

# The Paradigm Reconstruction of College English Teaching From the Perspective of Country and Regional Studies

LIU Xiaoquan

Guangxi University of Chinese Medicine, Nanning, China

The official recognition of Country and Regional Studies as a first-level interdisciplinary discipline presents both historic opportunities and structural challenges for the transformation of foreign language education in China. College English teaching, the largest segment of foreign language instruction in Chinese higher education, has long been trapped in dual dilemma: a path dependence on linguistic centralism and a persistent ambiguity of disciplinary identity, which has further escalated its identity crisis. This paper hereby proposes a triple paradigm shift for Chinese College English teaching from the perspective of Country and Regional Studies, encompassing curriculum design, teaching philosophy as well as teacher development. Specifically, the currently existing prevailing curriculum model in China must shift from a “language skill-oriented” approach to a “regional knowledge-oriented” approach, and the currently dominant teaching philosophy must evolve from “communicative competence cultivation” to “inter-cultural competence construction”. Plus, teacher development must also be reoriented from the role of “language drill instructor” to that of “regional studies collaborator”. The paper argues that actively embedding traditional College English teaching into the disciplinary system of Country and Regional Studies constitutes a strategic pathway for resolving its identity crisis and achieving disciplinary reconstruction.

*Keywords:* Country and Regional Studies, College English teaching, paradigm shift, content-language integration, intercultural competence

## Introduction

In 2022, Country and Regional Studies was formally incorporated into the Umbrella of the Catalogue of Disciplines for Graduate Education as a first-level discipline under the category of interdisciplinary studies in Chinese higher education. This institutional breakthrough has been widely recognized as a “significant milestone in the disciplinary construction of Country and Regional Studies with Chinese Characteristics” (Wang, 2023, p. 298). For the Chinese foreign language academic community, which has long grappled with disciplinary identity anxiety or even crisis, this development presents both golden opportunities and grave challenges.

College English teaching, the most extensive and highest-enrollment segment of foreign language instruction practice in Chinese higher education, has been serving millions of non-English-major undergraduates annually. It possesses a stunning “scale effect” that English-major programs cannot ever match. However, amid the growing scholarly enthusiasm for Country and Regional Studies, academic attention has been overwhelmingly concentrated on the transformation of English-major programs, while College English is largely regarded as peripheral to this urgent agenda.

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LIU Xiaoquan, Lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, Guangxi University of Chinese Medicine, Nanning, China.

This perception practically overlooks a fundamental reality in Chinese higher education: The demand for talent in Country and Regional Studies is hierarchically stratified. While top-tier Country and Regional Studies researchers undoubtedly require the elite training provided by foreign language majors, who have always enjoyed the unparalleled language skills, the broader need for compound talents equipped with foundational regional knowledge and international vision must be met through the universal platform of College English instruction. The critical question, therefore, is whether the current English curriculum—predominantly comprising “General English” and oriented toward the College English Test (CET) Band 4 and Band 6—can fulfill this mission.

Accordingly, the central argument of this paper is that College English teaching in China must undergo a paradigm reconstruction from the perspective of Country and Regional Studies. This proposition has three material implications. First, College English should not cling to its narrow identification as “language skill training” but should instead serve as a foundational platform for disseminating knowledge about countries and regions. Second, the “intercultural” objectives of College English must transcend superficial cultural comparisons and progress toward deeper and insightful regional understanding. Finally, College English instructors should not be content with the identity of language teacher or instructor but must extend their professional boundaries towards becoming regional research collaborators.

In view of this, this paper proceeds through the following five sections. It first examines the structural demand Country and Regional Studies place should place on foreign language competence in Chinese higher education, and then analyzes the dual dilemma confronting Chinese College English teaching. Based on this analysis, it delineates the specific pathways for the triple paradigm shifts. Subsequently, it further demonstrates the comparative advantages of College English from the perspective of large-scale talent cultivation. Finally, the paper reaches its conclusion by addressing potential objections and outlining pathways for institutional development for future College English teaching in China.

## **The Disciplinary Rise of Country and Regional Studies and the Response of Foreign Language Education**

### **The Knowledge Production Logic of Country and Regional Studies**

Country and Regional Studies in nature has enjoyed a considerable history within Western academic traditions. It actually can be traced back to the post-World War II when the United States substantially invested in area studies through the National Defense Education Act for its national interests, establishing numerous area research centers explicitly designed to serve its national security imperatives during the Cold War. However, this historical origin has long burdened Country and Regional Studies with the academic positioning of “pragmatic knowledge serving national strategy”, creating an increasingly enduring tension with the ideal of “pure knowledge” (Wang, 2023, p. 300). By contrast, Country and Regional Studies in the Chinese context possesses a distinctive generative logic. In contrast to the existing prevailing Western Area Studies, Chinese Country and Regional Studies has been more explicitly oriented towards serving its nation’s foreign strategy from its very inception. Actually, since its grand strategic planning, namely, the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, China’s demand for systematic knowledge about its global partner countries has surged dramatically. Yet, a long-standing regional knowledge deficit or the absence of systematic overall understanding of the political, social as well as its cultural dimensions of specific countries—has significantly constrained China’s capacity for global governance participation. It is precisely against this backdrop that Country and Regional Studies has been elevated to the status of a first-level discipline at a strategic level for a county.

However, pitifully enough, the knowledge production logic of Country and Regional Studies is not reducible enough to information gathering. Just as Wang (2023) points out, Country and Regional Studies is strikingly characterized by its profoundly interdisciplinary nature, which breaks down the knowledge barriers of traditional disciplines and requires researchers to possess multi-disciplinary or even trans- or inter-disciplinary perspectives (Wang, 2023, p. 302). Hence, a qualified country and regional researcher must not only master the language of the targeted country but also apply the methodologies of political or geo-political science, economics, history, anthropology, and some other concerning disciplines so as to develop a holistic understanding of specific regions or countries. In other words, language should be viewed as an instrument rather than the purpose itself, whereas the essences of regional studies lie in regional knowledge production instead of in the traditional overwhelmingly emphasized linguistic skill demonstration.

Accordingly, this judgment aims at direct implications for Chinese College English teaching: if College English teaching continues to be fixated on teaching students how to ask for directions, order meals, and conduct business negotiations in English, which in nature continue to drive English to serve as the practical instrument for superficial daily cross-cultural communication, a significant but embarrassing enough disjuncture will persist between its practices and the knowledge requirements of Country and Regional Studies.

### **The Response of Foreign Language Disciplines and the Anxiety of English-Major Programs**

Confronted with the disciplinary institutionalization of Country and Regional Studies, the foreign language academic community has responded proactively. Foreign language universities, represented by Beijing Foreign Studies University and Dalian University of Foreign Languages, have taken the lead in implementing curriculum reforms incorporating Country and Regional Studies content within English-major programs.

Based upon research supported by a key project of the National Philosophy and Social Sciences Foundation, Chang (2024a; 2024b) proposed the Content and Language Integration (CLI) pedagogical framework, which moves beyond the traditional English-major curriculum centered on the five micro-language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, constructing instead a curricular structure organized around knowledge—not only stimulates learning motivation more effectively than pure language skills training but also cultivates students’ “exploratory capacity and comprehensive competencies” (Chang, 2024a, p. 5).

This reform initiative demonstrates that “language” and “content” do not stand in opposition; embedding regional knowledge within language instruction is not only feasible but potentially more effective and efficient than the traditional decontextualized language teaching, which justifies its considerable methodological significance. Actually, the CLI framework developed by Chang’s team has accordingly been recognized as a pedagogical innovation distinguished by its distinctive local innovation characteristics (Chang, 2024b, p. 5).

However, it is noteworthy that these reform explorations have primarily occurred at the level of English-major programs. The establishment of Country and Regional Studies as a first-level discipline has exerted direct disciplinary identity pressure on English-major programs: What precisely constitutes their disciplinary affiliation? Is it “English language and Literature” or “Country and Regional Studies”? If English-major programs seek to integrate into Country and Regional Studies, wherein lies their comparative advantage relative to disciplines such as political science, economics, and history?

At the core of these questions above lies “the problem of disciplinary identity”; Wang (2023) characterizes this as the “disciplinary identity expansion of English Language and Literature”, noting that the establishment of

Country and Regional Studies has brought mass “opportunities for foreign language institutions to participate in disciplinary agenda-setting”, but only on the condition that English-major programs must deepen the innovation of their disciplinary knowledge systems and reform their talent cultivation models (Wang, 2023, p. 305). In other words, the opportunity exists, but it will not materialize automatically.

### **College English: The Neglected Dimension of Transformation**

Within all the debates on “the transformation of foreign language disciplines”, College English has still remained almost entirely absent. Scholarly attention in China has been overwhelmingly focused on how English-major programs in current Chinese higher educational institutions should reform, while College English, the instructional sector serving far more non-English major students, has been deemed irrelevant to the disciplinary construction of Country and Regional Studies. This apparent selective neglect reflects multiple cognitive biases: First, the “scale effect” of College English has been obviously overlooked. According to Chinese Ministry of Education statistics, the number of students enrolled in College English courses across Chinese universities reaches several million annually, whereas the total enrollment of English-major programs represents only a much smaller fraction of this figure. If the objective of Country and Regional Studies is to cultivate the large-scale internationally competent talent pool required for China’s increasing participation in global governance and its far surging national interests across the globe, then the universal College English platform undertakes a far more foundational tasks than the elite English-major programs. Second, the “temporal window” of College English has undoubtedly been ignored. For the vast majority of Chinese university students, College English constitutes the only foreign language coursework they will undertake for their undergraduate study years. If foundational training in knowledge of countries and regions is not provided at this crucial stage, the cost of remediation at the later graduate level will increase substantially. In this regard, College English in effect represents the final systematic opportunity for most Chinese students to establish a “regional cognitive framework”. Finally, the “interdisciplinary advantage” of College English has been completely neglected. English-major students’ coursework is highly concentrated in language and literature, whereas students served by College English come from far more diverse disciplines including science and engineering, business and management, law and medicine, and the like. These students have already possessed domain-specific or professional knowledge from their respective professional study fields. If they can acquire foundational training in Country and Regional Studies during their College English coursework, they will be able to perform as more compound talents integrating “language + disciplinary expertise + regional knowledge”, the very precisely the type of talent most urgently needed by Country and Regional Studies fit for the national interests.

Therefore, if the agenda of “foreign language education transformation from the perspective of Country and Regional Studies” remains confined to English-major programs, it can only scratch the tip of the iceberg. The transformation of College English constitutes the truly needed scalable dimension of this educational reform.

## **The Dual Dilemma of College English Teaching**

### **The Path Dependence of Linguistic Centralism**

The core problem confronting College English teaching in China can be briefed as most prevailing “linguistic centralism”, namely, the reduction of English language education to language skills training. This teaching practice tradition or mindset has its own historical origins, but within the current disciplinary ecology, it has become a structural impediment to development.

Currently, this linguistic centralism manifests most directly at the curricular level. College English curricula across Chinese universities are predominantly composed of “English for General Purposes”, with specific skill-oriented courses such as Comprehensive English, Listening and Speaking, Reading, Writing and Translation occupying a dominant position. The implicit design logic of these courses is that students must first secure their mastery of the linguistic instrument. As for the question of what to do with the acquired instrument more often than not can be deferred. The problem, of course, is that the “postponed” pragmatic performance or the so-called “later” often never arrives: Upon completing four semesters of College English, students have typically acquired nothing beyond the CET qualifications and have developed no structured regional knowledge framework (Yan, 2025, p. 3).

Thus, this “language-only” or linguistic-skills-centered instructional model is described in English language teaching research as a “language island” phenomenon. Dominated by this model, learners are scheduled to complete extensive vocabulary memorization and grammar drills on this island, but linguistic symbols are severed from regional cultural contexts, rendering students “unable to grasp the social logic and cultural implications embedded in language” (Yan, 2025, p. 3). One typical or even most prevailing example within the current Chinese foreign language teaching and learning can be cited here: When a student acquires the word democracy but cannot understand its differentiated institutional practices across political systems, or learns the concept of individualism without being able to connect it to America’s political-cultural traditions, this type of language learning is undoubtedly substantively hollow.

Worse still, the examination-oriented instructional approach further compounds this dilemma. The CET Band 4 and Band 6, as China’s nationwide standardized tests, exert an incredibly powerful “backwash effect” on Chinese College English teaching and learning. In such a context where pass rates serve as a de facto hard indicator of teaching quality, instructors are compelled to allocate substantial class hours to test-preparation strategies. Hence, the consequence is that language learning is further narrowed to the cultivation of “test-taking ability”, while regional knowledge, cultural understanding as well as critical thinking ability are systemically marginalized.

So far, Chinese scholarship in foreign language teaching and learning has engaged in systematic reflection on this problem. Researchers have noted that traditional English instruction “focuses exclusively on the transmission of instrumental skills such as vocabulary and grammar, abstracting language from the cultural contexts of specific regions”, with the result that although students can perform “basic linguistic encoding activities”, most of them still remain incapable of “deep insightful cultural understanding” (Yan, 2025, p. 3). All the embarrassment with Chinese College English teaching and learning is precisely the inevitable outcome of this linguistic centralism.

### **Disciplinary Ambiguity and Functional Misalignment**

Another structural dilemma confronting Chinese College English is “disciplinary identity ambiguity”, a most fundamental problem closely tied to its distinctive status within China’s higher education system.

Under the current educational system of China, in terms of disciplinary architecture, College English falls under the first-level discipline of “Foreign Languages and Literature”. In practice, however, College English instruction is largely “decoupled” from the disciplinary construction of Foreign Languages and Literature. The core responsibility of College English instruction is to serve university-wide general foreign language instruction rather than to pursue academic research in the professional field of foreign language and literature studies. This

kind of teaching-oriented positioning has long relegated College English to a marginal position within the existing Chinese educational disciplinary hierarchy.

Accordingly, the more acute problem is “functional misalignment”. “What exactly is the function of College English?” To support students’ disciplinary studies? To cultivate intercultural communicative competence? Only or mostly to ensure students pass the CET? Or to accumulate linguistic capital for future professional development? All these diversified objectives are frequently listed instantaneously in various institutional documents, yet at the operational level, they apparently lack clear prioritization.

This identity ambiguity itself has trapped College English in the predicament of “attempting everything yet achieving depth in nothing”. If its function is designed to “support disciplinary studies” for the students, the course content naturally should be closely aligned with students’ fields of specialization—science and engineering major students studying English for the sake of science and technology and business students studying business English. The teaching and learning reality with China’s College English, however, is that the overwhelming majority of universities implement a “One-size-for-all” standardized instructional model of “unified syllabi, unified textbooks, and unified examinations” across all disciplines. If its function is to “cultivate intercultural competence”, then the coursework should be focused on fostering deep comparative understanding of different cultural regions—yet the “cultural content” in current prevailing textbooks for China’s College English teaching and learning is typically confined to superficial treatments or experience of “festivals, cuisine and taboos”, etc., totally lacking systematic depth.

Therefore, this diffuse positioning of China’s College English has rendered College English particularly passive in the face of the disciplinary demands of Country and Regional Studies, which naturally require deeper, more systematic, and better structured regional knowledge. Pitifully enough, what College English continues to provide is fragmented, superficial, and unstructured linguistic training. The incompatibility between the two is still stunningly structural.

### **Paradigm Shift: From Language Skills Training to Regional Knowledge Initiation**

#### **Curriculum Design: From “Language Skill-Oriented” to “Regional Knowledge-Oriented”**

As to reconstructing the College English paradigm, the primary task is undoubtedly the redesign of the curriculum. The core direction is then a shift from the language skill-oriented approach—in which the curriculum is organized around the five micro language skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation—to a “regional knowledge-oriented” approach, in which the curriculum must be organized centered systematic understanding of specific regions and countries.

However, this reorientation does not entail a wholesale abandonment of language skills; rather, it should involve repositioning the traditional skills training within the innovated overall curricular architecture. In the traditional model, skills training more often than not constitutes the end; while in the reconstructed model, skills training will become the means targeted language performance and competence. Put differently, students are no longer confined to “learning language for the sake of learning language” but are “naturally acquiring linguistic competence in the process of learning regional knowledge”—this is precisely the core proposition of the CLI framework (Chang, 2024a, p. 19; Chang, 2024b, p. 4).

It is noteworthy that curricular reconstruction can proceed through parallel “embedded” and “thematic” approaches.

The embedded approach involves integrating regional knowledge modules within the existing College English courses, without requiring a wholesale dismantling of the current curricular structure. Taking the most prevailing Comprehensive English course as an example, the existing reading selections, which predominantly feature general humanistic themes or topics, can be progressively replaced with academically oriented texts focused on specific countries and regions. A reading on the operation of American federalism”, for instance, can simultaneously serve three pedagogical objectives: Firstly, at the linguistic level, acquisition of relevant terminology and argumentation patterns; secondly, at the knowledge level, understanding of American political structures; and finally, at the cognitive level, comparative analysis of the differing logics of Chinese and American political systems. Comparatively speaking, a single instructional text achieving those three objectives is substantially more efficient than decontextualized mechanical language drills.

As to the thematic approach, it involves developing a series of elective courses oriented toward countries and regions, forming a modular structure of “English for General Purposes” + “Regional Themes”. Accordingly, courses that can be offered include “Societies and Cultures of English-Speaking Countries”, “Survey of Countries Along the Belt and Road”, “Introduction to Country and Regional Studies”, and “Case Studies in Intercultural Communication”. Initial explorations along these lines at selected institutions have yielded evidence that thematic courses can “broaden students’ international horizons” and enhance their “exploratory capacity and comprehensive competencies” (Chang, 2024a, p. 22).

One notable and instructive case is the reform initiatives at Shandong Jianzhu University by introducing interdisciplinary course modules within its College English curriculum: a foundational tier offering Societies and Cultures of English-Speaking Countries and Introduction to Country and Regional Studies; an applied tier offering Intercultural Business Negotiation and Case Studies in Country and Regional Analysis; and an advanced tier offering Research Methods in Country and Regional Studies and International Communication Practice (Yan, 2025, p. 5). This stratified, progressive design better accommodates the cognitive levels and learning needs of students at different stages, establishing a relatively more comprehensive curricular sequence.

### **Teaching Philosophy: From “Communicative Instrument” to “Cultural Understanding”**

Curricular restructuring, in nature, must be accompanied by a renewal of teaching philosophy. If curriculum is designed to address the question of what to learn, teaching philosophy then addresses the question of why to learn.

The dominant philosophy in traditional College English instruction has long been Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), whose core objective can be briefed into the cultivation of learners’ communicative competence. Since its introduction to China back in the 1980s, this approach has made a positive contribution to redressing the so-called ever-prevailing phenomenon of “mute English”. The problem, however, is that competence-oriented instruction tends to reduce language to “an instrument for task completion in the simulated scenario”—asking for directions, ordering meals, conducting business negotiations—rather than the genuine capability to tackle the real communicative problems in the close-to-life contexts. Therefore, the dimension of language as “a window for understanding the world” is substantially diminished.

College English teaching, from the perspective of Country and Regional Studies, needs to shift from the cultivation of the “communicative instrument” to the construction of “cultural understanding”. The theoretical foundation for this shift lies in the recognition that the nature of language is not that of an “encoding system” but of a “meaning-making system”. When learning a language, learners are in effect learning a “way of seeing the

world". Without understanding the political logics, social structures, and cultural traditions of English-speaking countries, it is almost impossible to genuinely understand the English language. This is not a sheer abstract theoretical claim, but rather, it can be operationalized into pedagogical strategies. The "multidimensional cultural interaction" model proposed by Yan (2025) merits special attention: Through methods such as "immersive cultural scenarios" and "case analysis", instructional activities can be transformed from "knowledge transmission" to "interactive inquiry" (Yan, 2025, p. 4). Concretely, classroom activities such as simulated international conference negotiations, intercultural conflict case analyses, and policy debates can be designed to enable students to deepen their understanding of specific regional cultures through dynamic participation.

A typical and concrete example may be cited here as defending evidence for further exploration: An instructor selects the theme, China-U.S. climate policy divergence, for the in-class instruction. Students are first encouraged to read all the official policy documents and statements from both countries (linguistic input), and then work in groups to systematically identify the positions of both sides on issues such as responsibility attribution, emissions reduction pathways, and financing mechanisms (linguistic output). Throughout the instructional process, language learning consistently serves the deep understanding of the two involved countries' policy logics, rather than the traditional mechanical, decontextualized vocabulary and sentence pattern drills.

Zhang and Jia (2024) have distilled three dimensions of regional culture course development based upon their pedagogical practice in the course *A Survey of English-Speaking Countries*, namely, "knowledge transmission, cognitive training and value cultivation" (p. 9). This framework possesses more broad applicability: Knowledge transmission addresses the question of "What to know", cognitive training "how to think", and value cultivation "how to evaluate"! All the three dimensions are indispensable and together constitute a logically meaningful and complete learning cycle.

### **Teacher Development: From "Language Instructor" to "Regional Research Collaborator"**

The most challenging dimension of paradigm transformation of China' College English teaching lies in the transformation of people now that the beliefs, competencies, and professional identities of instructor ultimately determine whether any reform can be effectively implemented.

Hence, the College English instructor community confronts distinctive transformational challenges. On the one hand, the disciplinary backgrounds of the vast majority of College English instructors are specialized in linguistics, literature, or foreign language education, while they lack systematic training in Country and Regional Studies. On the other hand, College English instructors generally shoulder heavy teaching loads, with weekly contact hours frequently reaching 12 to 16 or even much higher, leaving extremely limited time for academic research and professional development.

Acknowledging these difficulties, however, does not imply that transformation of the paradigm of College English teaching is infeasible. The key lies in providing instructors with viable pathways for the transformation rather than demanding that all instructors "reach the destination in a single step" by becoming regional studies specialists.

A more realistic direction for this transformation is proposed as follows: College English instructor should take their career transition from "independent language instructors" to "collaborators within regional research teams". Under this role positioning, instructors' core competency is not to conduct original regional research themselves but to develop the capacity to: first, understand the fundamental problematics and methodologies of Country and Regional Studies; second, transform regional knowledge into instructional materials and cases

suitable for classroom use; and third, establish collaborative relationships with colleagues engaged in political science, economics, history, and related disciplines within their institutions, “translating” their research findings into content usable in the College English classroom.

Experience of the key project from Chang’s (2024b) team indicates that teaching reforms guided by the CLI framework, through the “introduction of project-based teaching methods, have promoted transformations in pedagogical methods and approaches” (Chang, 2024b, p. 6). This case further implies that instructors need not become almighty experts in every domain (which is almost impossible), but they need to master the methodology of “teaching language through content”. Once equipped with this methodology, instructors can readily transfer their teaching design capacities across different regional themes—teaching “American politics” one day and “Brexit” the next, with the core pedagogical design competencies remaining consistent.

Therefore, faculty development, at the institutional level, requires “parallel recruitment and cultivation”. On the one hand, doctoral graduates with research backgrounds in Country and Regional Studies should be recruited into College English teaching teams; on the other hand, existing teaching staffs and instructors should be offered with sufficient support in pursuing visiting fellowships in political science, economics, and history departments, or in participating in research projects at Country and Regional Studies centers, thereby enhancing their regional knowledge literacy through interdisciplinary practice.

### Conclusion

The elevation of Country and Regional Studies to a first-level discipline should not be exclusively a concern for English-major programs but also equally constitute a transformative opportunity for China’s College English teaching. This paper has argued that College English teaching must undergo a threefold shift—in curriculum design from “language skill-oriented” to “regional knowledge-oriented”; in teaching philosophy from “communicative instrument cultivation” to “cultural understanding construction”; and in teacher development from “language instructor” to “regional research collaborator”.

The proposed paradigm reconstruction of China’s College English teaching is neither a wholesale repudiation of the instrumental value of English nor a demand that College English instructors transform overnight into the advocated regional studies specialists. Rather, it should be viewed as a strategic repositioning: Recognizing that College English in China, by virtue of its unparalleled scale and its unique position at the intersection of language education and multidisciplinary talent cultivation, constitutes the most consequential platform for realizing the talent cultivation objectives of Country and Regional Studies in Chinese higher education. Actively embedding College English into disciplinary system of Country and Regional Studies is not merely a matter of curriculum reform; it should be a strategic choice for breaking through disciplinary identity ambivalence and achieving a more meaningful disciplinary reconstruction.

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