

Fostering Contemporary Consciousness in EFL Education — An Instructional Approach Based on the *Understanding Contemporary China* Textbook Series

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, significant progress has been made in integrating ideological and political education into college English courses in China. However, students' performance in productive tasks still reveals a lack of contemporary consciousness—that is, their ability to integrate traditional topics with current global trends and to engage in critical, contextualized thinking remains limited. To address this gap, this study incorporates the *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook series into college English instruction. This series covers core themes such as China's economic development, social transformation, and cultural continuity, while closely linking these themes to pressing international issues and global dynamics. Grounded in the Production-Oriented Approach (POA), this instructional model emphasizes output tasks aligned with contemporary ideological and political themes, aiming to cultivate students' awareness of present-day China in a global context. The study demonstrates how such an approach enhances students' critical thinking, global vision, and engagement with contemporary issues, thereby enriching the overall effectiveness of ideological-political education in EFL teaching.

Keywords: Ideological and political education, Production-Oriented Approach (POA), *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook series, Contemporary consciousness, College EFL teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional college English teaching has long emphasized the cultural background of language, writing skills, and the appreciation and analysis of literary works, with a primary focus on historical cultural knowledge, grammatical structures, and the interpretation of classical texts. However, this teaching model tends to overlook the cultivation of students' ability to integrate language proficiency with contemporary social trends and practical application. Although students often acquire a solid linguistic foundation and rich literary literacy, many struggle to flexibly apply their knowledge to address real-world issues amid the rapidly changing international landscape, current affairs, and multicultural integration in the context of globalization. They also lack a profound global

perspective and keen awareness of the contemporary era.

In practice, students frequently encounter difficulties when engaging in discussions on political and cultural topics or cross-cultural understanding. Specifically, their understanding of international hotspots and global issues tends to be superficial, lacking in-depth analysis and critical thinking skills. They often find it challenging to link language knowledge with complex real-world problems, resulting in communication and expression that lack depth and logical coherence. Moreover, the traditional teaching framework neglects the development of students' contemporary awareness, leaving them deficient in cultural judgment and value discernment in cross-cultural communication. This hinders their ability to effectively navigate the conflicts and integrations arising from diverse cultural backgrounds. These

issues highlight the limitations of current teaching approaches in fostering students' comprehensive abilities and timely awareness.

With the ongoing societal transformations and escalating demands on individual competencies, the urgency for educational reform is increasingly evident. As Xi Youmin (2020) notes, societal expectations for individual capabilities have shifted from the traditional mental models suited to stable environments toward complex cognitive abilities required for navigating uncertain and dynamic contexts. To cultivate versatile talents who meet future social needs, college English instruction must adjust its strategies, organically integrating current political education into the curriculum. This integration enables students to master language skills while staying attuned to contemporary developments, ultimately fostering citizens with global vision and a strong sense of social responsibility.

Sun Youzhong (2020) emphasizes the unique advantages of ideological and political education in foreign language courses. College English, due to its extensive audience, abundant class hours, and combination of humanistic and instrumental functions, offers rich thematic content and educational resources, establishing a solid foundation for moral education and value guidance (Xiang Mingyou, 2022). Based on these insights, we introduced the *Understanding Contemporary China* series into the conventional college English curriculum. This series not only covers core topics such as China's economic development, social transformation, and cultural heritage but also closely relates to current international situations and global issues. It fills the gap in traditional English teaching regarding political awareness cultivation, enhances students' sensitivity to contemporary times and social engagement, and through diverse teaching materials and practical activities, helps students build a comprehensive understanding of contemporary China and global affairs.

In the construction of ideological and political education within college foreign language courses, the core concept is "student-centeredness" and "output orientation," with students' learning experience and outcomes serving as key evaluation indicators (He Lianzhen, 2022). Grounded in the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) theoretical framework, this study emphasizes the integration of ideological and political outputs aligned with global trends, aiming to anchor college English teaching in

current realities, promote practical application of knowledge, and foster students' contemporary awareness.

2. PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Despite the increasing attention given to college English teaching reform, several significant problems persist that hinder the effective cultivation of students' contemporary awareness and practical language abilities.

2.1 *Limited Integration of Contemporary Contexts into Traditional English Teaching*

Traditional college English instruction has long emphasized linguistic accuracy, textual analysis, and the appreciation of classical literature. While this approach has helped students build solid language foundations and literary knowledge, it often fails to integrate contemporary socio-political issues into the learning process. As a result, students become proficient in language skills but struggle to apply them meaningfully when discussing current global affairs or engaging in complex intercultural communication. This disconnection between language instruction and real-world application hinders the cultivation of students' global perspectives and critical thinking abilities.

Moreover, conventional teaching materials rarely address current international developments, social challenges, or global trends. Textbooks typically center on timeless themes or literary excerpts detached from students' lived realities. This lack of contemporary relevance reduces students' motivation to engage deeply with course content and impairs their ability to analyze, synthesize, and respond to the modern world in English. Without a curriculum that connects language to the present, students often lack awareness of how English can be a tool for international dialogue and civic participation.

2.2 *Superficial Understanding of Global and Political Issues*

A common issue in classroom practices is students' shallow engagement with international or political topics. When asked to comment on current events or global phenomena, many students rely on vague generalizations or familiar stereotypes. Their responses frequently lack analytical depth, nuanced

perspectives, or evidence-based reasoning. This reflects a limited ability to integrate language use with up-to-date knowledge, as well as a gap in their exposure to structured training in political or cultural discourse.

This problem is compounded by the students' limited access to credible, relevant English-language resources that address global issues from a Chinese perspective. Without guided exposure to authentic and complex input, such as academic articles, policy documents, or speeches, students struggle to develop the vocabulary, conceptual frameworks, and rhetorical tools needed to articulate informed viewpoints. Consequently, their output — both written and spoken — tends to focus on surface-level comparisons or overused dichotomies, rather than constructing original, critically aware arguments.

2.3 Absence of Structured Pedagogical Support for Contemporary Awareness

Another major challenge lies in the lack of systematic pedagogical design aimed at cultivating contemporary awareness. Many university English courses lack clear instructional objectives aligned with the development of students' political sensitivity, social responsibility, or intercultural competence. Teachers, despite having the will to innovate, often face constraints in curriculum planning, lack of institutional support, or insufficient training in integrating ideological-political elements into language instruction.

In addition, assessment practices rarely prioritize students' ability to engage with contemporary themes. Writing tasks, for instance, tend to evaluate grammar and structure more than content depth or relevance. Without performance tasks that encourage students to apply language to analyze real-world problems, the cultivation of contemporary awareness remains incidental rather than intentional. To transform English education into a platform for global citizenship and civic literacy, a more coherent framework is urgently needed.

3. CONSTRUCTING CONTEMPORARY AWARENESS IN EFL EDUCATION

3.1 The Connotation of Contemporary Awareness

Contemporary awareness refers not only to an individual's cognitive understanding of the current social and cultural landscape but also to a profound recognition of the defining characteristics of our era, a sense of historical mission, and an active response to global transformations. Zhang Huiyu (2022), in *Chinese Literary and Art Criticism*, elaborates on the evolving concept of "new contemporary awareness," arguing that it is deeply rooted in the historical experience of socialist revolution and development in the People's Republic of China. This awareness embodies the spiritual ethos of China in the new era and has taken shape against the backdrop of China's achievement of a moderately prosperous society since 2010, alongside drastic shifts in the global political and economic order.

This renewed awareness emphasizes the continuity and integration between traditional culture and modern civilization. It champions cultural self-awareness and confidence, while breaking away from the binary thinking and anxiety surrounding East-West cultural relations. Instead, it advocates for pluralistic and equal cultural exchange and coexistence. By telling culturally self-aware "Chinese stories," contemporary awareness facilitates the connection between revolutionary culture and modern thought, thereby affirming China's autonomous and proactive position in global discourse. According to Zhang (2022:14), the essence of contemporary awareness lies in reconstructing national identity and cultural confidence—encouraging participation in global governance and international communication with openness, inclusivity, and confidence.

In the field of education, fostering contemporary awareness requires that both content and pedagogy evolve in step with societal change. Education must go beyond knowledge transmission to inspire students' cultural self-awareness, historical responsibility, and global perspective. As Xi Youmin (2020) notes, Chinese education faces a "dual transformation": one that responds to new societal forms in the post-reform era and another that adapts to global shifts in economics and technology. The goal of contemporary awareness in

education is to cultivate culturally confident, innovative, and globally competent citizens—individuals who are prepared to contribute to the building of a shared future for humanity.

3.2 A POA-Based Approach to Cultivating Contemporary Awareness

To meet the aforementioned goals, this study adopts the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) proposed by Professor Wen Qiufang as the guiding pedagogical framework. POA is rooted in the principle of “output-driven learning,” which emphasizes the design of challenging language output tasks to stimulate learners’ motivation, foster autonomous inquiry, and facilitate the simultaneous development of language and cognitive abilities.

The POA framework incorporates three core teaching philosophies — “learning-centeredness”, “integration of learning and application”, and “education of the whole person”. These are operationalized through four key instructional stages: output-driven, input-enabled, selective learning, and learning through assessment (Wen, 2015). This dynamic cycle ensures that students not only acquire linguistic skills but also deepen their understanding of contemporary sociocultural contexts through meaningful output practices.

- **Output-driven Learning:** Each instructional unit centers around a thematically and ideologically rich output task—such as argumentative writing or public speaking—that prompts students to explore contemporary Chinese societal issues, cultural symbols, and global topics. These tasks help clarify learning objectives and production standards while encouraging students to think critically and express ideas relevant to current times.
- **Input-enabled Learning:** To support these output tasks, instructors carefully select

high-quality materials that align with themes of national development, global governance, and cultural confidence. Key resources include selected chapters from the *Understanding Contemporary China* textbook series, such as *China’s Peaceful Rise*, *Harmony Without Uniformity*, and *Towards a Community of Shared Future for Mankind*. These readings provide both theoretical perspectives and factual grounding, enabling students to make informed connections between language use and socio-political awareness.

- **Selective Learning:** Based on students’ interests and needs, the POA framework encourages personalized and targeted knowledge acquisition. This enhances learner autonomy and accommodates varying levels of familiarity with contemporary issues, thus promoting differentiated instruction and deeper engagement with the content.
- **Learning Through Assessment:** Continuous, formative assessment is integrated into every phase of the instructional cycle. A combination of teacher feedback, peer review, and self-reflection is employed to evaluate students’ output not only for linguistic accuracy but also for ideological depth and critical thinking. This approach fosters reflective learning and reinforces the connection between language performance and global awareness.

Throughout the entire instructional design, the “Drive–Enable–Assess” cycle is consistently applied. Teachers serve as facilitators at every stage, providing scaffolding in language, knowledge, culture, and communication strategies. This progressive structure supports students as they incrementally build comprehensive abilities through increasingly complex challenges, thereby achieving a meaningful integration of language learning with the spirit of the times. (“Table 1”)

Table 1. Sample output and input tasks for college English instruction

Instructional Unit	Input Materials (from <i>Understanding China</i>)	Input Materials (from <i>Understanding China</i>)
Chinese Culture and Tradition	Chinese Dragon Is Good	<i>English Reading and Writing Textbook:</i> Unit 6 “China’s Peaceful Rise”, Unit 8 “Harmony Without Uniformity” Unit 9 “Towards a Community of Shared Future for mankind”
Experiencing the Charm of Nature	The Charm of Nature	<i>English Reading and Writing Textbook</i> Unit 2 Beautiful China <i>Chinese-English Translation Coursebook</i> Unit6 Building ecological civilization
Effective Communication	No man is an island	<i>English Reading and Writing Textbook:</i> Unit 9 “Towards a Community of Shared Future for mankind”
Growing Pains	A Story of Growing -up	<i>English Reading and Writing Textbook:</i> Unit 7 “China’s Epic Journey from Poverty to Prosperity”

4. INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN AND EFFECTIVENESS ANALYSIS

This chapter analyzes the integration of the *Understanding China Today* textbook series into college English instruction. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) and constructivism, it explores how to effectively enhance students' contemporary awareness, expressive ability, and autonomous learning competence. The instructional design centers on two core questions:

- (1) How can the *Understanding China Today* series be integrated into regular English instruction to realize the value of “curriculum-based ideological and political education” and foster students' contemporary awareness?
- (2) How can structured output tasks and feedback mechanisms be designed to help students develop deeper cognition, effective expression, and sound value judgment through practice?

4.1 Instructional Design

4.1.1 Output-driven Phase: Stimulating Thinking and Setting Clear Learning Objectives

At the beginning of each unit, the instructor assigns an output task with strong ideological and political (ideological-instructional) significance, which serves as the core writing or speaking goal for the unit. For instance, in *College English 2* Unit 1, “What Can Americans Learn from Confucianism?”, students are introduced to the 2024 “Understanding China Today” Speech Competition topic: “Chinese Dragon is Good”, via a cross-cultural comparison framework.

In the initial phase, students are intentionally given minimal guidance, allowing them to independently draft a speech based on their current understanding. Results show that students tend to stay at a surface-level comparison of cultural connotations between Eastern and Western dragons. A typical example: “While both Chinese dragons and Western dragons are mythical creatures, their cultural connotations are vastly different. The Chinese dragon symbolizes power, prosperity, and unity, while the Western dragon embodies evil, destruction, and challenge.”

Though this reflects a basic cultural awareness, it lacks deeper insight into the symbolic meaning of the dragon as a modern national icon and its role in international discourse — revealing a gap in students' understanding of contemporary socio-political contexts.

This output-driven phase serves to diagnose students' initial cognitive status and simultaneously arouses their intrinsic motivation to bridge knowledge gaps, laying a foundation for deeper learning and reflection in the following stages.

4.1.2 Input-enabled Phase: Targeted Input and Cognitive Enrichment

To address the superficial cognitive tendencies identified in students' initial drafts, teachers offer targeted feedback—affirming the students' efforts in cultural comparison while pointing out deficiencies in contemporary relevance. Students are guided to reinterpret the symbolism of the “Chinese dragon” within the context of China's rise, increasing global discourse power, and the vision of building a shared future for mankind.

High-quality input materials are selected from the *Understanding China Today* textbook series, such as Chapter 6 “China's Peaceful Rise,” Chapter 8 “Harmony Without Uniformity,” and Chapter 9 “Towards a Community of Shared Future for Mankind.” These are supplemented with reading tasks, multimedia resources, and case studies, providing a rich and multifaceted contextual understanding of the dragon symbol in the international socio-political landscape.

Furthermore, students analyze China's role in international organizations, cultural diplomacy projects, and the global popularity of traditional festivals. They gradually come to understand that the Chinese dragon is not only a cultural symbol but also a bridge for international friendship and mutual understanding. This multidimensional input enhances students' political sensitivity and broadens their global perspective.

4.1.3 Output Reconstruction Phase: Deepening Understanding through Creative Expression

With enriched input, students revise and reconstruct their speeches. Their new drafts show significantly improved depth of thought and language flexibility, effectively incorporating key textbook perspectives. For instance:

“The rise of China, much like the mythical dragon, has been a subject of much debate and speculation. Perhaps some consider it as a threat that could disrupt the global order... The concept of a ‘Community with a Shared Future for Mankind’ is not just a slogan. It is a vision of a world where nations work together to solve common challenges.”

These revised works demonstrate that students not only understand the cultural symbolism of the dragon more deeply, but can also elevate their discussions to the level of national image, cultural confidence, and international cooperation. This reflects a significant shift from cultural comparison to political consciousness—highlighting the success of ideological infusion through POA-based output.

This phase aligns with constructivist principles of deep learning, where students integrate knowledge, reflect critically, and express creatively. It also exemplifies the core value of POA: promoting cognitive growth and competence through purposeful output tasks.

4.1.4 Assessment for Learning: Evaluation as Motivation and Collaboration

To consolidate learning outcomes, mock speech competitions are held in class, requiring students to articulate their arguments clearly and coherently, followed by peer assessment. Evaluation criteria include content depth, language expression, logical structure, and originality of thought. The process fosters self-reflection, mutual appreciation, and critical thinking skills.

Rather than marking the end of learning, assessment becomes a new starting point. Feedback from multiple sources helps students identify weaknesses and refine their learning strategies, creating a positive feedback loop. This “assessment for learning” approach supports the development of students’ overall abilities and helps build a collaborative learning community.

4.2 Effectiveness Analysis of Instructional Implementation

This section analyzes the instructional outcomes from multiple dimensions, including practical feedback, student output, competence development, and ideological transformation. The following are key observations:

4.2.1 Improved Output Quality with Deeper Ideological Engagement

Throughout the instructional process, students’ speeches, essays, and oral responses evolved from surface-level cultural comparisons to deeper explorations of contemporary national values. Compared to their initial drafts, students’ revised works increasingly featured expressions related to national strategies and global issues, such as “community of shared future,” “global governance,” and “cultural confidence.” These linguistic shifts highlight the cognitive value of input materials and the self-reflective power of assessment-for-learning.

By comparing early and final drafts, teachers found that students’ content became more coherent and logically structured, with significantly enhanced thinking and information integration abilities. For instance, students discussing the “Chinese dragon” could relate it not only to symbolism but also to national image building, global communication strategies, and cultural soft power—demonstrating relevance and depth.

4.2.2 Strengthened Autonomous Learning and Collaborative Engagement

Due to the timeliness and social relevance of the *Understanding China Today* series, students showed greater initiative in learning. They actively sought additional resources, followed current affairs, and participated in group discussions, rehearsals, and feedback cycles.

It was frequently observed that students practiced voluntarily after class, forming self-organized learning teams using tools such as Padlet, Rain Classroom, and iCourse platforms. This transformation—from passive learners to proactive explorers—reflects the essence of POA and echoes the constructivist emphasis on learner-centered engagement.

4.2.3 Enhanced Cross-Cultural Competence and Contemporary Awareness

Based on pre- and post-course surveys, student reflection journals, and interviews, most students reported a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of China’s global image. They began to recognize China’s cultural role in global governance and the construction of a shared future for mankind.

Some students stated that the course encouraged them to reflect on questions such as: “How can we, as young Chinese citizens, better tell China’s story?” and “How can we help the world understand contemporary China?” Through the fusion of language instruction with national discourse and contemporary mission, students internalized value judgments and cultural identity while gaining deeper insights into international communication and cultural diplomacy.

5. CONCLUSION

In an increasingly globalized world, East-West cultural comparison has become a vital approach for developing students’ intercultural competence, critical thinking skills, and global perspectives. The infusion of contemporary awareness into this practice adds a new dimension of depth and relevance. Traditional comparative teaching methods often remain at the surface level—focusing on cultural symbols, holidays, and historical traditions—while failing to address the deeper cultural logics and contemporary implications of these elements. This study underscores the importance of embedding contemporary awareness into cross-cultural instruction, linking cultural content with current developments in technology, society, and global governance.

By guiding students to critically reflect on the contemporary significance of East-West cultural differences—especially in the context of China’s rise, global governance reforms, and digital transformation—educators can help students recognize the unique charm and global value of Chinese culture. This promotes national identity, cultural pride, and a strong sense of civic responsibility, while also fostering global awareness and intercultural communication skills.

Engaging students in discussions informed by contemporary global issues also enhances their understanding of international phenomena across different cultural contexts. It equips them with the cognitive and affective tools to interpret global trends, engage with the world, and contribute to international cooperation. Furthermore, contemporary-oriented cultural comparisons stimulate critical thinking and independent judgment—skills essential for navigating an increasingly interconnected and complex world.

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