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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 distance 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.

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