THE LEARNER-CENTRED CURRICULUM: PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES

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1. INTRODUCTION

Due to a set of events which are partly circumstantial and partly historical, much of the development in language teaching has occurred outside of the educational mainstream. The assumption seems to have been that educational theory and research has nothing to contribute to language teaching.

The implicit message, that learning a language is so different from learning anything else that there is little point in developing links with the educational mainstream, has been due largely to the disproportionate influence exercised over the field by theoretical linguists. The belief that language pedagogy is basically a linguistic rather than an educational matter has led to research which is located within a linguistic rather than an educational paradigm. This, in turn, has created a fragmentation within the field, with different interest groups being concerned with particular aspects of the teaching/learning process to the exclusion of other aspects. Thus, in Europe, in the seventies, the focus was on the specification of content through the development functional-notional syllabuses. While this represented a broadening of focus, the focus itself was still basically linguistic and still only focused on one element within the curriculum process. In the United States, on the other hand, there was a tendency for the curriculum process to be driven by a concern with methodology.

This state of affairs is beginning to be redressed. In the last two or three years a number of publications have appeared urging the development of integrated and systematic approaches to curriculum development (see, for example, Richards 1984; Nunan 1985; Dubin and Olshtain 1986). These publications urge the development of procedures which are comprehensive, containing similar elements to those contained in traditional curriculum development.

Here, I should like to present a set of procedures for developing a learner-centred curriculum for adult ESL. Such a curriculum will contain similar components to those contained in traditional curriculum development, that is needs analysis, goal and objective setting, methodology, (including materials development and adaptation), learning arrangements and evaluation.
However, the key difference between learner-centred and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught.

This change in orientation has major practical implications for the entire curriculum process since a negotiated curriculum cannot be introduced and managed in the same way as one which is prescribed by the teacher or the teaching institution. The practical aspects of introducing a learner-centred curriculum will also be explored with reference to the Australian Adult Migrant Education Program.

2. CURRICULUM PROCESSES

In a curriculum based on the traditional means-ends model, a fixed series of steps is followed. Thus, in the curriculum planning process proposed by Taba (1962), planning, implementation and evaluation occur in a sequential order, and most of the key decisions about aims and objectives, materials and methodology are made before there is any encounter between teacher and learner. In a learner-centred curriculum, on the other hand, these processes are cyclical. Much of the consultation, decision making and planning is informal and takes place during the course of program delivery, and any aspect of the course can be modified to take account of changing needs.

2.1 Aims

It is presumed that the implementation of any language curriculum is aimed at improving the ability of the learner to use the target language. Debate centres on the most effective ways of bringing this about.

One of the major assumptions underlying the learner-centred philosophy is that, given the constraints that exist in most adult learning contexts, it is impossible to teach learners everything they need to know in class. What little class time there is must therefore be used as wisely as possible to teach those aspects of the language which the learners themselves deem to be most urgently required, thus increasing motivation. It should also provide learners with the skills needed to continue learning language autonomously.

In consequence, while one major aim or set of aims will relate to the teaching of specific language skills, other aims will relate to the development of learning skills. Such aims may include the following:

- to provide learners with efficient learning strategies;
- to assist learners identify their own preferred ways of learning;
- to develop skills needed to negotiate the curriculum;
- to encourage learners to set their own objectives;
- to encourage learners to set realistic goals and timeframes
- to develop learners' skills in self-evaluation

Although the adoption of a learner-centred orientation implies differentiated curricula for different learners, it is unrealistic to expect extensive participation in curriculum planning by learners with little experience of language and learning. Hence, it is often necessary for the teacher to start off by making most of the decisions. This particular problem is discussed in further detail in the section devoted to problems associated with the introduction of a learner-centred curriculum.

2.2 Initial Needs Analysis

The first step in the curriculum process is the collection of information about learners in order to diagnose what Richterich (1972) refers to as their objective needs, that is, needs that are external to the learner. This initial data collection can very often only be superficial, and be related mainly to factual information. The sort of information commonly collected within the AMEP at this stage is mainly restricted to biographical information such as current proficiency level, age, educational background, previous learning experiences, time in Australia, and previous and current occupation. It is also sometimes possible to obtain more subjective information on preferred length and intensity of course, preferred learning arrangement, learning goals, and information relating to preferred methodology, learning style preferences and so on. However, this sort of information, relating to learners' subjective needs as an individual in the learning situation can often only be obtained once a course has begun.

In the AMEP, learner data is usually obtained at an initial interview by teachers with skills in counselling. With learners at the lower end of the proficiency scale, it is preferable for the interview to be conducted in the learner's home language and bilingual assistants are sometimes employed for this purpose.

2.3 Grouping Learners

If the information is collected before learners are assigned to a class, it can be used for initial class placement purposes. At this point, a decision has to be made as to the weighting which will be given to the different kinds of needs which have been assessed. This will depend very much on the relative importance which accorded by teachers to factors such as language proficiency, lifestyle, learning preferences and so on. In making a placement decision, these factors have to be balanced against the administrative and resource constraints under which the program has to operate. Thus, it would be perfectly feasible to imagine a situation in which the same learner might well be placed in one centre in an "intermediate class", while in another he could be placed in an
'English for motor mechanics' group and in yet another in a 'young, fast learners' category.

While language proficiency continues to be the single most important grouping criterion used in the AMEP, other possible types of class arrangement are being explored and in some language centres teachers working in teams have been experimenting with diverse grouping arrangements. Teachers are starting to accept to notion that the grouping convention of "twenty students for twenty hours a week" is not the only possible type of class arrangement, or even the most desirable one (although it is probably the preferred option from an administrative point of view).

One of the most successful experiments has been carried out within the intermediate level program in South Australia. The five teachers working in this program found that, while their learners were all around the 1+ level on the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating Scale, their learning experiences and language needs were extremely diverse and were not adequately catered for by placing learners in five, rather arbitrary class groups.

In order to develop a more responsive, needs-based curriculum, the intermediate teachers derived procedures for more sensitive learner groupings. On occasion this has led to the creation of up to twenty-three "class" groups or teaching "strands" in any one teaching week.

The teachers found that, as a result of taking part in the negotiated curriculum:

clients are able to identify and state their needs, and so be involved in the necessary course design and implied decision making [and] their commitment is at a high level, as is their perception of the course's relevance.

(Reade, Brink, Mullins and Pedler 1985)

The experience of these teachers underlines the importance and utility of extensive learner consultation in deriving learner groupings which reflect group and individual needs.

2.4 Goal and Objective Setting

Goal and objective setting are important components of a learner-centred curriculum, although their role is somewhat different than in a traditional curriculum. In traditional terms, the use of objectives is justified on the grounds of rationality and efficiency. For instance, Mager (1975) suggests that objectives are important for three main reasons; they provide a basis for the selection and design of instructional materials, content and methods, they enable evaluation to take place, and they act as a guide for students.
In the learner-centred curriculum, objectives have these three benefits. But they also have important additional functions. They are an important part of the process of sensitising learners to what it is to be a language learner. By making explicit the objectives of a course, and, eventually, by training learners to set their own objectives, the following benefits can accrue:

i. learners come to have a more realistic idea of what can be achieved in a given course;
ii. learning comes to be seen as the gradual accretion of achievable goals;
iii. students develop greater sensitivity to their role as language learners and their rather vague notions of what it is to be a learner become much sharper;
iv. self-evaluation becomes more feasible;
v. classroom activities can be seen to relate to learners real-life needs;
vi. skills development can be seen as a gradual, rather than an all-or-nothing process.

Steps in deriving goals and objectives from learner data are as follows:

Step 1: Look through learner data and identify broad course goals. For example;
My learners want to:
- converse with native speakers
- find out about Australian culture
- read newspapers
- understand TV and radio
- fill out forms
- read signs and public notices

Step 2: For each goal, produce a set of general skills. For example;
Goal: converse with native speakers
Skills: identify topic of conversation
- signal lack of comprehension
- exchange greetings/leavetaking
- understand requests for information
- provide personal information
- indicate likes and dislikes
- request information
- describe objects and entities
- offer and ask for help

Step 3: Using learner data, as well as information obtained informally from learners, decide on suitable topics, materials, interlocutors etc.

Step 4: Grade the language tasks taking into consideration such factors as context embedding, cognitive demand, experiential knowledge, degree of help and processing difficulty (Clark 1985).
It is worth noting at this point that recent research into second language acquisition of the kind carried out by Johnston (1985) provides a great deal of "learner-centred knowledge" on which to base the selection and grading of tasks. Through such research, we now know a lot more about what syntactic structures are assimilable at different stages of ESL development. This knowledge enables objectives to be set which we know from empirical research to be attainable. Up until recently, the content and sequencing of language teaching materials has been based solely on the intuitions of those who designed them. However, as Johnston (1985) has demonstrated, those intuitions are frequently wrong since the language which is presented for production in ESL textbooks is often patently at odds with what learners actually do. By building learnable language content into the curriculum, gearing our expectations of what learners should produce to what we know they can do, we are reducing the risk of overloading the learners and thus creating in them a sense of frustration.

Step 5: For a sample of the skills identified in Step 2, produce a number of specific objectives. These should contain three elements; performance (what the learner is to do), conditions (under what circumstances the learner will perform), and standards (with what degree of skill). For example;

Skill: exchange greetings/leavetaking
Specific Objective: In a classroom role play, students will exchange greetings with the teacher. Utterances will be comprehensible to someone used to dealing with second language learners.

Where possible, learners themselves should be involved in these five steps. Suggestions for learner involvement in negotiating goals and objectives are made in Brindley (1984).

A crucial distinction between traditional and learner-centred curricula is that in the latter, no decision is binding. This is particularly true of goal and objective setting. These will need to be modified during a course as the learner's skills develop and their perceived needs change.

It is therefore important that the objectives which are set at the beginning of a course are not seen as definitive; they will vary probably have to be modified as learners experience different kinds of learning activities and as teachers obtain more information about their subjective needs (relating to learners' affective needs, expectations and learning style). It is the results of the resultant on-going dialogue between teachers and learners which will determine learning objectives.

The setting of objectives is therefore something which is shaped and refined during the initial stages of a learning arrangement, rather than being predetermined. This is because the most valuable learner data can only be obtained in an informal way after relationships have been established between teachers and learners.
2.5 On-going Needs Analysis

The initial data collection, which is used principally for placement purposes, generally only provides fairly superficial information which can be used to make rough predictions about communicative needs. The most useful information, relating to subjective learner needs, can only be obtained once a course has begun and a relationship is established between teacher and learners. It is these subjective needs, derivable from information on learners' wants, expectations, and affective needs which is of most value in selecting content and methodology.

As most learners find it difficult to articulate their needs and preferences, the initial stages of a course can be spent in providing a range of learning experiences. It is unrealistic to expect learners who have never experienced a particular approach to be able to express an opinion about it. This does not mean, however, that activities and materials should be foisted on the learners at the whim of the teacher. Learners should be encouraged to reflect upon their learning experiences and articulate those they prefer, and those they feel suit them as learners.

With low level learners, developing a critical self-awareness can best be facilitated by the use of first language resources. In some cases, the use of bilingual assistants may be a possibility, in others, translated activity evaluation sheets should be used. These need not be elaborate. In fact they may simply require the learner to say whether or not they liked a given activity or set of materials (e.g. Carver and Dickinson, 1982). Learner responses should be supplemented by teacher observation.

2.6 Methodology

Methodology, which includes learning activities and materials is generally the area where there is greatest potential for conflict between teacher and learner. In a traditional curriculum, this conflict would probably be ignored on the grounds that "the teacher knows best". In a learner-centred curriculum, it is crucial that it be resolved.

Several large-scale studies within the Australian Adult Migrant Education Program point to a widespread mismatch between teacher and learner expectations. Brindley (1984) found this mismatch in interviews with teachers and learners. He reports that:

It is clear that many learners do have rather fixed ideas about what it is to be a learner and what it is to learn a language. These ideas, not always at a conscious level, run roughly thus:

- Learning consists of acquiring a body of knowledge.
- The teacher has this knowledge and the learner has not.
- The knowledge is available for revision and practice in a textbook or some other written form. It is the role of the teacher to impart this knowledge to the learner through such activities as explanation, writing and example. The learner will be given a program in advance.

- Learning a language consists of learning the structural rules of the language and the vocabulary through such activities as memorisation, reading and writing.

The corresponding set of assumptions for many teachers who hold a "learner-centred" view of language teaching would probably be something like the following:

- Learning consists of acquiring organising principles through encountering experience.
- The teacher is a resource person who provides language input for the learner to work on.
- Language data is to be found everywhere - in the community and in the media as well as in textbooks.
- It is the role of the teacher to assist learners to become self-directing by providing access to language data through such activities as active listening, role play and interaction with native speakers.
- For learners, learning a language consists of forming hypotheses about the language input to which they will be exposed, these hypotheses being constantly modified in the direction of the target model.
  (Brindley 1984:97)

The possibility of serious mismatches between learner and teacher expectations is reinforced in studies by Willing (1985) and Nunan (1986). In an investigation of over five hundred learners, Willing found that certain classroom activities and materials were highly rated by almost all learner types, while other were rated low. These activities and their ratings were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation practice</td>
<td>very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanations to class</td>
<td>very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation practice</td>
<td>very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error correction</td>
<td>very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary development</td>
<td>very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to/using cassettes</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student self-discovery of errors</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using pictures, films, video</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair work</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language games</td>
<td>very low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The study by Hanan (1986) involved sixty teachers working within the AMEP. These teachers were asked to rate the same activities, and the same scale system was used to analyse their responses. The ratings were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair work</td>
<td>very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student self-discovery of errors</td>
<td>very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation practice</td>
<td>very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanations to class</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary development</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to/using cassettes</td>
<td>medium high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation practice</td>
<td>medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using pictures, films, video</td>
<td>low medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error correction</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language games</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it would be a mistake to read too much into these results, they do indicate the potential at least for serious mismatches between teachers and learners. Faced with such mismatches, teachers have several alternatives. At one extreme, they could ignore the wishes of the learner altogether, maintaining that it is their professional responsibility and right to determine what happens in class. At the other extreme, they could simply accommodate the wishes of the learner.

Within a learner-centred curriculum, decisions on appropriate learning content and strategies can be determined through negotiation. If, for example, learners want to engage in activities considered by the teacher to be inefficient, it is up to the teacher to convince them of the efficacy of alternatives. As Brindley suggests:

Since, as we have noted, a good many learners are likely to have fixed ideas about course content, learning activities, teaching methods and so forth, it seems that teachers will continually have to face the problem of deciding to what extent to make compromises. However, if programs are to be learner-centred, then learners’ wishes should be canvassed and taken into account, even if they conflict with the wishes of the teacher. This is not to suggest that the teacher should give learners everything that they want – evidence from teachers suggests that some sort of compromise is usually possible, but only after there has been discussion concerning what both parties believe and want.

(Brindley 1984:111)

2.7 Evaluation
The purpose of evaluation is to determine whether or not the objectives of a course of instruction have been achieved, and, in the case of a failure to achieve objectives, to make some determination of why this might have been so. Key questions relating to evaluation include who is to evaluate, how, at what point in the program and to what ends.

In traditional curriculum models, evaluation has been identified with testing and seen as an activity which is carried out at the end of the learning process, often by someone who has not been connected with the course itself. In a learner-centred system, on the other hand, evaluation generally takes the form of an informal monitoring which is carried on alongside the teaching/learning process and is carried out principally by the participants in that process.

Self-evaluation by both teachers and learners will also be promoted. By providing learners with skills in evaluating materials, learning activities and their own achievement of objectives, evaluation is built into the teaching process. By encouraging teachers to evaluate critically their own performance, evaluation becomes an important part of both curriculum and teacher development.

Any element within the curriculum process may be evaluated. At the planning stage, needs analysis techniques and procedures may be evaluated, while, in the teaching process itself, elements for evaluation will include materials, learning activities, sequencing, learning arrangements, teacher performance and learner achievement.

There may be a number of causes for the failure of learners to achieve objectives. These may include inefficient learning strategies, poor attention in class, irregular attendance, particular macroskill problems, inability to utilise the target language outside class, inappropriate teaching techniques, inappropriate objectives, unsuitable materials or methods, and personal problems on the part of the learner. With more advanced learners it is often possible, not only to train learners to identify causes of learning failure, but also to suggest remedies. Such consciousness raising activities can assist learners to monitor and evaluate their own learning process.

3. PROBLEMS IN IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation within the AMEP of curricula based on the principles just outlined has been fraught with difficulty. With no other adult ESL programs of a similar size and complexity to act as a model, the introduction of learner-centred curricula into the Program has been characterised by improvisation. This is to a certain extent inevitable in the introduction of such major educational change. Administrators and teachers have been learning as they go along. There is, in fact, something ironic about the haphazard and rather piecemeal introduction of a set of curriculum processes which are aimed at making the planning process more systematic.
It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of these changes or to make any realistic assessment of the effects of policy implementation at the classroom level because systematic evaluation procedures have not yet been put into place. This is something that Program administrators are currently addressing as a matter of highest priority, and should be facilitated by the publication of a recent evaluation survey (Shaw and Dowsett 1985).

3.1 Demands on Professional Staff

As it is the teachers who are responsible for all phases of planning in the learner-centred curriculum, they obviously need greater professional skills than in a system which requires them to implement a centralised predetermined curriculum. In addition to the skills required to be a competent classroom practitioner, teachers need skills in needs-assessment, counselling, objective setting and evaluation. They have to be flexible enough to teach in a variety of learning arrangements. These include mainstream classroom teaching, individualised and self-access learning centres, distance learning, community classes and industrial language teaching. Above all they need to be comfortable with the notion of the negotiated curriculum and accept that their job entails more than teaching language, it also involves teaching students what it means to be a language learner.

3.2 Administrative Support

Despite the lip service paid to the notion of learner-centred curricula, the classroom arrangements and timetables in many language centres are generally not conducive to the introduction of such curricula. Some of the implications for program management of introducing learner-centred curricula are spelled out by Reade, Brink, Mullins and Pedler (1985).

i. Organisation is shared with equal responsibility: program management becomes a new role for teachers.
ii. Teacher meetings must be seen as contact time.
iii. "Traditional" term organisation is affected as hours of classes, numbers of classes, size of rooms etc. cannot be predicted in advance.
iv. A natural outcome of extensive consultation is that some clients will have their needs met in other programs - so transfers and withdrawals may take place.
v. An essential feature of the process is the acquisition of a range of counselling skills.
vi. Skills in timetabling and time for producing complicated timetables must be allowed.
vii. Courses are based on client needs, rather than on "accepted" standardised views of appropriate curricula. The material covered and the skill
levels attained will be different for each client, and it is difficult to say when a course has been "completed".
(Reade, Brink, Mullins and Pedler 1985:6)

3.3 Learner Attitude

As indicated in 2.6, the attitudes and expectations of the learner, which are often derived from previous learning experiences, are central to the planning process. Learners are very often antipathetic to the concept of learner-centredness which is seen as violating socio-cultural norms about what is legitimate pedagogic activity. It is for this reason that this paper has stressed the importance of building planning and consultative processes into the curriculum itself, so that any given course is a preparation for further learning. Many of the difficulties experienced by teachers attempting to organise their classes on learner-centred principles result directly from the failure to take the attitudes and expectations of the learners into account.

4. SUMMARY

In this paper, we have outlined a practical framework for learner-centred curriculum development from the perspective of the Australian Adult migrant Education Program. It has been suggested that the curriculum process involves a number of essential steps including initial and on-going data collection and needs analysis, goal and objective setting, methodology and evaluation. The product resulting from this curriculum process is a joint venture, involving extensive consultation and negotiation between teacher and learners. An extended discussion of this process is to be found in Nunan, 1985.

The key point in the paper is that this curriculum development activity is seen, not as peripheral or antecedent to, but as a central part of the pedagogic process. Course aims and objectives therefore relate to both language and learning.

REFERENCES


Reade, H. Brink, A., Mullins, H., and Pedler, B. 1985. Submission the the Committee of Review of the AMEP.


This paper is based on a paper presented at the University of Hawaii, 20 March 1986.