

Reimagining High School English Teaching Through an Interdisciplinary Lens

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Abstract: In the era of competency-based education reform, the limitations of siloed, single-subject instruction have become increasingly apparent. Interdisciplinary teaching offers a compelling alternative, especially in English classrooms where language intersects naturally with history, science, technology, and the arts. Drawing on classroom experience, curriculum standards, and project-based practices, this paper explores how English teaching at the senior high school level can be restructured to promote deeper learning, meaningful application, and the development of global competencies. It also examines practical challenges in implementation and offers concrete suggestions to support teachers and schools transitioning toward more integrated forms of instruction.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary teaching; high school English; core competencies; project-based learning; curriculum integration.

1. Why Interdisciplinary Teaching Matters—Now More Than Ever

As a high school English teacher involved in both classroom teaching and curriculum design, I have increasingly come to realize that teaching English in isolation—as a subject of grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension—can feel detached from students’ lives and the world around them. The *General High School English Curriculum Standards (2020 Edition)* call for a shift: language learning must be functional, connected to real-world issues, and oriented toward the development of core competencies—language ability, critical thinking, cultural understanding, and independent learning.

This isn’t just a matter of updated policy. Students are asking better questions. They want to know how climate change affects their city, how artificial intelligence is changing the job market, and how history influences modern cultural identity. These questions cannot be answered within the confines of English alone. Hence, an interdisciplinary approach becomes not only pedagogically desirable but necessary.

2. What We Mean by Interdisciplinary English Teaching

2.1. From “Language Learning” to “Learning Through Language”

In interdisciplinary English instruction, English is not only the subject of learning—it becomes the medium through which students explore science, geography, ethics, and more.

This approach enables:

Real-world application: Students use English to solve problems, present research, and express opinions beyond textbook examples.

Integrated thinking: Through cross-subject tasks, students develop the ability to synthesize information and think from multiple perspectives.

Cultural competence: Students explore how language reflects social values, historical forces, and cultural identities.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations in Practice

In my own classes, I often draw inspiration from Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. Some of my students are visual thinkers, others are more analytical or musically inclined. Interdisciplinary teaching, with its varied inputs and outputs, allows each student to find their entry point.

Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) is equally useful. Complex tasks—say, designing a climate awareness campaign in English—fall right into the ZPD: challenging, but doable with guidance and peer collaboration.

3. Building Interdisciplinary Learning into English Classrooms

3.1. Start with the Textbook—But Don’t Stop There

English textbooks are often more interdisciplinary than we realize. I once used a unit on “Advertising” to explore persuasive writing, but it expanded into visual design, consumer psychology, and ethical marketing—all in one project. Some natural entry points:

Unit Topic	Linked Disciplines	Interdisciplinary Possibilities
The Art of Advertising	Language Arts, Art, Psychology	Analyzing visual rhetoric, designing ads
Climate and Environment	Geography, Biology, Politics	Climate data interpretation, sustainability reports
Technology and the Future	IT, Ethics, Physics	Debating AI, writing tech blogs
Cultural Heritage	history, Geography, Sociology	Researching local heritage, museum proposal

Teachers need not be experts in every discipline—collaboration with colleagues or brief background research can open up rich learning opportunities.

3.2. Theme-Based Project Design

Here's an example from one of my classes:

Project Title: *Designing Our Green School*

Goal: Students investigate how to make their school more environmentally sustainable and present their findings in English.

Subjects Involved:

English: Research, reporting, oral presentation

Geography: Mapping school layout, water systems

Biology: Native plants, carbon footprint

Art/IT: Poster design, infographic creation

Process:

Group discussions → Field observation → Proposal drafting → English presentation

Outcome: Students presented bilingual posters and gave 3-minute speeches to a mock school board.

What surprised me most was how seriously they took the task. One group even interviewed the school janitor about electricity use—a level of initiative I hadn't seen in standard reading lessons.

4. What Changes—and What Doesn't—in Student Learning

4.1. What Improves

Language use becomes more meaningful: Students write and speak to real audiences with purpose, not just for tests.

Thinking becomes deeper: Comparing energy policies across countries led to rich debates on fairness, development, and equity.

Engagement rises: Students are naturally curious when topics affect their own lives.

Civic and global awareness grows: Projects on AI and climate change fostered ethical reflection and global perspective.

4.2. What Challenges Remain

No approach is without its growing pains. Some I've experienced:

Teacher preparation: Not all English teachers feel equipped to teach topics like environmental science or economics.

Scheduling and coordination: It's tough to align with other subjects' pacing or exam pressure.

Student readiness: Some students lack the research skills or confidence to tackle interdisciplinary tasks.

Assessment: Rubrics for interdisciplinary outcomes are still evolving and often inconsistent.

5. Practical Strategies for Teachers and Schools

From my experience and discussions with colleagues, I suggest:

1. Start small: Pick one unit and integrate just one subject first. Build from success.

2. Use authentic tasks: Simulated conferences, city

proposals, or museum brochures help students connect learning with life.

3. Leverage team teaching: Even a brief visit from a science teacher can deepen understanding.

4. Create flexible rubrics: Focus on thinking, communication, creativity—not just grammar.

5. Encourage student reflection: Ask students to document what they learned across disciplines, not just in English.

6. Looking Ahead

Interdisciplinary English teaching is not a fixed formula—it's a mindset. It requires us, as teachers, to be learners too: curious, flexible, and open to co-constructing knowledge with students. What matters most is that we offer them a classroom where English is not just a subject to be studied, but a tool to explore the world, question assumptions, and imagine better futures.

As we navigate increasingly complex global challenges, teaching English in ways that connect across disciplines isn't just innovative—it's essential.

7. Conclusion

Interdisciplinary teaching in high school English is not merely a trend but a powerful response to the needs of modern learners. By weaving language instruction with relevant content from other academic fields, educators can foster more engaging, meaningful, and applicable learning experiences. This approach encourages students to become not just competent English users, but informed citizens who can think critically, collaborate effectively, and respond thoughtfully to the challenges of a globalized world.

Moving forward, it is essential for teachers, curriculum developers, and school leaders to embrace interdisciplinary thinking as a foundation for future-ready education. Rather than viewing English as an isolated subject, we should position it as a bridge that connects students to complex issues, diverse perspectives, and deeper learning across disciplines. When English teaching is reimagined in this way, the classroom becomes not only a place for language acquisition, but also a launchpad for interdisciplinary inquiry, civic engagement, and global competence.

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