

Designing an EFL Curriculum: Steps in Assessing Needs

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Introduction

Designing a curriculum is a laborious task requiring time and a great deal of careful research in order to produce a document which can be used successfully for a foreign language program. Within the field of EFL, professionals often find that they are asked to do tasks other than teach. Usually, these duties involve planning courses and writing materials. However, occasionally we are asked to design curriculum without any prior training or any guidelines on how to proceed. The aim of this paper is to present general guidelines which will enable the person undertaking the task to be successful. The framework which is presented here is concise and practical, making the steps easy to follow and, therefore, easier to design a curriculum to fit the goals of any EFL program.

Although there is a plethora of excellent information on curriculum development and design (Bloom 1956, Taba 1962, Allen 1983, McNeil 1985), there is still little available on designing a curriculum which fits the goals, objectives and setting of EFL programs (Dubin and Olshtain 1986, Nunan 1989, Yalden 1983). Often, the curriculum for most EFL programs is based upon the texts used. Unfortunately, many times this selection is not related to the realistic needs of learners nor the program's resources, but instead upon a set of ideals of what the program should be and what it should accomplish.

Thus, developing or designing an EFL curriculum is a complex undertaking in which the designer needs to consider both the role of English in the community and the existing EFL program, thereby, clarifying the goals of the program, correlating these goals with the students' backgrounds and needs, offering content and skills materials in a variety of ways and providing an outline for evaluating the program.

In order to explain the steps in designing an EFL curriculum, the terms curriculum, syllabus, goals and objectives will be defined. Although there are numerous meanings for these words, those found in Taba (1962) and Dubin and Olshtain (1986) are used here.

A curriculum is essentially a plan for learning and combines educational goals and cultural goals with language goals. It reflects the societal trends as well as the linguistic ideas, and it contains a statement of goals, specific objectives, the selection and organization of content and a program for evaluating. It also implies patterns of learning and teaching. A syllabus, on the other hand, is a more

detailed and specific document. It focuses on short-term results. Goals are the program's general aims and are found in a curriculum. The objectives are specific short-term aims stated in a syllabus.

All this, which formulates the curriculum, is influenced by the educational views, cultural views and goals, and the linguistic and language learning theories.

Step One: Diagnosing the Needs

This is the fact-finding stage. These collected data will provide the general direction to the curriculum. The information which is gathered should answer key questions, such as what the backgrounds of the learners and the community are, who the learners are and who the teachers are, why the program is needed, what skills should be taught, what methods should be used, what the setting of the programs is and what its resources are. These questions can best be answered by incorporating them in the design of both the interviews and questionnaires.

Background of the Community

A comprehensive needs assessment of the community can be divided into four parts: the importance of English, the use of English in the community, the attitudes of groups and individuals, and the role of English within the country (Dubin and Olshtain 1986). First, data are obtained which define the role of English within the society. In EFL we know that English is a foreign language, but we may not know if it will be used for special purposes. Included in this, we need to know if there is environmental support for the learners who wish to use English, and if so, what this support is. For example, in some areas there are only movies in English and a few native speakers while in other areas one can find native speakers, movies, television programs and reading materials in English. Finally, it is beneficial to know if there is a real need to use English and/or to understand the U.S. culture.

In investigating the community--the educational system, the economics and the accessibility to English materials--one should gather information from various places. In evaluating education, one begins by examining the public school system. The subjects taught in schools and the materials used along with information about the EFL teachers should be noted. The designer needs to know if teachers are native speakers, and if not, their proficiency levels. It is also important to know how much actual time is devoted to the teaching of English and what methodologies are used.

One outward indication that a public school system is not fulfilling the needs of the learners is the presence of private schools. This is usually an excellent sign that the public system is either not teaching English or that the current curriculum does not meet the needs of its students.

Data concerning education can be obtained by viewing official documents published by the Ministry of Education, by observing English classes, and by in-

interviewing teachers and supervisors. The data should include the foreign language goals, EFL materials used, teaching methods observed, the quality of teachers, the opinions of both students and teachers and class size.

As part of the community assessment we need to consider the role of English in the labor market (Dubin and Olshtain. 1986). It is important to get the opinions of as many employers as possible when answering the question as to if English is necessary in the work place and at which levels. If possible, the best source for this information is to interview business people in financial institutions, businesses and government offices. From these people we can accurately project the actual need for employees to use English. Newspapers and classified ads which generally reflect the labor needs for the community and are a good predictor of the various uses of English.

Finally, we need to be aware of the availability of materials in English. Often times this is an indication of the importance of technology within the society. For example, if modern equipment is sold, we would want to know if instructions and manuals are available in the native language. Also, what percentage of professionals / students receive their education or training in English speaking countries, the number of English speaking foreign advisors in the community and to what degree, if any, nationals working with them or in foreign companies need to know English. The availability and cost of English language reading materials should be noted since this may limit the students able to use such materials as resources.

The attitudes of the community and individuals toward English play a major role in assessing needs (Gardner and Lambert 1972, Dubin and Olshtain 1986, Cadd 1994). At this point one can distinguish between the two types of attitudes found within a community: attitudes toward the language, people and culture, and attitudes toward learning a foreign language. Positive attitudes toward English reflect a high regard for the people and culture; whereas, positive attitudes toward learning a foreign language result in high motivation in language learning. Negative attitudes toward either the language or the learning process usually result in low levels of foreign language learning (Gardner and Lambert 1972).

In gathering these data one should interview as many people as possible in all fields and of all ages. Since this may involve a large number, questionnaires are more efficient. Information might include favorite authors, music, television programs, actors, singers as well as data about how individuals feel about their country and the target country. In order to obtain reliable data, all questionnaires should be anonymous; however, it is useful to know the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds the individuals. Present research suggests that ethnocentrism, which seems to affect language learning, relates positively to socioeconomic and educational levels (Cadd 1994).

Finally, one should examine the policy of the government towards the importance of learning English as a Foreign Language.

Generally this information is easy to obtain, especially if the planner has been in the country awhile. However, it is possible to glean this knowledge from the mass media, particularly if they are controlled by the government. This view can also be influenced by the presence of a large English speaking minority within the country. The policy regarding that minority often communicates the government's view of the foreign language.

Once these data have been collected and analyzed, a background report concerning the needs of English within the community can be written. This will be combined with the second half of the needs assessment which examines the existing EFL program.

Background of the Existing EFL Program

In order to compile this information we need to do an extensive survey on the program: its curriculum and goals, its syllabi and objectives, its texts and materials and its evaluation process (Dubin and Olshtain 1986, Yalden 1983, Nunan 1989). Since an EFL curriculum will reflect the needs of the learners, we must also collect data about teachers and learners. Here, the basic question is how the program has failed and why. To answer this, one has to understand the function of the program within the institution, the community and the country.

The existing program is evaluated by studying the present curriculum and syllabi. These documents should contain the general goals of the program, the specific objectives, the selected content, and the implied learning activities currently used in the instruction. This can be carefully examined and evaluated in terms of previous data concerning the community needs. Unfortunately, in many programs the curricula are incomplete or non-existent, and the syllabi are the texts. Nevertheless, in analyzing these documents one will be able to understand which aspects of the curriculum are not applicable and which parts do not integrate with the current needs.

In evaluating the texts and materials, it is best to remember the prior goals and objectives of the program even if the present collection of data does not support either. This also applies to the studying of any in-house placement exams as well as all teacher-produced tests. In most programs these materials are kept on file and readily available. Once the structure of the program is understood then teacher and learner needs can be addressed.

A program's major resources are its teachers and learners; therefore, their needs are paramount to any successful needs analysis. The most effective method in collecting the data about teachers is to interview them and to request they anonymously complete questionnaires. The main aim of these is to elicit information relating to educational backgrounds, opinions on the current programs,

attitudes towards English, the culture and the students, and dispositions towards changes. Also, personalities and preferences to teaching styles are key data. If the program is part of a institution, it would be beneficial to know teachers' views regarding the institution.

Once this part is completed, interviews and questionnaires are given to a sample population of students currently studying English. In this questionnaire one wants to know students reasons for studying English, their attitudes towards the culture and language learning, their feelings about their own culture and prior educational experiences in foreign language learning (Gardner and Lambert 1972).

No needs analysis would be complete without information concerning the physical setting and the physical resources available to teachers and learners. This includes searching for material resources and visiting classrooms to get valid data about the setting. These data are very important because they gives planners some ideas about the limitations which actually exist. For example, if access to a VCR is limited then it is not advisable to include videos in an EFL curriculum.

Observations of classrooms should include both the interior and the exterior for the positive and negative aspects. Classroom climate data includes such information as the students' attitudes in class, the placement of chairs, the use of blackboards and audio/visual aids and punctuality. The outside environment should be evaluated for noise and any other physical factors which might influence the quality of instruction.

During the observations, it is also possible to assess the lesson presentations. This includes the student/teacher relationship and the class size. An analysis of the lesson presentation consists of student participation, sequencing skills, error correction, explanations, instructions and questions (Dubin and Olsh-tain 1986). All this information gives the observer some idea as to the control and learning experiences in classes as well as the content.

Once all the background data are collected, the laborious process of re-viewing and analyzing this information can be undertaken so that program goals and objectives can be formulated.

Step Two: Writing the goals and objectives

This step involves translating the information from the needs assessment into realistic goals and short-term objectives for the program. The goals can be divided into four categories: knowledge, reflective thinking, attitudes and skills (Taba 1962). Based upon the data in step one, the goals of the programs can include as many or as few of these types as needed. For example, if data indicate a focus on knowledge and skill objectives then the curriculum should contain more of these and fewer of the attitude and reflective thinking ones.

It is important to remember that the goals should be operational and attainable and that they should translate into more specific objectives. For this reason, the needs of the learners who enter the program as well as those still in the program will influence the objectives. This is also the reason for undertaking a community needs analysis as it assists in predicting the incoming learners' needs. If broad goals are selected, it might be necessary to establish a number of intermediate goals in an attempt to specify the outcomes of each stage. These goals and objectives are important because they affect the selection of the content and learning activities and the type of evaluation needed.

This step is essential before selecting a text or before writing materials. If the text does not satisfy the goals of the program then the program will not be effective. For instance, if the background data indicate that an emphasis should be placed upon reading and listening skills with a minor focus on speaking and writing skills, then a program director would choose materials focusing on those skills since this would address learners' needs.

Step Three: Selecting and Organizing the Content

This deals with the content of the program and how it is presented. The criteria for choosing the content is usually based upon the function of the program, the significance of the content, the interests of the learners, the type of balance in depth and breadth, and the needs of the community (Taba 1962).

Decisions pertaining to the organization of content and the presentation of new topics depend upon linguistic theories and current views in language learning. However, generally this organization is influenced by the selected text and is based upon the shape of the syllabus.

Step Four: Selecting the Activities

This step focuses on the learning experiences or methodologies used. These experiences should provide for integration, unify the curriculum, consider the teachers' backgrounds, and provide a variety of learning modes (Taba 1962).

Step Five: Evaluating the Program

The final step involves evaluating the curriculum once it is in use. The criteria for deciding what to evaluate are fourfold (Taba 1962). First, the evaluation must be consistent with the goals of the curriculum. Secondly, the evaluation ought to be as comprehensive in scope as the objectives are. Thirdly, the evaluation results should be diagnostic enough to distinguish the various levels of mastery. Lastly, any evaluation should be valid. One can use these criteria to evaluate any aspect of the program - tests, materials, syllabi.

Conclusion

Designing an EFL curriculum is tedious and laborious work which can be confusing and difficult. However, in using these steps the planner will at least have a framework within which to work and should be able to determine the direction for the curriculum. Regardless of the type of EFL program, the steps in assessing the needs, of formulating the goals and objectives and of evaluating the progress and changes will be effective in providing a useful EFL curriculum.

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