

# **A Study on English Teaching Practices in Vocational Colleges: Guided Mentorship Theory of Full-time English Counselors**

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## **Abstract**

With China's accession to the World Trade Organization and its emergence as the world's second-largest economy, the country has witnessed increasingly close political, economic, and cultural exchanges with other nations. Given that English functions as a global lingua franca, there is an urgent national demand for large numbers of English professionals. As the primary institutions for cultivating highly skilled talent, higher vocational colleges bear an unshirkable responsibility to nurture such professionals. However, numerous shortcomings persist in the cultivation of English majors within these institutions, such as exam-oriented instruction and inadequate teaching staff. At Anhui Finance and Trade Vocational College, full-time counselors have adopted a guided mentorship model based on scaffolding theory and second language acquisition theory to explore the root causes of current challenges in vocational English instruction.

**Keywords:** Guided mentorship; scaffolding theory; vocational English teaching

## **I. The Core Principles and Application of the Guided Mentorship Model**

The Guided Mentorship Model, also known as the Bell–Lancaster System, was originally developed by English educator Bell Lancaster. First implemented in 18th-century British secondary vocational education, its core idea is to use outstanding students as role models and guides. These student guides transfer the knowledge they have acquired to their peers, who then pass it on to others, creating a cyclical process of knowledge dissemination. The ultimate outcome is that the teacher instructs a select few, who then propagate the knowledge to a broader group, amplifying the instructional impact. The system was initially developed in response to a shortage of qualified teachers, yet it aimed to enhance the knowledge base of workers and the general populace.

Despite its early limitations—such as potential misinterpretation of the teacher’s original intent by intermediary learners—the model played a crucial role in mitigating the teacher shortage. In contemporary China, domestic scholars have made considerable progress in applying the Guided Mentorship Model to vocational English teaching. For example, Gao Tiexiang integrated the model with secondary vocational education and highlighted its benefits in reducing teachers’ extracurricular workload and promoting peer interaction. Similarly, Zhang Yingxia explored its application in English translation and writing instruction, noting that the model provided students with a platform to discuss writing techniques and resolved the issue of delayed teacher feedback outside class.

In sum, the Guided Mentorship Model serves as a viable solution to the persistent shortage of English teaching faculty in vocational institutions. Therefore, adopting this model as a supplementary strategy in vocational English instruction is both practical and necessary.

At Anhui Finance and Trade Vocational College, the full-time English counselor system based on the Guided Mentorship Model has been in place for six months. The initiative was designed to enhance students’ English translation and writing skills.

Study sessions are scheduled during evening self-study periods from 7:00 to 8:00 PM. The system adopts the theoretical foundation of the mentorship model and is adjusted according to students' English proficiency levels. First, English-proficient teachers—those who have passed the College English Test Band 4 or Band 6—are selected from the full-time counselor team and are assigned to students based on proficiency levels.

A key responsibility of English counselors is to correct students' pronunciation during evening sessions and organize mock exams for A/B-level English and CET-4/6 on weekends. They also grade the exams and provide explanations afterward. Over the six-month period, seven mock tests for A/B-level and five for CET-4/6 have been conducted. The data from these 12 assessments reveal a steady improvement in students' English performance. Compared to their abilities prior to counseling, the students have made notable progress. To optimize this system, the current study draws on Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory to refine the operational mechanisms and offer actionable recommendations.

## **II. Operational Feasibility of the Full-time English Counselor System**

Krashen's Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory emphasizes the importance of both language input and output. Based on this theory, he proposed seven hypotheses, among which the "Input Hypothesis" and the "Affective Filter Hypothesis" serve as the foundational theories supporting the operational structure of the English counselor system in this study. Moreover, based on Kovács' marginal effect theory, Bruner introduced the concept of "scaffolding" into everyday teaching, further enriching the theoretical basis for the system's feasibility.

### **1. Input Hypothesis**

The authors conducted an entrance-level English assessment for first-year students at Anhui Finance and Trade Vocational College. The results revealed significant differences not only between English majors and non-majors but also among different academic departments and even among students within the same class. For instance, some students easily passed the midterm assessment, while others scored in single

digits. These discrepancies pose a substantial challenge for instructors: how to select appropriate teaching materials and methodologies that cater to both high- and low-proficiency learners.

According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, effective language instruction depends on providing learners with comprehensible input—language that is slightly above the learner's current level but still understandable. Students must internalize language learning strategies and externalize them in practice while absorbing input from their instructors that exceeds their current linguistic capabilities. Based on the initial test results, the disparities among students often leave instructors unable to meet everyone's learning needs, resulting in some students falling behind.

To address this, full-time English counselors use their time outside regular class hours, including evening self-study periods, to re-explain classroom content. They present key and difficult concepts using engaging, student-friendly formats to transform previously incomprehensible input into comprehensible input. This process helps lower-level students gradually enhance their skills and also assists all students in previewing future lessons more effectively.

## **2. Affective Filter Hypothesis**

In *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*, Krashen proposed the Affective Filter Hypothesis to explore how learners' emotional states impact language acquisition. He categorizes emotional variables into motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence, asserting that motivation has the most significant impact on successful second language acquisition. These emotional factors can either positively or negatively influence the acquisition process.

High motivation facilitates effective comprehension and language processing. The English counselor system was designed precisely to increase students' motivation by helping them pass A/B-level and CET exams. This “learning through testing” approach, in turn, promotes “testing through learning,” resulting in a virtuous cycle in which comprehensible input becomes an integral part of the students' internal language system.

## **3. Scaffolding Theory**

The term "scaffolding" was borrowed from architecture by Jerome Bruner and initially applied in early childhood education. The concept refers to the external support that enables learners to complete tasks they could not accomplish independently. As learners develop the necessary competencies, the external support gradually becomes unnecessary.

Today, scaffolding is widely used not only in preschool education but also in secondary and tertiary vocational education. It can be categorized into two forms: human interaction-based scaffolding (e.g., peer support and teacher-student collaboration) and technology-assisted scaffolding (e.g., platforms like Learning Pass and Tencent Meeting).

Full-time English counselors fall under the category of interpersonal scaffolding. For first-year students, passing the A/B-level English exam before the end of the academic year is a mandatory requirement. Achieving this goal necessitates the joint support of English teachers and counselors, who must also cultivate students' autonomy during the instructional process. Before playing the role of scaffold, English counselors conduct diagnostic assessments to determine the proficiency levels of their assigned students, allowing them to create differentiated scaffolding strategies.

After six months of implementing the scaffold-based approach, over half the students demonstrated preliminary autonomy in learning English. At this point, the scaffolding—i.e., the counselor's intensive support—should be gradually withdrawn to allow students to assume control over their own learning. In conclusion, the scaffolding role of English counselors not only effectively enhances students' English proficiency but also fosters their independent learning capabilities.

### **III. Suggestions for Improving the English Full-Time Counselor System**

#### **1. Selection Process Needs Improvement**

At Anhui Finance and Trade Vocational College, the selection process for English full-time counselors involves a written test and an oral interview. The written test is

based on past CET-6 examination papers, and the oral component includes self-introduction and Q&A in English. This process is supported by the English Association. However, significant flaws exist in the selection procedure: it fails to ensure objectivity and does not account for individual student characteristics. It is hoped that future selection processes can adopt more targeted approaches tailored to different student types. Furthermore, while the current selection practice represents a good start, there is a lack of subsequent, targeted training for English full-time counselors. In the future, training modules could be added, including content such as Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, psychology, and education-related knowledge.

## **2. Clarifying the Role of English Full-Time Counselors**

To effectively fulfill their responsibilities, English full-time counselors must establish effective communication with English instructors. However, most counselors have failed to do so; existing communication tends to be superficial. This weak coordination negatively impacts the implementation of the counselor system and leads to a disconnect between classroom teaching and after-class tutoring. In addition, most counselors follow overly rigid working routines, lacking innovation in both thought and practice. Their focus often remains limited to repetitive test drills. Thus, it is essential for counselors to accurately define their role—as teaching assistants to instructors—and pursue innovation in teaching methods, aiming to combine education with enjoyment while avoiding isolated, closed-door practices. Counselors should maintain timely communication with instructors to understand students' classroom performance and tailor tutoring accordingly. When interacting with students, counselors should build friendships rather than uphold strict teacher-student boundaries, creating a relaxed and engaging learning atmosphere.

### **(1) Acting as "Scaffolds" Between Teachers and Students**

English full-time counselors play a bridging role between teachers and students, especially during after-class sessions. Given that the current English curriculum at Anhui Finance and Trade Vocational College includes only four classes per week,

which is insufficient to substantially improve students' English proficiency, and considering limited teaching staff and weak teacher responsibility, students often struggle to receive timely responses to their questions. Therefore, counselors have emerged as necessary intermediaries. Their role primarily lies in pre- and post-class activities: before class, they help students preview materials and memorize vocabulary; after class, they assist students in addressing learning gaps, check homework and vocabulary memorization, and report students' mastery of knowledge points to instructors.

## **(2) Serving Students with Love, Patience, and Attentiveness**

Unlike English instructors, English full-time counselors play a supporting role that extends beyond academics into student care. Many counselors are new to the role and tend to focus solely on teaching, often overlooking students' emotional needs, which creates a sense of distance. Therefore, counselors must approach students with empathy, patience, and attentiveness, aiming to develop strong bonds that allow students to learn in a relaxed and pleasant environment.

## **3. Personalized Support Services**

Currently, support methods are overly traditional, heavily relying on rote reading and repetitive test drills, which leads to student disengagement. Counselors should adopt a student-centered mindset and provide personalized services. For example, organizing English drama contests, debate competitions, English corners, and movie screenings can foster a "learning through fun" environment, enhancing students' interest in learning English.

## **4. Facilitating the Transition from High School to College English**

Significant differences exist between high school and college English in terms of teaching goals and methods. High school English focuses on exam preparation for college entrance, while college English emphasizes communicative competence. High school teaching methods are largely didactic, with teacher-centered instruction, whereas college English requires more self-directed learning, with instructors playing

a guiding role. These differences make it difficult for freshmen to adapt to the new learning environment.

To address this transition, Professor Wang Funing suggests that college instructors should understand the realities of high school English education, including teaching methods, philosophy, and students' knowledge base, in order to lay a solid foundation for effective college instruction. As English full-time counselors are mostly graduate students from various universities and have strong high school English backgrounds, they are often more familiar with high school English teaching than long-serving college instructors. This positions them well to assist freshmen in adapting to college English. First, counselors should help students shift their learning perspectives—from viewing English as merely an exam subject to recognizing its practical value. Second, they should cultivate effective learning strategies. Since high school English assessments focus mainly on listening and writing, with limited emphasis on reading, college English should promote students' overall language development.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

English full-time counselors should equip themselves with advanced theories and apply them to practice, continually refining theory through reflective practice. The full implementation of the English full-time counselor system across the campus will play a crucial supporting role in college English instruction, enhance students' English proficiency, and contribute to cultivating talents for international engagement.



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