Content-Based Instruction: Perspective of College English Curriculum Planning in Southwest University of China

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Abstract
The study of Content-based instruction (CBI) and its application in College English in China has been one of the most talked about issues over the recent years due to the reform in College English. The paper discussed the theory of CBI and its application in China first, and then explored the reform and curriculum planning in recent four decades. After a survey carried out in Southwest University of China, a new curriculum planning based on CBI was introduced, particularly from the perspective of Six-T’s Approach.

Key words: CBI; Six-T’s Approach; College English reform

INTRODUCTION
Content-Based Instruction (CBI), distinguished by its dual commitment to language and content-learning objectives, though not necessarily equal (Kasper, 1999), has been translated into diverse ways to meet the needs of second and foreign language students at various levels in different contexts. Different from other language instruction approaches, content in CBI refers to the use of nonlanguage subject matter or topic, like history or music, rather than grammatical structures or language skills. What’s more, content and language create a symbiotic relationship in CBI; that is, the learning of content will contribute to the learning of language and a mastery of language gives learners easier access to content (Stoller, 2004). CBI, in which language is used as a vehicle for teaching, provides learners with more comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) rather than vocabulary memorizing and grammar exercises completing. Therefore, content-based classrooms are not only the places where students learn a second language; they are the places where students gain an education (Mohan, 1986). Although CBI is not new, and it used to meet many challenges, including coordination between content and language, and program evaluation, it has attracted increased attention particularly in USA and Canada where it has proven to be very effective in ESL immersion programs (Davies, 2003). Later the interest in integrating content and language-learning objectives has spread to EFL classrooms around the world. CBI emphasizes learning about something rather than learning about language and it provides learners the opportunity to continue their academic development and at the same time, to improve their language proficiency. Of course, in perfect CBI classroom, learners, who are preparing for full-time study through their second language, can master both language and content through a reciprocal process as they understand and convey various concepts through their second language (Wesche & Skehan, 2002).

College English instruction in China is of no exception, and it has also been greatly influenced by the theory and practice of CBI. The past decades have witnessed large amounts of studies on the curricula, development, and approaches of CBI in English learning. Wang (1994) first introduced the concept and approaches of CBI in China, then more than 30 papers were published in the next fifteen years discussing the application of CBI in teaching of English majors (Feng & Li, 1995), in post-CET 4 (College English Test Band 4) English (Wang,
2006), in English writing (Yu & Zhang, 1996) and in college English curriculum (Wang, 2001; Zhao, 2005; Li, 2006). From 2005, the application of CBI in various English classrooms is discussed and the results are CBI is more beneficial for learners to cultivate their language proficiency compared with other approaches (Shi, 2005; Gao, 2006; Yuan & Yu, 2008). From 2010, hundreds of papers related to CBI are published and more and more scholars and researchers turn their attention to CBI partially because of the college English reform carried on in China. And to some extent, the study of the relationship between CBI and the reform of college English in China (Zhang & Wang, 2013; Zhang & Zhang, 2013) has reached the summit.

There are mainly three models of CBI, that is, sheltered instruction model, adjunct instruction model and theme-based instruction model. However, in most educational context, the basic is thematic instruction. The other two models are not alternatives to theme-based instruction; rather, they represent two different organizational structures for carrying out theme-based instruction (Stoller & Grabe, 1997). Six-T’s approach is an approach to theme-based instruction which can be applied to a wide range of CBI contexts. It is applicable when teachers control content and when content is controlled by a central curriculum plan. Thus, teachers should be given the freedom to make major curriculum and content decisions, to organize content resources for instruction and to select appropriate English learning activities. Six-T’s approach is not new in China. Cai (2002) discusses the relationship between ESL and CBI and the problems which should be noticed during the application of CBI, particularly application of Six-T’s in unit planning. Yuan and Yu (2008) did a comparative study between the control group with regular college teaching method and treatment group with CBI which adopted Six-T’s approach. Compared with the control group, the treatment group was more highly motivated and more active in using English to communicate and gained higher language proficiency. When discussing the review of the book Content-Based Instruction in Higher Education Settings, Liao (2009) argues that Six-T’s should be adopted in college to design curriculum syllabus and plan to ensure the coherence and consistency. Wu (2014) also discussed the application of CBI in college English teaching, especially the principle of Six-T’s. But the description is pretty simple and no specific examples are introduced. Luo (2013) provided a curriculum plan of one unit in Pharmaceutical English with the help of Six-T’s. But the information provided was pretty simple, no detail information could be found by the readers.

The objective of this research is to introduce the new curriculum planning based on CBI in Southwest University of China after a survey carried out; give details of how Six-T’s Approach, the six curricular components, can be applied into an English instruction unit planning.

1. COLLEGE ENGLISH REFORM AND CURRICULUM PLANNING

The recent four decades have witnessed the growth and development of college English in China. Especially after 2002, the focus of college English was changed greatly, from the reading and writing to students’ comprehensive ability, particularly listening and speaking. Even though some scholars (Zhang, 2012; Wang, 2010) argue that the focus on listening and speaking can not be in accordance with the rule of English teaching, and not meet the requirements of most learners, less than the requirements of talents of society and nation. Even though, the study of English based on computer and Internet was gradually adopted by universities and colleges. What’s more, the cultivation of autonomy study was paid great attention. Modern equipments and facilities walked into the study of English and the test method was also changed from monosyllabic mid-term and final exams to the combination of autonomy study, oral English, online study, performance and final exam. Because at the year of 2002, a project named “College English Teaching Reform” was carried out by State Education Ministry and National College English Syllabus and College English Curriculum Requirement were issued in the very next year for trial implementation to encourage web-based English learning to facilitate autonomy study of learners. SWU was one of the first several universities to implement this reform and achieved great success; public English course became one of the national excellent courses.

However, problems began to emerge with the large enrollment of students in colleges. Students with different English levels and various orientations of colleges’ types (teaching type, researching type, teaching and researching type) made the situation worse. Different English learning materials, contents and classes were adopted. Even so, it still couldn’t meet the needs of students due to monosyllabic curriculum, large amounts of students, teaching methods and teachers’ academic background. According to the survey made in SWU, about 8% of students are usually absent from English lectures because of various reasons and 2.5% never around, less than 21% are not satisfied with the lectures.

In September 2007, Curriculum Requirements for College English was released by Education Ministry, which clearly pointed out that college English should be divided into two parts: fundamental and advanced. Based on the present situation of college, college English Syllabus and curriculum system should be designed by the colleges themselves; thus, the normalized and monosyllabic English study can be changed, walking toward personal and multi-dimensional. Work point of Advanced Education Division in 2014 was released and determined to guide college English teaching, aiming at the reform of teaching evaluation, orientation, evaluation body, evaluation content and guiding colleges and
universities to provide classified English teaching of high quality. SWU also issued a new document—View on Further Reform of Public Courses—in 2014, optimizing structure of public courses, creating teaching pattern, improving evaluation system, and gradually constructing public courses with distinguishing features like classified guidance, classified evaluation and development.

How to plan college English curriculum gradually catches scholars’ attention. Some experts (Cai, 2012; Feng, 2010; Wang 2010) argue college public course—English should be cancelled, like Tsinghua University, because the fundamental English of students has promoted to a higher level. Some point out (Cai & Xin, 2009) that the compulsory English course should be changed to elective or at least elective content (Wen, 2011). Others (Fan, 2013; Shu, 2012; Cai & Liao, 2010; Zhang, 2003) state that public English course should be directed at ESP (English for special purpose), or the combination of ESP and EGP (English for General Purpose) (Wen, 2011). At the same time, some pioneering universities began their reform on curriculum planning in college English, which shed light on SWU.

2. CBI AND COLLEGE ENGLISH CURRICULUM PLANNING IN SWU

In SWU, hundreds of students could apply for exemption of English if they score high in CET-4. However, some still attend English class because they need further improvement. They think the classroom is a better place to acquire knowledge, especially through communicating with other classmates. However, some students are not quite satisfied with the curriculum plan due to repetitive and monotonous content. CBI, which integrates language study into nonlanguage subject matter or topic, focuses on the final aim of English study—training students’ practical competence effectively. China’s college English curriculum planning can be guided by the four main characteristics of CBI, namely, subject knowledge core, using authentic contents, learning of new information and appropriate to the specific needs of students. It is known to all that each course is a sequence of topics tied together by the assumption of a coherent overall theme. Therefore, the challenge in curriculum planning is to create a sense of seamless coherence among various topics which combine to create a theme for a given course.

According to the requirements of National College English Syllabus distributed by Education Ministry in China, colleges and universities can independently plan English curriculum based on their practical condition. Therefore, students’ needs, which consist of two parts—requirement of goal and study, should be considered first. The requirement of goal refers to the aim students want to achieve through English study; the requirement of study refers to students’ concern about teaching content, method and concept. The second should be considered is the opinions and conceptions of college and university leaders, and didactic staff. The expectation of leaders and staff, the abilities of teachers and the resources available should also be considered when planning English curriculum. Based on CBI and after investigation and survey of leaders, teachers and students, English curriculum planning of SWU is made for the newcomers—grade 2014.

The freshmen will have a comprehensive English test which will classify them into five levels and will have classroom study from two to four terms differently. According to academic credit system, exemption of credit is adopted, namely, two credits can be exempted with each higher level. The first and second levels are fundamental periods: the first level requires four semesters’ English study, 3 credits each semester, 12 credits in total; the second level also requires four semesters, 3 credits each at the first and second semesters, 2 credits each at the third and fourth semesters (optional required courses). From the third level to fifth, all the courses are optional required courses (ORC), the third level requires four semesters study with 2 credits at each semester; the fourth level requires three semesters study with 2 credits at each semester; the fifth level requires two semesters study with 2 credits at each semester. The specific schedule can be seen in Table 1. Students at each level are required to take classes and get the needed credits, and then they are identified as successful completion of college English course and getting 12 credits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>First semester</th>
<th>Second semester</th>
<th>Third semester</th>
<th>Fourth semester</th>
<th>Credits in total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level one</td>
<td>3 credits</td>
<td>3 credits</td>
<td>3 credits</td>
<td>3 credits</td>
<td>12 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level two</td>
<td>3 credits</td>
<td>3 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>10 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level three</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>8 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level four</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>6 credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level five</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>2 credits</td>
<td>4 credits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for the specific curriculum planning, it can also be seen in Table 1. It is known to all that college English course is not only a fundamental language course, but also a course to widen students’ view, to understand
more about world culture. It has the characteristic of instrumentality and humanity. To meet the needs of students and to make sure students at different levels can have sufficient training and improvement in English, six categories are provided, namely, fundamental English (F, classified into four levels, F1 to F4), language ontology (ORC 1), language skills (ORC 2), language and culture (ORC 3), language application (ORC 4) and advance language (ORC 5). Each category has three or more ORCs. Students at different levels will attend classes from appointed categories provided in Table 1, and only one course can be attended from one category at each semester. The amount of students at SWU in each grade is about 8000, the details of each level are shown in Table 2. Level five takes up the least 5%, about 400 students; while level two takes up the most, 35%, nearly 2900 students.

### Table 2
**Details of Students’ Distribution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Students’ distribution (%)</th>
<th>Students amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level one</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level two</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>2,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level three</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>2,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level four</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level five</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. For the assessment of students, final exam will surely be part of it, taking up 30%, performance 40% and the last 30% will be comprehensive ability.*

### 3. **SIX-T’S APPROACH AND CURRICULUM PLANNING**

Six-T’s Approach, namely, Themes, Texts, Topics, Threads, Tasks, and Transitions are six curricular components. Themes are the central ideas which organize major curricular units; Texts are content resources which drive the basic planning of theme units; Topics are the subunits of content which explore more specific aspects of the theme; Threads are linkages across themes which create greater curricular coherence; Tasks, the basic units of instruction through which the Six-T’s Approach is realized day-to-day, are the instructional activities and techniques utilized for content, language, and strategy instruction in language classrooms, and in the Six-T’s Approach, tasks are planned in response to the texts being used; Transitions are explicitly planned actions which provide coherence across topics in a theme unit and across tasks within topics (Stoller & Grabe, 1997).

In the new curriculum planning in SWU, students’ needs, students’ goals, colleges’ expectations, teachers’ abilities and interests, available resources are all taken into consideration. In the class, especially in ORC, English teachers are given more freedom to design their lectures. Therefore, the time to adopt Six-T’s Approach in English instruction is ripening.

To better understand how Six-T’s Approach can be applied into English class, one unit of *Viewing, Listening and Speaking of New Horizon College English* can be taken as an example. The theme of this unit is “Our globe is in danger” which is the central idea; the content resources provided are listening materials and video clips related to different environmental problems; as for the topics, air/water/earth/light pollution can be the subunits, greenhouse effect, destruction of ozone layer, energy shortage and littering can also be discussed; to make the class more coherent, threads and transitions are definitely needed, because coherent curricular can help students further in both language learning and content consolidation: responsibility can be the thread of this unit, thinking of the responsibilities of individuals, industries and governments, what they have done to our globe, what environmental problems have caused by them, and later in discussing specific topics, like water pollution, the teacher can encourage students to think about the responsibilities of individuals, industries to respect nature and then the students can be engaged in the task of what the individuals, industries and governments can do to take responsibilities to change the situation and make things better; and this lead to the task, in fact, there are more than one task for students in this unit: after listening to one short dialogue related to environmental problem, students will be ask to choose the best answer (task 1), to discuss how this problem emerged (task 2), what would happen in the future if nothing would be done (task 3), what can be done by individuals, industries and governments (task 4), search information about environmental problem related to their local area (task 5) and finally students can make the oral presentation to share the newly learned information with their classmates (task 6)—one task leads nicely to the next and students can be involved into lots of language learning can content knowledge; transitions, planned across tasks, can be clearly observed from the five tasks provided above and of course transitions can also be planned across topics, transparent to the students or not, should be orchestrated in lesson plans to make sure the topics and tasks being smoothly leaded from one to the next and as for the transition among these topics, the teachers can ask the students to think about the living environment of human being—water, air, food, earth, etc. Table 3 shows the detailed Six-T’s planning of this unit.

### Table 3
**Six-T’s Planning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Six-T’s Planning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Listening materials, Video clips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>Water pollution, Earth pollution, Air pollution, Light pollution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tread</td>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks</td>
<td>Multiple choice, Discussion, Oral presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>Living environment of human being</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

College English, meeting both challenges and opportunities, has stepped into a crucial period. A new curriculum planning based on CBI surely will help. At the same time, much more freedom should be given to the university and teachers. However, the design of curriculum planning based on CBI hasn’t been put into practice; neither does the Six-T’s planning, therefore, the effect still needs to be tested by time. At the same time, the demands of teachers are pretty higher than before, so the trainings of teachers are also needed to be taken into consideration. What’s more, several factors still need to be taken into consideration, such as the number limitations of students in one course, the schedule of timetable, and the specific arrangements and syllabus of one course.

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