

An OBE Case Study on Redesigning College English Assessment in GCAST, Guangzhou, China

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Abstract

In China, traditional college English assessments tend to focus on knowledge input and summative exams but neglect students' practical language application skills, intercultural communication abilities, and developmental progress during the learning process. As higher education becomes increasingly internationalized and the need for cultivating applied talents grows, College English, as an indispensable component of general education, has drawn significant attention to the scientific validity and effectiveness of its teaching quality and evaluation system. Outcome-Based Education (OBE) is an educational model centered on learning outcomes, emphasizing that educational objectives should align directly with societal needs, professional competencies, and student development requirements. The OBE concept highly aligns with the talent cultivation goals of application-oriented universities and has begun to be carried out in China's application-oriented higher education institutions. This study adopts OBE as its core guiding principle, focusing on the reconstruction of the College English course evaluation system in Guangzhou University of Applied Science and Technology (GCAST). It explores how to establish a scientific, dynamic, and operational evaluation framework for College English teaching. This research not only integrates OBE principles into language assessment but also provides actionable pathways for College English teaching reform in application-oriented universities. Additionally, it can offer evidence-based insights for educational policymakers, curriculum designers, and frontline instructors. Preliminary implementation with 180 students showed improved performance on integrated tasks, though workload and scoring reliability challenges were identified.

Keywords: *Assessment Framework, College English, GCAST, OBE*

Introduction

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) originated from the work of William Spady in the 1980s and 1990s, who defined it as "a way of designing, developing, delivering, and documenting instruction in terms of its intended goals and outcomes" (Spady, 1994). The OBE framework is built on four fundamental principles: clarity of focus (all instructional activities center on what students should know and be able to do), expanded opportunity (providing students with multiple pathways and timeframes to demonstrate learning), high

expectations (requiring all students to achieve meaningful outcomes), and design down (designing the curriculum backward from final outcomes).

Research Background and Introduction to GCAST

Chinese higher education is undergoing a profound transformation. The Ministry of Education's "Implementation Plan for the Undergraduate Teaching Quality Assessment of Regular Institutions of Higher Education (2021-2025)" explicitly requires universities to fully implement three core concepts: "student-centered, outcome-oriented, and continuous improvement" – which are precisely the fundamental principles of Outcome-Based Education (OBE). This policy direction signifies not merely operational adjustments, but a fundamental paradigm shift from traditional input-oriented quality assurance to evidence-based demonstration of graduate competencies.

Review of Related Literature

Guangzhou College of Applied Science and Technology (GCAST), as a comprehensive application-oriented undergraduate institution in Guangdong Province, exemplifies this tension. The university's College English course serves approximately 8,000 students annually from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Prior to the 2024 reform, the course's evaluation system exhibited traditional characteristics of language teaching: the final exam accounted for 70% of the total grade, assessment items focused on discrete grammatical knowledge and vocabulary recognition rather than communicative competence, and formative assessment, where it existed, consisted primarily of attendance records and homework completion logs. While student pass rates on internal assessments consistently exceeded 90%, they demonstrated significant competence deficiencies in authentic language application contexts. This disconnect prompted faculty and administrators to recognize the misalignment in the evaluation system.

The misalignment between GCAST's College English evaluation practices and intended learning outcomes can be described across three dimensions. First, at the curriculum articulation level, course learning objectives were neither derived from program-level graduate competency statements nor defined in measurable terms. Learning objectives such as "students will improve their English communication skills" failed to specify conditions of application, performance criteria, or specific contexts. Second, at the assessment design level, assessment tools measured what was easiest to measure, such as vocabulary recognition, discrete sentence-level grammatical accuracy, rather than what was most important like integrated communicative competence, strategic competence, intercultural reasoning. Third, at the feedback utilization level, assessment data were used primarily for summative grading purposes rather than to guide instructional adjustments or document course-level outcome attainment.

Objectives

This case study aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) How can OBE principles be specifically applied to the reconstruction of the evaluation system for a College English course at an application-oriented undergraduate institution in China?
- (2) What evidence regarding outcome attainment and instructional quality improvement can be obtained through the reconstructed evaluation system?

Methodology

Phase One: Defining Outcomes

The reconstruction process began with systematically defining learning outcomes – a task proved more challenging than initially anticipated. A working group consisting of six experienced faculty members, two curriculum specialists, and the department head spent three months developing outcome statements that met OBE criteria which mainly are specificity, measurability, and meaningfulness. The resulting outcome framework encompassed three domains with 3 targets respectively:

(1) Language Competence Domain. T1: Able to comprehend main ideas and detailed information in medium-length (800-1200 words) academic and professional texts, with a reading speed of 150 words per minute and 85% comprehension accuracy; T2: Able to produce 300-500 word coherent written texts that articulate clear arguments, develop reasoning with evidence, and employ appropriate syntax, grammar, and vocabulary according to purpose and audience; T3: Able to engage in sustained spoken interaction on familiar topics, including initiating and responding to questions, expressing and justifying opinions, and managing turn-taking, with minimal communication breakdown.

(2) Strategic Competence Domain. T1: Able to employ listening strategies (prediction, note-taking, inference) to comprehend authentic spoken materials; T2: Able to employ writing process strategies (planning, drafting, revising, editing) to enhance text quality; T3: Able to employ compensatory strategies (circumlocution, approximation, requesting clarification) to overcome communication breakdowns.

(3) Intercultural Competence Domain. T1: Able to identify cultural references and assumptions in English-language materials and explain their meanings; T2: Able to demonstrate culturally appropriate communicative behaviors in simulated intercultural situations; T3: Able to articulate similarities and differences between Chinese culture and target language cultures in terms of practices and values.

Phase Two: Assessment Design

Following outcome definition, the working group redesigned assessment tasks to elicit evidence of outcome attainment. The new framework shifted from a single final examination in the past to a "50/20/30" model: 50% formative assessment, 20% summative performance tasks, and 30% final closed-book examination. This weight distribution reflects OBE's emphasis on continuous evidence collection rather than one-time testing.

(1) Formative Assessment (50%). The formative assessment consists of 2 parts. The first part is weekly routine tasks (15%): Students complete weekly online quizzes targeting vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Unlike traditional quizzes, these provide immediate feedback and allow multiple attempts, with the highest score recorded. The purpose is diagnosis and learning promotion, not mere evaluation. The second part is performance tasks (35%): Three tasks per semester requiring integrated language production. Task one (required to finish from week 4 to 5) involves recording a 2-minute individual presentation on a course-related topic, submitted for peer and instructor feedback. Task two (from Week 8 to 10) is a collaborative group project producing a 5–7-minute podcast episode discussing an intercultural issue. Task three (from weeks 12 to 14) is an in-class debate requiring students to research, prepare,

and present arguments on a controversial topic. Each task incorporates structured peer evaluation and self-reflection components.

- (2) **Summative Performance Tasks (20%).** Mid-term and end-of-term performance assessments require students to demonstrate integrated competence in scenarios simulating authentic communicative demands. The mid-term task is an integrated reading-writing task: students read two short texts presenting opposing viewpoints, then write a 400-word response synthesizing both texts and articulating their own position. The end-term task is a one-on-one oral interview with the instructor, including responses to impromptu follow-up questions.
- (3) **Final Closed-Book Examination (30%).** The reduced-weight final examination focuses on outcomes not adequately covered by performance tasks, particularly long-text reading comprehension and discrete knowledge items. The examination includes 50 multiple-choice and short-answer questions (60% of exam score) and one extended writing task (40% of exam score).

Findings and Discussion

Evidence of Outcome Attainment

Analysis of student performance data (n=180) from the pilot course revealed outcome attainment patterns distinctly different from traditional final exam scores. While traditional final exam scores remained consistently high (M=82.4, SD=8.7), performance on the integrated writing task showed substantially greater variability (M=74.2, SD=12.3), with 23% of students scoring below the "meets expectations" threshold. This discrepancy is instructive. Students who performed well on discrete grammar and vocabulary items did not necessarily succeed in integrating these knowledge components in authentic writing tasks. Traditional assessment overestimated students' ability to apply knowledge – precisely the knowing-doing gap that OBE aims to address.

Instructor Perspectives

Instructor interviews revealed a mix of enthusiasm and implementation challenges. All six interviewed faculty members affirmed the pedagogical value of the new framework, with comments like: "I finally feel like I'm teaching for authentic communication, not just test-taking skills," and "Formative assessment lets me see students' thinking processes in a way that exams never could." However, instructors also reported significant increases in workload. Scoring performance tasks using analytic rubrics required 2-3 times more time duration than grading traditional exams. Providing meaningful feedback on diverse student submissions added additional hours. Several instructors noted that class sizes (still 55+ students) were incompatible with the individualized feedback envisioned by the new framework.

This case study documents the transformation of GCAST's College English evaluation system from an examination-centered model to an OBE-oriented, outcomes-driven system, encompassing outcome definition, assessment redesign, and rubric development with instructor calibration. Findings revealed both promise and challenges: students showed improved performance on integrated competence tasks and reported greater clarity about learning expectations. However, workload increases, anxiety about new assessment formats, and scoring reliability concerns emerged as significant barriers. Instructors

affirmed the pedagogical value of the new framework but reported substantial time demands requiring institutional support for sustainability.

Recommendations

For GCAST and similar institutions, the following recommendations are proposed:

- (1) Maintain the "50/20/30" weight distribution while adjusting implementation to reduce workload, such as providing detailed feedback on sampled student submissions rather than individualized responses to every submission.
- (2) Develop student orientation modules introducing OBE assessment expectations, including exemplary of varying quality levels and practice calibration activities.
- (3) Establish a standing assessment committee with representatives from all course levels to continuously refine rubrics and coordinate assessment efforts across courses.

The GCAST case demonstrates that OBE assessment reconstruction is neither simple nor quick, but it is possible and worthwhile. The shift from *What did I teach?* to *What did students learn?* – and from measuring what is easiest to measure to measuring what is most important – represents precisely the kind of fundamental reform demanded by China's quality agenda. This case provides a roadmap for following researchers and institutions that have similar interest.

Conclusion

This case study documents the transformation of Guangzhou College of Applied Science and Technology's College English evaluation system from a traditional, examination-centered model to an OBE-oriented, outcomes-driven system. The reconstruction process involved three phases: defining measurable learning outcomes across language, strategic, and intercultural domains; designing corresponding performance assessment tasks; and developing analytic rubrics with instructor calibration. Implementation findings revealed both promise and challenges. Students demonstrated improved performance on integrated tasks measuring application competence; students reported greater clarity regarding learning expectations and valued feedback that supported improvement. However, workload concerns, anxiety regarding new assessment formats, and challenges regarding performance scoring reliability emerged as significant implementation barriers. Instructors affirmed the pedagogical value of the new framework but reported substantial time demands requiring institutional support for sustainability.

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