Nurturing of Application-oriented Foreign Language Talents in Local Tertiary Education in China: An Outcome-based Perspective

Haiyan Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jian Qiao University, 201306 Shanghai, China
05037@gench.edu.cn

Abstract. In response to the transformation of higher education in China, some local universities put forward new requirements for applied education. Lately, a widespread dispute arose regarding the training of talented individuals in the field of foreign languages. The focal point is whether the training should adhere strictly to the essence of foreign language studies, namely language, literature and culture or accentuate the integration of foreign language study with other disciplines. This paper suggests that for local universities, cultivation of foreign language talents should change from a single talent-cultivation mode to a compound talent-cultivation mode. With outcome-based education (OBE) as the theoretical foundation, this study aims to investigate the optimal approach for cultivating applied foreign language talents by exploring the external catalysts and internal pathways that contribute to this process.

Keywords: Foreign language majors, Application-oriented talents, External drives, Outcome-based education, Internal implementation pathways.

1   Introduction

In the era of globalization, the tertiary education in China is undergoing a significant shift from a focus on expansive growth to a quality-oriented development to maintain sustainability [1]. The Ministry of Education in China has provided guidance to transform some local institutions into application-oriented centers of learning, emphasizing the integration of education and industry, as well as fostering collaborations between academia and businesses. Nevertheless, foreign language majors face unprecedented challenges during this transformative journey because of the constraints imposed by their professional attributes.

On one hand, for lack of faculty expertise and opportunities for scientific research, foreign language studies cannot compete with other disciplines such as science and technology. In local institutions, science and technology programs often receive more attention and support due to their direct impact on economic development. As a result, foreign language programs may experience limitations in transformation and development. However, it is crucial to recognize that foreign language proficiency remains vital in an increasingly interconnected world.

On the other hand, various issues arise concerning knowledge structure, curriculum system, teaching content and instructional management in the applied foreign-language -talent nurturing model [2]. One such challenge is how to balance nurturing practical abilities and preserving humanistic nature of foreign language studies. It is obvious that practical abilities are essential for graduates to meet the demands of the job market. However, it is equally important to pay attention to the intrinsic value of language and literary traditions, as they provide students with a deep understanding of the cultural and historical contexts that shape a language.

In this situation, how to cultivate the application-oriented foreign language talents becomes a practical issue for local universities. This study aims to investigate the optimal approach for cultivating talents in foreign language majors by exploring the external catalysts and internal pathways that contribute to this process.

2 Related Literature of Application-oriented Foreign Language Talents Nurturing

In the transformation of applied education, the concept of foreign language talent nurturing should be clarified. Based on the previous studies, it is redefined as follows.

2.1 Foreign Language Talents with Multiple Competences

When exploring the transition of foreign language majors towards an application-oriented approach, it is imperative to establish a clear vision regarding the goals of talent cultivation. The essence of transforming foreign language majors lies in nurturing multi-competent linguistic talents, which might cover the following three layers.

First is the integration of knowledge in various disciplines. Students not only grasp language, literature and culture of a foreign language, but also learn something in other domains to meet the demands of job market. For graduates, they should satisfy two requirements: for one thing, they must have knowledge accumulation considered as the knowledge structure for every graduate; for another, they need to develop the ability to combine knowledge with context considered as dynamics for every graduate [3]. Second is the fusion of intellectual and non-intellectual. For second-language acquisition, concerns for the intellectual and non-intellectual are ultimately inseparable [4]. Besides knowledge acquisition through intellectual efforts, students need to develop some soft skills like the emotional, social, behavioral and cognitive competencies to facilitate this learning process. Third is the combination of theoretical knowledge and practical proficiency [5]. Simply put, students skillfully put what they have mastered into application.

2.2 Foreign Language Talents with Practical Skills

The nurturing of application-oriented foreign language talents necessitates a comprehensive focus on foundational language skills, linguistic and cultural knowledge, and other specialized proficiencies [6]. Clearly, it emphasizes the integrated application of

language proficiency and relevant professional skills within specific working contexts. To achieve this goal, a comprehensive and multifaceted practice-teaching system is necessary, with which students will have more chances to put theoretical knowledge to practical use.

Consequently, a practice-oriented curriculum system should include both language and professional skills, with a strong emphasis on the integration of these two dimensions. However, an excessive emphasis on professional-knowledge-application module may undermine the development of fundamental foreign language proficiency, diminish the humanistic essence inherent in foreign language studies, and overlook the development of critical thinking abilities. As a result, students' knowledge structure may become incomplete [7].

2.3   Foreign Language Talents with Innovative Abilities

In terms of application-oriented foreign language talents, innovation is a crucial characteristic. Usually, innovation is more associated with intellectual development and creation, which can bring out tangible outcomes. Therefore, research in fields such as science, technology and economics often makes the measuring of innovation easier. By contrast, it is more difficult to quantify and qualify the innovation in the fields of liberal arts. Foreign language talents are primarily concerned with the improvement of foreign language abilities through memorization, comprehension, imitation and application, thus overlooking innovation as an important feature in language study [8].

However, it must be noted that for foreign language majors, the core of innovation is quite different from other fields. Developing abilities of critical thinking, insightful understanding, transferable learning and problem solving should be prioritized for cultivating innovative talents in foreign language majors [9]. This expanded definition of innovation stresses quality rather than quantity: instead of material forms such as products, inventions and entrepreneurship, character building and thinking development should serve as more important features.

3   External Drives and Theoretical Foundation for Nurturing Application-oriented Foreign Language Talents

3.1   The External Environment

The concept of the sustainability of higher education involves the interaction of higher education with the surrounding environment and economic growth, etc [1]. This also explains why application-oriented foreign language talents are in great need.

Economic globalization has created new opportunities and challenges for individuals and organizations worldwide. Global markets are increasingly interconnected, leading to unprecedented international trade and investment. In this context, foreign language skills are crucial for businesses seeking to expand into new markets and foster international collaborations. As a result, economic globalization acts as a driving force behind the demand for application-oriented foreign language talents.

Cultural exchange plays another significant role in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between nations. Language proficiency is a crucial component of cultural exchange, allowing individuals to engage with various cross-cultural activities. Moreover, multinational companies require employees who can navigate different cultural and linguistic contexts. The external driver of cultural exchange and global workforce mobility highlights the importance of application-oriented foreign language talents to address linguistic diversity within societies and global workplaces.

In a few words, economical development, demands of job market and feedback from society are all critical factors that contribute to the cultivation of applied and innovative language talents.

3.2   An Overview of OBE Concept

As far as the external environment is concerned, the theory of outcome-based education (OBE) put forward by American scholar , William. G. Spady, in 1981 lays new theoretical foundations for talents cultivation of foreign languages. He pointed out that OBE means clearly focusing and organizing everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences [10]. Under the concept of OBE education, teachers define, organize, implement and evaluate teaching based on the expected learning outcomes, or learning outputs [11]. According to Chandrama Acharya (2003), implementing OBE- model include four steps, namely defining learning output, realizing learning output, evaluating learning output and using learning output. Similarly, Li Zhiyi (2015) held that the implementation of OBE theory consists of determining learning outcomes, constructing curriculum system, designing teaching strategies and self-referential evaluation. All these statements, though with different points of emphasis, explain the concept of outcome-based education with the same ultimate goal.

In a nutshell, OBE theory highlights student-centered learning and pays more attention to the practical learning outcome, and thus is in full conformity with the concept of application-oriented talents cultivation.

4   Internal Implementation Paths for Nurturing Application-oriented Foreign Language Talents

The above external factors and theory put forward new requirements for foreign language education. School of foreign languages should cultivate students' ability through the network of related resources of teachers, curriculum, teaching strategies and evaluation.

Kramsch (2008) proposed the goal of cultivating foreign language majors with the core idea of combining knowledge and skills together, thinking and values together [12]. This goal emphasizes both professional ability and humanistic qualities needed for communication. This training goal not only meets the internal requirements of foreign language studies, but also takes the external environment into consideration.

4.1   Redefinition of Multi-competence System of Foreign Language Graduates

The cultivation of applied foreign language talents should be in line with international standards on one hand and with the domestic situation on the other to highlight foreign language majors with Chinese characteristic. For applied foreign language professionals, the cultivation of competence is not just the consolidation of the basic language skills, but more importantly, the clarification of the humanistic connotation of foreign language studies. Students should grasp both general knowledge and practical skills to carry out tasks in various contexts and the expertise to put their language proficiency into use, as well as the inner quality helpful in the fulfillment of a certain task in a particular field of specialization.

Cook (2012) argues that second language learners are not to develop a fragmented transitional language based on their native one, but to develop new competencies, which, in some sense, are called multiple competencies [13]. Foreign language learners are undergoing the transition from native language to foreign language, and in this process, various changes might take place in cultural cognition, behavioral habits, and thinking patterns that come along with foreign language learning. Thus, multi-competence includes bilingual knowledge, bilingual thinking, and intercultural communication skills and etc. [14]. The following is how the multi-competency structure is redefined with the inner and outer factors involved.

General-knowledge competence. A well-rounded education focuses not just on academic success, but helping students develop important soft skills such as resourcefulness, adaptability and problem-solving abilities. The only focus on language skills will inevitably lead to neglect of enhancement of inner qualities of students.

Linguistic competence. Skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are the basic language proficiency for language learners to apply them in the real working context.

Multicultural competence. Specifically speaking, multicultural competence means learners of foreign languages need to develop a third culture that blends both the native culture with the culture of a second language. In this culture, students gradually establish an intercultural citizenship [15] and develop a sense of self-identity.

Multi-disciplinary competence. As for multi-disciplinary competence, it is a must for students to possess the ability to learn knowledge beyond their own major and know how to integrate the knowledge in different disciplines.

Hands-on competence. The training of professional skills for foreign language majors should not be separated from the requirements of the foreign language as a context of use.

Generally speaking, the cultivation of applied foreign language talents can be reflected in the system of multiple competences, including language use, emotional intelligence, knowledge application and other abilities, empathizing the concept of talents nurturing based on language knowledge and extended professional skills.

4.2   Integration of Knowledge Modules in the Curriculum Design

To cultivate applied foreign language talents, the demand for practical talents (utility) and the humanistic values of high education (humanism) must be properly combined [16]. Therefore, an open, dynamic and diversified curriculum system structure should be established, in which not only the teaching philosophy like practicality and humanity are fully manifested, but also the regional industrial developments are considered.

First of all, school of foreign languages should pay attention to all-around development of students, focusing on the improvement of their humanistic values rather than just language skills. This can be fulfilled through general knowledge module. Secondly, a larger part of the curriculum system should cover the langue skills and language theory which will lay a solid foundation for the students to use language as a tool. Thirdly, the curriculum design should keep up with the up-to-date trends of economy and include specialized knowledge. This can be realized through a close combine of foreign language major with other majors, and to execute the interpenetration between disciplines.

As is the case in some local universities, the curriculum system is mainly composed of the following sections, shown in Figure 1, with the ultimate purpose of knowledge application.
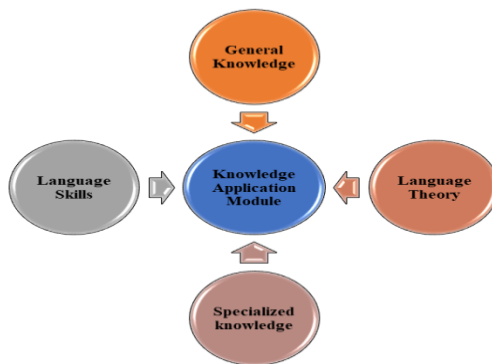

Fig. 1. Curriculum system for training application-oriented foreign language talents.

In the above figure, these modules are not simply put together. The key to the integration of different knowledge modules lies in scientific designing of the knowledge system. In this system, the distribution of teaching hours is proper, the progress from easy to difficult is possible and theory-practice learning procedure is effective. The purpose of the curriculum system is to ensure the continuity, systematicity and integrity of the knowledge system so that students can develop all-around abilities and make flexible use of knowledge.

4.3   Training of Dual-qualified Teaching Faculties

The dual-qualified teaching faculty structure provides strong support for the transformation of foreign language majors. Teachers in foreign language majors should have both teaching-oriented and application-oriented knowledge and ability [17]. The former includes the ability of language skills training and cultural-literature knowledge teaching, while the later emphasizes professional knowledge structure and practical skills training. The key to dual-qualified teaching faculty structure is a change in teaching philosophy, which, to a large extent, will determine the teaching-learning process and consequently maximize the teaching and learning outcome [18].

Firstly, the cultivation of foreign language talents involves both intellectual and non-intellectual aspects. Therefore, teachers should not only focus on students' mental development through instructions in class but also need to cultivate their non-intellectual aspects, which function as the facilitator to students' intellectual development. These two aspects work together to support students' knowledge acquisition.

Secondly, to ensure that students are adequately prepared for the job market, teachers should keep up with the latest trends and developments in society, as well as the requirements of the related professions. This can be fulfilled through enterprise internships, industry research or participation in joint research projects with the enterprises. By combining industry and social demands in the teaching process, teachers will be able to cultivate students' multiple abilities for future career.

Lastly, teachers should shift away from a theoretical teaching model to a practical teaching model, honing students' language application abilities and practical professional skills. With the transformation of teaching strategies and teaching contents, students' innovative consciousness and creative thinking ability will be further enhanced. This will be further discussed in next section.

4.4   A Combined Teaching Model with Theory and Practice

According to the teaching model of integration of theory and practice, the teaching and learning sessions might involve the following steps in application-oriented foreign language talents training.

In-class lectures. Teachers impart relevant knowledge to students, especially knowledge and meta-language that they cannot master by themselves, through lectures, demonstrations and instructions.

Scenario practice. Teachers guide students to simulate language use or professional -knowledge application trough activities in a virtual context.

Learning reflection. This is the process in which students acquire relevant knowledge, reflect on what has been learned, achieve effective knowledge transfer and form their own opinions, and thus developing critical thinking.

Hands-on practice. Students put the knowledge gained through lectures, self-reflection and virtual practice into application, try to find problems and solve problems.

This teaching model enables learners to gain new knowledge by utilizing existing knowledge for fresh purposes, and then applying that knowledge creatively to new

practices. These teaching procedures can be alternately used or used in a cycle. This model reaffirms the relationship between knowledge and practice, broadens student' horizon and changes the way of knowledge acquisition.

4.5   Diversified Evaluation Framework and Content

To ensure the teaching outcome, the evaluation of learning should be conducted in various ways, particularly through real-life learning contexts [19]. Because in real context, teachers can observe, record, analyze and know each student's strengths and weaknesses. This can be fulfilled with diversified progressive assessments of learners to maximize the development of students' independent learning and lifelong learning abilities.

The evaluation content should not be limited to language knowledge inside textbooks but should be more comprehensive in testing students' abilities. In addition to their intellectual aspects, their non-intellectual factors like emotional involvement and personality development should also be included in the test.

The evaluation can take place in the form of situational performance, case study, practice report or real-life projects to test students' abilities of language application, critical thinking and problem solving in a given working context. By utilizing these methods, it is feasible to capture students' learning progression, proficiency and their aptitude to apply knowledge and skills to daily life.

5   Conclusion

Based on OBE theory, this study focuses on the internal implementation paths of the cultivation of applied foreign language talents driven by the new external environment. It is suggested that the cultivation of foreign language talents should change from a single talent-cultivation mode to a compound talent-cultivation mode and various measures should be taken accordingly.

Challenges to implementation include limitations of curriculum available to address the range of goals and the breadth of knowledge that educators need to adapt such curricula in ways that meet students' practical needs; limitations of current assessments for addressing learning aimed at higher-level thinking and performance skills; and limitations for administrators at the university level to provide necessary support and guidance.

However, evidence from successful strategies and programs illustrates that it is possible to implement this model in local universities. The teaching practice carried out by local universities, coupled with insights from educational research, provides a framework for cultivation of application-oriented foreign language talents. Analyses of this integrated approach to education have shown that with qualified teaching staff, purposeful curriculum systems, appropriate teaching design and thoughtful assessments, universities can achieve these goals at scale.

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