

Preparing a Course of Study for Elementary School Students

Part 2: A Discussion of Issues Relating to Curriculum and Syllabus Design

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Introduction

In this paper, I will look at various issues relating to language course design with particular reference to sixth grade students at the elementary school level. I will argue that although it is important to consider the needs of the learners, with regard to sixth grade students, I suggest that they may not be able to clearly state their needs and as such it will be necessary for teachers to reevaluate the course goals to ensure that they remain relevant to their students. Following this, I will move on to look at course content. Here I suggest that content should relate to the students' experiences as this helps them to focus on the meaning of the language that they will study and use. I will then consider the roles of teachers and students. I argue that teachers should be eclectic; using a range of methods depending on their students, the task and materials and, above all, the goals of that section of the course. Following this, I will suggest various points relating to developing tasks and selecting materials. Here I argue that both tasks and materials, in an EFL situation, are very important as they help to compensate for the lack of target language input. Finally, I look very briefly at evaluation. Although

this section is comparatively short, I argue that evaluation is essential for developing an effective course. Overall, it is hoped that through the following discussion, those charged with the task of creating a language syllabus for their school will have a firm grasp of the issues they need to consider in order to produce a viable syllabus.

Elements of the Curriculum / Syllabus

In this section, I will firstly, define the terms curriculum and syllabus and then move on to consider the elements of each. In general a curriculum covers all the issues relating to the content to be taught at a school whilst a syllabus provides an outline of the content for a particular subject area and how it will be delivered, underpinned by the course creators' views of language learning (Breen 1984; White 1988; Rodgers 1989). In developing a syllabus, a consideration of a number of areas has been identified as being important. These areas include a specification of: (1) the course objectives; (2) course content; (3) the roles of participants (e.g. teachers, students); (4) the kinds of tasks and materials to be used and (5) evaluation of the course. Each of these elements should be based on an analysis of the needs of the students and other groups involved. Traditionally, following an analysis of needs, each of these factors has been considered in a linear fashion so that one is seen as a necessary prerequisite of another. In addition, traditional syllabus design has been seen as non-negotiated and imposed, taking little account of the views of those teachers whose responsibility it is to put the syllabus into practice (Candlin 1984 in Brumfit).

Current research, however, suggests that this approach is too rigid and does not provide for a syllabus which can develop over time. Consequently, it has been argued that a cyclical and reflexive process of review of all

elements, involving all the participants, is more likely to produce a syllabus that can meet the objectives for which it has been designed (Rodgers 1989; Richards 1990; Cameron 2001). As Nunan writes,

“much curriculum development seems to proceed on the rather simplistic assumption that there is a direct equation between planning, teaching and learning. In other words, it is assumed that what is planned will be taught and that what is taught will be learned. Recent studies of what actually goes on at the stage of programme implementation, however, demonstrate that the equation is much more complex. Teachers do not always teach what has been planned, and learners very often learn things other than what has been taught.” (1989b:185)

Needs Analysis

Undertaking a needs analysis is generally acknowledged to be important but it is not without its problems. Firstly, in investigating any group of students a range of needs will become apparent and these may not always be compatible. Therefore, although the course may, in general, meet the students' needs it is quite possible that many students will feel a certain degree of dissatisfaction with the course. Secondly, the methods used to find out about needs are, to a certain extent, based on the assumptions of the needs analyst, therefore it is arguable that the results are not always an accurate reflection of the needs as the students perceive them (Nunan 1988a; Richards 1990; Brown 1995). Thirdly, students may not always be able to confidently express their needs, as they may be ephemeral. This is particularly relevant in this situation as the question must be raised as to whether sixth grade students can accurately and adequately express their needs and desires relating to language learning beyond the general aim of

being able to speak in the L2. Finally, very often needs analysis has produced behavioural objectives, that is, statements as to what the students will be able to perform at the end of the course. Whilst it is important to have some indication of this, it is also important to consider the learning processes that the students will be exposed to. Thus, in addition to behavioural objectives, cognitive objectives also need to be stated.

Despite these criticisms, needs analysis is seen as an important process, not least because it provides the participants with the feeling that the course is working to deliver what was expected and thus help to minimize the potential for mismatch between the interpretation of the course by the designers, teachers and students.

In this situation, I would suggest that a large part of the identification of students' needs will be in response to the guides published by the Japanese Ministry of Education Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in its handbook (2001) for elementary school teachers. However, in addition, it will be important for course designers to consult the children's parents for their attitudes towards English education. From this, a syllabus can be designed that will not only meet the specified educational requirements, but also have the support of the parents attached to the school. This support and understanding is essential to the smooth running of the syllabus and can help encourage students to take a more active role in the course activities.

Objectives and Goals

Brown (1995) argues that objectives should be statements of what is desirable and attainable. In addition, it is very important that the objectives should be communicated to students in manner that is readily

understandable to them, even if this means presenting them to students in their native language where their knowledge of the L2 is insufficient. In so doing, it is argued the potential for mismatch can be reduced as all the participants are clear as to the direction and purpose of the course (Breen 1984; Nunan 1989a).

I would like to suggest a series of objectives for a course relating to sixth grade students at elementary school in Japan. Underlying these objectives is the assumption that for such students this is *not* their first experience with English language learning but rather the culmination of their language learning experience at elementary level.

Students will:

- be able to respond in English to questions and ask questions about their family and home-life and their hobbies and interests
- be able to provide basic physical descriptions of other people
- be able to identify and write the individual letters of the alphabet and form simple three and four letter words
- be able to ask for help when they have not understood a question or statement said to them
- have opportunities to think about how to rephrase their own statements and questions when their partner has not understood them
- be assessed by having simple conversations about the topics indicated above with an adult (either their homeroom teacher or Assistant English Language Teacher) at regular intervals throughout the course. The focus of these conversations will be on students' progress.

In these objectives, the students will be made aware of the content to be covered and the skills they will primarily be focused on developing, that

is, their listening and speaking skills. The course will begin to introduce the skills of reading and writing but at this level, demands will not be placed on students in these areas as, considering the needs of the students and their stage of educational development, listening and speaking are more appropriate. In terms of assessment, both teachers and students will be aware that their effort should be placed on each individual's progress and improvement. Thus, rather than defining absolute levels of performance for all students, success will be measured by how much an individual student has progressed in relation to their starting point and it is hoped that this will provide motivation to help students to continue improving.

Course Content

In this section, I will make some suggestions about course content. This section will make only general comments as the selection of content will depend greatly on the students and availability of resources in any particular situation. Thus rather than limiting the type of content within the overall areas stated in the objectives above, I feel it is important to allow individual schools and teachers to identify the content they wish to cover.

Firstly, content should be based on the students' needs. As it is likely that sixth grade students will be asked about their families and home-life, course designers and teachers will, therefore, need to identify the types of areas within this topic area that will be most appropriate. Secondly, having identified the areas to be studied, course designers and teachers should make lists of the vocabulary items and grammatical structures that will be necessary and useful. This will help to guide them in constructing individual lessons and provide a sense of continuity and consistency between lessons and class groups studying in the same programme. Although, in recent years, there has been a tendency to attempt to move away from grammar

as an organizational base, I feel this is problematic because a knowledge of grammar is still considered essential for the accurate expression of meaning (Nunan 1988a; Stern 1992). In addition, these lists will help teachers to see how and where language can be recycled and developed. Thirdly, course designers and teachers need to take account of the resources that are available to them. This is important as it will help to keep the course realistic and deliverable. Finally, thought will need to be given to the sequencing of the content. In this situation, I would suggest, the organizing theme is chronology. Using this idea as the basis, the course topics can move from first meeting through to more developed conversations between people who are known to one another. Alternatively, timings through the day, week and month could be used to sequence the delivery of the content. Nevertheless, of overall importance here, is that the content of the course should essentially reflect the students' lives and experiences (Stern 1992).

Roles of Participants

When designing a course, it is important to consider who will be participating within it. In this situation, designing a course for sixth grade elementary students, the participants include: the local board of education (acting as a mediator between the school and the Japanese Ministry of Education), administrators at the school (including the principal and vice principal), parents, students and teachers. Whilst all of these groups have an important role to play, in this paper I want to focus on the role of the teachers and students as these will be most familiar and useful for those designing courses at the elementary level. In addition, I feel it is appropriate to isolate these two groups as being most important as it where these two meet, that is, in the classroom, that the language syllabus will truly be decided (Breen 1984).

Clearly, teachers must be aware of the nature of their students so that they can decide the best mix of teaching techniques to ensure that as many students as possible are able to perform to the best of their ability (Brown 1995). This means that the results of any needs analysis will need to be made available to teachers in order to help them to plan lessons appropriately. In addition, teachers will need to consider how they view their own persona in the class and be prepared to balance taking an authoritative role with one where they allow the students more freedom to take responsibility for their own learning.

Secondly, teachers must take the lead role in organizing the classroom. This includes grouping students to enable them to develop not only their linguistic but also their social skills. This requires sensitive handling as not all students at this level are able to work well together. Furthermore, teachers will need to decide how they view the use of L1. In this situation, I would suggest that it would be both impracticable and potentially harmful to insist on teachers and students using L2 only. This is because, whilst teachers should take steps to compensate for the paucity of English input (Stern 1992), they should also realize that at this level showing understanding is very likely to be through use of L1.

Thirdly, teachers need to be able to give clear instructions relating to both the tasks the students should perform and the reasons why they are doing a particular activity, and the purpose of the class as it relates to the overall objectives of the course. Research shows that where teachers do this, students feel the teacher has explained the nature of the task to them adequately (Fischer et al. 1980 cited in Richards 1990; Brown 1995).

Finally, teachers need to monitor the progress and involvement of the students and the potential influence of the teaching environment. Whilst, in regard of this latter point, teachers may have limited power, it is important that any difficulties are fed back promptly to those in a position to make changes. Therefore, this requires a positive and supportive teaching and learning environment throughout the whole school.

Thus, as I argued in my previous paper, in order to coordinate all these functions, teachers need to be good at planning. Woodward (2001) points out that planning need not be formal in terms of writing detailed lessons notes but is the whole process of thinking about teaching (though it is true that having written documents acts as a useful aid to reflection, review and maintaining continuity between classes). In addition, Woodward recommends teachers attempting to visualize lessons to help them identify any potential pitfalls. Finally, Woodward suggests that planning can occur at anytime and ideas triggered by a whole range of stimuli should be accepted. Thus she says,

“most teachers probably, at heart, consider that language is partly a skill that can be trained, partly a subject matter that you can know about, partly an instinct, and partly a natural organic system that grows slowly over a number of years. To be able to encompass this mixed view, we need to use starting points for our planning on different days.” (Woodward 2001:208)

Having looked at the role of the teacher, I would now like to consider that of the students. Perhaps of primary importance is that students need to be willing to *try* to learn. I am sure that many elementary, and

other, teachers would argue that this is not always possible, however, I would suggest that, initially at least, students do generally have a certain level of interest and willingness to attempt subjects, even when they are compulsory. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that in many instances interest can soon evaporate, therefore Estaire and Zanon (1994) argue that involving students in the decision making process relating to their learning helps to maintain interest and helps them to take more responsibility for their own learning. Furthermore, students need to be willing to try to learn not only from the teacher and the tasks that he or she provides but also from each other. Therefore, teachers and students need to work together to create an environment which allows rather than hinders this (Van Ek and Trim 1998). Finally, students need to be inquisitive and not afraid of asking questions. At this level, students will be able to form more detailed questions and be able to accept more complex responses from the teacher, even to the point of accepting that language works in certain ways which are beyond explanation.

Tasks and Materials

In this section, I want to consider a number of points, firstly, related to task design and, secondly, to help teachers identify materials suitable to their teaching situation. It should also be pointed out that, particularly at the elementary level, it is helpful for teachers to create a bank of activities which are flexible, enjoyable and adaptable to various teaching situations and topics (Nunan 1988a). In addition, in an EFL situation development of effective tasks and selection of appropriate materials are particularly important as their purpose is to make up for the lack of English input available to the students (Richards 2001).

The first point for teachers to consider is the purpose of any activity they choose and its final goal (Gika and Superfine 1998; Cameron 1997). Purpose can be divided between linguistic and cognitive. Linguistic tasks will largely focus on a useful part of the target language. This language structure should be related to a 'real world' situation, such as making introductions or going shopping, for it to be practised meaningfully. Alternatively, the task may focus on a learning process or development of a language learning skill, such as doing a problem solving activity or an activity which helps students develop a coping strategy for when talking with someone in the target language. In the early stages of language learning there is a need to develop receptive knowledge, particularly listening skills, and to develop coping strategies for listening (Scott and Ytreberg 1990). Furthermore, it is argued that tasks in which both students are involved in exchanging information to solve a problem are more likely to lead to language acquisition (Long and Crookes 1986 cited in Nunan 1988b).

Secondly, in most Japanese elementary schools, classes will be primarily mixed ability groups, therefore it is important that tasks have the potential for multiple outcomes which genuinely reflect achievement in relation to differing linguistic and academic abilities (Nunan 1988a / b). Wright (1997) suggests that tasks should allow students to be creative as being creative helps them with their overall learning and understanding of language. For example, in a comprehension exercise based on an initial presentation, students could be asked to select between different answer sheets ranging from those with picture options of the correct answers, those with word options written on the sheet or a sheet which simply gives spaces for the students to fill in with either words or pictures. In this way, those students who feel in need of more support are still able to take part fully in the task.

Considering the level of support, or scaffolding, is also important. Scaffolding means enabling tasks which lay the necessary ground work for the students to be able to complete the main activity. This may simply be a discussion in L1 around the topic to draw on and awaken the students' existing schema. Or it may be a series of preliminary tasks which focus on building relevant skills. Therefore, the teacher needs to consider whether tasks will be linked so that students must successfully complete one task before being able to move on to subsequent tasks, or whether they are a series of independent tasks which can be undertaken in any order the student, or teacher, chooses. Clearly, both styles of sequencing, depending on the overall goals, are equally valid. Nevertheless, whichever style is chosen, the nature of the tasks must be made clear to the students (Nunan 1989b).

Thirdly, tasks need to be related to the students' own experiences. Whilst clearly it is not possible to cover every possible experience of each individual student, it is possible to identify various common areas of experience. These would include: home life, living conditions and environment, activities and interests, and leisure and social life (van Ek and Trim 1998). These topics are important as they develop the students' sociolinguistic competence, in that they help students to realize how to use language in different social situations.

Finally in this section, I will look at the following three task types. Firstly, very often teachers like to use role playing. However, researchers warn that regardless of whether or not the student is playing 'self' in the role play or another character, without proper thought and adequate preparation this can be threatening and potentially harmful to a student's language learning and social development (Dubin and Olshtain 1986). Scott and

Ytreberg (1990) suggest that role play should be used only when children are equivalent in age to sixth grade students, there is a clear language and content focus (not just simply repetition) and adequate preparation time. Once the role play activity is complete there needs to be follow up to help students to learn from the experience (Dubin and Olshtain 1986; Rosenshine and Meister 1998). Secondly, Cameron (1997) suggests that songs are often over looked as a tool for developing understanding and use of language. Songs are also effective as they provide legitimate opportunities for meaningful repetition. This is also the case with stories which not only provide for meaningful recycling of language but also can be linked to other areas of learning (Gika and Superfine 1998). This is important as it helps to place language firmly within content rather than being something separate from the students' other learning experiences. Finally, allowing students to create stories is helpful in enabling them to produce longer turns, as it is sometimes easier for young learners to invent events than to describe real experiences (Wright 1997).

Swales (1980 cited in Nunan 1991) argues that, especially in EFL classrooms, materials flesh out the syllabus, that is, help to make the course content real. Therefore, I would now like to look at points relating to the selection of materials.

Brown (1995) argues that in judging the effectiveness of materials it is important to check whether: (1) they match the syllabus goals and objectives (2) are of interest to the students and (3) agree with the teachers' attitude towards the nature of language learning. Nunan (1988b) suggests that for materials to be effective they must be recognized as being legitimate by students. This means that the materials must be seen to help students

realize their learning goals in a manner which they feel is appropriate. However, Nunan also points out that students' opinions of appropriate learning texts may be very traditional, thus, an important task for teachers is ensure they clearly explain the purpose of the materials and justify the tasks attached to them so that students can see the value in working with them. This is particularly necessary as worthwhile materials may not always be interesting therefore the aim should be to do interesting things with them (Nunan 1988a). Consequently, Nunan says that, "in the final analysis, we can only judge the efficacy of materials by evaluating them in contexts of use ..." (1991:211)

Evaluation

In this final section, I would like to cover the topic of course evaluation, though I will not look at the various methods of evaluating the students' performance. Overwhelmingly researchers now acknowledge the importance of carrying out both on-going and course-end evaluation (White 1988; Hargeaves 1989; Rea-Dickens and Germaine 1992). On-going, or formative, evaluation is designed to assess the day to day performance of the course and to identify any areas that need immediate consideration to ensure the present course is able to satisfy the stated goals and objectives. Clearly, this inevitably requires the involvement of teachers and, to a certain extent at the elementary level, that of students. Course-end, or summative evaluation, is meant to help all those who have been involved in the course to reflect upon it and identify both those parts that worked well and those which need to be revamped. Consequently discussions of this nature need to be open and objective with the knowledge that the purpose is to further develop the effectiveness of the course rather than to focus on the performance of individual teachers. As Johnson writes,

“ ... evolution not revolution must be the main aim in language curriculum development, particularly at the classroom level. Radical change, whether well-motivated in terms of policy or an ill-motivated attempt to be fashionable, usually results in a loss of coherence which may take many years to remedy.” (1989:11)

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at various issues relating to language course design with reference to sixth grade students at the elementary school level. I argued that course designers and teachers must think carefully about the needs of their students, and to reevaluate these needs to ensure that they remain relevant. Furthermore, I argued that teachers should be eclectic in their approach using the goals of a particular section of the course to help them judge which teaching methods will be most appropriate and effective. Finally, I considered various points relating to developing tasks and selecting materials and I argued that both, especially in an EFL situation, are very important in making up for the lack of target language input. Whilst this paper is by no means exhaustive, I hope that it may prove to be of assistance to those involved in elementary school language course design.

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