The Learner-Centred Curriculum

A study in second language teaching

学习者为中心的课程设置

——第二语言教学研究

David Nunan

The Learner-Centred Curriculum

A study in second language teaching

学习者为中心的课程设置

—— 第二语言教学研究

David Nunan

出 版 前 言

　　1999 年 5 月至 2000 年 6 月间,上海外语教育出版社先后出版了从牛津大学出版社引进的"牛津应用语言学丛书"19 种、"牛津语言学入门丛书"6 种和"牛津应用语言学丛书续编"10 种,受到了外语界师生的一致好评和欢迎。为了向我国的外语教学与研究人员提供更多的有关专著,帮助读者了解近年来国外应用语言学和外语教学研究的理论,促进我国外语教学研究水平的提高,上海外语教育出版社又精心挑选了剑桥大学出版社的应用语言学丛书 10 种,形成与"牛津应用语言学丛书"相辅相成的"剑桥应用语言学丛书"。相信这套丛书也同样能开阔我国学者的视野,通过借鉴国外研究成果,进一步总结我国自己的外语教学经验,形成具有中国特色的外语教学理论。

　　《学习者为中心的课程设置:第二语言教学研究》是一部有关第二语言教学中课程设置的学术专著,作者戴维·努南博士(David Nunan)是澳大利亚阿德雷德国家课程设置资料中心主任。本书于 1988 年由剑桥大学出版社出版,至 1997 年已重印了九次。

　　本书向读者展示了英语语言教学领域中的课程设置理论和实践。贯穿于全书的主题是"以学习者为中心"的理念。

　　本书介绍的课程设置采用"自下而上"的模式,即课程设置不是简单地按照课程设置专家、学者所提出的理论,而是基于观察与研究语言教师在规划、实施和评估语言课程过程中的观点和实际举措。书中所提供的一系列研究实例进一步阐述和论证了本书提出的理论模式。

　　全书共分 10 章。第一章概述本书的主要内容。第二章详细地回顾和评价课程设置,特别是第二语言教学课程设置中常见的一些理论。第三章主要阐述语言教学课程设置中以学习者为中心的理论依据。第四章涉及课程设置前期的教学目的分析、学习方

法和数据收集等有关问题。第五章主要探讨教学内容的选择与分级。第六章着重讨论教学法。第七章侧重阐述学习资源的利用、教材的使用和如何使社区成为学习资源等专题。第八、九两章主要讨论测试与评估问题。最后一章阐述了课程设置中诸多因素的复杂性，以及在以学习者为中心的课程设置模式中教师的作用和面临的问题。

鉴于本书是一本理论与实践并重的专著，书中的诸多研究实例对我国英语语言教学的研究具有较好的借鉴作用。本书的读者对象为从事课程设置与研究的人员，也可供从事英语师资培训的教师和应用语言学，特别是英语教学法方向的研究生参考用。

Series Editors' Preface

Australia has one of the largest and most dynamic migrant education language programmes in the world. What makes the Australian Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) unique is that although the program is co-ordinated at the national level, the process of curriculum development it embodies is bottom up rather than top down. At each institution where migrant language programs are offered, learners are actively involved in setting their own goals and determining what and how they will learn. It is this experience which Dr David Nunan, director of the National Curriculum Resource Centre, Adelaide, presents in this important book.

This is more than just an account of the AMEP however. This book offers a model of what curriculum development is. David Nunan shows that curriculum development involves the interaction of needs analysis, goal setting, grading and sequencing of content, materials development, implementation and evaluation, and shows how these processes interact within a learner-centered approach to curriculum. Throughout, the discussion is illustrated with numerous examples from the AMEP experience. At the same time, Nunan demonstrates that curriculum work must move beyond speculation and have a solid empirical basis if it is to have any substance, and illustrates the use of questionnaire, interview and case study data in curriculum planning. In addition, Nunan demonstrates that language curriculum practitioners have much to learn from mainstream educational research and practice.

The AMEP is a unique example of a national curriculum project which attributes a central role to both teachers and learners at every phase of the curriculum process. As such, it should be examined carefully by all those involved in language curriculum work. We are happy to have the opportunity to bring this important work to the attention of a wider audience through its publication in the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series.

Michael H. Long
Jack C. Richards

Preface

This book presents curriculum theory and practice as these are applied to English language teaching. The concept of 'learner-centredness' provides a unifying theme for the work as a whole, and, while the focus of the study is adult ESL, it is hoped that the book has something to say to those working in EFL and also to those working with children.

The book takes a 'bottom-up' view of curriculum development. In other words, it is grounded in studies of what language teachers actually do and think as they plan, implement and evaluate their language programmes, rather than on what curriculum specialists say they ought to do. A series of exemplary case studies of teachers at work illustrates and reinforces the theoretical perspectives presented in the body of the book.

The book attempts to marry theoretical perspectives and empirical insights from applied linguistics with those from curriculum research and development. It is hoped that the marriage is a happy one, and that the strengths rather than the weaknesses of both disciplines are apparent in the work. It is also hoped that teachers, researchers and academics working within a linguistic paradigm might come to see the benefits to be derived from applying general educational theory and research to language teaching.

This book owes a great deal to the Australian Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) which is charged with the task of providing English language learning opportunities to non-English speaking immigrants to Australia. The studies in the book were only made possible by the collaboration, assistance and involvement of many of the fifteen hundred teachers employed by the AMEP. These teachers gave generously of their time and professional expertise, and the ideas and insights presented here belong to them.

While is is not possible to name all those who helped make this study possible, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the support and assistance of several special individuals. Foremost is Geoff Brindley who was a joint partner in the development of many of the ideas presented here. I owe a great deal to the editors of this series, Jack Richards and Mike Long, both of whom have been extremely supportive. I should also like to thank the following individuals for their encouragement, assistance and advice: Chris Candlin, Carole Urzua, Pat Rigg, Alan Beretta and Leo van Lier. Thanks are also due to my colleagues at the

National Curriculum Resource Centre, in particular to Jill Burton and Mary Szabo. Finally, I should like to thank Peter Donovan, Adrian du Plessis and Ellen Shaw from Cambridge University Press for their advice and support.

Adelaide, April 1987.

Contents

1 *Introduction*

1.1 Preamble

Traditionally 'curriculum' is taken to refer to a statement or statements of intent – the 'what should be' of a course of study. In this work a rather different perspective is taken. The curriculum is seen in terms of what teachers actually do; that is, in terms of 'what is', rather than 'what should be'. The work is thus based on what many language teachers have found both desirable and possible.

The curriculum is seen from the perspective of the teacher for two reasons. In the first place, in the sort of learner centred system towards which many language teaching organisations are moving, the teacher is the prime agent of curriculum development. Second, educational reality is not what educational planners say ought to happen, but what teachers and learners actually do. The notion that planning equals teaching and that teaching equals learning is naive. Research suggests that the equation is much more complex than this, that teachers do not slavishly follow a pre-specified plan, and that learners do not necessarily always learn what teachers teach (Allwright 1986; Burton and Nunan 1986). It is this insight which has prompted within these pages a rather different view of language curricula.

1.2 Linguistics and Language Teaching

Due to a series of events which are partly circumstantial and partly historical, much of the development in language teaching has occurred outside the educational mainstream. The assumption seems to have been that educational theory and research has very little to contribute to the field of language teaching.

The implicit message, that learning a language is so different from learning anything else that there is little point in developing links with the educational mainstream, has been partly due to the disproportionate influence exercised over the field by theoretical linguists. The belief that language pedagogy is basically a linguistic rather than an educational matter has led to research which is couched within a linguistic rather than an educational paradigm. This, in turn, has created a fragmentation

within the field, with different interest groups being concerned with particular aspects of the teaching–learning process to the exclusion of other aspects. Thus, in Europe, in the 1970s, the focus was on the specification of content through the development of syllabuses which had a linguistic focus. While the development of functional–notional syllabuses represented a broadened focus, the focus itself was still basically linguistic, and there was a comparative neglect of methodology. Other practitioners focused on methodology to the exclusion of other elements in the curriculum, such as content specification and evaluation.

This state of affairs is beginning to be redressed. In the last two or three years a number of publications have appeared urging the development of integrated approaches to language curriculum development. (See for example Stern 1983; Yalden 1983; Richards 1984; Nunan 1985a; Dubin and Olshtain 1986.) These publications urge the development of procedures which are systematic and comprehensive, containing similar components to those contained in traditional curriculum development.

1.3   Learner-Centred Curriculum Development

This work differs from other publications in that it provides a theoretical and empirical rationale for learner-centred curriculum development within an adult ESL context. Such a curriculum will contain similar elements to those contained in traditional curriculum development, that is, planning (including needs analysis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and materials development) and evaluation (see for example Hunkins 1980).

However, the key difference between learner-centred and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught.

This change in orientation has major practical implications for the entire curriculum process, since a negotiated curriculum cannot be introduced and managed in the same way as one which is prescribed by the teacher or teaching institutions. In particular, it places the burden for all aspects of curriculum development on the teacher.

In a curriculum based on the traditional ends–means model, a fixed series of steps is followed. Thus, in the curriculum planning process proposed by Taba (1962), planning, implementation and evaluation occur in sequential order, and most of the key decisions about aims and objectives, materials and methodology are made before there is any encounter between teacher and learner.

In fact, studies have demonstrated that most teachers simply do not operate in this way. Thus, Shavelson and Stern write:

> Most teachers are trained to plan instruction by (*a*) specifying (behavioural) objectives, (*b*) specifying students' entry behaviour, (*c*) selecting and sequencing learning activities so as to move learners from entry behaviours to objectives and (*d*) evaluating the outcomes of instruction in order to improve planning. While this prescriptive model of planning may be one of the most consistently taught features of the curriculum of teacher education programmes, the model is consistently not used in teachers' planning in schools. Obviously there is a mismatch between the demands of the classroom and the prescriptive planning model.
>
> (*Shavelson and Stern* 1981:477)

In this work, we shall look at what teachers do focus on in the planning, implementation and evaluation of language courses. From studies of teacher practice a negotiated curriculum model is developed in which much of the consultation, decision making and planning is informal and takes place during the course of programme delivery.

Most of the studies on which this work is based are reported here for the first time. They include a large-scale study of the teacher as curriculum planner in which over eight hundred teachers participated. Also included are smaller-scale empirical studies of teachers' involvement in content selection, methodology, materials selection and adaptation and assessment.

One of the major assumptions underlying the learner-centred philosophy is that, given the constraints that exist in most learning contexts, it is impossible to teach learners everything they need to know in class. (While this is certainly true of adult contexts, it is probably also true of other contexts as well.) What little class time there is must therefore be used as effectively as possible to teach those aspects of the language which the learners themselves deem to be most urgently required, thus increasing surrender value and consequent student motivation.

In consequence, while one major aim or set of aims will relate to the teaching of specific language skills, other aims will relate to the development of learning skills. Such aims may include the following:
- to provide learners with efficient learning strategies
- to assist learners identify their own preferred ways of learning
- to develop skills needed to negotiate the curriculum
- to encourage learners to set their own objectives
- to encourage learners to adopt realistic goals and time frames
- to develop learners' skills in self-evaluation.

The adoption of a learner-centred orientation implies differentiated curricula for different learners. This is because it is unrealistic to expect

extensive participation in curriculum planning by learners with little experience of language and learning. When dealing with inexperienced learners, it is often necessary for the teacher to begin by making most of the decisions. For this reason the curriculum is conceptualised, as much by processes for carrying out curriculum tasks as by products (that is, the specification of content, lists of methodological options and so on).

1.4   The Curriculum Process

The key elements in the curriculum model proposed here are as follows: initial planning procedures (including data collection and learner grouping); content selection and gradation; methodology (which includes the selection of learning activities and materials); and ongoing monitoring, assessment and evaluation. A brief description of these elements and their functions within a learner-centred curriculum follow and are elaborated upon in the body of the text.

The first step in the curriculum process is the collection of information about learners in order to diagnose what Richterich (1972) refers to as their objective needs, that is, needs which are external to the learner. This initial data collection is usually superficial, relating mainly to factual information such as current proficiency level, age, educational background, previous learning experiences, time in the target culture and previous and current occupation. It is also sometimes possible to obtain more subjective information on preferred length and intensity of course, preferred learning arrangement, learning goals and information relating to preferred methodology, learning-style preferences and so on. However, this sort of information, relating to a learner's subjective needs as an individual in the learning situation, can often only be obtained once a course has begun.

If the information is collected before the learners are assigned to a class, it can be used for initial class placement purposes. At this point, a decision has to be made as to the weighting which will be given to the different kinds of needs which have been assessed. This will depend very much on the relative importance which is accorded by teachers to factors such as language proficiency, life-style, learning preferences and so on. In making a placement decision, these factors have to be balanced against the administrative and resource constraints under which the programme has to operate. Thus it is perfectly feasible to imagine a situation in which the same learner might well be placed in one centre in an 'intermediate class', while in another he would be placed in an 'English for motor mechanics' group and in yet another in a 'young, fast learners' category.

While language proficiency continues to be the single most important

grouping criterion in most language teaching institutions, it is worth exploring other possible types of class arrangement. In developing more diverse grouping arrangements it is important for teachers to accept the notion that the grouping convention of 'twenty students of the same proficiency level for twenty hours a week' (or whatever the convention might be) is not the only arrangement, nor even the most desirable one. Unfortunately, from the evidence collected during the study reported in Chapter 10, it is often administrative inflexibility which precludes more imaginative learner groupings.

Content selection is an important component of a learner-centred curriculum. In such a curriculum clear criteria for content selection give guidance on the selection of materials and learning activities and assist in assessment and evaluation. By making explicit the content objectives of a course and, eventually, by training learners to set their own objectives, the following benefits can accrue:

Learners come to have a more realistic idea of what can be achieved in a given course.

Learning comes to be seen as the gradual accretion of achievable goals.

Students develop greater sensitivity to their role as language learners and their rather vague notions of what it is to be a learner become much sharper.

Self-evaluation becomes more feasible.

Classroom activities can be seen to relate to learners' real-life needs.

Skills development can be seen as a gradual, rather than an all-or-nothing, process.

A crucial distinction between traditional and learner-centred curriculum development is that, in the latter, no decision is binding. This is particularly true of content selection and gradation. These will need to be modified during the course of programme delivery as the learners' skills develop, their self awareness as learners grows and their perceived needs change.

It is therefore important that the content selected at the beginning of a course is not seen as definitive; it will vary, and will probably have to be modified as learners experience different kinds of learning activities and as teachers obtain more information about their subjective needs (relating to such things as affective needs, expectations and preferred learning style). It is the outcomes of ongoing dialogue between teachers and learners which will determine content and learning objectives.

The selection of content and objectives is therefore something which is shaped and refined during the initial stages of a learning arrangement rather than being completely pre-determined. This is because the most valuable learner data can usually only be obtained in an informal way after relationships have been established between teachers and learners.

The initial data collection, which is used principally for grouping learners, generally provides only fairly superficial information which can be used to make rough predictions about communicative needs. The most useful information, relating to subjective learner needs, can be obtained only once a course has begun and a relationship is established between teacher and learners. It is these subjective needs, derivable from information on learners' wants, expectations and affective needs which are of most value in selecting content and methodology.

As most learners find it difficult to articulate their needs and preferences, the initial stages of a course can be spent in providing a range of learning experiences. It is unrealistic to expect learners who have never experienced a particular approach to be able to express an opinion about it. This does not mean, however, that activities and materials should be foisted on learners at the whim of the teacher. Learners should be encouraged to reflect upon their learning experiences and articulate those they prefer, and those they feel suit them as learners.

With low-level learners, developing a critical self-awareness can best be facilitated by the use of first-language resources. In some cases the use of bilingual assistants may be a possibility. In other cases translated activity evaluation sheets should be used. These need not be elaborate. In fact they may simply require the learners to say whether or not they liked a given activity. Sample self-evaluation sheets are provided in Chapter 8.

Methodology, which includes learning activities and materials, is generally the area where there is the greatest potential for conflict between teacher and learner. In a traditional curriculum, this conflict would probably be ignored on the grounds that the 'teacher knows best'. In a learner-centred curriculum, it is crucial that any conflicts be resolved. Evidence from recent studies documenting widespread mismatches between teacher and learner expectations are examined in the chapter on methodology. The solution to methodological mismatches is to be found in techniques and procedures for negotiation and consultation. As Brindley suggests:

> Since, as we have noted, a good many learners are likely to have fixed ideas about course content, learning activities, teaching methods and so forth, it seems that teachers will continually have to face the problem of deciding to what extent to make compromises. However, if programmes are to be learner-centred, then learners' wishes should be canvassed and taken into account, even if they conflict with the wishes of the teacher. This is not to suggest that the teacher should give learners everything that they want—evidence from teachers suggests that some sort of compromise is usually possible, but only after there has been discussion concerning what both parties believe and want.

(Brindley 1984:111)