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Importance of needs analysis in ELT Curriculum

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Abstract

English language programs worldwide have become increasingly aware of the need for curriculum review due to both demographic and situational changes taking place. As student populations, societal views and institutional factors are constantly changing, English language programs need to adapt their curriculum. Therefore, a process of reviewing an English language program needs to be implemented routinely to make the changes necessary to facilitate the desired outcome of the program. Keeping the desired outcome in mind, the present article focuses on the significance of needs analysis in developing the curriculum for English language program in our country.

Introduction

Language curriculum development is an aspect of a broader field of educational activity known as curriculum development or curriculum studies. Curriculum development focuses on determining what knowledge, skills, and values students learn in schools, what experiences should be provided to bring about intended learning outcomes, and how teaching and learning in schools or educational systems can be planned, measured and evaluated. Language curriculum development refers to the field of applied linguistics that address these issues. It describes an international set of processes that focuses on designing, revising, implementing and evaluating language programs.

The history of curriculum development in language teaching starts with the notion of syllabus design. Syllabus design is one aspect of curriculum development but is not identical with it. A syllabus is a specification of the content of a course of instruction and lists what will be taught and tested. Thus the syllabus for a speaking course might specify the kinds of oral skills that will be taught and practiced during the course, the functions, topics or other aspects of conversation that will be taught, and the order in which they will appear in the course.

Needs Analysis

Needs analysis, also commonly called needs assessment, is now often viewed as an integral part of second language curriculum development and review. Determining the needs

of a particular institution's students is seen as a direct way to inform the curriculum developers of the possible goals and objectives necessary to create the curriculum. In the field of English as a Second Language (ESL), the growing interest in the needs of the students has primarily focused on what types of linguistic output the students will need, often referred to as an ends-means approach to curriculum design.

Purpose of Needs analysis

Needs analysis in language teaching may be used for a number of different purposes, for example:

- To find out what language skills a learner needs in order to perform a particular role such as sales manager, tour guide, or university student
- To help determine if an existing course adequately addresses the needs of potential students.
- To determine which students from a group are most in need of training in particular language skills.
- To identify a change of direction that people in a reference group feel is important.
- To identify a gap between what students are able to do and what they need to be able to do.
- To collect information about a particular problem learners are experiencing. (Richards, 52)

Needs Analysis in English Language Teaching

It is important to understand how students' perceived language needs change over the course of their English language studies at one institution. This is possible by identifying the students' background and then conducting repeated measures of the students' perceived English language needs. Furthermore, determining the factors that cause changes in the perceived language needs would also serve as constructive information to curriculum review.

The necessity of a curriculum review of the ELP, and the subsequent needs analysis, has come from both routine maintenance as well as feelings from the curriculum designers and teaching staff that the current curriculum is not appropriate for a portion of the student population. A description of the program's initial curriculum development and the demographic and situational changes that have occurred since the program started is useful.

The process of collecting English language learner needs, including real linguistic needs as well as wants and desires is now viewed increasingly important in the creating of English language programs. Due to ever changing learner, societal and institutional factors, current English language programs need to also include needs analysis as part of routine program review. Identifying and confirming the various perceptual needs and wants of the students' at one institution. It is hoped that the description and analysis of the current needs analysis will be conducted at all levels (schools, colleges and universities).

The inclusion of needs analysis in second language curriculum development began in earnest in the 1960's as language programs started emphasizing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction (Richards, 2001). The types of needs analysis for ESP focuses on gathering detailed language used for vocational or other specific language needs.

An important principle of ESP approaches to language teaching is that the purposes for which a learner needs a language rather than a syllabus reflecting the structure of general English should be used in planning an English course. Rather than developing a course around an analysis of the language, an ESP approach starts instead with an analysis of the learner's needs. Schutz and Derwing (1981, 30) point out that this was a new concern with ESP: "most language planners in the past have bypassed a logically necessary first step: they have presumed to set about going somewhere without first determining whether or not their planned destination was reasonable or proper." Different types of students have different language needs and what they are taught should be restricted to what they need. These needs are fairly specific; they can be identified and they should determine the content of any course.

In ESP learner's needs are often described in terms of performance, that is, in terms of what the learner will be able to do with the language at the end of a course of study. Whereas in a general English course the goal is usually an

overall mastery of the language that can be tested on a global language test, the goal of an ESP course is to prepare the learners to carry out a specific task or set of tasks.

Besides obtaining the specific language needed in particular situations by asking professionals in the field, it has also become useful to determine the overall needs as perceived by the learners themselves. The term needs here takes on a larger meaning than often considered. In his article of curriculum development, Brindley (1984) provides a wider definition of the term needs as it is used in needs analysis for educational purposes. In this context it is sometimes used to refer to wants, desires, demands, expectations, motivations, lacks, constraints and requirements. The importance of this wider concept of needs is highlighted by possible conflict that can arise when the curriculum and the students' beliefs and assumptions are not the same. As Nunan (1989, 176) has noted, "...the effectiveness of a language program will be dictated as much by the attitudes and expectations of the learners as by the specifications of the official curriculum".

Language needs

In many cases, learners' language needs may be relatively easy to determine, particularly if learners need to learn a language for very specific purposes, for example, employment in fields such as tourism, nursing or the hotel industry. In this case the tasks employees typically carry out in English can be observed and the language needs of those tasks determined. The information obtained can then serve as a basis for planning a training program. In some cases, "needs" also includes students' rights. Linse comments.

It is the school's responsibility to take into account the cultural, political, and personal characteristics of students as the curriculum is developed in order to plan activities and objectives that are realistic and purposeful. It is not the responsibility of the school to act on political matters, but it is the school's responsibility to provide equal access to school opportunities and to validate the experiences of all students, regardless of their political and/or cultural backgrounds. (Linse, in Hudelson 1993, 46)

Conclusion

Designing a needs analysis involves choosing from among the various options listed below and selecting those that are likely to give a comprehensive view of learners' needs and that represent the interests of the different stakeholders involved. Decisions have to be made on the practical procedures involved in collecting, organizing, analyzing and reporting the information collected. It is important to make sure that the needs analysis does not produce an information overload. There needs to be a clear reason for collecting different kinds of information so as to ensure that only information that will actually be used is collected. In investigating the language needs of non-English-background students at a New Zealand university (Gravatt, Richards, and Lewis 1997), the following procedures were used:

- Literature survey
- Analysis of a wide range of survey questionnaire
- Contact with others who had conducted similar surveys
- Interviews with teachers to determine goals
- Identification of participating departments
- Presentation of project proposal to participating departments and identification of liaison person in each department
- Development of a pilot student and staff questionnaire
- Review of the questionnaire by colleagues
- Piloting of the questionnaires
- Selection of staff and student subjects
- Developing a schedule for collecting data
- Administration of questionnaire
- Follow-up interviews with selected participants
- Tabulation of responses
- Analysis of responses
- Writing up of report and recommendations

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