



A Case Study of College English Curriculum Design Under the Social Needs Analysis

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Abstract

College English (CE), an integral part of higher learning, is a required basic course for undergraduate students in China. CE curriculum design is a vital part in CE Teaching. In College English Curriculum Requirements (2007), CE curriculum design is required to be fully individual-oriented, more social-orientated and needs-based. The case study described in this paper is conducted to practically investigate and analyze the social needs for CE so as to set up a proper CE teaching objective and to design a scientific and effective CE curriculum system.

Key words: CE curriculum design; Social needs analysis; Case study

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INTRODUCTION

Curriculum design also called curriculum development is an aspect of a broader field of educational activity known as curriculum studies. Curriculum design focus on determining what knowledge, skill, and values students learn in schools should be, what experiences should be provided to bring about intended learning outcomes,

and how teaching and learning in schools or educational systems can be planned, measured, and evaluated (Richards, J. C, 2001, p.2).

Needs Analysis (NA) also called needs assessment 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” and “a process for identification and defining valid curriculum and instructional and management objectives in order to facilitate learning in an environment that is closely related to the real life situations of the student” (Brown, 2001, p.35-36). Therefore, to explore learners’ needs and social needs has been regarded as an essential approach to effective learning and teaching and a vital consideration in curriculum development.

However, In China, needs analysis is a rather new research area in which little work has been done to it, esp. in CE curriculum design, which resulted in a lot of problems. For example, some universities just design CE curriculum blindly without any social needs analysis. As a result, CE curriculum design is not proper for students’ learning needs and social needs.

This paper is intended to identify the social needs for CE curriculum by conducting a case study to establish a proper teaching objective, to design a new paradigm of CE curriculum based on the practical social needs analysis. There are three research questions in this paper. 1. What are social needs for CE curriculum? 2. What is the teaching objective of CE curriculum to meet the needs of society? 3. How to design the CE curriculum according to the social needs analysis?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Needs analysis has appeared informally and abundantly in language teaching for over a quarter of a century. It is an important part of systematic curriculum design for it can produce information to give feedback on the course

design so that revision and improvement can be made.

1.1 Needs Analysis

At first, needs analysis was mainly applied in Language or English for Specific Purposes (LSP/ESP) education. The first model of needs analysis in the language education, proposed by Richterich (1972, p.34) appeared in the 1970s in the context of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project. The concept was then used to define the content and objectives of the program of language instruction closely identified with the LSP/ESP movement during the 1960s and 1970s. The pedigree of needs analysis in language and EFL education is thus rooted in evaluation studies and research. Since 1980, Needs analysis has been playing an important role in curriculum design. It begun to be utilized in the instruction of English for General Purposes (EGP) when its focus shifts from identification of learners' language needs to that of learning needs (Hutchinson & Water, 1987, p.56).

Up till now, abundant work has been done as to the needs analysis in the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). However, much needs analysis has been aimed to ESP (English for Special Purposes) curriculum, little to the EGP (English for General Purposes) curriculum. Besides, much attention has been paid to language needs aimed to determine the course contents or develop teaching materials (Tarone & Yule, 1989, p.23) while inadequate attention is paid to other types of needs, such as, target needs or social needs, learning needs, objective needs and subjective needs etc..

1.2 Curriculum Design

The history of curriculum design or development in language teaching starts with the notion of syllabus design. Syllabus design is one aspect of curriculum development but not identical with it. A syllabus is a specification of the content of a course of instruction and lists what will be taught and tested. Curriculum design is a more comprehensive process than syllabus design. It includes the processes that are used to determine the needs of a group of learners, to determine course structure, teaching methods, and teaching materials, and to carry out an evaluation of the language program that results from these processes.

Historically, models of language curriculum design have undergone a considerable evolution, which represents different curriculum processes in the past years. Among all the models, one of the most important models is Tyler's linear model which was concluded from one of the most important statements on the nature and process of curriculum development made by Tyler in a book that

brought about a revival in curriculum studies throughout in 1950s (see Table 1).

Tabel 1
Tyler (1951)'s Linear Model of Curriculum Design

Needs→ Aims and objectives→Content→ Organization→ Evaluation

Some people criticized the linear approach implied in Lyler's model, which leaves evaluation as the final stage rather than building it in at every stage. In its place, Brown (1989)'s systematic curriculum development model came into being. In Brown's model, needs analysis is perceived as the first component, followed by five other components, "goals and objectives", "language testing", "material development", "language teaching", and "program evaluation". However, the last components "program evaluation" is built into the whole system curriculum design, not in the last stage.

Brown's systematic curriculum development model was attached great importance to by designers in the following years. Since then, the view that curriculum development processes are central elements in language teaching has been widely accepted.

However, curriculum design is changing because there are increasing social and economic pressures on higher education to generate a wider range of knowledge, skills and attitudes for coping with the demands of our "super- complex age". The current pace of technological and social change is impelling teachers to think in terms of educating students not for today's problems but for those of tomorrow. In recent years, there has been a healthy trend in curriculum and course design with the focus shifting from teacher-centered to learner-centered activities and in this connection, a lot of credibility is being given to need-based courses in English as Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. It is believed that needs analysis should be a logical first step in curriculum design.

1.3 CE Curriculum Design and Needs Analysis in China

Faced with the problems in CE instruction, in 2003 the Chinese Ministry of Education put forward to the reformation of CE Instruction throughout the whole country. In 2004, Curriculum Requirements (trial)was drawn up, and in 2007, after being complemented and revised, College English Curriculum Requirements (formal) (Requirements hereafter) was published and distributed to all the higher education institutions of China as the guidelines for CE instruction of non-English major students. Different from the College English Syllabus (1999), the Requirements specified the Curriculum design of CE and required all the colleges and universities in China to design their own individual-oriented CE curriculum according to the practical situations of their students so as to meet the needs of their development in different specialties. Thus some colleges and universities in our country have done a certain degree of work to the

CE curricula reform. Some universities designed their own curricula according to the students' different language proficiency and various leaning needs.

However, the existing CE curriculum design of our country still has many problems and weak points. Among them, the most serious problems are as follows: Firstly, The cultivation objectives of CE curriculum design were greatly separated from the social needs as well as the students' individual needs. Secondly, No enough English elective courses or expanding series of courses are provided to develop students' competences in language practical application, to enrich students' English knowledge and to broaden their horizon. Thirdly, the courses of English for Special Purposes were not supplied to students efficiently and bilingual courses cannot be successfully offered to students in different departments and special subjects. As a result, few students are skillful in applying English in practical situation; a large number of students can hardly communicate with others esp. foreigners in English. Therefore, many undergraduates in our country cannot find satisfactory jobs, and some of them cannot be qualified for their jobs. Our country needs a large number of people possessing both professional knowledge and enough competence to communicate in English.

All these problems show that CE teaching reform still has a long way to go. And the CE curriculum design should be further perfected by making it more social-orientated and needs-based.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the needs analysis in this study is to investigate the social needs for CE to evaluate whether currently available CE curriculum meets the social needs and to design a new type of the CE curriculum. As was mentioned before, the study belongs to a case study and the case is CE curriculum design for non-English major undergraduates of University of Jinan.

2.1 Participants

To gain insight into the social needs for CE, 20 non-English major graduates are chosen as targeted subjects by means of random sampling in consideration of the probability and operability. All the 20 graduates have been away from University of Jinan for more than one year and found jobs in various fields of society. After they found jobs in different areas, they have to use English to complete their tasks and to communicate with others now and then.

2.2 Instruments

In this study, the main instrument used to collect data is a questionnaire which was drafted according to the framework of analyzing language needs put forward by Hutchinson and Water (1987, p.57) to know about the

graduates' target needs for English in their jobs. The questionnaire is designed based on a pilot study in which 10 graduates are interviewed on the CE social needs. The questionnaire is made up of five parts: A. Current position and working experiences; B. Tasks to use English in their positions; C. Criteria of successful performance; D. Student's perception of the current CE curricula.

2.3 Research Procedure

The questionnaire which was made up of both closed questions and open questions was administered in July -August, 2010. It was directed to 20 non-English major graduates from different workplaces. The questionnaire was sent to the graduates by e-mail. 19 questionnaires were returned. The percentage of returns is 95%.

2.4 Data Analysis

In this study, the data collected from the questionnaire was put into SPSS 13.0 to be analyzed by means of descriptive statistical analysis to get means, percentage, std. deviation, minimum variance and maximum of the data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Results

In Part A of the questionnaire, there are two open-ended questions to know about the students' objective information. In which field are you currently working? How long have you been working in this field?

The result shows that of the 19 students, 12 students are working in Business; 7 students are working in government organization. 10 graduates have worked for more than two years but less than 5 years. Another 9 students had worked less than two years.

Part B of the questionnaire contains the open-ended question: Do you use English in your work? If you replied "yes", please identify the following English-language tasks you complete in your work. You can choose more than one.

As to this question, all the graduates investigated gave the answer "Yes". Table 2 provides the tasks the students must complete in their work and the percentages of the students who choose the task.

Table 2
Tasks Completed in Graduates' Work and the Percentages of Students Choosing the Task

| | |
|---|-----|
| 1. Assisting English-speaking customers | 42% |
| 2. Promoting products | 32% |
| 3. Discussing socially | 58% |
| 4. Explaining procedures/arrangements | 53% |
| 5. Letter and Report writing | 63% |
| 6. Making/taking telephone inquires | 63% |
| 7. Negotiating terms and conditions | 47% |
| 8. Asking for advice | 68% |
| 9. Summarizing English information in Chinese | 89% |
| 10. Interpreting between Chinese and English speakers | 79% |
| 11. Sending/receiving official documents by e-mail | 89% |
| 12. Locating information from English sources | 63% |
| 13. Translating documents from English to Chinese | 95% |
| 14. Creating and editing official English documents | 95% |

Table 2 displays that what most graduates do in English in their workplaces are Translating documents from English to Chinese(95%), Creating and editing official English documents(95%), Summarizing English information in Chinese (89%) and Sending/receiving official documents by e-mail(89%), and that what the graduates seldom do in English is promoting products(32%).

Part C is about criteria of successful performance in their work. The requirements for students in the questionnaire are designed like this: Based on your experience, please indicate how well each of the following criteria represents successful performance in your field according to the following scale: Not representative at all-1; A little representative-2; Representative-3; Very Representative-4.

The task performances that were used as assessment criteria can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3
English-Language Tasks Used as Assessment Criteria

| |
|---|
| 1. Speaking fluently (without too many pauses and repetition) |
| 2. Responding naturally while listening |
| 3. Speaking accurately (without too many grammatical errors) |
| 4. Speaking with a good pronunciation |
| 5. Using an appropriate range of vocabulary |
| 6. Demonstrating cultural awareness |
| 7. Being able to communicate the meaning sufficiently |
| 8. Speaking politely |

Table 4
Relative Importance of Assessment Criteria

| Business (n = 12) | | Government Organization (n = 7) | | Overall (n=19) | |
|------------------------------|------|---------------------------------|------|------------------|------|
| Criterion number | Mean | Criterion number | Mean | Criterion number | Mean |
| <i>Essential</i> | | | | | |
| 7 | 3.15 | 7 | 3.41 | 7 | 3.28 |
| | | 5 | 3.11 | | |
| | | 6 | 3.08 | | |
| | | 8 | 3.06 | | |
| | | 2 | 3.00 | | |
| <i>High importance:</i> | | | | | |
| 6 | 2.77 | 4 | 2.81 | 5 | 2.92 |
| 8 | 2.76 | 1 | 2.61 | 6 | 2.92 |
| 5 | 2.76 | 3 | 2.52 | 8 | 2.89 |
| 2 | 2.61 | | | 2 | 2.78 |
| | | | | 4 | 2.61 |
| <i>Secondary importance:</i> | | | | | |
| 4 | 2.47 | | | 1 | 2.41 |
| 1 | 2.30 | | | 2,10 | 2.29 |
| 3 | 2.10 | | | | |

Table 4 summarizes the results of how task performance is evaluated. The figure indicates that of highest importance(Essential) for both groups was being able to communicate the meaning sufficiently (7), that of high importance were using an appropriate range of vocabulary (5), demonstrating cultural awareness (6), speaking politely (8), responding naturally while listening (2), and speaking with a good pronunciation (4) and that of secondary importance for both groups were speaking fluently (1) and speaking accurately (3) (see the number of each English- language Task in Table 3).

3.2 Discussions

The results of investigation from the questionnaire indicate that the graduates need to complete at least five types of tasks for position in business and government organization, i.e. there are at least five social needs, which include locating information, translating documents, summarizing information, creating and editing official English documents, and interpreting between speakers. The results also indicates that the most important criteria to evaluate graduates' success in their career is the ability to communicate in English, that means, students should be able to respond naturally while listening, to speak fluently, politely and accurately with good pronunciation, to use an appropriate range of vocabulary and to demonstrate cultural awareness.

The investigation draws such a conclusion that although there are some differences in task types in different workplaces, the most important skills to decide students' success are to communicate better in English, that means society needs the students who have high competence in English communication. Therefore, CE curriculum design should try to cultivate students' competence in English communication. The finding from the investigation also indicates that students in society need to have more English knowledge connective with their special subjects so as to complete their tasks better.

Thus, ESP and Bilingual education should be stressed and developed in the CE curriculum system.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The main findings in the case study have already provided reliable and valuable answers to the three research questions of this study.

1) What are social needs for CE Curriculum? The social needs for CE curriculum are the needs of English knowledge connecting with special subjects, e.g. English for Special Purposes and Bilingual courses, the needs of comprehensive applied capacity of English-language in practice, and the needs of higher competence in English communication.

2) What is the teaching objective of CE curriculum to meet the social needs? The case study demonstrates that the teaching objective of CE Curriculum is to equip all students with an adequate English proficiency, to develop their abilities 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.

3) How to design CE curriculum according to the needs analysis?

CE Curriculum should consist of two important parts, that is, CE Basic Courses and CE Follow-up Courses. CE Basic Courses are provided to the freshmen and sophomores, which are made up of the Required Courses, the Elective Courses and the Second-Class Practical Courses. The Required Courses refer to the three core courses, that is, Comprehensive English course, Listening & Speaking course as well as Grammar & Writing courses. The Elective Courses include Basic Elective Courses, e.g. Listening and Speaking, Extensive Reading, Basic Writing etc., Advanced Elective Courses, e.g. Practical English Listening & Speaking, Advanced Spoken English, Culture and Literature etc. and Elective Courses of ESP, e.g. Business English, Scientific English and Computer English etc.. The Second-Class Practical Courses refers to all English learning activities outside class with the aim to arouse students' learning interests and to stimulate students' active learning motivations.

CE Follow-up Courses are provided to juniors and seniors, which are mainly made up of Expanding Elective Courses, English for Special Purposes (required courses),

Bilingual Courses (required courses) and Second-Class Practical Courses. Expanding Elective Courses should contain the following four types: Language Skills, Language and Culture, English for Practical Uses and English for Special Purposes which are provided to students by CE teachers. The required courses of ESP and Bilingual Courses are provided to students by major teachers of different schools. The Second-class Practical Courses should also be provided to students in CE Follow-up Courses, in which all kinds of practical activities should be organized better to supply students with real surroundings in which to practice applying English. All the courses in CE Follow-up Courses aim to give students special training in language skills, enrich students' English knowledge, broaden students horizon and provide more information about special subjects.

In summary, the case study has fulfilled the research tasks and achieved the research purposes. The findings of this study will help us to solve the problems appearing in the process of teaching, to adjust the teaching objective and the teaching methods and to make CE teaching meet the needs of students and society better. The needs analysis conducted in this study will direct us to design CE Curriculum more scientifically. However, we must know that needs analysis is continuous and ongoing research work which needs more researchers to go on taking greater efforts to conduct deeper and wilder researches on it.

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