1 A context for classroom action

"I dunno," Jimmy said, "I forget what I was taught. I only remember what I've learnt."

(Patrick White)

You are given the experiences you need to understand the world.

(Paulo Coelho)

Introduction

The decisions that teachers are required to make during the instructional process are all driven by the nature of the program, the goals of instruction, and the needs of the individual learners. It is therefore critical for us to consider these issues before turning to the management of the learning process in the classroom. This chapter is a scene-setting exercise, proving a foundation, as well as a point of departure, for the rest of the book.

In the first section we define some of the key concepts that provide a framework for the rest of the book. These concepts include learner-centeredness, learning-centeredness, self-directed teaching, communicative language teaching, and high- and low-structured teaching. We then outline our conception of "curriculum," a broad term that covers the planning, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs.

Concept map of Chapter 1

In this chapter we cover the following issues and concepts:

— *Setting the context and defining terms* key terms defined are "learner-centeredness," "experiential learning," "humanism," "learning-centeredness," "communicative language teaching," "high-structure and low-structure teaching"
— *Curriculum processes* the scope of curriculum development and the importance of curriculum development for the management of learning
— *Needs analysis* definition and examples of needs analysis

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– *Setting goals and objectives*   from learner needs to learning goals, il-
lustration of goals and objectives, how clearly stated goals and objectives
provide a sound basis for managing the learning process

Setting the context and defining terms

In the introduction we asserted that managing the learning process in the
language classroom had gradually become more complex with the intro-
duction into pedagogy of new views of language, learning and the role of
the learner within the learning process. In this section we examine the key
concepts of learner-centeredness, learning-centeredness, self-directed
teaching, communicative language teaching and high- and low-structured
teaching, and we explain their relevance to the book as a whole.

Learner-centeredness

The concept of learner-centeredness has been invoked with increasing
frequency in recent years. What does the term mean? Like many widely
used terms, it probably means rather different things to different people
(Nunan & Brindley 1986). For us, learner-centered classrooms are those in
which learners are actively involved in their own learning processes. The
extent to which it is possible or desirable for learners to be involved in their
own learning will obviously vary from context to context (and, indeed,
from learner to learner). If learners are to learn anything at all, however,
ultimately they have to do the learning for themselves. Thus it is a truism to
say that they should be involved in their own learning. In an ideal learning-
centered context, not only will decisions about what to learn and how to
learn be made with reference to the learners, but the learners themselves
will be involved in the decision-making process. Each element in the cur-
riculum process will involve the learner, as Table 1 shows.
    The philosophy of learner-centeredness has strong links with experien-
tial learning, humanistic psychology and task-based language teaching.
These links are evident in the following quotes:

[A learner-centered] curriculum will contain similar elements to those contained
in traditional curriculum development, that is, planning (including needs analy-
sis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and ma-
terials development) and evaluation (see for example Hunkins 1980). However,
the key difference between learner-centred and traditional curriculum develop-
ment 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

10   *The self-directed teacher*

Table 1   Learner roles in a learner-centered curriculum

Curriculum stage	*Role of learner*
Planning	Learners are consulted on what they want to learn and how they want to go about learning. An extensive process of needs analysis facilitates this process. Learners are involved in setting, monitoring, and modifying the goals and objectives of the programs being designed for them.
Implementation	Learners' language skills develop through the learners actively using and reflecting on the language inside and outside the classroom. They are also involved in modifying and creating their own learning tasks and language data.
Assessment and evaluation	Learners monitor and assess their own progress. They are also actively involved in the evaluation and modification of teaching and learning during the course and after it has been completed.

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. (Nunan 1988: 2)

The proponents of humanistic education have broadened our concept of learning by emphasizing that meaningful learning has to be self-initiated. Even if the stimulus comes from outside, the sense of discovery, however, and the motivation which that brings has to come from inside driven by the basic human desire for self-realization, well-being and growth. . . . [I]n terms of personal and interpersonal competence the process-oriented classroom revolves around issues of risk and security, cooperation and competition, self-directedness and otherdirectedness; and meaningful and meaningless activities. We have also tried to make clear that "teachers who claim it is not their job to take these phenomena into account may miss out on some of the most essential ingredients in the management of successful learning" (Underhill 1989, p. 252). (Legutke & Thomas 1991: 269)

We can see from these extracts that learner-centeredness is strongly rooted in traditions derived from general education. Our view is that language pedagogy needs to draw on its general educational roots for sustenance,

which it has not not always done. In fact, some language programs seem to have suffered an "educational bypass." During the course of this book, our orientation will become clear, as we have drawn on insights and resources, not only from language pedagogy, but from education in general (Brown 1989; Everard 1986; Everard & Morris 1990).

TASK

Aim To evaluate your own attitude toward the concept of learner-centeredness.

Procedure With reference to a teaching context you are familiar with, indicate your attitude to the concept of learner-centeredness by rating the following statements from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).

1. Learners have a right to be involved in curriculum decision making (e.g., selecting content, selecting learning activities and tasks).   1 2 3 4 5

2. Learners learn best if the content relates to their own experience and knowledge.   1 2 3 4 5

3. Learners have fixed ideas about language learning that need to be taken into account in developing language programs.   1 2 3 4 5

4. Learners who have developed skills in "learning how to learn" are the most effective students.   1 2 3 4 5

5. Learners are less interested in learning for learning's sake than in learning in order to achieve immediate or not too far distant life goals.   1 2 3 4 5

6. Learners have different learning styles and strategies that need to be taken into consideration in developing learning programs.   1 2 3 4 5

7. Learners who have developed skills in self-assessment and self-evaluation are the most effective students.   1 2 3 4 5

In doing this task in workshops with teachers, we have found that teachers will give different answers according to the context and situation in which they are working. This finding serves to underline the essential point that learner-centeredness is not an all-or-nothing concept. It is an attitude, a philosophy, which will be conditioned by the situation and context in which teachers finds themselves.

Learning-centeredness

Table 1, which sets out the role of the learner in relation to curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation, represents the ideal. As teachers

Table 2   Learner-centeredness in the experiential content domain

Level	Learner action	Gloss
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the course.
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their own goals and objectives from a range of alternatives on offer.
3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning program.
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives.
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom.

and course designers, we have been in relatively few situations in which learners from an early stage in the learning process have been able to make critically informed decisions about what to learn and how to learn. In our experience, learners need to be systematically taught the skills needed to implement a learner-centered approach to pedagogy. In other words, language programs should have twin goals: language content goals and learning process goals. Such a program, we would characterize as being "learning centered." By systematically educating learners about what it means to be a learner, learners reach a point where they are able to make informed decisions about what they want to learn and how they want to learn. It is at this point that a truly learner-centered curriculum can be implemented. Learning-centeredness is thus designed to lead to learner-centeredness.

The previous discussion underlines the fact that learner-centeredness is not an all-or-nothing process. Rather it is a continuum from relatively less to relatively more learner-centered. Nunan (1995b) has captured this continuum in the following tables, which show that learner-centeredness can be implemented at a number of different levels. The tables also illustrate some of the practical steps that can be taken in implementing a learner-oriented approach to instruction.

Table 2 relates to the experiential content domain. It demonstrates that, all other things being equal, a classroom in which learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of instruction is more learner-centered

Table 3   Learner-centeredness in the learning process domain

Level	Learner action	Gloss
1	Awareness	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles/strategies.
2	Involvement	Learners make choices among a range of options.
3	Intervention	Learners modify/adapt tasks.
4	Creation	Learners create their own tasks.
5	Transcendence	Learners become teachers and researchers.

than one in which goals and content are left implicit. We would argue that all learners should, in the first instance, be alerted to goals and content. In collecting data for this book we were surprised at how infrequently this step happened. However, we would go further, and argue that it is just a first step along a path that, given the appropriate context and types of learners, could take the learners through a gradual learning process in which they made selections from a range of alternatives, modified and adapted goals and content, created their own goals and selected their own experiential content areas and finally moved beyond the classroom itself. (For practical descriptions and illustrations of these processes, see Nunan 1995b.) How far one chooses to move along the continuum depends on one's learners and the context and environment of the instructional process.

Table 3 shows how the continuum can apply to the learning process domain. Once again, we see that learner-centeredness is not an all-or-nothing process, but can be implemented in a series of gradual steps.

Communicative language teaching

Communicative language teaching emerged from a number of disparate sources. During the 1970s and 1980s applied linguists and language educators began to re-evaluate pedagogical practice in the light of changed views on the nature of language and learning, and the role of teachers and learners in the light of these changing views. The contrast between what for want of better terms we have called "traditionalism," and communicative language teaching (CLT), is shown in Table 4 in relation to a number of key variables within the curriculum. The table presents contrasts in relation to theories of language and learning, and in relation to objectives, syllabus, classroom activities and the roles of learners, teachers and materials. The views illustrated represent points on a continuum, rather than exclusive categories, and most teachers will move back and forth along the continuum in re-

Table 4   Changing views on the nature of language and learning: Traditionalism and CLT

Teaching	Traditionalism	Communicative language
Theory of language	Language is a system of rule-governed structures hierarchically arranged.	Language is a system for the expression of meaning: primary function – interaction.
Theory of learning	Habit formation; skills are learned more effectively if oral precedes written; analogy not analysis.	Activities involving real communication; carrying out meaningful tasks and using language that is meaningful to the learner promote learning.
Objectives	Control of the structures of sound, form and order, mastery over symbols of the language; goal – native speaker mastery.	Objectives will reflect the needs of the learner; they will include functional skills as well as linguistic objectives.
Syllabus	Graded syllabus of phonology, morphology, and syntax. Contrastive analysis.	Will include some or all of the following: structures, functions, notions, themes and tasks. Ordering will be guided by learner needs.

Activities	Dialogues and drills; repetition and memorization; pattern practice.	Engage learners in communication; involve processes such as information sharing, negotiation of meaning and interaction.
Role of learner	Organisms that can be directed by skilled training techniques to produce correct responses.	Learner as negotiator, interactor, giving as well as taking.
Role of teacher	Central and active; teacher-dominated method. Provides model; controls direction and pace.	Facilitator of the communication process, needs analyst, counselor, process manager.
Role of materials	Primarily teacher oriented. Tapes and visuals; language lab often used.	Primary role of promoting communicative language use; task based, authentic materials.

sponse to the needs of the students and the overall context in which they are teaching. The truth is that language is, at one and the same time, both a system of rule-governed structures and a system for the expression of meaning. Learning is a matter of habit formation as well as a process of activation through the deployment of communicative tasks. The challenge for the teacher, the textbook writer and the curriculum developer is to show how the rule-governed structures enable the language user to make meanings.

We do not believe that many classrooms can be defined exclusively in terms of a particular methodology. Whether a classroom is characterized as "traditional" or "communicative" is therefore determined by the relative emphasis and degree to which the views listed in the table underpin what happens in the classroom rather than on the exclusive adherence to one set of views to the exclusion of any other. The difference lies, not in the rigid adherence to one particular approach rather than another, but in the basic orientation. Some teachers operate out of a traditional paradigm, making occasional forays into CLT, and for others it is the other way around. In the ESL and EFL classrooms we have worked in and studied in recent years, the prevailing trend has been toward CLT, although by no means exclusively so.

High- and low-structure teaching

The insight that communication was an integrated process rather than a set of discrete learning outcomes created a dilemma for language education. It meant that the destination (functioning in another language) and the route (attempting to learn the target language) moved much closer together, and, in some instances (for example, in role plays and simulations), became indistinguishable. The challenge for curriculum developers, syllabus designers, materials writers and classroom teachers revolved around decisions associated with the movements between points on the continua set out in the tables in the preceding section. Questions such as the following therefore appeared with increasing frequency in teacher-training workshops: How do I integrate "traditional" exercises, such as drills, controlled conversations and the like, with communicative tasks such as discussions, debates, role plays, etc.? How do I manage decision making and the learning process effectively in classroom sessions devoted to communicative tasks which, by definition, require me to hand over substantial amounts of decision-making power and control to the learners? How can I equip learners themselves with the skills they will need to make decisions wisely and to embrace power effectively?

For some individuals the solution lay in rejecting the changing views

along with their inconvenient pedagogical implications. Others went to the opposite extreme, eschewing "traditional" solutions to their materials development and language-teaching challenges. In most contexts, however, a more balanced view prevailed.

For some time after the rise of CLT, the status of grammar in the curriculum was rather uncertain. Some linguists maintained that it was not necessary to teach grammar, that the ability to use a second language ("knowing how") would develop automatically if the learner were required to focus on meaning in the process of using the language communicate. In recent years, this view has come under serious challenge, and it now seems to be widely accepted that there is value in classroom tasks which require learners to focus on form. It is also accepted that grammar is an essential resource in using language com-municatively. (Nunan 1989a: 13)

In educational terms, a useful way of viewing this emerging dilemma in language education is in terms of high- and low-structure teaching. High-structure tasks are those in which teachers have all the power and control. Low-structure tasks are those in which power and control are devolved to the students. We have borrowed the terms "high-structure" and "low-structure" from Biggs and Telfer. As we pointed out in the introduction, they suggest that the successful management of the learning process de-pends on teachers knowing where to locate themselves on the high- to low-structure continuum in relation to a given task. In a high-structure task, students are placed in reactive roles and accorded relatively little choice. In a low-structure context, students have many options and maximum auton-omy. However, we do not equate high-structure with non-communicative and low-structure with communicative tasks. In certain communicative tasks, learners have relatively little freedom of maneuver. However, we do believe an association exists between low-structure and CLT and that the incorporation of communicative tasks with low-structure implications into the classroom increases the complexity of the decision-making process for the teacher.

We would argue that the kinds of managerial issues that arise and the sorts of decisions that teachers are required to make will be largely driven by the degree of structure implied. This concept is illustrated in Table 5, which provides exemplary questions relating to high- and low-structure contexts as these apply to key elements at the levels of curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation. This schema will be referred to constantly in the pages that follow, as it is one of the key organizational frameworks underpinning the work as a whole. It allows us to deal coherently with the following key managerial questions and to demonstrate that the answers will vary according to the degree of structuring called for by the instruc-tional goals guiding the interaction at that particular time.