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Designing and improving a language course

THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO DESIGNING AND IMPROVING courses based on a model of course design. The strength of systematically following a model is that the important things are not overlooked.

There are many possible starting points for curriculum design. For example:

1. Curriculum design can begin with the adaptation of an existing course, gradually reshaping it to become quite different from what it was. This allows the course to be taught while curriculum design is going on.

2. Curriculum design can begin from an unorganized set of resources that are used, supplemented, adapted, or discarded as the design progresses. These resources can include course books, source books (Prabhu 1989), teacher-made materials, and material from newspapers or magazines.

3. Curriculum design can begin from nothing except an idea in the mind of the designer.

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Parts of the curriculum design process

Course design can be seen as a kind of writing activity and as such it can usefully be studied as a process. The typical subprocesses of the writing process (gathering ideas, ordering ideas, converting ideas to text, reviewing, editing) can be applied to course design, but it makes it easier to draw on current course design theory and practice if a different set of parts is used.

The model in Figure 1 illustrates the process of course design. The figure consists of three outside circles and a subdivided inner circle. Some course designers distinguish curriculum from syllabus. In the model, both the outer circles and the inner circle make up the curriculum. The inner circle represents the syllabus. The outer circles (principles, environment, needs) represent practical and theoretical considerations that will guide the process of course production. There are many such issues to consider when designing a course. These include the learners' present knowledge and knowledge gaps, the resources available (including time), the skill of the teachers, the course designer's strengths and limitations, and principles of teaching and learning. If such factors are not considered, the course may be unsuited to the situation and learners and may be ineffective or inefficient in encouraging learning.

In the course design process, these factors are considered in three subprocesses: environment analysis, needs analysis, and the application of principles. The result of environment analysis is a ranked list of situational factors and a consideration of their effects on the design. The result of needs analysis is a realistic list of language ideas or skills to be achieved based on the present proficiency and future needs and wants of the learners. The application of principles first requires selecting the most important teaching and learning principles and then monitoring their application through the whole design process.

The inner circle has goals as its centre. This is meant to reflect the importance of having clear general goals for a course. The content and sequencing part of the inner circle represents the items to learn in a course and the order in which they occur. It also represents the ideas content if this is used as a vehicle rather than being a goal in itself. Language courses must give consideration to the language content of a course even if this is not presented in the course as a series of discrete items for study. Consideration of content makes sure that there is something useful for the learners to learn to advance their control of the language, that they are getting the best return for their effort, and that they are covering all the things they need to cover for a balanced knowledge of the language.

The format and presentation part of the inner circle represents the format of the lessons or units of the course, including the techniques and types of activities that will be used to foster learning. This is the part of the course that the learners are most aware of. It is important that it is guided by the best available principles of teaching and learning. The monitoring and assessment part of the inner circle represents the need to observe learning, test the results of learning, and provide feedback to the learners about their progress. It is often not a part of commercially designed courses. It provides information that can lead to changes in other parts of the course design process.

Now imagine a large circle drawn around the whole model. This large outer circle represents evaluation. Evaluation can involve looking at every aspect of a course to judge if the course is adequate and where it needs improvement. It is generally a neglected aspect of course design.

The shape of the model in Figure 1 makes it easy to remember. The three-part shape that appears in each of the outer circles also appears in the large inner circle and in the way the three outer circles connect to the inner circle. Let us now look at each of the sub-processes of course design, starting with the outer circles.

Consider the environment

Environment analysis considers the situation in which the course will be used and determine how the course should take account of this context. One way of approaching environment analysis is to work from a list of questions which focus on the nature of the learners, the teachers, and the teaching situation. These include questions like, Do the learners share the same first language? How old are they? Do they have special purposes in learning English? Are they highly motivated? There is value in spending some time on these ques-

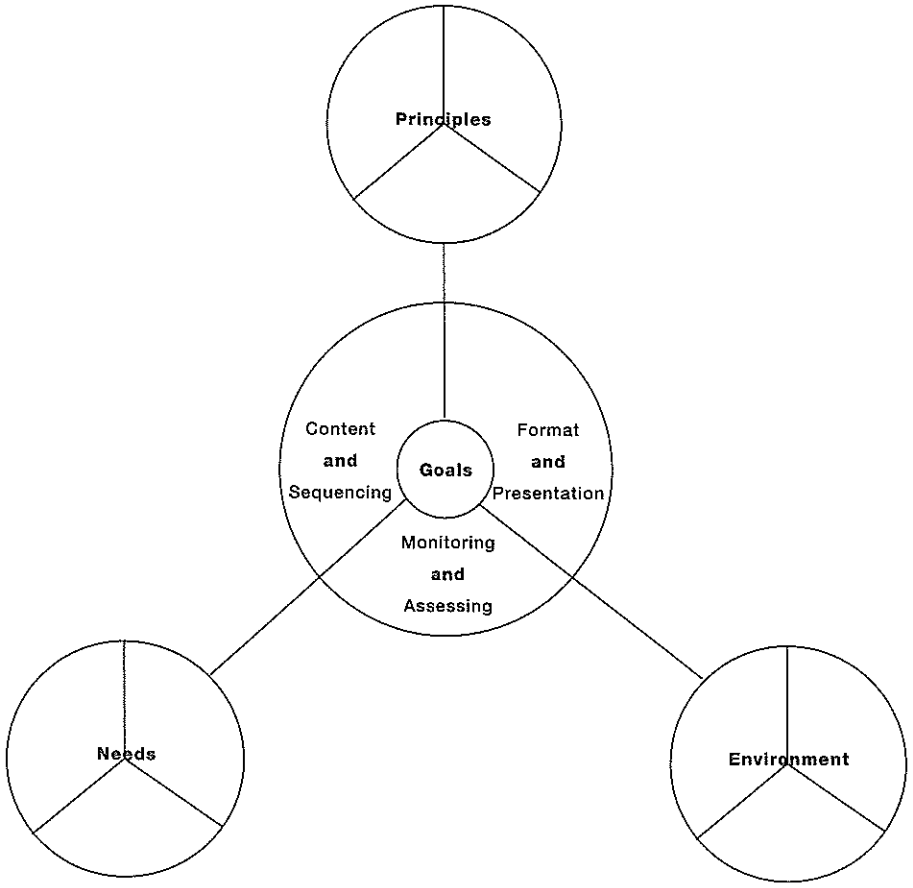

FIGURE 1: A MODEL OF THE COURSE DESIGN PROCESS

tions and their answers. Then choose three factors which will have the strongest effect on the design of your course, and rank them by importance.

Here are some of the top factors selected by several teachers designing different courses for different learners.

1. One teacher decided that the learners' lack of interest in learning English should be the major factor influencing course design. The learners were required to do an English course as part of their degree but received no credit for it. So the teacher's goal of making the course as interesting and motivating as possible guided the design of the course, particularly the format and presentation of lessons.

2. Another teacher decided that the learners' plan to move on to academic study in a university or technical institute should have the greatest effect on the design of the English course. This had a far-reaching effect on the course's language items, the language skills it focused on, and its learning activities.

3. A third teacher decided that the externally designed and administered test at the end of the course should be the major consideration. This meant that the course book always had to make it obvious to the learners that the work they were doing was directly related to the test.

Here are some other factors that the teachers considered important:

- The small amount of time available for the course
- The large size of the classes
- The wide range of proficiency among the students
- The immediate survival needs of the learners
- The lack of appropriate reading materials
- The teachers' lack of experience and training
- The learners' use of the first language in the classroom
- The need for the learners to take more responsibility for their learning

Unsuccessful course designs often fail to take account of the environment questions. Here are some examples:

1. A communication-based course was deserted by its Vietnamese learners because

they were not getting the grammar teaching that they expected. Instead they set up their own grammar-based course.

2. An English course for agricultural students had a simplified version of an English novel unrelated to agriculture as its main reading text. Some of the learners produced their own L1 translation of it, which they copied and sold to other learners. They saw no value in coming to grips with its content through English.

3. One communicative course did not account for the learners' reluctance to be active participants.

Next to each important environment factor, note one or more effects. For example, the factor "the large size of the class" could have the following effects on the course design:

1. Incorporating a large amount of group work,

2. Using large-class techniques like text-recall activities, which work better the more learners there are, or

3. Training learners for independent work or individualized tasks.

The two main approaches to dealing with an environment are working within the constraint and working around the constraint. With a time constraint, for example, the goals can be adapted to suit the time available or extra time can be found by setting homework and other out-of-class activities.

The importance of environment analysis is that it helps ensure that the course will be suitable, practical, and realistic.

Discover the needs

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) make a useful division of learners' needs into necessities (what the learner has to know to function effectively), lacks (what the learner knows and does not know already), and wants (what the learners think they need). These are discovered by a variety of means: testing; questioning and interviewing; recalling previous performance; consulting employers, teachers and others involved; collecting data such as textbooks and manuals that the learners will have to read, and then analyzing them; and investigating the situations in which the learners will use the language. Ways of doing needs analysis can be evaluated by the same general criteria used to evaluate tests—reliability, validity, and practicality.

Necessities, lacks, and wants may all be compared against a list of learning goals for the course. An exception to this approach is to base the course on what the learners request, in which case the lists are created by the learners. This is effective if the learners have very clear purposes for learning English which they are aware of. For example, a course for immigrants who have been in the country a few months could very effectively be based on a list of things that they want to be able to do using English. One way of making needs analysis become a central, ongoing part of a course is to set up a negotiated syllabus. This means regularly involving the learners in decision making regarding the goals, content, presentation, and assessment of the course (Breen 1987, Clarke 1991).

In its simplest form needs analysis should (1) assess how the learners will need to use the language after they leave the course, (2) measure the learners' present level of proficiency, and (3) ask the learners what they consider to be most important for them. The outcome should be a list of tasks or language features that can be the basis for the course.

Follow principles

Research on language teaching and learning should be used to guide decisions on course design. There is considerable research on the nature of language and language acquisition which can guide the choice of what to teach and how to sequence it. There is also extensive research on how to encourage learning in general, and language learning in particular, which can be used to guide the class presentations. The principles derived from this research include the importance of repetition and thoughtful processing of material, the importance of taking account of individual differences and learning styles, and principles related to learner attitudes and motivation (see Table 1).

It is important for curriculum design to make the connection between the research and theory of language learning on the one hand and the practice of designing lessons and courses on the other. There is a tendency not to make this connection, with the result that curriculum design, and therefore learners, do not benefit from important research. A striking example of this is the failure of many

TABLE 1: TWENTY PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

Environment and needs

1. The selection, ordering, presentation, and assessment of the material in a language course should be based on a careful consideration of the learners and their needs, the teaching conditions, and the time and resources available.

Content and sequencing

2. A language course should progressively cover useful language items, skills, and strategies.

3. The focus of a course needs to be on the generalizable features of the language.

4. Teaching should take account of the most favourable sequencing of language items and when the learners are most ready to learn them.

5. A language course should provide the best possible coverage by including items that occur frequently in the language, so that learners get the best return for their learning effort.

6. The items in a language course should be sequenced so that items which are learned together have a positive effect on each other for learning and so that interference effects are avoided.

7. Learners should have repeated and spaced opportunities in a variety of contexts to retrieve and give attention to items they want to practice.

8. A language course should train learners in how to learn a language and how to monitor and be aware of their learning, so that they can become effective and independent language learners.

Format and presentation

9. As much as possible, the learners should be interested in and excited about learning the language, and they should come to value this learning.

10. As much time as possible should be spent using and focusing on the second language.

11. A course should include a roughly even balance of meaning-focused input, form-focused instruction, meaning-focused output, and fluency activities.

12. There should be substantial quantities of interesting, comprehensible activity in both listening and reading.

13. A language course should provide activities aimed at increasing the fluency with which learners can use the language knowledge they already have, both receptively and productively.

14. The learners should be pushed to produce the language in both speaking and writing over a range of discourse types.

15. The course should include form-focused instruction in the sound system, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse areas.

16. Learners should process the items to be learned as deeply and as thoughtfully as possible.

17. The course should help learners make the most effective use of previously gained knowledge.

18. A course should be presented so that the learners have the most favourable attitudes possible to the language, to users of the language, to the teacher's skill in teaching the language, and to their chance of success in learning the language.

19. There should be opportunity for learners to work with the learning material in ways that most suit their individual learning styles.

Monitoring and assessing

20. Learners should receive helpful feedback which allows them to improve the quality of their lan-

courses to take account of research regarding the interference that occurs when semantically and formally related items (such as opposites, near—synonyms, and lexical sets) are presented together. In spite of the clear findings of this research, course books continue to present such topics as parts of the body; items in the kitchen; opposites such as *hot/cold, long/short, old/new;* numbers; days of the week; and articles of clothing in the same lesson. As Tinkham (1993 and 1997), Waring (1997), and Higa (1963) show, this approach will make learning more difficult than it should be (see principle 6 in Table 1).

Table 1 is not an exhaustive list of principles and is based on the personal prejudices of the writer. Course designers may wish to create their own lists (see Brown 1993, Christison and Krahnke 1986, and Jones 1993, for examples of other short lists). What is important is that curriculum design is treated as a normal part of the field of applied linguistics and thus draws on available knowledge to guide it. Initially a teacher or course designer should choose a short list of the most important principles and make sure that these are properly applied in the course.

Goals

The curriculum design model in Figure 1 has goals as its centre. This is because it is essential to decide why a course is being taught and what the learners need to get from it. Goals can be expressed in general terms initially and be given more detail when considering the content of the course. Here are some examples of goals set for language courses.

1. The aim of communicative teaching is to encourage students to exploit all the elements of the language that they know in order to make their meanings clear. Students cannot be expected to master every aspect of the language before they are allowed to use it for communicative purposes (Harrison and Menzies 1986).

2. The course aims to:

(a) encourage students to communicate in a wide range of everyday situations,

(b) sustain interest and motivation,

(c) help students understand and formulate the grammatical rules of English,

(d) develop students' receptive skills beyond those of their productive skills,

(e) give students insights into daily life in Britain.

(f) develop specific skills, including skills required for examination purposes, and

(g) contribute to the students' personal, social and educational development (Driscoll 1987).

Write a very short statement of the goals of the course (25 words or fewer) to help clarify what the course is trying to achieve. Having a clear statement of goals is important for determining the content of the course, deciding on the focus in presentation, and guiding assessment. Learners can also benefit from being told about the goals.

Content and sequencing

The content of language courses consists of the language items, ideas, skills, strategies, and tasks that meet the goals of the course. The unit of progression of a course (Long and Crookes 1992 and 1993, call it the "unit of analysis") is the language or content feature that represents movement or progress through the course. Some courses, for example, use grammar as the unit of progression, with each lesson dealing with a new grammatical feature. Progress through the course means increasing coverage of the grammatical features of the language. Other courses use tasks as the unit of progression. The tasks are chosen partly because of their resemblance to the language activities that learners will need to perform outside the course. Progress through the course is based on coverage of a range of language use tasks.

Table 2 lists a range of possible units of progression. Typically, course designers choose one of these to be the most important unit of progression in the course.

Even though the units of progression in a course might be tasks, topics, or themes, it is important for the course designer to check vocabulary, grammar, and discourse to make sure that important items are being covered and repeated. If the course designer does not check, learners may not learn items that are important for later use of the language. Learners also may not use items often enough to establish them in their minds.

One way to provide a systematic and well-researched basis for a course is to make use of frequency lists and other lists of language items or skills. These lists should be chosen and adapted as a result of the needs analysis in

TABLE 2: UNITS OF PROGRESSION

Starting point	Type	Units of progression	Determinants of progression
Vocabulary	Series	Words	Frequency levels, occurrence in tasks
Grammar	Series	Grammatical constructions	Frequency, acquisition stages, complexity
Language use	Field	Functions	
Ideas	Field	Topics, themes	
Discourse	Field	Topic types, genre	
Situations & roles	Field	Situations, roles	
Component skills	Series	Subskills	Order of complexity
Strategies	Field	Strategies	
Outcomes	Field	Real-life outcomes task outcomes	

order to set the language learning content of the course. A list may be used as a way of checking or determining the content of a course, but this does not mean that the lessons have to consist of item-by-item teaching. A conversation course, for example, could be carefully planned to cover the important high-frequency vocabulary and structures, and still consist of a series of very free task-based conversation activities (Joe, Nation, and Newton 1996). Working from lists makes sure that what should be covered is covered and is not left to chance.

Typical lists include:

1. Frequency-based vocabulary lists. These are lists of words with indicators of their frequency of occurrence. Perhaps the best known is Michael West's (1953), *General Service List of English Words* which contains 2,000 high frequency word families. This is a good source for courses at the beginner and intermediate level. Other well-researched lists include *The Cambridge English Lexicon* (Hindmarsh 1980). The COBUILD dictionary (Sinclair 1995) indicates the frequency levels of more commonly used vocabulary. At a more specialized and advanced level, the academic word list (Coxhead 1998) contains over 570 word families and is useful for study in the upper levels of English-medium secondary schools and at university.

2. Frequency lists of verb forms and verb groups. These contain items such as simple past, present continuous, verb + *to* + stem (where the stem is dominant) *going to* + stem, and *can* + stem (ability), along with information about their frequency of occurrence, mainly in written text. These lists can be found in George (1963 and 1972). The most striking feature of these lists is the very high frequency of a small number of items, such as the simple past and verb + *to* + stem, and the very low frequency of most of the items studied in the typical language classrooms. Comparison of beginners' books of published courses with these lists indicates that the mixture of high-frequency and low-frequency items in many course books could be considerably improved.

3. Lists of functions and topics. These lists are not frequency based, and as a result the selection of items must be based on perceived need, which is less reliable than frequency evidence. The most useful of the available lists are in Van Ek and Alexander (1975).

4. Lists of subskills and strategies. These include the subskills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and language coping and learning strategies.

5. Lists of tasks, topics, and themes (Munby 1978, Van Ek and Alexander 1975, Prabhu 1987). Course designers can refer to these lists but it is better for them to develop their own lists, taking account of the background of their learners and their needs.

Not only do lists check or determine the items that should be in the course, but they can be used to exclude items that should not be there, that is, those that are not in the list. The result of analyses based on lists is a set of

language items that represent sensible and achievable goals for the course.

Needs analysis can play a major role in determining the content of courses, particularly for language items. As well as using needs analysis to set language goals, it is useful to decide the basis for the ideas content of the course.

An important decision to be made at this stage is the form the syllabus will take. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) describe several syllabus forms including linear, modular, cyclical, and matrix. Whatever form is chosen will have a marked effect on the opportunity for repetition of items to be learned. It can be argued that the first presentation of an item is not as important as the later repetitions of that item. This repetition is often neglected in courses, but it is crucial to learning. It is through repeated meetings that items are enriched and established.

Format and presentation

The material in a course needs to be presented in a form that will help learning. The presentation will use suitable teaching techniques and procedures, and these need to be put together in lessons. Some lessons might consist of an unpredictable series of activities, while others might be based on a set format, where the same sequence of activities occurs in all or most of the lessons. For example, in the *First Lessons* book of the *COBUILD English Course* (Willis 1990), most lessons begin with a brief introduction about the current topic. Then there is a listening activity, followed by a reading and speaking task. Then the learners plan a report and present their task to the rest of the class. This is followed by another listening activity and then language focus activities.

There are several advantages to having a set format for lessons. First, the lessons are easier to make, because each one does not have to be planned separately. It also makes the course easier to monitor, to check if all that should be included is there and that accepted principles are being followed. Finally, it makes the lessons easier to learn from, because the learners can predict what will occur and are soon familiar with the learning procedures required by different parts of the lesson.

The source material used for the lessons will affect the ease of making the lessons and of the possibility of future distribution or publication of the course. A shortcut is simply to take suitable material from other courses, adapting it as required, but this creates copyright problems.

Key principles need to be applied at this stage. Among the most important is the amount of time given to learning from listening and reading, learning from speaking and writing, direct study of language features, and fluency development.

The lesson format needs to be checked against the environment analysis of the course to make sure that the major environmental factors are being considered. Because course design is not a linear process, it may be necessary to alter the content or sequencing to suit the lesson format and to reorder the list of environmental factors. The lessons may require further adjustment at other stages of the course design. Perhaps the most difficult task at this stage is making sure that the learning goals of the course are met—that is, that the required language items are well represented and well presented in the course.

Monitoring and assessing

The aims of course design are to make a course that has useful goals, achieves its goals, and does this in an efficient way. An important recurring part of the design process is to assess to what extent these goals are achieved.

Assessment generally involves the use of tests. An important distinction in testing is between proficiency tests, which measure what a learner knows of the language, and achievement tests, which measure what has been learned from a particular course. Proficiency tests may be used to measure a learner's level of language knowledge before entering a course and after a course is completed. Achievement tests are closely related to a course, and the items in the tests are based on the content and learning goals of the course. Short-term achievement tests at the end of each lesson or group of lessons tell the teacher and learners how much has been learned. They can have a strong effect on motivation, on the speed of movement through the lessons, and on adapting and supplementing the course. Well-designed courses include short-term achievement tests in the curriculum design.

More comprehension achievement tests

can be given at the end of a course and perhaps halfway through the course. The information gained from such tests can be useful in evaluating the course. Other kinds of tests include placement tests (to see if the course is suitable for a prospective learner or to see where in the course the learner should begin) and diagnostic tests (to see if learners have particular gaps in their knowledge).

But testing is only one way of gaining information about the progress of learners and the effectiveness of the course. Other ways include observing and monitoring, using checklists and report forms, getting learners to keep diaries and learning logs, having learners collect samples of their work in folders, and asking them to talk about their learning. Curriculum design can plan for this kind of data gathering.

When improving an existing course, well-thought-out tests can be a useful starting point. The information gained from the tests can indicate areas in which the course needs to be improved.

Evaluating a course

Information gained from assessment is a useful source of data about the effectiveness of a course, but it is only one of the sources of information that can contribute to the evaluation of a course. Evaluation tries to answer the question, "Is this a good course?" The range of meanings that can be attached to "good" depends on who is doing the evaluating (the teacher, the learners, the owner of the school, the parents, the course designer) and determines what sources of information are used to carry out an evaluation. Because there are so many sources, it is necessary to decide on an appropriate focus for evaluation.

A "good" course may be one that:

1. attracts a lot of students,
2. makes a lot of money,
3. satisfies the learners,
4. satisfies the teachers,
5. satisfies the sponsors,
6. helps learners gain high scores in an external test,
7. results in a lot of learning,
8. applies state-of-the-art knowledge about language teaching and learning,
9. is held in high regard by the local or international community, or
10. follows accepted principles of curriculum design.

An evaluation of a course can have many purposes, the main ones being to assess whether to continue or discontinue the course or to bring about improvements in the course. Responsible curriculum design includes ongoing evaluation of the course.

Introducing a "negotiated" part to a course can be a useful way of gaining some evaluation information. In this part the learners discuss and decide how they would like to use a part of the classroom time. Clarke (1989) describes useful ways of organizing this negotiated involvement.

Conclusion

This brief description of a model of curriculum design has only touched lightly on the processes involved in designing or improving a course. Curriculum design can be a large job involving a lot of time, resources, and people. However, it can also be done on a small scale, and most curriculum design is like this, being done by teachers to prepare or improve a course that only they will teach. In both large-scale and small-scale curriculum design projects, it is important to have a plan to ensure that important sources of information are considered and that a well-balanced curriculum design process is followed.

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