

Chapter 24

Laying the Ground for Online English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) Composition Courses and University Internationalization: The Case of a U.S.–China Partnership

Estela Ene

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, USA

ABSTRACT

As universities internationalize and U.S. and Chinese universities become partners, there is growing demand for online English language courses for students seeking to improve their English prior to arriving to the U.S. Situated in the context of a partnership between a U.S. Midwest university and its Chinese partner, this chapter provides a methodological model for assessing (1) English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) composition and online learning needs and resources prior to developing courses for a new population; (2) the potential for collaboration between partnering institutions; and (3) the effectiveness of an online English composition course. The chapter illustrates, in a step-by-step fashion, the decision-making process which shaped the needs assessment and the actions based on it. By doing so, it provides a realistic portrayal of the complexity of the Needs Assessment (NA) and curriculum development process.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Internationalization is an important goal for universities in the U.S. and other countries. Defined as “the process of integrating international or intercultural dimensions into the teaching, research,

and service functions of higher education institutions” (Knight cited in Donahue, 2009, p. 215), internationalization includes the development of student exchange programs, the recruitment of international students, the establishment of U.S. university campuses overseas, the creation of dis-

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tance education programs (Donahue, 2009, p. 215), and of joint and dual or double degree programs. In the latter, students complete a course of study agreed upon by partner institutions in different countries and graduate from both.

It is a fact that China is, and will be in the near future, the principal partner country for the U.S. in internationalization, and particularly in the creation of joint and dual/double degree programs (Obst, Kuder, & Banks, 2011, p. 13). To support the development of new, world-class Chinese institutions with an international outlook:

The [Chinese] government has pledged 39 billion yuan (about \$6-billion) of additional investment ... Chinese universities are looking for serious American institutional partners for collaborative programs in teaching and scholarship (Spak, 2011).

The development of international university-level partnerships is intrinsically connected with the development of online English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) composition courses. Dual-degree students likely need to improve their English or complete language requirements prior to arriving in the U.S. ESL composition courses are a candidate for coursework that can be completed online before U.S. arrival, as first year composition is required at most U.S. universities.

In order to develop international partnerships and online English as a Second Language composition courses that meet the needs of the institutions and students involved, it is necessary to identify those needs. Online teaching situations are relatively new, particularly when instruction is delivered from a U.S. university for an English as a Foreign Language audience. This chapter illustrates the needs assessment process and course piloting phase leading up to the development of an online English as a Second or Foreign Language composition course or program from a U.S. university for its Chinese partner.

SETTING THE STAGE: THE PARTNERSHIP

In 2009, the author's institution and another from Southeast China signed a strategic partnership agreement. This was the culmination of a period of about a year during which delegations of faculty and administrators from both universities met on both campuses to explore the ways in which they could enhance one another's development.

The U.S. institution is a growing urban university in the U.S. Midwest which serves about 28,000 students, of which about 2000 are international. The number of students from China has grown recently and is expected to continue growing due to the recent partnership and in accord with the national trends. The Chinese institution also educates about 30,000 students and it attracts the top 5%-10% high-school graduates from the province.

One of the outcomes of the mutual assessment and partnership agreement was the decision to create dual degree programs between several departments in a variety of disciplines represented on both campuses. In such programs, students from the Chinese university would finish their first two years of studies at their home institution and then complete their last two years in the U.S., graduating with degrees from both universities. Students from the U.S. institution also have the option to participate in such programs.

Both institutions agreed that it was important for the Chinese students in dual degree programs to have the English proficiency necessary for academic success, just like other international students on the U.S. campus. A series of questions needed to be answered by the English as a Second/Foreign Language units on both campuses:

- Q1:** What was the Chinese students' present level of competence in English composition?
- Q2:** If additional instruction in English composition was necessary before the Chinese students would head to the U.S., which insti-

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