

Combining English and CTE courses: A case study on curricular integration in vocational education of China

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Abstract: The current English teaching program in vocational school of China is far from meeting either the requirement of career or social expectation. In this study, an approach of systematic English curriculum reform was proposed aiming to improve the quality of English teaching. The core of this approach is to integrate English course and career & technical education (CTE) course together, which is based on both the current trend of CTE reform and the actual situation of the English teaching in vocational schools of China. Three key aspects of this approach were introduced: the objects, the content and the way to realize it. The significance and the challenge of this reform strategy were also discussed.

Key Words: Curricular Integration; English Teaching; CTE; Vocational School

I. Introduction

The modern concept of modern career & technical education (CTE) values more on the development of students' capabilities rather than the grasping of abstract knowledge. So, the teaching program in vocational school should aim at the students' development of capabilities rather than their performance in examinations^[1]. Nowadays English skill is getting more and more important in individuals' career development. However, the current English teaching program in vocational school of China is far from meeting either the requirement of career or social expectation and need to reform.

In this case study, an approach of systematic English curriculum reform is proposed aiming to improve the quality of English teaching. This approach roots in both the current trend of CTE reform and the existing problems of English teaching in the selected vocational school. The core of this approach is to integrate English course and CTE course together.

II. Theoretical background of the study

2.1 The concept of Curricular integration in CTE

Curricular integration is an educational reform strategy to make students achieve both academic and occupational competencies simultaneously. It aims to improve the educational and employment opportunities of youth who will face new technologies and business management systems that demand high-level worker skills.

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The motivation of integrating the academic and CTE course are the vocational schools being expected to deliver workers who have both special career skill as well as problem-solving abilities, higher-level thinking skills, and communication/ employability skills, which need the cooperation of both vocational and academic educators. In the traditional class room, the vocational and academic classes are separated from each other. Vocational educators have been criticized for promoting overly specific training while academic educators suffer criticism for providing curriculum that lacks participatory forms of learning and opportunities for students to connect learning to "real world" events ^[2]. The integration of vocational and academic education offers an opportunity to help students make connections between academic and technical information.

There are several reasons why to make academic and technical integration. Integration establishes positive connections between academic and CTE disciplines by helping CTE teachers realize the significant amount of academic knowledge and skills embedded in their technical content, while providing academic teachers with real-life problem-based activities where students can apply academics in relevant ways. This positive connection stimulates higher levels of thinking in students: rote memorization and drill and practice can take a secondary role in the instructional process.

By working together, integration draws on the capabilities of all teachers involved in the process. CTE teachers often lament their students' lack of basic academic skills and may feel unqualified to help them learn these skills. Having a certified math or language arts teacher as part of an integration team can provide missing expertise to the CTE teacher and his/her students. Working together can also help prevent fragmentation of the curriculum, as students start to see how the different subjects relate to one another and make learning more relevant. In addition, curricular integration can also address academic standards by giving students opportunities to not only acquire new knowledge and skills, but also apply it ^[3].

2.2 Characteristics of integration

Several aspects can be observed in the school where people have adopted an integrated approach to CTE and academic curriculum. Firstly, rather than a teacher in isolation, teachers should be working in teams, developing cross-curricular objectives, activities and assessments ^[4].

There should be flexibility in scheduling, and the length of class periods might be variable, rather than limited to 45-minute blocks. Teachers should be given time to plan together (an essential part of curricular integration). Also, there should be a focus on the core skills (both academic and career-technical) that are needed by all students.

In addition, there should be school and community support for the integrated curriculum approach. It should not be seen as a "passing fad" ^[5] but a curricular approach that is embraced. These characteristics can be found within the career academy models that many large high schools have adopted. They can also be found in many area career centers that have a full complement of academic teachers on staff along with CTE instructors, and the students attending the career center for a full day.

In this paper, as a case study, a general integration approach will be proposed to combine English course (academic course) and Travel specialty course in the vocational school, aiming at extending thoughts in vocational education's reform. To make sure such an approach does work to improve the quality of English teaching, several classes in Travel specialty of Beijing Changping Vocational School has been chosen to apply the new approach. It turns out very successful to inspire the interest of students and help them make a progress in English..

III. Practical background of the study

3.1 The situation of English teaching in travel major of Beijing Changping Vocational School

Training English skill is a very important part in the education of travel major. Currently there are six English classes each week in the Travel Major of Beijing Changping Vocational School. Four of them are for Basic English. The text book is used by all the vocational school in Beijing. The main contents of the text book are some general topics, such as weather, clothes etc. Two classes are given for oral English or specialty English course, depends on terms.

Basically the training object of this major is to encompass major specialist areas within travel management and service e.g. tour operations, aviation, events, hospitality and cruise management and places. Through three years training and education, the students should grasp the special knowledge and theories on tourism, as well as broadly general knowledge e.g. history, geography, architecture, religion, ceremony, cultures etc. They should be able to solve the problems in the real work situations with their knowledge and skill. They should acquire competitive skills of computer and language, particularly English skill.

The English teaching in travel major should reflect current trends and developments within this dynamic service sector industry. With the bursting of several important events, such as participating WTO, holding 2008 Olympic game and successfully application of 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, China has attracted more than ten millions tourists from all over the world each year, which makes the tourism in China more prosperous. However, a very serious situation is the lack of tourism specialist with high qualification and competitive skills, particularly those who have both strong tourism knowledge and proficient English communication skills, which has become an obvious shortcoming to impede the development of Chinese tourism ^[6].

Unfortunately, the current English teaching focuses more on the English itself than the relationship with the knowledge and skill in travel and tourism. Although the English teachers may have excellent English ability, they know little about tourism. As a result, they usually emphasize the general English knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary rather than practical tourism English. On the other side, the English skills of tourism teachers are usually poor, which limit themselves to touch the abundant global tourism information and get ideas of the current trends. Furthermore, they don't even know how to translate the key tourism words and sentences into English that is important to be a qualified tour guide and manager. Since the current English teaching and career teaching in vocational schools is far from meeting the requirement of the reality.

3.2 The properties of the students in the travel major

For the students in the vocational school, there is a sharp contrast between their attitudes and confidence of learning English and learning CTE courses.

Most of them are at very poor level in English. As one research investigated by Beijing Changping Vocational School, about 3 out of 40 students can not speak out 26 English letters in order correctly and more than 1/3 can not understand some daily phrases used in class, such as "class is over." "Let's have a rest" before they come into the vocational school¹. The content of their text book is too difficult for them. Even worse, most of them have completely lost their confidence and hold hostility in studying English when they enter the school².

However, the students show strong interests and high talent in learning CTE course, and they are also very keen to participate the practical session. Currently most of students of travel major in middle vocational schools are graduates from primary middle schools all over the country. Some of them have accepted geography and history courses in their middle school education from which students can get some basic knowledge on tourism. The courses of geography and history in middle school are basic of the courses of tourism geography and tourism history in travel major. This make the students can accept the major courses easily.

Usually they have strong abilities of organization, inter-personal skill and coordination. The personality of most students is warm-heartedness and open-mindedness. The career education and training makes them polite, tolerant and obedient. They are also very sensitive to the comments and evaluation from other people. They are far more interested in the major courses than the academic courses. There are about 300 students in travel major in our school served as volunteers for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and they get high valued for their high discipline and profession.

3.3 The current CTE curricula reform in Beijing Changping Vocational School

The curricular reform of CTE course has been successfully put forward in Beijing Changping Vocational School. And the Automobile-Maintaining major plays a leading role in curriculum and education reform. The reform in this major has the following properties: 1) emphasizing the construction of the quality control system; 2) being oriented by the job markets; 3) systematically reforming. The step and process of developing new curricula has been systemized. And several supportive systems have been established such as faculty team, the practice base, and the quality control and assessment system, and resources database.

The CTE course reform has made a big progress, and substantially improved the quality and the effect of the teaching. However, the reform of academic courses, particular English course, is just

¹ It is a routine to have an examination on academic courses for the first grade students when they just enter to Beijing Changping Vocational School. In the examination of the first term of 2007, one item was about writing out the 26 English letters. And 3-5 students in each class could not give a right answer.

² Generally, all the new students in Beijing Changping Vocational School will be required to write a short passage about their feeling on English study, both English and Chinese are accepted. More than half of the new students during half of them confessed their unsuccessful experience on English study and their hostility attitude to English.

at the beginning.

From the above review of the background, the following points can be concluded:

- a. the current English course in the travel major of Beijing Changping vocational school focuses on the general English knowledge rather than practical tourism English, which is far from meeting the requirement of the English skill in the students' career development.
- b. Half of the students in this major show neither interests nor confidence in learning English course, although they show strong interests and high talent in learning CTE course.
- c. The CTE course reform has made a big progress in this school; however, English course reform is just at the beginning.

As a conclusion, the English course in the travel major of Beijing Changping vocational school need to reform to meet the requirement of the students' career in future, and to arouse the student's interest. Based on the writer's teaching experience, a systematic approach to reform the current English course in Beijing Changping Vocational school will be proposed in the next part of this essay. The core of this approach is to make curricular integration between English course and CTE course, which derived from the concept of "academic and CTE course integration" --- an international trend of education reform [7].

IV. The new approach to integrate English and CTE course

The new approach has three key aspects to integrate English and CTE course in vocational school: the object of integrated curriculums set, the teaching content selection and the application of action-oriented & mission-driven teaching program.

4.1 Setting the object of integrated curriculum

Setting the goal of the integrated curriculum should consider the key capabilities that the career development requires. "The key capabilities are also called general capabilities or core capabilities. It refers to a kind of general, transferable ability. It will play a key role in it's owners career development in future. Somebody also calls it 'portable skills'" [8]. Besides specialty skills, the portable skills (core skills) and personalities are more and more important for a worker. "Modern vocational education aims at developing these qualities of the students and cultivates their abilities of solving the problems from the real world" [9].

According to the cultivation Plan, key capabilities that the students in travel major in Beijing Changping Vocation School should possess are listed in the figure 1.

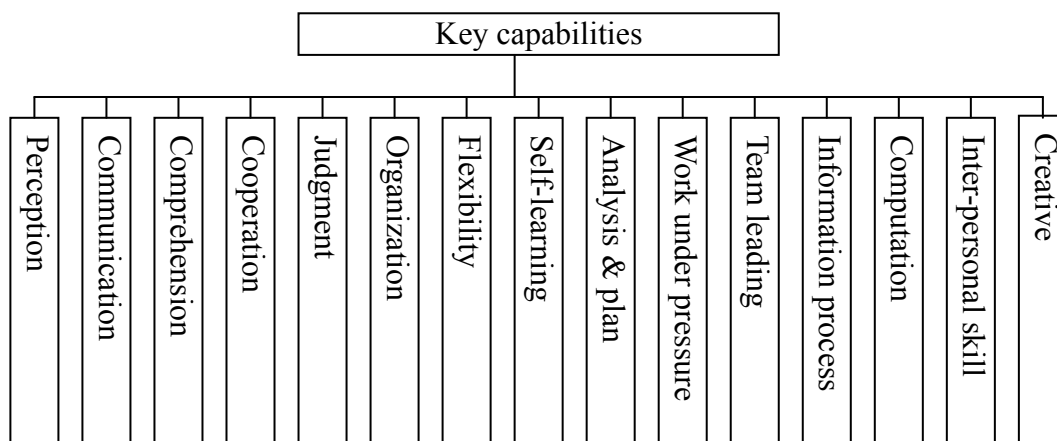


Figure 1. Key capabilities that students of travel

The goal of training the social, interpersonal and communication capabilities is compatible with the properties of English language as communication tool. English teaching is an important way to improve such abilities.

Actually the English education reform pursues multiple goals besides the training of key capabilities of students. For example, the curricula reform also aims at developing their attitudes, emotion, judgment and personality and so on. The new approach will try to integrate the curricula under guide of multiple goals.

4.2 English teaching content selection

The teaching content of the combined curriculum should be selected based on the analysis of both the role of the English education and the properties of the travel major above, with reflecting the integration with CTE course.

The new term examination in September of 2007 in Beijing Changping Vocational School shows that the students in vocational school generally have little interests in learning English. Most of them hate to learn new vocabulary, particularly for those words difficult to remember. However, the students show strong interests in learning CTE course, and they are very keen to participate the practical session. Based on this, a strategy to reform the current English teaching is to combine the content of specialty curricula in the English teaching and extend the range of teaching topic selection. Here are several possible ways to make such combination or integration.

1. To supplement and embody the contents of specialty curricula in the basic English course

The current text book for English course in vocational schools is authorized by Beijing Education Committee, which focuses on basic and daily English rather than specialty English. However, the teacher can supplement and embody the contents of specialty curricula in the English course.

For example, when giving a lesson to student of Travel major, teachers can select special words and paragraphs usually used in tour guiding to develop dialogues and text, which is common content of CTE course. Then the students can learn specialty knowledge when they practice their English communication skills.

Teachers can also use different ways to extend students' specialty English knowledge step by step. For example, at the beginning of each class, teachers can ask one or more students to introduce randomly-selected scenery in English and write down the new words in their introduction, and then teach the new words to other students. Such activities can strengthen the students' spoken English skill as well as extend their special vocabulary.

Here is another example to show how to integrate the English course and specialty curricula from the angle of content. The topic of unit 8 (Accident—dialogue: An Emergency) in the textbook is a story that a girl witnessed a car crash, then made a phone call to police for help, and then dialogued with the police. When teaching this unit, the teacher can ask the students to play the

role of tour guide and to imagine how to deal with such issue. The students are allowed to modify the dialogue to meet the situation. In case students do not know some special words that might be used in such situation, the teacher may teach the potentially useful words first. Such arrangement can substantially increase the students' interests and improve their abilities to apply the knowledge to solve real-world problems.

2. To develop specialty English course

To deal with the problems in real world, the students should accept a all-around education, which generally combines with all kinds of teaching contents in different field but related with the course of a piece of real work, including technology, social condition, environment.

From the angel of content selection and combination, to create specialty English course means to integrate the knowledge from both English and specialty curricula. For example, In the CTE course of Travel Major, the travel sceneries have been classified into three levels: National Key Scenery, Beijing Key Scenery and Changping Key Scenery. To create specialty English course, English teachers can select a Key Scenery, such as the Ming Tombs, and set different study content and situation for each scenery based on the established procedure.

In the English class, the students can be asked to guide the whole tour as a role of tour guide, and the tour can be further separated as different key situations, such as picking up the tourists from airport or train station, arranging accommodation, shopping, dinner, scenery introduction, tourist delivery, and dealing with unexpected affairs etc. The teaching programs should be developed centering on these key situations, and set different key missions at different situations.

It is worth to note that the teaching content should not be the direct translation from the tourism course. Instead, more emphasis should be put on the activity, interaction and culture difference etc.

4.3 Action-oriented & mission-driven teaching program

The core of vocational education is to help students get practical abilities applicable in their work by particular practices. The teaching program should be orchestrated under the guide of the action-oriented concept, which claims that the best way to develop the capabilities is carrying on a particular mission by DOING or ACTION^[10]. “The basic feature of action-oriented education is to replace the old partial action mode, that is, to finishing assigned task according to the external regulations, with the full action mode which includes all the steps of action such as clear task, plan, strategy, executing, controlling, and feedback’ to finish a real work. Teachers should help students get necessary knowledge and build their personal knowledge system by developing suitable learning tasks and multiple teaching strategy.”^[11]

In other words, the ability of students will be developed in the course of planning, collecting information, practicing and thinking which are needed for completing the missions which are selected from the real work. The successful teaching programs should include several meaningful missions that provide challenges to make decision and action themselves, which can be called “action-oriented & mission-driven teaching program”. There are two critical points in making

such a program.

1. To make the students identify themselves as expert

German great educator Friedrich Adolf Wilhelm Diesterweg (1790-1866) said: "The essence and the art of education is encouraging, evoking and inspiring rather than just teaching". This is more important for students in vocational schools. The expert here means that compared with the English teacher, the students know more about specialty knowledge through their previous study. Most students in vocational school, as the academic or English learning loser have an unsuccessful experience on academic learning, and lack confidence and interests in learning academic courses. But if the students identify themselves as experts, they will be much more confident and active in the English class. The expert here does not mean they are real experts in travel major field, but means that compared with the English teacher, the students know more about specialty knowledge through their previous study. The teacher can encourage the students by this way.

So in the action oriented teaching program, the teacher should remind the students to be aware of their identification of expert. For example, telling the students that they should think themselves as a tour guide or working staff. Once the students identify themselves as experts, they will enjoy the role and like to share their knowledge with others.

2. To create teaching mission

English, as a tool for communication, should be grasped in daily use. Otherwise, it is a dead language. So, English education should high-light the function of usage in class. A proper teaching mission can inspire the students' interest to use English in class.

As mentioned before, teachers can select a Key Scenery to create specialty English course by dividing the tour of the selected scenery into different units or situation.

Take the Ming tombs travel line for example. The teaching missions can be designed or created based on the actual situation. In this case, leading a travel group to the Ming tombs is the main mission. With matching the contents of CTE course, the mission of guiding Ming Tomb can be divided into several sub-missions, such as picking up the guest, hotel accommodation, shopping, touring and sightseeing, bidding farewell to guests, dealing with incidents or emergency etc. Different situations can set according to the submissions. The students should be complete each of the submission, in order to grasp how to finish the whole mission.

This program is illustrated in figure 2.

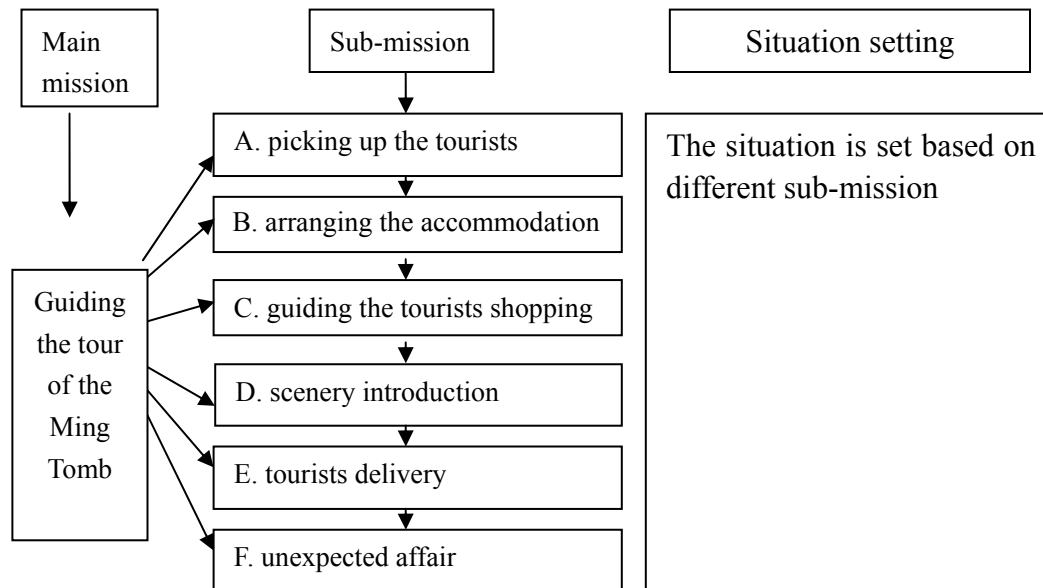


Figure 2: The illustration of “mission –driven” teaching program

The teaching mission can be optimized and improved in the practice of teaching. For example, after carrying on the mission-driven teaching program, a survey can be done to collect the comments and the questions from the students. Based on the feedbacks of the survey, the teaching mission can be improved in future.

V. The significance and the challenge of the approach

5.1 the significance of the approach

A recent study by the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education highlighted the potential value of curriculum integration and provided several case study examples of the strategies schools were employing to achieve curriculum integration. While perhaps more research needs to be done regarding its effectiveness, it is clear that for many schools, curriculum integration has become an effective strategy for enhancing student achievement^[12].

So theoretically, the approach of curricular integration between English and CTE courses should be effective to help students find their interests and confidence in learning English, and substantially improve their English skills. It can also foster the growth of students' learning teams in which teachers get to know the needs of each student.

This approach has been applied in real teaching experience in Beijing Changping Vocational School. For example, in the term of 2005-2006, lots of students were struggling to prepare for the examination of certification of restaurant service in the second-grade in Travel Major. The certification included 2 parts. One part is about the students' specialty skill. Another part is about their oral English on serving guests in restaurant. The teacher selected some important potential contents of the examination and prepared many dialogues, special words and paragraphs in the situation of restaurants and hotels. Then the students could learn and review specialty knowledge when they practiced their English communication skills. By using such strategy, the students showed much stronger interests in learning English, and they also developed their abilities in

applying the knowledge to solve real-world problems. As a result, the pass rate of the examination for this certification is very high. No students were failed for the oral English part.

Besides this, there is another strong evidence can approve the approach is very successful to inspire the interest of students and can help them make a progress in English. The testing-class got the top marks among all the para-classes in the final exam on the first term of 2007-2008 (Quoting from the statistics made by the academic affairs office in Beijing Changping Vocational School).

A survey on the mission-driven teaching strategy can also approve the effect of this teaching strategy. It was based on the investigation of 80 students in the 2 testing classes on the second term of 2007-2008. The result of the survey showed that the attitude of the students to the program was positive. 97% of students believed that setting a mission after the dialogue could help them grasp the key sentences and know how to use them in daily life. 53% students said they liked the team-work in which they could cooperate with each other to finish the mission. In the survey 73% students suggested that they could be more involved in designing the mission, and the mission types could be more flexible. These feedbacks provide clear evidence of the effectiveness of curricular integration also bring useful information to improve the quality of curricular integration and mission designing in future.

The survey and the statistics can suggested that such an approach by integrating English course and major course can improve the students' oral English skills as well as inspire their interest to learn English.

5.2 The challenges of curricular integration

There are several potential challenges that make the curricular integration between English of CTE course difficult.

This first set of challenges may be tied to the ways in which teachers are prepared in vocational school. Teacher education programs typically focus on a single course, either English or CTE area. There are separate methods, curriculum, testing/assessment and other teaching pedagogy courses in English and CTE course, which reinforces the separation of, rather than the integration of career-technical and English teaching. Teachers are prepared to teach a separate, dissimilar curriculum.

There are several issues that prevent integration activities. Both English and CTE teachers have curriculum that may be driven by a combination of local, state and national standards. For CTE teachers, the concern may be, "How will I cover the technical content if more time is spent on English?" while English teachers may ask, "How can I prepare my students for their English level tests if I have to work with the CTE teacher?" Some educators see integration as actually "watering down" academics rather than enhancing them^[13].

There are a host of logistical issues. Building layout may not be conducive to integration activities. In many vocational schools, many CTE labs are out of mind, out of sight at the back of

the building, making contact with English teachers difficult. The need for scheduling flexibility is difficult for some schools to manage. Trying to match up teachers' schedules for common planning time is perhaps the biggest challenge. This is where administrative support is key. A building principal must be willing to try different strategies, including shifting teacher responsibilities, hiring additional staff or reworking bell schedules to make time and space available for teacher planning.

Finally, there are time constraints for the teachers involved in curriculum integration. In addition to the struggle to find common planning time, teachers have a lack of time--period. It is extra work from their routine teaching, and developing integrated activities is a challenge that will likely require work well outside any normal school day. So, teachers must be willing to make sacrifices of their own.

VI. Conclusion

Based on the review of the properties of the Travel Major, the role of English education in this major and the current curriculum reform in Beijing Changping Vocational school, a systematic approach to integrate the English course and CTE course is proposed in this essay. This approach could substantially increase both the students' interests and their performance in English teaching. The approach will be the outline to guide the next English curriculum reform. Several classes will be selected for running the teaching programs. People will continue to evaluate the effect of the approach with surveys, examinations, etc. Hopefully it will be generalized as a reform pattern to integrate other academic course with CTE in the vocational schools of China.

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