

Research on Assessment of Online Foreign Language Teaching System

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Abstract—With the rapid advancement of information and education technology, online teaching systems and software has emerged like mushrooms. More specifically, the booming of online language teaching systems has greatly facilitated instructors' teaching and students' learning. However, the lack of comprehensive and scientific assessment mechanism of these systems has also brought about problems. Thus, this paper starts with the overview and discussion of current situation of online learning system education assessment in China and then tentatively proposes basic principles in language teaching software assessment. By so doing, the paper concludes that with consideration of all relevant aspects, systems that cater to both instructors' teaching demands and learners' learning demands will remarkably boost language learning.

Keywords—assessment; online foreign language teaching system; principles

I. INTRODUCTION

When we stepped into the new century, online education based on hardware, software and online education resources has extended to every corner of education. However, the importance of hardware and software has gradually eroded due to the rapid progress and advancement of information technology; on the contrary, the center position of online education resources has become increasingly apparent [1]. As a result, as the core part of online education, online course does not only play the role of basic carrier of online education, but also even determines the success of e-learning. Therefore, how to assess varieties of online teaching systems has become a hot issue of online education research in the new era.

Online education in China began in the 1990s. Compared with developed countries, it is still in its initial period, exploring the unknown and summarizing past experiences. In the recent decade, with the surge of MOOC and flipped classrooms, the number and content of online courses have developed remarkably. However, the analysis and research on the quality still far lags behind the actual demand of online course construction. In order to attract more target students, some online courses attach excessive importance to the novelty of course forms, neglecting the essence of the course content. Therefore, it is must to establish a feasible and scientific online teaching system assessment mechanism to test and evaluate these systems before they can be put online.

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Today, in this increasingly globalized world, people's enthusiasm in foreign language learning is still growing. New online language learning systems has emerged in an unprecedented pace. In this case, the study and design of online foreign language teaching system assessment have become a meaningful and fruitful issue.

II. CURRENT SITUATION OF ONLINE LEARNING SYSTEM EDUCATION ASSESSMENT IN CHINA

Although online education emerged late in China, a large number of people have benefited from the convenience and efficiency of online education due to the simultaneous development of education and information technology. From 1990s, Chins has taken a series of effective measures to promote the smooth development of online education.

A. Efforts to Make Assessment Standards

Faced with the fierce competition from international online education giants, Science and Technology Department of Ministry of Education launched the project Distance Learning Technology Standards to push online education forward in 2000. The project aims to realize resource-sharing, support system interactivity, and guarantee online education service qualities. By "tracing-introducing-absorbing" international standards and integrating domestic situations, the project finally has established a modern online education standard system with Chinese characteristics, i.e. *Development Standards of Modern Online Engineering Education Resources (Draft)*, which makes basic requirements for online learning resources, software and courses [2]. The standards, a cornerstone to guide online education, have specified key technical indicators in online education resource development in China. The draft lays adequate emphasis on online course development, making basic requirements for online learning resources, courseware and courses; however, it does not involve online course assessment standards and cannot test and evaluate online course qualities systematically.

In order to further drive research work on modern online education standardization, Education Technology Department of Ministry of Education established Committee for Standardization of Modern Distance Education Technology to focus on relevant work and research in 2001. The Committee formally issued *China E-Learning Technical Standards (CELTS-22.1) – Criteria of Online Course Assessment (Draft)* on June 7th, 2002. The draft, a significant document in online

course assessment and construction, applies the indicator system method to evaluate quality features of online course from four dimensions of course content, teaching design, interface design and technology [3]. The birth of the draft provides scientific basis to assess online courses and systems and leaves profound impact on online course development. However, the specifications in the draft can only evaluate a single factor that affects online course quality qualitatively, and cannot objectively assess the overall qualities of the course, i.e. it lacks integration of all indicators.

B. Research Achievements

In recent years, MoE places more emphasis on online course construction and its assessment standardization. Some online education research institutes and higher learning institutes are making efforts to acquire online course quality authentication by means of experiments, surveys, questionnaires, etc., aiming to set up scientific and feasible online course assessment standards. Based on theoretical and teaching practice, researchers in China have made fruitful achievements in online course assessment.

After comparing 17 online course development platforms and their courses both at home and abroad, Zhang and his colleagues made a comprehensive questionnaire among 1728 online learners of different subjects and 105 online teachers from 9 regions in 7 countries in Asia. Further, they invited 11 local and foreign online education researchers to discuss and study the validity and reliability before they proposed assessment system of online learning environment. The system highlights online course design and interactivity of learning environment, mainly covering eight dimensions of “course website design”, “course teaching design”, “online course content”, “learning flexibility”, “student interaction”, “online learning support”, “online technology support” and “online teaching evaluation” [4].

Liu [5] points out that online course assessment is a systematic project, which requires a comprehensive operation from teaching content design, framework design, teaching components design, user interface design and so forth. He designed an assessment form with four items of framework structure design (including dynamicity, flexibility and organization), user interface design (including interactivity, design style and link structure), teaching content design (including scientific nature, structure, teaching content, and relationship between teaching objectives and learners), and teaching component design (including scientific nature, flexibility and aesthetic design).

Ma [6] believes that adequate understanding of the course and assessment themselves must be achieved before scientifically evaluating online courses. In practice, systemic assessment on knowledge skill factors, affective factors, objective factors and evaluative factors can be done from two facets of online course content assessment and online teaching support system and three dimensions of static study, dynamicity and comprehensiveness.

C. Comments on Past Research

Domestic researchers focus online course assessment on course content, course objectives, course evaluation and so on from education assessment theories and online course teaching practice, and endeavor to construct an online course assessment system. However, as different researchers design their system from diverse dimensions, the systems lack compatibility and fail to integrate into a standardized system. Overall, main problems of online course assessment research lie in the following aspects.

Unclear assessment objectives. As the contents of online courses have far exceeded those of traditional courses, involving a line of education elements and activities, to assess them is rather complicated. Confined by knowledge structure, most assessment standards are limited in use as they fail to consider all the factors concerning online courses: some focus on technology, some emphasize contents and some highlight interactivity.

Confusing assessment indicator systems. The design of an assessment system involves dimension, weight among different levels in each dimension, relevant independence of indicators of all levels. However, it is almost a mission impossible to have a comprehensive system with an explicit weight structure and without overlapping among different indicators.

Overemphasis on experts. Undoubtedly, the role of experts is indispensable to online course assessment. However, teachers and students are the frontier participants and users of these courses and their feedbacks deserve more attention. Therefore, more teachers' and students' involvement in online course assessment would greatly contribute to the improvement in the construction and assessment of online courses.

Excessively general assessment scope. Current online course research mainly concentrates on the exploration of indicator system and lacks case studies on specific courses or systems, which fails to solve the concrete problems in online education.

III. PRINCIPLES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING SOFTWARE ASSESSMENT

A relatively complete and scientific assessment indicator system with reasonable indicator weight distribution and assessment standards has to be set up before the establishment of online course assessment mechanism. And then, objective and feasible assessment methods can be implemented following scientific assessment principles.

In the new century, with the rapid advancement of net technology and education philosophies, new online language teaching software surges in large amounts, offering completely new language learning environment and atmosphere for Chinese language teachers and learners. Faced with abundant software, how to pick up appropriate one catering to both language teaching/learning demands and social demands for future employees' language proficiency becomes a real challenge. Thus, a scientific and pragmatic assessment system may significantly help decision-makers and users to make a wise choice.

Jia (2007) [7] compares software design to writing; it has to innovate constantly in theory and content; likewise, software assessment is like critics' contents, which proposes criticism and problems for development. An ideal assessment system is supposed to reveal shortcomings and deficiency of the software in aspects of design philosophy, theoretical framework and explores unique features and advantages of different software, offering scientific foundation for rational decision-making.

Compared with other online teaching software, online language teaching software has its own uniqueness. Besides conforming to traditional requirements, like solid theoretical support, explicit teaching objectives, complete knowledge structure, moderate exercise, and rational assessment measures, it also has network-based features, like interactivity among language learning elements, authenticity of virtual environment, and effectiveness of net management and technology support. Therefore, we have to both comply with general principles of teaching/learning software design and establish specific regulations for language teaching software assessment. In general, the assessment of online language teaching software follows the principles below.

A. Theoretical Support

Teaching theory derives from teaching practice and further guides the implementation and development of teaching activities. As an important element in language teaching practice, the design of online software must be based on relevant education and teaching theories, and apply the theoretical guidance to every corner of software design. Designers have to know and master basic theories and methodologies of language teaching and achieve scientific nature and effectiveness of the software by using these principles in contents, updating, lecturing, exercise, testing, etc. of language courses.

B. Completeness of Course Contents

Course contents, including elements of teaching objectives, materials, methodologies and processes, are the core part of online language teaching software.

Online teaching software is supposed to meet students' demands for both classroom learning and autonomous learning after class. Thus, setting of teaching objectives should be clear, e.g. both overall learning objectives and unit learning objectives should be specified; these objectives both appear in the main interface of the software and every learning step, reminding students of completing learning tasks consciously with these objectives in mind.

Unlike traditional off-line teaching software, the biggest advantage of online teaching software is its massively abundant contents and constant updating. Core language learning materials, like texts, audios and videos, are relatively fixed; however, background cultural knowledge, interesting videos and language games are more apt to be renewed by technical means. In this way, students individualized learning demands can be met while their learning interests are raised at the same time.

For different target users/learners, due to different teaching objectives, teaching methodologies embedded in the online language teaching software are supposed to differ. Even for the same software, different teaching methods have to be applied in different settings. For example, while teaching listening and speaking tasks, opportunities to simulate and input language should be offered to facilitate students' practice; in the meanwhile, audio recognition technologies can be applied to strengthen exercise and interaction. In reading comprehension session, communicative teaching approach and task-based teaching/learning would achieve much better results than solely using grammar-translation approach.

Learning process includes two aspects: the first one is whether teaching contents can transit naturally from preliminary language knowledge to advanced language knowledge following set expectations; the second one is whether teaching design can follow theories in psychology and linguistics to help students acquire new knowledge while mastering past knowledge by constant repetition.

C. Teacher Support

As online language teaching instructors, language teachers play a critical role in the successful application and promotion of the software. First of all, learning institutions and/or software publishing houses have to offer necessary training on net technology and education technology to language teachers before the software is massively used. The training will familiarize teachers with the application of the software and help them to transform from traditional teaching to online teaching. Second, in the process of using the software, software publishing houses give teachers online support and solve their problems instantly. Thirdly, software publishing houses regularly collect teachers' feedback to further improve the software.

D. Student Support

As students are the users and beneficiaries of online language teaching software, whether the software caters to their needs is one of the most important indicators of its success. One the one hand, students can improve their language proficiency by completing the learning tasks set by teaching objectives and contents in the software; on the other hand, students can offer suggestions to improve the software from learners' perspective by communicating technical problems with publishing houses. In this process, students would truly understand the advantages and charm of net-based learning, thus more motivated to learn.

IV. CONCLUSION

Currently, domestic online language teaching software assessment mainly focuses on the macro level to discuss the overall quality assurance system. For more specific assessment issues, more explicit factors, like online technology support resources and teachers' network knowledge and skills are the frequently explored. However, For more implicit factors like teachers' and students' psychological and behavioral actions in real online teaching and learning, effective assessment of learning results, design of learning activities, effectiveness of

course resources and so on are seldom mentioned in online language teaching software assessment. More practical work and theoretical research need to be done to conduct comprehensive studies on the construction and assessment of online language teaching software.

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