

A CRITICAL REVIEW

Curriculum Approaches in Language Teaching: Forward, Central, and Backward Design

(Jack C. Richards)

Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing the article “Curriculum Approaches in Language Teaching: Forward, Central, and Backward Design” by Jack C. Richards. A brief summary of three kinds of curriculum design will be followed by a discussion for strengths and limitations of the article in general, and of each design in particular. A personal reflection including responses, relevance and implication of these curriculum approaches is also covered in accordance with Vietnam teaching and learning context.

Introduction

Throughout the history of language teaching, curriculum development has attracted a lot of concerns from educators and linguists about how to build the best curriculum approach. Therefore, the call to change and innovation for a new approach seems to be constant in language teaching and learning. This paper is to critically review the article “Curriculum Approaches in Language Teaching: Forward, Central, and Backward Design” by Professor Jack C. Richards who is an internationally recognized authority on methodology, curriculum development and materials design. The article was originally an informal presentation to participants at a seminar in Chile, and then asked for a written version. The purpose of the article is to examine the assumptions and implementation underlying three different curriculum design approaches. The framework the author presents in the paper provides a general overview on how different practices and trends in language teaching methodology and curriculum design approach can be understood.

Summary

The article starts with the introduction in which the author presents the purpose of his article, and its significance of understanding the nature and implications of these approaches in language teaching.

The Introduction is followed by the section of Input, Process, Output, and the Curriculum. In this part, the author clarifies what these terms mean in the context of language teaching. The term *Curriculum* is the overall design for a course and how the content is transformed into a detailed plan for teaching and

learning which makes the expected learning outcomes achievable. *Input* means the linguistic content of a course which is selected, organized and arranged into units in a rational order. As a result of this process, a syllabus is produced. There are different approaches to syllabus such as vocabulary, grammar, functions or text types. When the input has been decided, the *process* including teaching method and how to design classroom activities and materials can be discussed. *Process* refers to methodology applied in language teaching which presents beliefs, philosophy, and theories relating to nature of second language learning, teachers and learners' roles in classroom, and instructional materials. It consists of learning activities, procedures, and techniques that teachers employ in teaching process. Once teaching process has been standardized and fixed, it is generally referred to as a method. Output is described as learning outcomes that is what learners will be able to do by the end of a course. Learners are expected to achieve a target level of language proficiency scale, a standardized test, or communicative competency in particular situations.

According to the author, Input, Process, and Output are three components to develop a curriculum. The starting point of curriculum development in language teaching can be Input, Process, or Output, and each of curriculum approach reflects different assumptions about the means and ends of teaching and learning. The writer argues that it is better understood about effective approaches to language teaching by recognizing the differences in the implications and applications of the curriculum with different starting points. For each of curriculum design, illustration, examples, and implementation are presented in a very comprehensible way.

Firstly, Forward design means building up a curriculum through moving from input, to process, and to output in the linear direction. This curriculum approach starts with the selection of instructional materials and linguistic content for the syllabus before determining the method and learning outcomes. The syllabus can be approached by a core set of lexical items; a block of grammatical structures needed to sustain language ability; corpus – a ready source of authentic text for language teaching; or discourse analysis – study on lexical,

grammatical, textual features and the nature of different text types, which is important in the design of courses in English for Specific Purposes. Two typical examples of Forward Design Approaches in language teaching are Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Content-based Instruction (CoBI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). They all start with a model of language that is broken down into small units – elements of knowledge and part-skills, then sequenced from simple to more complex and build the learning outcomes. Forward design Curriculum is implemented through five stages: selecting content, planning syllabus, determining methodology, building desired learning output, and designing assessment. In some cases, each of different stages may be conducted by different experts who specializes in each process.

Secondly, Central design starts with the selection of teaching activities, techniques, and methods rather than with the elaboration of a detailed language syllabus or specification of learning outcomes. Central design can be understood as a “a learner-centered and learning-oriented perspective” which gets learners involved in discussion, decision making, critical thinking, cooperating in group or pair work. The examples of Central design suggested in the article consist of Novel Methods of the 1980s, Gategno’s Silent Way, Task-based Language teaching TBLT (version 1), Dogme, Post-method Teaching, The Ecological classroom. The implementation of central design is an ongoing interaction between the different curriculum elements: content, outcomes, and assessment which are represented as a circle, not a linear progression in Forward design

Thirdly, Backward design begins with detailed description of learning outcomes, and use these as the foundation for planning instructional processes and input. The examples of Backward design includes Backward design through Objectives, Need analysis, Task-based Language Teaching (version 2), Competency-based Instruction (CpBI), Standards, and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Among these, CEFR is evaluated to be the most widespread example of Backward design which is designed to supply a set of explicit statements of objectives, content and methods of the study of

mordern languages. The implementation of Bacward design involving CEFR is presented in the linear fashion including stages: outcomes, syllabus, materials and test, teaching, and assessment.

Lastly, the author comes to a conclusion that there is no best approach to curriculum design and each design may work well in different contexts. The author also presents different features of Forward design, Central design, and Backward Design in terms of syllabus, methodology, the role of teacher and learner, and assessment.

Critique

As a whole, the article provides a comprehensibly systematic introduction to the issues related to curriculum approach. Forward Design, Central design, and Backward Design are not new approaches; in fact, they derive from the previous approaches. Particularly, Forward design is described as the traditional approach by Richards and Rodgers (2001) while Central design is referred to the progressivism by Clark (1987) and Backward design is considered as Objective model by Finney (2001). It cannot be denied the value of the article in the field of language teaching and learning. Throughout the history of curriculum development, a number of curriculum approaches have been developed and implemented with different achievements. Three curriculum designs proposed in this article, despite not being a new invention, generalize a practical framework of curriculum approaches with different starting points from diversity of existing approaches. Through examining the previous works and theories of curriculum approach carefully, the author builds three designs convincingly in terms of theory and practicality. In comparison with the article “The ELT curriculum: A flexible model for a changing world”, Finney proposed three curriculum design approach: Content model (Classical Humanism), Process model (Progressivism), and Objective model (Reconstructivism), which are similar with Forward, Central, and Backward design by Richards. Finney was in favor of analyzing assumption about goals, ideologies of the models while Richards prove the applicability and practicality of his curriculum designs through specific examples. This advocates that Richards’s Curriculum approaches provides

teachers and curriculum planners a clear image about how these designs are applied in reality.

Despite the strong points involving its value, practicality, and applicability, the article reveals some weaknesses. It is visible that the whole article is a logical description rather than a deep analysis of each design. Therefore, it is highly recommended to include a detailed analysis on advantages and disadvantages of each kind of design, which helps teachers or curriculum planners to have a closer look at different approaches. As a result, they can select a curriculum approach that best activates in their real context. Another limitation is that the examples suggested for each design are not unifying. For example, the author listed Backward design through Objectives, Need analysis, Task-based Language Teaching TBLT (version 2), Competency-based Instruction (CpBI), Standards, and the Common European Framework of Reference as examples of Backward design. Among these, TBLT and CpBI are sorts of teaching approaches while Need analysis is a part of the process carried out to identify learners' needs, or Standards and CEFR are descriptive frameworks of the outcome or language proficiency level learners should be able to reach.

In particular, each design approach reveals strengths and limitations when being implemented in reality.

Forward design is accessible because teachers are free to choose instructional materials which are widely available in the market. Learners can benefit from content-planned curriculum which helps them acquire language step by step through small units. However, this kind of design ignores the importance of learning experience, forces learners to accept rather than challenges what they are learnt.

Backward design produces a clear connection between what learners learn inside the classroom and their needs. As a result, it gives learner power to transfer skills and knowledge that they have learnt to achieve a targeted language proficiency level or pass a standardized test. Nevertheless, this design requires teacher to invest much time and effort to create or select material appropriate to learners' desired needs.

In Central design, learners are central to the process of teaching and learning. They are motivated and autonomous to learn language through learning activities and tasks. They may feel comfortable and flexible to acquire a language without pressure of achievement or compulsion of planned language content. In similarity with Backward design, teachers must spend much time to screening activities and tasks that match with their interests. They are also required to be good at language proficiency and controlling over the teaching and learning process since the lessons are based on tasks which are hard to predict.

Responses

Personally, I appreciate the practical framework of these curriculum design approaches and the elaborations from theoretical issues to implementation presented comprehensibly in each design. The article is a worthwhile contribution that provides teachers and curriculum planners with clear, useful guidelines on how to approach different curriculum designs. Recently, I have had an opportunity to get involved in planning a curriculum for preschoolers (aged from 4-6) at my language center. The team leader advocates selecting linguistic contents, grammar, and vocabulary that learners need to master at the early stage of English learning. After that, a syllabus will be organized into learnable and teachable units. Interestingly, this kind of approach belongs to forward design covered in the article, which gives me a strong reference to plan the curriculum. However, I recognized that I considered the goals and what the learners would be able to perform as a result of the course while screening and selecting the content. I believe that it is also similar with central design since curriculum designers also think about learning outcomes when developing methodology. Obviously, Input, Process, and Output may be considered concurrently, rather than presented in a linear sequential model. Also, it seems to be mechanical to exactly follow these curriculum approaches distinguished by their starting points.

Relevance

In Vietnam context, nowadays learners have more chances to learn English than ever, not only learn English as a compulsory subject at school but also learn for specific purposes at foreign language centers. As to English as a compulsory subject at high schools, forward design is employed to design curriculum without specific learning outcomes. The linguistic content and instructional materials are selected, and standardized for each grade by Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Then, methodology may be implemented disparately by different teachers in different regions. Learners are expected to achieve language proficiency through the mastery of grammatical structures, vocabulary, four basic language skills to prepare for tests. Central design and Backward design cannot be used to design curriculum in this context because the program is applied nationwide, and building specific learning outcomes or methodology for a particular group of learners seems to be impossible. Therefore, Forward design is evaluated to be the best approach in this circumstance. In contrast, backward design is widely employed in most language centers. At my language center, both forward design and backward design are employed depending on the target learners. For general English courses, introductory courses at primary or secondary level, forward design is preferred. Most of language curriculum belong to Backward design which aims at specific learners who wish to achieve a targeted level on standardized tests (TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS), or on a proficiency scale of CEFR (such as A1, A2, B1 through KET or PET test), or communicative competency (such as English Communication for receptionists, salesmen, or office workers). After determining the desired learning output, instructional materials, learning activities, and teaching techniques are built to strongly meet the ends. Through implementation of this design, I recognize there two contradictory effects. When it comes to learner's target achievement, this backward design really brings great benefit, helps learners fulfill the objectives. In terms of efficiency view of education, this kind of curriculum approach, however, may be the danger which turns teaching into technical process using

mechanical exercises to achieve the outcomes, while goals of teaching and learning- meaningful and worthwhile learning experiences are ignored.

Since English teaching and learning are strongly influenced by teacher-centered orientation and test-based system, Central design seem to be challenging in Vietnam context. However, it is being currently applied successfully in international or bilingual schools where students have more chances to learn English through tasks and activities rather than learn for achievement or learn according to planned textbooks. In this environment, they can build up their learning autonomy and motivation.

Implication

Assumptions and practices of these three curriculum design approaches have clear implications for language teachers and curriculum designers. Instead of separating different designs in different circumstances, teachers or curriculum planners should flexible to combine these designs, and take three components of curriculum design: Input, Process, and Output into consideration at the same time. As to Forward design, curriculum planners should select linguistic contents in accordance with learner's level, and examine to choose the most suitable textbooks among mass commercial materials in the market. Teaching method as well learning activities, tasks should be designed with clear and specific purposes in Central design. For Backward design, materials and teaching method must match with the desired learning outcomes. Importantly, exercises and teaching process should not be intensively focused to fulfill the objectives, but facilitate learners to experience worthwhile learning. It is truly the goal of education that educators wish to build up and achieve.

Conclusion

Curriculum development and implementation requires stakeholders to take more responsibility and attempt to make a breakthrough in a new era. This may be a big challenge for teachers, especially Vietnamese teachers who have been got used to applying traditional approaches and being afraid of employing new and challenging ones. In short, this article is a valuable contribution in the field of language learning and teaching, and a reliable source for practitioners who

want to make more researches on curriculum approach or to build up a successful curriculum for their real context.

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