

Design and Implementation of College Oral English Curriculum

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Keywords: College English, curriculum design, constructive alignment,

Abstract. College English is a compulsory course at Yunnan Agricultural University, China. The school-based curriculum development of this course meets the general outcomes and specific skills training requirement. The author critically reflects on its present curriculum design considering the student profile and other stakeholders, clarifying the emerging flaws, focusing on the oral English aspect. A comparison with Wheeler's (1967) model helps clarify the unaligned weaknesses in curriculum alignment within the present model. With emphasis on constructive alignment, a new-designed College Oral English curriculum is shaped through the analysis of Print's (1993) model. The 3 phases of Print's (1993) curriculum development process account for the design and implementation of the new curriculum.

1. Contextualisation of the Learning Programme and Assessment Regime

College English is a compulsory course during the first two years of undergraduate study in Yunnan Agriculture University (YAU), China. Students are required to participate for 4-6 hours every week in 4 semesters and to take at least 2 summative assessments (mid-term and final) each semester. All students are just graduated from high schools; their ages range from 17-21. They have accepted certain primary English education in schools although their competencies are varied, many mostly not capable of using English. Furthermore, they all have different approaches to learning. The English language knowledge and basic skills training are included in the course, which has the following learning outcomes set by the University and Ministry of Education:

General learning objectives:

- * training students to possess good English reading competency and certain ability in listening, speaking, writing and translating English;
- * helping students construct good learning methods;
- * developing students' competency in communication with English;

Specific learning outcomes of skills:

- * **reading:** can fluently read and understand articles of general topics and middle-scale difficulties, with a reading speed of 70 words per minute;
- * **listening:** can understand the common conversations and lectures;
- * **speaking:** can easily participate in the daily conversations and express certain ideas;
- * **writing:** can write short letters and articles with certain topics and make notes in English;
- * **translating:** can translate short English and Chinese articles into Chinese and English with the help of dictionaries, with a speed of 300 words per hour;

Assessment criteria:(for every semester)

- * learning performance (including attendance and at least 8 coursework assignments): 20%
- * mid-term test (summative assessment): 20%
- * final examination(summative assessment): 60%

The two summative assessments for each semester consist of similar questions format, checking students' reading, listening, writing, and translation, there are no oral tests. The mid-exam is focused on the first half of the textbook, but the final exam covers the whole textbook.

2. Analysis of the Present Curriculum Design

Required by the Ministry of Education of China, College English module is carried out in almost every college and university. Although the general outcomes and skills training requirements are set by the ministry, universities can make adjustments based on their own context so the curriculum of College English is actually a school-based curriculum development (SBCD). At YAU, all non-English major students are required to take College English. These students are mainly from science majors and possess different fundamental English competency because of varied secondary education levels. Curriculum design is “the arrangement of the components of a curriculum... 1) aims, goals and objectives; 2) subject matter or content; 3) learning activities; and 4) evaluation” [1] and designing, implementing and evaluating the curriculum is an important professional responsibility of teachers in higher education, so the curriculum is designed using this presage by several experienced teachers of the English department, other teachers taking the role of implementers.

Students are assigned an English teacher for the first semester and can choose the teacher by themselves in the following three semesters. Regardless of the teacher, the whole curriculum process will be developed as shown in Figure 1:

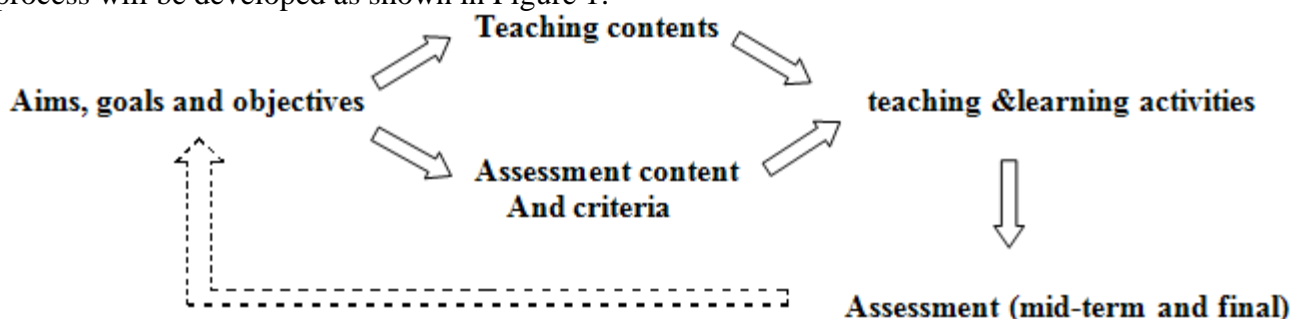


Figure 1: Curriculum Process of College English Module in YAU

Curriculum development is a creative process, but takes “place in response to the increasing demands/wishes of many and varied stakeholders”[2] This is no different at YAU. When assigned to be the English teacher, one would be given a document clarifying the teaching outcomes of this course, which is a SBCD decided by deans of the teaching group. It is not greatly different from the requirements of the Ministry of Education. These aims, goals and objectives are set based on the supposed needs of the students and future employers who are key stakeholders. According to Ramsden, “it is necessary to look at how students have experienced learning in order to judge the extent to which development takes place.” [3] Before getting to university, all students have received at least 6-year basic English education; however, because they come from different places (cities or villages) and schools, they have obtained varied English competency, so it is not ideal to put every student at the same line and suppose they can achieve the same learning outcomes regardless of their own majors and real expectations.

The curriculum content, “subject matter of the teaching-learning process” including “knowledge, skills and values associated with the subject”, [4] is decided by the teachers in charge of the module and all teachers get the same teaching materials and requirements. This brings advantages to make the implementation of the whole module under control, but on the other hand brings too much limits for teachers to make reasonable changes according to students’ presage as Print says two of “criteria for selecting effective content are:... 5 Learnability and 6 Interest”. [4]

When taking the assignment, every teacher has been clearly told about the assessment criteria and requirements. These two assessments, mid-term and final, are summative assessments and the exam papers are designed by several appointed teacher according to the requirements of the deans. Based on the generally low competency of students, the papers are mainly targeted to the contents of the textbooks (without too much flexibility) so they cannot show the real development of English competency of students. Most students just focus on the textbooks and take part in the exams by reciting the answers of the pre-done exercises, which make students more emphasize the lectures

but neglect the deep learning and understanding. This curriculum design encourages students to choose a surface approach, with students engaging in inappropriate and low-order learning activities [5]. Prosser *et al.* (2003) regards that “surface approaches with perceptions supporting surface approaches, and deep approaches with perceptions supporting deep approaches”. [6]

Limited by the format of the exams, students’ oral English competency is not included in the assessment, which is focused on assessment of listening, reading, writing, and translation. The biggest disadvantage is students lose motivation in accepting or participating in oral English training no matter how hard the teacher tries to encourage them. As Biggs says, “learning for assessment is inevitable...The trick is to align the assessment to what students should be learning.” This is “backwash, when the assessment determines what and how students learn more than the curriculum does”. [7]

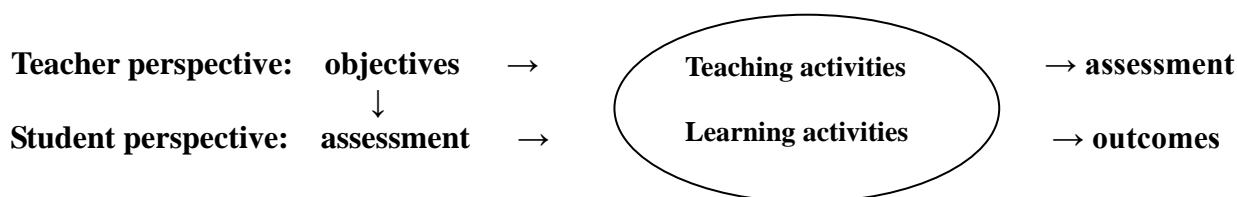


Figure 2: teacher’s and student’s perspectives on assessment

As an experienced teacher, the author can choose the appropriate teaching activities based on the set teaching outcomes and materials, but students’ learning activities would be likely to focus on the assessment approach. So when the assessment approach is not completely aligned with the learning outcomes, students would easily turn to the surface learning and ignore some important learning of oral English that are desired by key stakeholders, particularly employers.

When analyzing the curriculum design process of College English in YAU, it is easy to see similarities and differences with Wheeler’s (1967) model of the curriculum process:

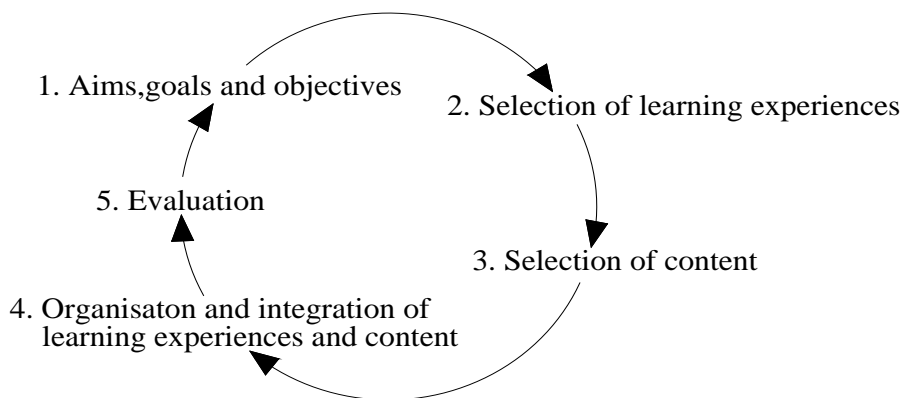


Figure 3: Wheeler model of the curriculum process [8]

Wheeler’s cylindrical model is “rational in nature... each phase is a logical development of the preceding phase”. [8] He places selection of aims, goals and objectives at first, but brings the selection of learning experience prior to the selection of content. Compared with the curriculum model of College English module, there is not too much difference between the two processes. But when choosing the appropriate teaching activities for College English, teachers easily focus on teacher-centered approaches because of the limited freedom due to the prescribed teaching tasks and assessment approaches, while Wheeler emphasizes the organization and integration of learning experiences and content, which makes the curriculum process better aligned.

The biggest difference between the curriculum designs of College English and Wheeler’s model is his steps “are in a continuous cycle that responds to changes within education” [8], whilst in the

College English, the curriculum process is seldom changed. Although it is ideally supposed to develop the aims, goals and objectives of the curriculum, in accordance with the reflection on assessment results, the fact is for many years, the teaching/learning outcomes remain unchanged because it is a system intended to teach about 5,000 students each year and so very hard to make practical developments.

After critical reflection on the present curriculum design, the author regards that it can actually satisfy the basic teaching outcomes, but has key weaknesses:

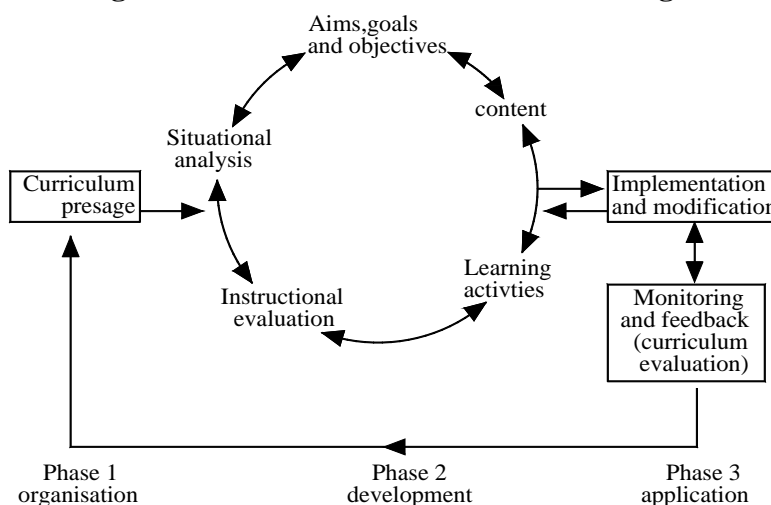
1. it does not take students' expectation and presage into account when defining the aims, goals and objectives and learning outcomes;
2. it does not leave enough space for teachers to amend the teaching contents and activities for different students, with different approaches to learning;
3. its assessment approach does not completely align with the teaching/learning outcomes because it obviously neglects the aspect of oral English competency;
4. the study of the assessment results can not effectively improve the development of the curriculum process.

3. Reflection on and Redesigning the Curriculum and Its Implementation

Ecclestone says that “if unchecked, there is a real danger that uncritical acceptance of increasingly prescriptive, standardized outcomes will create cynical, instrumental attitudes to learning in teachers and students alike and remove critical dimensions of student-centeredness from higher education.”,[9] so founded on this and the above critical analysis on the present curriculum design, the author would like to raise some thoughts on how to improve it, focusing on the oral English competency aspect because this part is almost neglected by teachers and students since it is not included in the assessment approach. Developing good English-speaking ability is included in both the general learning outcomes and specific skill training targets. Furthermore, employers would like to choose future employees with good oral English competence and students themselves also want to get more practical education on this aspect because it is a more direct way to show their ability.

Print's model of curriculum development pictures a clear process of curriculum design, which is also the main theory the author turned to when analyzing and redesigning the curriculum for oral English module in YAU.

Figure 3: Print's model of curriculum design [10]



The first necessary change is to separate the oral English learning from the present whole package of teaching outcomes and activities. It should also begin at the first semester and possess 1/3 of the learning hours of each term, ideally, 2 hours each week. This adjustment would make the learning outcomes and activities better aligned to the assessment approach.

3.1 Phase 1: Organization

Curriculum presage are “those activities and forces that influence curriculum developers in their curriculum decision making” [11], which is linked to Biggs’ 3P model of learning and teaching, which would be taken into account before setting any learning outcomes and activities. By undertaking a “situational analysis, teachers become aware in a systematic manner of the needs of their students and the resources they have available to meet those needs” [11], so all teaching staff would be welcomed to raise their opinions of the curriculum and the faculty should get agreement on general learning outcomes. Students would be regrouped according to their performance in the baseline assessment and their majors and interests. As a result, an economical major student would get more special training in businesses conversation whilst a student learning horticulture science would know more botanical terms. With a baseline formative assessment, students can study with others who have similar abilities of oral expressing, which put students at different starting line so that the teacher could choose different teaching contents and activities to best develop students and allow them to achieve the learning outcomes.

3.2 Phase 2: Development

Print[11] holds that “to achieve the second phase developers follow the cyclical procedure ... the sequence of curriculum elements that begin with situational analysis and continuous with aims, goals and objectives; content; learning activities; evaluation and then continuing on to situational again.” Teachers of this module should first analyze the students’ presage and could develop their own further teaching outcomes based on the general ones. Then they could choose appropriate teaching materials and activities to develop the module and allow achievement of the learning outcomes. Experiential learning activities are recommended because the learning of oral English is actually a process of experiences. As discussed before, the present College English teaching activities are mainly prescribed to teachers and with too many learning outcomes to be achieved in limited time, teachers often have to implement lectures as the main teaching approach, teaching in a teacher-centered way, “teaching as telling”. [12] “Experiential learning is learning that is rooted in our doing and our experience.” [13] Learners always hope or are supposed to practice and construct their own learning in oral English. With appropriate combination between practical learning outcomes and activities, students could achieve outcomes in an authentic environment by using their oral skills. Teaching should not be telling or simply organizing activities, but “should making learning possible” [14]

The assessment should consist of formative opportunities and a summative assessment at the end of each semester. “From our students’ point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum” [15], so it is possible to use this to encourage students’ to learn. Separating the oral aspect from present curriculum and choosing appropriate assessment approaches can make the assessment better aligned with the learning outcomes. After situational analysis, teachers could decide the form of formative assessments, such as presentations and virtual situation conversations. The summative assessment would be same and with identical criteria for all classes in same grade, checking how well the students have achieved the outcomes and reanalyzing the changing situation, which could also work for a new cycle of the curriculum development.

3.3 Phase 3: Application

Curriculum implementation should go with continuous modification to achieve the learning, through contents, activities and assessment approaches. “The degree of successful implementation will reflect to a large measure the ability and willingness of developers to accommodate modifications to their curriculum.” [15] To effectively modify the curriculum implementation, teachers should give and draw effective feedback to and from students. “It is impossible to overstate the role of effective comments on students’ progress in any discussion of effective teaching and assessment.” [15] Many studies emphasize the importance of formative feedback and using Gibbs and Simpson’s eleven conditions under which assessment supports learning, effective feedback can greatly motivate student’s learning. The student’s feedback to the teacher (evaluation) can also improve the teacher’s teaching strategies so that both the teaching and learning can get good outcomes. Through monitoring and feedback, the effectiveness of the curriculum could be evaluated

so that the teachers can reflect and make necessary adjustments to accommodate curriculum presage.

4. Conclusion

The present College English curriculum possesses certain advantages in meeting the general outcomes set by the Ministry of Education, and basically satisfies the students and future employers' expectations. However the analysis shows flaws in the oral English learning aspect, which is ineffective, lacking freedom in choosing contents, activities and assessment. The redesign of College Oral English curriculum using Print's model [16] with Phase1: organization, accommodating student presage, which influences the development (Phase 2) of aims and learning outcomes, puts emphasis on a learning and teaching system that is constructively aligned [17]. The changes are intended "to make student learning possible" [18] to help students acquire knowledge and understanding and the skills to use these in a constructivist environment understanding and allow them to achieve learning outcomes through deep learning. It is also targeted to better accommodate the students' profile and the requirements of other shareholders. It is time to make changes for learning!

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