

On Online Business English Curriculum and Cultural Communication

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Abstract

This paper studies on curriculum design and practice based on learning activities. It presents an overall principle and guiding ideology on web-based courseware -- "Starting Business English". According to practice, it introduces the function of web-based courseware and concludes two revelations to be used: They are practice and application; Insist on openness of web-based courseware.

Key words: Soft power; Business English; Cultural communication

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INTRODUCTION

Network is an important mode of communication media in modern distance education, with the interactive feature providing us interactive learning environments. Interactive activities on the network can be used to study tasks design courses of design courses. Online education can cultivate students' abilities of self-learning and inquiry learning which is difficult to achieve in the traditional classroom, and its rich multi-media forms can also promote students' deep learning. In addition, the function of network is more powerful and consummate, with strong systemic integrity and uniform interface and style, convenient for sharing of teaching resources between teachers and students; while providing diversified, synchronous and

asynchronous learning exchanges, the network has a strong backup office support and management, easy for maintenance, and online courses can be done interactively and develop sustainable. Online courses have a common drawback: First, all subjects were using a fixed model with uniform interfaces so that it cannot embody the professional features; second, because teachers of different subjects designed and made their own online courses, the development model is mainly based on the subject teachers and the teachers seek technical staff to develop curriculum according to the features. However, most teachers are not network experts, so communication of teaching content organization and instructional design with technical personnel often cannot achieve the desired results. Low technology content and standard, weak sharing and openness, inconvenient maintenance, not conducive to the future promotion and lack of effective management of background is a major shortage of such online courses. Thus, professional teachers' design of their own curriculum and consideration on online course development, and developers' understanding and creativity largely affect the quality of developed online courses. Currently, most university's online course development model has not formed and there is a serious shortage of developers, which led to the development of high-quality web-based course.

Many current online courses help students to know, understand and apply knowledge, but cannot achieve the level of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Because there is no variety of learning activities to bring a variety of experiences and feelings, students have been learning in a shallow state, so that students cannot make full use of their subjectivity. "Starting Business English" is professional basic course of English major in Open College in Zhejiang Radio and Television University. On the one hand, as a basic course of Business English, it has its own subject characteristics and there are similarities with other subjects. It plays an important role in cultivating

professional abilities of students; on the other hand, for modern distance education, the design and development of the course has different functions from other professional courses. It plays a very significant role for students to understand such a form of distance education. Development of “Starting Business English” online course, and the research of design and development of this course means much to improve students’ subjectivity and to promote the integrated development of students.

1. THEORETIC BASES OF INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

1.1 Activity Theory

“Activity” is the basic form of human existence and development, the process of communication between human beings and the objective things around, and the process of human beings achieving understanding and needing the environment. The so-called “Activity theory”, is defined as a psychological theory which takes “activities” as the logical starting point and central areas to study and explain the occurrence of human psychological development. Learning activities is the operational summation of learners and learning groups to accomplish specific learning objectives. Learning activities is a source of physical and mental development of learners, so the design of learning activities is the core content of the teaching design. Online courses are composed of a series of learning activities based on learning resources. The quality of learning activities decides the quality of online course.

The design of learning activities is not only the design of task, and not just the design of learning environment based problems. Learning activities include learning activity tasks, activity processes, activity result form, operational methods of students and teachers, monitoring and evaluation rules of activities, as major components.

Activity theory forms great contradiction with traditional education which ignores the student’s status, with teaching and infusing students as the main features. It emphasizes the learner’s subjectivity, as well as the initiative; it lays emphasis on the learner’s interests, needs, abilities experience as a starting point of education. Activity theory makes the concept of teaching have a fundamental reform. Education should encourage the development of students’ subjectivity so it must first let students active as the subject, to complete the two-way learning objects and self-construction, to develop in meaningful activities.

Activities provide the possibility and effective way to promote knowledge generation and construction. Activities-construction concept that the learning process “is actually activities the subjects take part under the guidance of teachers, process of selection and processing of the information from the object on their own existing

cognitive structure, process, in the main activities, of information selection and reorganization of objects, assimilating the outside world with existing cognitive structures.” The activities students participate in is the basis to build students’ knowledge and develop cognitive ability. Without the free and self-conscious activities of subjects, this construction is difficult to achieve.

Activity is the basic unit of activity theory analysis. Subject, group and object are the three core components of the system; tools, rules and division are the the three minor components of the system. The activity system can be described by a triangle (Engestrom, 1987).

1.2 Activity-based Instructional Design Theory

Instructional design theory based on activities clearly stated three design objects: learning activities, learning environment, and media delivery.

1) The Design of Learning Activities

Viewing from the constructivist perspective, the motivation of a learner’s learning and development comes from the interaction between the learner and the environment. The development of a learner’s cognitive function and the change of emotional attitude are also the result of interaction between learners and the environment. Therefore, the core of instructional design is the design of learning activities which is ultimately performed through learning task design. We arouse learners’ cognitive processing and thinking by formulating objectives, results forms, content, strategies and methods of activities that have to be finished by them. In this way, learners’ mental function got developed.

(2) The Design of Learning Environments

From a design perspective, the learning environment is an organic combination of learning resources (specific to media resources) and learning tool for some purposes. The design of learning environment is mainly reflected in the integration of learning resources and tools.

(3) The Design of Media Delivery

The task for the design of media delivery is to decide which media form to choose, according to what kind of presentation order, in what forms of organization to transmit information to learners. The activities in this level include design and development of classroom lecture, and instructional media materials.

Although the instructional design theory that is centered on learning activities emphasizes the concept of “learning method first, teaching method second”, but it does not exclude any role teaching method play. A learning activity sometimes can reflect a teaching method, sometimes several, and sometimes just a component part of a teaching method. Instructional designs based on learning activities are able to respect individual differences, result in the combination of a variety of teaching modes, and fully reflect the changes in teaching structures.

1.3 Learning Activities in the Network Environment

In the book *The Application of Network Education*, Dr. Wu Fati divided learning activities in the network environment into three categories: knowledge learning, strategy learning and problem-solving. Among them, the knowledge learning belongs to structured domains while the other two belong to non-structured domains.

(1) Knowledge Learning

Knowledge learning is the most common way of learning, including the learning of concepts, propositions, rules and laws. Browse, search, exchange, generation and evaluation are five ways of learning activities in the network environment.

(2) Strategy Learning

The browse, search, exchange and cooperation strategy are some special learning strategies in the network environment; planning, management, regulation, inspection, evaluation, comprehension are activities occurred in the formation of learning strategies. To make strategy learning a conscious process is one aspect that the designers of network learning environment should strive for.

(3) Problem Solving

Problem solving, caused by certain scenarios, is a process of solving problems according to a certain target, with the application of various cognitive activities, skills, and through a series of thinking actions. Problem solving includes four stages: problem representation, program design, tentative answers and evaluation results.

2. GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

2.1 General Principles of “Starting Business English” Web-based Courseware Design and Development

(1) A Combination of “Focused and Divergent” Between Learning Content and Learning Resources

Ultimately, the development of “Starting Business English” web-based courseware ought to be extensive in course content, and profound and thorough in course teaching. The web-based courseware should conform to network’s characteristic of openness. It should not only provide learners as much learning resources relevant to the course as possible, but also guarantee the openness and divergence of learning content.

(2) A Combination of “Network and Reality” in the Teaching Process

In “Starting Business English” web-based courseware, teachers’ teaching, classroom learning, homework submitting, simulations and examinations and evaluation are all conducted online. According to a survey on the

effect of online courses implementation, all students hope that apart from online course, there are corresponding written textbooks available to them. The survey, to some extent, shows the significant role traditional teaching methods play in constructing teaching and learning environment. Therefore, online learning and teaching should be combined organically with real teaching and learning.

(3) A Combination of “Key, Difficult and Main Points” in Curriculum Selection and Design

Text, graphics, images and other popular media should be applied to the teaching of basic knowledge points in “Starting Business English” and it is necessary that teaching content is explained clearly so that students learners can understand and master them by browsing. The key and difficult points in courses should be presented by various media forms such as hypertext, animation, sounds, and be concretely and profoundly illustrated so that students can not only master the knowledge, but also flexibly use the knowledge to solve practical problems.

(4) A Combination of “Stability and Open Dynamic” in Learning Content and Learning Resources

On the basis of ensuring the relative stability of its subject content, and full demonstration of all major teaching content in web-based courseware, is necessary for us to take into consideration the openness, dynamic and novelty of the course content and relevant learning resources. Both learners and teachers can upload their own latest academic views and information, established cases, lesson plans, question courseware. Only in this way can web-based courseware be assured to keep up with changes in curriculum and meet the requirements of learners.

2.2 Guidelines

“Starting Business English” web-based courseware is designed as a model that is centered on students’ independent study and supplemented by teachers’ help and by relevant course resources. That is to say, “Starting Business English” web-based courseware is oriented to let students learn, teach, and test by themselves so as to assist them to construct knowledge by themselves. Course content should have good organizational structure, in line with the inner logic system of “Starting Business English” curriculum and laws of students’ cognition. According to the knowledge classification theory, we should use different organizing and teaching methods for different knowledge, provide learners with strategic knowledge in the network learning environment to help them learn better. Besides, we should use actively modular and non-linear hypertext organization; focus on creation of learning environment and cultivation of students’ working ability and innovation; break through the limits of original monotonous linear form of courseware, low navigation capability, difficulty in updating content and inconvenience in online transmission limitations to ensure the scientific nature, richness, openness, interactivity and

scalability of online course content,

3. THE FUNCTION AND STRUCTURE OF “STARTING BUSINESS ENGLISH” WEB-BASED COURSEWARE

The entire “Starting Business English” web-based courseware involves students, teachers, and system administrators. Among them, students are the beneficiaries in the teaching process, teachers’ duty is to release learning resources and information is released, and the system administrators’ role is to maintain the normal operation of the system, configure accounts and assign appropriate permissions. To enable teachers to test their own resources, teachers in the same account have students’ privilege.

In order to adapt to the characteristics of students, six modules have been set up: course study, resources downloads, BBS questions and browsing, bulletin browsing, self-test, learning tools and music. For the convenience of teachers, we have installed modules where teachers can edict learning resources, release information, reply BBS questions, edit test questions and announcements, and comment on other teachers. The function of system administrators is supported by account configuration module and permission assignation module.

“Starting Business English” web-based courseware primarily designed several links such as theoretical teaching, questions and answers exchange, tests practice, the submission of teaching resources and assigned works to provide students with a platform of a online independent-learning.

- **Theoretical teaching:** mainly used to provide learning navigation, curriculum, lesson plans, multimedia courseware and some learning tools. It adopt multimedia teaching, and self-learning approach to help students learn in real time so as to enable them to understand learning steps and progress, to grasp the system of theoretical knowledge.

- **Questions and Answers Exchange:** Through modules provided by online courseware such as online answering questions, real-time communication, we help students to have a better understanding and digestion of learnt content better and enhance student interest in learning.

- **Practice and Testing:** practice and testing have installed test questions and comprehensive test questions of each chapter so that students can select a variety of questions to practice from test database according to their schedule, and their tests can be checked in time to give students a score as well as correct answers. In this way, tests become effective, accurate and practical and to play the role in helping students find their weakness.

- **Teaching Resources:** we use learning templates, software tools, typical cases to further enrich and

supplement teaching resources. Students can further expand their knowledge according to their abilities and interests.

4. THE INSPIRATION IN THE DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATIONS OF “STARTING BUSINESS ENGLISH”

In recent years, although the level of college network course construction has been significantly improved, and much success has been achieved. However, the construction of web-based courseware is a complicated systematic project. Many questions are worth our consideration such as how to build high-quality online courses, to give online teaching benefit into full play, and to improve quality of teaching. For the construction of this course, my propositions are as follows:

4.1 Strengthen and Expand the Implementation and Applications of Web-based Courseware

The online course can not only be a supplement to the open learning course via the construction of institutions of higher learning, but also serve for further education and whole society’s lifelong learning. At the same time, as the construction of network classrooms, multimedia classrooms and other building hardware, some online courses can totally find access to classrooms through the campus network. Through the sharing of good educational resources and give full play to the value and role of online courses, online class now van replace traditional classroom lectures. On one hand, this can ease the shortage of resources in colleges and universities, and economize teaching resources; the other hand, this can promote the reform of higher education teaching, and cultivate students’ ability of self-learning and innovation.

4.2 Strengthen the Practicality and Applicability of Web-based Courseware

“Starting Business English” is a very practical course, so we can not just make it a replica of written materials. Instead, we ought to highlight its practicality and applicability which can be reflected in the network system, content, and teaching activities. Through the creation of problem situations, we help students to apply and increase knowledge, and to enhance capacity by means of solving practical problems.

4.3 Improve the Openness of the Construction of Web-based Courseware.

The design and development of “Starting Business English” web-based courseware is a continuously changing, and improving process. In the practical application of network courseware, according to learners’ learning and collected feedback, we should adjust the structure and specific content of network courseware timely. This requires the design of Web-based course to

be open so that it can be flexibly modified according to specific requirements.

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