

# *Research on the Construction of Core Curriculum Integration for English Majors from the Perspective of Cognitive Assimilation Theory*

Zhang Bingjie

*School of English Language and Culture, Xi'an Fanyi University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710105, China*

**Keywords:** Cognitive Assimilation Theory; Curriculum integration; English major; Curriculum integration construction

**Abstract:** Curriculum integration refers to the integration or unification of two or more courses. The curriculum integration integrates many different courses into a common category and provides in-depth knowledge involved in all levels of courses. This concept is highly consistent with the Cognitive Assimilation Theory of language learning, and is one of the important contents of the current reform of the curriculum system for English majors in higher education. The construction of the core curriculum integration of the English major is in line with the development characteristics of the major, but also has certain feasibility, because the unity of the quality, knowledge and ability teaching objectives of the English major can make the teaching content and assessment methods of each course cross and integrate, so that the teaching and teaching activities of each course can effectively link up, and ultimately help learners achieve "meaningful learning" of Cognitive Assimilation Theory.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, China's higher education system and educators have gradually realized that the construction of curriculum integration is one of the important means for schools to optimize the curriculum system as a whole, to improve teachers' teaching quality, and to help students to proceed effective learning, because the characteristics of the curriculum integration include: high degree of intersection and integration of classroom teaching content, wide comprehensiveness of the curriculum system, and strong relevance of practical teaching.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

The Cognitive Assimilation Theory is also known as Integration Theory or Advance Organizers Theory. It is one of the main theories of American educational psychologist David Ausubel on cognitive learning. In the 1960s, Ausubel was influenced by the famous child psychologist Jean Piaget's work *Stage Theory of Cognitive Development*, and began to develop meaningful language acceptance learning theory and relevant methods that are conducive to classroom learning.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of curriculum integration or integrated curriculum appeared earlier in the research of western scholars: Professor M. C. Linn believes that there should be a certain relationship between

the courses offered by higher education institutions, and they should not be isolated. The integrated curriculum can help students deepen their understanding of knowledge by integrating the contents of relevant courses, thus improving their ability to use the knowledge learned in practice, and finally enabling students to acquire knowledge. This view is undoubtedly consistent with Ausubel's theory of meaningful learning: meaningful learning is a mode of integrated learning in which learners can be well anchored in the cognitive structure. This "meaningful learning" occurs when learners can find meaning in the information presented. Unless learners' new ideas are presented in a clear way and can be connected with their other ideas, unless learners have other ideas that they can connect with new ideas, and unless learners do consciously try to do so, "meaningful learning" will emerge as the times require.

## **2.1 Cognitive Assimilation Theory**

From the perspective of Cognitive Assimilation Theory, learners' effective learning is achieved by developing new cognitive structures. The new cognitive structure formed can accommodate the newly acquired information of learners. Therefore, cognitive structure is widely defined as "the clear and stable organization of individuals' knowledge of specific subject areas at any given time". The cognitive structure organizes knowledge hierarchically according to highly inclusive concepts. In the Cognitive Assimilation Theory, knowledge is organized hierarchically by learners in a pyramid model. At the top of the pyramid, general and common ideas as well as concepts will appear, and will be more and more specific to its bottom. The closer concepts and knowledge are to the top of the pyramid, the more common they will be and the longer their "life span" will be. Learners can absorb new knowledge into the existing more general concepts in this pyramid hierarchy by anchoring, which also explains the anchoring concept or anchoring position.

### **2.1.1 Meaningful Learning**

The proposed Cognitive Assimilation Theory provides a very valuable basis for meaningful learning of English language learners or effective learning process of English language learners: in the process of learning, both teachers and students undoubtedly agree that "rote learning" is an indispensable part of English language learning. Because English language learning usually requires memorizing a large number of sample words, sample sentences or grammatical structures to lay a good foundation for effective language output in the future. However, if learners can associate the new materials recited and memorized with the language concepts they have learned, this "rote learning" will be easier, more lasting and more effective. The theory of Cognitive Assimilation Theory meaningful learning therefore has important implications for the teaching process: effective and successful teaching and learning process depends on both teachers and learners. In the teaching process, the teacher puts forward the concepts and knowledge that students should learn -- this process is defined as "acceptance learning" -- the teacher "places" new ideas in the context of learners' cognitive structure to make them accept; While learners actively discover the learning content through subjective initiative, and carry out relevant reflection and internalization to form a cognitive structure -- this process is defined as "discovery learning" -- learners "place" new ideas in the context of known cognitive structure, and actively try to connect new materials with the acquired knowledge, so as to have meaningful learning.

### **2.1.2 Advance Organizers**

From the above explanation of the concept of meaningful learning, we can see that prior knowledge is the key to effective learning in the next step. In order to achieve the goal of meaningful learning, learners must have a higher level of prior knowledge or concepts, which will

serve as anchor points for new knowledge. This requires that students must be provided with appropriate advance organizers in the process of learning. While ensuring that students have the required prior knowledge, teachers should organize and display the learning content in a more systematic way<sup>[1]</sup>.

## 2.2 Curriculum Integration

The curriculum integration, as the name implies, is to systematically sort out and reorganize many related courses with logical relations, aiming to clarify the riveting points of each course and then organically integrate them. The curriculum integration pays attention to the concept, knowledge convergence and integration between various courses, and ensures that learners can more easily and concretely lock in the "anchor" while improving the efficiency of classroom teaching, so as to carry out the transition and convergence of new and old knowledge concepts, and finally achieve meaningful learning<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 2.2.1 Course Integration Overview

The concept of curriculum integration initially refers to the combination of various disciplines for learning. Throughout its history of development, its name also has different changes: such as interdisciplinary learning, cross-curriculum learning, and curriculum integration. As early as the 1940s, New Zealand secondary schools had research reports on interdisciplinary methods. In the 1970s, English educator Basil Bernstein described the current concept of "curriculum integration", and he proposed an integration method: "subordinating previously isolated subjects or courses to certain relational concepts". In 1990, the concept of curriculum group was put forward by scholars from Beijing University of Technology in China: "In curriculum construction, we should take the overall optimization of teaching plan as the goal, and pay attention to the research and construction of curriculum group".

### 2.2.2 Current Situation of the Construction of English Major Curriculum Integration

*The National Standard for Undergraduate Teaching Quality of English Majors in Colleges and Universities* states that English majors in China should cultivate students with three qualities in teaching: correct outlook on life, world outlook and values, sense of social responsibility, patriotism and international vision; Three abilities: professional application ability, professional learning ability and professional thinking and innovation research ability; And four kinds of knowledge: English language knowledge, literature and social cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries, and basic theories and methods required for professional research. According to the above training objectives, it is not difficult to see that it is difficult to cultivate the comprehensive quality, ability and knowledge of students with different learning conditions in a limited time. To achieve the above "integration", universities and teachers need to meet several basic requirements, such as matching the teaching content with the teaching objectives, distinctive curriculum settings, and the correlation between the curriculum. However, it is not easy to achieve the above points<sup>[3]</sup>. Most colleges and universities have invested a lot of time and energy in demonstration, research and practice in the first point, that is, the matching of course teaching content and course teaching objectives, but have not paid enough attention to the setting of characteristic courses and the relevance between courses, or some scholars have carried out theoretical research on them, but have not yet carried out detailed demonstration in practical teaching.

### 3. The Necessity of Constructing Core Curriculum Integration for English Majors

According to the description of English majors in the Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Universities, the core courses of English majors include Comprehensive English, English Audio-visual Course, Oral English, English Reading, English Writing, English Grammar, English Public Speaking, English Debate, English-Chinese/Chinese-English Translation, Introduction to English Literature, Cross-cultural Communication, History of Western Civilization, Academic Writing and Research Methods, etc. Although each course has its distinctive teaching characteristics and fixed teaching content, the quality goal of setting up these core courses is to cultivate students with correct world outlook, outlook on life and values, good moral quality, patriotism and international vision, sense of social responsibility, humanistic and scientific literacy, cooperation spirit, innovation spirit and basic discipline literacy; The goal of knowledge is to train students to master foreign language knowledge, foreign literature knowledge, national and regional knowledge, be familiar with Chinese language and culture knowledge, understand relevant professional knowledge and basic knowledge of humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, form an interdisciplinary knowledge structure and reflect professional characteristics; The goal of the ability is to cultivate students' ability to use foreign languages, appreciate literature, think critically, as well as certain research ability, innovation ability, information technology application ability, autonomous learning ability and practical ability<sup>[4]</sup>. In view of this, the unity of objectives lays a theoretical foundation for the interaction among courses.

Moreover, throughout Ausubel's theory of meaningful language learning, its essence is that "the use of external organizational means to change learners' cognition can promote their memory structure". In other words, if the learners' existing cognitive structure is clear, stable and well organized, then learning will become easier and retain new knowledge, form new concepts and form new cognition. However, if it is unstable, ambiguous, disorganized or disorganized, it will inhibit its learning, memory and internalization.

If colleges and universities can take into account the integration and connection among the above courses when setting up talent training programs and syllabuses, build a systematic curriculum group, and build a corresponding pyramid-type curriculum group system according to the cognitive structure of learners, so that the theoretical and practical teaching contents of each course are mutually contained, connected, and confirmed, then the teaching content of each course will be more targeted. The in-class and after-class teaching activities will be more relevant. In this way, a systematic curriculum integration can be described as "connecting courses in different fields of knowledge learning by crossing the curriculum theme but emphasizing the unity of concepts." The constructed curriculum integration is more focused on establishing links for learners, enabling them to participate in relevant and meaningful activities. At the same time, these activities can also be linked with real life, and become the leading organizer of meaningful learning. This will help them connect the theory they learned in the classroom with practical and practical knowledge and experience. Thus, the construction of curriculum integration can promote the memory structure of learners, help them acquire new knowledge, and realize the unity of knowledge and practice on the basis of reducing the academic burden of learners<sup>[5]</sup>.

### 4. Approaches to the Construction of Core Curriculum Integration for English Majors

The construction approach of the core curriculum integration of English majors should specifically reflect "one correlation", "two integrations" and "three connections".

#### 4.1 The Correlation of Course Objectives

As mentioned earlier, the quality, knowledge and ability objectives of the core courses of English majors are highly unified. Therefore, when constructing the curriculum integration, each

teacher of different course should create the concept map of curriculum integration related objectives for the individual core curriculum. This concept map can be used to investigate whether there are overlapping areas of a topic concept or knowledge when teachers teach courses and students learn different courses through classroom observation or teacher interviews, student interviews or teacher-student focus group interviews<sup>[6]</sup>. For example, Comprehensive English is a course with the quality goal to enable students to have the awareness and ability of cross-cultural communication, the knowledge goal is to enable students to master the relevant core words and phrases related to "Major Country Diplomacy", and the ability goal is to enable students to communicate effectively on the topic of "diplomacy". According to this, the teacher of English Reading can assign students corresponding extracurricular reading expansion materials, because students have relatively limited time to read in class; At the same time, the course of English Writing can also set the writing model or writing material that involves the teaching goal of discourse structure organization as the relevant teaching content, highlighting the specific use of the central sentence, transitional sentence and conjunction; Moreover, the English Public Speaking Course can also combine the survey results, take the effective organization of the teaching objectives as the relevant teaching objectives, supplemented by relevant speech examples, so that each link of the key theme involved in the course - the concept of "Major Country Diplomacy" has relevant "subordination", "reorganization" and "innovation", and achieve systematic correlation at the level of the teaching objectives of the course.

#### 4.2 Deep Integration of Course Teaching Content and Assessment Methods

In a broad sense, teaching content can be divided into theoretical teaching content and practical teaching content. In this way, each course in the course integration should have a clear division of labor in terms of theoretical and practical teaching content, and retain their own key points and highlight their own characteristics. For example, the courses of Comprehensive English, English Reading, English Writing and English Public Speaking<sup>[7]</sup> have the characteristics of complementing each other, because the basis of practical teaching in English writing and English Public Speaking classroom is that learners first have systematic input of English vocabulary, discourse, grammar and cross-cultural communication awareness, and have effective document retrieval and reading. This can ensure that learners have the basic requirements for writing speeches. However, in the process of writing, it is still necessary to input theoretical knowledge such as style and rhetoric to further ensure that learners at the output stage can speak with substance (vocabulary, discourse, grammar and corpus input in Comprehensive English and English Reading) and reason (logic, relevance, theme and organization input in English Writing). On the basis of the above theoretical input. The limited lecture hours can also ensure that learners can further speak with emotion (the non-verbal skills of speech input in the course of English Public Speaking).

At present, the assessment link of all subject courses advocates the combination of summative evaluation and process evaluation, and the core courses of English majors are no exception. However, when formulating the assessment content and evaluation method, teachers of all subjects can also give the assessment content fusion point of each course a certain score based on the above teaching content and highlighting the characteristics<sup>[8]</sup> of the course to encourage learners to form a systematic cognitive structure and more effectively carry out meaningful learning. For example, Comprehensive English and English Writing can set the same theme when setting the sub-item of "text writing", but make a specific distinction in terms of details: Comprehensive English requires students to write short articles, mainly assessing students' choice of words and sentences; English Writing, on the other hand, requires students to write long articles, mainly assessing students' opinions and the logic of the article. The course of English Reading can set the assessment as the main content of retelling reading articles to assess students' reading ability, while the course of English Public Speaking can use the same materials as the course of English Reading, but it mainly assesses students' views on the text and their related statements on topics related to society.

### 4.3 Effective Connection of Course Teaching Activities

Since the combination of modern educational technology with education and teaching, the after-class activities have been included in the curriculum assessment system, teaching activities have expanded from traditional classroom teaching activities to the broader category of online pre-class activities, in-class activities and after-class activities. In this way, the construction of curriculum integration also needs to ensure the effective connection of teaching and learning activities in these three links. Because students' energy and time are limited after all, if every course is set up with irrelevant activities according to the above links, it will inevitably lead to students' watching online micro-class quickly and pointlessly, inactive participation in classroom activities and passive participation in the after-class activities. On the contrary, if the curriculum integration can effectively connect the preview, classroom practice and after-class consolidation according to the characteristics of the curriculum when setting up these related activities, it can promote the enthusiasm of students to participate in activities on the basis of ensuring the characteristics of the curriculum, and enable students to connect the new and old knowledge, fix the anchor point, and then acquire new knowledge step by step<sup>[9]</sup>.

### 5. Conclusion

Cognitive Assimilation Theory emphasizes that new and old knowledge have subordinate or common attributes on the surface of cognitive structure. The so-called "new knowledge" at a certain time node can be assimilated by "old knowledge", forming the concept of "acquisition", which makes learning meaningful. Therefore, the construction of the core curriculum integration of English majors is conducive to helping students assimilate the knowledge at various time nodes, so as to achieve the quality, knowledge and ability objectives in English majors more efficiently and systematically. Colleges and universities offering English majors can further develop talent training programs and curricula in a scientific, collaborative and school-based direction through the construction of core curriculum integration, laying a solid foundation for cultivating more high-quality foreign language talents in line with the needs of the country's educational modernization.

### References

- [1] Ausubel D. P. *Schemata, "Cognitive Structure, and Advance Organizers: A reply to Anderson, Spiro, and Anderson."* *American Educational Research Journal*, 1980(17):400-404.
- [2] *Learning Theories: Assimilation Theory.* [https://www.learning-theories.org/doku.php?id=learning\\_theories:assimilation\\_theory](https://www.learning-theories.org/doku.php?id=learning_theories:assimilation_theory), 2012-01-12.
- [3] Li Lin & Cheng Lin, *Research on the Construction of Full-time Subject Teaching (English) Major Curriculum Group [J]. Journal of Hunan Polytechnic of Industry*, 2022. 22(02):82-85.
- [4] Marcia C. Linn. "Designing the Knowledge Integration Environment." *International Journal of Science Education*, 2000, 22(8):781-796.
- [5] Ren Xiaolong, et al., *On the construction of curriculum groups for English majors under the integration of the National Standard and OBE Journal of North China Institute of Aerospace Technology [J].* 2021. 31(06): 45-47.
- [6] Rossner Vivian F. *A Description and Critique of David P. Ausubel's Model of Learning [D]. Simon Fraser University*, 1982.
- [7] Royer James M. *The Cognitive Revolution in Educational Psychology.* IAP, 2005.
- [8] Wang Jiakai, Yang Shiyi, Huo Yaling, et al. *Study on class groups and their quality inspection and evaluation index system [J]. Higher Engineering Education Research*, 1999 (supplement):71-75.
- [9] *What is Integrated Curriculum.* <https://study.com/learn/lesson/integrated-curriculum-benefits-examples.html>, 2022 - 02-24.