

The Curriculum Development of the Less Commonly Taught European Languages Programs in China: a Social Contextual Perspective

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Abstract

Less Commonly Taught European Languages (LCTELs) as foreign language teaching in China can be dated back to the 1950s. The curriculum has been continuously developed based on environment and needs analyses conducted through the years. Many of the changes have been required due to changes in social context (domestic and international). This paper examines the curriculum development from a social contextual perspective. It provides a brief history on the development, with a focus on the changes throughout the years. The study was conducted through literature reviews and semi-structured interviews. A total of 51 participants from the educational sphere, including teachers and administrative staff, contributed to the study. Based on the teaching archives and staff consensus, the curriculum development

of the LCTELs programs was divided into three phases. Each phase reflected different social contexts and employed various change approaches. It also found the limitations in the present curriculum, which demand further improvement and suggest new LCTELs programs to give special consideration on these aspects.

Keywords: LCTELs, curriculum, development, social context

Introduction

The Less Commonly Taught European Languages (LCTELs) Programs in China

Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) is a designation firstly used in the United States, referring to the languages other than the commonly taught foreign languages in the public educational system. The definition offered by the Center

for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition in the University of Minnesota states, “Less Commonly Taught Languages include all the world’s languages except English, French, German and Spanish” (Para. 1, October, 2017).

Because of geographical and social differences, LCTLs in Chinese context has a different referent. The teaching of LCTLs in China takes place mainly at the tertiary education level. With the increase in the number of LCTLs in China through the years, the concept was adopted to feasibly organize and administrate foreign language teaching. In Chinese context, LCTLs includes all the world’s languages except English, Russian, German, French, Spanish, Japanese, and Arabic.

Less Commonly Taught European Languages (LCTELs) is subclassified as a branch of LCTLs from a geographical aspect. LCTELs as foreign language teaching in China can be dated back to the 1950s with the start of the Polish Language Program and Czech Language Program at Peking University. In 1956, the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (nowadays, Beijing Foreign Studies University, BFSU) started a Romanian Language Program, and integrated the Polish and Czech Programs from Peking University into one faculty. Presently 27 LCTELs are taught in Chinese tertiary educational system; including 26 modern languages (Albanian, Bulgarian, Catalan, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish, Greek, Hungarian, Icelandic, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovenian, Swedish and Ukrainian) and 1 ancient language, Latin. As the Latin language

in modern society is seldom utilized in direct communication, it will not be included in this discourse hereinafter.

BFSU is the main university engaged in the LCTELs programs and offers the widest range of language studies in China. BFSU LCTELs currently is comprised of 20 bachelor programs, 12 master programs, and 4 doctorate programs in this area; as well as, 6 of LCTELs languages are offered as elective courses for non-LCTELs students. The curriculum of the BFSU programs is the base of this paper, with the focus primarily at the bachelor level.

Language Curriculum in Social Context and Change Introduction

The definition of curriculum (Kerr, 1968; Wood & David, 1978; Marsh, 1997; Kelly, 2004) is not generally agreed upon among educational theorists and researchers. For the purposes of this paper, we define the concept as the total learning experience which is planned and guided by the language program, whether it is carried out in groups or individually, inside or outside the classroom.

Language curriculum development has been an area of heated debate through the years, and is fruitful with many theories and models (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Murdoch, 1989; Graves, 2000; Richards, 2001; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Even with the existing differences, the social context and needs analysis are the foci. It shows that curriculum is not isolated to the classroom environment, but is shaped by multiple social contexts in which it is situated. Social context evolves constantly, therefore curriculum

must also evolve. Here is a list of possible social contextual changes that cause curriculum development.

- New teaching approach and techniques introduced by the latest research;
- Educational reforms initiated by new theory or practice in different levels;
- New requirements in a labor market created by new social economical situations;
- New teaching equipment and methodologies introduced by the development of information and technology;
- Standard-based assessments organized by related institutes, *etc.*

Changes can be made by different approaches. Kennedy's study (as cited in Nation & Macalister, 2010) describes three main approaches: (1) power-coercive, which is a top-down approach achieved through authority; (2) rational-empirical, which is a top to down negotiation approach achieved through explanation and justification; (3) normative- re-educative, which is a bottom-up approach achieved through discussion and involvement. Each approach is suited to certain circumstances. Throughout the curriculum development of the LCTELs programs in China, various change approaches are employed in different phases, which is to be shown in the following part.

Research questions and methods

Nation and Macalister (2010) express that curriculum design usually involves changes (p. 172). This paper presented the curriculum development phases of the

LCTELs programs in China, examined the changes that have been implemented in the curriculum related to the social contextual perspective and answered the following questions:

1. How the LCTELs curriculum in China has changed and emerged over the past 60 years?
2. What are the limitations of the present curriculum?
3. For new LCTELs programs, such as the Latvian Language and Latvia Studies Program (hereinafter, the Latvian Program, which was initiated in 2010), how to improve the process of curriculum design and development? Thus, making the process for efficient, productive, and effective.

The research was conducted through literature reviews and semi-structured interviews. The participants to the interviews are teaching and administrative staff at Faculty of European Languages and Cultures, which is the main faculty teaching LCTELs at BFSU. The total number of staff is 78, among which 56 are Chinese local teachers and 22 are expatriate teachers. Since the expatriate teachers' service term is rather short, usually no longer than 5 years, and they have little knowledge about the overall development of the LCTELs programs in China, they are excluded from the interviews. 51 of 56 Chinese local teachers were involved in the voluntary interviews. 50 participants are LCTELs teachers, among which 3 are senior managers at faculty level, and 20 are program administrators; 1 participant is a full-time administrator in charge of general affairs. The interviews and discussion occurred in July and August of 2017.

Results and Discussion

Based on the information provided by the teaching archives and the consensus reached during the interviews, we divided the curriculum development of the LCTELs programs into three phases. The curriculum of each phase emerged different teaching goals, subject matter and change approaches, which are determined by social context and needs analysis. Throughout the years, the curriculum has been in constant improvement; however, the limitations in the present curriculum are still obvious. More details will be discussed below.

The Three Phases of Curriculum Development in the LCTELs Programs in China

The 1st phase: The 1950s to the beginning of the 1990s.

Throughout history, China has always attached importance to learning the languages of other nations to assist in the understanding of different cultures and societies. However, the modern LCTELs programs in tertiary education started after the founding of New China. In 1950, 25 students were sent to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria to specialize in language and history studies. These 25 students later became the first local teachers of the corresponding language programs (Ding, 2016).

During this phase, China needed qualified translators and interpreters to develop relationships with foreign partners. Chinese government attached importance to LCTLs programs, and explored educational cooperation to send

students studying in the target language countries. 11 LCTELs programs were initiated: Polish (1954), Czech (1954), Romanian (1956), Italian (1959), Portuguese (1960), Albanian (1961), Bulgarian (1961), Hungarian (1961), Swedish (1961), Serbian-Croatian (1963) and Greek (1972). Most of these languages were chosen based on the fact that the countries had established diplomatic relationship with New China. In most cases, the students were educated for specific posts, which means they were firstly selected by employers and then sent into the target programs. Thus, the LCTELs curriculum had very specific goals, and all the courses served them. The core courses in the curriculum focused on the five language skills: reading, listening, speaking, writing, and translating. The target language country's history, culture, and literature were merged into the core courses to enhance the skills of the translators and/or interpreters. The main teaching methods utilized during this phase were translation and audio-lingual with an emphasis on drilling.

In the year 1978, China initiated a policy, "Reform and Opening-Up". Consequently, the economy started to shift from a planned economy to a market economy. Due to the market drive, a change in individual's values, complicated social situations, and the popularization of English learning, LCTELs did not achieve their full potential. On the other hand, due to social inertia, the system for employing tertiary educational students remained the same. The LCTELs programs continued to educate the students for designated positions and the curriculum remained almost unchanged.

The 2nd phase: The middle of the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s.

Throughout this phase, the impact of the “Reform and Opening-Up” policy gradually appeared in tertiary education resulting in three new trends. Firstly, the introduction of competition and enterprise reformation led to free and bidirectional choice between employers and employees. Secondly, enrollment expansion in tertiary education increased competition among graduates. Thirdly, tertiary educational reform called for changes to improve the quality of education and to adapt to social development. Besides, English was used more and more widely in international communication and it undoubtedly impact the teaching of LCTELs.

Exceptional language skills were still required, English learning became compulsory for each program, and at this time the competitiveness of the individual student and the programs also became important to fulfill the needs of the growing labor market. The curriculum goals and contents also changed correspondingly. It was reflected in two innovative aspects: (1) General knowledge of a specific discipline was introduced into the language courses. One example of this was the need for Swedish speaking tour guides who could not only function as guides to the growing number of Swedish tourists, but also to act as a represented of the Chinese people and culture. The teachers merged the knowledge of tourism, etiquette, Chinese culture and intercultural communication into the Swedish language courses. These changes were accomplished mainly through a normative-re-educative approach by teachers’ autonomous activities, thus were seldom

recorded in official archives. (2) Course content was not restricted to the use of the target language as the instructional language. The General Elective Course Module was introduced to the LCTELs programs, covering the subjects of culture, history, philosophy, business and Chinese language etc. This change was done through a power-coercive approach, and the courses in this module were administrated at a university level.

The 3rd phase: The middle of the 2000s till present day.

In the 21st century with information and technology advancing exponentially and globalization growing wider, the world has changed fundamentally which leads to unprecedented challenges in education today. For the LCTELs programs, three new dynamic factors compel the curriculum to develop. (1) Modern language curriculum theories and practices are continuously being introduced; especially competency-based curriculum. Due to change resistance, the process of utilizing competency-based curriculum is still being updated. (2) Standard-based assessments are regularly conducted at different levels to monitor the teaching process and quality. (3) The increased accessibility of foreign teachers and foreign materials, along with the increased opportunities for students to study in the country of their target language requires curriculum updates.

In 2007, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, a team of the LCTELs professors from BFSU compiled the General Curriculum for Teaching in LCTELs Bachelor Programs. The same year, the LCTELs

bachelor programs were standardized with official curriculum, which has been in modification every four or five years since then, resulting from classroom and social feedback.

BFSU incorporated six new language programs, Estonian, Irish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese and Slovenian in 2009, therefore all of the European Union (EU) official languages are now being taught in China. It also made the sub-discipline European Languages and Literatures more integrated. Since 2013, to support the deeper cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative, the Ministry of Education in China offers priority and funds to develop the LCTLs programs teaching and study.

The latest change to the curriculum was done in 2016. To meet new social needs and the needs of learner, a Discipline Directional Module was introduced with the target language as the instructional language. During a four-year bachelor study program, besides mastering the target language, the students must specialize in the general knowledge area of at least one other discipline in the social science and/or the humanity science sphere; such as literature, business or law. This ensures the student is prepared for further study or specialized work in a certain field.

In this phase, standard-based assessments, both at the national level and the university level, are important steps and thus require the power-coercive approach to introduce change. However, the LCTELs programs are relatively “small”, and the teachers are at the same time program managers. Without the support of teachers, the change would be impos-

sible. Therefore, the rational-empirical approach is also necessary.

The Limitations in the Present Curriculum

Compared with commonly taught languages, the demand for learning LCTELs is relatively small. Therefore, the number of teachers and administrators is not large, but the student-to-teacher ratio is more reasonable. Each staff is the front-line practitioner and researcher of the target language studies. They are in direct contact with either the subject matter or the learners. During the curriculum design and development, they enjoy more autonomy than other language programs. These factors enable the curriculum to be update quickly to fit the social contextual change and to ensure the students are educated in accordance to their key needs.

On the other hand, the limitations in the present curriculum cannot be ignored, and require continuous discussions and improvements in new practices.

Language curriculum theories are mainly founded on the practice of commonly taught languages, especially English. The LCTELs instruction is far behind; moreover, different languages in the same framework and language schooling in different contexts have different features. Although, the curriculum standardization provides better administration and assessment tools for the language programs, it inevitably dismisses some differences, due to being grounded on the common theory. This factor should be understood, not only by the in-service teachers and administrators but also by the experts of the related disciplines involved in policymaking and assessment.

Currently, most of the LCTELs programs face a shortage of qualified teachers and teaching materials. A qualified LCTELs teacher is not only a skilled user of the target language, but also a designer of curriculum and program, a developer of teaching materials, and a researcher in at least one related area. Of the 51 teaching and administrative staff from BFSU that were interviewed, 70.73% believe the biggest challenge of implementing the present curriculum is the lack of qualified teachers; 60.98% considered the teaching materials to be lacking and therefore requires teachers to undertake the heavy task of preparing extra curriculum. Especially in some new programs, one or two local teachers plus one expatriate teacher must complete at least three academic years of different courses. Even though new technologies promote staff mobility and introduces distance-teaching system, which does reduce the pressure to some extent, instability prevents it from becoming a systematic solution. So far, the main way to train new teachers in the LCTELs programs is the traditional master-apprentice model. Although it is effective, it is not the most efficient way in this fast changing environment.

The present curriculum offers students the opportunity to study for one academic year in their target language country to immerse themselves in the real linguistic and cultural experience. Nevertheless, the inconsistency between Chinese and European curriculum also causes limitation. Most of European curriculum involving LCTELs stresses discipline knowledge and academic research all through the program and mastery of the language in a high level is not al-

ways compulsory. By contrast, Chinese curriculum requires students to first become proficient at the linguistic fundamental and then use the target language to acquire discipline knowledge and do research. Therefore, a dilemma appears. If the exchange students enter the international students group, the academic hours for language learning might not be enough. At the same time, if they enter the local students group, their lower language level might make them fall behind. Facing this dilemma, BFSU and partner universities are actively discussing this issue and searching for solutions. One of them is the joint program to improve the integration of Chinese and European networks in the LCTELs sphere.

Implications of the study

This study firstly discussed the curriculum development history of the LCTELs programs in China and divided the 60 years into three phases. It offered general information in each phase, including social context, teaching goals, subject matter and change approaches, to give an overview of the LCTELs programs development in China to novice teachers and administrators, especially to the ones who are preparing to manage new programs.

Secondly, it pointed out the limitations in the present curriculum, among which the key ones are: a) At the initial and evaluation phases of the curriculum development, no enough attention is paid to the characteristics of the LCTELs programs due to the leading role of the commonly taught languages programs, especially EFL program; b) The shortage

of qualified teachers makes it difficult to fulfill the new module and creative ideas; c) In some programs, the incompatibility between curriculum in China and in the target language country makes the exchange study hard to reach the expectation. These limitations require curriculum designers, program managers and teachers to pay special attention to future curriculum improvement. It also provides references to new programs to pre-consider and to avoid the same problems in the curriculum design process.

Conclusion

The curriculum of the LCTELs programs in China has been continuously developed based on needs analyses conducted over the past 60 years. Many of the changes have been made due to changes in social context. It promotes the development of both the programs and the education the students receive. However, limitations still exist. These limitations demand that educators continue to research curriculum theory specific to the LCTELs programs in China's context, explore ways to train qualified teachers more efficiently, to develop more innovative teaching materials, to seek further cooperation with the target language countries to integrate with the European educational network. Nowadays, the development of the LCTELs programs is in the golden period, with international cooperative environment and national-level support. For the new LCTELs programs, such as the Latvian Program, which are about to enroll degree study students, need to pay special attention to the limitations of the present

curriculum, in order to make the process of curriculum design and development more efficient, productive and effective.

Acknowledgement

This paper was instructed by Prof. Ilze Kangro, supported in part by University of Latvia and China Scholarship Council and revised by Judith Bowles.

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