The Notional Syllabus used in an Intercultural Communication Course in Sweden: A Needs Analysis

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Abstract- This qualitative study aims to investigate whether the use of the notional syllabus in an Intercultural Communication (IC) Course in Sweden satisfies Chinese exchange students' needs, and to evaluate to what extent their needs are met. The research approach adopted in this article includes a structured interview and introspection. The findings indicate that with the aid of the notional syllabus, the course meets Chinese learners' demands on the aspects of situation, stakeholder and theory. It should also be highlighted that lacking systemic language instructions is an inherent weakness of the notional syllabus. How to balance the requirements of both the IC and English for Specific Purpose (ESP) course to fulfill learners' needs is mainly determined by the teacher.

THENOTIONALSYLLABUSUSEDINANINTERCULTURALCOMMUNICATIONCOURSEINSWDENANEEDSANALYSIS

Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:

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Abstract- This qualitative study aims to investigate whether the use of the notional syllabus in an Intercultural Communication (IC) Course in Sweden satisfies Chinese exchange students' needs, and to evaluate to what extent their needs are met. The research approach adopted in this article includes a structured interview and introspection. The findings indicate that with the aid of the notional syllabus, the course meets Chinese learners' demands on the aspects of situation, stakeholder and theory. It should also be highlighted that lacking systemic language instructions is an inherent weakness of the notional syllabus. How to balance the requirements of both the IC and English for Specific Purpose (ESP) course to fulfill learners' needs is mainly determined by the teacher.

Keywords: needs analysis; intercultural communication; notional syllabus.

I. INTRODUCTION

Needs analysis is regarded as "prerequisite for effective course design" (Long, 2005). As a guidance, it is always conducted before a course begins. Wilkins (1981:84) specified: "starting from an awareness of the learners and their needs, it is proposed that from the total set those categories should be selected that are relevant to the particular population of learners." For the reason of satisfying learners' needs, the course designers ought to make certain of what the target subjects want to learn from the course. Previously, some research are about the application of needs analysis, such as the using in public sectors (Lett, 2005), occupational sectors (Malicka et al., 2017) and academic ones (Mochizuki, N., 2017). Despite the increasing studies on curriculum design, seldom do scholars concentrate on the effect of needs analysis on syllabus design (Malicka et al., 2017). It is noteworthy that although the current study was carried out after the end of the IC course, it gathered learners' opinions which could be a reference for the future syllabus design. After all, the needs analysis is not only relevant to learners, but it is associated with designing communication tasks in the course(Nunan, 1988). This statement also uncovers the reason why the researcher examines the notional syllabus through needs analysis in an IC course.

Indeed, IC course covers a lot of ground from cultural topics to international issues. The responsibility for imparting the professional knowledge to learners rests with the course designers or teachers. Nevertheless, as for how the IC course is named, communication occupies the central position in the course, but with the result that many kinds of literature only concern about the macro issues of culture and communication (Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2003). Students' capability of IC and their practice of the knowledge are to some extent underestimated. In order to address the problem, course designers begin to adopt the notional syllabus in IC course. It is determined by the innate features of the notional syllabus. As Nunan (1988) stressed on, "communication will be intrinsically motivating" in the notional syllabus. For this reason, the characteristics of the notional syllabus are identical to the requirements of IC courses. The using of the notional syllabus strengthens the importance of the "real" communication in an IC course.

What the more essential part of the current research is that the IC course is set up mainly for exchange students in Sweden. It magnifies the features of an IC course, which implies that the course itself is a platform for IC, and students can practice what they learn synchronously in the class. It is the uniqueness of the course. By the characteristics of needs analysis, the notional syllabus and IC course, the specific research questions to be addressed in this study are as follow: (1) Does the using of the notional syllabus meet Chinese learners' needs on the IC course? (2) If yes, to what extent does the using of the notional syllabus meet Chinese learners' needs?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

a) Needs analysis

Needs is depicted by Hyland (2006) as an umbrella term that embraces almost every aspect of learners including their goals, backgrounds, their teaching and learning preference, etc. That is why Long (2005) stated that "most NAs, are concerned with needs specification at the level of individuals or, more often, learner types". Seemingly, because of the close relation to specific learners' demands, some research regard

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needs analysis as an isolated topic, without further explaining its function and impact. Cameron (2010) made a needs analysis on nursing students, and summarized the several abilities that students can obtain from the course like speech production accuracy, clinical performance, inferencing skills and so on. It is salient that this conclusion is still around learners' needs, which means that the researcher did not scrutinize the effect of learners' needs. Some scholars only want to explore learners' specific needs on a particular course and report them. For instance, Spence & Liu (2013) underlined in what situation that oral proficiency is demanded by engineers.

Admittedly, to ascertain learners' needs is inevitable for any needs analysis. Learner's needs are constituted by target needs and learning needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 2002).

Target needs refer to what the learner needs to do in the target situation, which contains necessities, lacks and wants. The necessities are objective requirements set for who would like to grasp knowledge in a specific area, meanwhile, lacks and wants are also evaluations that consist of mixed opinions from different stakeholders like teachers, learners, administrators and so on. It is far from enough if only the target analysis is conducted, learning needs show how people learn to do with language. These contain learners' language skills, strategies, subject knowledge, etc. To be more specific, the importance of examining learning needs is that learners' mind (Hutchinson & Waters, 2002) can be exposed. It allows the researcher to probe into learners' needs. Therefore, in the current study, a learning needs framework is adopted in a structured interview. Robinson (1991) examined that the information obtained through needs analysis is valuable for syllabus design. The procession usually begins before any teaching activities because teachers or course designers need to know what the learners' needs are. Only when the demands of the subjects in a course are figured out, can the course shoot the arrow at the target.

b) Notional syllabus

Originally, a syllabus is a document which says what will (or at least what should) be learned (Hutchinson & Waters, 2002). Among various syllabuses, the notional syllabus is formed on the theory of communicative competence, which means that it has inherent features of communication. In the initial stage, as Markee (1997) identified "the notional syllabus was created for adults who used the language in specific purposes". That is why the notional syllabus is always used in ESP courses. If a the notional syllabus is devised for an ESP course, it indicates that book knowledge about language is placed as the secondary position, while communication needs to be the core. Johnson (2006) further explained that the use of the notional syllabus made it possible to synthesize different purposes of a course. Indeed, studies on the notional syllabus have also revealed that it is used to organizes units for communicative purposes like asking questions, expressing wishes, making suggestions and so on, instead of being constrained by grammatical knowledge (Wilkins, 1976). It can be adduced that the merit of the notional syllabus is its topic-oriented nature, in the meantime, learners are much more involved into the course because "communication" is the pillar of the notional syllabus. However, scholars barely researched the notional syllabus used in the IC course before, and most literature are about ESP course. Harlow (2010) highlighted the crucial role that the notional syllabus played in the design of courses and textbooks. Also, Waters (2010) underscored that the reason why ELT innovation experienced a fall in recent years is that there is a widespread failure during the use of innovative teaching theories.

Therefore, the current study tries to analyze the utilization of the notional syllabus in an IC course, to investigate whether the application helps answer the learners' needs.

Regarding the uniqueness of the notional syllabus, Sheng (2006) summarized its features of the notional syllabus from five angles concluded in the table below,

Table 1: Five features of the notional syllabus by Sheng (2006)

Teaching arrangement	Topic-oriented
Teaching materials	Follow functional/notional syllabus
Teaching methods	Communication-based
Teaching philosophy	Primary: communication; Secondary: linguistic instructions
Language training	Listening, speaking, reading and writing

Edited from Sheng (2006)

Except that five characteristics are summarized, the conclusion pinpoints mainly three innate features of the notional syllabus. They are communication-based, topic-oriented and subordinate language training. Besides, the notional syllabus is also known for its wide application, as Johnson (2006) reviewed, what Wilkins (1976) elaborated in his book was that the notional/functional syllabus was suitable to be used in high surrender value courses, limited duration courses, special purpose and remedial courses. Thus, as is mentioned above, even though it is commonly-used in ESP courses but not limited into it. This opinion renders support to the using of the notional syllabus in an IC course.

c) IC course

Gudykunst (2000) defined IC as communication across cultures. IC course is not only aiming at cultivating learners' Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), but imparting culture knowledge to students as well. Eisenchlas & Trevaskes (2003) highlighted that the necessity to analyze IC course from a language-related perspective. For example, IC issues like appropriate speech act, mark ethnic, group identity are tied to how people use languages. Research conducted by Scollon & Scollon (2001) suggested that when an environment in which meta-linguistical awareness was triggered. It can be deduced that language learning plays a crucial part in an IC course. Chen (2012) did a research on the curriculum design for nurturing learners' talents on ICC and demonstrated that language training, professional training, international competence training etc. were compulsory for IC learners. Hence, no clear-cut distinction can be drawn between an IC course and an ESP course which is designed for fostering students' abilities in the domain of IC. Sharifian (2007) stated that one way to acquire cultural knowledge was to learn the target language. Especially when the notional syllabus is adopted, the function of communication is revealed. Nunan (1988) illustrated activities arranged following the notional syllabus was to replicate in class 'real communication. Consequently, an IC course taking advantage of the notional syllabus can be considered as an ESP course, especially when the course has an international setting. Just as what the current essay focuses on, the IC course in Sweden is on international level. Asuncion-Lande (1977) elucidated that the contact between learners using different languages and from different cultures promoted their awareness of the significance of IC. Consequently, the IC classroom for overseas students is, in essence, a platform for intercultural communication.

III. METHOD

a) Setting

The course was set up mainly for exchange students in a Swedish university, and native students were also allowed to apply for. 31 Students in total participated in the course, among which five were English native speakers from Canada and America. Most of the students were females. The course was arranged in the fall semester in 2015. There were nine lectures which took 24 hours in total. Each class lasted one hour and forty-five minutes in the teaching buildings in the university where three teachers (including a guest teacher) gave lectures and held seminars. The materials used in the course consisted of published books and a compendium. The two books used were Introducing Intercultural Communication: Global cultures and contexts (Liu, S., Volcic, Z. & Gallois C., 2014) and Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction (Piller, Ingrid, 2011). The compendium An Introduction to Intercultural Communication I, edited by teachers in KAU, included ten articles written by experts from different countries in the field of intercultural studies. Students needed to buy the books and compendium in the university's bookstore. Powerpoint and projector were the mainly-used equipment in the classroom. The aims of this course listed in the Study Guide for students were learning approaches to IC studies, the terminology, concepts, and theories in the field of IC studies, etc. During the class, except for teachers' lectures, seminars, group discussion, students' presentation, and movie appreciation were also included. Since English was the only language used in this course and closely related to the goal of this course for overseas students, not only was this course an IC course, but an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course as well.

b) Subjects

There were six Chinese students altogether in the class, and the author of this current essay was one of them. They were from two different Chinese universities, among whom two male students majored in Physics, while the left four students were females from another Chinese university majoring in English. The female students passed the Test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM 8), the highest level of the English competence test for English majors in China. While the other two male students got scores of 7.5 and 6.5 in the IELTS tests respectively. Although learners' backgrounds differentiated with one and another, they were close in age. All six students were given the code names from S1 to S6, and the detailed information is listed below.

23

Table 2: Participants' information

Name	Age	Sex	Semester	Major	English Competence
S1	21	Female	1(half a year)	English	TEM 8
S2	21	Female	1(half a year)	English	TEM 8
S3	22	Female	1(half a year)	English	TEM 8
S4	22	Female	1(half a year)	English	TEM 8
S5	22	Male	1(half a year)	Physics	IELTS: 7.5
S6	21	Male	1(half a year)	Physics	IELTS: 6.5

c) Data collection

In order to investigate Chinese learners' needs, a structured interview and introspection were adopted. According to Long (2005), structured interview is one of the most frequently used methods in Needs Analysis. The interview for each student lasted about 20 minutes, which was recorded in the meantime. It is worth noting that introspection was used for collecting the researcher's ideas from a student's perspective. Although as Long (2005) demonstrated that research conductor's participation in needs analysis is rarer, it helped the researcher to consider the information neglected. (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999). Questions raised in both Interviews and introspection were all from Framework for analyzing learning needs put forward by Hutchinson & Waters (2002). The reason why the checklist was used in the interview was that as is mentioned above, Learners' internal needs can be mainly reflected in their learning needs. It also needs to note that this framework was originally designed for ESP courses. The IC course in the current study is somewhat an ESP course. Thus, the using of it in the research is reasonable. In total, there were five questions including several sub questions under the framework. Three of them were asked for learners about the reasons for taking the course, the methods they adopted to study, and their personal information. Two of the questions were around the course itself, which were about its place and time. The left broad question was about the resources used in the course, in which teachers, techniques, material, etc. were all included. Overall, participants were reminded of answering the questions based on their experiences in the IC course.

The interview and the introspection were transcribed by the author. To ensure the internal validity of the transcriptions, the researcher adopted participant verification' (Hyland, 2006: 68), which was to invite interviewees to check them out. During the procession, some of the interviewees also added supplementary information to the transcription draft.

d) Data analysis

Brown (2015) specified that the more specific a needs analysis was, the more practical and worthwhile it would be. Three constraints were then put forward, situational constraints, stakeholder constraints and theoretical constraints. Situational constraints refer to society, policies, resources and curricula in an ESP course. Stakeholder constraints are about different roles involved in a course like students, teachers and administrators, while theoretical constraints are about approaches and syllabuses. It is worth noting that although three constraints are designed for an ESP course, they can also be used for analyzing an IC course (also an ESP course aforementioned) in the research. Therefore, by the three constraints, the interview data were categorized. If the needs analysis is considered as a quadrant, the vertical analysis is carried out based on the three requirements of the IC course, while the horizontal analysis of the five indices of the notional syllabus. After the coding of the interview and the introspection data, the needs analysis was conducted vertically and horizontally.

Table 3: Vertical and horizontal analysis

Needs Analysis					
	Teaching arrangement	Teaching materials	Teaching methods	Teaching philosophy	Language training
Situational constraints	√	√			√
Stakeholder constraints			√	√	
Theoretical constraints		√	√		

Vertical: three course constraints

Horizontal: five features of notional syllabus

A further explanation is shown in table 2, in which five characteristics of the notional syllabus may contribute to the IC course on the three different aspects. The symbol "sa/»» represents, what the

researcher believes, that the features of the notional syllabus can be embodied in the constraints of the IC course. In an overall picture, to probe whether the using of syllabus answer the needs of learners is, in essence, to figure out whether the five features of the notional syllabus help the course achieve the three requirements. To be more specific, the using of the notional syllabus is operational zed as the five features which can be examined by researchers, in the meantime, the interviewees' opinions are also categorized, according to three constraints, situation, stakeholders and theory.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

a) Situational constraints

One of the situational constraints is about resources. The resources include linguistic and discourse resources (Wenger, 1998). Admittedly, the materials used in the course follow the functional/the notional syllabus. Students have three materials that are closely related to the topics that the course sets up for. For example, the fifth class is about nonverbal communication. As the syllabus shows that learners should read Chapter 8 of Introducing Intercultural Communication: Global cultures and contexts. The title of that chapter is also nonverbal language. From the three available materials, the teacher selects the most relevant parts from the topics he will teach. In other words, the materials are used in a quite flexible way and around topics. In contrast, the topic-oriented resources certainly are not arranged around grammar.

Another important element in situational constraint is about society. Courses, especially like IC course, are topic-oriented. It teaches students to understand and deal with the different situations.

SI: "We got a schedule from the teacher on which not only times and places were informed, the topic of each class was also listed. It's quite convenient that you can know what the course is about immediately."

S4: "I think the merit of using topic is that it can help students review what has been studied and prepare for what will be learned in the future."

From students' explanations, it can be speculated that the topic-oriented arrangement is fresh and popular for the Chinese students. What's more, they regard the schedule as a learning tool.

However, the limitation of the topic-oriented schedule is that it almost ignores the systematicity of language training. An interviewee though agrees on the importance of topic oriented arrangement in an IC course, as an ESP course, the language training is not enough.

S5: "Although I like to talk with my classmates in the IC course, I am still not confident of my English because I don't know whether there are mistakes in it. People sometimes can still catch your meanings even if there are misuses in your sentences. So I think teacher spends too less time to help us improve our English."

In the student's view, their socio-cultural background determines that they are attuned to Chinese English teaching methods helping students improve their English knowledge through a systematic way, that is, language-oriented course, even though Chinese teachers may not focus too much on communication. It is the intrinsic characteristic of the notional syllabus that communicative competence is the target, and language learning should replicate language using (Wilkins, 1976). That is why some students feel out of their elements in the IC course.

b) Stakeholder constraints

Students the main stakeholders in needs analysis, their motivation, attitudes, English competence and even background may influence their needs on the IC course. Among the answers to the question about what they think they will achieve in the course, students have different views.

S6: "I made new friends from different countries, and it was also a good way to know different cultures."

S5: "I think the course helped me solve many practical problems, because as an exchange student, I was often faced with culture shock or discrepancy."

The communication-oriented teaching methods benefit students on the two aspects, connecting people from different countries and helping tackle the down-to-earth problems in IC. It can be understood, as Hyland & Hamp-Lyons (2002) stated people from different communities sometimes offer contrasts in their ways of talking and social behavior, which may be the reasons causing the discrepancy.

When asking whether they resent the time that they spent on the course, all their answers are negative. From their attitudes, it can be seen that the IC course is a successful course for Chinese students. They also explained what they gained from it.

S4: "hm....I began to be interested in the cultural issues which I haven't concerned about before, after I finish the course. And it's also timely when I am just in an international environment."

S3: "The course is easy to get passed, which makes me find a sense of fulfillment. The exam is in the oral form, in which my effort to the course pays off, yes."

Focusing on communication, the ESP course as well as an IC course kindle students' interests to learn cultural knowledge through English. Compared with Chinese IC course, the exchange students in the Swedish IC course were immersed in the circumstance of intercultural communication. Thus, taking part in the class is also practicing textbook knowledge.

As is mentioned above, the six students come from two different universities in China, four of them are

English majors. For them, comprehensive English competence makes them overcome language barriers. The left two though majoring in Physics have reached the language requirements of the exchanging program. Although it seems that they can handle the basic language communication with foreign people, as S5 said above, they still hope to improve their English abilities through the course.

The adoption of the notional syllabus fits learners' requirements. Communication is at the central position in the notional syllabus, which is more important than language training under the framework. Students responded to the question about their socio-cultural background, in which they mention that the course did not resemble the English course they applied in China. S3: "As a Chinese student, I think...ah...we are so used to listening to teacher's lectures and taking notes in an English course, and we seldom speak English with our classmates after class. But the IC course itself is a platform for SLA learners to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, it pushes me to speak English with them."

From this perspective, the notional syllabus emphasizes the notion of communication that is an incentive for students to practice their language. Because as exchange students in a whole new country, they need to contact with people from all walks of life. The IC course using the syllabus accord with the demands of these "in-service" learners (Long, 2005).

c) Theoretical constraints

Students' needs on the theoretical aspect can be embodied from both teaching materials and teaching methods. Teaching materials are topic-oriented. From interviewee's feedback, they are somewhat helpful and efficient, even if there are still shortcomings. When referring to teaching methods, students' feedback on "seminar" is almost unanimous. S2: "Well, I prefer seminars among all the approaches, and we even cooked our food to share with others from different countries."

S3: *"Let me think...ah...I would say group discussion, group presentation, movie appreciation and seminars are the methods teacher adopted. I like seminars because...ah...in China we don't have this form of activities. I still remember that in the first seminar, we were divided into different groups in which people have different nationalities. We were asked to map our country together in a blank paper. It had so much fun when we saw how people viewed others' countries."*

In order to achieve the goal of communication under the framework of the notional syllabus, the teacher designed various activities during which people need to talk to each other in English so as to finish the tasks. It shows that seminar impresses Chinese students a lot, in which the teacher will not deny learners' freedom to exchange their ideas and even debate. Widdowson (1972) also supported the application of language knowledge in communication, that is, the real world uses of language is often different from what was told in grammar books.

However, the satisfaction of some approaches is not the whole story, and still different voices are heard. In the question of "What sort of techniques bore/alienate you", participants mentioned that teacher's lecture was too long to follow and the slides were dull.

S5: *"We don't have that long lecture in China, we have a break each 45 minutes. The teacher usually spent an hour to deliver a lecture and his accents were strong, which made me...bored."*

SI: *"The slides teacher used were full of data and words. I noticed that some students were distracted and even did their own things".*

S4: *"Teacher almost doesn't ask any questions or communicate with us during his lecture."*

It is shown that the technique of the course used is not popularity with students and even makes them disinterested. Moreover, the time set up for each class does not meet students' expectations either. From the angle of the notional syllabus, some of the techniques and teachers' methods used are not by the features of it. Just as Zhang & Zhou (2002) summarized, according to their research on the characteristics of both structural syllabus and the notional-functional syllabus, all syllabuses have both sides. The using of syllabuses depends on the features of different courses and teachers. Hence, how teachers conduct and to what extent they follow the guidance of it affects the outcome of a course.

V. Conclusion

The use of the notional syllabus meets Chinese learners' needs, which is salient from interviewees' answers, that is, they do not resent the time they spent on the IC course. The obvious merit for the application of the notional syllabus in the course, based on the Chinese learners' interviews and the introspection, is that it guides students to solve practical problems in intercultural communication. Since all of the Chinese students are exchange students, their learning needs are quite congruent. They may face problems when getting along with people from different cultural backgrounds in a new language community.

The notional syllabus emphasizes communication. Learners may have more opportunities to communicate with each other in English if the notional syllabus is adopted in IC course. The class itself is also a platform for learners to exert their intercultural communication knowledge. Besides, the notional syllabus is topic-oriented. Learners can know what they would learn and also what they have learned, and they can get an overall picture of the course before it begins.

The limitation of the IC course lies on an inherent weakness of the notional syllabus. Language knowledge taught in the course is not systemic, because the course is arranged in line with different topics. Generally, learners whose English are on different levels have different needs on language knowledge. To balance the features of IC course and ESP course relies on teachers' course design and teaching experience. It is also noteworthy that how teachers make use of the notional syllabus is vital for the success of a course. Any syllabus is no more than a tool. The effect is mainly determined by people who use it. Ultimately, the significance of the research is to provide suggestions for course designers, after all, as Long (2005) stated that the output of conducting needs analysis will be used as the input of designing syllabus.

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