

Designing and Assessing Learning for Teaching *New Horizon College English Book I: Reading and Writing Module**

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Abstract: This paper provides a critical analysis of the design and implementation of *New Horizon College English Book I—reading and writing module* for the students in 2007 at Yunan Agricultural University. This critical analysis has attempted to explore issues associated with the module design and implementation. This includes the learning aims, outcomes, assessment and the delivery with attention to its learning theories, especially constructive alignment on curriculum design and assessment. Altering the assessment seems to be the most important. Designing the teaching plan tries to use appropriate activities to encourage deep approach to learning. After this analysis and improvement, the learning outcomes will meet the requirements of the good curriculum design better, the assessment will be valid and reliable.

Key words: critical analysis; constructive alignment; curriculum design; deep approach to learning

教学课程设置和评价研究 大学英语新视野第一册——综合读写教程模块

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摘要: 对“大学英语新视野第一册——综合读写教程”教学模块在云南农业大学2007级的设置和应用提供批判性分析, 试图探究课程设计和应用所引起的相关问题。内容包括学习目的、结果、评价和讲课的方法。同时注意理论的研究, 特别是建设性组合理论在课程设置和评价的研究。改变评价方法似乎是最重要的。制订教学计划要尽力采用恰当的教学活动鼓励学生进行深层学习。通过分析和改进, 学习结果将会更好地达到课程设置的要求, 课程评价应更有效度和可信度。

关键词: 批判性分析; 建设性组合; 课程设置; 深层学习

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1 Introduction

Teaching is a balanced system in which curriculum, the teaching methods, the assessment, the climate, the institutional procedures and the rules support each other to be aligned to each other. Building assessment into module design involves an ordered consideration of the learning outcome, in relation to

standards with this information related to expectations in terms of a chosen mode of assessment^[1]. The aims of module need to be translated into learning outcome in order to imply the assessment criteria, which are basis for assessment. What and how students learn depends to a major extent on how they think they will be assessed. Assessment practices, which complicate matters, must be the right signal to

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send students what they should be learning and how they should be learning it^[2].

2 Context

New Horizon College English (NHCE) is offered to all students during the first two years of four-year study of 2007 at Yunan Agricultural University. It is a required course; of which the students must pass the examination—the final examination every term, passing the course the students can gain four credits towards their degree. The course includes New Horizon College English: reading and writing; listening and speaking. Every student should pass the course or he / she should study it again. If the students do not pass it in a second time, they cannot get the degree.

In most Chinese universities, non-English majors have only four English classes a week in which they must improve their different abilities—listening, speaking, reading and writing. For every aspect, the teacher only allots a little time. The students study the text, do exercises, and sometimes write compositions according to the analysis of the texts. These are their formative feedback. Students pay more attention to Summative assessment, the results of which usually are the middle, final examination, or a short test given after each unit. In the teaching, the teachers often do these assessments.

3 An analysis of the design of the programme

All students of 2007 at Yunan Agricultural University are required to study the New Horizon College English, which is a compulsory subject, and students' numbers normally range between fifty and sixty in age from 19 to 20 years old. The students I teach are from three departments—Tea Horticulture, Vegetable Science, Electronic Engineering and Automation in Yunnan Agricultural University. They are non-English major. Each student had completed 6 years of English study prior to entering the college. All of them had taken part in a placement test before entering the university. According to the result of their placement test, most of them are not good at English; they had a lower-intermediate level of Eng-

lish.

Aims of the reading and writing module are:

- Master the key words concerning the text
- Grasp the main idea and structure of the text
- Understand some important language points and grammatical structure in the text
- Conduct a series of reading, and writing activities related to the theme of each unit.
- Become familiar with the freshman's skill of English, especially reading and writing.

Well - defined students learning outcomes are important, so that everyone can clearly understand what is expected of them by the end of the course^[3]. The learning outcomes for the module are described as following:

- The students can make an analysis of a paragraph using the similar structure in each unit.
- The students should be able to use some important reading skills to improve their reading ability.
- The students can practice writing different kinds of paragraphs or compositions.
- Students are able to retell the story, get some background knowledge about westerners and make good use of the expressions what they've learned.

The module focuses on “aims and objective” as a way of presenting the traditional results of students achievement, shifting away from them towards learning outcomes. According to Otter's^[4] opinion, the notion of what a learner knows or can do, as a result of learning. The learning outcome denotes a wider range of learning than with the previously used “aims and objectives”^[5]. Learning outcomes examine the relationship between outcomes, assessment and the experience of students learning.

4 Issues arising from the implementation

The students of 2007 will be the first year that they learn the New Horizon College English; experience learned from the first term of teaching on the programme indicates the following issues:

4.1 A little higher aim

The aim is a little higher for the students in Yun-

nan Agricultural University because the English teaching level in our university is not good; the students' English level is also the same. According to Ramsden^[6], aims are best thought of as educational intent, seen from the students' point of view. The aims are clear and excellent from all the universities in our country but not adequate from different kinds of students' background, especially for the undeveloped provinces.

4.2 The learning outcomes are not sufficiently specific

The learning outcomes described above are not clear enough, they may seem to outline different areas which be described the students will know because of learning. There are no specific benchmarks for the teacher to follow. Rhodes and Tallantyre^[7] describe benchmark statement providing guidance about standards expected in degree subjects and enabling designer to map out the content of their course to ensure comprehensive. Knight^[3] stated that subject specific benchmarks are very useful guides when planning and designing courses.

4.3 Time issues——insufficient time

There are four or six English classes a week. For reading including intensive reading and extensive reading, most of the teachers only explain one of the passages carefully, as a way of teaching the rule of grammar, word formation and vocabulary; leaving the other two articles for students to read quickly and selectively after class. The module is composed of thirty articles and ten written compositions. The mode of assessment for this is by formal written compositions, multiple-choice, the class presentation and middle or final exam.

4.4 Not enough motivation to read or write a composition

In the examinations for the first semester, the school only checks the students' translation ability. Therefore, students pay little attention to the writing. Some of them just want to pass the examination. I think there is not a little complete in the summative assessment.

5 Evaluating the module's teaching and assessment strategic

Turn to evaluation strategies to assess the effective of teaching; teachers employ a range of methods to monitor the success of teaching and learning activities, including students' perceptions of the module—designed/delivered, content/perceived relevance and recommendations for improvement.

Biggs' constructive alignment is that a good teaching system aligns teaching method and assessment to learning activities aimed in the objective, so that all aspects of this system act in accord to support appropriate learning. According to the theories, we can see that the students' levels of outcomes——increase the knowledge, memorizing, and the acquisition of procedures^[8] are surface learning. A framework describing the alignment of learning and teaching process is the 3p model which describes three points in time at which learning-related factors are placed:

—presage: external learner factors the relevant prior knowledge of the students and for teaching context assessment, climate of the classroom and institutional procedure, namely what is intended to be taught, how it will be taught and assessed.

—process: learning focused activities;

—product: learning outcomes.

Biggs^[2] citing Tyler (1949) supports constructive alignment by stating that “Learning takes place through the active behavior of the student; it is what he does that he learns, not what the teacher does”

As discussed above the aspects of the module were not carefully assessed from the students' perspective to insure their requisite prior knowledge had been got. So when we plan a programme of learning, some appropriate learning activities, we should think according to the theories in order to teach them effectively.

A difficult in traditional English in China is that two or four hours of reading and writing, two hours of listening and speaking, which has a little connected with the content. The students spend a lot of time

learning the textbook in order to pass the examination, most students using surface learning to learn English. They failed to see the relevance to the four parts. The non-English majors in the higher education in Yunnan Agricultural University lack the English learning environment. They have fewer English classes and less time in English communication. Therefore, in the limited time of English classes, the teacher should provide the students with different materials in the target language with flexible language activities.

At the beginning of the module most of the teachers try to explain the text in detail, ask them to translate the text into English, I want some students who are not good at English to try to recite some useful sentences but the others feel boring because maybe this kind of activities and teaching method are not appropriate for the students. Print^[9] stated "Learning activities may be defined as those activities offered to learners in the teaching-learning situation which are designed to enable them to acquire the designated content and thereby achieve the stated objectives and more broadly, the curriculum's intent." In this way the various methods not only teach the content but also help achieve the initially stated objective.

Later I alter my teaching method, which enables students to do the task meaningfully and appropriately, meanwhile provide appropriate background knowledge, by using questioning, presenting problems, rather than explaining the text in detail. I try to design to overcome this surface learning by utilizing teaching methods that encourage deep learning.

I ask the students to do Webquest activities for three weeks, during which students engage in variety of activities including pair work, group work, making colorful and excellent PPT slides, searching in the Internet answering different kinds of questions, do exercises and write some composition, Presentation, tasks about the text.

Whether we think of ourselves as lectures, or teacher, or facilitators of learning, the most important thing we do for our students is to assess their work^[10]. According to Race's theories, assessment

can be

—More valid, measuring that which we really intend to measure;

—More reliable and consistent, moving away from the subjectivity that cause assessment fairly;

—More transparent and diverse, so that students can see the clear links between intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria applied to students' work;

—More efficient and manageable, both for out students and for ourselves;

—More useful in terms of feedback, so that students' learning is enhanced, motivate students to learn;

—More successful in promoting deep learning, so that students get a firmer grasp of the important theories and concepts underpinning their learning;

—More timely and incremental, giving students a chance to practise before they pass or fail and the feedback should be continuous.

So my assessments reveal some problems, which I should be changed.

—Not timely.

—It is difficult to deal with large number of pieces of student work.

Therefore, I use self-assessment and peer assessment to motivate the students to learn effectively.

Self-assessment involve reflection, which is being used in a variety of ways to assess skills, knowledge and competence^[11]. I first ask them to write the short passage by themselves, and then I give them the three samples to modify their composition using self-assessment.

Peer assessment involves students making judgment about, or commenting upon, each other's work. Group may comment on the work of individuals or groups. Using peer assessment may derive from the desire to reduce the teacher's marking load, or for more pedagogical reasons, such as a belief in ability of peer assessment to develop important skill when students graduate. Two students comment the other four or five students' compositions and try to find the

errors in them; they will give explanations about the error or structures after the assessments.

At last I will give more useful in terms of feedback, so that students' learning is enhanced, motivate students to learn. The module we try to use formative feedback and link to deep learning (feed forward) "assessment always defines the actual curriculum." [12]

During class we try to different questions to motivate the students to learn and consolidate the students learning, such as Closed Questions, Open Questions, Direct Questions, Probing Questions, Multiple Questions and Hypothetical Questions.

The assessment of this module is a little restricted, the middle and final examinations are marked as the most important part of the students summative feedback, students who can do a few assignments if they can got higher mark in the exams, because they can pass the course, the students just attempt to pass with minimum of effort. That is why some students do not hand in their compositions, seldom finish their reading articles, which can improve their reading comprehension, and miss the lessons. The situation sometimes has a bad effect on other students who is not good at English learning. This can also lead to inefficient learning environment. This situation could be solved by requesting the leader of this module to reduce the percentage part of middle and final examinations and add more percentage of the students' formative feedback. In this way, the students can be developed their real language ability not the ability of passing examination.

The other assessment used in this module is the two hours examinations in the middle or final, which composed of reading comprehension, cloze and writing but the writing is only to translate some Chinese sentences or phrases into English, all of them are about the key language points in the module which they did before the examinations. It may align towards the learning outcomes partly, but not emphasis on the aims. In the latest edition teaching syllabus for col-

lege English, specific requirements concerning English writing are raised for college students. As is described, writing is one of the important language skills that both teachers and learners cannot neglect. Writing is an important productive skill in language learning. It can objectively reflect students' competence of thinking, organizing and expressing. In English teaching, writing is a knot for both students and teachers. Writing, as perhaps the most difficult skills in language learning, involves vocabulary, grammar knowledge, but also syntactical knowledge, discourse analysis. However, for me because there is not enough time, I pay a little attention to it. The module is composed of thirty articles and ten written compositions. Nevertheless, in the examinations there no compositions, this must mislead the students to try to recite the translations instead of writing composition. Therefore, this assessment seems oppose the deep learning approach, for it could be successfully completed by surface learning. Rust [13] argues that assessment should be an intrinsic part of the learning process and not something "tacked on" the end of the programme.

6 Conclusions

This critical analysis has attempted to explore issues associated with the module design and implementation. The approach to teaching is not good enough to make several improvements. Assessment is traditional; altering the assessment seems to be the most important. Designing the teaching plan tries to use appropriate activities to encourage deep learning. There are some assessments used in this module are not suitable to the strategy. Areas for improvement are suggested in the document. After this analysis, I think next term the learning outcomes will meet the requirements of the good curriculum design better; the assessment may be valid and reliable.

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