Asia Pacific Science Press

Journal of Educational Theory and Practice
ISSN(O):3005-9313
ISSN(P):3005-9305
Vol. 2 No.4 (2025)

Research on the Training Paths of Foreign Language Talents in Vocational Undergraduate Universities Under the Background of New-Quality Productive Forces: A Case Study of a Vocational Undergraduate University in Shandong

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Abstract: The development of New-Quality Productive Forces (NQPF) has emerged as a core driver of China's high-quality economic growth, generating an urgent demand for high-caliber compound foreign language talents equipped with technical and vocational competencies. As a pivotal link connecting the education, talent, industrial, and innovation chains, vocational undergraduate universities play an indispensable role in cultivating such talents to underpin NQPF advancement. However, the current foreign language talent training in these universities faces prominent challenges, including ambiguous orientation, inadequate practical teaching, insufficient industry-education integration, and simplistic evaluation mechanisms, resulting in a mismatch between graduates' capabilities and industrial needs. Employing a qualitative case study approach, this research focuses on the Applied English program at a vocational undergraduate university. By analyzing relevant literature and data, it identifies the core dilemmas in talent cultivation and proposes a five-dimensional optimization framework. The study aims to provide practical pathways for nurturing foreign language talents with solid linguistic proficiency, industry-specific expertise, and digital capabilities, thereby supporting the international upgrading of industries and the sustainable development of NQPF.

Keywords: New-Quality Productive Forces; Vocational Undergraduate Education; Foreign Language Talent; Talent Training

Published: Dec 27, 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.62177/jetp.v2i4.936

1.Introduction

The concept of New-quality Productive Forces (NQPF), first proposed by President Xi Jinping in September 2023, refers to an advanced form of productive forces driven by revolutionary technological breakthroughs, innovative allocation of production factors, and in-depth industrial transformation and upgrading[1]. It serves as a critical guideline for high-quality development in China, emphasizing the integration of technological innovation, industrial innovation, and talent development. The 15th Five-Year Plan, adopted in October 2025, further highlights the strategic importance of accelerating self-reliance in high-level science and technology, fostering NQPF, and enhancing the capacity of vocational education to serve industrial needs.

1.1 Research Background and Significance

In the context of NQPF, globalization and digitalization have intensified the demand for compound foreign language talents who can bridge international technical exchanges and industrial cooperation. These talents are expected to combine proficient foreign language skills with cross-cultural communication capabilities, digital literacy, and industry-specific expertise to adapt to scenarios such as cross-border trade, digital economy, and international technical collaboration. Vocational undergraduate universities, as the main providers of high-level technical and skilled talents, are tasked with aligning their training models with the evolving needs of NQPF. However, existing foreign language training in these institutions often fails to meet industrial requirements, creating a talent gap that hinders industrial internationalization. Thus, exploring effective training paths for foreign language talents in vocational undergraduate universities under the NQPF background is of great practical significance for promoting the integration of education and industry, and supporting national strategic development.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to address the aforementioned research gaps. By conducting a systematic review of relevant literature and carrying out field investigations, it identifies the higher requirements for foreign language talents in vocational undergraduate universities under the background of NQPF, as well as the gaps between current training models and such requirements. It further constructs a holistic optimization framework to resolve the core dilemmas in talent cultivation, and provides actionable and targeted recommendations for vocational undergraduate institutions, industrial enterprises, and educational policymakers.

2.NQPF and Foreign Language Talent Cultivation

NQPF has reshaped industrial demand for compound foreign language talents and pushed vocational undergraduate education toward reform, with existing research echoing the need for practice-oriented and technology-integrated training. However, the actual foreign language training in these institutions fails to keep pace with such demand and reform trends, presenting systemic mismatches across multiple dimensions rather than isolated issues.

2.1 An Overview of NQPF

The global shift toward digitalization, cross-border collaboration, and technological innovation has catalyzed the emergence of NQPF—a concept defined by revolutionary technological breakthroughs, innovative allocation of production factors, and in-depth industrial transformation. As a core driver of China's high-quality economic growth, NQPF has been formally elevated to a national strategic priority: the 15th Five-Year Plan (2025) explicitly emphasizes accelerating the integration of scientific and technological innovation with industrial development. Besides, Erik Baark, Honorary Professor in the Department of Social Science at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, stated that China defines the development of advanced productive forces as the pursuit of higher technological content. This implies that China needs to accelerate technological innovation to advance the development of new quality productive forces[2]. David Monyae, Director of the Center for Africa-China Studies at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa, pointed out that the proposal of new quality productive forces reflects a shift in the perception of China regarding the role of technology in the economy and the broader modern society[3], and they firmly believe that technology and innovation can become the core productive forces.

It is evident that NQPF, incubated against the backdrop of global digitalization, cross-border collaboration and technological innovation, is characterized by revolutionary technological breakthroughs and other core attributes, serving as a pivotal engine for China's high-quality economic development. Overseas scholars have affirmed its value, noting that it reflects China's emphasis on technological innovation and the shifted perception of technology's role.

2.2 NQPF-Driven Foreign Language Talent Cultivation

It is imperative to accelerate the in-depth integration of scientific and technological innovation with industrial development and position vocational education as a critical link that connects the "education chain", "talent chain", and "industrial chain". Behind this strategic positioning lies a profound trend: NQPF are no longer confined to the economic realm; instead, they have evolved into a transformative force reshaping the demand for human capital, exerting a far-reaching impact particularly on fields characterized by both cross-cultural attributes and technical collaboration requirements, such as foreign language services.

For vocational universities, the phenomenon of NQPF-driven talent demand manifests in two key trends. First, industries

closely tied to NQPF increasingly seek compound foreign language talents—individuals who combine linguistic proficiency with digital literacy, industry-specific expertise, and cross-cultural problem-solving skills. Hu Yingmei noted that NQPF rejects "single-skill" labor and instead demands talents who can "adapt to dynamic industrial scenarios, apply new production tools, and create innovative value"[4]. Second, vocational undergraduate education—tasked with cultivating high-level technical and skilled talents—faces mounting pressure to align its curricula and training models with these industrial needs. Feng et al. highlight that vocational undergraduate institutions must move beyond traditional "theory-heavy" models to prioritize practical, industry-integrated training, as their role in supporting NQPF lies in "translating technological innovation into actionable workforce capabilities"[5].

Existing research has increasingly recognized the need for reform, yet it suffers from insufficient interdisciplinary integration. Studies by some scholars propose initiatives such as integrating digital technologies and adopting project-based learning, but these efforts remain confined to superficial applications rather than in-depth interdisciplinary convergence. In contrast, Wang and Zhou have applied activity theory to analyze how AI and big data reshape foreign language teaching mechanisms, revealing the interactive relationships between teaching subjects, tools, and rules[6]. Similarly, Wang Zhuli's "on-demand learning paradigm" demonstrates how educational technology can integrate with vocational foreign language teaching to enhance learning adaptability[7]. Despite their insights, these interdisciplinary findings have not been fully leveraged in current research.

International experience offers valuable insights for addressing these gaps. Germany's dual vocational training system integrates classroom instruction with enterprise-led practical training, nurturing foreign language skills through real-world project participation, with approximately two-thirds of trainees securing employment with their training companies—a testament to its effective industry integration[8][9]. Australia's Technical and Further Education system adopts competency-based foreign language curriculum design, offering short courses tailored to industry needs[10]. Global research on digital technology empowerment, such as studies on "digital technology-enabled vocational foreign language teaching" and "cross-border collaborative language service talent training", underscores the importance of adaptive learning platforms and cross-cultural communication simulations[11]. These perspectives can provide a framework for identifying the unique context of NQPF in China while leveraging universal best practices.

To sum up, NQPF, a national strategic priority for China's high-quality growth, reshapes demand for compound foreign language talents with linguistic, digital, industrial and cross-cultural competencies, pushing vocational undergraduate education to reform. While research confirms reform needs and international experiences offer references, systemic mismatches (theory-practice disconnection, superficial integration) persist. Future efforts should integrate interdisciplinary insights and global practices to deepen collaboration and optimize systems, aligning training with NQPF demands.

3.Methodology

This study takes the Applied English major of a vocational college in Shandong Province as the research object. As a representative vocational undergraduate major with a history of over 20 years in running programs, it has an enrollment scale of more than 20,000 students and has established extensive cooperative relationships with dozens of enterprises in the fields of cross-border trade, language services and digital marketing. Three criteria were followed for case selection: first, the professional orientation is highly consistent with industries related to NQPF; second, complete and accessible data resources are available, including talent training programs, course syllabi, graduate employment records and other materials; third, it presents typical dilemmas in foreign language talent training in vocational undergraduate colleges. To systematically explore the talent training practice of this major, this study integrates multiple specific research methods and conducts targeted research around core research dimensions, which are detailed as follows.

3.1 Literature Research Method

As the basic data collection method of this study, the literature research method systematically sorts out and analyzes various official documents and materials to obtain objective basic data support. The research objects include talent training programs from 2021 to 2025, syllabi of core courses, faculty files, school-enterprise cooperation agreements and graduate employment reports from 2022 to 2025.

3.2 Semi-Structured Interview Method

To obtain in-depth subjective data and make up for the limitations of literature research, this study adopted the semi-structured interview method and selected 15 key stakeholders as interviewees, including 5 university and department-level teaching administrators, 6 backbone teachers with more than 5 years of teaching experience, 2 industry mentors from cross-border e-commerce and language service enterprises, and 10 fresh graduates employed in international technical services and cross-border marketing positions. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. With the consent of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data integrity.

3.3 Classroom Observation Method

To obtain first-hand empirical data on the teaching implementation process, this study employed the classroom observation method, selecting 8 core courses as observation objects and designing a structured observation scale. The observation focused on recording key information around the courses and practice dimension while taking into account the relevant performance of other dimensions.

3.4 Case Study Method

As the overall research paradigm of this study, the case study method integrated the research results of the literature research method, semi-structured interview method and classroom observation method, taking the Applied English major of a vocational college in Shandong Province as a single case.

Through literature research, the “design-level” characteristics of the talent training system were clarified; through semi-structured interviews, the “cognitive-level” feedback from various subjects on training practice was explored; through classroom observation, the “operation-level” performance of teaching implementation was captured. The analysis results of the three levels of data were mutually verified and supplemented, forming a comprehensive understanding of the talent training practice of this major.

4.Research Findings

Based on a multi-dimensional analytical framework and multi-source data triangulation, this study summarizes the current development status of the Applied English major at a vocational college in Shandong Province. The advent of the new-quality productivity era, characterized by innovation-driven development, digital transformation, and deep industry-education integration, has raised higher requirements for talent cultivation in vocational undergraduate education. In particular, the Applied English major is expected to foster compound, practical, and innovative talents capable of adapting to the digital and intelligent development of related industries. However, the current development of this major still has a certain gap with the higher requirements of new-quality productivity, which is manifested in the following aspects.

4.1 Ambiguous Talent Training Orientation

The talent cultivation model of the major still replicates the “theory-heavy and practice-light” approach adopted by general undergraduate institutions. This model not only fails to highlight the core characteristics of vocational education, but also deviates from the demand for compound talents driven by new-quality productivity. Such talents should be proficient in English application, skilled in digital tools, and well-acquainted with emerging industries. Three core mismatches between the current training model and actual demand are identified as follows.

First, the proportion of practical course hours is insufficient and the course content is disconnected from digital industrial scenarios. Practical teaching is mainly limited to classroom simulations and does not cover training on core digital skills. Second, the teacher-centered teaching model lacks digital practice activities conducive to improving students’ practical abilities. Third, less than 15% of graduation thesis topics are related to the field of new-quality productivity, while most of the topics focus on traditional academic research directions.

4.2 Insufficient Implementation Effect of Practical Courses

Although the major has added digital courses to its traditional curriculum system, the implementation effect of these courses is far from meeting the requirements of new-quality productivity, resulting in a mismatch between training content and the needs of digital industrial positions.

The teaching of digital courses still relies heavily on teacher demonstrations. Classroom observations show that in AI-aided

translation courses, teachers only explain and demonstrate the basic operation of tools, and students merely take notes and conduct simple practice. Practical activities are confined to classroom exercises, without in-depth practical tasks such as real translation projects. Students can only use simplified software for simulation operations in class, with no access to real business platforms such as language service enterprise systems. As a result, they cannot participate in daily business processes in the new-quality productivity era. Enterprise mentors confirmed that graduates need 3 to 6 months of on-the-job training to adapt to digital positions, especially lacking core skills. This situation directly indicates that the current practical courses have failed to achieve the training goal of "zero-distance connection with digital positions" required by new-quality productivity.

4.3 Lagging Faculty Development

The insufficient number of digital "double-qualified" teachers, who possess both solid professional theoretical knowledge and practical experience in the digital industry, has become a core bottleneck restricting the quality of talent cultivation[12]. New-quality productivity requires teachers to have the ability to integrate digital technology into the teaching process, but the current faculty team has not yet formed such supporting capacity.

The survey results show that, over 70% of professional teachers are newly graduated academic postgraduates. Although they have a solid theoretical foundation, they generally lack practical experience in the digital industry. Their enterprise practice is mostly short-term, lasting only 1 to 2 months, which makes it impossible for them to master cutting-edge industry technologies, let alone integrate digital practical content into classroom teaching. In addition, part-time enterprise mentors employed by the college are mostly technical backbones in the digital industry, but they lack systematic training in teaching capabilities, and thus cannot transform their rich industrial experience into teachable course content. The selection, training and development mechanism for digital "double-qualified" teachers is yet to be improved.

University-enterprise cooperation remains at a superficial stage and fails to build a collaborative ecosystem for digital talent cultivation required by new-quality productivity. New-quality productivity demands that both universities and enterprises participate in the entire process of talent cultivation, but the current cooperation model lacks such in-depth synergy.

4.4 Insufficient Depth of Industry-Education Integration

A backward inference based on indicators such as the employment direction and employment rate of graduates majoring in foreign languages shows that university-enterprise cooperation in foreign language majors mostly stays at the level of superficial connection such as internship recommendation and position placement. There is a lack of in-depth collaborative models involving joint research on curriculum standards, co-construction of teaching content, co-design of training projects and joint cultivation of talents, failing to form a closed-loop of "industry-university-research-application" integrated talent cultivation.

4.5 Undiversified and Rigid Evaluation System

Most courses adopt an assessment model consisting of 60% final examination scores and 40% regular performance scores. The final examination focuses on traditional theoretical knowledge such as grammar and literary translation, while regular performance only includes homework submission and attendance. Core digital abilities are not included in the assessment scope.

Both teachers and enterprise mentors pointed out that there is a lack of systematic assessment standards for students' practical performance in digital positions, and there is a serious mismatch between graduates' academic scores and their digital abilities at work. This single evaluation orientation cannot effectively guide students to focus on improving their digital skills, nor can it accurately assess the effectiveness of talent cultivation oriented to new-quality productivity.

5.Optimization Paths for Foreign Language Talent Training Under the Background of NQPF

The paths focus on "talent positioning, practical ecology, faculty development, university-enterprise collaboration, and evaluation system"—five core dimensions, aiming to realize the transformation from "knowledge-oriented training" to "competency-oriented training" and build a talent training system that is compatible with NQPF development needs.

5.1 Clarify the Orientation of "Foreign Language +" Compound Application-Oriented Talents

The advent of new-quality productive forces has fostered emerging job roles such as cross-border digital marketing

and language model training. However, the conventional model of foreign language talent cultivation is plagued by the predicaments of ambiguous positioning, singular competency profiles, and superficial practical training—it focuses exclusively on the imparting of linguistic and literary knowledge while neglecting industry-critical competencies including technological adaptability and cross-disciplinary collaboration. To address the dilemma of ambiguous training orientation and the "theory-heavy, practice-light" model, this path focuses on reconstructing the training system with "compound competency" as the core and "practical empowerment" as the means.

Specific measures cover five aspects: First, standardize curriculum content. Taking the Applied English major as an example, the curriculum system should be restructured to quantify practical course hours—requiring that practical teaching hours, including project training, simulation operations and real case analysis, account for no less than 40% of professional core courses. Part of the original theoretical hours should be transformed into "theoretical explanation plus immediate practice" modules, and the learning effect of practical hours should be integrated into the formative evaluation system. Second, reform practical forms. Based on the cognitive apprenticeship model, a "classroom workshop" mode should be implemented. Arranging courses such as translation and cross-border e-commerce English in training rooms equipped with professional software to integrate teaching and training[13]. Adopt "project-based homework": replace traditional written homework with micro-projects from cooperative enterprises, such as product description translation, overseas social media content creation and customer email handling simulation, which are completed by students in groups and evaluated jointly by enterprise mentors and professional teachers. Third, add "professional direction module courses". In the second semester of the sophomore year or the junior year, set up micro-major modules such as "technical document translation", 'cross-border digital marketing" and "language model trainer". Students can choose 1-2 modules and complete all courses and training projects in the selected modules. Fourth, emphasize practicality in graduation theses. Students can write graduation designs or investigation reports based on their internship experience to solve real practical problems and put forward effective solutions or process optimization plans. Fifth, promote interdisciplinary integration and professional transformation. Through "foreign language + AI/technology" and "foreign language + specific field/industry" models, break the barriers of traditional foreign language majors and reshape professional value and competitiveness by integrating with other disciplines.

5.2 Build a Practical New Ecology of "Real Projects + Interdisciplinarity"

Aiming at solving the problem of insufficient implementation of practical courses and the disconnection between training and industrial reality, this path focuses on building a practical ecology that integrates "real scenarios, real projects, and interdisciplinary collaboration". Two key measures are proposed: First, introduce real enterprise projects into the classroom. Sign agreements with cooperative enterprises to take part of their non-core but real businesses as daily training content, which are completed under the guidance of teachers and enterprise mentors. Enterprises pay according to quality or provide certifications, enabling students to gain real work experience and rewards or certificates. Second, establish interdisciplinary project workshops. Cooperate with the school's colleges of computer science, finance, and design to set up "digital product going global workshops" and "international integrated media content creation workshops". Foreign language majors are responsible for language, culture, and market analysis, while students of other majors are responsible for technology, design, and operation to jointly complete interdisciplinary projects and simulate real workplace collaboration. In addition, driven by these workshops, students can jointly participate in skill competitions and innovation and entrepreneurship competitions to promote learning through competition.

5.3 Strictly implement "Dual-Qualified" Faculty Development Mechanism

To address the inadequacies of the "dual-qualified" faculty team, this path focuses on building a two-way flow mechanism between the university and enterprises and realizing hierarchical empowerment of faculty. Two key measures are formulated: First, send no less than 20% of professional course teachers to cooperative enterprises for "on-the-job practice" in full-time or part-time form every academic year, with a duration of at least 2 months. Teachers should undertake specific work tasks and sign a task book, and enterprises should issue a practical ability appraisal report at the end of the practice. Second, hire a group of experienced business backbones or managers with willingness to teach from cooperative enterprises as industrial mentors. Instead of giving occasional lectures, industrial mentors are required to undertake the teaching of a practical course

for at least 32 class hours. In addition, they should jointly guide graduation designs or theses with on-campus teachers and participate in revising curriculum syllabi and training manuals. Systematic "teaching methodology" workshops should be held for industrial mentors, covering curriculum design, classroom management, teaching skills, and assessment and evaluation, which are taught by senior on-campus teaching experts to improve their teaching effectiveness.

5.4 Promote the Construction of a University-Enterprise Collaborative Education Community

To solve the problem of insufficient depth of industry-education integration, this path focuses on building a community of shared interests with "benefit sharing and process co-management" as the core, and proposes three key measures: First, establish a "professional construction committee", requiring that experts from industries and enterprises account for no less than 40% of the committee members. The committee not only provides consulting services but also has the right of review and veto over talent training programs and core curriculum standards to ensure that the training direction is closely aligned with industrial needs. Second, jointly build "on-campus productive training bases". Cooperate with leading enterprises to build physical or virtual institutions with both operation and teaching functions on campus, such as cross-border live broadcast incubation centers and language service studios. Enterprises provide projects, technologies, and part of the operation support, while the university provides venues, equipment, and student teams. Profits are shared according to agreements to achieve self-sustainability. Third, jointly develop teaching resource packages. Cooperate with enterprises to compile loose-leaf textbooks based on real cases, develop online training course packages, and establish enterprise real corpus and project databases, directly transforming enterprise work standards into teaching standards.

5.5 Establish a Comprehensive Evaluation System

To address the dilemma of a single evaluation system, this path focuses on building a comprehensive evaluation system that integrates process tracking, multi-dimensional assessment, and industry-education collaboration, with two key measures: First, reform the course assessment method. Significantly reduce the proportion of final closed-book exams, and increase the weight of assessment forms such as project defense, practical operation assessment, work review, and simulated scenario performance. In addition, introduce enterprise evaluation—for project courses and internships, the evaluation of enterprise mentors should account for no less than 30%-50% of the total score. Second, introduce the third-party competency certification. Integrate industry-recognized vocational skill level standards into course assessment, encourage students to participate in authoritative third-party competency certifications, and use certification results as an important reference for course completion or graduation.

The above five optimization paths form a systematic and mutually reinforcing improvement framework. Clarifying talent positioning provides a direction for the reform; building a practical ecology provides a carrier for ability training; constructing a "dual-qualified" faculty team provides human support; establishing a university-enterprise collaborative community provides institutional guarantee; and establishing a comprehensive evaluation system provides a feedback mechanism. Together, they address the core dilemmas of foreign language talent training in vocational undergraduate institutions and provide actionable solutions for adapting to the talent demand of NQPF.

6.Conclusion

6.1 Research Summary

This study focuses on the talent training of foreign language majors in vocational undergraduate institutions under the background of NQPF, and systematically explores the core dilemmas and optimization paths through qualitative case study on the Applied English major of a vocational college in Shandong Province. The research conclusions and prospects are summarized as follows.

First, the development of NQPF has put forward higher and more compound capability requirements for foreign language talents in vocational undergraduate institutions. Vocational education must transform to cultivate "new-quality" technical and skilled talents with high innovative literacy to meet the demand of NQPF. The case study confirms that foreign language talent training in vocational undergraduate institutions currently faces five interrelated core dilemmas: ambiguous training orientation, insufficient implementation of practical courses, inadequate faculty development, insufficient depth of industry-education integration, and undiversified evaluation system. These dilemmas collectively lead to the mismatch between

talent output and the compound capability requirements of NQPF, highlighting the urgency of training model reform. Second, the five optimization paths proposed in this study form a systematic solution to address the above dilemmas. Clarifying the "Foreign Language +" compound application-oriented talent orientation clarifies the core direction of reform; building a practical ecology of "real projects + interdisciplinarity" provides a carrier for capability cultivation; improving the "dual-qualified" faculty development mechanism strengthens human resource support; deepening the university-enterprise collaborative education community ensures institutional synergy; and establishing a comprehensive evaluation system provides an effective feedback and incentive mechanism. These paths are mutually reinforcing and targeted, which can systematically promote the reform and innovation of talent training models, and provide solid talent support for the sustainable development of NQPF.

6.2 Implications

Looking forward, foreign language education in vocational undergraduate institutions should more proactively integrate into national development strategies and industrial upgrading. On the one hand, it is necessary to dynamically adapt to technological changes such as digital economy and artificial intelligence, and more closely integrate cutting-edge technological tools with teaching practice—for example, further exploring the application of large language models in translation teaching and cross-border business simulation. On the other hand, it is essential to expand the international perspective of talent training, strengthen intercultural communication and global competence cultivation, so as to adapt to the increasingly frequent international cooperation needs under NQPF.

In conclusion, by constructing a more resilient, open and forward-looking talent training system, foreign language education in vocational undergraduate institutions will not only effectively empower NQPF, but also contribute key strength to China's gaining advantages in global competition. This study enriches the research on foreign language talent training in vocational education under the new economic background, and the proposed optimization paths have certain practical reference value. However, the research is limited to a single case, and future research can expand the scope of cases to verify the universality of the conclusions and further explore the differentiated paths for different types of foreign language majors.

Funding

School-level Scientific Research Project of Shandong Vocational and Technical University of International Studies in 2024: Research on Foreign Language Talent Training Paths in Vocational Undergraduate Universities Under the Background of New-Quality Productive Forces

(Project No.: KY202405)

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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