The Language Teaching Matrix

Jack C. Richards

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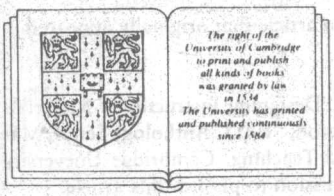

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Preface

The Language Teaching Matrix is designed to serve as a textbook in courses on language teaching methodology and teacher preparation, and as a source book for courses on language curriculum design, materials development, and teaching practice. The "matrix" in the title is a metaphor for an interactive and multidimensional view of language teaching; for in this book effective language teaching is seen to result from interactions among the curriculum, teachers, students, methodology, and instructional materials. In particular, three factors are singled out as central to effective teaching: the curriculum, methodology, and instructional materials.

This is not a book of prescriptions, where teaching is approached in terms of *methods*, or *products* that offer teachers predetermined models to follow. Rather, teaching is approached as a dynamic *process*. Teaching depends upon the application of appropriate theory, the development of careful instructional designs and strategies, and the study of what actually happens in the classroom. Because these ingredients will change according to the teaching context, effective teaching is continually evolving throughout one's teaching career. Discussion questions and tasks at the end of each chapter will aid teachers in their personal journeys toward effective teaching.

Each chapter in the book takes a central issue in language teaching and examines its position within the language teaching matrix – that is, its role and position within the network of factors that have to be considered. Chapter 1 presents an overview of curriculum development processes and suggests that an effective second language program depends upon careful information gathering, planning, development, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Chapter 2 contrasts two approaches to conceptualizing the nature of methodology in language teaching. One is the familiar methods-based approach to teaching. This is seen to be a "top-down" approach because it involves selecting a method, then making teachers and learners match the method. The other is a "bottom-up" approach; it involves exploring the nature of effective teaching and learning, and discovering the strategies used by successful teachers and learners in the classroom. This chapter hence seeks to draw attention away from methods and to address the more interesting question of how successful teachers and learners achieve their results.

The next four chapters of the book focus on the teaching of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each skill is discussed from a different perspective.

Chapter 3 looks at a key issue in the teaching of listening comprehension: the design of suitable instructional materials. It is argued that teaching materials should recognize the difference between two kinds of listening processes, referred to as top-down and bottom-up processing. In addition, differences between interactional and transactional purposes for listening are discussed. These distinctions are then used as a framework for designing listening exercises.

In the next chapter, teaching conversation is approached through an examination of the nature of casual conversation and conversational fluency. Two approaches are compared – an indirect approach, which teaches conversation through the use of interactive tasks, and a direct approach, which focuses on the processes and strategies involved in casual conversational interaction. The need to monitor classroom activities to determine their effectiveness in promoting conversation skills is emphasized.

In Chapter 5 a case study is presented of an effective reading teacher. From interviews and video recordings of the teacher's class, an attempt is made to understand how the teacher approaches his teaching and the kinds of planning and decision making that the teacher employs. In Chapter 6 approaches to the teaching of writing are considered. The importance of an adequate theory of writing is stressed, and product- and process-based approaches to teaching writing are compared. Implications for the roles of learners, the teacher, and instructional activities are discussed.

Chapter 7 discusses ways in which teachers can explore the nature of their own classroom practices and improve the effectiveness of their teaching through self-monitoring. Three approaches to self-monitoring are elaborated: personal reflection through journal or diary accounts of teaching, self-reports based on focused reports of lessons, and audio or video recordings of lessons. Practical suggestions are given on what teachers can look for in their own lessons, procedures for carrying out self-monitoring, and how to use the information obtained.

In Chapter 8 approaches to developing programs for students of limited English proficiency are considered. Traditionally language proficiency has been the main focus of such programs. The goal has been to develop minority students' language skills to a level where they can cope with the demands of regular classroom instruction. It is suggested that this approach is inadequate, and that an effective program must address three crucial dimensions of classroom learning, referred to as the interactional dimension (the ability to understand and use the social rules of classroom discourse), the instructional task dimension (the ability to

understand the nature of learning in mainstream classrooms), and the cognitive dimension (the ability to understand and assimilate concepts and information in different content areas).

The book concludes with a short chapter offering reflections on some of the key points of the book. The primary goal of *The Language Teaching Matrix* is to engage teachers and teachers-in-training, as well as teacher educators, in the investigation of classroom teaching and learning. In order to facilitate this and to assist instructors using the book, each chapter concludes with a set of discussion questions and practical activities. These serve to link the information in each chapter with practical issues in curriculum development, methodology, classroom observation, and materials design.

This book resulted from graduate courses I taught as a faculty member of the Department of English as a Second Language at the University of Hawaii, from 1981 to 1988. Discussions with students and colleagues helped clarify my understanding of many of the issues discussed here. For ongoing support, advice, and encouragement while the book was being written, I am particularly grateful to my former colleagues Richard Day, Richard Schmidt, and Martha Pennington. Others whose advice has always been both constructive and supportive include particularly Chris Candlin, Fred Genesee, David Nunan, and Tom Scovel. Lastly, special thanks are due to Ellen Shaw at Cambridge University Press, whose guidance and encouragement helped shape the book into a more readable and coherent form; to Barbara Curialle Gerr, who saw the book through production; and to Sandra Graham, whose skillful copy editing helped remove many a circumlocutious thought and infelicitous phrase – though not this one!

Contents

Preface vii

1 Curriculum development in second language teaching 1

2 Beyond methods 35

3 Designing instructional materials for teaching listening comprehension 50

4 Conversationally speaking: approaches to the teaching of conversation 67

5 A profile of an effective reading teacher 87

6 From meaning into words: writing in a second or foreign language 100

7 The teacher as self-observer: self-monitoring in teacher development 118

8 Language and content: approaches to curriculum alignment 144
Jack C. Richards and Daniel Hurley

Conclusion: a look toward the future 163

References 167

Index 177

1 Curriculum development in second language teaching

Second language teaching is often viewed from a very narrow perspective – that of the teaching act. Consequently much of the literature on second language teaching deals with teaching methods or with the design and use of instructional materials. If students aren't learning it is assumed to be the fault of the method, the materials, or the teacher. Yet the success of a language program involves far more than the mere act of teaching. As with any successful educational program, a number of levels of planning, development, and implementation are involved. Goals and objectives for the program have to be developed as well as syllabuses and instructional materials. Instructional strategies have to be determined, teachers selected and trained, and tests and assessment procedures chosen. Once the program is in operation, procedures are needed to enable the program to be monitored and its effects on learners and learning evaluated. In order to plan for effective second language teaching, a comprehensive view is needed of the nature and process of language program development. Providing such a view is the goal of this chapter, in which issues and practices in language curriculum development are reviewed and their contribution to effective language teaching assessed.

Language curriculum development, like other areas of curriculum activity, is concerned with principles and procedures for the planning, delivery, management, and assessment of teaching and learning. Curriculum development processes in language teaching comprise needs analysis, goal setting, syllabus design, methodology, and testing and evaluation.

Needs analysis

Needs assessment refers to an array of procedures for identifying and validating needs, and establishing priorities among them. (Prator 1980:79)

In language curriculum development, needs analysis serves the purposes of:

1. providing a mechanism for obtaining a wider range of input into the content, design, and implementation of a language program through

involving such people as learners, teachers, administrators, and employers in the planning process
2. identifying general or specific language needs that can be addressed in developing goals, objectives, and content for a language program
3. providing data that can serve as the basis for reviewing and evaluating an existing program.

In language teaching, the impact of needs analysis has been greatest in the area of special-purposes program design, and a considerable literature now exists on the role of needs assessment in English for specific purposes (ESP) (Robinson 1980). But needs analysis is also fundamental to the planning of general language courses.

Parameters, sources, and procedures

Needs analysis may focus on either the general parameters of a language program or on the specific communicative needs of language learners. The first approach may be referred to as *situation analysis*, and involves focusing on the following kinds of questions:

Who are the learners?
What are the learners' goals and expectations?
What learning styles do the learners prefer?
How proficient are the teachers in the target language?
Who are the teachers?
What training and experience do the teachers have?
What teaching approach do they favor?
What do teachers expect of the program?
What is the administrative context of the program?
What constraints (e.g., time, budget, resources) are present?
What kinds of tests and assessment measures are needed?

The second approach, *communicative needs analysis* (Munby 1978), is concerned with gathering information about the learners' communicative needs in the target language, and involves questions such as these:

In what settings will the learners use the target language?
What role relationships are involved?
Which language modalities are involved (e.g., reading, writing, listening, speaking)?
What types of communicative events and speech acts are involved?
What level of proficiency is required?

Answers to these questions help determine the type of language skills and level of language proficiency the program should aim to deliver. An example of a questionnaire in the domain of situation analysis is given

in Appendix 1, and one in the domain of communicative needs analysis in Appendix 2.

Determining needs is not an exact science, however, since it involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches, requires the use of a variety of formal and informal data-gathering procedures, and seeks to identify or quantify needs that may be by nature imprecise. Needs statements thus represent judgments by the needs analyst as to what should be analyzed, the means to be used, and the meaning and significance of the data collected. Methods employed in gathering data vary according to setting and may involve participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, content analysis of job descriptions and job advertisements, tests, role play, and analysis of communication breakdowns (Roberts 1980; Schroder 1981).

Needs-analysis procedures generate a considerable amount of data, including information about the context of the language program, the learners, the teachers, and the administrative factors that affect the program. This information is then used in planning the program itself. Let us examine some of the key processes involved in more detail.

Goals and objectives

Curriculum goals are general statements of the intended outcomes of a language program, and represent what the curriculum planners believe to be desirable and attainable program aims based on the constraints revealed in the needs analysis. Goals can be used as a basis for developing more specific descriptions of the intended outcomes of the program (the program objectives). Goal statements refer to elements of the program that are actually going to be addressed by instruction. For example, a needs analysis might reveal that a group of learners had unfavorable attitudes toward the proposed language program. A goal statement reflecting this might be:

Students will develop favorable attitudes toward the program.

However, while this goal might represent a sincere wish on the part of teachers, it should appear as a program goal only if it is to be addressed concretely in the program.

From goals to objectives

In language teaching, a number of different ways of stating program objectives are commonly employed, including behavioral, skills-based, content-based, and proficiency-based objectives.

BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES

The most familiar way to state objectives is in terms of behavior. Mager (1962) specified three essential characteristics of behavioral objectives:

1. They must unambiguously describe the behavior to be performed;
2. They must describe the conditions under which the performance will be expected to occur;
3. They must state a standard of acceptable performance (the criterion).

Findlay and Nathan (1980) give examples of behavioral objectives in "competency-based" language programs. Sample objectives for a survival language course include:

Given an oral request, the learner will say his/her name, address and telephone number to a native speaker of English and spell his/her name, street and city so that an interviewer may write down the data with 100% accuracy.

Given oral directions for a 4-step physical action, the learner will follow the directions with 100% accuracy.

Sample objectives for an ESP course for clerical workers are:

Given a letter with 10 proofreading marks for changes, the learner will rewrite the letter with 90% accuracy in 10 minutes.

Given the first and last names of 10 persons, five with Spanish surnames and five with English surnames from a local telephone directory, the learner will locate the names and write down the telephone numbers in 5 minutes with 90% accuracy. (Findlay and Nathan 1980: 226)

Four justifications are commonly made to support the use of behavioral objectives in curriculum planning:

1. They help teachers to clarify their goals.
2. They facilitate instruction by highlighting the skills and subskills underlying different instructional content.
3. They make the evaluation process easier.
4. They provide a form of accountability.

A criticism that is often made, however, is that representing language teaching goals in terms of behavioral objectives is impractical, as well as undesirable. Some learning goals cannot readily be stated in terms of behavioral changes expected in students. In such cases, it is preferable to focus on the classroom tasks and learning activities that learners should engage in, and the intrinsic worth and value of these experiences for their own sake, without specifying precise learning outcomes. This is sometimes referred to as a process-based approach (Stenhouse 1975).

Behavioral objectives also tend to deal only with aspects of second language proficiency that can be represented as "competencies" and hence tend to trivialize the nature of second language acquisition.

SKILLS-BASED OBJECTIVES

A common way of stating objectives in language programs is to specify "microskills," or processes that account for fluency in such specific "macroskill" areas as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In specifying microskills, the curriculum planner tries to describe the competencies that account for functional ability in a given skill but are "independent of specific settings or situations" (Krahnke 1987: 49). For example, Nuttall (1983: 146) presents objectives for an intensive reading program in the following form:

After completing the reading course, the student will:

a) Use skimming when appropriate to ensure that he reads only what is relevant, to help subsequent comprehension.
b) Make use of non-text information (especially diagrams etc.) to supplement the text and increase understanding.
c) Read in different ways according to his purpose and the type of text.
d) Not worry if he does not understand every word, except when complete accuracy is important.
e) Recognize that a good writer chooses his words carefully and would have meant something different if he had chosen A rather than B. (An advanced reader will be able to explain the difference.)
f) Make use of the reference system, discourse markers, etc., to help himself unravel the meaning of difficult passages.
g) Be aware that a sentence with the same signification may have a different value in different contexts, and be able to identify the value.
h) Be able to make use of the rhetorical organization of the text help him interpret a complex message.
i) Be aware that a writer does not express everything he means, and be able to make inferences as required.
j) Be aware that his own expectations influence his interpretation and recognize those occasions when the writer's assumptions differ from his own.
k) Be aware, when necessary, that he has not understood the text, and be able to locate the source of misunderstanding and tackle it.
l) Respond fully to the text in whatever way is appropriate.

Richards (1985a: 199) lists among the microskills needed for academic listening the ability to

1. identify the purpose and scope of a lecture
2. identify and follow the topic of a lecture

3. identify relationships among units within discourse (e.g., major ideas, generalizations, hypotheses, supporting ideas, examples)
4. identify the role of discourse markers in signaling the structure of a lecture
5. infer relationships (e.g., cause, effect, conclusion)
6. recognize key lexical items related to a topic
7. deduce meanings of words from context.

Krahnke (1987) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of a skills-based approach. Relevance to students' needs is a key advantage, whereas the potential ambiguity and subjectivity of skills taxonomies are disadvantages.

CONTENT-BASED OBJECTIVES

Many language programs specify objectives in relation to content. For example, the Council of Europe's Threshold Level English (Van Ek and Alexander 1980: 29) includes objectives related to fourteen topic areas. Under the topic "House and Home," for example, the following are among the specifications given:

Learners should be able to discuss where and under what conditions they live, specifically:

types of accommodation	describe the type of house, flat etc in which they live themselves, as well as those in the neighborhood, and seek similar information from others
accommodation, rooms	describe their own accommodation, house, flat, etc and the rooms in it, and seek similar information from others
furniture, bedclothes	mention and inquire about the availability of the most essential pieces of furniture and bedclothes
rent	state, rent and/or purchase price of their own accommodation and inquire about that of other houses, flats, etc

Lists of functions, often related to specific situations or settings, are also employed as objectives in language programs. For example, a syllabus guide for vocational English in industry lists "core needs" in the following form (MacPherson and Smith 1979):

To ask:
  someone to lend you something
  someone to pass something that's out of reach
To ask for:
  change in deductions
  change in holiday dates

change in shift
help from workmates when the job is too much for one person

It is clear that in using skills taxonomies and content-based descriptions as objectives, the distinction between "objectives" in the sense proposed by Mager and "syllabus" – that is, between goals and content – has been blurred.

PROFICIENCY SCALES

A related development in language curriculum development is the use of proficiency scales. Program objectives may specify a level of proficiency, such as "survival English," or "Level 3 on the Foreign Service Oral Proficiency Scale." An example of the use of proficiency-based objectives in large-scale language program design is the Australian Adult Migrant Education On-Arrival Program, a program for immigrants (Ingram 1982).

> In order to ensure that a language program is coherent and systematically moves learners along the path towards that level of proficiency they require, some overall perspective of the development path is required. This need resulted... in the development of the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLRP). The ASLRP defines levels of second language proficiency at nine (potentially twelve) points along the path from zero to native-like proficiency. The definitions provide detailed descriptions of language behaviour in all four macroskills and allow the syllabus developer to perceive how a course at any level fits into the total pattern of proficiency development. (Ingram 1982: 66)

Likewise instruments such as the Foreign Service Institute Oral Interview (a scale that contains five levels of oral proficiency supplemented by ratings for accent, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency) can be used not only to assess proficiency for diagnostic or placement purposes but also to establish levels of proficiency as program objectives. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in 1982 published Provisional Proficiency Guidelines, which are "a series of descriptions of proficiency levels for speaking, listening, reading, writing, and culture in a foreign language. These guidelines represent a graduated sequence of steps that can be used to structure a foreign-language program" (Liskin-Gasparro 1984: 11). However, Ingram and others have stressed that proficiency descriptions complement rather than replace the use of program objectives since, particularly at the lower levels, they tend to resemble profiles of incompetence and hence are hardly suitable as statements of objectives (Brindley 1983: 39). It has also been observed that there is little relevant empirical data available to develop valid statements of proficiency levels across skill areas, an issue that has proved

problematic with the ACTFL proficiency scales (Lee and Musumeci 1988).

No matter what approach to stating goals and objectives is used, all language programs operate with explicit or implicit objectives. Where the program fails to make objectives explicit, teachers and learners have to infer them from the syllabus, materials, or classroom activities. Teachers may hence regard objectives merely as instructional goals (e.g., "to develop learners' confidence in speaking"), as course descriptions (e.g., "to concentrate on listening skills"), or as descriptions of the material they intend to cover (e.g., "to cover Chapter 3 of *Strategies*") (Brindley 1984). Without clear statements of goals and objectives, questions of content, methodology, and evaluation cannot be systematically addressed.

Syllabus design

In standard models of curriculum processes, curriculum planners progress systematically from needs assessment, to goals and objectives, to specification of the instructional content of the program. Taba's model of curriculum processes (1962: 12) consists of:

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 means to evaluate

In language teaching, Steps 3 and 4 are usually known as *syllabus design*. Syllabus design (the product of which is usually referred to as a *syllabus* in British usage and a *curriculum* in American usage) is concerned with the choice and sequencing of instructional content. If the Taba model were followed, the procedures for developing a syllabus would involve examining instructional objectives and arranging them by priorities, and then determining what kind of content was required to attain the objectives.

In reality, in language teaching the syllabus has traditionally been the starting point in planning a language program, rather than an activity that occurs midway in the process. The concept of a language syllabus has been fundamental in the development of language teaching practices in the twentieth century. In the work of such British language teaching specialists as Harold Palmer, Michael West, and A. S. Hornby, and such American specialists as Charles Fries and Robert Lado, questions con-

cerning the linguistic content of a language program were considered primary and a necessary basis for planning a language program. This reflects the fact that many applied linguists were trained as linguists, rather than as educational planners. Hence from the 1920s through to the present, debate over the most appropriate form for syllabuses in language teaching has continued. A properly constructed and planned syllabus is believed to *assure* successful learning, since it represents a linguistically and psycholinguistically optimal introduction to the target language. Syllabus design theory has consequently been one of the most active branches of applied linguistics in recent years (e.g., Wilkins 1976; Shaw 1977; Yalden 1983; Krahnke 1987; Nunan 1988) – to the astonishment perhaps of those with a broader educational view of curriculum issues.

Conceptions of the nature of a syllabus are closely related to the view of language and second language learning that the curriculum designers subscribe to. Under the impact of grammar-based views of the nature of language, language syllabuses were traditionally expressed in terms of grammar, sentence patterns, and vocabulary. As a result of the more recent movement toward communicative theories of language and language learning, syllabuses have tended to be expressed more in communicative terms. The following kinds of syllabuses (or variants and combinations of them) are commonly found in current English as a second language (ESL) courses and materials, particularly those dealing with speaking and listening.

1. Structural (organized primarily around grammar and sentence patterns)
2. Functional (organized around communicative functions, such as identifying, reporting, correcting, describing)
3. Notional (organized around conceptual categories, such as duration, quantity, location)
4. Topical (organized around themes or topics, such as health, food, clothing)
5. Situational (organized around speech settings and the transactions associated with them, such as shopping, at the bank, at the supermarket)
6. Skills (organized around skills, such as listening for gist, listening for specific information, listening for inferences)
7. Task or activity-based (organized around activities, such as drawing maps, following directions, following instructions)

Despite the extensive literature on syllabus design in recent years, there is little empirical evidence to warrant commitment to any particular approach to syllabus development. In practice, a combination of

approaches is often used, since many would agree with Johnson (1981: 34):

> A syllabus is essentially a job specification, and as such it should set out clearly and precisely what is to be done, and the standards or criteria to be met by those who do it. If seen in this light, arguments as to the relative merits of notional, situational, or topic based syllabuses, etc. are no more sensible than arguments as to whether the specifications in a construction contract should cover the foundations, or the steel framework or the concrete or the glass or the interior design etc. The obvious answer is that all of these must be covered.

In addition, it should be emphasized that the form in which a syllabus is presented reflects the intended users and uses of the syllabus. Is the syllabus primarily a guide for materials writers, or are classroom teachers expected to teach from it? Is the syllabus a document teachers will consult, and if so, what do they expect to find in it? Will learners be tested on the content of the syllabus, or are teachers free to adapt and supplement it? What teaching skills and teaching styles do the teachers have who will be using the syllabus? The effect of different answers to these kinds of questions is seen when syllabuses are compared.

Appendix 3, for example, is taken from the *Malaysian Communicational Syllabus* (1975), a syllabus for the teaching of English in upper-secondary school. The syllabus specifies activities and tasks rather than notions, functions, grammar, or vocabulary, as well as the level at which tasks are to be accomplished. Procedures suggested for classroom use include various kinds of communication tasks, role plays, and simulations, and the syllabus provides sample situations as a guide to the teacher. The syllabus reflects the philosophical assumptions of the syllabus planners: a commitment to communicative language teaching and to a needs-based approach to program content. At the same time the syllabus assumes that teachers have a high degree of proficiency in English and are able to adapt and plan materials and classroom activities around the syllabus. The syllabus was also intended as a guide for textbook writers, who were expected to write materials that exemplified the principles of the syllabus.

The syllabus example in Appendix 4 is very different in form and approach. This is part of a tutor's kit intended for volunteers working with Vietnamese refugees in Britain. In this case the syllabus is planned around topics and content, and a great deal more linguistic specification is given. This reflects the fact that the users of this syllabus were not expected to have the same high degree of training and experience as the teachers using the Malaysian syllabus.

Appendix 5 is from a syllabus for refugees in the United States who need survival-level skills to enter the job market. The philosophy of the