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CURRICULUM DESIGN STRATEGIES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Introduction. The activities of language teaching have often been viewed from a very narrow perspective. This is evident from the fascination with teaching methods that has characterized the history of language teaching until relatively recently. Methods have often been regarded as the most important factor in determining the success of a language program, and advances in language teaching have sometimes been seen as being dependent on the adoption of the latest method. A

perspective often missing from the method-based view of teaching is that of how methods interact with other factors in the teaching-learning process. Choice of teaching method cannot therefore be made unless a great deal is known about the context for the language program and the interactions between the different elements involved. It is this perspective that characterizes a curriculum-based approach to language teaching.

Curriculum development in language teaching provides a systematic introduction to the issues involved in developing, managing, and evaluating effective second and foreign language programs and teaching materials. Language teaching has reflected a seemingly bewildering array of influences and directions in its recent history, some focusing on syllabus issues (A. Burns, C. Curran, D. Freeman, J. Munby etc.), some reflecting new trends or proposals in methodology (J. Crandall, R. Docking, C. Goh, M. Snow etc.), and some with a focus on learning targets (K. Graves, R. Hindmarsh, P. McKay, J. Shaw etc.). Researchers refer to three different curriculum design strategies to forward design, central design, and backward design. An understanding of the nature and implications of these design approaches is helpful in understanding of some past and present trends in language teaching.

Goals: The aim of this article is to examine the assumptions and practices underlying three different curriculum design strategies that are referred to as forward design, central design, and backward design.

The term curriculum is used here to refer to the overall plan or design for a course and how the content for a course is transformed into a blueprint for teaching and learning which enables the desired learning outcomes to be achieved.

Curriculum takes content (from external standards and local goals) and shapes it into a plan for how to conduct effective teaching and learning. It is thus more than a list of topics and lists of key facts and skills (the «input»). It is a map of how to achieve the «outputs» of desired student performance, in which appropriate learning activities and assessments are suggested to make it more likely that students achieve the desired results [9, c. 95-97].

In language teaching, Input refers to the linguistic content of a course. It seems logical to assume that before we can teach a language, we need to decide what linguistic content to teach. Once content has been selected it then needs to be organized into teachable and learnable units as well as arranged in a rational sequence. The result is a syllabus. There are many different conceptions of a language syllabus. Different approaches to syllabus design reflect different understandings of the nature of language and different views as to what the essential building blocks of language proficiency are, such as vocabulary, grammar, functions or text types. Criteria for the selection of syllabus units include frequency, usefulness, simplicity, learnability and authenticity. Once input has been determined, issues concerning teaching methods and the design of classroom activities and materials can be addressed. These belong to the domain of process.

Process refers to how teaching is carried out and constitutes the domain of methodology in language teaching. Methodology encompasses the types of learning activities, procedures and techniques that are employed by teachers when they teach and the principles that underlie the design of the activities and exercises in their textbooks and teaching resources. These procedures and principles relate to beliefs and theories concerning the nature of language and of second language learning and the roles of teachers, learners and instructional materials, and as ideas about language and language learning have changed, so too have the instructional practices associated with them. Throughout the twentieth century there was a movement away from mastery-oriented approaches focusing on the production of accurate samples of language use, to the use of more activity-oriented approaches focusing on interactive and communicative classroom processes.

Once a set of teaching processes has been standardized and fixed in terms of principles and associated practices it is generally referred to as a method, as in Audiolingualism or Total Physical Response [4, c. 23].

Output refers to learning outcomes, that is, what learners are able to do as the result of a period of instruction. This might be a targeted level of achievement on a proficiency scale (such as the ACTFL Proficiency Scale) or on a standardized test such as TOEFL, the ability to engage in specific uses of language at a certain level of skill (such as being able to read texts of a certain kind with a specified level of comprehension), familiarity with the differences between two different gram-

matical items (such as the simple past and the present perfect), or the ability to participate effectively in certain communicative activities (such as using the telephone, taking part in a business meeting, or engaging in casual conversation). Today, desired learning outputs or outcomes are often described in terms of objectives or in terms of performance, competencies or skills [4, c. 5-33]. In simple form the components of curriculum and their relationship can be represented as follows:

– Curriculum development in language teaching can start from input, process or output.

– Each starting point reflects different assumptions about both the means and ends of teaching and learning.

Curriculum development from this perspective starts with a first-stage focus on input – when decisions about content and syllabus are made; moves on to a second-stage focus on methodology – when the syllabus is 'enacted', and then leads to a final-stage of consideration of output – when means are used to measure how effectively what has been taught has been learned. Much debate and discussion about effective approaches to language teaching can be better understood by recognizing how differences in the starting points of curriculum development have different implications and applications in language teaching. This leads to the distinction between forward design, central design, and backward design. Forward design means developing a curriculum through moving from input, to process, and to output. Central design means starting with process and deriving input and output from classroom methodology. Backward design as the name implies, starts from output and then deals with issues relating to process and input [4].

Forward design is based on the assumption that input, process, and output are related in a linear fashion (R. Docking, J.C. Richards and T. Rodgers, M. Tessmer, J.F. Wedman etc.). In other words, before decisions about methodology and output are determined, issues related to the content of instruction need to be resolved. Curriculum design is seen to constitute a sequence of stages that occur in a fixed order – an approach that has been referred to as a 'waterfall' model [7, c. 77-85] where the output from one stage serves as the input to the stage that follows. This approach is described as the traditional approach to developing a syllabus involves using one's understanding of subject matter as the basis for syllabus planning [5, c. 143-44; 2, c. 8-17]. A syllabus and the course content are developed around the subject. Objectives may also be specified, but these usually have little role in teaching or assessing of the subject. G. Wiggins and J. McTighe [9, c. 15] give an illustration of this process with an example of a typical forward-design lesson plan:

– The teacher chooses a topic for a lesson (e.g. racial prejudice);

– The teacher selects a resource (e.g. To Kill a Mocking-bird);

– The teacher chooses instructional methods based on the resource and the topic (e.g. a seminar to discuss the book and cooperative groups to analyze stereotypical images in films and on television);

– The teacher chooses essay questions to assess student understanding of the book.

In language teaching, forward planning is an option when the aims of learning are understood in very general terms such as in courses in 'general English' or with introductory courses at primary or secondary level where goals may be described in such terms as proficiency in language use across a wide range of daily situations, or communicative ability in the four language skills. Curriculum planning in these cases involves operationalizing the notions of general English, or intermediate level English or writing skills in terms of units that can be used as the basis for planning, teaching and assessment.

The audiolingual method, the audiovisual method and the structural situational method have already been cited as examples of forward design methods. More recent examples include communicative language teaching and content based teaching.

While a progression from input, to process, to output would seem to be a logical approach to the planning and delivery of instruction, it is only one route that can be taken. The second route could be called central design. With central design, curriculum development starts with the selection of teaching activities, techniques and methods rather than with the elaboration of a detailed language syllabus or specification of learning outcomes. Issues related to input and output are dealt with after a methodology has been chosen or developed or during the process of teaching itself. J.L. Clark [1] refers to this as 'progressivism' and an example of a process approach to the curriculum.

Research on teachers' practices reveals that teachers often follow a central design approach when they develop their lessons by first considering the activities and teaching procedures they will use. Rather than starting their planning processes by detailed considerations of input or output, they start by thinking about the activities they will use in the classroom. While they assume that the exercises and activities they make use of will contribute to successful learning outcomes, it is the classroom processes they seek to provide for their learners that are generally their initial focus.

Despite the approach they have been recommended to use in their initial teacher education, teachers' initial concerns are typically with what they want their learners to do during the lesson. Later their attention turns to the kind of input and support that learners will need to carry out the learning activities [3, c. 149-178]. This contrasts with the linear forward-design model that teachers are generally trained to follow. Central design can thus be understood as a learner-focused and learning-oriented perspective.

Novel Methods of the 1980s. Language teaching in the first part of the twentieth century was shaped by teaching methods which reflected a forward planning approach. Alternative bases for methods emerged in the second half of the twentieth century with the emergence of a number of instructional designs that rejected the need for pre-determined syllabuses or learning outcomes and were built instead around specifications of classroom activities. These new teaching methods and approaches started with process, rather than input or output and were often recognized by the novel classroom practices they employed. They reflected the central design approach – one in which methodology is the starting point in course planning and content is chosen in accordance with the methodology rather than the other way round. The purpose and content of a course will vary according to the needs of the students and their particular interests. Goals are stated in very general terms such as 'basic personal communication skills: oral' and 'basic personal communication skills: written'.

A more recent example of the use of central design in language teaching has been labelled Dogme (a term taken from the film industry that refers to filming without scripts or rehearsal). It is based on the idea that instead of basing teaching on a pre-planned syllabus, a set of objectives and published materials, teaching is built around conversational interaction between teacher and students and among students themselves. From this perspective, learning takes place in a context and evolves through the interaction and participation of the participants in that context. Learning is not viewed as the mastery of pre-determined content but as constructing new knowledge through participating in specific learning and social contexts and through engaging in particular types of activities and processes.

The third approach – backward design – starts with a careful statement of the desired results or outcomes: appropriate teaching activities and content are derived from the results of learning. This is a well-established tradition in curriculum design in general education and in recent years has re-emerged as a prominent curriculum development approach in language teaching. It was sometimes described as an 'ends-means' approach [6, c. 12; 8] that consists of:

Step 1: diagnosis of needs
Step 2: formulation of objectives
Step 3: selection of content
Step 4: organization of content
Step 5: selection of learning experiences
Step 6: organization of learning experiences
Step 7: determination of what to evaluate and of the ways of doing it.

The role of methodology was to determine which teaching methods were most effective in attaining the objectives and a criterion-referenced approach would be used for assessment. There is no place for individually-determined learning outcomes: the outcomes are determined by the curriculum designer.

The planning process begins with a clear understanding of the ends in mind. It explicitly rejects as a starting point the process or activity-oriented curriculum in which participation in activities and processes is primary. It does not imply any particular pedagogical approach or instructional theory or philosophy. A variety of teaching strategies can be employed to achieve the desired goals but teaching methods cannot be chosen until the desired outcomes have been specified. From this

perspective many of the central-design methods or activity-oriented approaches discussed above fail to meet the criterion of good instructional design.

Applications. A forward design option may be preferred in circumstances where a mandated curriculum is in place, where teachers have little choice over what and how to teach, where teachers rely mainly on textbooks and commercial materials rather than teacher-designed resources, where class size is large and where tests and assessments are designed centrally rather than by individual teachers. Forward design may also be a preferred option in situations where teachers may have limited English language proficiency and limited opportunities for professional development, since much of the planning and development involved can be accomplished by specialists rather than left to the individual teacher.

Central design approaches do not require teachers to plan detailed learning outcomes, to conduct needs analysis or to follow a prescribed syllabus, hence they often give teachers a considerable degree of autonomy and control over the teacher learning process. Teachers may simply adopt the practices without worrying about their claims and theoretical assumptions since they offer a supposedly expert-designed teaching solution. Adoption of a central design approach may also require a considerable investment in training, since teachers cannot generally rely on published course-book materials as the basis for teaching.

A backward design option may be preferred in situations where a high degree of accountability needs to be built into the curriculum design and where resources can be committed to needs analysis, planning, and materials development. Well-developed procedures for implementing backward design procedures are widely available, making this approach an attractive option in some circumstances. In the case of large-scale curriculum development for a national education system, much of this development activity can be carried out by others, leaving teachers mainly with the responsibility of implementing the curriculum.

In conclusion, any language teaching curriculum contains the elements of content, process, and output. Historically these have received a different emphasis at different times. Curriculum approaches differ in how they visualize the relationship between these elements, how they are prioritized and arrived at, and the role that syllabuses, materials, teachers and learners play in the process of curriculum development and enactment. The notion of forward, central and backward design provides a useful metaphor for understanding the different assumptions underlying each approach to curriculum design as well as for recognizing the different practices that result from them.

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