagogy into a theoretical teaching model of “Three-Chains, Four-Dimensions, Five-Stages” for Workplace Communication English Course, developed from front-line teaching experience and grounded in established educational theories.

3. Theoretical Framework : The “Three-Chains, Four-Dimensions, Five-Contexts” Teaching Model

Therefore, this article addresses the above gap by integrating ESP, value education, and AI-Enhanced pedagogy into a theoretical teaching model of “Three-Chains, Four-Dimensions, Five-Stages” for Workplace Communication English Course, developed from front-line teaching experience and grounded in established educational theories.

The Three-Chains component conceptualizes learning as a progressive developmental pathway rather than a linear instructional sequence. Specifically, it consists of a learning chain, a practice chain, and a development chain, which together structure how vocational ESP learners move from knowledge acquisition to professional identity formation. The learning chain focuses on the systematic cultivation of linguistic knowledge and communicative competence, emphasizing workplace discourse, genre awareness, and functional language use. This stage corresponds to ESP’s foundational goal of enabling learners to understand and produce language appropriate to professional contexts (Basturkmen, 2010; Hyland, 2006). Building on this foundation, the practice chain emphasizes experiential learning through simulated workplace tasks and school–enterprise collaborative projects. Learners engage in role-plays, case-based problem solving, and project-oriented activities that mirror authentic professional scenarios. Through these practices, linguistic competence is transformed into situated performance, allowing learners to internalize professional norms, ethical considerations, and collaborative responsibilities. This chain aligns with task-based and experiential learning theories, which stress that meaningful language development emerges through purposeful action in context (Ellis, 2017; Gulikers et al., 2004). The development chain represents the ultimate educational orientation of the model, extending beyond skill mastery to the cultivation of professional ideals and social responsibility. At this stage, learners are encouraged to reflect on their roles as future professionals, considering issues such as ethical conduct, civic awareness, and long-term career development. Rather than treating values as abstract or externally imposed concepts, the development chain frames them as outcomes of sustained participation in professional practices. In this way, value formation is embedded in learners’ communicative experiences and career-oriented trajectories, responding directly to critiques that Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE) in English courses often remains superficial or symbolic (Li, 2020; Mei, 2024).

The Four-Dimensions component represents the conceptual core of the model. It posits that effective CIPE-integrated ESP learning requires the coordinated development of knowledge, values, skills, and application. The knowledge dimension includes linguistic, genre, workplace, and cultural knowledge. Hyland’s (2006) genre theory and Evans and Morrison’s (2021) work on workplace communication underscore the necessity of integrating professional and cultural knowledge into ESP teaching. Yu et al. (2023) further show that storytelling related to Chinese culture enhances students’ identity and communicative awareness, reinforcing CIPE goals. The value dimension embeds CIPE’s ideological, ethical, and civic objectives directly into communicative tasks. Rather than delivering values through lectures, the model integrates them into problems, scenarios, and interpersonal interactions. The skill dimension emphasizes ESP communicative competence alongside professional soft skills such as negotiation, digital literacy, and customer interaction. Newton and Chan (2022) argue that vocational ESP should prepare learners for multimodal communication in digitalized workplaces, supporting this dimension. The application dimension focuses on real-world communicative performance through tasks such as service dialogues, promotional pitches, complaint management, and AI-based simulations. Authentic application is central to both ESP and CIPE, aligning with Gulikers et al.’s (2004) authentic assessment principles.

The Five-Contexts component articulates a pedagogical process aligned with sociocultural learning and task-based instruction. The first stage, context activation context, situates learning in meaningful professional scenarios. This corresponds to the pre-task planning phase in TBLT (Ellis, 2017) and provides the value-situated context recommended by CIPE theory (Mei, 2024). The second stage, collaborative context, encourages learners to analyze cases, discuss values, interpret genres, and consult AI tools through group work. This resonates with Swain’s (2000) notion of collaborative dialogue and Norton’s (2013) identity-oriented perspectives on language learning. The third stage, skill cultivation, centers on task performance supported by teacher scaffolding and AI-mediated interaction. The AI component reflects Warschauer and Liaw’s (2023) argument that intelligent systems can serve as

semiotic mediators. The fourth stage, evaluation context operationalizes learning outcomes through the multidimensional “Ability, Values, Quality” rubric, which evaluates linguistic ability, value orientation, and product quality. This rubric draws from ESP assessment frameworks emphasizing communicative performance (Douglas, 2000) and moral education research advocating value-sensitive evaluation (Nucci, 2014). The final stage, creative transfer context, requires learners to apply their learning to new workplace situations or design innovative communicative products such as promotional videos, complaint-handling scripts, or AI-supported service protocols. This aligns with project-based learning (Stoller, 2006) and knowledge-creation theories (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993).

The theoretical construction of this “Three-Chains, Four-Dimensions, and Five-Stages” teaching model operates as a unified guideline for the Workplace Communication English Course. The Three-Chains ensure structural alignment; the Four-Dimensions provide conceptual coherence; and the Five-Stages offer a dynamic learning process for classroom activities. AI technology serves as a mediating tool throughout, expanding learners’ communicative opportunities, supporting reflection, and enriching value exploration. The model responds directly to gaps identified in the literature. It builds a theoretical foundation for future empirical research and provides a practical pathway for vocational English teachers seeking to implement CIPE meaningfully without sacrificing linguistic or professional rigor. The model is shown as the Figure 1.

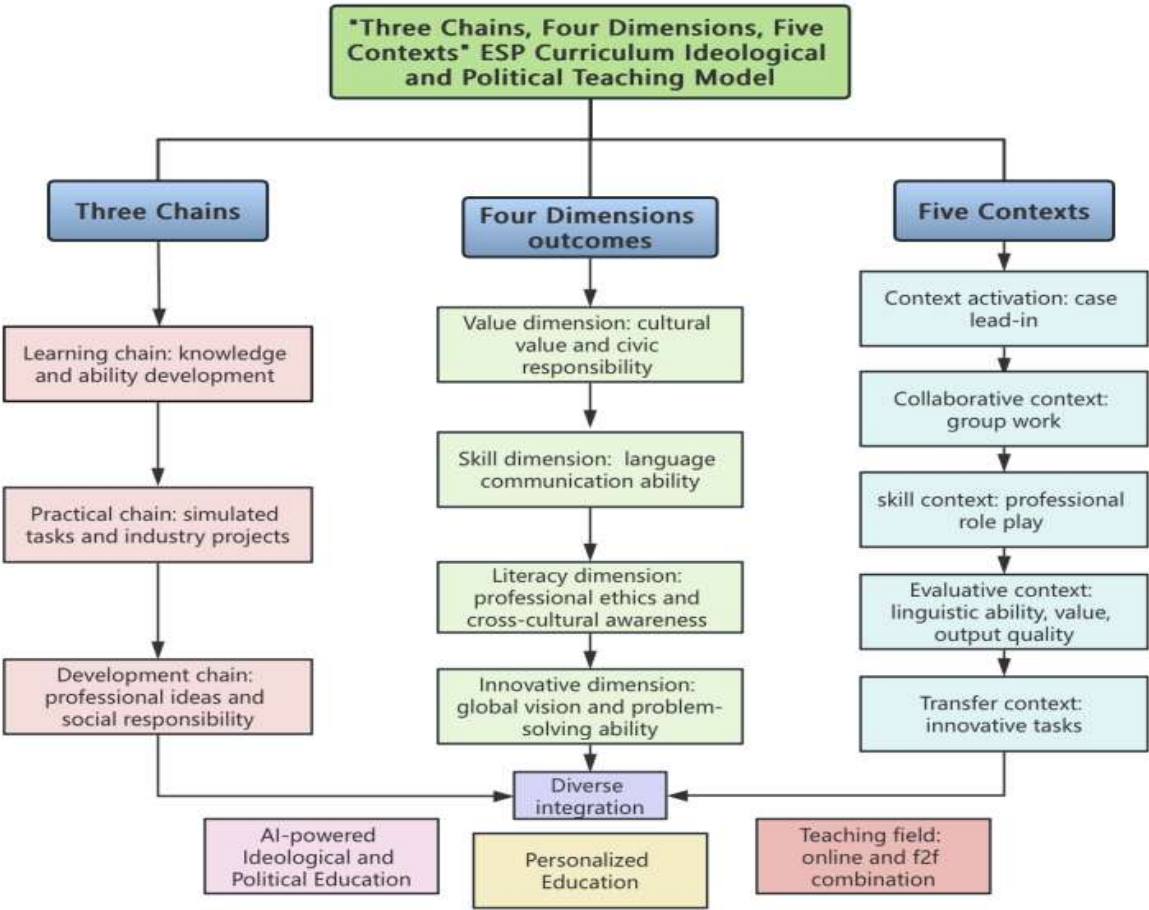


Figure 1: Three Chains, Four Dimensions, Five Contexts” ESP Curriculum Ideological and Political Teaching Model

4. Results

The proposed “Three-Chains, Four-Dimensions, Five-Contexts” teaching model responds directly to theoretical and practical gaps in the literature on ESP pedagogy, CIPE implementation, and AI-enabled language learning in the Chinese vocational education context. This section synthesizes how the model aligns with and extends existing research, clarifies its contributions, and identifies emerging directions for future inquiry. It positions the model not as an isolated pedagogical innovation but as a theoretically grounded restructuring of vocational English instruction that integrates linguistic, professional, ethical, and technological dimensions.

A further implication of this model concerns teacher cognition and professional development. Existing studies show that teachers’ beliefs strongly influence the quality of CIPE implementation and the integration of emerging technologies (Yu et al., 2023). The multi-layered design of the model—mapping, tasks, AI support, and assessment—provides a conceptual roadmap that reduces

ambiguity for teachers and increases the feasibility of achieving multiple learning goals. Teachers can rely on structured cases, task flows, AI prompts, and rubrics rather than improvised or superficial ideological insertions. This structured approach enhances instructional consistency and increases teachers' confidence in integrating values meaningfully into ESP.

Additionally, the model provides a lens for examining broader questions of identity and value formation in vocational education. Studies in applied linguistics show that language learning contributes to identity development by positioning learners within imagined communities and professional roles (Norton, 2013; Morgan & Clarke, 2011). In vocational contexts, learners must adopt identities as responsible professionals, ethical communicators, and culturally aware participants in international exchanges. The model supports this identity formation by situating learners in authentic professional tasks, embedding values into communicative choices, and providing reflective opportunities to articulate ethical stances. The model therefore contributes not only to ESP and CIPE scholarship but also to work on learner identity, employability, and professionalism.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This conceptual article has articulated a theoretically grounded and practice-oriented model for integrating ESP pedagogy, CIPE value formation, and AI-mediated language learning into the Workplace Communication English Course in Chinese vocational colleges. By synthesizing insights from ESP research, sociocultural learning theory, moral education, and AI-assisted language instruction, the "Three-Chains · Four-Dimensions · Five-Contexts" teaching model offers a coherent and systematic approach to embedding values meaningfully within professional English curricula. Its contributions lie not only in aligning curriculum, teaching, and assessment but also in redefining the relationship between language learning, professional identity, and ethical development. The model demonstrates that value education within ESP is not an additional burden but a natural extension of communicative practices. Workplace genres inherently encode values such as honesty, empathy, accountability, and respect. When tasks are designed around real professional dilemmas and supported by AI-mediated interaction, learners engage in meaningful linguistic and ethical decision-making. The Four-Dimensions framework ensures that knowledge, values, skills, and application develop in a coordinated manner, while the Five-Contexts cycle structures learning through contextualized engagement, collaboration, practice, reflection, and creative transfer. The multidimensional rubric innovates assessment and reinforces the integration of ability, value orientation, and product quality.

For teachers, the model offers a clear and practical roadmap for designing CIPE-integrated ESP courses. The mapping tables guide lesson planning, the instructional chain supports classroom implementation, and the assessment rubric provides transparent criteria for evaluating both communicative and value-based learning outcomes. Teachers can adopt AI not only as a tool for practice but as a mediating resource that supports ethical reflection and professional reasoning.

For institutions, the model aligns with national CIPE mandates while respecting the integrity of disciplinary learning. It offers a scalable framework that can be adapted across vocational majors. The model also encourages institutions to invest in AI literacy training, professional development, and integrated curriculum design.

In an era where workplaces demand both communicative proficiency and ethical awareness, and where AI transforms how language is learned and used, vocational ESP must evolve. The Three-Chains · Four-Dimensions · Five-Stages model offers a timely and holistic response to these demands. It bridges theoretical knowledge, values education, professional communication, and technological mediation, laying the foundation for a future-oriented approach to vocational English teaching in China and beyond.

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