

1 *Introduction*

1.1 Preamble

Traditionally ‘curriculum’ is taken to refer to a statement or statements of intent – the ‘what should be’ of a course of study. In this work a rather different perspective is taken. The curriculum is seen in terms of what teachers actually do; that is, in terms of ‘what is’, rather than ‘what should be’. The work is thus based on what many language teachers have found both desirable and possible.

The curriculum is seen from the perspective of the teacher for two reasons. In the first place, in the sort of learner centred system towards which many language teaching organisations are moving, the teacher is the prime agent of curriculum development. Second, educational reality is not what educational planners say ought to happen, but what teachers and learners actually do. The notion that planning equals teaching and that teaching equals learning is naive. Research suggests that the equation is much more complex than this, that teachers do not slavishly follow a pre-specified plan, and that learners do not necessarily always learn what teachers teach (Allwright 1986; Burton and Nunan 1986). It is this insight which has prompted within these pages a rather different view of language curricula.

1.2 Linguistics and Language Teaching

Due to a series of events which are partly circumstantial and partly historical, much of the development in language teaching has occurred outside the educational mainstream. The assumption seems to have been that educational theory and research has very little to contribute to the field of 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 partly due 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 couched within a linguistic rather than an educational paradigm. This, in turn, has created a fragmentation

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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 1970s, the focus was on the specification of content through the development of syllabuses which had a linguistic focus. While the development of functional–notional syllabuses represented a broadened focus, the focus itself was still basically linguistic, and there was a comparative neglect of methodology. Other practitioners focused on methodology to the exclusion of other elements in the curriculum, such as content specification and evaluation.

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 approaches to language curriculum development. (See for example Stern 1983; Yalden 1983; Richards 1984; Nunan 1985a; Dubin and Olshtain 1986.) These publications urge the development of procedures which are systematic and comprehensive, containing similar components to those contained in traditional curriculum development.

1.3 Learner-Centred Curriculum Development

This work differs from other publications in that it provides a theoretical and empirical rationale for learner-centred curriculum development within an adult ESL context. Such a curriculum will contain similar elements to those contained in traditional curriculum development, that is, planning (including needs analysis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and materials development) and evaluation (see for example Hunkins 1980).

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 teaching institutions. In particular, it places the burden for all aspects of curriculum development on the teacher.

In a curriculum based on the traditional ends–means model, a fixed series of steps is followed. Thus, in the curriculum planning process proposed by Taba (1962), planning, implementation and evaluation occur in 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.

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In fact, studies have demonstrated that most teachers simply do not operate in this way. Thus, Shavelson and Stern write:

Most teachers are trained to plan instruction by (a) specifying (behavioural) objectives, (b) specifying students' entry behaviour, (c) selecting and sequencing learning activities so as to move learners from entry behaviours to objectives and (d) evaluating the outcomes of instruction in order to improve planning. While this prescriptive model of planning may be one of the most consistently taught features of the curriculum of teacher education programmes, the model is consistently not used in teachers' planning in schools. Obviously there is a mismatch between the demands of the classroom and the prescriptive planning model.

(Shavelson and Stern 1981:477)

In this work, we shall look at what teachers do focus on in the planning, implementation and evaluation of language courses. From studies of teacher practice a negotiated curriculum model is developed in which much of the consultation, decision making and planning is informal and takes place during the course of programme delivery.

Most of the studies on which this work is based are reported here for the first time. They include a large-scale study of the teacher as curriculum planner in which over eight hundred teachers participated. Also included are smaller-scale empirical studies of teachers' involvement in content selection, methodology, materials selection and adaptation and assessment.

One of the major assumptions underlying the learner-centred philosophy is that, given the constraints that exist in most learning contexts, it is impossible to teach learners everything they need to know in class. (While this is certainly true of adult contexts, it is probably also true of other contexts as well.) What little class time there is must therefore be used as effectively as possible to teach those aspects of the language which the learners themselves deem to be most urgently required, thus increasing surrender value and consequent student motivation.

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 adopt realistic goals and time frames
- to develop learners' skills in self-evaluation.

The adoption of a learner-centred orientation implies differentiated curricula for different learners. This is because it is unrealistic to expect

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extensive participation in curriculum planning by learners with little experience of language and learning. When dealing with inexperienced learners, it is often necessary for the teacher to begin by making most of the decisions. For this reason the curriculum is conceptualised, as much by processes for carrying out curriculum tasks as by products (that is, the specification of content, lists of methodological options and so on).

1.4 The Curriculum Process

The key elements in the curriculum model proposed here are as follows: initial planning procedures (including data collection and learner grouping); content selection and gradation; methodology (which includes the selection of learning activities and materials); and ongoing monitoring, assessment and evaluation. A brief description of these elements and their functions within a learner-centred curriculum follow and are elaborated upon in the body of the text.

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 which are external to the learner. This initial data collection is usually superficial, relating mainly to factual information such as current proficiency level, age, educational background, previous learning experiences, time in the target culture 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 a learner's subjective needs as an individual in the learning situation, can often only be obtained once a course has begun.

If the information is collected before the 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 is accorded by teachers to factors such as language proficiency, life-style, 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 programme has to operate. Thus it is 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 would 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 in most language teaching institutions, it is worth exploring other possible types of class arrangement. In developing more diverse grouping arrangements it is important for teachers to accept the notion that the grouping convention of 'twenty students of the same proficiency level for twenty hours a week' (or whatever the convention might be) is not the only arrangement, nor even the most desirable one. Unfortunately, from the evidence collected during the study reported in Chapter 10, it is often administrative inflexibility which precludes more imaginative learner groupings.

Content selection is an important component of a learner-centred curriculum. In such a curriculum clear criteria for content selection give guidance on the selection of materials and learning activities and assist in assessment and evaluation. By making explicit the content objectives of a course and, eventually, by training learners to set their own objectives, the following benefits can accrue:

Learners come to have a more realistic idea of what can be achieved in a given course.

Learning comes to be seen as the gradual accretion of achievable goals.

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.

Self-evaluation becomes more feasible.

Classroom activities can be seen to relate to learners' real-life needs.

Skills development can be seen as a gradual, rather than an all-or-nothing, process.

A crucial distinction between traditional and learner-centred curriculum development is that, in the latter, no decision is binding. This is particularly true of content selection and gradation. These will need to be modified during the course of programme delivery as the learners' skills develop, their self awareness as learners grows and their perceived needs change.

It is therefore important that the content selected at the beginning of a course is not seen as definitive; it will vary, and will 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 such things as affective needs, expectations and preferred learning style). It is the outcomes of ongoing dialogue between teachers and learners which will determine content and learning objectives.

The selection of content and objectives is therefore something which is shaped and refined during the initial stages of a learning arrangement rather than being completely pre-determined. This is because the most valuable learner data can usually only be obtained in an informal way after relationships have been established between teachers and learners.

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The initial data collection, which is used principally for grouping learners, generally provides only fairly superficial information which can be used to make rough predictions about communicative needs. The most useful information, relating to subjective learner needs, can be obtained only 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 are 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 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 other cases translated activity evaluation sheets should be used. These need not be elaborate. In fact they may simply require the learners to say whether or not they liked a given activity. Sample self-evaluation sheets are provided in Chapter 8.

Methodology, which includes learning activities and materials, is generally the area where there is the 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 any conflicts be resolved. Evidence from recent studies documenting widespread mismatches between teacher and learner expectations are examined in the chapter on methodology. The solution to methodological mismatches is to be found in techniques and procedures for negotiation and consultation. 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 programmes 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)

The value of negotiation and consultation between teacher and learner is vividly illustrated in the case study which forms part of Chapter 10.

Evaluation is the final component in the curriculum model. Traditionally, evaluation occurs at the final stage in the curriculum process. In the model proposed here, however, evaluation is parallel with other curriculum activities and may occur at various times during the planning and implementation phases, as well as during a specified evaluation phase. In the model, course evaluation is separated from student assessment (Shaw and Dowsett 1986).

The purpose of assessment is to determine whether or not the objectives of a course of instruction have been achieved. In the case of a failure to achieve objectives, it is the purpose of evaluation to make some determination of why this might have been so. Questions relating to evaluation include the following:

Who is to evaluate?

How are they to evaluate?

What are they to evaluate?

At what point in the curriculum process will evaluation occur?

What are the purposes of the evaluation? In other words, what will happen to the curriculum as a result of evaluation activities?

In traditional curriculum models, evaluation has been identified with testing and is seen as an activity which is carried out at the end of the learning process, often by someone who is not connected with the course itself. (In other words, the emphasis is on summative rather than formative evaluation.) 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, principally by the participants in the process, that is, the teachers and learners.

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 integral part of both curriculum and teacher development.

Any element within the curriculum may be evaluated. At the planning stage, needs analysis techniques and procedures may be evaluated, while, during implementation, elements to be evaluated may include materials, learning activities, sequencing, learning arrangements, teacher performance and learner achievement.

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 processes.

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1.5 The Structure of the Study

Chapter 2 looks in detail at some of the theoretical and philosophical perspectives which have been articulated in curriculum development in general, and in language teaching in particular. The various elements in the curriculum are described, and it is suggested that, until fairly recently, some of the essential elements in the curriculum have either been seriously neglected or completely overlooked. Chapter 3 looks at the background to the development of a learner-centred approach to curriculum development, with particular reference to the language curriculum. Different philosophical approaches to the curriculum are examined, and a contrast is drawn between subject-centred and learner-centred approaches. A rationale for the learner-centred approach is drawn from work on adult learning and communicative language teaching. Finally the chapter looks at the roles, functions and responsibilities of the teacher within a learner-centred curriculum.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the initial planning processes. It looks at the controversy surrounding needs analysis, discusses procedures for grouping learners and provides some practical suggestions for data collection which have been developed by teachers.

Chapter 5 considers the questions of content selection and gradation. Various principles for selecting content are discussed, and ways in which such content, once selected, may be graded are outlined.

Methodology is considered in Chapter 6. The perspective taken is that of the communicative curriculum, and it is suggested that a 'weak' interpretation of the communicative movement allows the greatest flexibility. The importance of learner consultation in selecting learning activities is also discussed. Recent research into second-language acquisition is presented, along with a study designed to demonstrate its practical implications.

Chapter 7 looks at resources. It is suggested that authenticity is a key concept in any programme designed to provide learners in class with the sorts of skills they will need to communicate effectively outside. However, a broad view of authenticity, encompassing learner response as well as textual source, is stressed. The notion of the community as a resource is also explored.

Chapters 8 and 9 address issues relating to monitoring, assessment and evaluation. In these chapters it is suggested that encouraging self-assessment on the part of learners will raise their sensitivity as language learners. It is also suggested that self-evaluation on the part of teachers, particularly through small-scale action research projects, is a valuable means of promoting professional development.

The final chapter presents the results of a large-scale ethnographic study of the difficulties faced by teachers in implementing a learner-

centred curriculum model. It also draws together some of the central themes in the book, and points the way for future directions. In particular, it suggests that there is a pressing need for an empirical as well as a theoretical base for curriculum development. In order for the curriculum to be truly learner-centred, there is a need for documentation, not only of what learners want from language courses, but also of what they are capable of doing at various stages of proficiency.

1.6 Conclusion

In their analysis of theory and practice in education, MacDonald and Walker have this to say:

Happy alliances between theorist and practitioner in our system are rare: more often, the relationship is one of mutual mistrust punctuated by open antagonism. Between sub-groups of practitioners also, and perhaps particularly between teachers and managers, the unity of common purpose rests on almost religious observance of territorial boundaries. Practitioners can, however, generally rely on each other for support when faced with an external enemy, such as public criticism, whereas the theorists' behaviour in such circumstances is less predictable.

Partly as a consequence of this, education has a highly developed and long-standing mythology which acts as a protective public image projected by its members. At all levels of the system what people think they are doing, what they say they are doing, what they appear to others to be doing and what in fact they are doing, may be sources of considerable discrepancy.

(MacDonald and Walker 1975:7–8)

One of the central themes of this study is that such discrepancies will continue as long as a simple equation is assumed between what is planned, what is taught and what is learned. It is only when the complex inter-relationships of the various elements within the curriculum are studied together that we might begin to get an accurate picture of what is going on. However, such a picture is only likely to emerge if a truce is called in the war between theorist and practitioner. Both must be prepared to admit that they need the other so that theory might be constantly tested against practice.

2 Curriculum Processes

2.1 Traditional Approaches to the Curriculum

Why does Teacher A teach functions but not structures? Why does Teacher B try to encourage learners to discover their own errors rather than correcting the learners herself? Why does Teacher C try to develop communication skills through role play, language games and so on, rather than through drills and controlled practice activities? Why does Teacher D create all her own materials through authentic sources, while Teacher E, who has students with similar needs, uses coursebooks written by someone else?

Some teachers claim that teaching is essentially a practical activity, and has very little to do with the theoretical deliberations of educational philosophers, psychologists and curriculum designers. Stern, in fact, suggests that this is a characteristic of language teachers in general:

Language teachers can be said to regard themselves as practical people and not as theorists. Some might even say they are opposed to 'theory', expressing their opposition in such remarks as 'It's all very well in theory, but it won't work in practice'.

(Stern 1983:23)

However, as Stern goes on to observe, implicit in all the decisions made by the teacher relating to classroom practice, materials, methodology and content is a theory about the nature of language and the nature of language learning. Not all teachers will be able to articulate their theories, but they will have them just the same, and they lie behind the sorts of questions posed at the beginning of this chapter.

Curriculum planning can be seen as the systematic attempt by educationalists and teachers to specify and study planned intervention into the educational enterprise. In this chapter we shall explore some of the central concepts behind the study of the curriculum and look at a number of different models which have been developed to specify and assist in the planning, presentation and evaluation of learning.

One way of looking at the curriculum is to see it as an attempt to specify what should happen in the classroom, to describe what actually does happen, and to attempt to reconcile the differences between what 'should be' and what actually 'is'.