



Research
Ruminations

A Bouquet of Educational Thoughts

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Empowering the Language Teacher as Curriculum Developer

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Introduction

The key purpose of teaching English in India is to enable the learner to use the language with ease to communicate with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, teaching English in India has always been quite a challenging task in that, the English language teachers have not been able to reach all the learners, in the first place; and with a lack of immediate classroom objectives or what might be termed a 'blueprint' to be maneuvered in a heterogeneous larger classrooms, it is more a Herculean task for the language teachers to make all the learners in a class to communicate 'fluently' in English, in both speaking and writing. There are many factors that this situation can be attributed to. Notwithstanding the prominence and permanence of these factors, this paper tries to project the language teacher as the captain of the language class, who has not only got every right and responsibility but also the liberty to navigate the class yielding or catering to its immediate demands, and steer through to reach the desired shore. This paper also highlights that, despite the presence of deep-rooted, time-tested practices of

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any language classroom, it is the teacher who should generate and justify the feasibility of solutions for the second language-based issues inside the classroom.

The Language Teacher

In fact, the aim of any language course is to make the language learners communicate in English with ease and effectiveness. To achieve this end, it is important that the language teaching curriculum should be designed in such a manner that it meets the diverse demands of the language learners, which are determined by the different sources including their employers, higher education, knowledge, professional establishment and so on. Underscoring the fact that it is indispensable to develop all the language skills in order to improve the communication skills of the learners, this paper puts forth the idea that this can be better achieved if the language teachers themselves are empowered to design part of or the entire language curriculum, based on the needs analyses.

As Paul Wright et al.(1997) rightly put it, “effective teachers appear to be effective with students of all achievement levels regardless of the levels of heterogeneity in their classes.” Thus it goes without saying that, whether accepted or not, the most important factor that affects the students’ learning a language is the teacher. The English language learners in fact look up to their teacher to mould them to be better communicators. Most of the time, they do submit themselves at the discretion of the teacher, for matters pertaining to the form and content of language they ought to be provided with. And drawing attention to the fact that the teachers know better

the set of learners in hand, this paper emphasizes and highlights how the knowledge and potential of the language teachers can be utilized in designing a curriculum that works. This might add to or complement the already existing tailor-made use of English content, as prescribed by the institutions.

Curriculum vs. Syllabus

In the first place, the language teacher has to be given enough exposure to the difference between 'curriculum' and 'syllabus'. Latta & Chan (2011) quote Pinar (2008) who traces the roots of the term 'curriculum' back to the Latin 'currere', referring to run. Nunan (1988) authenticates Candlin's (1984) suggestion that "curricula are concerned with making general statements about language learning, learning purpose and experience, evaluation, and the role relationships of teachers and learners...they will also contain banks of learning items and suggestions about how these might be used in class. Syllabi, on the other hand, are more localized and are based on accounts and records of what actually happens at the classroom level as teachers and learners apply a given curriculum to their own situation. These accounts can be used to make subsequent modifications to the curriculum, so that the developmental process is ongoing and cyclical."(p. 3)

Applying this distinction to the case of English Language Learning, as such, the curriculum becomes:

- *A reciprocal medium*, involving communicative interchanges among students and other(s)
- *A connectivity medium*, preceding meaningful learning and

- *A transformational medium, with self and other(s) changing in the process. (Latta& Chan, 2011)*

To put it elaborately, using the curriculum as a reciprocal medium, the English language learners become part of the interchanges that involve this language and try their best to reciprocate in the same language. Here the reciprocation is purposeful and does not actually demand that the learners should be conscious about the use of the language. Thus the curriculum as a reciprocal medium benefits the language learners from various fronts. Secondly, serving as a medium of connectivity, the curriculum enables the English language learners to check the relevance of the form and content of their language against the larger backdrop of common or general standards. Thus in the process of language learning, the learners tend to seek purposeful learning connectedness and identify their range or standard of language against that. The English language learners find themselves transformed to better communicators as a result of the process of language learning.

Language Curriculum vs. Language Teacher

For purposes of argument, this paper conceives and concedes that a curriculum is anything that has a set of aims to be achieved, objectives that make it more concrete and a set of methods and/or techniques that make up to this end. It also underscores that in addition to the criteria that construct a curriculum, as it is universally understood, there is one indispensable element that must be given due consideration throughout the implementation process – the methodology. The

author feels that as far as the language teaching process is concerned, apart from selecting and organizing the language content to be 'taught', it is important to take into account the methodology that is used to meeting the specifications of the curriculum. And as such, the methodology itself becomes a curriculum of its own, ascribing to itself more autonomy and liberty in terms of implementation. It is this stance that the author establishes to argue in favour of the teachers, who, by virtue of the 'autonomy' they enjoy inside the classroom, can be perceived as active 'curriculum developers' or developers of an 'active' curriculum.

The English Curriculum in India

Starting with the Grammar-Translation method and later with the Direct method, as elsewhere in the world, the English language teaching scenario in India keeps testing and testifying the different methodologies, despite the difficulties posed by the presence of the dominant bulk of rural folk as language learners. It is the Secondary Education Commission (1952-53) led by Dr. A. LakshmanaswamyMudaliar that concerned itself with the methods of teaching English, materials for teaching and the evaluation system in the Indian English language teaching. Since then, a number of different frameworks has been tried. Some of them include the MELT campaign (1952), the Bridge Intensive Course (during the 1960s), the Bombay Project (1977), the Communicational Teaching Project or the Bangalore Project (1979-84), the Communicative syllabus of the Loyola College (1980s), the CBSE Interact English Project (1990s) and the others prevalent till date.

In 1987, the Curriculum Development Cell (CDC) of the University Grants Commission (UGC) prepared a blueprint for the English curriculum, redefining the goals of learning English on the basis of needs which recommended a learner-centred, interactive, skill-oriented methodology. Notwithstanding the potential of this framework and the ones prescribed by the others, it is still a distant dream for a majority of underprivileged Indian English language learners to achieve either fluency in communication or proficiency in English as a whole. Though there are many factors that thwart the learners achieving ease in communication, the dominant one is that the learners are not provided with the climate that mandates the actual use of this language inside the classroom premises, which might be extended to real life situations. And despite the presence of the broader curriculum that specifies the content to be provided and the syllabus that actually provides the content, it is the language teacher that decides the provision of premises that would enable the learners to achieve the long-term as well as immediate goals and objectives, as set in the curriculum and syllabus. Thus, it is the language teacher - who promotes or demotes language learning by providing opportunities - that gains more prominence as actual curriculum developer, in terms of executing the prescribed framework of language teaching. And therefore it becomes essential that the teachers should be educated of their responsibility and be empowered to exercise their autonomy to its fullest in making the ends meet.

Why should the teachers be empowered?

More than 30 years ago, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement launched the First

and later the Second International Mathematics Study (FIMS and SIMS). It is by then that three types of curricula were identified in SIMS (Wilkins, 1997). They were *the Intended Curriculum*, *the Implemented Curriculum* and *the Attained Curriculum*. The *Intended Curriculum* is the content specified by the state, district, or school to be addressed in a particular course or at a particular grade level. The *Implemented Curriculum* is content actually delivered by the teacher, and the *Attained Curriculum* is content actually learned by students. The author of this paper draws in the implications of this project to the status quo of language teaching.

Analyzing our English language classes against this backdrop, one can clearly understand that there are obvious discrepancies among these three different curricula. There are numerous studies that indicate that despite using highly structured textbooks as the basis for a curriculum, teachers commonly make independent and idiosyncratic decisions regarding what should be covered and to what extent. Of course these decisions are either voluntary or thrust upon by many factors, some of which are beyond the preparing and repairing ability of the teachers. The point is, all said and done, inside the actual classroom, the teachers rule.

Nation (2010) rightly points out that curriculum design does not need to be a large-scale operation. The whole curriculum design process, in his opinion, can be applied to something as small as an activity in a lesson. Thus it is clear that curriculum design is not done exclusively by expert, professional curriculum designers alone. Any thing that works

inside the classroom that accomplishes the objectives of the course makes up to a curriculum and therefore an individual teacher who works it out automatically becomes the curriculum developer too.

How can the Teachers be Empowered?

Generally teachers of any discipline tend to find security in curriculum materials prescribed and so always resort to them as the major source of activities and tasks. This in fact poses to be a risk-free practice and easy to account for achievement. As far as language teaching is concerned, the ultimate aim of any language teacher willy-nilly happens to be to enable the learner to achieve communicative competence. And, as a matter of fact, anything and everything that is available and is within the reach of the teacher becomes a tool to teach language. So to say, any material is language material. What the teacher requires is an awareness (and education, by the way) as to how it can be utilized. Nevertheless, by virtue of the interactive role of language, the language teacher's role becomes integral in that, at one time the teacher has to steer through the language class, providing instructions to the class as a whole. At other times the teacher should be less visible in the class, involved with small groups and individuals, giving them tasks to be accomplished. At some other times the teacher has to lead an entire class discussion and slowly extend it to individual study and contemplation. This is only to portray the potential points of curriculum development that the language teacher has, within the four walls of a classroom. There are other points from where the teacher can position herself on the road to success in an

English language teaching course. The following are some of them that the author pronounces on.

i) Needs Analysis

In the first place the teachers should realize that most of the curriculum planning does not begin from zero or from the scratch. Many a time, it is only from an evaluation of what already is in place. So, the first thing to be done by every teacher is needs analysis – for the development of a language program which is responsive to the learner and the learning needs. On the one hand, the needs analysis will encapsulate the needs of the institution, the employer, the parents and the society at large from the language course. And on the other, the analysis should also concentrate on the needs of the student as a ‘language learner’, from various stances - his motivation, attitude, inclination, intelligences, learning styles as well as the target language behavior as perceived and defined by the learners themselves.

ii) Setting Goals

After having made the needs analysis, a consolidation of the findings to be made by the teacher and should be rated as long term and short term goals, which provides the basis for the objectives they are going to have for every instructional design of theirs. At this juncture the teachers also need to take into account the processes involved in language acquisition and language learning. This will enable the teacher to determine the methodology that might work better to achieve a particular goal or objective of a content specified at some given point of

time; because at times, the lack of objectives, also compels the teachers to keep changing the modes of teaching.

iii) Assessment of Learning Aids

Now that the goals have been set, the teachers have to make an assessment of the possible learning aids within their reach, their accessibility and affordability. The teachers should also train themselves in gaining adeptness in flexing the material in hand to suit their purposes, just in case of any lack of aids as such.

iv) Maintaining a Learner Profile

The entry point for curriculum decisions should be the teacher's knowledge of her learners' characteristics – their strengths, needs, interests, questions, goals, perspectives and prior experiences. Essential understandings within the subject area can be attended to by a curriculum and yet be implemented through a teaching and learning framework that can be modified and adjusted to better meet small groups of learner's essential characteristics and profiles. Used in this manner, the teacher-generated curriculum builds a bridge between students' characteristics and the essential content to be learnt in the course.

v) Creating Opportunities to Use the Language

Widdowson (2002) rightly points out that, "...knowing a language as a subject is not the same as knowing it as it naturally occurs in the social contexts of everyday life." Therefore the teacher should create tasks that demand and mandate the

participation of every learner in the class, using the target language with ease. To start with, the teacher may apply open tasks that will allow the learners to decide upon the information to be used and tackle some language problem. Gradually the tasks may be made at the group level, as pair work and ultimately as an individual work. The intrinsic challenge of these language tasks, the autonomy that it grants and the sense of achievement it gives all make up to motivate the learner to participate, and slowly make them fall in line with the teacher.

vi) Contextualizing the Communication

Even in the case that the prescribed text book is the only tool on hand for the teacher to use, the language teacher can always flex the form, without disturbing the content and can invite the learners to generate any number of similar forms. Especially in the Indian language teaching scenario, the teacher relies solely upon the prescribed text book, which is complimented and complemented by a cheaper version of translated and transliterated guides in the market. Realizing that these 'guides' are not going to make it to improve the communication skills, the teachers have to be educated as to how to contextualize their communicative classes, making the road easier to skate. This definitely brings in the learners to participate actively and thereby gradually move towards the desired goal of achieving 'fluency'.

vii) Taking the Cues from Fellow Teachers – Blogs Speak Bolder

The language teachers can join hands to make up to a continuum of curriculum developers. The easiest mode to create

one such community is to create a blog that can be used as a medium to propagate the success stories of experienced teachers. This not only compliments the teaching community but also complements them by providing the methodologies that work(ed) better in the language classroom. For instance, one lesson can be provided to a set of teachers and different methodologies of teaching that piece of work can be invited from them. The best can be taken with incorporations from the other suggestions and be implemented with necessary improvisations.

viii) Generating a Methodology Bank

In addition to the above, the teachers can be given periodical orientation that will give them the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to implement some or all of the steps mentioned above, so they will be able to solve selected curricular problems in ways that are practically feasible. Thus the ESL or the otherwise common Part-II English courses themselves can be used as a laboratory for curriculum development – so that teachers will engage in a process of innovation, the products of which include the development of new materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values by teachers. The welcome by-product of this process is that the teachers get more refined as task masters, in the real sense of the term.

To Sum Up

Every language teacher, who makes a decision about what to teach and when, or about the presentation of classroom

activities, or about what to test, is actually a curriculum designer. The decisions that the teacher makes about what should happen in the language classroom when the tasks are being performed are going to be informed by a number of factors, especially in an Indian Second language classroom. These factors include knowledge of the students, the lay out of the classroom, the availability of appropriate technology, and beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching (Nation, 2010). In making appropriately informed decisions on the basis of these and other incidental factors, the language teacher becomes an active participant in the process of curriculum designing, thereby making language classes more communicative and meaningful. Therefore every language teacher has to be empowered to decide and design the curriculum of their own and implement the same, especially to fulfill the language needs of the learners who will and should no more be underprivileged.

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