

# Exploration of the Reform of French Language Instruction as a Second Foreign Language in Application-Oriented Colleges and Universities

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**Abstract:** The evolution of educational philosophies and shifting demands in talent development have exposed the limitations of traditional French language instruction as a second foreign language. To remain relevant and prepare graduates for the evolving needs of society, reforming French teaching in applied colleges and universities is crucial. This paper examines the current challenges faced by French instruction and argues for necessary reforms. It proposes practical pathways for achieving this aim in the context of applied colleges and universities. The proposal emphasizes striking a balance between teaching language knowledge and fostering language practice skills. Cultivating students' robust practice awareness and abilities can equip them to become competent applied foreign language professionals who can confidently navigate the demands of the new era.

**Keywords:** Education reform; Application-oriented talents training; Second foreign language teaching; Reform of French language instruction

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## 1. Introduction

Applied colleges and universities are dedicated to the development of applied talents, addressing the evolving requirements of societal advancement<sup>[1]</sup>. Distinct from conventional universities, which prioritize theoretical inquiry, these institutions focus on equipping students with the competency to implement advanced knowledge and technologies in practical settings, contributing to real-world productivity and daily life. Applied talents, therefore, emerge as pivotal agents of societal progression, forming the cornerstone of national revitalization and advancement. In response to contemporary demands, educators within foreign language departments of private applied institutions are urged to embrace reform, leveraging curriculum-based education as the foundation to innovate in the development of talent training mode. According to the current talent training program for English majors, there is an explicit expectation for students to not only engage deeply with their primary field of study but also acquire proficiency in a secondary foreign language. This training concept, characterized by robust foundational knowledge and a wide-ranging skill set, facilitates the future growth

of foreign language students, equipping them for the multifaceted demands of society <sup>[2]</sup>. Nonetheless, the prevailing market demands for talent remain unmet under traditional educational frameworks. Investigations across numerous universities indicate a year-on-year increase in the percentage of foreign language graduates entering employment sectors unrelated to their field of study. This trend underscores the pressing necessity to reassess and recalibrate strategies of talent cultivation in alignment with market demands, a move that bears significance not only for student personal development but also for the alignment of foreign language education with national development. Particularly in the domain of second foreign language education, such as French, a strategic overhaul beginning with curriculum design and pedagogical approaches is imperative. This overhaul aims to enhance the quality of training comprehensively, ensuring alignment between academic content and market requisites, thereby contributing genuinely valuable applied foreign language professionals to the societal fabric.

## **2. The current situation of French teaching as a second foreign language**

As a required course for foreign language majors, the teaching of French within second foreign language programs serves as a microcosm of broader trends and challenges in second foreign language education. Extensive research at various universities and interviews with numerous French second foreign language teachers reveal significant issues within French language teaching in this context.

### **2.1. Shorter second foreign language teaching programs**

The French as a second foreign language course, primarily for English majors, aims to reach College French Level 4 within two years, as recommended by the “Teaching Requirements for College French Courses” <sup>[3]</sup>. This is equivalent to 256 credit hours or four credits per week over four semesters. However, surveys show that many universities have significantly reduced teaching hours for second foreign languages, sometimes compressing it into a single year. Xiangtan Institute of Technology, for example, offers English and Business English majors the choice of French, Japanese, or German as a second foreign language, with French starting at 64 class hours per semester (4 hours per week) in the first year, then dropping to 2 hours per week in the second year. Given that many students have no prior experience with a second foreign language, this condensed time frame poses a significant challenge for teachers to solidify students’ foundation and develop communicative skills.

### **2.2. Low persistence of student learning**

From the actual teaching process, it is found that students do not pay enough attention to the second foreign language courses. The knowledge imparted in the classroom cannot be separated from the sorting and consolidation after class. With limited time and energy, students can often only focus on the study of their major subjects, and often have no time to take into account the study of their second foreign language. The lack of necessary independent learning time not only affects students’ mastery of the knowledge they have learned but also hinders the absorption and connection of new knowledge. Many students start learning a new foreign language with enthusiasm, but over time lose enthusiasm and confidence and give up halfway.

### **2.3. A single method of course assessment**

After conducting field research at several universities, it was observed that the second foreign language course evaluation heavily depends on written examinations in its traditional teaching model. The assessment of courses predominantly relies on written scores, constituting a substantial proportion of the overall evaluation, typically

ranging from 60% to 70%. The assessment content is predominantly centered around teaching materials, with an excessive emphasis on evaluating grammar and vocabulary knowledge <sup>[4]</sup>. Under the sway of an assessment system overly reliant on examinations, students' educational priorities have shifted to exam preparation, leading to an excessive fixation on textbook knowledge. Consequently, their enthusiasm and interest in improving their language proficiency and practical application skills have significantly waned.

#### **2.4. The dilemma of the second foreign teacher facing teaching reform**

Teachers encounter various challenges when implementing reforms in French as a second foreign language in the current context. Given the placement of French as a second foreign language in the curriculum, teachers must balance the development of comprehensive language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, within a limited time frame. Many teachers in second foreign language schools often lean towards traditional teaching methods to enhance students' written scores and assist them in passing the College French Test Band 4 (CFT4) and postgraduate entrance examinations. This preference stems from the immediate results that traditional methods provide. As a result, many teachers remain conservative in their approach to teaching. In particular, the applied talent teaching model, focusing on student-centered and language practice, gives less priority to improving test scores. Moreover, the applied talent model requires more instructional time, which poses a challenge given detailed school regulations on teaching content and semester progress. Given the meticulous regulations set forth by schools regarding the content and pace of instruction for each semester, failure to effectively manage the teaching process in the implementation of educational reforms would not only result in inadequate attainment of desired educational outcomes but also impede teachers from fulfilling mandated teaching obligations, thereby disrupting the overall teaching schedule. Consequently, many teachers harbor apprehensions about engaging in teaching reforms and are inclined to adhere to traditional teaching methodologies.

### **3. Innovations in the second foreign language (French) teaching approach**

To better adapt to the evolving demands of the era and to meet society's need for skilled individuals, reforming the teaching model for second foreign language education is essential. However, striking a balance between imparting language knowledge and practical skills, introducing innovative teaching methodologies, and effectively fostering students' interest and engagement are pivotal considerations in the reform process. In pursuit of this objective, several reform initiatives were actively undertaken, yielding promising initial results. These reforms are firmly centered on the goal of nurturing applied talents. They encompass the implementation of the "Check-in Learning Mode" to enhance students' oral communication proficiency, innovative integration of moral education into classroom instruction, and refinement of the course assessment framework. By doing so, the aim is to achieve a more comprehensive and profound innovation and breakthrough in the teaching of French as a second foreign language, thereby meeting the evolving needs of contemporary society and preparing students for success in an increasingly globalized world.

#### **3.1. Implementation of the "Check-in Learning Mode" to enhance oral proficiency in a second language**

In the milieu of the "Internet+" era, the emergence of mobile learning represents a burgeoning trend, distinguished by its unparalleled flexibility accessible to anyone, anywhere, anytime, and in any style <sup>[5]</sup>. The proliferation and integration of a myriad of mobile learning applications on handheld devices empower university students to capitalize on intermittent periods, transcending traditional temporal and spatial limitations

to pursue self-guided learning endeavors. Despite its potential, mobile learning encounters specific obstacles in practical scenarios, such as the risk of fragmenting the learning continuum, which may impede the construction of a holistic knowledge framework, and the deficiency in students' self-regulatory and autonomous learning capacities, which challenge the sustainability of mobile learning initiatives <sup>[6]</sup>. In response to these impediments and to invigorate student engagement in self-directed learning, the "Check-in Learning Mode" has been introduced. Teachers can meticulously orchestrate semester-long learning activities, crafting a structured educational agenda, and leveraging the check-in protocol to monitor and motivate, ensuring timely completion of academic undertakings and fostering significant advancements in self-learning outcomes.

In the field of foreign language education, the deployment of self-directed learning strategies, augmented by check-in oversight, has proven to be instrumental in extending language training beyond conventional classroom boundaries. This model serves as a vital complement to language skills, such as listening and speaking, which may not receive comprehensive attention within classroom settings. The synergistic integration of classroom instruction and extracurricular autonomous practice not only bolsters students' application and independent learning capabilities but also amplifies the pedagogical impact, positioning students as the central figures in their language learning. They are actively involved in and enjoy the language learning process. For instance, Xiangtan Institute of Technology has adeptly utilized a check-in application in its French as a second language curriculum, instituting weekly oral practice assignments that are pragmatically oriented. These assignments encompass a spectrum of real-life scenarios – ranging from restaurant reservations to medical consultations, shopping excursions, and international travel – with provided dialogues serving as a reference. Learners are encouraged to form conversation groups, practicing scenario-based dialogues based on their understanding of the provided texts. Analysis of these oral practice engagements reveals a direct correlation between the consistency of check-in participation and the improvement in task performance. A detailed examination of a learner's progress through the various stages of the check-in exercises reveals notable improvements in French pronunciation accuracy and mastery of speech rate and intonation among those who maintain regular participation. This underscores the critical role of consistent check-in activities in strengthening language skills. Furthermore, the requirement for collaborative completion of check-in exercises not only fosters mutual encouragement and supervision among peers but also cultivates a constructive competitive spirit throughout the collective check-in process, markedly boosting motivation towards completing tasks.

### **3.2. Integrating moral education into second foreign language teaching**

In addition to fostering students' ability to use foreign languages for effective communication, foreign language teachers should also prioritize guiding students in establishing their ideals and shaping their values, thereby integrating moral education into their teaching practices <sup>[7]</sup>. As a compulsory component of the curriculum for English majors, the second foreign language class serves as a crucial avenue for students to broaden their international perspectives and enhance their intercultural communication skills. In the context of studying French as a second foreign language, the curriculum should not only focus on developing students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in French but also emphasize the importance of foreign language acquisition. It is essential to instill in students a clear understanding of the broader implications of language learning, empowering them to cultivate a sound worldview, values, and unwavering cultural confidence. In addition, students should be encouraged to embrace and respect diverse civilizations, fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural exchange and the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind. Consequently, second foreign language courses should collaboratively fulfill the educational mission alongside other language programs, harmonizing the transmission of knowledge with the guidance of values. In this way,

educators can lay a solid foundation for the holistic development of students.

Compared to the depth of English major courses, elementary-level content in second foreign language courses tends to be more basic, focusing primarily on the study of phonetics. This emphasis can make it challenging to naturally integrate discussions of moral education. Thus, effectively integrating these elements into the classroom presents both a challenge to teachers' teaching skills and an opportunity for innovative content design. Taking Xiangtan Institute of Technology as an example, each time a unit of teaching content is completed, the special teaching module "Speaking Chinese in French" is set up. The content is based on the sentence patterns learned in this unit and introduces Chinese society and culture to students through the combination of pictures and texts. Take the second foreign French textbook "New Public French" as an example<sup>[8]</sup>: in Lesson 1, students learn to use the interrogative pronoun *Qui* to ask questions about someone's identity. In this teaching module, the author utilizes the phrase "*Qui est-ce?*" (Who is this?) and answers "*C'est le Président Xi.*" (This is President Xi.), so that students can feel and apply what they have learned in real contexts, and at the same time cultivate their interest and get used to introducing Chinese society and culture in French. In the second lesson, students learn the phrase "*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*" (What is this?). This sentence pattern is practically utilized through the response "*C'est la Cité Interdite.*" (This is the Forbidden City.) Another example is the new phrase "*Où allez-vous?*" (Where are you going?) in Lesson Four, the answer is set to "*Je vais à la Grande Muraille.*" (I'm going to the Great Wall.) Through this series of teaching designs, students can truly feel the close integration of language learning and real life, and experience the fun of introducing China in French. According to the feedback from the class, the students are generally happy to accept this kind of teaching method<sup>[9]</sup>.

### 3.3. Enrichment of course assessment system

To ensure that innovations in talent cultivation programs and course teaching designs are effectively reflected in students, it is crucial to enrich the course assessment and evaluation system. In reforming the assessment of second foreign language courses, the primary goal should be to enhance students' learning outcomes by adopting a multidimensional assessment approach. The variety of assessment methods not only stimulates students' interest in learning but also enhances their independent learning ability<sup>[10]</sup>. Specifically, teachers should communicate course assessment standards to students at the beginning of the semester to ensure that assessments are aligned with the focus of course learning and to promote the concept of "assessment for learning." In terms of assessment content, more emphasis should be placed on process assessment within the course. This includes evaluating students' application skills and encouraging them to apply their knowledge flexibly. For instance, in the context of check-in learning exercises, teachers could include these tasks in the process evaluation, provide regular updates on students' completion status, and actively engage students in the evaluation process. Furthermore, the assessment forms for French as a second language curriculum should be diversified. Traditional final exams should be replaced by diverse forms such as defenses, group discussions, and dissertation reports to reduce the reliance on written exams. Additionally, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural knowledge should be integrated into assessments, with an emphasis on application and critical thinking questions to encourage students to not limit themselves to textbook knowledge and embrace innovative approaches to learning. In summary, throughout the construction of the course assessment system, the core objective of training applied talents should be consistently prioritized. By integrating theory and practice, a harmonious interaction between course assessment and teaching can be achieved, which ultimately enhances the effectiveness of students' learning.

## 4. Conclusion

The reform of teaching French as a second foreign language is an essential response to the evolving demands of the times and the changing requirements of talents. Aligned with the goal of cultivating applied talents, the second foreign language curriculum must evolve, enriching and innovating teaching content while seamlessly integrating moral education with foreign language teaching. Establishing a multi-dimensional evaluation mechanism and diversifying assessment forms are feasible strategies to effectively improve students' language application skills and foster innovative thinking. Moreover, it is crucial to emphasize the dynamic link between classroom language teaching and extracurricular autonomous practice. This approach fully harnesses and stimulates students' autonomy and initiative in learning. It is imperative to recognize that the teaching reform of the French as a second language curriculum is a challenging and ongoing task that requires the active involvement and unremitting efforts of teachers. Teachers must courageously embrace the responsibility of teaching reform, continually improve their teaching proficiency and skills, and dare to break free from traditional constraints. Only through such dedication can the obstacles and challenges inherent in the reform process be overcome and the teaching reform of French as a second foreign language continuously advanced. In doing so, a significant contribution will be made to cultivating high-quality talents equipped with both an innovative spirit and practical skills, thus making a meaningful impact on society's evolving talent needs.

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