Syllabus: designing needs assessment

The two terms of prime focus of this study are: ' Syllabus' and ' Needs'. This chapter includes a literature review on different aspects of syllabus designing and needs assessment . The characteristics and many faces of Curriculum Development/ Syllabus Design are presented in addition to needs assessment, reasons for conducting needs assessment, steps in needs assessment and the relationship between syllabus designing and needs assessment.

2. 1 Curriculum

A key term of this study is-' Curriculum', hence this section aims to give clarity on the meaning, scope and process of curriculum. A common error that comes into notice while studying curriculum development process is the synonymous use of the words-' curriculum' and ' syllabus'. This section also attempts to demarcate and differentiate these two words so that the course designers and developers may systematically initiate the process in context to SGBAU.

2. 1. 1 Definitions of Curriculum

Although the idea of curriculum is not new and has been extensively used by education planners yet there remains considerable dispute as to meaning. The word is from the Latin root " currere." It means " a course or race." It term originated from the running/chariot tracks of Greece. It was, literally, a course. In Latin curriculum was a racing chariot; currere was to run.

Throughout the history of second-language programmes, the concept of ' curriculum' has been important. However, there is little general agreement on actual form, function, and scope of curriculum. Before discussing the

theory of curriculum development, some definitions of curriculum as quoted by Finch, A. E. (2000)1 are presented below:

Stenhouse (1975) describes Curriculum as " an attempt to communicate the essential properties and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice"

Eisner & Vallance 1974, describe curriculum as: " what can and should be taught to whom, when, and how"

Nunan 1988 adds to his curriculum " elements designated by the term syllabus along with considerations of methodology and evaluation"

White et al. 1991, see curriculum as " concerned with objectives and methods as well as content". Such a definition involves consideration of the philosophical, social and administrative factors of a programme.

Richards, Platt , and Webber 1985, definition of curriculum focuses on the components necessary for delivering instruction and evaluating the success or failure of the curriculum.: " An educational programme which states: (a) the educational purpose of the program (the ends); (b) the content, teaching procedures and learning experiences which will be necessary to achieve this purpose(the means); (c) some means for assessing whether or not the educational ends have been achieved'

Tanner, 1980 define curriculum as : " The planned and guided learning experiences and intended learning outcomes, formulated through the systematic reconstruction of knowledge and experiences, under the auspices

of the school, for the learners' continuous and willful growth in personal social competence."

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000, offer the following definition of curriculum: " A language curriculum can be viewed as a document that provides guidelines for textbook writers, teacher trainers, language teachers, developers of computerized and hi-tech teaching aids, language testers, and many other populations that might function as stakeholders in the language teaching context. As such a curriculum should express the cultural, social and political perspectives of the society within which it is to be implemented. It combines past and present ideologies, experiences, philosophies, and innovations with aspirations and expectations for the future. It serves as the major framework within which educational decision making is carried out with respect to goal specification and teaching methodology, teacher training and text book selection."

The term curriculum is generally seen to include the entire teaching/learning process, including materials, equipment, examinations, and the training of teachers and the syllabus, are therefore subsumed by this definition.

From the above definitions and interpretations of curriculum , there emerge two broad perspectives

According to the first of these, the term ' curriculum' has a narrower scope and refers to the substance of a programme of studies of an educational system.

In the second (and more recent) meaning, ' curriculum' includes the entire teaching/learning process, including materials, equipment, examinations, and the training of teachers.

2. 1. 2 Curriculum Components

Despite the different perspectives on the meaning and scope of curriculum, Stern (1983) identifies three major curriculum components, which are further amplified by Breen & Candlin (1980) and Stenhouse (1975) as presented in table 2. 1 below:

TABLE 2. 1: MAJOR CURRICULUM COMPONENTS OF SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAMMES

Stenhouse (1975)

Breen &Candlin (1980)

Stern (1983)

i) planning;

ii) empirical study;

iii) justification.

i)language teaching

(what is to be learned?);

ii) methodology

(how is the learning to be undertaken and achieved?);

iii) evaluation (to what extent is i) appropriate and ii) effective?).

i) purposes and content;

ii)instruction;

iii) evaluation.

Source: STERN 1983

According to Richards, Platt , and Webber (1985) the most important components of curriculum development are: " (a) the study of the purposes for which a learner needs a language(needs analysis); (b) the setting of objectives, and the development of a syllabus, teaching methods, and materials; (c) the evaluation of the effects of these procedures on the learner's language ability'.

Brown (1989) concentrates on the following curriculum components: needs analysis, instructional objectives, tests, materials, teaching, and evaluation.

TABLE 2. 2 Curriculum Process Model

NEEDS ANALYSIS

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A

T

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O

N

OBJECTIVES

TESTING

MATERIALS

TEACHING

(Source: Brown 1989)

There are some components that are common in all the above perspectives and they are:

Needs analysis

Setting of objectives

Teaching

Evaluation

However, it is important that the two prime stakeholders should be involved in the curriculum development process. As Hills 1976, puts it- no teaching/learning method however innovative or systematic can succeed without a proper consideration of the two main participants, the student and the teacher.

… every learner will bring a different set of knowledge and experiences to the learning process, and will construct in different ways, their own sense of the situation with which they are faced. (Williams & Burden 1997: 96)

It is therefore necessary to involve teachers and students in the process of curriculum design and to allow for individual differences in learners (Breen & Candlin 1980: 94) and for changes in self-perceptions of these differences as the courses progress. In the light of these considerations, important questions about curriculum content to be addressed are:

How do the learners perceive themselves as language learners?

What effect do their " personal constructs" have upon the process of learning a new language?

How do individuals go about making sense of their learning?

How can teachers assist learners in making sense of their learning in ways that are personal to them?

(Williams & Burden1997: 96)

2. 1. 3. The Stages of Curriculum Design

Curriculum designing is a systematic process and every stage needs to be followed sequentially. Taba's outline (1962: 12) of the steps which a course designer must work through to develop subject matter courses has become the foundation for many other writers' suggestions. Her list of ' curriculum processes' includes the following:

Step 1. Diagnosis of needs

Step 2. Formulation of objectives

Step 3. Selection of content

Step 4. Organization of content

Step 5. Selection of learning experiences

Step 6. Organization of learning experiences

Step 7. Determination of what to evaluate, and the means to evaluate

Cited in Yordanova Svetlana, 2000

According to Long & Richards [quoted by Johnson, 1989: IX] language curriculum design is regarded as a decision – making process and involves:

Policy making.

Needs assessment.

Design and development.

Teacher preparation and development.

Programme management and evaluation.

a) Policy making

Based on the information collected about learner's , educational objectives and strategies have to constructed.

According to Breen (1980) -" The communicative curriculum defines language learning as learning how to communicate as a member of a particular socio-cultural group. The social conventions governing language form and behavior within the group are, therefore, central to the process of language learning." For Nunan [1994] the aim of communicative language learning is achieving language proficiency based on the development of the four macro skills. The level of language proficiency therefore , vary for different groups of learners and will depend on learners' needs.

Thus this a crucial stage of curriculum development as it spells out the scope of the curriculum as well as the strategy to be used for curriculum design and implementation.

b) Needs assessment

On the basis of the identified aim it is possible to make an analysis of the learners' both linguistic needs (expressed in structures or functions) and communicative needs expressed in communication situations. Needs assessment is discussed in detail in a subsequent section of this chapter.

c) Curriculum design

With the aims of the curriculum identified and the needs of the learners analyzed, the specific learning goals can laid for the different levels of the course (year/term). These learning objectives can be categorized as follows:

Product objective- specifying the learners' target language proficiency and performance.

Process or pedagogic objectives- specifying the the learning process and methodology that shall be adopted to the learning outcomes.

While deciding the learning framework the following are usually ascertained:

Objectives or what is intended.

Means or what is to be done to achieve the objectives planned.

The results or evaluation of what is achieved.

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It is important that there is a logical relationship between the ends and the means. If there is a gap or discrepancy between the objectives and the process adopted in the classroom language curriculum would fail to achieve the desired result. It is this problem that constantly challenges language planners and often results in failure of many well-conceived curriculum.

Just as there are product and process objectives there are product-oriented (summative evaluation) and/or process-oriented (formative evaluation) approaches to evaluation [Weir & Roberts, 1994]. Evaluation usually attempts to compare current performance with desired performance by

means of testing. The evaluation can be quantitative (based on quantitative criteria) and/or qualitative (based on qualitative criteria). Sometimes a mix of both may also be adopted to obtain valid findings.

d) Teacher preparation and development

Teachers are a vital part of the jigsaw puzzle of curriculum development and the curriculum designing process would be incomplete without their active involvement during development and implementation stages. Moreover, they are the ones who experience the curriculum in the class and their inputs are invaluable in subsequent curriculum improvements and innovation.

e) Curriculum evaluation

Course evaluation acts as a measure of the effectiveness of the curriculum and also provides indicators for further improvements and innovations. Evaluation is defined by Brown as " the systematic collection and analysis of the relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum and access effectiveness and efficiency." [Johnson, 1989: 223] According to Johnson, curriculum development would consist of a process of continuous adjustments or " fine tuning." Curriculum evaluation consists in the interaction of formative (process) and summative (product) evaluation.

2. 2 Syllabus

A syllabus outlines what will be taught and thus helps the teacher and the learner to work together towards the objectives of the curriculum. Breen offers a very general definition of ' syllabus': the meeting point of a perspective upon language itself, upon using language, and upon teaching

and learning which is a contemporary and commonly accepted interpretation of the harmonious links between theory, research, and classroom practice. (1987a: 83)

Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 80) cited in Rabbini Roberto, 2002, define syllabus as follows:

At its simplest level a syllabus can be described as a statement of what is to be learnt. It reflects of language and linguistic performance. This definition focuses on outcomes rather than process. However, a syllabus can also be seen as a " summary of the content to which learners will be exposed" (Yalden. 1987: 87). Yalden sees it as a representation of what will be taught and that it cannot accurately predict what will be learnt.

Prabhu gives a more specific definition:" specification of what is to be learnt" (1987: 89). For Allen HYPERLINK " http://www. finchpark. com/afe/appends/"(1984), the syllabus is "… that subpart of curriculum which is concerned with a specification of what units will be taught" (Allen 1984: 61), whereas for Yalden (1987), it is primarily a teacher's statement about objectives and content, with formal and functional components in a dual progression of linear and spiral learning (cf. Stern 1984: 14). Brumfit (1984d) specifies content (linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, cultural, substantive), and also sequences the learning that takes place, while NunanHYPERLINK " http://www. finchpark. com/afe/n. htm#Nunan" (1988c) takes a wider, non-specific view of "… a framework within which activities can be carried out: a teaching device to facilitate learning" (1988c: 6), and Prabhu (1987) proposes " a form of support for the teaching activity that is

planned in the classroom and a form of guidance in the construction of appropriate teaching materials" (1987: 86). In contrast, Kumaravadivelu sees the syllabus as " a preplanned, preordained, presequenced inventory of linguistic specifications imposed in most cases on teachers and learners" and claims that this is a " widely recognized" perspective (1993b: 72).

The above definitions rather than bringing clarity, add to the complexity of understanding the term ' syllabus':

every syllabus is a particular representation of knowledge and capabilities. And this representation will be shaped by the designer's views concerning the nature of language, how the language may be most appropriately taught or presented to learners, and how the language may be productively worked upon during learning. (Breen, 1987a: 83)

2. 2. 1 Curriculum/Syllabus

The two terms–' curriculum' and ' syllabus', are often used synonymously with each having areas and functions not distinctly defined. The discussion and confusion between the two terms continues since these can at times be very close in meaning, depending on the context in which they are used (Nunan 1988c: 3).

However for course designers and developers a distinction between the scope, objectives and functions of the two terms- curriculum and syllabus is necessary.

Stern (1984) defines syllabus as connected with content, structure, and organization, while curriculum development is viewed as connected with

implementation, dissemination and evaluation. For Yalden (1984) syllabus is connected with learner's needs and aims. Syllabus along with selection and grading of content specifies and grades learning tasks and activities. While syllabus design refers to the ' what' of a language programme, ' methodology is concerned with the ' how" (p. 7). Nunan, 1994.

Candlin (1984) as cited in Nunan, 1994, states the fact that while curriculum is connected with ' language learning, learning purpose and experience, evaluation, and the role relationships of teachers and learners', syllabus is a more concrete term, referring to the actual events in the classroom, i. e. the application of a syllabus to a given situation.

Breen (1980) sees syllabus as a part of the overall curriculum: " ' Curriculum' can be distinguished from ' syllabus' in that a syllabus is typically a specification of the content of teaching and learning and the organization and sequencing of the content. Content and its organization is subsumed within a curriculum as a part of methodology. A syllabus is therefore only part of the overall curriculum within which it operates."

Stenhouse (1975: 4), and Allen (1984) proposes:

… [a] clear distinction, similar to that which has been prevalent in Europe, the curriculum being concerned with planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of education programmes, and the syllabus focusing more narrowly on the selection and grading of content. (1984: 61, cited in Nunan 1988HYPERLINK " http://www. finchpark. com/afe/n. htm" c: 8).

The position presented in Dubin and Olshtain (1986: 3):

" A curriculum is a document of an official nature, published by a leading or central educational authority in order to serve as a framework or a set of guidelines for the teaching of a subject area-in our case a language- in a broad and varied context. Thus , a state at the national level, aboard of education at the district level, a community at the municipal level or a university or college at the local academic level may choose to issue a document stating the scope and goals of its program for teaching a second or foreign language. Accordingly, such a curriculum will present broad overall perspectives that can apply to large number of different programs within the specified context. At the state level, the document will be concerned with goals that apply to all types of schools and segments of the population. At the district level it will apply to all schools within the district and at a given university to all the language courses-even though they may be taught in different departments.

A Syllabus, in contrast to the curriculum, is a more particularized document that addresses a specific audience of learners and teachers, a particular course of study or a particular series of textbooks. Ideally, in this sense, a curriculum should be implemented through a variety of syllabuses and each of these syllabuses should be compatible with the overall curriculum. At the state level this would mean that the curriculum provides general guidelines for all educational planners and policy makers and all material and courseware developers. All textbooks, supplementary materials, tests and courseware would be designed so as to fit the goals specified in the general curriculum."

The above definitions and perspectives on syllabus and curriculum thus make it clear that curriculum has a broader scope and starts with deciding course objectives and ends with evaluation to judge whether the course objectives have been met.

The term ' syllabus' is seen as a part of curriculum which specifically refers to content selection and classroom delivery.

2. 2. 2 Classifications of Syllabus and Approaches to Syllabus Design

There are at present several proposals and models for what a syllabus might be . Yalden (1983) describes the major current communicative syllabus types which were summarized by J. C. Richards and T. S. Rodgers (1986) with reference sources to each model:

Type