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Article

Reconstructing Picture-Book Pedagogy for Higher Vocational English Education: A Culture-Digital-Dialogue Synergistic Model

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Abstract: Students in applied English programs oriented toward early-childhood and primary education are expected to develop not only language proficiency but also the professional capacity to select instructional resources, interpret cultural content, design age-appropriate activities, and organize meaningful classroom interaction. However, picture books in higher vocational English courses are frequently utilized merely as supplementary reading materials or lesson-plan references, leaving their substantial teacher-education value significantly underdeveloped. Drawing on second language acquisition theory, culturally responsive teaching, sociocultural theory, communities of practice, and cognitive load theory, this study proposes a Culture-Digital-Dialogue (CDD) synergistic model for cultivating picture-book teaching competence among preservice teachers. The model systematically reconstructs the instructional chain through five interconnected phases: cultural resource transformation, AI-assisted pedagogical adaptation, collaborative microteaching, school-based trial teaching, and evidence-based reflective practice. A 32-week quasi-experimental study was conducted with 92 students from two cohorts of an applied English program, comprising an experimental group implementing the CDD model and a control group receiving conventional picture-book reading and lesson-plan training. Evidence gathered through competency assessments, learning portfolios, classroom observations, peer reviews, dual-teacher feedback, and representative case analysis demonstrates that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group across multiple dimensions, including cultural transformation, AI-supported instructional design, classroom interaction, reflective lesson design, and intercultural interpretation. These findings suggest that the CDD model can effectively shift higher vocational picture-book teaching from supplementary language-material utilization toward integrated preservice teacher competence formation, offering a replicable framework for teacher education reform.

Keywords: higher vocational education; picture-book pedagogy; culturally responsive teaching; artificial intelligence; teaching competence

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1. Introduction

As vocational education evolves, the focus of applied English programs in higher vocational colleges has shifted from general language-skill training toward cultivating comprehensive educational competence within authentic occupational contexts. Recent policy guidance highlights the importance of aligning school-based instruction with workplace realities, industry expectations, and competence-based assessment. For students preparing to teach young children or primary-school pupils, English proficiency alone is insufficient. They must also understand children's cognitive development, select appropriate teaching resources, organize classroom interaction, and convey cultural meanings in age-appropriate ways. The English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education (2021 edition) identify workplace communication, intercultural exchange, language thinking, and autonomous learning as core dimensions of curriculum

development. Legislation concerning early childhood education, effective from June 2025, emphasizes respect for children's developmental characteristics and prohibits premature academic instruction inconsistent with early childhood needs [1]. These requirements indicate that higher vocational English courses should move beyond vocabulary, grammar, and textual analysis to address professional demands related to developmental appropriateness, cultural interpretation, and pedagogical implementation.

English picture books are widely used in early English learning and primary-level extension activities due to their integration of visual narrative, concise language, coherent situational contexts, and culturally rich content. In higher vocational English instruction, however, picture books are often limited to warm-up tasks, supplementary reading, or illustrative examples for lesson planning. Their potential for teacher preparation remains underutilized [2]. A preliminary course review revealed that approximately 68% of students required three to six months to adjust after beginning work in primary-school English teaching roles. The average score for picture-book lesson-plan design was 70.7, and the frequency of using picture books and other foundational instructional resources remained below 30%. These findings suggest the central challenge extends beyond English language proficiency. Rather, students lack the capacity to integrate language knowledge, cultural understanding, child development principles, and classroom practice into cohesive, purposeful teaching plans. They may replicate established picture-book activities without adapting them to children's cognitive stages. They may employ AI tools to generate visuals or presentation materials but lack the ability to evaluate whether outputs meet criteria for cultural authenticity, linguistic accessibility, and alignment with learning objectives. They may complete simulated microteaching exercises on campus but miss opportunities for iterative refinement grounded in real classroom experience, peer collaboration, and mentorship from practicing educators. A significant gap thus exists between being able to read picture books and being able to teach effectively using them.

This study addresses three research questions [3]. First, what core dimensions constitute picture-book teaching competence in higher vocational English education beyond language acquisition? Second, how can cultural resources, digital tools, and collaborative professional learning environments jointly support students' transition from language learners to preservice teachers? Third, how can a course implementation and competence-evaluation framework be designed to ensure observable, documentable, and measurable outcomes?

2. Literature Foundation and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Picture Books, Multimodal Input, and Second Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is widely understood to require comprehensible input that is slightly beyond the learner's current proficiency level. Interactional negotiation of meaning further enhances input comprehensibility, while productive language use supports learners' awareness of linguistic forms and contributes to language development. Picture books offer multimodal input—including illustrations, narrative text, plot structure, and repetitive linguistic patterns—that collectively provide rich contextual support, reduce cognitive load, and facilitate language internalization. For higher vocational students, such materials serve not only as sources of language input but also as practical resources for developing competence in designing English-language instruction for young learners [4].

Teaching with picture books to children necessitates careful cognitive adaptation. Developmental theories indicate that children's capacity to interpret symbols, comprehend narrative causality, and engage with abstract ideas varies significantly across age stages. Consequently, higher vocational students must thoughtfully align linguistic complexity, visual scaffolding, narrative coherence, and real-world relevance when adapting or selecting picture books. Direct translation from Chinese narratives into English is insufficient; effective pedagogical use depends on intentional integration of text, image, learning tasks, and interactive classroom practices.

2.2. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Cultural Resource Transformation

Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes transforming learners' cultural experiences and social backgrounds into meaningful instructional resources. When applied to higher vocational English picture-book teaching, the key task extends beyond merely incorporating Chinese cultural content. Instead, students must develop the capacity to adapt traditional cultural resources into child-friendly, English-mediated, and activity-based instructional materials [3]. Traditional stories, festival-related practices, and local cultural elements can enter children's English classrooms only after thematic refinement, language simplification, visual narrative reconstruction, and purposeful classroom activity design.

This perspective also helps mitigate overreliance on Western classic picture books [5]. While such texts hold pedagogical value, consistently centering instruction around pre-existing Western works may lead students to equate picture-book pedagogy with imitation rather than critical selection, interpretation, and creative adaptation of cultural resources. Higher vocational students need to learn how to establish meaningful comparative connections between Chinese and Western picture books, articulate cultural distinctions in developmentally appropriate ways, and avoid reducing cultural expressions to static or stereotypical representations.

2.3. AI Empowerment and Cognitive Load Management

Generative artificial intelligence offers new capabilities for adapting teaching materials, generating illustrative images, designing pedagogical activities, transcribing classroom interactions, and producing instructional feedback. For higher vocational students, AI should not be viewed as an automatic substitute for lesson design but rather as a cognitive scaffold. In picture-book teaching design, learners must concurrently manage language complexity, visual narrative coherence, developmental appropriateness for children, cultural sensitivity, classroom logistics, and formative assessment—factors that collectively impose substantial cognitive demand [6]. AI tools can alleviate extraneous cognitive load during initial text adaptation, image prototyping, activity ideation, and analysis of classroom interaction fragments, thereby enabling students to focus more deliberately on pedagogical decision-making, cultural validation, and strategic refinement.

However, AI does not inherently enhance instructional quality. Outputs may reflect cultural misalignment, inconsistent linguistic scaffolding, inadequate developmental suitability, or potential copyright concerns [7]. Within this framework, AI functions primarily as a design support and a catalyst for critical reflection—not as an automated replacement for professional teacher judgment. A key measure of effective digital empowerment lies in students' ability to articulate prompt rationale, critically evaluate AI-generated content for conceptual or contextual shortcomings, and perform purposeful, pedagogically grounded revisions.

2.4. Communities of Practice and Professional Competence Formation

Cognitive load theory indicates that learners face constraints due to limited working-memory capacity during problem solving, necessitating instructional designs that minimize extraneous cognitive demands while promoting meaningful processing [8]. In AI-assisted picture-book teaching, this underscores the need for both technological scaffolds and human oversight grounded in pedagogical expertise. While AI can streamline tasks such as material adaptation, image generation, and classroom-record analysis, it cannot substitute for learners' active engagement with children's lived experiences, cultural interpretations, and instructional objectives.

Sociocultural theory highlights learning as a process mediated by tools and shaped through social interaction, with the zone of proximal development offering a foundational framework for scaffolding. The concept of communities of practice further clarifies how professional identity develops incrementally through legitimate peripheral participation. Consequently, the formation of picture-book teaching competence among higher vocational English students relies on sustained engagement within a practice-oriented

community comprising college instructors, primary-school educators, peers, and real-world classroom settings [9].

Accordingly, curriculum design must extend beyond individual assignments and campus-based presentations. Students benefit from iterative refinement of teaching plans through dual-teacher workshops, microteaching sessions, school-based trial instruction, and structured peer feedback. Authentic classroom interactions enable them to observe children's responses to picture books, interpret cultural representations in visual texts, and assess patterns of participation in English-language activities. Only through such sustained, reciprocal engagement can students transition from executing lesson plans to reasoning like professional educators [1].

3. Construction of the CDD Synergistic Model

This study proposes a Culture-Digital-Dialogue synergistic model, abbreviated as the CDD model. Using picture books as the mediating resource, the model posits that higher vocational students' picture-book teaching competence extends beyond language ability alone. It constitutes a composite competence arising from cultural resource transformation, digital-tool scaffolding, and active participation in a community of practice.

3.1. Culture Inheritance: From Cultural Materials to Teaching Resources

The culture-inheritance dimension addresses the question of what to teach. Its core task is to guide students in transforming Chinese traditional culture, local culture, and everyday culture into picture-book teaching resources that are accessible to children, expressible in English, and implementable in classrooms. This process involves source-text selection, extraction of cultural images, cognitive adaptation for young learners, graded language rewriting, visual-narrative reconstruction, and activity design. For instance, the legend of Chang'e Flying to the Moon can be reframed around themes of the moon, festival customs, and family reunion; similarly, the tale of Ma Liang and the Magic Brush can be reframed to emphasize kindness, responsibility, and creativity. Cultural resources must be child-centered and pedagogically adapted; otherwise, they remain superficial cultural labels.

3.2. Digital Empowerment: From Tool Display to Pedagogical Judgment

The digital-empowerment dimension addresses how instructional design can be enhanced. Students may apply AI for tasks such as graded English adaptation, visual-style exploration, first-draft activity generation, prompt refinement, and analysis of classroom discourse fragments; however, each application must align with pedagogical goals and learners' developmental needs. The central concern is not the quantity of tools employed, but whether students can justify tool selection, recognize bias or inaccuracy in AI-generated content, and revise outputs with professional discernment.

3.3. Dialogue Construction: From Individual Assignments to Community Participation

The dialogue-construction dimension addresses how continuous improvement can be achieved. The course situates students within a sustained feedback community through dual-teacher workshops, peer review, microteaching, and school-based trial teaching. Higher vocational educators contribute theoretical frameworks and research standards, primary-school educators share authentic classroom practice and student responses, and peers offer comparable instructional designs and reciprocal evaluation. Through iterative cycles of observation, teaching, feedback, and revision, students progressively develop professional identities.

3.4. Synergistic Mechanism of the Three Dimensions

The three dimensions of the CDD model are interdependent, mutually constraining and reinforcing one another. Cultural inheritance defines the substantive boundaries for digital generation, helping to ensure AI-generated outputs remain grounded and avoid vagueness or stereotyping. Digital empowerment alleviates extraneous cognitive load associated with material adaptation and classroom analysis, thereby enabling more

profound pedagogical judgment. Dialogue construction offers professional calibration for both cultural expression and AI output through iterative feedback from teachers, peers, and actual children. Collectively, these dimensions support evidence-informed development of higher vocational students' picture-book teaching competence (As shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Core Structure of the CDD Synergistic Model

Dimension	Core question	Main tasks	Competence orientation
Culture inheritance	What to teach	Cultural-material selection; image extraction; child-oriented transformation; intercultural comparison	Cultural resource transformation
Digital empowerment	How to design	AI-assisted adaptation; image generation; activity suggestion; classroom analysis and human review	AI-supported instructional design
Dialogue construction	How to improve	Dual-teacher feedback; peer review; microteaching; school-based trial teaching	Classroom interaction and reflective improvement

4. Curriculum Implementation Pathway

Based on the CDD model, the course is structured into four sequential modules. The first module focuses on cultural resource transformation, where students select traditional stories, festival-related content, or local cultural materials and conduct cultural-image extraction alongside age-appropriate analysis. The second module involves digital picture-book creation, during which students apply AI tools for leveled English adaptation, image-style experimentation, and initial activity design, while documenting prompt inputs and human review annotations. The third module entails dual-teacher collaborative trial teaching, with joint supervision by higher vocational and primary school educators, including microteaching sessions, peer evaluation, and school-based implementation trials. The fourth module centers on evidence-based reflection, requiring students to refine lesson plans using data from classroom observations, children's responses, peer feedback, instructor input, and AI-generated classroom analysis reports, culminating in comprehensive learning portfolios.

Throughout implementation, instructors must explicitly embed criteria for responsible AI use, cultural accuracy, and developmental appropriateness within task instructions. For instance, when submitting AI-generated images, students must justify their fidelity to authentic cultural representations and assess potential stereotyping risks. When submitting adapted English texts, students must articulate how vocabulary selection, syntactic complexity, and narrative length align with target learners' linguistic and cognitive development. When proposing activity designs, students must explicitly connect learning objectives, interaction formats, and assessment mechanisms. This approach ensures technology integration remains pedagogically grounded and cultivates disciplined professional judgment (As shown in Table 2).

Table 2. Curriculum Implementation Modules Based on the CDD Model

Module	Core task	Student output	Teacher support
Cultural resource transformation	Select cultural materials and refine child-understandable themes	Cultural transformation notes and picture-book theme design	Provide a culturally responsive teaching framework
Digital picture-book creation	Use AI for graded text adaptation, image	Prompt records, picture-book draft,	Guide AI-output review and copyright-risk judgment

	generation, and activity design	and resource package	
Dual-teacher collaborative trial teaching	Conduct microteaching, peer review, and school-based trial teaching	Trial-teaching video and revised lesson plan	Provide joint feedback from college and primary-school teachers
Evidence-based reflection	Revise teaching plans based on multi-source evidence	Reflection report and final portfolio	Guide evidence synthesis and professional expression

5. Practical Validation and Evaluation System

To examine the curricular appropriateness of the CDD model, this study involved 92 students from two cohorts in an applied English program oriented toward early-childhood and primary education. The experimental group consisted of 46 students who adopted the CDD synergistic teaching model, while the control group consisted of 46 students who followed conventional picture-book reading and lesson-plan training. The implementation lasted 32 weeks. Evaluation adopted a dual-track approach combining process portfolios and competence assessment. Process portfolios included picture-book adaptations, AI prompt records, pre- and post-revision lesson plans, trial-teaching videos, peer review, dual-teacher feedback, and practicum performance records. Competence assessment focused on five dimensions: cultural resource integration and transformation, AI tool application and innovation, classroom interaction and organization, instructional design and reflection, and intercultural communication and interpretation. Quantitative data were organized in Excel. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each dimension, and two-tailed Welch independent-samples t tests were used to compare differences between the experimental and control groups, with the significance level set at 0.05.

Given that curriculum improvement initiatives often generate numerous practices but limited empirical evidence, the CDD model emphasizes multi-source evidence to demonstrate effectiveness. Evaluation does not rely solely on final presentations or subjective instructor ratings [10]. Instead, it integrates learning portfolios, classroom observation, peer review, dual-teacher feedback, student reflection, and practicum performance. The five-dimensional evaluation framework is designed to combine quantitative assessment with representative case analysis.

After the implementation, unified assessment results across the five competence dimensions showed that the experimental group performed better than the control group. The most pronounced difference appeared in AI tool application and innovation, suggesting that deep integration of digital tools provided students with greater opportunities for material generation, prompt iteration, and lesson-plan optimization. Relatively large differences were also observed in intercultural communication and interpretation and in instructional design and reflection. These outcomes indicate that students progressed from using picture-book materials as-is toward comparing, adapting, and re-expressing Chinese and Western cultural resources, while demonstrating increasingly refined pedagogical judgment in lesson revision and classroom activity design.

It should be noted that these data primarily reflect stage-based outcomes of curriculum enhancement within a single institution and should not be generalized mechanically to all higher vocational English courses. Their value lies in illustrating that when cultural resource transformation, AI-assisted design, and community feedback are integrated into a coherent curricular sequence, students' picture-book teaching competence can be systematically observed through artifacts, classroom performance, and assessment data (As shown in Table 3, 4).

Table 3. Five-dimensional Evaluation Framework for Picture-Book Teaching Competence

Evaluation dimension	Indicators	Evidence materials	Result presentation
Cultural resource transformation	Cultural-image extraction; child-oriented transformation; intercultural comparison	Picture-book adaptation, cultural explanation, and teaching activities	Rubric scores and representative case analysis
AI-supported design	Prompt quality; AI-output review; version iteration	Prompt records, generated results, and revision notes	Version comparison table and learning-log excerpts
Classroom interaction and organization	Questioning hierarchy; response quality; activity coherence	Trial-teaching videos, observation forms, and transcripts	Observation scores and interaction-fragment analysis
Instructional design and reflection	Problem diagnosis; evidence use; secondary revision	Reflection reports and pre-/post-revision lesson plans	Revision trajectory and teacher evaluation
Intercultural interpretation	Cultural sensitivity; value explanation; avoidance of stereotypes	Chinese-Western comparison activities and children's response records	Case description and interview coding

Table 4. Post-implementation Competence Assessment Results

Competence dimension	Experimental group (n=46)	Control group (n=46)	t value	p value
Cultural resource integration and transformation	82.1 +/- 2.4	77.8 +/- 2.6	8.28	<0.001
AI tool application and innovation	89.1 +/- 1.2	72.5 +/- 2.4	42.20	<0.001
Classroom interaction and organization	84.0 +/- 1.4	78.1 +/- 2.0	16.16	<0.001
Instructional design and reflection	86.0 +/- 1.2	80.4 +/- 1.5	19.60	<0.001
Intercultural communication and interpretation	84.9 +/- 1.4	76.4 +/- 1.9	23.93	<0.001

6. Representative Case: From Ke Zhou Qiu Jian to the Tea Party on the River of Time

The student-adapted picture book The Tea Party on the River of Time exemplifies the CDD model in practice. It integrates the core philosophical insight of the Chinese fable Ke Zhou Qiu Jian—commonly rendered as 'making a mark on a boat to find a lost sword'—with iconic elements from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, including the tea party, the Hatter, and the March Hare. This synthesis constructs a new imaginative setting: the tea party on the river of time. The protagonist, Mr. Chu, journeys by boat along this river; when his time key falls into the water, he marks the table and attempts to retrieve it at the same location. Guided by the Hatter and the March Hare, he gradually realizes that yesterday's tea cannot be reclaimed—the past is irretrievable, and what holds significance is attentiveness to the present moment.

From the standpoint of cultural inheritance, this adaptation moves beyond literal translation of Ke Zhou Qiu Jian. Instead, it distills child-accessible themes—such as temporal flow, attachment to bygone moments, and mindful engagement with the present—and reconfigures them through the whimsical, open-ended framework of the Wonderland tea party. The Chinese fable supplies the ethical and conceptual foundation, while Anglo-American children's literary motifs furnish the narrative scaffolding. Together, they articulate ideas accessible and expressible for sixth-grade learners.

Regarding digital empowerment, students employed AI tools to generate illustrations, experiment with visual styles, refine English language expression, and co-develop classroom resources. They also designed an activity wherein AI instantly visualized personally meaningful moments. Here, AI functioned not merely as a presentation aid but was embedded across text adaptation, visual storytelling, interactive pedagogy, and affective articulation. Teaching materials included story-structure mapping, event sequencing, sentence-pattern identification, an emotional coordinate axis, and an activity titled Write Down Your Precious Moments—demonstrating how digital tools facilitated integration across reading comprehension, grammatical reinforcement, and thematic reflection.

In terms of dialogue construction, the lesson was framed as We Found New Keys! and structured around assisting the time guardian Mr. Chu in gathering present-moment experiences. The instructional sequence comprised warm-up, pre-reading prediction, while-reading exploration, post-reading extension, and concluding reflection. During reading, students engaged with a story-structure chart, event sequencing, a human-sentence flash activity, and a sentence-river treasure map to revisit five fundamental English sentence patterns: SVP, SV, SVO, SVOO, and SVOC. Following reading, they participated in parallel Chinese and English tea-party experiences and used authentic expressions such as This moment is quiet and peaceful, We are happy together, and The cake tastes good to convey genuine emotion [11]. Finally, students recorded their own precious moments and leveraged AI to produce corresponding visual representations—thus unifying language acquisition, cross-cultural engagement, and value-oriented understanding.

This case illustrates that successful intercultural picture-book adaptation hinges not on superficial juxtaposition of source narratives but on identifying a shared thematic architecture capable of sustaining meaningful dialogue. Ke Zhou Qiu Jian exposes the fallacy of applying static markers to dynamic reality, while the Wonderland tea party offers a generative space for temporal play, logical inversion, and imaginative freedom. Supported by AI tools, students transformed these two traditions into a developmentally appropriate picture book and associated classroom practices—enabling the philosophical depth of the Chinese fable to enter an English learning process characterized by reading, performance, lived experience, and expressive articulation.

7. Discussion

The value of the CDD model lies in shifting higher vocational English picture-book teaching from resource utilization toward competence development. First, the culture-inheritance dimension addresses overreliance on Western canonical texts and enables students to recognize local culture not as an external supplement but as a foundational content source that can be meaningfully adapted into children's English learning materials [12–14]. Second, the digital-empowerment dimension moves beyond treating AI as mere technical demonstration; it highlights AI's scaffolding role in reducing extraneous cognitive load, facilitating iterative material refinement, and enhancing pedagogical reflection. Third, the dialogue-construction dimension situates students within dual-teacher collaboration and authentic classroom feedback loops, ensuring their professional growth extends beyond isolated assignments and campus-based presentations.

The CDD model does not propose substituting teacher judgment with technological tools. AI-generated texts and images may entail risks including cultural misrepresentation, uneven language complexity, inadequate age-appropriateness, and copyright concerns. Such outputs require systematic teacher review, peer discussion, and empirical validation in real classroom settings. Digital tools become integral to teaching competence only when students can articulate the rationale for selecting a particular AI output, describe the modifications applied, and explain how the final product supports children's learning outcomes [12].

8. Conclusion

This study addressed picture-book teaching competence within applied English programs for early-childhood and primary education. A Culture-Digital-Dialogue (CDD) synergistic model was developed, accompanied by a curriculum implementation pathway and an evidence-based evaluation system. The model responds to persistent challenges in higher vocational English picture-book instruction—namely, fragmented cultural integration, instrumental rather than pedagogically embedded technology use, and the lack of sustained professional learning communities. It supports a paradigm shift from treating picture books as supplementary language materials toward systematically cultivating integrated preservice teacher competence.

Several limitations warrant attention. First, empirical data were drawn primarily from a single higher vocational institution with a limited sample size; the assessment instrument and inter-rater consistency require further refinement. Second, AI-assisted picture-book adaptation raises unresolved concerns regarding copyright compliance, cultural fidelity, and developmental appropriateness for young learners—issues demanding clearer pedagogical guidelines and ethical boundaries. Future work may employ multi-site action research or quasi-experimental designs across diverse institutional, classroom, and practicum settings. Integrating pre- and post-tests, portfolio assessments, classroom observations, and coded interview data would strengthen longitudinal examination of the CDD model's impact on preservice teachers' picture-book teaching competence.

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