***LANGUAGE CURRICULA AND COMMUNICATIVE CLASSROOM***

*Summarizing study concerning the problems of FLT curricula and communicative classrooms*

Second or foreign language teaching is often looked at from the very narrow point of view - that of the teaching act. And therefore much of the literature on second language teaching deals with teaching methods or with the design and use of instructional materials. If students are not learning it is assumed to be the fault of the method, the materials, or the teacher. Yet the success of a language program involves far more than the mere act of teaching. As with any successful educational program, a number of levels of planning, development, and implementation are involved.

CURRICULUM AND SYLLABUS

Curriculum planning can be seen as the systematic attempt by teachers to specify and study planned intervention into the educational process. There are 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’.

According to David Nunan, 'curriculum' is a large and complex concept, and the term 'curriculum’ is used in a number of different ways. In some contexts it is used to refer to a particular program of study (for example the 'science curriculum' or the 'mathematical curriculum')(Nunan 1989:14). In other contexts, it is used more widely. Nunan uses 'syllabus' to refer to the selecting and grading the context, and 'curriculum' more widely to refer to all aspects of planning, implementing, evaluating and managing an educational program (Nunan 1988).

In the United Sates, the term ‘curriculum’, rather than ‘syllabus’, is used to refer to all aspects of the planning, implementation and evaluation of curriculum. The term is also used for a particular course of instruction. In Britain, the term ‘syllabus’ is used to denote that part of curriculum activity concerned with the ‘what’ of the curriculum. It can be said that the term ‘curriculum’ incorporates those elements designated by the term ‘syllabus’ along with considerations of methodology and evaluation. According to David Nunan, in relation to language teaching, the key elements for consideration within the curriculum are as follows: initial planning including needs analysis, grouping learners, goal and objective setting, selection and grading of content, methodology (which includes materials and learning activities), and finally assessment and evaluation (Nunan 1988: 14).

HISTORICAL REVIEW

As background information for second and foreign language course designers, a brief review of a few of the outstanding contributors to the general curriculum planning literature is necessary.

One of the most influential curriculum developers this century is Tyler, whose best known work, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, was published in 1949. For many, this book is seen as the early bible of curriculum design. In it, Tyler provides a model for the systematic development of the curriculum. He asserts that the development of any curriculum for any subject whatsoever must be based on a consideration of four fundamental questions:

What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?

What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?

How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?

How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

The first question forces the curriculum developer to contemplate and clarify the nature of the education process in which he or she is involved. In other words, it requires the specification of aims, goals and objectives. The second question relates to the content of instruction and requires the curriculum designer to articulate the subject matter which will be used as a vehicle for attaining the pre-specified aims, goals and objectives. The third question, relating to the organization of the educational processes, requires the curriculum designer to articulate the principles for staging and sequencing input for the curriculum. The final question, on attainment of pre-specified purposes or objectives, relates to the area of evaluation.

In other words, Ralph Tyler suggested that a rational curriculum is developed by first identifying goals and objectives, then by listing, organizing and grading the learning experiences, and finally, by finding means for determining whether the goals and objectives have been achieved (Tyler 1949).

Taba's outline (1962:12) of the steps which a course designer must work through to develop subject matter courses has become the foundation for many other writers' suggestions. Her list of 'curriculum processes' includes the following:

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 the means to evaluate

According to Fraida Dubin and Elite Olstain (Dubin, Fraida and Elite Olstain. 1986: 2), adapted to English language teaching matters, her list, although suggestive, is not sufficiently explicit regarding the area of language content. Nor does it allow for a distinction between broad, national goals for courses in multilingual contexts and narrower course objectives for the teaching of actual language skills and competencies.

In language teaching, Steps 3 and 4 are usually known as *syllabus* design. Syllabus design is concerned with the choice and sequencing of instructional content. If the Taba steps were followed, the procedures for developing a syllabus would involve examining instructional objectives and arranging them by priorities, and then determining what kind of content was required to attain the objectives.

As Jack C. Richards sees it, in reality, in language teaching the syllabus has traditionally been the starting point in planning a language program, rather than an activity that occurs midway in the process (Richards, Jack C. 1990: 8). The concept of a language syllabus has been fundamental in the development of language teaching practices in the twentieth century. In the work of such British language teaching specialists as Harold Palmer, Michael West, and A. S. Hornby, and such American specialists as Charles Fries and Robert Lado, questions concerning the linguistic content of a language program were considered primary and a necessary basis for planning a language program (Richards, Jack C. 1990: 8). This reflects the fact that many applied linguists were trained as linguists, rather than as educational planners. Therefore debate over the most appropriate form for syllabuses in language teaching continues. A properly constructed and planned syllabus is believed to *assure* successful learning, since it represents a linguistically and psycholinguistically optimal introduction to the target language. Syllabus design theory has consequently been one of the most active branches of applied linguistics in recent years.

In a discussion of principles of syllabus design, Corder (1973: 322) warns that “there is no such thing as a perfect, ideal or logical syllabus… Ideally, each learner requires a “personalized” syllabus of his/her own. But we teach groups, not individuals. Any syllabus is bound, therefore, to be something of a compromise.” But we have seen that it is unsatisfactory in principle to separate the learning of a language from the social use of a language, and any use of a language as compromise. It is specifically within the process of compromising with the demands and strategies of other language users that language acquisition occurs. Perhaps, therefore, if we can find an appropriate way of compromising, we shall benefit the learner more than if we try to identify the in-built syllabus of a learner operation in isolation.

But it is isolated syllabuses that constitute the main body of traditional language syllabuses - isolated in the sense that they assume that language learning will be carried out by individuals requiring a special body of content. Corder comments (p. 322) that “what we finish up with is some sort of integrated but parallel set of syllabuses: syntactic, phonological, cultural and functional and within each of these a parallel set of learning tasks”, and other have made the same point with even larger lists. Swan (1981: 39), for example, includes Corder’s four syllabuses, but adds lexical, notional, topic, situational, discourse, rhetorical, and stylistic syllabuses as well. There is in fact some confusion here, for the various types of syllabuses can be related to one another more systematically than Swan implies (‘discourse’, ‘rhetoric’, and ‘style’, as he defines them, are three different ways of looking at the same phenomenon), but they are all based on analytical categories from the point of view of the observer of language activity.

Another writer who also has written on general curriculum designs, McNeil (1977:1), offers guidelines for planning which are extremely valuable for identifying the role that a curriculum plays in establishing the intellectual backdrop or policy for instructional plans. He categorizes recent curriculum designs in the United States under four general headings based on their educational-cultural orientations: humanistic, social-reconstructionist, technological, and academic subject matter. Any one of these orientations could serve as the basis for a curriculum for a language program. However, since McNeil's model is not specifically concerned with language programs, what is lacking is some mechanism for including a theoretical view toward language and language learning.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Recently, it has been suggested that at the very minimum a curriculum should offer the following:

A *In planning*:

1. Principles for the selection of content - what is to be learned and thought.

2. Principles for the development of a teaching strategy - how is to be learned and taught.

3. Principles for the making of decisions about sequence.

4. Principles on which to diagnose the strengths and weakness of individual students and differentiate the general principles 1, 2 and 3 above, to meet individual cases.

B. *In empirical study*:

1. Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of students.

2. Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of teachers.

3. Guidance as to the feasibility of implementing the curriculum in varying school contexts, pupil contexts, environments and peer-group situations.

4. Information about the variability of effects in differing contexts and on different pupils and an understanding of the causes of the variation.

C. *In relation to justification*:

A formulation of the intention or aim to the curriculum which is accessible to critical scrutiny.

(Stenhouse 1975: 5)

This list, although by no means exhaustive, demonstrates just how comprehensive the field of curriculum study can be.

Language curriculum development, Richards says, like other areas of curriculum activity, is concerned with principles and procedures for the planning, delivery, management, and assessment of teaching and learning (Richards, Jack C. 1990: 1). Curriculum development processes in language teaching comprise needs analysis, goal setting, syllabus design, methodology, and testing and evaluation.

In language curriculum development, needs analysis serves the purposes of:

1. providing a mechanism for obtaining a wider range of input into the content, design, and implementation of a language program through involving such people as learners, teachers, administrators and employers in the planning process.

2. identifying general or specific language needs that can be addressed in developing goals, objectives, and content for a language program.

3. providing data that can serve as the basis for reviewing and evaluating an existing program.

Needs analysis is fundamental to the planning of general language courses.

Curriculum goals are general statements of the intended outcomes of a language program, and represent what the curriculum planners believe to be desirable and attainable program aims based on the constraints revealed in the needs analysis. Goals can be used as a basis for developing more specific descriptions of the intended outcomes of the program (the program objectives). Goal statements refer to elements of the program that are actually going to be addressed by instruction. For example, a needs analysis might reveal that a group of learners had unfavorable attitudes towards the proposed language program. A goal statement reflecting this might be: Students will develop favorable attitudes toward the program. However, while this goal might represent a sincere wish on the part of teachers, it should appear as a program goal only if it is to be addressed concretely in the program.

According to Jack C. Richards, goals and objectives for the program have to be developed as well as syllabuses and instructional materials (Richards, Jack C. 1990: 1). Instructional strategies have to be determined, teachers selected and trained, and tests and assessment procedures chosen. Once the program is in operation, procedures are needed to enable the program to be monitored and its effects on learners and learning evaluated. In order to plan for effective second language teaching, a comprehensive view is needed of the nature and process of language program development.

It is not until the goals, objectives, and content of a language program have been determined that decisions about methodology can be taken up in detail. The focus of this phase of program development is on the kind of instruction that will be required to achieve the goals of the program. From the perspective of curriculum development , questions of methodology do not center on the choice of a ‘method.’ Appropriate teaching methodology is not predetermined; not can it be imposed on teachers and learners. Rather it evolves out of the dynamics of the teaching process itself. This does not mean, however, that effective teaching cannot be planned for and conceptualized in advance (Richards, Jack C. 1990: 11).

Methodology can be characterized as the activities, tasks, and learning experiences selected by the teacher in order to achieve learning, and how these are used within the teaching/learning process. These activities are justified according to the objectives the teacher has set out to accomplish and the content he or she has set out to teach. They also relate to the philosophy of the program, to the view of language and language learning that the program embodies, and to the roles of teachers, learners, and instructional materials in the program. Since the assumptions underlying methodology are not necessarily shared by teachers, administrators, and learners, it is a useful exercise for all who are involved in a language program to clarify their assumptions about the kind of teaching and learning the program will try to exemplify. This can be done through teacher preparation activities that examine attitudes, beliefs, and practices concerning five central issues (Richards, Jack C. 1990: 1):

1. the approach or philosophy underlying the program
2. the role of teachers in the program
3. the role of the learners
4. the kinds of learning activities, tasks, and experiences that will be used in the program
5. the role and design of instructional materials.

Turning more specifically to language teaching, the distinction drawn between syllabus design and methodology suggests that syllabus design deals with the selection and grading of content, while methodology is concerned with the selection and sequencing of learning activities. If one sticks to the traditional distinction, then task design would seem to belong to the realm of methodology. However with the development of communicative language teaching the distinction between syllabus design and methodology becomes difficult to sustain: one needs not only to specify both the content (or ends of learning) and the tasks (or means to those ends) but also to integrate them. This suggests a broad perspective on curriculum in which concurrent consideration is given to content, methodology and evaluation.

In this perspective, David Nunan (Nunan, D. 1989: 15) makes one substantial departure from the ‘traditional’ approach to curriculum design. With a traditional approach, such as the one suggested by Tyler, the curriculum designer first decides on the goals and objectives of instruction. Once these have been satisfactory specified, the curriculum content is specified. The learning experiences are then decided upon, and, finally, the means for assessing learners and evaluating the curriculum are established. The process is thus a linear one which operates in one direction, with a feedback loop from evaluation to goals as the following diagram shows:

Goals Content Experiences (Tasks) Evaluation

(Nunan, D. 1989: 16)

Applying this to language curricula, one would first decide on why one’s learners are coming along to learn in the first place. The learning tasks would be specified. Finally, means would be established for deciding whether the content has been learned and the goals achieved. This final evaluative step would allow us to decide whether our goals, content and tasks need to be modified.

But while this might seem to be a logical way of designing a curriculum, Nunan thinks in practice it can be unnecessary rigid: a more flexible approach generally leads to a more satisfactory and coherent end product (Nunan, D. 1989: 16). Taking a set of curriculum goals as a point of departure, he simultaneously specifies content and develops learning tasks. He illustrates such a process as follows:

Content

Goals Evaluation

Tasks

In this model, content and tasks are developed in tandem so that content can suggest tasks and vice versa. There is also a feedback loop so that the results of the evaluation can be fed back into the curriculum planning process.

David Nunan (Nunan, D. 1989: 16) gives the following example to represent this process:

“Imagine we are developing a curriculum for second language learners who want to study in English at university. Such a curriculum will have the following sorts of goals:

- Reading academic texts

- Taking part in tutorial discussions

- Obtaining and recording information from academic lectures

- Writing formal essays.”

In developing a unit of work for a goal such as ‘reading academic texts’ we might have as resources a number of syllabus checklists which specify topics, grammar, vocabulary etc. and input data in the form of a variety of reading texts and extracts. Teachers would examine a given text and decide on an activity or sequence of activities requiring the learner to extract and transform the key information contained in the text in some way (for example, by completing a diagram). Teachers would also determine which aspects of the content learners would need to engage in to complete the task successfully. This might include finding the meaning of a range of vocabulary items, comprehending logical relationships, identifying anaphoric links and understanding relative clauses. Separate exercises would be written for these, and the items would be checked off against the syllabus checklists. In this way, the syllabus would evolve in the course of preparing the program, rather than preceding the specification of learning tasks and other exercise types.

COMMUNICATIVE CLASSROOM

Goals are usually defined in a very broad terms, allowing for more specific decision-making to be carried out at lower levels. Such a wide, general view is illustrated in the following statement which might occur in an EFL setting: “The purpose of introducing an additional language into our educational system is to allow communication with the rest of the world.” (Dubin, Fraida and Elite Olstain. 1986: 24). This statement of objectives reflects overall societal goals for a country which needs to promote contacts with other communities. On the other hand, if the particular educational system places high priority on personal aspects of language learning, a statement like the following might be found: “The main objective in learning an additional language is to allow for personal growth and enrichment.” (Dubin, Fraida and Elite Olstain. 1986: 24). Both of these quite general statements might lead policy makers towards different types of decisions. The first strongly emphasizes the need for communication, while the second emphasizes individual choice and achievement.

If the emphasis is on the communicative aspect of language learning, or in other words on the learners’ ability to use the target language for communicative purposes, then planners are likely to design a utilitarian-oriented syllabus, one which encourages the development of communicative-type teaching materials. In more operational terms, the curriculum committee might define the terminal goal of the program as follows: “The student finishing this program will be able to converse effectively with a native speaker on topics of interest, will be able to read authentic materials for pleasure or professional needs, and will be able to correspond with friends, colleagues or business associates in the target language.” This definition is still very general, but it is an attempt to give some description of the terminal competencies which are the expected outcome of the course.

A great deal has been written in the last few years about the theory and practice of communicative language teaching. However, a basic principle underlying all communicative approaches is that learners must learn not only to make grammatically correct (propositional) statements about the world, but must also develop the ability to use language to get things done. These two aspects of language are captured in the distinction between the propositional and illocutionary (or functional) levels of language (Widdowson 1978). It was recognized that simply being able to create grammatically correct structures in language did not necessarily enable the learner to use the language to carry out various real-world tasks. While the learners have to be able to construct grammatically correct structures, they also have to do much more. In working out what this ‘much more’ includes, linguists and sociolinguists began to investigate the concept of speech situation. In so doing they were able to define some of the ways in which language is likely to be influenced by situational variables. Some of the most important of these variables are the situation itself, the topic of conversation, the conversational purpose, and probably the most important of all, the relationship between interlocutors in an interaction (Nunan, D. 1988: 25). All of these interact in complex ways in communicative interaction.

The development of communicative language teaching has had a dramatic effect on the roles that learners are required to adopt. This is particularly true of oral interaction tests. In the small-group interaction tasks learners are required to put language to a range of uses, to use language which has been imperfectly mastered, to negotiate meaning, in short, to draw on their own resources rather than simply repeating and absorbing language. This can sometimes cause problems if the learners have rather set ideas about language and learning, particularly if these differ greatly from their own. In such cases the teacher has a number of options. On the one hand he/she can insist that, as a teacher, he/she knows best and the learners must resign themselves to doing as the teacher says. On the other hand, the teacher can give in to the learners and structure activities around their preferences. In Nunan’s words, a more positive option would be to discuss the issue with the learners, explain why you want them to engage in communicative tasks, and attempt to come to a compromise (Nunan, D. 1989: 86).

The roles of teachers and learners are, in many ways, complementary. Giving the learners a different role (such as greater initiative in the classroom) requires the teacher to adopt a different role. According to Breen and Candlin (1980), the teacher has three main roles in the communicative classroom. The first is to act as facilitator of the communicative process, the second is to act as a participant, and the third is to act as an observer and learner (Breen and Cadlin 1980).

Conversation is a multifaceted activity. In some language programs it is an opportunity for untrained native speakers to get students to talk, using whatever resources and techniques the teacher can think of. In language programs where trained teachers are available, they are often left to their own resources and encouraged to use whatever materials they choose in order to provide practice in both *accuracy* and *fluency*. Consequently the content of conversation classes varies widely. In one class, the teacher’s primary emphasis might be on problem solving. Students work on communication games and tasks in pairs or small groups with relatively little direct teacher input. In another class, the teacher might have a more active role, employing grammar and pronunciation drills and structured oral tasks. A third teacher may use the conversation class as an opportunity for unstructured free discussion, while in another class the teacher might have students work on a situational dialogue such as “At the bank” and “At the supermarket.”

The following diagram from Wright (1987) illustrates the different ways in which learners might be grouped physically or arranged within the classroom.

Social organization  Pupils

and teaching activity  Products

 Activities. Forms of interaction

Small Group  Whole

Work   class

       

       

       

Pair work   

  



Individual       

    

Presentation,

Film, etc.

TASKS

Wright: Roles of Teachers and Learners (1987: 58)

Part of the difficulty in deciding what to do in the conversation class is due to the nature of conversation itself. In order to appreciate the complex nature of conversation and conversational fluency, Richards shows some of the most important dimensions of conversation: the purposes of conversation, turn-taking, topics, formal features of conversation, and the notion of fluency (Richards, Jack C. 1990: 67).

*Purposes of conversation*

Conversations serve a variety of purposes. Two different kinds of conversational interaction can be distinguished - those in which the primary focus is on the exchange of information (the transactional function of conversation), and those in which the primary purpose is to establish and maintain social relations (the interactional function of conversation) (Brown and Yule 1983). In transactional uses of conversation the primary focus is on the message, whereas interactional uses of conversation focus primarily on the social needs of the participants. Approaches to the teaching of both conversation and listening comprehension are fundamentally affected by whether the primary purposes involved are transactional or interactional.

*Turn-taking*

Conversation is a collaborative process. A speaker does not say everything he or she wants to say in a single utterance. Conversations progress as a series of ‘turns’; at any moment, the speaker may become the listener. Basic to the management of the collaborative process in conversation is the turn-making system.

*The role of topics*

The way topics are selected for discussion within conversation and the strategies speakers use to introduce, develop, or change topics within conversations constitute another important dimension of conversational management. For example, coherent conversation respects norms concerning the choice of topics. Questions concerning one’s age, salary, and marital status may be appropriate on first encounters in some cultures, but not in others.

*Formal features of conversation*

Conversational discourse is also recognized by formal features, which distinguish it from written discourse. Written language exhibits a different syntax from spoken discourse. In written mode, clauses are linked in complex ways, with a main clause often followed by or linked to subordinate clauses. This is not possible in spoken discourse.

An important dimension of conversation is using a style of speaking that is appropriate to the particular circumstances. Different styles of speaking reflect the roles, age, sex, and status of participants in interactions.

*The concept of fluency*

The concept of fluency reflects the assumption that speakers set out to produce discourse that is comprehensible, easy to follow, and free from errors and breakdowns in communication, though this goal is often not met due to processing and production demands. “The prime objective of the speaker is the generation of maximally acceptable speech in both content and form and a concomitant minimization of errors by the time an utterance has been articulated” (Hieke 1981: 150). Hieke proposes three conversational “maxims” that motivate the speaker:

1. Be Error-Free (phonology and syntax)
2. Be Intelligible (semantics, lexicon, logic, stylistics, and rhetoric)
3. Be in Control of the Communication Channel (fluency, and turn taking).

Accuracy (including control of grammar and pronunciation) is here a *component* of fluency, rather than as independent dimension of conversational skill. The kind of discourse speakers produce and the degree of fluency they achieve depend upon the task the speaker is attempting and the context for communication (i.e., whether the speech situation involves face-to-face conversation, whether the speaker is taking part in an interview or a discussion, or whether the speaker is involved in telling a story, giving a description, or replying to a question).

*Approaches to the teaching of conversation*

Currently there are two major approaches to the teaching of conversation in second language programs. One is an indirect approach, in which conversational competence is seen as the product of engaging learners in conversational interaction. The second, a more direct approach, involves planning a conversation program around the specific microskills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation.

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