

An Investigation into College English Teaching and 4C Skills Development: A Case Study of Higher Education in China

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Abstract. The Chinese college English Curriculum continues to face numerous challenges in developing the 4C skills (creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration). This study examines the current state of 4C skills development within the college English curriculum by investigating students' learning experiences and teachers' teaching practices. Concerning data collection and analysis, a questionnaire was administered to 400 undergraduates from four different colleges and universities in China to obtain descriptive statistics. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather views and experiences from instructors ($n = 5$) and students ($n = 7$), using thematic analysis. The research findings indicate that current English courses struggle to effectively cultivate the 4C skills among students, primarily due to an overly simplistic assessment framework, misaligned course objectives with student needs, and inadequate institutional incentives. Drawing on constructivist learning theory and competency-based education (CBE), this study develops an analytical framework to identify underlying causes and propose countermeasures. Theoretically, it establishes an analytical framework integrating constructivism and competency-based theory. Practically, it explores the adaptability and challenges of localising the 4C skills framework, offering actionable reform insights for higher education administrators and teaching staff.

Keywords: College English Teaching (CET); current status; 4C skills development; 21st century skills; higher education in China

1. Introduction

Against a background of globalisation and rapid development of digitalisation, the core objective of education has long since shifted from pure knowledge transfer to comprehensive competency development (González-Guerra & Pérez-

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Murueta, 2025). The 21st-century competencies have become an important direction of international education reform, in which the “4C skills” (creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration) have become the core competencies of education, supporting learners’ ability to cope with the challenges of a complex society, cross-cultural communication and innovation (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). With the transformation of education systems in various countries, how to effectively develop students’ 4C skills in different disciplines and curriculum systems has become a common focus of educational research and teaching practice (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2015).

In the field of international education research, language teaching is regarded as one of the most important ways to develop 4C skills (Shadiev & Wang, 2022; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). It has been shown that communicative and task-driven pedagogy (such as task-based learning and project-based learning) are effective in promoting students' communication and cooperation skills, as well as stimulating creative and critical thinking (Rehman et al., 2024). In recent years, scholars have also attempted to combine the 4C skills framework with language course objectives, classroom activity design and performance assessment, emphasising that language learning should not be confined to the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, but should be developed into a comprehensive competence cultivation process that places equal emphasis on thinking and expression (Rao, 2023).

In Chinese tertiary education, College English Teaching (CET) is in a critical period of transition from “test-oriented to core literacy-oriented”. The Guidelines for College English Teaching (Rao, 2023) clearly put forward that college English should focus on the cultivation of thinking quality, innovation consciousness and intercultural communication ability on the basis of improving language proficiency, which is highly compatible with the core concept of the 4C skills framework. In recent years, scholars in China have proposed new ideas and methods for reforming the college English curriculum (Wang & She, 2024).

However, in general, the approach still focuses on conceptual discussions. The development of 4C skills and their constraints in specific teaching contexts has not yet been clearly mapped out due to a lack of empirical analyses. Moreover, research on the 4C skills framework in language education is still fragmented. Most focus on a single competency dimension, particularly communication and collaboration skills, while there is relatively little empirical research into the synergistic development of all four competencies (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023).

In addition, the context of English language teaching in Chinese colleges and universities is unique, involving large class sizes, an imbalanced faculty and the need for undergraduates to prepare for standardised exams such as the College English Test Bands 4 and 6, and the Graduate School Entrance Examination (Mu, 2025). This may affect the development of 4C skills, but systematic studies in this area are still insufficient.

Based on this, the aim of this study is to examine the current status of 4C skill development in college English curricula systematically, using a descriptive survey, and to identify the major challenges instructors face in practice. Theoretically, by integrating constructivist and CBE (competency-based education) theories, the study constructs a more comprehensive analytical framework, overcoming the limitations of a single perspective. In practice, this study focuses on the reality of large class teaching and resource inequality in China, with a view to localising and embedding the 4C skills framework, thereby providing empirical references to the Chinese context for relevant pedagogical reforms in non-native English-speaking countries.

Building upon the above discussion, this study proposes the following three questions:

RQ1: What is the current status of College English teaching in China?

RQ2: What is the current status of the development of 4C skills in College English teaching in China?

RQ3: What are the challenges of developing 4C skills in the College English curriculum?

2. Literature Review

2.1 4C skills and the 21st century skills framework

To gain a clearer understanding of the 4C skills in the context of language learning in higher education, it is important to consider them in the broader context of a 21st-century skills framework. Over the past several decades, international organisations and scholars have proposed numerous frameworks aimed at defining the key competencies required for students to thrive in modern society. Examples include the OECD Key Competencies Framework, the ATC21S Framework and the P21 Framework (Griffin et al., 2015; OECD, 2005; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2009).

The 21st Century Learning Framework is notable for its practical implementation and accumulation of cases. Since its inception, it has been applied bottom-up across 21 US states for over two decades. This extensive practical foundation has enabled the framework to exert significant influence on international educational reform. Within this framework, learning and innovation skills are positioned as a core domain with its four core elements distilled as the 4C skills: creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

The dimensions of 4C skills do not exist in isolation but form an interconnected, mutually reinforcing organic whole (Stanikzai, 2023; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). For example, creativity exhibits a significant positive correlation with critical thinking. Individuals who possess strong critical thinking often demonstrate higher levels of creativity, potentially because critical thinking helps individuals break through mental rigidity, stimulating innovative ideas (Eggers et al., 2017). In addition, research indicates that the frequency of communication is positively correlated with collaboration, and enhancing communication helps promote collaboration among individuals and institutions (Plotner et al., 2020). In turn,

collaboration-based learning improves students' oral communication skills in language education (Ingrid, 2019).

Based on the above discussion, it would be better in future research to investigate 4C skills as an integrated whole and explore their synergistic effects. Thus, it can provide more systematic theoretical support for developing 21st-century talents. Therefore, integrating the 4C skills into college English teaching is not only aligned with China's policy shift towards core competency-oriented education, but also reflects widely recognised international educational principles.

Despite the increasing maturity of the 4C skills framework, existing research still exhibits notable limitations. Firstly, although the 4C skills are regarded as a holistic competency set, existing studies in language education tend to concentrate on one or two dimensions, particularly communication or collaboration, thereby overlooking the synergistic development mechanisms among the four skills. Compared with many other contexts, college English teaching in China possesses unique contextual characteristics, such as oversized classes (exceeding 100 students) and a strong score-driven orientation. However, current research considering these localised factors is still limited.

Moreover, most domestic research focuses on macro-level concepts, with insufficient systematic investigation into operational aspects, such as classroom activities and teacher-student interactions. As a result, these gaps impede the transformation of pedagogical theory into classroom practice, making the pathway of developing 4C skills in China unclear. This research addresses these gaps by systematically investigating the current status and challenges of 4C skills integration in college English teaching, generating evidence-based implications for pedagogical improvement and curriculum innovation.

2.2 Constructivist theory

Constructivist theory emphasises that the essence of learning is a process of constructing meaning through interaction and in context. Moreover, requiring knowledge relies on learners' experience, exploration, and reflection (Fosnot, 2013; Piaget & Inhelder, 1972). Such an essence requires that teaching not only transforms knowledge but also shifts to learners' deep participation, which means that learners' higher-order thinking skills can be improved through inquiry-based activities.

Currently, the principles of constructivism are widely applied in language education, encompassing active knowledge construction, contextualised learning, scaffolding, and social interaction (Arega & Hunde, 2025). In existing literature, a large body of evidence suggests that instruction based on constructivism plays a positive role in improving each of the 4C skills. For example, Gorobet (2024) argued that integrating constructivist principles with digital learning platforms can effectively improve students' creativity and English proficiency. The research conducted by Le and Nguyen (2024) highlights that a learning environment with social interaction and problem-driven learning enhances students' critical thinking by stimulating them to question, analyse, and evaluate. Additionally,

under the guidance of constructivism, introducing interactive technology into the classroom enhances students' learning engagement, reduces students' anxiety about speaking, and then improves their language application as well as cross-cultural communication. What's more, Wang (2014) explored the use of a wiki platform in EFL writing classrooms.

The findings showed that cooperative writing activities boosted students' confidence in writing and their group collaboration skills. In general, constructivism provides a theoretical foundation and practical direction for integrating 4C skills into English courses. However, existing research focuses more on examining how constructivist principles influence individual skills; the exploration of improving the whole set of 4C skills is scarce, particularly in the context of developing regions.

2.3 Competency-Based Education

Competency-Based Education (CBE), as an outcomes-oriented and individual-centred theory, highlights that learners can acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes in authentic contexts, including group work, process evaluation, and flexible learning experiences (Levine & Patrick, 2019). In language education, CBE drives a shift from "mastering language knowledge" to "using language in practice effectively", emphasising the language's communicative function and practical value (Csajbok-Twerefou, 2022). This shift aligns with the cultivation of 4C skills and provides a theoretical foundation for synergistic development between English proficiency and core competencies.

Currently, research exploring the relationship between CBE and the 4C skills as a whole framework is limited. However, there are studies on CBE and on specific 4C skills, such as critical thinking and communication. For example, Ukrainian scholars Red'ko et al. (2023) introduced authentic tasks in language teaching, establishing a context in which students can use language naturally to solve practical problems. They argued that such an approach enhances students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. CBE also emphasises the integration of assessment and teaching.

It posits that clear assessment criteria should be established, helping students understand what abilities they should possess and how to demonstrate them. Especially in language learning, continuous formative feedback can guide students to adjust their expressive patterns, thereby improving their communication skills (Atuhura & Nambi, 2024). In addition, the personalised learning pathways and contextualised learning activities such as project-based tasks and collaborative inquiry advocated by CBE offer practical guidance for achieving a deeper integration of language proficiency and 4C skills in English teaching (Alt et al., 2023).

Overall, research has shown that the core value of CBE in foreign language education lies in promoting students' holistic development across knowledge, skills, and attitudes through competency-oriented curriculum design and authentic learning tasks. Such an approach enhances the authenticity, functional

value, and social adaptability of language learning (Csajbok-Twerefou, 2022; Red'ko et al., 2023). However, research on the integration of the CBE into college English teaching and the cultivation of 4C skills remains underexplored, suggesting a need for more extensive research.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

To systematically analyse the current state of 4C skill development in college English teaching, constructivist theory and CBE were integrated to form a dual-dimensional framework that aligns the teaching process with learning outcomes in this study. The rationale behind integrating the two theories is grounded in the idea that constructivism alone may lead to an excessive focus on the learning process, while overlooking measurable competency outcomes.

Conversely, a purely competency-based approach may risk a mechanical focus on assessable skills and neglect the inherently social and interactive nature of competency development. The synergy between the two precisely compensates for each other's blind spots when analysing complex pedagogical phenomena. This integrated framework does not simply juxtapose the two theories. Instead, it assigns them distinct and complementary analytical functions. In summary, constructivist theory primarily underpins a critical examination of the teaching process. It directs our attention towards whether the classroom environment supports active learning and fosters the development of 4C skills.

Meanwhile, competency-based education focuses on analysing teaching objectives and assessment systems to evaluate whether college English courses are competency-oriented, and to what extent existing teaching and assessment methods contribute to the formation and enhancement of students' 4C skills. The integration of these two approaches enables this study to conduct a systematic and comprehensive investigation into the current state of 4C skills cultivation within college English teaching, examining both the process and the objectives.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This research employed a case study method to explore in depth the current status of college English teaching and 4C skills development in China, analyse the problems behind these phenomena and their causes, and propose targeted countermeasures.

A combination of questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews was employed to collect data (Creswell, 2015). The questionnaire survey was employed to gather extensive sample data, thereby ascertaining the current state of college English teaching and students' overall perceptions regarding the development of 4C skills. Semi-structured interviews, meanwhile, served to gain deeper insights into the authentic experiences of both teachers and students within the teaching and learning process, revealing the specific challenges encountered in developing 4C skills.

The complementary use of quantitative and qualitative data provided both generalisable evidence and in-depth interpretations for the research conclusions,

thereby enhancing the study's credibility and validity. Concurrently, the study strictly adhered to ethical standards. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed of the research objectives and intended use of the data, with anonymity employed to safeguard individual privacy and rights.

3.2 Participants

This study selected undergraduates from central China as its research sample, primarily based on considerations of research feasibility and regional representativeness. On the one hand, the researchers possess teaching and research resources within this region, facilitating data acquisition. On the other hand, the diversity of higher education institutions in central China, encompassing both comprehensive key universities and local applied institutions, enables a comprehensive reflection of the current state of college English teaching and the development of 4C skills across different tiers of higher education. Additionally, the region occupies a central position nationally in terms of economic and educational development, demonstrating strong typicality and representativeness.

A total of 400 undergraduates who had taken the college English course voluntarily participated in the questionnaire survey. They were from Year 1 to Year 4, covering a wide range of majors and a relatively balanced gender ratio (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	217	54.25
	Female	183	45.75
	Freshman	117	29.25
Grade	Sophomore	245	61.25
	Junior	33	8.25
	Senior	5	1.25
Major	Humanities and Social sciences	60	15
	Engineering and Technology	263	65.75
	Natural Sciences	77	19.25

To ensure that the interviewees represented diverse backgrounds and to collect more comprehensive perspectives, 12 participants were selected through purposive sampling to take part in the semi-structured interviews. The number of interviewees was based on the principle of data saturation, which means that when the newly acquired data no longer provide new information or insights, the data collection can be stopped (Chowdhury et al., 2022). Specifically, seven students (STU01-STU07) and five English teachers (TCH01-TCH05) were interviewed. The student participants came from different grades and majors, while the teachers varied in teaching experience and roles. Detailed background information is presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Student interviewees' profile

Code	Grade	Gender	Major
STU01	Female	Freshman	Engineering & Technology
STU02	Male	Freshman	Natural Sciences
STU03	Female	Sophomore	Humanities and Social sciences
STU04	Female	Sophomore	Natural Sciences
STU05	Male	Sophomore	Engineering & Technology
STU06	Female	Junior	Humanities and Social sciences
STU07	Male	Junior	Humanities and Social sciences

Note: STU means student respondents.

Table 3: Teacher interviewees' profile

Code	Gender	Teaching Period	Education Background	Title	Administrative position
TCH01	Female	3 Years	Master's degree	Assistant Lecturer	/
TCH02	Female	8 Years	Doctoral student	Senior Lecturer	/
TCH03	Female	14 Years	Doctor's degree	Senior Lecturer	Curriculum Manager
TCH04	Male	18 Years	Master's degree	Associate Professor	Vice-Dean
TCH05	Female	20 Years	Doctoral student	Senior Lecturer	Curriculum Manager

Note: TCH means teacher respondents.

3.3 Instruments

In this study, the questionnaire was designed and developed grounded in the research objectives and the 4C skills framework, integrating competency-based education with constructivist pedagogical principles. It mainly included two sections: the current state of college English teaching and the cultivation of 4C skills. The first section examined classroom teaching characteristics and course evaluation, aiming to analyse the foundational conditions for developing 4C skills. The second section evaluated the actual integration of the concept of creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration into English teaching.

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, five experts (three in applied linguistics and two in education) were invited to review the items in terms of content relevance, logical coherence, and alignment with the research objectives. Following experts' feedback, the questionnaire was revised through several rounds of review, with redundant items removed and wording adjusted. A final version was obtained comprising 13 items (three for demographic information, six for the current state of college English teaching, and four items for the development of 4C skills). Subsequently, a pilot test was conducted to assess the

questionnaire's clarity and comprehensibility, with the respondents (N=30) randomly selected from a university in central China. Accordingly, reliability was tested through statistical analysis. Results indicated an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeding 0.70, demonstrating good internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978).

As for interviews, a protocol was designed to complement and further elaborate on the findings of the questionnaire survey. After evaluation by the same five experts who reviewed the questionnaire, the interview protocol underwent several stages of refinement, resulting in two sets: the first for undergraduates and containing 15 questions in three parts and the second for instructions with 14 questions in four sections.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

When collecting the quantitative data, an online questionnaire platform was employed, yielding 400 valid responses. Following that, descriptive statistics and variance analyses (independent samples t-tests and analysis of variance) were conducted using SPSS 27.0 (Creswell, 2015). In terms of qualitative data collection, online telephone interviews and in-person face-to-face interviews were flexibly conducted based on participants' circumstances, with each session lasting 30 to 40 minutes. Interview recordings were transcribed and organised into text by the researcher using NVivo 14.0 after the interviews.

The text was then systematically coded and thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. To ensure coding reliability, two researchers independently coded selected transcripts and then unified the coding framework through discussion. Themes extracted from teacher and student interviews were cross-referenced with questionnaire data to achieve triangulation, enhancing the credibility of conclusions. Furthermore, preliminary themes were shared with selected participants for validation, with necessary revisions made based on feedback to improve analytical validity.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Current status of college English teaching

The current status of college English teaching is mainly presented from two aspects. On the one hand, it focuses on classroom instructional features; on the other hand, it examines the evaluation of the college English curriculum.

4.1.1 Classroom instructional features

The classroom instructional features include three items: the difficulty of teaching content, the classroom atmosphere, and the frequency of English practice, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Findings for classroom instructional features

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Difficulty of the teaching content	Simple and easy to master	56	14
	Moderate and acceptable	277	69.25
	Too hard to follow	67	16.75
	Active and dynamic	139	34.75
Atmosphere in class	Negative	220	55
	Antagonistic	41	10.25
The frequency of practising English in class	Very High	218	54.5
	Medium	160	40
	Very low	22	5.5

Specifically, the difficulty of the teaching content is uneven, making it difficult for students at different levels to adapt. The survey data show that nearly 70% of the students believe the difficulty of the classroom teaching content is moderate. However, there is polarisation: 16.75% of the students reflect that the content is too difficult, while 14% criticise the teaching content as replicating the knowledge of the senior secondary school.

Student interviews further evidenced this phenomenon. For example, STU04 reflected: *"The teacher spoke so fast and with so much content that I couldn't keep up with their thoughts"*. STU01 and STU03 bluntly stated that, *"Classes are all about grammar and vocabulary. I have learnt all the grammar in high school, so I can't get interested in the classes"*. Regarding the challenge of adapting teaching difficulty, this was also raised in teacher interviews. One teacher (TCH04) noted, *"There are significant disparities in students' English proficiency upon enrolment, yet all non-English major students use the same textbook. It is difficult for us to cater to the learning needs of every student."* The interview data corroborate questionnaire results, indicating that both teachers and students recognise the imbalance in course difficulty.

For the class atmosphere, more than half of the respondents (54.23%) stated it was negative and 41 students (9.62%) reported there was an antagonistic atmosphere in the class. Moreover, the questionnaire examined the frequency of English practice in the classroom. While approximately 54.5% of students reported a very high frequency, nearly half of the respondents (45.5%) indicated a medium or even very low frequency. This suggests that a significant portion of students may be dissatisfied with the current opportunities for in-class English practice. The subsequent student interviews provided compelling corroboration for the phenomena. Several students stated: *"The classroom feels dull and lifeless. (STU02-04)"*

In summary, three issues currently exist in college English teaching: firstly, teaching content is out of step with students' existing knowledge levels; secondly, classroom interaction is insufficient, making it difficult to engage students; thirdly,

opportunities for students to practise and apply the target language are severely limited.

4.1.2 Evaluation of the college English curriculum

As shown in Table 5, the vast majority of students reported that summative assessment was the primary form of assessment currently used. Regarding the effectiveness of the current evaluation, more than half of the students acknowledged that the existing assessment system reflected their actual learning proficiency to some extent. However, a substantial proportion argued that the current evaluation approach could not provide helpful learning feedback and needs improvement.

Table 5: Evaluation of the college English curriculum

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Current evaluation method	Summative assessment, mainly based on final paper exam.	137	34
	Process assessment, mainly based on daily performance.	24	6
	Summative assessment, final exam plus daily performance.	239	59
The effectiveness of current evaluation	Can help me know my real level and how to improve English.	227	56.75
	I can only vaguely know my level, but not the specific problem.	152	38
The attitude for current assessment	The assessment cannot provide any feedback to me, I only know the result.	21	5.25
	Very reasonable.	171	42.75
	Need to improve.	219	54.75
	unreasonable	10	2.5

At the same time, interview data from teachers corroborated these findings. Most instructors pointed out that college English courses predominantly employed the assessment structure of “*a combination of continuous assessment scores and final examination scores, with the final exam typically accounting for 60% or more of the overall mark*” (TCH03-05). Students’ interview responses also supported this view. Under the current assessment system, students tend to focus more on the final examination. For instance, STU05 stated, “*Grades are primarily determined by the final exam. If a student fails the exam, all scores from regular performance become invalid...almost nobody really cares about the class performance*”. Student STU02 added, “*The assessment seems merely a procedural requirement to fulfil teaching duties. It offers little help for my personal development*”.

Overall, current college English courses continue to prioritise summative assessment, placing excessive emphasis on measurable outcomes while neglecting the importance of the learning process and formative assessment. This tendency reflects the imbalance identified by Black and Wiliam (1998) between “assessing for learning” and “assessing learning”, which means that instructors

focus more on grading results than on using assessment to support and promote learning.

To investigate variations in students' perceptions of college English teaching across different demographic variables, this study employed independent samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to statistically examine student feedback regarding classroom engagement, practice opportunities, teaching difficulty, and assessment effectiveness, categorised by gender, discipline and year group.

Results indicate that no significant differences were observed across any dimensions, suggesting that students from different groups share broadly consistent perceptions of classroom teaching and assessment practices. This homogeneity may be attributed to the uniform teaching environment within the sample institution, where minimal variations in curriculum content, classroom activities and assessment methods across year groups and disciplines likely contributed to convergent perceptions (Chen et al., 2023).

4.2 Current status of 4C skills development in college English teaching

In terms of the development of 4C skills, more than 60% of the students under each item of the questionnaire indicated that their teachers consciously integrated the training of 4C skills into the curriculum (as shown in Table 6). Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that while instructors generally acknowledge the importance of developing students' 4C skills, implementing them effectively in the classroom remains a challenge. For example, TCH05 said, "*The textbook we selected has a section on critical thinking in each unit, which I would explain to the students. But I'm not sure how effective it is.*" TCH04, on the other hand, stated, "*I would ask a question and have students discuss it from multiple perspectives, but I don't know how to guide them towards deeper thinking. I'm not sure if this approach is effective*".

Table 6: The current situation of 4C skills development in college English teaching

Items	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Do teachers intentionally foster creativity in English classes?	Often	277	69.25
	Sometimes	117	29.25
	Seldom	6	1.5
Do teachers intentionally foster critical thinking in English classes?	Often	256	64
	Sometimes	129	32.25
	Seldom	15	3.75
Do teachers intentionally foster communication skills in English classes?	Often	293	73.25
	Sometimes	102	25.5
	Seldom	5	1.25
Do teachers intentionally foster collaboration skills in English classes?	Often	279	69.75
	Sometimes	114	28.5
	Seldom	7	1.75

Beyond descriptive analysis, this study further conducted grouped comparative analyses based on variables such as gender, discipline and grade to explore differences in students' perceptions regarding the development of 4C skills within college English classrooms. Findings indicate that differences between groups were generally insignificant overall, suggesting that students share similar views on the extent to which teachers integrate 4C skills into their teaching.

4.3 Challenges in developing 4C skills in college English curriculum

4.3.1 Misalignment between teaching objectives and learning needs

Analysis of interviews with instructors and students reveals a significant disconnect between the objectives of college English courses and students' actual needs. This is prominently reflected in the widespread student disengagement, characterised by low classroom participation and limited motivation, which suggests deficiencies in the course's value and practical relevance. Students elaborated on this issue during the interviews. STU01 reported, "*Many classmates don't care about the class. They focus on practising for the CET-4 or CET-6 because the lessons don't help with the exam*". STU02 made similar comments, "*College English classes are just for catching up on assignments from other courses. Whether you listen or not doesn't really matter*".

Meanwhile, teachers also expressed their concerns during the interviews. For instance, TCH05 stated, "*I noticed that some students ignored the lesson and worked on English tests in the back row. They may believe doing practice tests is more beneficial than attending the class*". TCH02 further explained, "*Passing CET-4 matters a lot. A major issue now is that while the curriculum emphasises quality education, assessment still focuses solely on scores*".

Overall, despite explicit educational policies mandating the development of core competencies through English instruction, the learning motivation of most students remains overwhelmingly focused on exam preparation. This reflects the current disconnect between the advanced competency objectives of university English education and the utilitarian demands of exam-oriented learning.

4.3.2 The current teacher evaluation system constrains pedagogical innovation

Findings from teacher interviews suggest that a research-oriented evaluation system for teachers serves as a major barrier to instructional innovation in fostering 4C skills. Although teachers widely acknowledge the importance of cultivating students' 4C skills, weak institutional incentives make it difficult for them to devote sufficient effort to reforming teaching methods. Consequently, this undermines the effective implementation of 4C skill development in classroom practice.

In the interview, Teacher TCH03 remarked, "*Amongst the myriad administrative tasks, teaching is the most manageable, unless one encounters inspections by administrators or specialists*". Teacher TCH05 directly highlighted the absence of incentive mechanisms, "*Teaching innovation demands additional energy and time, yet educators who dedicate themselves to their lessons receive no tangible recognition for their considerable efforts*".

This indicates that, within the current evaluation framework, teaching innovation is perceived as an extra burden requiring high input but yielding low returns. Therefore, the heavy emphasis on research output in promotion and performance evaluations leads to an imbalance between teachers' instructional efforts and their rewards, making it difficult to sustain motivation for innovative teaching.

5. Discussion

Based on the research findings, an in-depth discussion will be conducted to analyse the causes of the current phenomena and propose corresponding strategies.

5.1 Current status of college English teaching

Regarding research question one, the analysis primarily focuses on two aspects: classroom instruction and the assessment system. In terms of classroom instruction, course content is disconnected from students' language proficiency, the classroom atmosphere is constrained and less engaging, and opportunities for active language practice are insufficient. These results align with previous research, suggesting that similar problems exist in many developing regions, such as Africa and Central Asia (Akramy et al., 2022; Atuhura & Nambi, 2024).

Drawing on existing literature and interview insights, these problems mainly stem from oversized classes, where teachers frequently resort to uniform, lecture-based instruction, failing to accommodate individuals' differences (Loughlin, 2024). Evidence from teacher interviews further validates the constraints of large-class teaching. As TCH05 remarked, "*when class sizes surpass one hundred, it is nearly impossible for teachers to reach every student, which often disrupts the pacing of instruction*".

Although differentiated instruction is advocated (Tomlinson, 2014), in oversized classes, instructional activities and teaching materials are still largely designed to cater to the "average level" (Li, 2021; Xu et al., 2022). Limited instructional time prompts instructors to adopt lecture-based methods to fulfil teaching objectives, which in turn leads to further reductions in classroom interaction and practice opportunities (Hornsby & Osman, 2014).

From the perspective of constructivist theory, if instructors primarily lecture to the class, it contradicts the principle that students construct meanings actively through interaction and reflection (Piaget & Inhelder, 1972). Additionally, when instructional design does not align with students' cognitive level, they struggle to construct meaning, which affects their motivation and leads to a poor learning outcome (Vygotsky, 1978).

To address this problem, it is necessary to introduce emerging technologies to optimise the teaching mode. For example, employing ChatGPT in class helps meet students' diverse needs and realise personalised learning (Ampo et al., 2025). Additionally, online interactive platforms, such as Kahoot! can be incorporated to facilitate quick classroom polls and quizzes. The learning management system, such as iSmart, can be used for an English course to establish a closed-loop

participation system spanning pre-class, in-class, and post-class activities. (Jia et al., 2025). These technologies are promising for enhancing classroom interaction and improving student engagement.

Secondly, in terms of the assessment system, results indicate that the evaluation relied primarily on examination scores and summative assessments. Such a single-dimensional assessment model not only fails to comprehensively evaluate students' English proficiency and core competencies but also lacks the effectiveness to promote teaching and learning (French et al., 2024). During the interviews, students also mentioned that "*the current assessment provides no valuable feedback*".

This suggests that the educational function of assessment in college English courses is terribly missing. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), a sound assessment system enables the improvement of students' learning motivation, encourages students to reflect, and enhances learning quality. However, the current method of assessment cannot deliver meaningful insights into students' learning progress. Consequently, they cannot identify their study problems and adjust their learning strategies, accordingly, let alone develop their higher order thinking skills (French et al., 2024).

From the perspective of competency-based education (CBE) theory, a system dominated by summative assessment deviates from its core principle. Such an approach fails to provide continuous feedback and lacks authentic tasks to foster students' higher order thinking skills (Alt et al., 2023). In contrast, formative assessment provides timely feedback during the learning process and helps cultivate students' core competencies.

Therefore, advancing the reform of the assessment system and strengthening formative assessment have become urgent tasks in the reform of college English courses (Zhang, 2024). To counteract students' excessive score, focus under the current exam-oriented evaluation system, college English teaching should increase the weight of process-based assessment and shift evaluation towards learning and skill development. In accordance with the requirements for diversified assessment outlined in China's Education Modernisation 2035 Plan (Hou, 2025), curriculum evaluation should expand beyond singular summative examinations to adopt more authentic and diagnostic approaches.

Specifically, performance assessment should be integrated into classroom teaching, evaluating students' comprehensive application of language and 4C skills through authentic contexts such as project tasks and presentation reports. Concurrently, a multi-source assessment mechanism should be adopted, combining student self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher evaluation to enhance students' agency and collaborative awareness. Furthermore, establishing assessment rubrics closely aligned with the 4C skills will render evaluation criteria more operational, ensuring assessment outcomes provide direct feedback on students' development in creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration.

5.2 Current 4C skills development in college English teaching

This section addresses the second research question, examining the current state of 4C skills development. The results suggest that while teachers generally acknowledge the importance of 4C skills and attempt to integrate them into lessons, the implementation remains inadequate, resulting in limited outcomes. This finding is consistent with Alharbi (2024), who also reported a similar situation in developing students' comprehensive competencies. This situation arises primarily because teachers lack sufficient abilities in developing the 4C skills from understanding to practical application.

Firstly, at the cognitive level, teachers often lack a clear conceptual understanding of each competency. Prior research suggests that only when teachers fully grasp the essence of 4C skills and their interrelationships can they design coherent and effective instructional activities to foster these competencies in students (Haug & Mork, 2021; Varas et al., 2023). Unfortunately, at the operational level, teachers also lack concrete methodological guidance. During the interviews, instructors repeatedly mentioned that they *"did not know how to integrate the 4C skills into teaching"*. For instance, TCH03 stated, *"I am not sure how to design effective classroom activities. I really hope to receive some training or expert guidance"*.

From a constructivist standpoint, teachers are expected to scaffold learning effectively to gradually develop students' abilities within the zone of proximal development (Arega & Hunde, 2025). However, this study reveals that teachers lack a clear understanding of the essence of 4C skills. Without this foundational knowledge, how can they accurately identify students' developmental needs and provide instruction that genuinely supports 4C skill development? As a result, although current instruction often integrates 4C elements at a superficial level, it remains challenging to facilitate students' internalisation of these competencies.

Therefore, to ensure the implementation of 4C skills development in college English teaching, it is necessary to enhance teachers' capabilities in course design and instructional management. Firstly, continuous professional development training should be introduced to help English teachers gain a deeper understanding of the 4C skills and the corresponding pedagogical strategies. This would strengthen teachers' pedagogical awareness and enhance their ability to design lessons in integrating competency development with linguistic knowledge (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; OECD, 2022).

Secondly, classroom observation and peer support mechanisms can be established to foster teachers' professional development through lesson observation, feedback, and collaborative lesson planning. Finally, institutions should provide teachers with practical resources, such as task-based language teaching plans or assessment tools, to support the 4C skills development. Such referable materials and adaptable resources can reduce the complexity of pedagogical innovation. Therefore, through the development of a multidimensional professional support system, teachers can acquire sufficient capability and confidence to seamlessly integrate the development of 4C skills into their classroom practice.

5.3 Challenges in developing students' 4C skills

This section is in accordance with research question three. The major challenge in developing the 4C skills in college English teaching lies in the substantial mismatch between teaching objectives and students' actual needs. The Guidelines for College English Teaching explicitly advocate a shift towards competence-oriented instruction (Rao, 2023). However, in practice, students' attention is still mainly directed towards CET-4/CET-6 and final exams. Consequently, they expect that classroom instruction focuses more intensively on examination techniques and the transmission of linguistic knowledge (Yasmin et al., 2023). Under the pressure of objective pass rates and student demands, teachers continue to rely on traditional, exam-oriented teaching methods, despite being aware of competency-based objectives (Fu, 2022).

To address this challenge, the first step is to align with the teaching objective and the needs of students. The core focus on developing 4C skills should be maintained while reasonably integrating examination requirements into a competency-based teaching system. Specifically, instructors may incorporate targeted examination strategies into their teaching, such as enhancing reading speed and optimising writing structures, while embedding higher-order tasks like critical writing and classroom debates within preparatory activities. This approach fulfils students' immediate examination needs while simultaneously fostering the long-term development of core competencies (Huang, 2024).

Furthermore, Understanding by Design, a practical framework proven to be effective for cultivating 4C skills, may be integrated into English teaching to reconstruct the curriculum (Ibrahim, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). For example, based on UbD, authentic tasks, such as cross-cultural projects and campus investigations, can serve as the main learning approach, allowing students to naturally apply their language knowledge to critical thinking, collaboration, and creative expression (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

The other challenge is the absence of institutional incentives for teaching innovation, as the prevailing "research-first" evaluation system severely constrains 4C-oriented teaching reforms. Interviews with instructors in this study revealed that most lecturers, burdened by heavy research and administrative workloads, struggle to devote sufficient time to designing 4C-related teaching activities. Moreover, teaching innovation carries a generally low weighting in both academic promotion assessments and performance evaluations. These findings align closely with existing research.

Both Aragon (2016) and Woelert (2023) note that research and administrative burdens encroach upon teachers' time for pedagogical innovation, thereby directly inhibiting classroom-level reform attempts. Research by Hanushek et al. (2023) and Blazar et al. (2024) demonstrates that when evaluation and remuneration systems prioritise exam performance or research output over teaching quality, educators tend to adopt conservative, standardised teaching approaches. Within Chinese higher education institutions, research performance serves as a core metric for academic promotion, marginalising teaching

responsibilities (Lai, 2010). In this study, teachers consistently reported that, under heavy pressure, they favoured traditional lecture formats, which are low-cost and low risk. This instructional approach led to monotonous classroom activities and insufficient interaction, thereby hindering the development of 4C skills.

Therefore, the root cause of the current predicament lies in the absence of institutional incentives, rather than in the teachers' insufficient willingness (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). Reforming the teacher evaluation system is key to strengthening institutional incentives for instructional innovation. Firstly, teaching innovation outcomes (such as improved classroom practices and enhanced student learning outcomes) should be incorporated as core indicators in professional title evaluations.

Secondly, mechanisms for teaching demonstration and feedback must be established, such as open teaching weeks and innovation reports, incorporating peer observation and student feedback into assessment (Pandit et al., 2025). By establishing a multidimensional, institutionalised incentive system, teachers can be encouraged to continually invest in pedagogical innovation. This would help translate the development of 4C skills from policy directives into routine classroom practice.

6. Limitation and Future Research

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. A limitation of this study is the sample. The students' distribution is slightly imbalanced, with sophomores as well as engineering and technology students accounting for a large number. Additionally, the number of teacher interviewees is relatively small, so they may not accurately represent the perspectives of all college English instructors. Furthermore, the data may be influenced by social desirability bias, as they relied heavily on self-reporting from teachers and students.

Finally, despite the use of triangulation to reduce bias, the researchers' positive stance towards instruction reform may affect their ability to identify issues and interpret the data. Therefore, future studies should expand the sample to include participants from diverse demographic backgrounds and higher education institutions. If possible, stratified sampling or weighting techniques could be employed to achieve a more balanced representation across disciplines and year levels. Furthermore, the introduction of class observation and analysis of learning logs should help minimise bias from self-reporting.

7. Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the current status of 4C skills development in college English teaching and subsequently identify the challenges associated with it. Results from this study indicate that although teachers acknowledged the importance of 4C skills, class instructions mainly focused on knowledge transformation and preparation for examinations. Furthermore, the oversized class, teachers' insufficient ability, and a single-dimensional evaluation

system collectively hinder the development of 4C skills among students. Accordingly, practical measures were proposed to address these problems, such as introducing performance assessments in class, organising continuous professional development for instructors, and strengthening institutional motivations for instructional innovation. Overall, this study theoretically combines constructivist learning theory and competency-based education, establishing a framework to analyse the development of 4C skills. In practice, it provides useful references for countries and higher education institutions facing similar contexts in fostering 4C skills among college students.

8. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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