

An Assessment of the Necessity of Offering College English Courses for Art Majors

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Abstract: *The internationalization trend of contemporary art activities makes English proficiency a key tool for art majors to participate in international exhibitions and cross-cultural cooperation. The current general English courses focus on daily communication and are structurally mismatched with the authentic language contexts of art majors. This paper assesses the necessity of offering College English courses from three aspects: language competence structure, curriculum support dimensions, and irreplaceable value. The language needs of art majors are characterized by high-contextualization and strong specialization. College English courses can expand access to creative materials, build discourse competence, and cultivate cultural negotiation skills. From the perspectives of cognition and semiotics, the differential influence of foreign language thinking and the synergistic mechanism between linguistic and non-linguistic signs jointly constitute the irreplaceable value foundation of this course.*

Keywords: *art major; College English course; English for Specific Purposes; language competence structure; synergy of semiotic systems.*

Introduction

Whether art majors need specifically offered College English courses has long been a subject of discussion in the curriculum design of higher art education. Artistic creation primarily employs non-linguistic media such as visual, auditory, or behavioral means, which easily leads to the judgment that language ability is irrelevant to artistic talent. However, the operational mechanism of the international art field shows that English has permeated all aspects of artistic production and dissemination, from exhibition applications, curatorial communication, to artwork statements. Although general English courses can address basic grammar and daily conversation issues, they cannot cover the terminological networks, rhetorical strategies, and cultural metaphorical requirements in artistic discourse. This supply-demand mismatch causes art majors to frequently encounter language barriers when facing real-world situations, limiting their ability to acquire creative materials from international resources and weakening their initiative to independently interpret their works in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically assess the unique functions of College English courses in the context of art majors, clarify their value positioning distinct from general English courses, and provide theoretical basis for curriculum design.

1. Language Competence Structure and Curriculum Needs of Art Majors

1.1 Characteristics of English Application Scenarios for Art Majors

The English usage scenarios for art majors are mainly distributed across three types of academic and professional activities. First, the writing of application materials and communication for review in international art exhibitions, biennials, and residency programs require artists to possess formal written English proficiency. Second, in the process of studying art history and theory, a large number of primary sources, critical anthologies, and artist interviews are presented in English, and the lack of direct reading ability will restrict the validity of original information acquisition. Third, in cross-cultural collaborative creation, team members need to use English for conceptual explanation, transmission of creative intentions, and coordination of technical parameters, thus making language an essential tool beyond the creative medium. These scenarios impose specific requirements on English in terms of stylistic register, density of specialized terminology, and real-time interactive competence,

which are distinct from those of general English.

Observed from the dimension of language skills, the English application in art majors presents a significant asymmetry between input and output. Reading and listening are mainly used for acquiring international cutting-edge trends, exhibition rules, and peer reviews, which belong to information-absorbing tasks; while writing and speaking involve curatorial proposal explanations, artwork statements, and review defenses, which belong to expressive tasks. The latter imposes higher requirements on grammatical accuracy, logical coherence, and cultural metaphorical appropriateness, because the meaning of artistic works often depends on the precise translation of abstract concepts through language. Current College English courses mostly focus on daily communication and general text reading, failing to adequately cover the specific language task types unique to art majors, which results in a competence gap when students face real-world scenarios.

1.2 Cross-linguistic Accessibility of Terminology in Art Disciplines

The terminological system of art disciplines comprises two levels: descriptive terms and theoretical terms. Descriptive terms involve vocabulary that can be intuitively corresponded to media, techniques, and materials, such as "watercolor," "composition," and "texture," and their cross-linguistic accessibility is relatively high. Theoretical terms carry abstract concepts under specific historical contexts or critical paradigms, such as "gaze," "simulacrum," and "site-specificity," and different language systems exhibit semantic shifts in their interpretations of these terms. As one of the core languages in the production of contemporary art discourse, a large number of critical theories and curatorial discourses are first fixed in English before being translated into other languages. Non-native English-speaking art majors who directly rely on translated versions will face the dual problems of information delay and interpretive deviation^[1].

The accessibility of terminology is also manifested in the cognitive difficulty of derived words and metaphorical expressions. Art criticism frequently employs interdisciplinary terms drawn from philosophy, semiotics, and psychology, such as "deconstruction," "liminality," and "heterotopia." These terms possess stable rules of usage in English academic writing, whereas their corresponding terms in the Chinese art context often fail to cover their entire range of reference. If College English courses can systematically introduce the core terminological networks of art disciplines and help students master the word-formation logic, synonymy relations, and contextual variants of English terminology, they can enhance the validity of students' comprehension of original texts and reduce the semantic loss caused by intermediate translation links. The absence of this competence will directly constrain students' ability to enter international academic dialogue and confine the knowledge sources for artistic creation to the limited materials that have already been translated.

1.3 The Language Threshold for Artistic Expression and International Communication

The international dissemination of artistic works relies on the anchoring function of language in relation to visual information. Even when works are presented through non-linguistic media, curatorial forewords, catalogue essays, and artist statements still require English texts to endow the works with a meaningful framework interpretable by cross-cultural audiences. The language threshold is specifically manifested in three aspects: first, the complexity of grammatical structures affects the accuracy of interpretation — for example, the use of the subjunctive mood and conditional adverbial clauses in English can distinguish "factual description" from "hypothetical speculation," and confusing the two may lead to misjudgment of the work's intention; second, the degree of formality in stylistic register determines the credibility of the text in academic contexts, as overly colloquial artwork statements are unlikely to gain professional recognition from review institutions; third, the appropriateness of cultural references tests the author's judgment of the cognitive background of the English-speaking audience, as direct translation of Chinese idiomatic expressions often creates comprehension obstacles^[2].

From a practical operational perspective, the language threshold in international art exchange often disguises itself as an illusion that it "can be solved by translation tools." Machine translation can handle declarative information, but it fails to cope with the subtle tones, rhetorical strategies, and coherence requirements in reflective writing. When art majors write artwork statements, research proposals, or exhibition applications, they need to demonstrate the depth of self-reflection and originality, and such texts differ from technical manuals or press releases, because their language quality itself is a manifestation of professional competence. If College English courses remain only at the level of general English, they will be insufficient to help students cross this threshold; whereas English teaching

specifically designed for the art context can systematically reduce students' language barriers when entering international communication settings through genre analysis, move practice, and lexical collocation training.

2. Supporting Dimensions of College English Courses for the Cultivation of Artistic Talents

2.1 The Expanding Role of Language Skills in Acquiring Creative Materials

The sources of knowledge for artistic creation include three categories: visual images, physical materials, and textual information. Among textual information, artist notebooks, studio interviews, technical manuals, and materials science literature published in English constitute an important supplement to creative methodologies. The reading skills cultivated by College English courses enable students to directly search for and process these untranslated primary sources, avoiding the loss of information density caused by selective omissions or terminological mistranslations in translated versions. For example, parameters for mixed media formulations in contemporary art, descriptions of programming logic in digital art, and safety operation specifications for specific techniques often exist only in English technical texts preserved in professional databases or manufacturer documentation. The lack of reading skills will force creators to rely on second-hand interpretations, thereby weakening their autonomous control over material properties^[3].

In addition to textual information, the listening training in College English courses also serves an expanding function for the acquisition of video-based creative materials. Resources such as open lectures from international art institutions, records of creative processes released by art organizations, and oral logs kept by artists during residencies mostly exist in the form of English audio or video. Listening competence determines the efficiency of extracting unstructured information from these resources, including technical details in impromptu statements, reflective processes on failed experiments, and experience sharing in informal contexts. These resources often contain more operational knowledge than formal publications, and language barriers will cause their value to be significantly underestimated. If College English courses incorporate listening strategy training specifically designed for art-oriented audiovisual materials, they can significantly enhance students' efficiency in extracting creative inspiration from multimodal resources.

2.2 Construction of Discourse Competence for Art Criticism and Artwork Interpretation

The completion of artistic creation does not end with the material presentation of the work itself, but also requires the aid of linguistic sign systems to accomplish the fixation and dissemination of meaning. The writing training in College English courses can provide students with the discourse organizational ability needed to construct artwork statements, artist statements, and exhibition proposals. Such texts possess specific rhetorical structures, typically including the delimitation of creative background, explanation of the intention behind material selection, the mapping relationship between formal language and conceptual ideas, as well as the positioning of the work within the contemporary art context. Mastering the English expressions of these move sequences helps students ensure that target audiences accurately understand the core propositions of their works when they apply for international residencies, participate in joint exhibitions, or publish critical reviews of their works.

Discourse competence also involves the critical reading of and response to existing art criticism. When students read English art critical articles, they need to identify the argumentative frameworks, citation strategies, and stance-taking methods employed by the authors. If the reading module in College English courses introduces genre analysis of art critical texts and trains students to distinguish descriptive language from evaluative language and to recognize the presentation of implicit arguments, it can provide them with reference models for writing their own critical texts. The discourse competence for artwork interpretation is not an extension of translation skills, but a process of reorganizing thoughts to conform to the norms of English academic discourse. The cultivation of this competence requires systematic cycles of language input and output, and it cannot be achieved by relying solely on fragmented terminology learning or template application^[4].

2.3 Cultural Negotiation Competence in the International Art Context

The core challenge that artistic activities face in the international context is not the linguistic conversion itself, but the differentiated understandings of artistic concepts, aesthetic standards, and

creative ethics across different cultural systems. College English courses can provide students with the linguistic tools to analyze these differences. Specifically, the intercultural communication content covered in the classroom, such as politeness strategies, indirect speech acts, and interpretive frameworks for cultural metaphors, can be transferred to artistic situations. When students need to explain the use of specific cultural symbols in their works before an international jury, their English competence enables them to actively set the boundaries of interpretation, rather than passively accepting misinterpretations based on the cultural positions of others.

Another important dimension of cultural negotiation competence is the linguistic recognition of power relations. The international art field contains an asymmetrical configuration constituted by language fluency, publication languages, and institutions that dominate exhibition discourse. Those with weaker English proficiency tend to be marginalized in conference discussions, proposal revisions, and cooperative negotiations, and their creative intentions may be reinterpreted by collaborators or curators to suit mainstream discourse requirements. If the dialogue and discussion modules in College English courses simulate real negotiation scenarios in the art industry, such as budget communication, curatorial plan adjustments, and creative boundary negotiations, they can train students to maintain the coherence and persuasiveness of their own arguments under pressure. This competence enables students to effectively participate in the network of transnational art production and dissemination while maintaining their creative independence, rather than appearing only as executors or objects of translation.

3. The Irreplaceable Value of English Courses in the Art Major Curriculum System

3.1 The Differential Influence of Native-Language Thinking and Foreign-Language Thinking on Artistic Perception

Native-language thinking manifests itself in artistic perception as an intuitive grasp of symbolic meanings. When art majors who are native speakers of Chinese view artworks, their attention distribution, schema extraction, and emotional associations are often implicitly constrained by the Chinese semantic network and rhetorical traditions. This constraint helps to rapidly establish connections between the work and local cultural experience, but it may also limit the depth of interpretation of artworks produced in non-Chinese contexts. Foreign-language thinking, especially English thinking, provides an alternative cognitive framework. The grammatical structures, lexical categories, and metaphorical systems of English differ systematically from those of Chinese. For example, the tense marking in English forces the speaker to attend to the temporal attributes of events, while the countability distinction of nouns affects judgments about the relationship between substance and form. When students use English for artistic perception, these linguistic features guide them to attend to visual elements or semantic layers that are habitually overlooked by their native-language thinking.

The differential influence of English courses on artistic perception does not require learners to abandon their native-language thinking, but rather to establish the cognitive habit of switching and contrasting between the two linguistic systems. A large body of research indicates that bilingual learners exhibit higher categorization flexibility when processing ambiguous visual stimuli, and this characteristic can be transferred to the meaning-generation process in art appreciation. If College English courses in art majors are positioned merely as translation tools or test-taking skills, they cannot fulfill the value of language in cognitive restructuring. Conversely, if the curriculum design guides students to compare the different ways in which Chinese and English art criticism texts describe the same work, and makes them aware of the shaping role that linguistic systems play in perceptual activities, then students can develop more flexible and reflexive artistic judgment within the tension between their native and foreign languages^[5].

3.2 The Synergistic Mechanism between Non-linguistic Sign Systems and Linguistic Sign Systems

Artistic creation and reception activities depend on the interactive operation of multiple sign systems. Non-linguistic sign systems include visual images, spatial arrangements, material textures, and sound frequencies, and these signs convey information through direct perception. Linguistic sign systems, on the other hand, are based on arbitrariness and organize abstract meanings through lexical and syntactic rules. The two are neither independent of each other nor mutually substitutable. In the generative phase of an artwork, linguistic signs often serve as cognitive organizational tools in the

pre-symbolic stage, helping the artist transform vague visual imagery into actionable work plans. The language structure training provided by English courses enables students, when recording their creative ideas in English, to establish logical relationships among concepts, including conditional relations, causal relations, and contrastive relations, thereby reducing the ambiguity of expression in non-linguistic sign systems.

From the reception perspective, the audience's understanding of non-linguistic signs requires linguistic anchoring. Especially in cross-cultural communication contexts, the material forms of artworks may be given incompatible interpretations by audiences from different cultural backgrounds. As the common language of international art exchange, English serves as a bridging function that converts information in non-linguistic sign systems into shareable semantic content. The discourse analysis training in College English courses can help students identify the semantic shifts that may occur during this conversion process. For example, when describing the same red color block, the English words "crimson," "scarlet," and "vermilion" each point to different hues, saturations, and cultural associations, while the Chinese counterparts, such as "deep red" and "vermilion," cannot fully cover the distinctions among the three. By mastering these differentiated linguistic sign resources, students can map visual experience more precisely into linguistic expression when writing their own artwork statements or curatorial texts, thereby minimizing the loss of information from non-linguistic sign systems.

3.3 Theoretical Basis for the Particularity of English Courses for Art Majors

The particularity of English courses for art majors is rooted in the target situation analysis within the theoretical framework of English for Specific Purposes. General English courses set their teaching objectives based on the needs of daily communication and general academic reading, and their corpus sources, task types, and assessment criteria are structurally mismatched with the language use contexts of art majors. The use of English in art majors often involves highly contextualized speech acts, such as artwork defense, critical negotiation, and conceptual proposal, and the linguistic features of these acts include weakening assertive force, using conditional expressions, and constructing virtual discourse spaces. The dialogue patterns and argumentative essay structures presented in general English textbooks cannot cover the above behavioral needs. From the perspective of needs analysis, designing English courses oriented toward art majors requires first identifying the hierarchical levels of language tasks that students face in authentic situations, and then determining the teaching sequence of grammatical points, lexical domains, and discourse types.

The Content-Based Instruction approach in language acquisition theory provides another theoretical support for English courses for art majors. When language learning is deeply integrated with professional content, learners' depth of cognitive processing and motivational intensity are significantly enhanced. Art majors engage with English through authentic tasks such as reading curatorial statements, writing exhibition reviews, and participating in mock juries, and their attention focus shifts from language forms to meaning construction. This learning approach more closely resembles the natural path of mother-tongue acquisition. If College English courses are dominated by general English textbooks, the separation between language forms and professional content will lead to transfer obstacles, and although students may complete classroom exercises, they cannot activate the acquired language knowledge in authentic situations. The irreplaceability of College English courses offered for art majors lies precisely in the fact that they embed the linguistic sign system into the entire process of artistic activities, making language an expressive medium for creative thinking rather than an external training task, thereby establishing a unique position within the curriculum ecology that is distinct from art history theory courses and technical courses.

Conclusion

The necessity of offering College English courses for art majors originates from the particularity of this group's language needs. The English usage scenarios of art students are characterized by a high density of terminology, strong contextual dependence, and reflective writing requirements, and these features determine that the general English teaching model is difficult to achieve effective transfer. By embedding language skills training into the entire process of artistic creation, specially designed English courses can form systematic support for talent cultivation across three dimensions: acquisition of materials, discourse construction, and cultural negotiation. From the cognitive perspective, foreign-language thinking provides a reference framework for artistic perception that differs from that

of the native language, and the synergistic mechanism between linguistic and non-linguistic signs reveals the irreplaceable function of English competence in meaning anchoring. Future research can further explore specific teaching model designs for English courses for art majors, including the presentation methods of terminological networks, the selection criteria for authentic corpus, and the construction pathways of assessment systems. At the same time, attention should also be paid to the differences in English needs across various art genres, so as to promote the optimization of course content through more refined needs analysis.

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