386

Chapter 19

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.

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 institution had the linguistic, content, and pedagogical expertise to develop the course(s)?
Q3: If the best solution for both institutions were to develop online coursework, which institution had the expertise and resources to do so?

CASE DESCRIPTION

In order to answer the previous questions, the study employed multiple methods typical of needs assessment or needs analysis (NA) studies. Needs assessment is the process that should be conducted prior to curriculum (re)design in order to determine learner and institutional needs and resources. The needs assessment process is cyclical and potentially infinite. Far from being limited to the initial identification of

needs and resources, it continues through repeated offerings of a curriculum, with the expectation that that curriculum will be improved based on the new information collected with each offering (Jordan, 1997).

Several approaches to needs assessment exist, depending on the goal of the process. A Target Situation Analysis (Jordan, 1997) focuses on finding out what learners need to know at the end of language instruction, whereas a Present Situation Analysis focuses on what the learners know before instruction is delivered. Many NAs blend the two foci into studies of "what the learners know and can do and what they need to learn or do so that the course can bridge the gap (or some part of it)" (Graves, 1997, p. 2). NAs also aim to identify subjective and objective needs, and can encompass linguistic analysis, discourse analysis, genre analysis, and means analysis (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Finally, ethnographic needs assessment, through the immersion of a researcher-ethnographer in the target community as an observer or participant, captures objective information as well as the values and beliefs of the target population.

Needs assessment methods of inquiry include the use of questionnaires and interviews to elicit the perceptions of learner needs as seen by various stakeholders (learners, teachers, institutional representatives and employers) and concomitant use of linguistic analysis of communication in the target discipline, profession or workplace (Basturkmen, 2013, p. 4210).

Additionally, "use of multiple measures, as well as multiple sources, will increase the quality of information gathered" (Long, 2005, p. 32). At the end of a needs assessment, reliable patterns of findings can be extracted through triangulation (Gilabert, 2005; Jasso-Aguilar, 2005; also see Cowling, 2007, p. 427).

This case study illustrates how the needs assessment methodology helped define the roles of English as a Second or Foreign Language units in the international partnership which involved their home universities, and the development of their curriculum.

Step One: Analyzing Existing Information

In order to understand the similarities and differences between the two environments and assess how the collaboration could be maximized, this author first analyzed the information which already existed. This consisted of:

- Literature on English as a Foreign Language composition in the People's Republic of China.
- Literature on Chinese students in English as Second Language composition courses in the U.S.
- Documents:
  - Reports from the mutual visits between the two universities.
  - The Chinese national policy as represented in the College English Curriculum Requirements.

BACKGROUND

Regardless of how the composition requirement for Chinese dual-degree students was going to be handled, it was important to be able to anticipate what to prepare for, in general terms. The author–who leads the English as a Second Language unit at the U.S. university–surveyed the literature from the applied linguistics subfield of Second Language Writing, even though the usefulness of a literature review in the specific situation of the partnership described in this study is limited. In addition to noting the absence of needs assessments of international partnerships, the author, who is also the administrator, surveyed two broad categories of articles: (1) Studies about Chinese students in (online) first year composition in the U.S. and (2) Studies about English composition in China. She anticipated that these categories of studies can foreshadow the student performance which might occur in the new partnership situation. They can also provide details about the teaching/learning conditions typically encountered at universities in the two countries.

Q1: What was the Chinese students' present level of competence in English composition?

With regard to *Q1*, a great deal is known about the writing of Chinese freshman students in U.S. and Chinese universities. Like any international student population, Chinese students encounter linguistic difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, and discourse organization, particularly in persuasive/argumentative academic papers (Hinkel, 2002; 2003; Kaplan, 2005; Liu & Braine, 2005; Qin & Karabacak, 2010). Integration into group work can also be challenging for Chinese students, both due to cultural preferences and linguistic limitations (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Liao, 2000; You, 2004a; You, 2004b). Considering that the goal of the Chinese students in dual degree programs was to become academically integrated at the U.S. university, it

seemed important that the U.S. university be substantially involved in developing and delivering the composition course or program under consideration. However, the precise degree to which each university should be involved could not be established simply on the basis of this portion of the literature.

Q2: If additional instruction in English as a Second Language composition was necessary before the Chinese students would head to the U.S., which institution had the linguistic, content, and pedagogical expertise to develop the course(s)?

When considering *Q2*, the literature which describes the teaching conditions in China began tipping the scale in favor of having the U.S. university offer the English as a Second or Foreign Language composition course. Numerous pieces present the large size of Chinese classrooms, the predominantly teacher-centered teaching styles, and the lack of professional development opportunities for the already over-worked English teachers in the Chinese system as causes of the Chinese students' weaknesses in English writing (Ortega, 2009; You, 2004a; You, 2004b).

Q3: If the best solution for both institutions were to develop online coursework, which institution had the expertise and resources to do so?

As far as Chinese students in online composition courses (*Q1 and Q3*), the literature has little to offer. To the author's knowledge, there are currently no needs assessments about the development of online English as a Second Language composition courses in an international partnership. In general, online or hybrid language courses seem to be as effective as face-to-face courses, though different and never ideal for learners and instructors who prefer to learn face-to-face (Goertler, 2011; Grgurovic, 2007). Online environments seem ideal for intensive, extensive, and interactive writing and reading (Hirvela, 1999). Studies also suggest that online or hybrid language programs are more successful when the participating teachers and students are trained and positive towards online learning (Goertler, 2011). This is the implication of the few studies which looked at the online activity of Chinese students in English as a Foreign Language writing courses (Chen, 2009; Hui, Hu, Clark, Tan, & Milton, 2008; Liou & Peng, 2009). However, because these studies are scarce and only Hui et al. (2008) focused on an exclusively online course, our understanding of what to expect in the process of creating an online composition program for Chinese students needs to be expanded.

Document Analysis

As far as the Chinese students' current abilities in English composition (*Q1*), it appeared that the requirements at the U.S. university were more advanced in the aspects that international students are expected to master in their academic writing in the U.S. This suggests that the Chinese students would need additional English language support. The Chinese institutions' target proficiency level upon graduation was defined as intermediate according to the College English Curriculum Requirements. By the end of their required semesters of college English, the students should be able to "express, by and large, personal views on general topics" in essays "of no less than 160 words," "summarize literature in their areas," and compose "English abstracts for theses in their own specialization" (p. 4). In the U.S. program, mastery of the first two skills is expected upon admission into basic English as a Second Language composition, while the third is developed in the first year course, and abstract or thesis writing are not an objective.

At the U.S. university, all international and domestic students must complete an English composition requirement, which includes–depending on placement test results–a basic and a regular freshman writing course, or just the latter. At the Chinese university, there are no courses that focus exclusively on English as a Second Language writing, but the skill is integrated in the required English courses. However, this in itself did not mean that the instructors from the Chinese university did not have the expertise to develop English composition courses.

At the beginning of the partnership, the English language courses at the U.S. university were technology-supported, but not hybrid (between 30%-80% online) or online (80%-100% online) per se. The courses used the Sakai open-source software (sakaiproject.org) as a Course Management System (CMS) for email, resources, classroom management, and discussions. The English as a Foreign Language unit at the Chinese university did not offer online or hybrid English language courses, but it assigned course sites to most of its courses. The institution used the Blackboard platform. At this point in time, the author did not have access to more specific information about the use of technology in English as a Foreign Language courses at the Chinese institution. Based on the information which was available, the institutions had relatively equal potential for online teaching (*Q3*).

At the conclusion of this step of the needs analysis, more information was needed to truly understand what role each institution could assume in the creation of online English as a Second Language composition courses. Although the U.S. institution had a tradition in teaching composition and higher English proficiency requirements, it did not follow that the Chinese university lacked the expertise for successfully teaching English composition. Both the faculty and the students there could, in practice, exceed the institutions' requirements by far, or teach and learn a

similar curriculum if required, both face-to-face and online. Besides, the English as a Foreign Language unit at the Chinese institution had more expertise in teaching Chinese students, which gave it an advantage in the partnership.

Step Two: On-Site Needs Analysis in the People's Republic of China

Following the realization that the institutions needed more knowledge about one another, the Chinese university invited the author and a fellow teaching faculty from the U.S. program to teach a summer intensive English composition course on the Chinese campus.

Sixty students enrolled and forty attended regularly. The students were from a mix of disciplines representative of those in which the universities were considering developing dual degree programs. Students majored in business (32%), informatics (26%), library science (10%), medicine and pharmacy (10%), environmental engineering (4%), physics (2%), and a mixture of arts and humanities (16%). Of the 40 regularly attending students whose data were used in this study, 66% were 20 years old, and 66% were female. Most of the students had begun studying English in 6th grade. About 10% had spent some time in an English-speaking country, and 30% planned to study in the U.S.

The first determination the needs assessment needed to facilitate was whether the Chinese students needed additional support to develop their English composition skills (*Q1*). This determination had to be based on the students' performance before additional instruction. If the students' performance was high and the instruction received at the Chinese institution proved to be sufficient, the conclusion of the needs assessment could have been that no additional English composition coursework was needed. Information on the students' performance came from three data sources:

- A diagnostic/placement test administered on the first day of class.
- A student survey which probed the students' perception of their own writing ability.
- Teacher and administrator interviews about their perception of the students' ability in English composition.

The diagnostic test was similar to the placement essay test given at many U.S. institutions for placement purposes. In thirty minutes, the students had to write a summary of a text criticizing American society for its materialism and a persuasive personal reaction to the excerpt's main idea. Three U.S. instructors (the two who taught in China and another from the U.S. university) rated the essays, using the

rating criteria normally utilized there (Appendix). The raters also noted on each diagnostic essay a strength and a weakness, to supplement the holistic assessment with concrete details.

The results of the diagnostic essay showed that all the students, by the U.S. institution's standards for international students, needed additional support in English composition after two semesters of mandatory English at the Chinese institution. Half of the students obtained scores of 2 and would be required to take both basic and regular first-year composition courses at the U.S. institution. The other half received scores of 3 and 4 and was considered ready for the non-basic freshman English as a Second Language composition course. According to the criteria (Appendix), the students who were ready for first year English as a Second Language composition could write an essay which was coherent, appropriately supported, and mostly correct from a lexical, grammatical, and mechanical point of view. Those placed in basic composition wrote essays which were insufficiently developed, organized, and supported, and difficult to understand due to word choice and grammar errors. The main strength noted by the raters was that 74% of the students presented clear main ideas in their thesis statements and topic sentences. However, 68% struggled producing evidence to develop those ideas and wrapping them up in a conclusion.

The student survey distributed on the first day of class showed that 34% of the students identified English composition as their weakest skill, and 38% perceived it as their second weakest skill, after speaking. Other questions in the survey dealt with the students' preparation for online learning and will be discussed in the appropriate section.

The Chinese teachers and administrator shared the perception that English composition needs were significant at their institution. In the words of the instructor who was charged to work closely with the U.S. instructors:

Chinese students have great difficulty in English writing … What Chinese students lack is not knowledge of how to write a good essay but practice. They know exactly what a good essay should be like (email communication, June 4, 2010).

This perception, seconded by the administrator, was supported by the results of the diagnostic essay, in which the students demonstrated a good general understanding of the structure of an academic essay in English.

The Chinese students' preparedness for online learning was determined with the help of a set of questions from the survey administered on the first day of class. The survey revealed a core of the student population which had had some experience with online learning.

- 46% of the students had taken a hybrid course in English at the university and used email, online assessment tools, gradebooks, course notes, wikis, and blogs in the course.
- 24% had participated in a synchronous online chat.
- 4% or 5% of them had video- or audio-chatted, respectively.
- 23% of the students identified instant messaging/text chatting, word processing, and email as their strongest online skills.
- 67% were interested in taking hybrid or online courses in English.

Essentially, the student data showed that, if online courses were to be created, it was possible and desirable to restrict enrollment to a group of students with some prior exposure to online learning and positive attitudes towards it. These two factors have been previously identified as essential for the success of online courses (Hui et al., 2008), although it has also been suggested that, sometimes, once online programs are created, attitudes improve after exposure (Barette, 2001; also see Goertler, 2011).

In sum, based on the information thus far, the needs assessment showed that the students from the Chinese partner institution had an awareness of basic English composition practices, and that additional coursework in the area was necessary (also see Ene (forthcoming)). It also showed that, if an online English as a Second or Foreign Language composition course were designed in order to address the students' needs in the area, a subgroup of the student population possessed the basic knowledge and positive attitude for a good start in an online English composition course. This finding was encouraging, especially if a course needed to be developed quickly.

The next question (*Q2*) the needs assessment needed to answer was which institution had the faculty with the knowledge and experience needed to offer additional instruction in English composition. Coming from the U.S. university, the author knew that the English as a Second Language unit on the U.S. campus had four full-time lecturers and at least other four part-time faculty specialized in English as a Second Language composition. The Chinese department had twenty English faculty. None were especially trained in teaching composition. Four of them had studied in English-speaking countries and had had to produce English academic writing for a western academic audience in graduate-level courses. On regular basis, they taught integrated English skills without focusing especially on academic writing, but this did not mean that they did not have the knowledge necessary to teach English composition courses.

The information that could truly inform the decision about which institution had the expertise to develop an English composition course that would facilitate the students' transition to writing across the curriculum at the U.S. university came from analyzing teacher practices. Twenty Chinese teachers of English participated in a survey. 18 (90%) shared that they taught the five-paragraph essay structure in

order to convey that academic writing in English usually requires explicit main ideas supported by evidence. This was in addition to other writing assignments typical of integrated skills English courses, such as translations, text analyses, résumés and other professional writing, book and film reviews, and narratives. These findings indicated that a broad foundation of teacher knowledge existed. However, a number of practices which are commonly encountered in process-oriented college composition courses in the U.S. were not frequently used. Only 3 (15%) of the teachers used multiple drafts, and only 4 (20%) gave feedback on content and organization. Only 7 (35%) wanted to provide feedback on content or organization, although 12 (60%) wished they could assist their students through multiple drafts. Seven (35%) of the teachers sometimes involved their students in peer reviews. The teachers explained that their classes were too large (of 40-100 students) and thus did not lend themselves to interactive work such as peer reviews. For a full-time teacher who could have a cumulated number of students of 100-300 per semester, providing feedback or having student-teacher conferences about compositions alone was simply impracticable.

Without reflecting lack of potential or professional competence on the part of the Chinese instructors, the teacher survey showed that the U.S. institution was likely better prepared to accommodate the English composition needs of the Chinese dual degree students, particularly if the development of dual degree programs was to begin right away. A possible scenario was to first begin a teacher exchange program in which instructors from both institutions could learn from each other. A priority for the Chinese instructors was to diversify their repertoire of teaching techniques from the process-based approach. Undoubtedly, although the U.S. instructors had years of experience working with international students, they can always benefit from learning from their Chinese colleagues' perspectives, about values and practices that influenced the writing of contemporary Chinese students.

Finally, *Q3* was which institution was better prepared to offer an online English composition course, if necessary.

The Chinese instructors' preparedness for online teaching was explored through interviews with the administrator and the Chinese instructor who worked as a consultant with the author. The author found that, although all or most courses at the Chinese institution received a *Blackboard* site, most teachers were not using them. The Chinese administrator spoke positively of the future potential of online education in general, and highlighted that the institution offered distance education courses for remote part-time students, showing that online teaching expertise existed. On the other hand, the consulting instructor and colleagues shared that the teachers were not experienced at, or sometimes appreciative of the online learning environment. Many viewed online learning as a static mode of teaching which could engage the students. As a result, they used online tools minimally, most of the times to store resources which the students could download. The teachers also perceived that the

administrators' enthusiasm for the potential of distance education was simply reflecting directives from the Chinese Ministry of Education, but felt that the practical training needed for distance education was not sufficient at the time.

By comparison, the U.S. institution had three instructors with several years of experience teaching online, including for international students and in English composition. The campus also had abundant resources for training, such as a unit especially dedicated to developing teachers' expertise in online teaching across various disciplines. Otherwise, the campuses were comparable as far as the availability of computers was concerned. At both universities, the libraries housed numerous computers available to the students, and most students owned a personal computer.

To conclude this section, at the end of the on-site needs assessment, the data suggested that the Chinese students needed additional coursework in English composition. In examining the potential of each institution to coordinate the development and teaching of that composition course, the author found that the distinguishing factor which gave the U.S. institution an advantage was its instructors' familiarity with process-based approaches to teaching composition, which were ideal for preparing the Chinese students for their academic work at the U.S. university until the end of their program. Similarly, the U.S. faculty had more experience in teaching English language skills online.

Step Three: Moving Forward with the Pilot Course Design

Upon returning from the Chinese campus, the author analyzed the needs assessment data and began designing an online basic composition course. The U.S. institution predicted receiving a cohort of about 14 dual-degree students in a year's time. This estimate gave it time to prepare a course design that took into account best practices from online course development and the specific needs of the students from the Chinese institution. It also afforded enough time to develop a basic English as a Second Language composition course first and later proceed with the non-basic course after experimenting with the former.

Meanwhile, the two universities continued defining the terms of their collaboration across the two campuses and at higher administrative levels. That the Chinese students needed additional support in English composition was a certainty. New financial considerations came into play. The viability of special, reduced rates of tuition for the students in dual-degree programs needed to be carefully examined at both institutions, to ensure that the dual-degree students could have access to the courses offered at the U.S. institution without the latter compromising its own financial standing. While departments at both institutions continued to work on clarifying such aspects, the English as a Second Language unit at the U.S. university decided

that having online composition courses–whether they be for dual-degree students from the Chinese institution or other international institutions–was desirable, if for no other reason, because it diversified the pedagogical approaches practiced in the program. The English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language units on both campuses remained open to the idea of collaborating in the development of online composition courses in the future.

In the new phase, the English as a Second Language unit at the U.S. institution needed to adapt its plan to offering online English as a Second Language composition courses for its regular international student population. This consists of Chinese students (30%), Arabic (41%), and other students (29%). If the unit became involved in other international partnerships, or if the partnership with the Chinese institution were to yield small group of students, other scenarios were still possible. The basic English as a Second Language composition course could either continue to be offered as online or as a hybrid on campus, or an exclusively online course could be created for international students from other countries.

Even though the task of the English as a Second Language unit had thus morphed, certain aspects of course design remained the same. First, the course objective, no matter the student population or mode of delivery, was still to teach principles of English academic writing. Another certainty to be considered in the course design was that online teaching/learning are successful when the students are trained to use the technology related to the course and are provided a comprehensible course structure alongside a supportive learning community (Hui et al., 2008). Third, in any course with multicultural populations, cultural variation exists, and the course structure has to give everyone the opportunity to participate. She expected, for example, that interaction and language production could be stimulated by setting up graded forum discussions with a required length and number of replies per student. Also, various learning styles were likely represented in any group of students, requiring that the instructor use visual, auditory, and experiential (tactile/kinesthetic) materials and assignments in order to appeal to all students.

In accord with the previous ideas, the basic composition course was designed as follows:

- The major assignments used in the face-to-face basic composition course were used in order to preserve the curricular articulation among the courses in the program and respond to the writing needs of the population enrolled in the course. The assignments were: paragraph types (4 weeks), summary and personal response (4 weeks), argumentative paper (4 weeks), final portfolio (3 weeks).

- The students were required to submit at least two drafts of each assignment and received electronic feedback on at least one draft of each paper.
- The students exchanged an advanced draft of each major assignment via email for peer review and completed a review form provided by the instructor.
- The instructor held online office hours twice a week for an hour each time.
- Teacher-student conferences were held online for each assignment. Each conference lasted 15-20 minutes.
- The course content was organized in content modules and published via the Course Management System used by the U.S. institution (*Oncourse*, a sakai platform). The information was presented in multimedia format, combining text with video clips, TV and or radio interviews, PowerPoint presentations, Adobe Presenter narrated presentations of content, as appropriate. Despite the inherent variation in the materials presented in each module, the modules were structurally parallel in order to convey a sense of order and clear organization.
- The first two class sessions of the semesters were face-to-face meetings in a computer lab. During these, the instructor presented the organization of the course site and the online functions which were to be used during the semester (messages, forum, gradebook, announcements, calendar, etc.).
- During the first week, the students completed an online learning readiness survey and a syllabus-based quiz which raised their awareness about the demands of online learning and provided the instructor an idea of the students' level of readiness for online work.
- The students were required to read sections of the electronic textbook in use in many of the composition courses the U.S. institution (*Writing Matters*).
- At least once a week, the students were required to complete grammar, punctuation, and composition exercises from the electronic text.
- At least once a week, the students were required to participate in an online discussion on a question/issue assigned by the instructor. The students normally have to post an original answer of about 200 words and reply to two other classmates. The instructor participates in all forum discussions.
- The class met face-to-face two more times, closer to the middle and end of the semester, to address content and technical questions as needed.
- Once a month, the class met online by video conference with Adobe Connect. During these conferences, the teacher could lecture, discuss readings, or clarify aspects of an assignment. The students could type their questions in a chat box next to the video feed, or the instructor could enable their microphone so that they could ask questions live.

Step Four: Assessing the Pilot Course

A section of the course thus designed has been offered in three consecutive semesters, enrolling on average 15 students per semester. Each semester, the students included on average 5 Chinese students, 5 Saudi students, and about 5 students from other countries (Korea, Japan, Kenya, and Mexico).

In the first semester, the instructor set up few face-to-face meetings with the students, because the intention was to see how well the course would work if it was 100% online, eventually. She met with the class twice during the first week of the semester to introduce them to the course and technology, then again in the middle of the semester and two weeks before the end. She also held all four sets of teacher-student conferences (one per assignment) online, in the course chat room; however, the students were free to make appointments for face-to-face meetings in the instructor's office (and some did). With this structure, the failure rate in the course was 27%–compared to about 16% in face-to-face basic composition courses in the same program. 2 Chinese and 2 Saudi students were among the students who failed the course each semester. This was not out of the ordinary, especially considering that these nationalities were the most numerous in the course. The previous failure rate occurred even though the students' readiness for online learning, according to a readiness survey delivered in the first week of class, was good. Thus, 88% of the students claimed that they did not need face-to-face interaction with their instructor or peers, and 77% said they preferred to work alone and ask questions only when needed. Only 22% of them thought online courses take less time than face-to-face courses, 88% preferred writing on a computer, and 55% rarely wanted reminders from the instructor about course assignments. 55% of the students had taken at least one other hybrid or online course in the past. Despite the apparent readiness, the students who failed the course were students who did not submit assignments on time or at all, and did not attend online or video conferences, even after receiving instructor reminders and offers to meet in person to clarify possible confusions about the course. The course evaluations at the end of the semester were excellent (4.6 on a scale of 5). The instructor, who designed the course, hypothesized that the students were not as independent as they had rated themselves, and that increasing the number of face-to-face meetings and email reminders of assignments due would lead to a lower failure rate in the course in future semesters.

Based on her experience with the first offering of the course, the author modified the course structure as follows:

● Teacher-student conferences were held online or in person (rather than just online) for each assignment. The students had the option to attend the conference either online or face-to-face. Each conference lasted 15-20 minutes.

- The instructor added face-to-face meetings at the beginning of each major assignment, meaning about once a month. During this face-to-face meeting, the instructor would introduce the new assignment and begin discussing the text which the students had to respond to in their papers. The students would also engage in large- and small-group discussions and peer reviews.

The modified structure was implemented two consecutive semesters with groups of international students with similar readiness profiles as in the first offering. While the students' perception of their own independence and ability to use computers was the same, their actual experience taking another hybrid or online course decreased to 33% and 11%, respectively. Although the course was again appreciated with a 4.4/5 effectiveness rating at the end of the semester, the failure rate was again 25%. Even though the course's interactivity increased compared to the first iteration, the learning community thus created barely compensated for the lack of prior experience with online learning.

The students in each section of the course provided anonymous feedback in a mid-semester survey about the course. Over the three semesters, the responses fell into very similar patterns, so a summary for all three semesters is given here. 80% of the students found the course about as useful and challenging as other courses they were taking at the university, including in a hybrid or online form. 30% of the students suggested that the course would be better if it were not online or hybrid at all, or if the teacher video-conferenced more often. She followed up on this suggestion after the first semester, but 30% of the third-semester students made the same suggestion. 90% of the students found the in-person class meetings useful or very useful, but only 50% saw the video conferences as useful or very useful. In-person teacher conferences were useful or very useful to 80% of the students, and 55% also felt this way about the online chat conferences. The course content and organization were useful or very useful to 80% of the students, but impressions about the technological and interactional aspects of the course were more nuanced. The email function of the CMS seemed overall more useful to the students than the chat (where office hours and teacher conferences occurred). The course modules were very useful or useful for 80% of the students, while the chapters of the electronic textbook and the homework assigned from it were very useful or useful to only 10% or 35% of the students, respectively. The students commented that the fact that the electronic textbook was an entirely different site confused them, as they would rather have had all the materials in one place, in the course CMS (See Table 1).

Table 1. ESL composition students' perceptions about the usefulness of online course components

	Very Useful	**Useful**	**Somewhat Useful**	**Not Useful**
Content modules	8 (40%)	7 (35%)	4 (20%)	1 (5%)
Online chat	6 (30%)	5 (25%)	7 (35%)	2 (10%)
Messages	11 (55%)	6 (30%)	3 (15%)	0
Electronic textbook chapters and exercises	2 (10%)	7 (35%)	5 (25%)	6 (30%)
Course notes (PPT)	4 (20%)	10 (50%)	6 (30%)	0
Forum discussions	6 (30%)	7 (35%)	7 (35%)	0
Video conferences	5 (25%)	5 (25%)	9 (45%)	1 (5%)
Online teacher-student conferences	5 (25%)	6 (30%)	8 (40%)	1 (5%)
In-person conferences	5 (25%)	11(55%)	4 (20%)	0
In-person classes	8 (40%)	10 (50%)	2 (10%)	0
Peer reviews	2 (10%)	10 (50%)	7 (35%)	3 (15%)

CURRENT CHALLENGES FACING THE ORGANIZATION

Piloting the online basic composition course provided an opportunity to reflect on the changes that would have to occur in the course for future implementation. Given the overwhelming student preference for in-person meetings, it appears that a hybrid course with a more balanced ratio of face-to-face and online meetings, or reverting to a face-to-face technology-supported class, would be more appealing to the student population taking basic English as a Second Language composition at the U.S. institution. The higher student failure rate in the online course also supports this inference, suggesting that an online basic English as a Second Language composition course may not be the most pedagogically sound option for students with intermediate English proficiency and limited experience with online learning. If the rationale of an institution is that online English as a Second Language composition courses may increase enrollment and revenue, this case study implies that that may not be the case. In the courses piloted here, enrollment was slightly lower and failure rate higher than in face-to-face composition courses in the same program. However, these suggestions should be interpreted cautiously; more data from other course offerings taught by other instructors should be collected in order to test them.

As far as the course being offered exclusively online for dual degree students from the Chinese partner institution, or other international institutions, the most important concern is how the instructor can be present online in a way that simulates the face-to-face experience for the students. For example, more video-conferences and video-lectures could be built into the course structure. Whether all or only some of these should occur live in order to enhance the students' learning experience and their sense of community remains to be determined by continued assessments.

The case study also suggests that enrollment in online or even hybrid basic English as a Second Language composition courses should be restricted. In the current study, the students' self-evaluation as independent learners for whom technology did not pose problems proved to be unreliable. Instead, the high failure rate correlated with a low degree of exposure to prior online learning. The effects of increased face-to-face meetings were counteracted by the students' lack of experience with online learning. This finding and suggestion correspond with prior findings from studies in online foreign language learning, which suggest that learner inexperience with instructional technology (though not with technology in general) relates to learner lack of success in an online or hybrid language course (Goertler, 2011; Li & Ranieri, 2010).

A reassuring finding from the online course assessment was that the course content in itself did not seem problematic. Rather, the mode of delivery, which results in insufficient opportunities for some students to operate without very frequent direct interaction with the instructor and peers, may have made it less accessible for that subgroup of students. Those who were successful in the course (meaning, those who obtained passing grades), performed similarly to students from the face-to-face sections of the course. The single most obvious change needed in the course content, related to the electronic textbook, was also essentially a problem caused by the mode of delivery. The students perceived the course content as generally useful and well organized, but they complained about the electronic textbook because it was located at a site outside of the university's CMS. Thus, it seems that, in order for the students to appreciate an electronic textbook incorporated in an online course, it may be best to build the electronic textbook in the CMS, so that it can be perceived as an integral part of the course rather than a separate source of information which requires additional management.

Looking forward, therefore, the U.S. institution foresees drastically modifying the technological aspects and enrollment requirements of the basic online course to increase the face-to-face time between students and instructor, and then re-evaluating the revised version of the course in order to make a final decision about its soundness.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the conclusions presented at "Step Four," the current study has several other implications about needs assessment, online English composition courses, and their role in international university partnerships.

As a needs assessment case, this chapter provides a methodological model for assessing (1) English as a second or foreign language 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 process, which often appears misleadingly neat and linear in empirical research studies. The stroke-by-stroke description of the process and outcomes, as well as alternate scenarios and changes of direction, accurately reflects the potentially infinite and complex nature of needs assessment and curriculum development. The study follows the process through its various manifestations–from the early stages, in which the needs assessment intended to identify the needs and potential of two institutions for developing online English composition courses, to a more advanced stage in which the international partnership decelerated and the English as a Second Language unit at the U.S. university developed an online English as a Second Language course in order to diversify its pedagogies. Thus, the article illustrates the dynamic nature of a needs assessment, and its ability to address multiple institutional needs.

The study performed a comprehensive needs assessment which combined multiple methods in a "systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes" (Brown, 1995, p. 36). The combination of needs assessment methods yielded a detailed and reliable depiction of the characteristics and needs of the students, instructors, and institutions involved. In the pre-pilot needs assessment, document and policy analyses were necessary but proved insufficient for a deep understanding. Direct participation in instruction at the Chinese institution facilitated access to an otherwise unreachable number of participants. Additionally, it gave an opportunity to see beyond appearances. It is doubtful that Chinese instructors would have revealed their reservations about instructional technology in writing knowing how they differed from the enthusiasm of their overseeing administrator. As instructor attitudes are important in the success of an online program, this was crucial information. Overall, the present research illustrates that direct immersion in an institution abroad in combination with traditional pre-immersion methods is worthwhile, as it yields

valuable information that cannot realistically be obtained without being present in the target environment (Brown, 1995). It enables institutions to design their curricula on the basis of the needs that exist, not the ones assumed.

As far as English composition courses for English as a second or foreign language environments, this study shows in detail the needs assessment steps that precede the development of an online English composition course, as well as the steps taken to evaluate a course once one is created. In the context of the international partnership between the U.S. and the Chinese institution examined here, the chapter established that the students at a well-ranked, large regional Chinese university needed additional support in English composition at the end of their first year of studies at the Chinese institution. It showed that the students mastered some notions of basic composition (such as main idea development) but needed further instruction on using evidence in argumentative essays, as well as process-based writing and, as most international students, in grammar and vocabulary. The study also showed that a core of the student population had been exposed to online learning and welcomed the opportunity to have more of it. Although physical resources for online teaching at the two institutions were equally sufficient, the data showed that the U.S. university possessed more experience and expertise in English composition teaching, online teaching, and resources for online teacher training. It is very likely that similar conditions exist at other similar institutions, and the findings presented here can help other universities involved in international partnerships anticipate the course of their relationship. As this is a case study and each situation needs to be understood individually, however, the findings here should be an awareness raiser for other institutions, rather than a determinant of their experience. Readers should also remember that the study here represents the perspective of the U.S.-based English as a Second Language unit. The author was able to explore numerous aspects of the Chinese partner, but, naturally, she did not have access to that institution's entire internal decision-making process regarding its steps with regard to the U.S. university and the development of online English courses.

This chapter also provides an opportunity to reflect on the role English as a Second or Foreign Language units can play in an international university partnership. English language proficiency is important in the exchanges among students, teachers, researchers, and administrators. Therefore, English as second or foeign language units occupy a crucial place in the success of those exchanges. However, as service units, they can take a leadership role only if the two partners, overall, agree to a significant amount of unconventional thinking. It seems that a successful partnership can occur only under the auspices of a shared assumption that, as one institution may be able to offer more in one direction, the other may offer more in another. Defining an equal partnership this way places both institutions in a relatively equal position in which each can contribute to the development of the other while

working towards a common goal. For example, in this case study, such an equality of roles could be achieved through an exchange of teaching experience. Even though the U.S. institution had initially more resources for teaching online English composition, it was possible to simultaneously train Chinese instructors to teach processed-based composition with technology; at the same time, the Chinese instructors could offer sessions focused on teaching Chinese students, for the U.S. faculty.

As any case study, the research presented here has certain limitations. As previously mentioned, it is based on a specific partnership which may not represent all possible partnership scenarios, or the internal views of another institution with its own agenda and priorities. However, it has the merit that it is based on substantial empirical and longitudinal data which were systematically collected and analyzed, and can thus serve as a methodological model for other NAs. As an ongoing process, the needs assessment continues into the future. Additional data need to be collected from students, teachers, and administrators in order to finalize the decision on the viability of a basic English as a Second Language course for the institutions in this case study. After all, online courses are here to stay, and many believe in their potential for resource pooling (Alosh, 2001); engagement in intercultural global communities, the development of computer and information literacy (Blake, 2007); accessing authentic materials, culture, and language (Goertler, 2011); thinking autonomously and critically (Wildner-Bassett, 2008); receiving teacher and peer feedback, automated feedback, and producing spontaneous and planned language; and even achieving curriculum articulation (Wilkinson, 2005). As we attempt to find the combination of elements that will materialize this promising potential, we must both give online teaching a chance and reserve the right to abandon it when evidence amounts against it.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Dual Degree Program: A degree program created by two partnering institutions in which the students of one institution complete a portion of their coursework at their home institution and then at the partnering one. Students graduate with degrees from both institutions. Also known as joint degree programs.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL): Used when English is learned in an environment where it is a foreign language.

English as a Second Language (ESL): Used when English is learned in an environment in which English is the dominant language.

Face-to-Face Technology-Supported Course: A course which meets in a traditional, physical classroom but uses up to 30% online resources and other computer applications, in and outside the classface-to-face classroom.

Hybrid Course: A course taught 30%-80% online via Internet service and the other part of the time is face-to-face.

Internationalization: The process whereby universities enhance their curriculum, research, and service by recruiting international students, collaborating with international researchers, and becoming involved in the international community. Internationalization includes student and faculty exchange programs and joint degree programs.

Needs Assessment (NA): The systematic process whereby learner, teacher, institutional needs and resources are determined prior to developing a curriculum.

Online Course: A course taught 80%-100% online via Internet service.

Present Situation Analysis: Needs assessment that focuses on what the learners know before instruction is delivered.

Target Situation Analysis: Needs assessment that focuses on finding out what learners need to know at the end of language instruction.

APPENDIX: HOLISTIC RATING CRITERIA FOR DIAGNOSTIC ESSAY

A 4 Essay: Competent

The essay effectively addresses the prompt; is unified and coherent, and shows a logical progression of ideas; supports generalizations with appropriate details; demonstrates consistent facility in the use of language, but errors may occur (articles, prepositions or tense usage). Errors do not interfere with meaning. Essay demonstrates syntactic variety and range of vocabulary.

A 3 Essay: Basically Competent

The essay: addresses the prompt adequately; has a basic, if not expert, organizational pattern; uses some details to support a thesis. Development may be uneven. Grammar and mechanical problems may be present, but do not dominate the essay nor obscure meaning. The essay demonstrates some syntactic variety. Vocabulary is, for the most part, appropriate and varied.

A 2 Essay: Developing Competence

The essay responds coherently to the prompt, but may lack amplitude; is inadequately organized or developed; fails to support generalizations with sufficient or appropriate details. The essay displays an accumulation of errors in sentence structure and usage. Problems with word choice or word/verb forms may interfere with meaning.

A 1 Essay: Lacks Competence

The essay responds minimally to the prompt. The essay is incoherent. It may have no discernible organization pattern. It has little or no detail, or irrelevant detail. It contains serious errors in verb construction, word forms, and word order; vocabulary is limited.