

Developing a Process Drama–Based Instructional Model to Enhance English–Speaking Ability of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Students in Chinese Vocational Colleges

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Abstract

This article aimed to: 1) study the current problems in the English–speaking ability, and 2) develop and validate an instructional model based on social constructivist theory, collaborative learning, and process drama. Participants included 240 second–year tourism management students and 6 English teachers selected through purposive sampling to identify core pedagogical gaps. Additionally, five experts in curriculum and instruction validated the model. Data were collected via structured questionnaires and semi–structured interviews. The validation of the research instruments was confirmed using the Index of Item–Objective Congruence (IOC), while the model's suitability was assessed using a 5–point Likert scale (1=Lowest, 5=Highest). Results indicated that students face significant linguistic barriers and affective factors like high anxiety. The developed model, titled the SCPD Model, consists of three stages (Pre–activity, While–activity, and Post–activity) and nine instructional steps. Expert validation yielded a high mean score of 4.31 (SD = 0.52). The research provides a validated framework for enhancing oral communication in vocational ESP contexts.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes; Instructional model; Collaborative learning; Process drama; Social constructivist theory; English–Speaking Ability

Introduction

English plays a vital role for tourism professionals interacting with diverse linguistic backgrounds, enabling them to provide clear information, address concerns, and improve positive relationships with international tourists (Blue & Harun, 2003). Regarding the English language skills, speaking seems to be the most crucial skill in terms of communication or interaction in daily lives (Ur, 1996). English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is very practical for professional training. In many vocational schools in China, students with low proficiency English-speaking ability often demonstrate limited motivation and negative attitudes toward English learning (Chuane et al., 2023). Social constructivist theory, rooted in Vygotsky's work, views learning as a socially mediated process where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction. Collaborative learning builds a more supportive environment for language practice through interaction among learners (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Process drama, an improvisational and role-playing technique, immerses learners in authentic communicative situations, encouraging spontaneous language use (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995). This research proposes the development of an instructional model integrating social constructivist theory, collaborative learning, and process drama to build an interactive, student-centered learning environment in meaningful communication.

Building on this background, the study addresses the need for an instructional model to enhance the English-speaking ability of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students in Chinese vocational colleges. This original research article presents the systematic development and empirical validation of the social constructivist theory-collaborative learning-process drama (SCPD) model. This study provides a comprehensive synthesis and expert-validated instructional syntax designed specifically for the professional communication needs of ESP students in Chinese vocational colleges. A mixed-methods design was employed, consisting of two phases: 1) an investigation of the current problems in ESP speaking instruction; 2) the development and validation of the instructional model combined with social constructivist theory, collaborative learning and process drama. Data were collected through questionnaires administered to students and teachers, as well as expert interviews and model quality evaluation. The proposed model may be utilized by English teachers, curriculum designers, and vocational education institutions seeking to support the development of students' English-speaking ability in professional settings.

Research Objectives

1. To study the current problems in the English-speaking ability of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students in China.
2. To develop and validate an instructional model based on process drama combined with social constructivist theory, and collaborative learning to enhance English-speaking ability of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Students in Chinese Vocational Colleges.

Literature Review

In order to conduct a study on the development of an instructional model to enhance the English-speaking ability of Chinese students, the researcher reviewed relevant research literature from social constructivist theory, collaborative learning, and process drama.

1. Social Constructivist Theory and the Pedagogical Gap in ESP Contexts

From a social constructivist perspective, learners construct linguistic knowledge and cognitive knowledge through interaction and cultural mediation. Supunya (2023) observed that ESP research rarely addresses context-specific, task-based implementation, revealing a gap between pedagogical theory and practical application across disciplines. This reveals a persistent gap in constructivist pedagogy to develop professional communication and domain-specific speaking competence, particularly within the Chinese ESP context.

2. Collaborative Learning and the Need for Adaptation

Collaborative learning, grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and social interdependence theory (Clapper, 2015), provides the interactional mechanism through which constructivist learning occurs. Empirical research confirms its effectiveness in developing linguistic competence and learner motivation (Gillies & Boyle, 2010). However, the effectiveness of collaborative learning is highly dependent on the instructional context. Chen (2024) began to explore the AI-supported chatbot interaction facilitates collaborative language learning by enabling learners to co-construct meaning through shared tasks.

3. Process Drama as a Constructivist and Collaborative Bridge

Process drama, as conceptualized by Heathcote and Bolton (1995), offers a performative and interactive approach that unites social constructivist and collaborative learning principles. It promotes experiential, meaning-centered engagement through improvisation and reflection. Recent systematic reviews (Luo et al., 2024) confirm its positive impact on communicative competence, motivation, and cultural awareness. Meanwhile, process drama also presents

difficulties in practice with learners in limited language proficiency (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2019). These considerations are particularly relevant as learners in vocational education commonly demonstrate significant gaps between their self-perceived and actual oral presentation skills, necessitating a matrix-based approach to identify and prioritize specific communication difficulties. (Charoensuk, 2026).

From the reviewed literature, social constructivist theory, collaborative learning, and process drama demonstrate strong conceptual compatibility. The theoretical integration among these frameworks suggests a promising basis for designing and validating an instructional model to enhance ESP students' speaking ability in China.

Conceptual Framework

This study integrates the three theoretical perspectives into a conceptual framework to design a proposed instructional model (SCPD model). The learning environment is grounded in social constructivist theory. Collaborative learning supports the organization of student interaction during the preparation stage. Process drama provides the instructional strategy for the implementation and reflection stages.

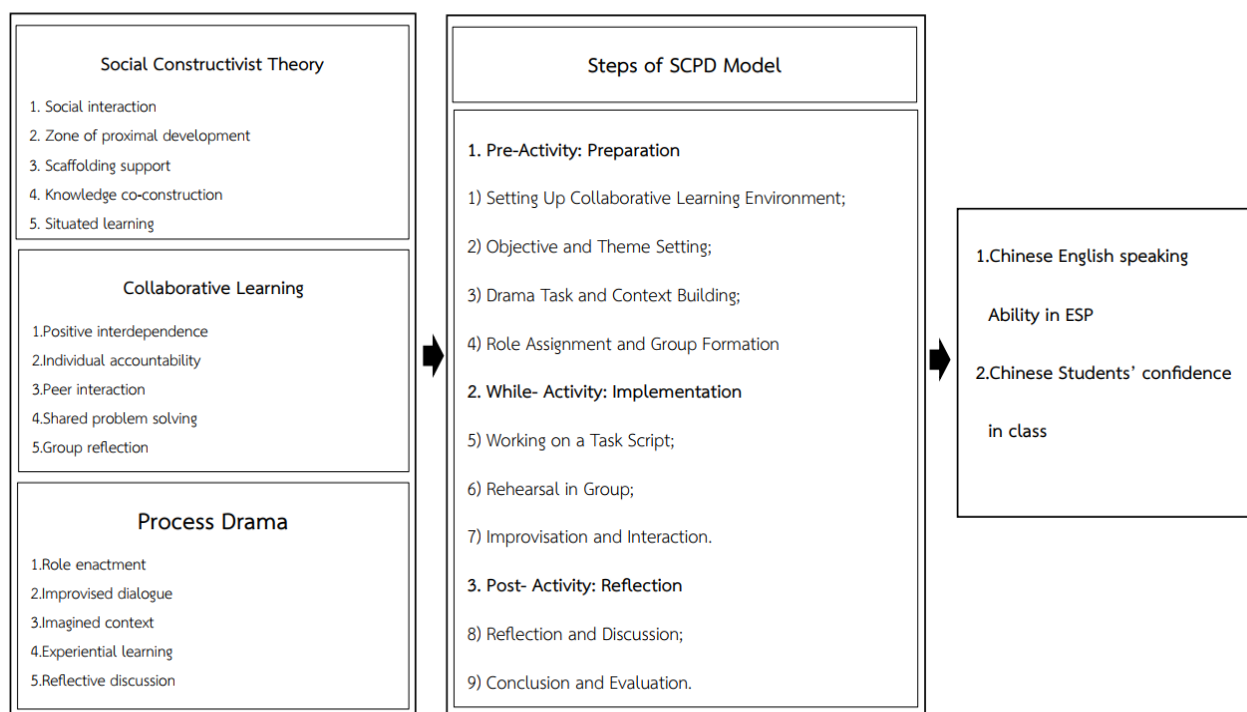


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods design through the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the two research objectives in a clear manner:

Phase 1: Study the current problems in the English-speaking ability of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students in China. Structured questionnaires were administered to 240 students and six English teachers at Zhengzhou Tourism College to document their experiences of ESP speaking instruction, including perceived barriers, affective challenges, and current pedagogical approaches. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five experts in English curriculum and instruction to obtain in-depth perspectives on existing approaches to ESP speaking instruction, instructional design principles, and the feasibility of drama-based interventions in vocational settings. The results from the questionnaires and interviews were used to identify key issues and to provide a basis for the development of the instructional model in the next phase.

Phase 2: Development and validation of the instructional model. Based on the findings in Phase 1 and the review of relevant literature, the SCPD model was systematically developed to include its instructional syntax, social system, support system, and evaluation procedures. After the initial model was constructed, it was submitted for validation by five experts selected through purposive sampling. These experts held specializations in English language teaching, curriculum design, and vocational education, and were recruited from university faculties and professional teacher training institutions. A model evaluation form using a five-point Likert scale was used to assess the appropriateness of the model components.

Participants

Three groups participated in this study: 1) Students (sample group): 240 second-year tourism management students who had completed foundational English courses and were preparing for work placements. The 240 represented the full second-year enrollment in 2024–2025, covering the entire cohort rather than a partial sample; 2) Teachers (key informants): Six ESP teachers currently teaching at the college, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct classroom experience with ESP instruction; and 3) Experts (key informants): Five curriculum specialists from university departments and vocational research centers, selected through purposive sampling based on their experience in instructional design.

Research Instruments

The research Instruments included 1) Questionnaires for teachers and students, designed to document current problems in ESP speaking teaching and learning at Zhengzhou Tourism College.

Each questionnaire contained 20 items measuring perceptions across five categories on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaires were pilot tested with 30 students who had characteristics similar to the sample group in order to examine the reliability of the instruments; and 2) Semi-structured Interviews used to obtain in-depth perspectives from five experts in English curriculum and instruction on current models to English-speaking instruction. All Data collected by distributing instruments during the first semester of the academic year in 2025; and 3) a model evaluation form based on a five-point Likert scale was designed for expert review of the proposed instructional model. All tools were evaluated by five experts in English curriculum and instruction using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). The IOC scores of questionnaires and Interview ranged from 0.80 to 1.00, confirming that all items were highly congruent with the research objectives.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires and the model evaluation form were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Mean/S.D.) in order to identify the main problems in ESP speaking instruction and to examine the appropriateness of the proposed instructional model. Mean scores were interpreted based on the criteria proposed by Chetupon (2025): 4.21–5.00 = Very High, 3.41–4.20 = High, 2.61–3.40 = Moderate, 1.81–2.60 = Low, and 1.00–1.80 = Very Low.

Qualitative data from the semi-structured expert interviews were analyzed using content analysis. The interview responses were transcribed and reviewed. Relevant statements were coded and grouped into categories, which were organized into themes and compared with questionnaire results to support model development.

Research Results

Objective 1: The results revealed the current problems in the English-speaking ability of vocational college students in China

A questionnaire was administered to 6 English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers to obtain current problems in ESP speaking instruction.

Table 1 Questionnaires with Teachers on Current Problems in ESP Speaking Instruction (n = 6)

Category	No.	Statement	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Interpretation
Student Engagement and Participation	1	It is challenging to engage students in speaking activities for ESP.	4.30	0.41	Very High
	2	Students often show a lack of confidence when speaking English in class.	4.40	0.84	Very High
	3	Students are hesitant to participate in discussions or speaking tasks in English.	4.20	0.55	High
	4	Students are not motivated to actively participate in speaking exercises.	4.20	0.75	High
Teaching Methods and Resources	5	The current teaching methods do not adequately address students' communication needs in ESP.	4.10	0.52	High
	6	There is a lack of innovative approaches to teaching speaking in ESP.	4.30	0.75	Very High
	7	Teaching materials do not sufficiently support the development of speaking skills.	4.10	0.55	High
	8	The current teaching approach does not encourage active student participation.	4.30	0.75	Very High
Practice and Application	9	There are limited opportunities for students to practice speaking in realistic contexts.	4.20	0.55	High
	10	Speaking tasks are often limited to scripted or repetitive exercises.	4.30	0.82	Very High
	11	Speaking activities are often overshadowed by a focus on grammar and writing.	4.30	0.52	Very High
	12	The current methods do not sufficiently prepare students for real-world communication in ESP.	4.30	0.75	Very High
Learning Environment and Collaboration	13	Collaborative activities are not effectively integrated into my teaching practices.	4.30	0.41	Very High
	14	Group activities in class do not foster collaboration among students.	4.10	0.82	High
	15	It is challenging to create an interactive and engaging learning environment for ESP.	4.30	0.75	Very High
	16	The teaching environment does not promote creativity in speaking lessons.	4.30	0.82	Very High
Assessment and Development	17	Feedback on students' speaking performance is often difficult to provide effectively	4.30	0.41	Very High
	18	Students struggle to retain and apply ESP-specific vocabulary in speaking tasks.	4.20	0.84	High
	19	I find it difficult to balance the teaching of subject-specific content and speaking skills.	4.10	0.75	High
	20	I feel that the current teaching methods are not effective in enhancing students' speaking abilities in ESP.	4.30	0.55	Very High
Total			4.22	0.66	Very High

According to the table 1, the questionnaire results from 6 teachers indicated that problems remain in current ESP speaking instruction. ($\bar{X}$ = 4.22, SD = 0.66). Teachers reported difficulty engaging students in speaking activities ($\bar{X}$ = 4.30, SD = 0.41) and noted that students often lack confidence when speaking English in class ($\bar{X}$ = 4.40, SD = 0.84). In terms of teaching methods and resources, teachers indicated a lack of innovative approaches to teaching speaking ($\bar{X}$ = 4.30, SD = 0.75) and the current approaches do not sufficiently encourage active participation ($\bar{X}$ = 4.30, SD = 0.75). Teachers also reported limited opportunities for realistic speaking practice ($\bar{X}$ = 4.20, SD = 0.55) and a strong reliance on scripted speaking tasks ($\bar{X}$ = 4.30, SD = 0.82).

Table 2 Questionnaires with Students on Current Problems in ESP Speaking Instruction (n=240)

Category	No	Statement	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Interpretation
Confidence and Anxiety	1	I find it difficult to speak English confidently in ESP contexts.	4.55	1.06	Very high
	2	I often worry about making mistakes while speaking in English.	4.42	0.96	Very high
	3	I do not feel confident expressing my ideas in English during group discussions.	4.52	1.09	Very high
Teaching Methods and Engagement	4	The current teaching methods make learning ESP less interesting to me.	4.28	1.13	Very high
	5	The current teaching methods do not motivate me to actively participate in speaking tasks.	4.42	1.25	Very high
	6	There is a lack of variety in the teaching methods used for ESP.	4.06	1.09	High
	7	I feel that traditional teaching approaches do not cater to my learning needs in ESP.	4.25	0.92	Very high
Practice Opportunities and Interaction	8	There are limited opportunities to speak English in class.	4.28	1.14	Very high
	9	Speaking activities in class are not sufficiently interactive or challenging.	4.24	1.01	Very high
	10	The activities in class do not help me improve my speaking skills.	4.12	1.12	High
	11	Speaking activities in ESP are limited to memorization instead of practical application.	4.16	0.93	High
Learning Environment and Collaboration	12	The learning environment does not encourage collaboration with classmates.	4.12	1.06	High
	13	I often feel isolated in my learning process and do not collaborate much with peers.	4.29	1.00	Very high
	14	The learning environment does not support creativity in speaking tasks.	4.26	1.06	Very high
Feedback and Skills Development	15	I rarely get feedback on how to improve my speaking abilities in ESP.	4.24	0.87	Very high
	16	I struggle to remember and use ESP-specific vocabulary effectively.	4.36	0.98	Very high
	17	The lessons often focus more on grammar and writing than on speaking.	4.21	0.90	Very high

Category	No	Statement	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Interpretation
Practical Application	18	Learning ESP is not often clearly linked to real-world communication scenarios.	4.22	1.04	Very high
	19	I find it hard to connect ESP lessons with my specific academic or professional needs.	4.26	1.06	Very high
	20	I feel that my current learning experience is not effective in improving my speaking ability in ESP.	4.28	1.14	Very high
Total			4.29	1.04	Very high

According to the table 2, The student questionnaire results reflect the gaps in ESP speaking learning ($\bar{X} = 4.29$, $SD = 1.04$). In the area of confidence and anxiety, students reported difficulty speaking English confidently in ESP contexts ($\bar{X} = 4.55$) and feeling anxious about making mistakes ($\bar{X} = 4.42$). Regarding teaching methods and engagement, students indicated that current teaching methods do not motivate active participation ($\bar{X} = 4.42$) and lack variety ($\bar{X} = 4.06$). Students also reported limited in-class speaking practice ($\bar{X} = 4.28$) and insufficient interaction during speaking activities ($\bar{X} = 4.24$). In addition, students noted limited collaboration with peers and insufficient feedback on speaking performance.

The qualitative findings from the semi-structured interviews were used to complement the quantitative results for model development. The expert panel pointed out that current ESP speaking instruction focuses mainly on controlled practice and provides limited opportunities for authentic interaction. One expert stated that "students usually practice speaking through scripted tasks rather than meaningful communication," while another noted that "classroom activities should allow students to collaborate and interact in realistic contexts." A third expert highlighted the need for clear role assignment and structured opportunities for reflection to support students in managing both the linguistic and affective demands of speaking tasks. These qualitative observations support the questionnaire results and suggest that an instructional model incorporating collaborative, context-driven speaking tasks is needed to enhance ESP students' oral communication development in vocational settings.

Objective 2: Basis on the findings from Phase 1, the drafted instructional model was designed consisted of three pedagogical stages comprising nine steps. The pre-activity stage focused on preparing learners for participation through warm-up and context setting, goal and theme establishment, drama task and context building, and role assignment with group formation. The while-activity stage focused on engagement through collaborative work on task scripts, group

rehearsals, and improvisational interaction. The post-activity stage involved reflection and discussion, followed by conclusion and evaluation.

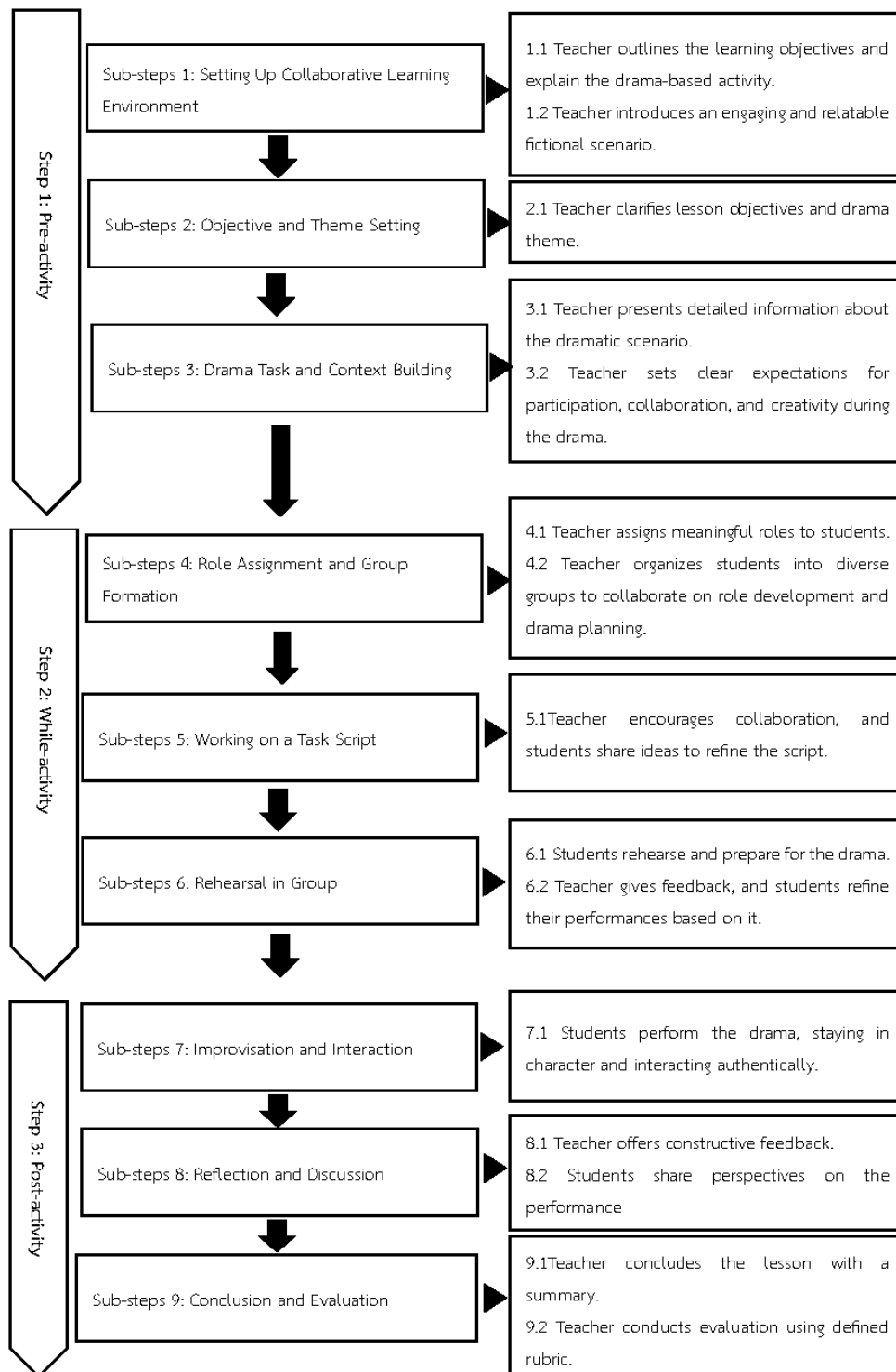


Figure 2 Details of the steps for teaching and learning by using SCPD model

Table 3 Quality Review Results of the Instructional Model by Five Experts

Evaluation Items	$\bar{X}$	SD	Interpretations
1. Theoretical Basis			
1.1 Integration of mature theories	4.30	0.45	Very High
1.2 Alignment of foundations with authentic scenarios/strategies	4.30	0.45	Very High
2. Teaching Objectives			
2.1 Clarity/measurability of objectives	4.30	0.84	Very High
2.2 Career readiness alignment	4.40	0.89	Very High
3. Teaching Content			
3.1 Coverage of authentic tourism scenarios/resources	4.30	0.84	Very High
3.2 Adaptability to individual differences	4.60	0.55	Very High
4. Operation Process			
4.1 Logical three-stage structure	4.30	0.84	Very High
4.2 Promotion of teacher/peer interactions	4.60	0.55	Very High
5. Teaching Strategies			
5.1 Anxiety reduction/spontaneous language use	4.30	0.45	Very High
5.2 Diversification for learning styles	4.30	0.55	Very High I
6. Teaching Evaluation			
6.1 Accuracy of formative assessments	4.10	0.71	High
6.2 Actionability of results	4.30	0.83	Very High
7. Implementation Conditions			
7.1 Sufficiency of resources/support strategies	4.20	0.84	High
7.2 Accounting for student realities/teacher roles	4.40	0.89	Very High
Total average mean score	4.28	0.69	High level

The instructional model was evaluated by five experts in English curriculum and instruction to assess the overall quality. The overall mean score was 4.28 (SD = 0.69) in table 3, indicating a high level of quality of the model. The theoretical basis of the model and authentic learning scenarios were both rated very high ($\bar{X} = 4.30$, SD = 0.45). Teaching objectives related to clarity and career readiness were also highly rated ($\bar{X} = 4.30$, SD = 0.84; $\bar{X} = 4.40$, SD = 0.89). The teaching content was considered appropriate for authentic tourism contexts and able to address learners' different needs and abilities ($\bar{X} = 4.30$, SD = 0.84; $\bar{X} = 4.60$, SD = 0.55). In addition, the operational process, including the three-stage structure and opportunities for teacher and peer interaction, received very high ratings ($\bar{X} = 4.30$, SD = 0.84; $\bar{X} = 4.60$, SD = 0.55).

Discussions

Related to Objective 1: Identifying current problems in ESP speaking instruction

The findings show that ESP students in vocational colleges experience several difficulties in speaking English, including limited vocabulary for professional contexts, low confidence, and high speaking anxiety. Questionnaire data from students and teachers indicate that speaking activities in current ESP classes are often limited to controlled exercises and lack opportunities for interaction related to tourism work situations. Teachers also reported that classroom speaking tasks are frequently constrained by time, curriculum pressure, and large class sizes, which reduces the possibility of communicative practice. These results support the need for instructional approaches that provide structured interaction and contextualized speaking tasks. In addition, cultural expectations in Chinese classrooms may influence students' willingness to participate in expressive activities.

Related to Objective 2: Development and validation of the instructional model

The instructional model developed and validated was combined with constructivist theory, collaborative learning and process drama to respond to real needs in English speaking education. Expert evaluation indicated that the model was appropriate in terms of theoretical foundation, instructional objectives, teaching content, and operational procedures. It was structured into three clear instructional stage (pre-activity, while-activity, and post-activity) and was composed of nine core steps. Furthermore, incorporating structured reflection tasks encouraged learners to evaluate pragmatic effectiveness. Despite these positive evaluations, several practical limitations should be acknowledged. The study focused exclusively on tourism management students at one vocational college, which restricts generalizability.

New Knowledge from Research

This study provides three main contributions based on the results of the two research objectives. 1) It proposes an integrated instructional model that combined with social constructivist theory, collaborative learning and process drama for tourism professionals. The model organizes the teaching process into a clear three-stage structure with nine steps. 2) It provides empirical validation of the key components of the model. Expert evaluation confirmed the appropriateness and clarity of the model structure and verified the validation of the syntax, social system, and support system. The results indicate that the instructional procedures, teacher-student interaction patterns, and supporting learning tools in classroom implementation. 3) the findings demonstrate

practical applicability for tourism ESP classrooms. The validated model provides structured role-play scenarios, guided dialogue prompts, and peer interaction procedures that support the development of tourism-related communicative competence.

Conclusion

In addition, expert interview data suggested that ESP speaking instruction still relies heavily on controlled speaking tasks and provides limited opportunities for authentic communication related to professional contexts. These findings indicate a gap between current classroom practice and the communication demands of vocational tourism settings, supporting the need for a structured instructional model to support more authentic and interactive speaking learning. The researcher successfully developed an instructional model that integrates the concepts of social constructivist learning, collaborative learning, and process drama to effectively enhance English-speaking ability of Chinese students. This was achieved through the analysis of relevant theories, an investigation of the needs of students and teachers, and validation by experts. The resulting instructional model features clearly defined steps divided into three phases: (pre-activity, while-activity, and post-activity).

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for Application

Teachers can apply the SCPD model by designing structured drama-based activities that emphasize student participation, such as tourism service situations, to enhance English-speaking ability. Role-play prompts may include tour guide explanations, hotel reception dialogues, and visitor problem-solving scenarios. Teachers can provide role cards describing the professional role, communication goal, and key information to deliver. Vocabulary support sheets and short dialogue frameworks related to tourism services can be used during the preparation stage. In addition, peer feedback checklists focusing on message clarity, task completion, and interaction management can be used during the reflection stage. These scaffolding tools help students participate in speaking tasks and reduce anxiety during improvisational interaction.

2. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should examine the classroom effectiveness of the SCPD model through quasi-experimental designs. Studies may examine how specific scaffolding tools, such as role cards, scenario prompts, and peer feedback sheets, influence students' speaking participation and

confidence. Future research could explore how different types of tourism-based drama scenarios function in ESP classrooms to determine which task structures produce stronger speaking outcomes. In addition, future studies should include students from different vocational majors and institutions to examine the generalizability of the model across ESP learning contexts.

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