

Innovation in the Curriculum for English Major Students in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract - In the context of accelerating globalization, English has become the dominant foreign language in the curricula of educational institutions in China, basically because it serves as the communicative means for global political, cultural and economic exchanges. In such an environment, the curriculum for English majors attracts the attention of many people and improving the curriculum is an efficient method of promoting satisfactory learning outcomes. The present essay proposes an innovation that integrates project-based learning throughout the curriculum and adopts the new technology of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) when implementing the program. Such a curriculum will provide the chance for students to receive and produce information comprehensively so as to learn and recycle knowledge in real life situation. It also has the valuable function of promoting student autonomy.

Index Terms - Curriculum, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), English Language Teaching (ELT).

1. Introduction

The curriculum for English majors attracts the attention of many people because it is closely connected to teaching content, teaching method and directly relates to students' learning outcomes. The curriculum proposals that I am advancing in this paper relates to the English major students in Chinese universities, called the Gaodeng Xuexiao Yingyu Zhuanye Yingyu Jiaoxue Dagang (English Curriculum for English Major Students). Even though students are relatively advanced in areas such as grammar and reading ability, any innovations in the curriculum are crucial since their communicative competence is not satisfactory. In order to meet the needs of an ever-changing global society, outdated and inappropriate aspects in the curriculum should be modified so as to achieve better learning and teaching outcomes. Furthermore, due to the students' relatively high English level and the characteristics of higher education, teaching practices can be more flexible and curriculum reforms can be more easily adopted. In addition, college students have relatively mature mindsets and can generate feedback regarding various innovations, which will help in the evaluation of each new measure.

The present essay proposes an innovation that integrates project-based learning throughout the Curriculum and adopts the new technology of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) when implementing the program. It provides the chance for students to receive and produce information comprehensively so as to learn and recycle knowledge in real life situation. In addition, it has the significant function of

promoting student autonomy. The present work is structured in the following way. In the following section, I review a case study and then identify the principles which can be adopted for my own curriculum reform proposal. Following that, I offer my innovative curriculum focusing on project-based learning and CALL. I then explore issues including aims and rationale, content and resources involved with such proposed modifications.

2. Case Study Review

Fang, X. & Warschauer, M. (2004). Technology and curriculum reform in China: A case study. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(2), pp. 301-323.

2.1. Rationale for the choice of this study

This study illustrates a five-year study (1998-2003) of a technology-enhanced English Language Teaching (ELT) innovation project at Jinhuang University in China. This study investigates the result of the attempted pedagogical and curriculum reform for English major students in China's Jinhuang University. Project-based courses as well as incorporation of technology are adopted as the reform measures. The project is closely relevant to my own field of inquiry due to the similar learning background, teaching method, problems relating to the current curriculum between Jinhuang University and my context.

2.2. Principles drawn from the study

One of the principles drawn from the Fang and Warschauer's study which is relevant for my curriculum design is that interaction resulting from project-based courses has the function of promoting students' learning. This form of learning provides students with the opportunities to practice their listening and speaking ability, and participating and interacting in authentic and purposeful communication contexts can facilitate the improvement of students' real communicative language abilities. Also, students' creative problem-solving ability can be promoted through project-based learning. Secondly, students are more engaged in learning the language when their autonomy has been enhanced. Both project-based learning and CALL can achieve this goal. Students can select content and activities according to their needs, and work at their own pace. Lastly, student collaboration should be highlighted in the innovation process, which allows students to share their experiences and ideas so as to promote learning; as Luke claims: "This collaboration allows more experienced and knowledgeable participants to

engage novices in a social interaction that will enable the novices to extend their current skills, abilities and knowledge to higher levels”[1].

3. My Curriculum Innovation

My proposed curriculum innovation integrates project-based learning and the adoption of new technology such as CALL based on the principles mentioned above and other language teaching and curricular ideas.

3.1. *The application of principles from the case study*

There are some valuable principles drawn from the case study which can be applied to my curriculum innovation. The first principle which might be applied to my proposed reform is that the use of new technology can promote language learning and learner autonomy. Technology can be a source of motivation both for teachers and learners [2]. It provides the opportunity for students to participate in communication and obtain information in a meaningful way because computer-based technology supports learning in constructivist and sociocultural settings by providing learners with multiple ways to interact with and process information, experience multiple media formats, create and distribute student work, and communicate with other learners and experts from across the globe[1]. Furthermore, the use of technology has the valuable function of promoting learner-autonomy because it engages students in social investigation and communication by using a computer. According to Little, such programs “can promote the development of learner autonomy to the extent that they can stimulate, mediate and extend the range and scope of the social and psychological interaction on which all learning depends” [3]. This technology can be used during class-teaching as well as after-class tasks. Teachers can engage Chinese students in authentic communication via computer usage. In addition, promoting Chinese students’ communicative ability and enhancing their motivation should be the focal point for ELT, and by adopting such kind of new technology provides an opportunity to achieve this goal.

Another principle from the case studies which can be applied for my curriculum change is the need for relevant course content in terms of students’ future careers, their way of life and culture, a strong sense of self, and life skills. Stephenson explains: “higher education should give students the confidence and ability to take responsibility for their own continuing personal and professional development and prepare students to be personally effective within the circumstance of their lives and work” [4]. This can be applied to my curriculum reform program because it is in accord with the aim of Chinese higher education which is not only equipping students with specialized knowledge but also preparing them for their future professional development and development as a well-rounded person. In other words, true reform must involve its contribution to the ethical development of students.

3.2. *Description of the proposed context*

The target students in this program are college English major students (first and second year) in universities in the

coastal region of east China, a region that is more economically developed and open to the outside world. The students’ English level is upper-intermediate with more than six years of English-learning experience. I focus on the first and second year students because teaching at this period needs to emphasize on developing students’ language skills and communicative competence compared with the third and fourth year students who need more knowledge about professional skills. The class is operated by Chinese EFL teachers and, generally speaking, the courses include courses for English specialized skills and some other courses related to specialized knowledge. Communicative Language Teaching is adopted by teachers. The teaching task for the foundation stage (first and second year) is to impart basic English language knowledge and to cultivate students’ communication abilities.

3.3. *Aim of the proposed curriculum*

As may be gleaned by the preceding analysis and discussion, the aim of my reform project is to develop students’ whole language skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and cultural awareness. In addition, it enhances students’ use of English in a real-life environment through project-based instruction and the use of technology so as to aim at improving students’ communicative competence. Furthermore, it aims to improve students’ autonomy, as well as motivating students by providing useful and interesting, learner-centered projects and activities, providing the foundations for life-long self-learning skills.

3.4. *Rationale for the innovation*

China’s English major program has been evolving for more than 30 years. The current curriculum (2000) is a significant improvement over previous ones and aims at further developing students’ language skills, especially in making a contribution to the students’ ethical advancement. However, some insufficiencies still mark the current situation, such as the teacher-centered teaching pattern, more emphasis on linguistic competence, and non-authentic teaching activities, which negatively influence student learning outcomes. In such a context, change is crucial. Integrating project-based learning throughout the curriculum and adopting Computer Assisted Language Learning for teaching can contribute to a more effective English major education process. To begin with, even though CLT is an element of the 2000 Curriculum, it has not been satisfactorily implemented, and one of the reasons is the lack of real-life activities, and the adoption of CALL and project-based learning can help reach this goal. Felix argues: “with the advent of the web, activities no longer have to be simulated or artificially contextualized but can be excitingly authentic. The real world of the target language can now be brought into the students’ experience with the creation of meaningful tasks tailored to their interests and capabilities at different levels of interactivity” [5]. Also project-based instruction provides the opportunity for students to engage in communication and investigation during the process of a project. Secondly, the current situation in densely-populated China is that the class time provided by the teacher

is limited. Most of the time, students need to study by themselves, so CALL becomes an effective form of learning. As Oberprieler claims: “the use of computer as agents for individual learning still has a very important role to play,

especially in facilities such as language centres that are set up for self-study”[6].

3.5. Content

Content for the foundation stage (first and second years)

Focus		Content
Four Macro-skills	Speaking	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It is developed by asking and answering questions on certain tasks and topics in the textbook. 2. It is developed through conversation with peers when doing some projects such as interviewing international students on the campus on certain topic. 3. Practice English through stimulation of pronunciation of native speakers on the English program through the internet. 4. Speaking for specific purpose such as business oral English for the students' future professional development. 5. Written report on some famous English works. 6. Oral presentation of research outcomes.
	Listening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learners comprehend and understand the main ideas of authentic English video documents through the internet, including news and TV programs. 2. Learners understand the situation and meaning of the vocabulary through simulated authentic project. 3. Learners comprehend and understand the vocabulary when provided with aural, pictorial online multisensory programs.
	Writing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learners are involved in producing written output in the web environment such as writing e-mails, blogs, and so on. 2. Learners write English project reports in a formal way after finishing the project. 3. Learners complete different types of writing tasks and can demonstrate a well-developed logical organizational structure with clearly stated ideas and sufficient supporting ideas. 4. Learners can write in different genres related to their future work.
	Reading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learners grasp the main ideas, contextual structure, language characteristics and rhetorical methods of both popular and literary English texts. 2. Learners accelerate and automatize word recognition through web-based activities. 3. Learners understand major facts and relevant details of English journals through the internet. 4. Learners can read the English project report.
Commun-icative Skills		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students communicate with peers and create solutions through cooperation when doing activities and group work. 2. Students can express themselves when doing an oral report after completing the project. 3. Students can communicate with native speakers on the internet by means of computers.

3.6. Materials

Textbooks, handouts and appropriate worksheets as well as multi-media software such as flash cards, movies, songs, English program videos, etc. are all required materials. Furthermore, English newspapers, novels, and journals on the internet are also required to facilitate the success of such a program.

3.7. Methodology

The main methodologies used in such curriculum reform include CLT, collaborative work and Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT). A brief description of these methodologies follows. To begin with, CLT is a broad approach to teaching that resulted from a focus on communication as the organizing principle for teaching rather than a focus on mastery of the grammatical system of the language [7]. CLT is also

considered as allowing students to develop their language ability through activities which actually simulate target performance. In addition, “tasks provide input to learners and opportunities for meaningful language use, both of which are generally considered valuable in promoting language acquisition” [8].

Secondly, TBLT provides learners the opportunity to develop their communicative ability during a task: “In TBLT, the learner takes up the central role; he is given a fair share of freedom and responsibility when it comes to negotiating course content, choosing linguistic forms from his own linguistic repertoire during task performance, discussing various options for task performance and evaluating task outcomes” [9]. CLT characterises CALL and TBLT features in project-based learning, thus maximizing the chances of success

of these innovations. In addition, part of the CALL rationale is that it has to do with collaborative learning which is also helpful in developing learner's communicative competence: collaborative learning makes students work together and communicate with each other to achieve certain learning goals. Student collaboration is therefore an integral element of a more effective English major education.

4. Evaluation of My Proposed Curriculum

There are a number of means of evaluating my proposed reforms. Firstly, traditional regular tests would still be needed to evaluate learners' achievements and learning outcome in any modified curriculum. Additionally, students can be evaluated via the results of individual or group projects, including oral reporting of the project results, thus allowing for evaluation of communicative skills. Furthermore, judging students' performances in some English contests or students' performance in internships, both language and communicative skills can also be assessed.

Class observation is an efficient way to appraising the effectiveness and appropriateness of teaching methods. Via class observation, teachers can learn from each other and draw valuable experience from other teachers. Likewise, teachers' self-evaluation is also needed. As Stenhouse suggests, "it is not enough that teachers' work should be studied: they need to study it themselves. Such self-evaluation, when tied to classroom action research, can also make valuable contributions to curriculum development" [10]. By recording and analysing segments of classroom interaction, teachers can have another means of assessing the effectiveness of teaching methods, students' feedback and other aspects of learning.

Furthermore, questionnaires and interviews would also be provided to students so as to collect student feedback. The use of statistics, such as student enrolment figures, can also form part of the evaluation process because it may indicate students' approval of the university and specific departments within the university.

5. Conclusion

Considering the insufficient aspects relating to the current 2000 Curriculum, measures such as CALL and the project-based learning approach would allow students the opportunity to learn English via authentic activities, thus also allowing them to foster meaningful collaborations and connections with the world. The innovative curriculum proposed here is based on principles drawn from the case studies of Timucin [11] and

Fang & Warschauer [12] with the aim of developing students' communication competence and language learning. As part of the exposition of my proposed curriculum program, a variety of its aspects were discussed, including a description of the Chinese region in which the reforms would be implemented, the rationale for the innovation, resources and anticipated difficulties. Such reform is crucial if China and its people are to gain the maximum amount of advantages that can be gained – both personally and corporately – from a highly effective English major curriculum program.

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