



From curriculum to syllabus design: The different stages to design a programme

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Abstract

Designing your own programme as an in-service teacher might be really time consuming and also difficult to teach how to do it to pre-service teachers. But in the long run it might be rewarding when knowing that we are giving the students what they want and need and not just what has been decided by the authorities. In this paper the following will be considered:

- What is curriculum, course and syllabus and possible approaches to course design?
- What is meant by articulating your beliefs?
- What is defining the context?
- What are goals, objectives and needs analysis?
- What stages are followed in designing a course?

Curriculum includes the philosophy, purposes, design and implementation of a whole programme. A course according to Hutchinson and Waters (1996) is an integrated series of teaching learning experiences, whose ultimate aim is to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge. And syllabus is the specification and ordering of content of a course or courses.

When reflecting on our own teaching we know that most of the time, we have used a commercial textbook as our syllabus for the different levels of English we have taught along our in-service years. Sometimes we modify something or add what we consider is missing in the current book used. But we do not take into consideration that most of the books have not been designed specifically for our different contexts. It is not the same to teach to students from a capital city than it is to teach students in a Secondary School up in the mountains where they do not have any kind of access to computers and less to the internet.

The factors to consider in defining the context such as: people, physical setting, stakeholders, teaching resources and time are crucial if we design the programme instead of just following the textbook. Graves (2000) mentions that defining the context and articulating your beliefs serve as the foundation for the process to follow when designing your own programme. Assessing needs, formulating goals and objectives, developing materials, designing an assessment plan, organizing the course and conceptualizing content is described as a framework of course development process. Although there is no one way of organizing a course; the factors mentioned can help you choose how to do it. The results have to make sense to you, to the students, and to the authorities. (Graves op. cit)



1. Introduction

The different definitions given to curriculum as well as possible approaches to course design will be given first. Articulating your beliefs and defining the context are going to be exposed, together with assessing needs, formulating goals and objectives. Next, we shall be focussing on the different ways of organizing courses and specification and ordering of the content i.e. the syllabus. Last, a short explanation about materials, designing an assessment plan and how to evaluate courses.

2. Curriculum, course, syllabus and approaches to course design

2.1 Curriculum

The definition of curriculum is complex because there are as many definitions as there are writers in the field. It can go anywhere along the range from a list of subjects for a course to the perception of the ultimate goal of education as a whole. What is required when referring to the term is “the grasp of the basic notions education involves as well as the structural organization every author states within this definition for the term curriculum” (Moreno, 2000: 11) Evidence of what mentioned before is the following listing of the same concept defined by different authors:

- Curriculum can be defined, as an educational program which states:
 - a) “The educational purpose of the program (the ends)
 - b) The content teaching procedures and learning experience which will be necessary to achieve this purpose (the means)
 - c) Some means for assessing whether or not the educational ends have been achieved.”

(Richards, Platt and Platt 1993: 94)



- “Curriculum is a very general concept which involves consideration of the whole complex of philosophical, social and administrative factors which contribute to the planning of an educational program.” (Allen quoted in Nunan, 2000: 6)

- “Curriculum theory encompasses philosophy and value systems; the main components of the curriculum: purposes, content, methodology and evaluation; and the process whereby curricula are developed, implemented and evaluated”. (White, 1993: 19).

2.2 Course

A course is “an integrated series of teaching-learning experiences, whose ultimate aim is to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge”. (Hutchinson and Waters 1996: 65) The distinction between a curriculum and a course is important because some of the areas of concern in curriculum development as: societal needs analysis, testing for placement purposes or programwide evaluation may be out of the hands of teachers who are developing courses (Richards, 2001).

2.3 Syllabuses

“Syllabus is essentially a statement of what should be taught, year by year – through language – syllabuses often also contain points about the method of teaching and the time to be taken” (Lee 1980:108). Another opinion is that that a “syllabus is a more detailed and operational statement of teaching and learning elements which translates the philosophy of the curriculum into a series of planned steps leading towards more narrowly defined objectives at each level” Dubin & Olshtain, (1997: 28).

Syllabuses are more localized and are based on accounts and records of what actually happens at the classroom level. Given these definitions it is suggested that it seems helpful to define a curriculum and a syllabus as separate



entities. To sum up it is possible to see syllabus design as part of course design, which in turn, forms part of the design of the curriculum as a whole.

2.4 What are the possible approaches to course design

It can be said that the field of education has undergone profound changes during the last 30 to 40 years and it is suggested that successful language programs depend upon the use of approaches. The following table shows what the different approaches are, and the different ways of defining what the students need to learn:

APPROACHES	WAYS OF DEFINING WHAT THE STUDENTS NEED TO LEARN
Classical approach	Humanism: students need to read the classics
Grammar-translation approach	Students need to learn with economy of time and effort (1800-1900)
Direct approach	Students need operant conditioning and behavioural modification to learn language (1890-1930)
Audio-lingual	Emphasized perfect pronunciation and repetition, lexical meaning was not considered important (1950-1970)
Communicative approach	Students must be able to express their intentions, that is, they must learn the meanings that are important to them (1970-present) (adapted from Brown, 1995: 5)

It is commented that although there has been a preference for particular methods at different times, methods often continue in some form long after they have fallen out of favour. This remark is true regarding the grammar translation approach that is still alive in some parts of the world. Mary Finocchario (1983) claims that the grammar translation approach was inherited from the teaching of Latin, a language that was only taught for passive use. "Course designers who carefully consider the various approaches to syllabus design may arrive at the



conclusion that a number of different ones are needed and are best combined in an eclectic manner in order to bring about positive result” (Dubin and Olshtain, 1997: 2)

3. Articulating your beliefs

Teachers’ beliefs

“Your view of what **language** is or what **being proficient in a language** means affects what you teach and how you teach it” (Graves, 2000: 28). Your beliefs play a role at each stage of course design even they may not always be present in your thinking, but they underlie the decisions you make. She provides a useful summary of the kinds of points one could consider under each concept

a) Your view of language

For example, language is rule governed, meaning-based, a means of self expression, a means of getting things done.

b) Your view of the social context of language

For example, sociolinguistic issues such as adapting language to fit the context, sociocultural issues such as cultural values and customs which may be in harmony or in conflict with those of the learners’ own culture

c) Your view of learning and learners

For example, learning is a deductive or inductive process; learning is the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Learners have affective, cognitive and social needs, learners receive knowledge or construct knowledge, and learners follow directions or direct their own learning.

d) Your view of teaching

For example, teaching is knowledge transmission, management of learning. The teacher is a decision maker, provider of learning structure, collaborator, and resource.

(Adapted from Graves 2000: 31)



4. Defining the Context

After articulating your beliefs you may start defining your context. Doing it can be viewed as part of pre-course needs assessment because information about the students and about the curriculum is clearly related to students' learning needs. Some of the possible factors to consider in defining the context might be:

- People: Students' number, age, gender, purpose, education.
- Physical setting: Location of school, classroom size and furniture.
- Nature of course and institutions: Type, purpose of course, mandatory, relation to current/previous courses, required tests or not.
- Teaching resources: Materials available, text, develop own material.
- Time: How many hours, day of week, time of day.

Defining one's context can also be viewed as part of pre-course needs assessment. Even the information we obtain such as time and setting will not help us to define students' language learning needs, it must be taken into account in order to design a course that can focus on the needs within the given of the context

5. Aims (UK) Goals (US) and Needs Analysis

5.1 Aims

Aims are rather imprecise, general statements or 'signposts' reflecting the underlying ideology of the curriculum. Richards (2001) suggests that aims have 4 main purposes:

- 1) to provide a reason for the program
- 2) to provide guidelines for teachers and learners
- 3) to provide a focus for learning
- 4) to describe important and realizable changes in learning (or in students)

It is mentioned that "stating your goals helps to bring into focus your visions and priorities for the course" Graves (2000: 75). And she keeps on saying that they are general statements, but they are not vague.



5.2 Objectives

Objectives are more specific than aims. They break down aims into smaller units of learning, and typically describe learning in terms of observable behaviour or performance (performance objectives), i.e. they describe 'learning outcomes' in terms of what a learner will be able to do.

Objectives help planning the course and enable evaluators to judge the success or failure of a programme. Richards (2001) suggests they should be:

- a) consistent with the curriculum aim;
- b) precise (not vague or ambiguous) and;
- c) feasible (i.e. capable of being achieved at the end of the specified time).

The main criticisms about objectives are that they 'trivialize teaching' in that not everything important can be expressed in terms of objectives. There is also a feeling that the process is too mechanical so that in the process of converting needs into objectives the broader goals of teaching/learning may be lost. Another criticism is that pre-specification imposes a lack of flexibility in the programme, or that specification of objectives which are easily measurable is too difficult. It must be noticed that many of these (and other) criticisms were advanced in the context of general education, rather than in language teaching, and most of the criticism, (as far as language teaching is concerned) can be dealt with.

5.3 Needs analysis

The importance of needs analysis is mentioned by Hutchinson and Waters (1996), Jordan (1997) Robinson (1990) when saying that any approach to course design should start with some kind of analysis of: target needs, present situation, language, etc. With the data obtained it will be possible to formulate 'general aims' and more 'specific objectives' as intended outcomes.

These specific objectives should realize the learners' needs, and provide the basis for decision making in the programme. Techniques and procedures used for collecting relevant information for syllabus design purposes are referred to as *needs analysis*. This information concerns the learner, the learning purpose, the



contexts of use as well as learner or learning preferences. Nunan (2000) establishes a distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' information (or needs). Objective data (age, language, educational background) concern facts about the learner. Subjective information concerns the learners' attitudes, wishes and preferences.

A classic example of an objective approach to needs analysis is the Munby (1978) model containing nine elements:

1. Participant;
2. Purposive domain;
3. Setting;
4. Interaction (with whom);
5. Instrumentality (spoken or written, face to face or indirect);
6. Dialect (or variety of English);
7. Target level (or proficiency required)
8. Communicative event (skills needed)
9. Communicative key (concerned with levels of formality and attitudes)

Note however, that not all learners are able to specify precisely how and what they want or need to learn! This is an issue taken up by Brindley (1989) who suggests that the analysis of needs must be ongoing – not something only done at the beginning of a course. Graves (2000) mentions that there are three time frames for gathering information: pre-course, initial and ongoing. They are complementary, not exclusive.

According to Hutchinson & Waters (1996), information on target needs can be collected in a variety of ways from the various participants (students and sponsors etc.) They mention using questionnaires, interviews, observation, data collection (target texts) and informal consultations, depending on time and resources available. The next framework consisting of the following questions is suggested:

- Why are the learners taking the course? (Compulsory, optional)
- How will the language be used? (Medium, channel, type of text).
- What will be the content areas? (Subject and level – e.g. school university)



- Who will the learners use the language with? (Native speaker? Expert? Superior?)
- Where will the language be used? (Country, institution, factory, meeting?)
- When will the language be used? (Before, during or after the course)

(adapted from Hutchinson & Waters, 1996: 59)

Answers need to be gathered from a variety of respondents. As for learning needs, H & W (op. cit) mention the importance of gathering information on how target objectives are to be achieved (the means to achieve the ends). The target situation may guide our selection of tasks but is not necessarily a reliable indicator of exactly how the target should be achieved. We must take into account learner motivation and preferences.

Needs analysis is a vital part of syllabus design. It helps to inform decisions concerning the formulation of both process and product objectives, and these in turn, assist with the specification of syllabus content and procedures. We should remember, however, “that needs should be regularly re-checked, and objectives modified as appropriate throughout the duration of the teaching programme.” (Lilley, 2002: 6).

6. What stages are followed in designing a course?

Articulating your beliefs and defining the context might be considered as the foundation for the processes to follow when organizing your syllabus. Needs analysis and specifying the aims and objectives could go next. What follows is what you must plan, organize and the decisions to take about what should be taught first, second, third, and so on. Brown (1995) presents a modified view of three syllabuses that were covered by McKay (1978), plus explanations of four other types of syllabuses that he has come across his ESL/EFL teaching:



Structural	Grammatical and phonological structures are the organizing principles-sequenced from easy to difficult or frequent to less frequent
Situational	Situations (such as at the bank, at the supermarket, at a restaurant, and so forth) form the organizing principle-sequenced by the likelihood students will encounter them (structural sequence may be in background)
Topical	Topics or themes (such as health, food, clothing, and so forth) form the organizing principle-sequenced by the likelihood that students will encounter them (structural sequence may be in background)
Functional	Functions (such as identifying, reporting, correcting, describing, and so forth) are the organizing principle-sequenced by some sense of chronology or usefulness of each function (structural and situational sequence may be in background)
Notional	Conceptual categories called notions (such as duration, quantity, location, and so forth) are the basis of organization-sequenced by some sense of chronology or usefulness of each notion (structural and situational sequences may be in background)
Skills	Skills (such as listening for gist, listening for main ideas, listening for inferences, scanning a reading passage for specific information, and so forth) serve as the basis for organization sequenced by some sense of chronology or usefulness for each skill (structural and situational sequences may be in background)
Task	Task or activity-based categories (such as drawing maps, following directions, following instruction, and so forth) serve as the basis for organization-sequenced by some sense of chronology or usefulness of notions (structural and



situational sequences may be in background

(Brown, 1995: 7)

It is mentioned that mixed syllabuses occur when authors choose to mix two or more types of syllabuses together. And that there is nothing wrong with the “complexity that results from mixing syllabuses.” Brown (op.cit.: 14) This might be noticed when looking at the tables of contents of some of the language textbooks. The Interchange third new edition by Richards, et al. (2005) claim that a functional syllabus parallels the grammar syllabus in the course.

6.1 Selecting the Shape of the Syllabus

When selecting the shape of the syllabus, “the basic dilemma which course planners must reconcile is that language is infinite, but a syllabus must be finite.” Dubin and Olshtain (1997: 51) Next they present five possible types:

The Linear Format

The linear format is adopted for discrete element content, particularly grammar or structures. Issues of sequencing and grading are of paramount importance. Once the sequence has been determined, internal grading will be presented. Teachers cannot change the order of units or skip some.

The Modular Format

The modular format is well suited to courses which integrate thematic or situational contents. Academically oriented units are integrated.

The Cyclical Format

The cyclical format is an organizational principle which enables teachers and learners to work with the same topic more than once, but each time a particular one reappears it is at a more complex or difficult level.

The Matrix Format

The matrix format gives users maximum flexibility to select topics from a table of contents in a random order, the matrix is well suited to situational content.

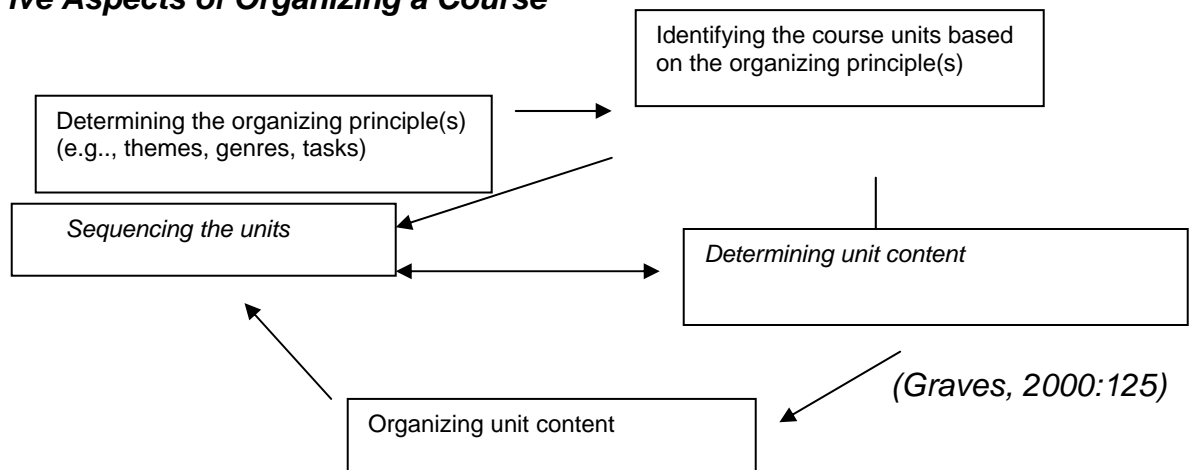
The story-line format

The story-line format is basically a narrative. It is of a different type than the ones mentioned and it could be used in conjunction with any of them.

6.2 Organizing the course

It is said that the way you organize your course depends on a number of factors which include: “The course content, your goals and objectives, your past experience, your students’ needs, your beliefs and understandings, the method or text and the context” (Graves, 2000: 127). Next she adds that organizing a course involves five overlapping processes captured in the next flowchart and that the processes do not have to follow a specific order:

Five Aspects of Organizing a Course



6.3 Language Testing

Based on the program’s goals and objectives the next step to follow is the development of tests. “Tests can be used to drive a programme by shaping the expectations of the students and their teachers”. (Brown, 1995: 22). He also says that the method he advocates for test development requires the use of two different types of tests: norm-referenced, the ones intended to compare the relative performance of students to each other; and criterion-referenced texts intended to measure the amount of course material that each student has learned.

6.4 Materials



As far as materials is concerned it is advisable to follow what next expressed:

“I will not prescribe a particular type of material or materials based on a particular philosophy of teaching or theory of language.... In other words I believe that decisions regarding approaches, syllabuses, techniques, and exercises should always be left up to the individuals who are on site and know the situation best. What I will advocate is a strategy in which students’ needs, objectives, tests, teaching and program evaluation will all be related to each other and to the materials”. (Brown, 1995: 163)

What might be concluded is that an important aspect of materials development is making choices and that you need to make these choices based on what you want your students to learn according to your goals and objectives and your syllabus focus

10. Evaluation

Scrivener (1967, quoted by Beretta, 1992) made the distinction between ‘formative’ and ‘summative’, defining formative as a matter of improving ongoing programmes and summative as determining the effects of a programme that has come to an end. Williams and Burden (1994) claim that there is a tendency to opt for a ‘summative’ type of evaluation. This involves selecting either teachers or students and then applying tests at the beginning and end of the programme, with the aim of getting to know if a certain innovation produced any changes.

Beretta (op. cit; 276) gives a list of purposes of evaluation. Some of those mentioned which are relevant to this paper are the following:

- To decide whether a programme has had the intended effect
- To identify what effect a programme has had
- To justify future courses of action
- To identify areas for improvement in an ongoing programme

It is possible to say that if language programme personnel – principles, directors of studies, head teachers, and teachers undertook their own internal



reviews, not only would “their programmes benefit from the information gained, but the bureaucrats would be less likely to impose their own” (Mackay, 1994: 144)

Conclusion

One of the first things clarified is that ‘syllabus’ refers to the content or subject matter of an individual subject, whereas ‘curriculum’ refers to the totality of content to be taught and aims to be realized within one school or educational system. Next, the possible approaches to course design and the ways of defining what the students need to learn was commented. It was concluded that to bring about positive results, different ones should be combined in an eclectic manner.

Articulating teachers’ beliefs was given. Defining the context was also discussed because the constraints of our context can help us to focus on what is realistic and appropriate. It was assumed that the two mentioned issues are the foundation for the process to follow when organizing your syllabus.

What aims and objectives imply was given together with needs analysis. Different techniques and procedures to collect information were also mentioned and it was emphasized that needs should be regularly re-checked and objectives modified if needed.

The different stages to follow when designing a course, including different types of syllabuses, selecting the shape of the syllabus and organizing the course were issues mentioned. Last, a short overview was given of language testing, materials and evaluation.

As said before, designing your own programme and better trying to involve more teachers when designing it, might be time consuming, but in the long run it might be rewarding knowing that we are catering for what the students really need and want. Then as a last remark it is advisable to have a subject in our study plans of the *Licenciatura en la Enseñanza del Inglés* that prepares student teachers on how to deal with the mentioned issue – course design.



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