Development of College English Teaching in China under Needs Analysis

LIANG Aimin[a], *; CHEN Yan[a]

[a] School of Foreign Languages, University of Jinan, Jinan 250022, China.
* Corresponding author.

Abstract

In China, College English is not only a language course that provides basic knowledge about English, but also a capacity enhancement course that helps students to broaden their horizons and learn about different cultures in the world. The development of College English Teaching is a complex systematic program in which several elements must be considered, i.e. needs analysis, teaching objectives, language testing, material development, language teaching, program evaluation and follow-up courses consisting of ESP and Bilingual education. Among all the elements, "needs analysis" is the logical first step and the important base of a sound College English curriculum design. That is to say, needs analysis is the foundation of the development of College English Teaching.

Key words: College English Teaching; Needs analysis; Curriculum design

INTRODUCTION

As we all know, societies, businesses and technologies are changing rapidly, and this development has led to the creation of what is commonly labeled "the knowledge society". This society shift has confronted higher education institutions with new challenges. Thus the roles of higher education institutions have been changed into the following two important ones. Firstly, higher education institutions have to facilitate students' competence built within a certain academic field. To do so they need to develop curricula that help students acquire knowledge and that enable them to develop skills for using this knowledge in concrete situations. Secondly, higher education institutions have to facilitate the development of competencies that can be used in the society and the world. To do so, they need to develop curricula that enable students to develop competencies which are transferable to contexts other than the academic field studied.

In China, with the development of 'the knowledge society', the roles of College English (CE) have also been greatly changed. Just as *College English Curriculum Requirements* (Chinese Education Ministry, 2007:22) indicates: College English is not only a language course that provides basic knowledge about English, but also a capacity enhancement course that helps students to broaden their horizons and learn about different cultures in the world. College English course design should help students to have a solid foundation in the English language while developing their ability to use English, especially their ability to communicate in English. It should ensure that students make steady progress in English proficiency, and it should encourage students' individualized learning so as to meet the needs of their development in different specialties.

However, how to make CE play active roles in "the knowledge society" successfully and effectively? How to develop CE teaching in this new society? The author thinks that the following methods can be applied.

1. CONDUCTING NEEDS ANALYSIS

Needs was defined by Kemp (1998) as "the gaps between

what is expected and the exiting condition". Needs Analysis is "a device to know the learners' necessities, needs, and lacks in order to develop curriculum that have a reasonable content for exploitation in the classroom" (Brown, 1995, p.35). Usually, it involves examining both qualitative and quantitative information based on questionnaires, tests, interviews and observations. It is believed that needs analysis should be a logical first step in systematic curriculum development model, followed by five other components, "goals and objectives", "language testing", "material development", "language teaching", and "program evaluation". Generally, in needs analysis, needs can be categorized into subjective needs and objective needs, target needs and learning needs, etc..

1.1 Objective Needs and Subjective Needs

Objective needs refer to all factual information about learners, that is the "biographical data" (Nunan, 1988, p.44) such as age, sex, nationality, marital status, education background, previous language courses, current proficiency level, language difficulties, use of language in real life, the length of time spent in the target culture and previous, current and intended occupation (Brindley, 1989; Nunan, 1988; Robinson, 1991). The objective needs can be diagnosed by teachers on the basis of the analysis of personal data about learners along with information about their language proficiency and patterns of language use (Brindley, 1984, p.31).

Subjective needs refer to the cognitive and affective needs of learners in language learning, such as confidence, attitudes and expectations. In the case of curriculum, learners' subjective needs also include "the preferred length and intensity of a course, the preferred learning arrangement (whether the learner wants to engage in classroom or non-classroom based instruction), the preferred methodology (which will include the types of materials and activities preferred by the learner), learning styles (Nunan, 1988, p.42) ".

Many studies follow the idea that objective needs analysis and subjective needs analysis should occur at different stages of curriculum design. Objective needs analysis can be carried out at the planning stage of curriculum while subjective needs analysis often take place at the implementation stage of curriculum. Nevertheless, the two are usually used together in practice. For example, at the evaluation stage of curriculum, learners' objective needs and subjective needs should be taken into serious account.

In a broad sense, objective needs refer to any factual information related to curriculum while subjective needs are those perceived by interested parties besides learners, such as teachers, administrators, sponsors, parents and potential employers.

1.2 Target Needs and Learning Needs

Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp.55-57) distinguished the conceptions of target needs and learning needs. Target needs focus on the situations in which the target language is used. It is concerned with what the learner needs to do in the target situation. The analysis of target needs involves identifying the linguistic features of the target situation. It's evident that such language needs can be relatively easy to define when learners know clearly what they want to use the language to do or in what situations they can use the target language. In learners' target needs, great importance is attached to analyzing both the situation where the target language will be used and the language proficiency perceived by teachers and learners themselves. In this thesis, the target needs is equal to the social needs concerning what English language skills the society needs students to have to complete their work successfully.

Learning needs refer to what the learner needs to do in order to learn what they should learn in some curriculum. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), it is the route that connects the starting point to the destination. The learning needs may include educational background, motivation, interest, previous courses, preferred course length, preferred learning arrangement, preferred methodology, learning styles, learning goals and expectations for a curriculum (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Nunan, 1988; Tomlinson, 1998).

In CE teaching, much emphasis should be put on learners' learning needs so as to help understand the clash between the learning needs and the current CE curriculum.

1.3 Models of Needs Analysis

Needs Analysis involves the collection of both objective information relating to the learner's biographical data, learning purpose, and language proficiency and subjective information relating to the learners' attitudes, preferences, wants and expectations before and during instruction (Brindley, 2000, p.439). A needs analysis which focuses on students' needs at the end of a language course can be called Target Situation Analysis (TSA) (Chambers, 1980).The best known model for a TSA type of needs analysis is formulated by Munby (1978) who presents a communicative needs processor, a complex and very detailed analytic tool that allowed course planners to build up a profile of a learner's communication needs. These needs were then translated into lists of language skills and micro functions which formed the basis of the target syllabus specification (Brindley, 2000, p.439).

As a complement to TSA, the Present Situation Analysis (PSA), sometimes called a language audit, seeks to establish what the students are like at the start of their language course, investigating their strengths and weaknesses. Three basic sources of information should be collected in order to establish the PSA: the students themselves, the language teaching establishment and the user institution, for example, the students' place of work. For each of these we shall seek information regarding

their respective levels of ability; their resources, for example, financial and technical; and their views on language teaching and learning. We might also study the surrounding society and culture; the attitude held towards English and towards the learning and use of a foreign language. It is believed that the PSA involves fundamental variables which must clearly be considered before the TSA. Besides Target Situation Analysis and Present Situation Analysis, Hutchinson & Water's Needs Analysis (1987) and Dudley Evans & St John's Needs Analysis (1998) are also two important needs analysis models.

In CE curriculum design, all the needs analysis models can be applied to investigate what the students' objective needs and subjective needs, target needs and learning needs so as to judge whether the current CE curriculum can meet the needs of students and the society and how to develop it.

2. DEVELOPING CE CURRICULUM SYSTEMATICALLY

According to Brown's (1995) Systematic Curriculum Development Model, following needs analysis, five other components should be developed in Curriculum development, that is, "teaching objective", "language testing", "material development", "language teaching", and "program evaluation". And the last components "program evaluation" must be built into the whole system curriculum design, not in the last stage. The first component, needs analysis, has been given enough discussion in this thesis. However, if we want to develop CE curriculum systematically, the other five components must be carried out scientifically.

2.1 Establishing Proper Teaching Objective of CE Curriculum

It is proved by many researchers that teaching objective is a necessary and important part of the curriculum. Generally speaking, in curriculum design, there are three kinds of objectives i.e. cognitive, psychomotor and affective objectives. Cognitive objective are concerned with mental or intellectual skills and abilities. Psychomotor objective are concerned with physical skills. Affective objective are concerned with feelings, values and attitudes. In this thesis, the CE curriculum objective mainly contains cognitive and psychomotor objectives used to describe the skill and knowledge that the students gain from completing the courses of College English.

No matter what kinds of objectives they are, the proper teaching objectives must be established according to the students needs and the social needs, especially, student-oriented. Therefore, based on the needs analysis conducted by Chinese Education Ministry, the teaching objective of CE curriculum is established like this: CE curriculum should be to equip college and university students with an adequate English proficiency, to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to use English effectively in oral and written communication and complete their English-language tasks successfully, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges.

2.2 Reforming Language Testing of College English

As Bachman (1990, p.279) points out, "... tests are not developed and used in a value-free psychometric test-tube; they are virtually always intended to serve the needs of individuals and the needs of society at large". Therefore, a promising language testing should respond as quickly as possible, to students' needs as well as social needs, i.e. for more appropriate measures of language skills and abilities, and for making decisions about individuals' attained levels of competency with respect to various educational and employment requirements. If a test fails to do so, then we can hardly find any reason for its existence.

Investigations conducted in China shows that both students' learning needs and the social needs are fixed on the needs for college and university graduates with a stronger communicative competence in English and a stronger comprehensive applied capacity in society. In order to meet such needs, language testing including the current College English Test (CET), is expected to undergo great reformations in some aspects.

Firstly, special care should be taken to ensure that the test is testing what we intend to test, i.e. college and university students' overall proficiency of using English in practice and communication so as to meet the challenges posed by social and economic development and to promote the teaching and learning of English. Secondly, special care should be taken to further improve the language testing's validity and efficiency. For doing this, it is quite important to fully utilize the technological advances in computer and internet. Thirdly, special care should be taken to CET, which, as a large-scale standardized EFL test, should be made to further improve the test's content and format and to advocate proper use of test results by students, teachers, university authorities and other stakeholders, so as to maximize its positive backwash effect on teaching and beneficial impact on society.

2.3 Developing Teaching Materials of CE Curriculum

Teaching materials include far more than textbooks, but they are usually equal to textbooks as far as teachers and students in China are concerned. Because of the conventional heavy dependence on textbooks, textbooks

are considered to be one of the major factors that affect English teaching and learning in the Chinese context. They are a major source of English language input for Chinese students and a major support for Chinese teachers of English.

The needs analysis conducted in China gave us such suggestions that the textbooks should include articles in different styles, cover a wide range of knowledge, reflect recent developments, help change teachers' backward educational ideology and improve teaching efficiency and that the textbooks should contain not only British-American cultures but also Chinese and other countries' cultures, which is supposed to effectively improve not only the visual but also the aural and oral comprehension ability of students. Additionally, textbooks should not be regarded as the only input in CE learning and teaching. The English materials on internets, newspapers and magazines should be made full use of by teachers and students both in class and outside class.

2.4 Remolding Language Teaching of CE Curriculum

Great changes of the society call for the changes in language teaching models. Changes in teaching models by no means call for changes in teaching methods and approaches only, but more importantly, changes in teaching philosophy and practice, and a shift from teacher-centered patterns to student-centered patterns, the new models should mix computer or network-based language teaching with traditional classroom teaching.

In computer or network-based language teaching, the teaching model should cover the complete process of teaching, learning, feedback and management, including such modules as students' learning and self-assessment, teachers' lectures, and online coaching, as well as the monitoring and management of learning and coaching. Meanwhile, in traditional classroom teaching, the students' roles should be shifted from passive receivers to active participants by means of carrying out such practical trainings and activities as discussions on hot issues, journalists' interviews and forums to realize the interactive functions of the English language. Students should become the masters of the classroom language learning and teachers should become the "organizers" of the teaching activities and the "advisors" of students' learning processes.

To sum up, new language teaching models should combine the principles of practicality, knowledge and interest, mobilize the initiative of both teachers and students, attach particular importance to the central position of students and the leading role of teachers in the teaching and learning process and make full use of various colorful teaching methods to pass knowledge to students effectively.

2.5 Establishing a New System of CE Curriculum Evaluation

As was described before, Curriculum Evaluation should be built into the whole system curriculum design. It focuses on collecting information about different aspects of a language curriculum in order to understand how the curriculum works, and how successfully it works, enabling different kinds of decisions to be made about the curriculum, such as whether the curriculum responds to learners' needs, whether the curriculum achieve its objective, whether students are learning sufficiently from it, or what about the teaching efficiency etc.. We can say that no curriculum design would be completed without an evaluation. Generally speaking, CE curriculum evaluation can be divided into the following three types considering different purposes.

2.5.1 Formative Evaluation

Evaluation may be carried out as part of the process of curriculum development in order to find out what is working well, and what is not, and what problems need to be addressed. This type of evaluation is generally known as *formative evaluation*. It focuses on ongoing development and improvement of curriculum. Typical questions that relate to formative evaluation are:

1) Has enough time spent on particular objectives?

2) Have the language tests placed students at the right level in the program?

3) How well are the teaching materials received?

4) Are the teaching methods teachers are using appropriate?

5) Are teachers and students having difficulties with any aspects of the curriculum?

6) Are students enjoying the curriculum? If not, what can be done to improve their motivation?

7) Are students getting sufficient practice work? Should the workload be increased or decreased?

Information collected during formative evaluation is used to addressing problems that have been identified in the process of conducting the curriculum and to improve the delivery of the curriculum.

2.5.2 Illuminative Evaluation

Another type of evaluation can be described as *illuminative evaluation*. This refers to evaluation that seeks to find out how different aspects of the curriculum work are being implemented. It seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the processes of teaching and learning that occur in the curriculum. Questions that might be asked within this framework are:

1) How do students carry out group-work tasks? Do all students participate equally in them?

2) What type of error-correction strategies do teacher use?

3) What kinds of strategies do teachers employ while teaching?

4) How do teachers use lesson plans when teaching?

5) What type of teacher-student interaction patterns typically occur in classes?

6) What reading strategies do students use with different kinds of texts?

7) Which students in a class are most or least active?

Much classroom action research or teacher inquiry can be regarded as a type of illuminative evaluation.

2.5.3 Summative Evaluation

A third approach to evaluation is the type of evaluation with which most teachers and curriculum administrators are familiar and which seeks to make decisions about the worth or value of different aspects of curriculum. This is known as *summative evaluation*. Summative evaluation is concerned with determining the effectiveness of a curriculum, its efficiency, and to some extent with its acceptability. It takes place after a curriculum has been implemented and seeks to answer questions such as these:

1) How effective was the curriculum? Did it achieve its aims?

2) What did the students learning?

3) How well was the curriculum received by students and teachers?

4) Did the teaching materials work well?

5) Were the objectives adequate or do they need to be revised?

6) Were the achievement tests adequate?

7) How appropriate were the teaching methods?

8) What problems were encountered during the curriculum?

All in all, CE curriculum evaluation system should be comprehensive, developmental and dynamic.

CONCLUSION

In all, the development of CE Teaching in China is a complex systematic program in which several elements must be considered, i.e. needs analysis, teaching objectives, language testing, material development, language teaching, and program evaluation. Among all the elements, "needs analysis" is the logical first step and the important base of a sound curriculum design. That is to say, needs analysis is the foundation of the development of CE Teaching. CE Teaching can be developed by fully analyzing the learners' needs, the social needs and even the needs of future. Students are the centers of CE teaching and also the persons to achieve the teaching objective of CE curriculum. Society is a large factory in which graduates from universities can put what they learn into practice. The future society is full of severe competition in ability and quality and gives students higher demands. Therefore, CE teaching should be of "advanced prospects" to equip students with strong competitive competences in the future society and world.

REFERENCES

Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berwick, R. (1989). Needs Assessment in Language Programming: From Theory to Practice. In R. Johnson (Ed.), *The Second Language Curriculum* (pp. 79-86). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brindley, G. (1984). *Needs Analysis and Objective Setting in the Adult Migrant Education Program*. Sydney, Australia: Adult Migrant Education Service.

Brindley, G. (1989). The Role of Needs Analysis in Adult ESL Program Design. In R. Johnson (Ed.), *The Second Language Curriculum* (pp. 14-18). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brindley, G. (2000). Needs Analysis. In M. Byram (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning* (pp. 439-445). London: Routledge.

Brown, J. D. (1995). *The Elements of Language Curriculum: A Systematic Approach to Program Development*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Chambers, F. (1980). A Re-evaluation of Needs Analysis in ESP. *ESP Journal, 1*(1), 25-30.

College English Syllabus Revised Working Group. (1999). *College English Syllabus*. Beijing: Higher Educating Press.

Hutchinson, T., & Water A. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes: A Learning-Centered Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kemp, E. (1998). *Design Effective Instruction*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Mackay, R., & Bosquet M. (1981). LSP Curriculum Development: From Policy to Practice. In R. Mackay, & J. D. Palmer (Eds.), *Languages for Specific Purposes: Program Design and Evaluation* (pp. 137-140). Massachusetts: Newbury House.

Ministry of Education. (2007). *College English Curriculum Requirements*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press.

Munby, J. (1978). *Communicative Syllabus Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (1988). *The Learner-Centered Curriculum: A Study in Second Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C. (2002). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language and Research Press.

Tomlinson, B. (1998). *Materials Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.