

## **Curricular Revision: An Interaction**

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In a sense, "the curriculum could be seen to be like the view of a house after it has been completed and is the dwelling of its inhabitants. The completion of the house possessed by the people living in it will be determined by the use they make of the dwelling; does it match their living requirements?...what modifications might they want to make to make it conform more usefully to their requirements?" (White, 1988: 4)

Reflecting on my own experience of participating in an extensive ESL curriculum redesign, I feel that Ronald White's analogy is quite accurate in pointing out one of the most important elements to be considered when planning and making changes in an ESL curriculum, namely its inhabitants. In my experience, the teachers and the curriculum "specialist" (coordinator, expert, etc.) are the main "inhabitants" whose cooperative and interactive roles in curricular revision should be recognized from the onset. As the title suggests, one of these inhabitants, the curriculum "specialist," whom I will refer to from this point on as the curriculum coordinator, has knowledge and experience in curricular matters, and the responsibility in overseeing the construction and maintenance of the curriculum. However, as I prefer to envision his/her role, the person facilitates the redesign process by working closely with the teachers as co-designers in revision. Indeed, the coordinator appreciates and uses the teachers' abilities and their unique insights into the curriculum. Interacting harmoniously on curricular reform with the curriculum coordinator are the ESL teachers. The ESL faculty, in particular, are the most intimately involved inhabitants of the "curricular house," who must interpret and utilize a curriculum to plan daily lessons and offer second language instruction. Often, the teaching faculty are the first to notice problems in the curriculum and the inappropriateness of its program goals and objectives: the so-called defects in the original "house" design. This paper describes an interactive process of curricular design involving ESL teachers and curriculum coordinator: one in which ESL faculty activate curricular redesign and curriculum coordinators facilitate it. It illustrates this process using a scenario based on an actual situation in Japan. As well, it offers alternative suggestions for avoiding or solving a variety of problems encountered in curricular design by teachers and coordinator. This paper provides a rationale for proposing and justifying this kind of interactive relationship especially since teacher involvement with the curriculum coordinator in program redesign is instrumental for on-going curricular development.

### **Rationale**

In the past, as Bell (in Nunan, 1988) has pointed out, teachers most often consumed the syllabi that others had developed. Teachers were usually engaged in writing lesson plans based on a predetermined curriculum in which they had little or no input or involvement. As happened, the decisions in curricular design and refinement were made unilaterally by administrators and curriculum coordinators. The trend has changed. Recently, the classroom teacher has been allotted an increasingly more active

role in curriculum design. Nunan sees a movement "away from the teacher as passive recipient and implementer of other peoples' syllabuses and methods towards the teacher as an active creator" (Nunan, 1988: 133). Why has a movement in this direction occurred?

There are several reasons for active teacher participation in curricular design. Perhaps one reason is the recognition that to be effective in the classroom, teachers should have a global awareness of the curriculum's goals and knowledge of specific course objectives to compose their lesson plans. To accomplish this more effectively, "ideally they should be involved in both the planning and the evaluation of the curriculum in their own institutions" (Omaggio, 1986: 407).

Second, there is a growing awareness of the importance of teacher attitudes and beliefs about any proposed changes in the curriculum. White (1988) believes that the decision-making involved in developing a language program is a reflection of what the participants in curriculum development assume and believe. If teachers are to support any curricular changes, their attitudes towards change must be surveyed and valued. Teacher attitudes must be altered or redirected first before actual change can occur. Nicholls (in White, 1988) contends that any proposed innovative change in curriculum has to be interrelated with a change in the actions and attitudes of teachers.

Furthermore, teacher investment in curriculum design is necessary for the successful implementation of any curricular changes. Referring to a content-based program, Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989) feel that second-language teachers ought to be trained in the design of the curriculum and syllabi because if teachers are not convinced of the need for change, they can easily undermine the entire project.

The last and perhaps the most important reason is that effectiveness of second language programs depends on a process that is formed by institutional, student, and societal factors, and that each of these factors, including the teachers and their concerns, must be considered and addressed. Teachers must be intimately involved in the entire process for success to be achieved (Richards, 1990). For these reasons, it appears that curriculum redesign will be enhanced when teachers become creative activators in the development and implementation of the curriculum. At the same time, the curriculum coordinator relies on their energies and resources, and encourages and supports their involvement. When appropriate, the coordinator offers direction.

At this point, we should consider how this idea of cooperative curricular redesign could (and did) succeed in practice by examining a Japanese scenario and its unfolding. Although local factors differ, ESL teachers and curriculum coordinators face numerous common problems in dealing with the entire curricular redesign process — from its needs-analysis to its evaluation and testing.

### **The House and its Inhabitants: A Japanese Scenario**

*The situation at American West University (a fictitious name) is somewhat typical of the host of American university and college programs that have been transposed from the US to Japan during the past few years. American West University (AWU) is an American university branch campus in a rural Japanese prefecture that is supported by the local Japanese town where the campus is located. Japanese students (400) are offered the opportunity of taking an American degree in Japan, and they are able to take credit courses at the AWU home campus in the States. Students are admitted directly to the university based on fairly liberal admission requirements using criteria such as high school grades, the Pre-TOEFL and other measures. Most students enter the ESL preparatory program instead of the credit-bearing content courses. A TOEFL score is not required for advancement into regular content coursework; satisfactory promotion within the six-level ESL program is a pre-requisite in most cases. The past events in the history of the ESL program at AWU have led to a need for major curricular changes.*

*During the first year of the "house's" existence, the original ESL curriculum was developed by a group of planners in the U.S. and directed by a different group of ESL*

administrators in Japan. Originally and over-optimistically planned as a two-level program, the ESL program at AWU was unable to provide for the needs of most students who had lower levels of proficiency and thus, students were unable to pass through the ESL program quickly and perform well in the content courses. During the second year, there was first a temporary administrator in control of the ESL Department and then an ESL Chair. In these confusing conditions, courses were haphazardly developed to fill the gaps in the existing curriculum. Individual faculty members planned courses and wrote syllabi. These measures provided a broader range of courses; however, since the courses were sometimes developed in isolation from others or loosely connected to those above and below, there was not a smooth transition from one level to the next. Despite the awkwardness of ESL administration, the language program expanded to five and a half levels.

At AWU, ESL classes were taught by experienced ESL faculty (25) who were organized in an ESL Department that elected one of its own members as Chairperson. The Chairperson, in turn, selected level and lab coordinators and the Curriculum Coordinator. The Chair and other coordinators had limited administrative powers. There really was no administrator directly supervising the activities of the ESL Department. In all respects, the ESL Department acted as one of the university departments responsible to the Academic Dean.

In its third year of existence the "house" was in need of major renovation. The ESL faculty was dissatisfied with the progress of students in both academic skill and language areas. This concern was voiced by the administration as well as by the local sponsor, a Japanese town. There were differing opinions among instructors on the value and appropriateness of the teaching methodologies — content-based in the upper levels and communicative language teaching in the lower. Also, the weighting of teacher assessment in student promotion was disputed. Most faculty were ignorant of an overall curricular plan and objectives, since information was contained in separate course syllabi and other documents and was not widely distributed among the ESL faculty. Clearly something had to be done to improve the situation. The first step was that the ESL Chair appointed a Curriculum Coordinator from the ESL faculty who was given the charge of revising the curriculum because it had become unsuitable for its "inhabitants." The Curriculum Coordinator realized that curricular revision had to be a joint effort that required active and creative involvement by ESL teachers in order for it to be successful.

### **Student Needs Analysis**

Analyzing student needs was the first step in the ESL curricular revision process at American West University. Questions had to be answered. What did students want to achieve linguistically and academically at AWU? What academic and language skills did teaching faculty believe students needed to develop in the language program as preparation for their success in regular college-credit coursework? How were these skills to be arranged in a logical and progressive order? Which teaching methodologies were best suited to aid students in reaching this aim? How did present curricular objectives match student needs and preferred faculty teaching and student learning styles?

At the outset, teachers were involved in an information-gathering phase in planning curricular revision. To obtain an updated description of the needs and background of the present student body, the curriculum coordinator initiated the idea of a student survey. An ESL faculty member volunteered to compose the form, a draft of which was distributed to the ESL faculty for comments. Written response was provided by the rest of AWU's ESL faculty. The survey was subsequently administered by the instructors in their own ESL classrooms and the results were compiled by the Curriculum Coordinator. Results were distributed to all ESL faculty members. Oral reaction and comment on the report were heard in subsequent Curriculum Committee

meetings by the entire faculty. In other programs, it might be beneficial to interview students individually. Also, one might speak to the student advisors or a college counselor to obtain personal information that students might not reveal in writing.

Meanwhile, teacher opinion on course goals was derived through various means. After compiling a list of current skill objectives from a review of course syllabi and other curricular documents in hard copy and on computer files, a faculty workshop was arranged by the Curriculum Coordinator for all faculty members to review the listed skills and level goals. Before the workshop, the Curriculum Coordinator had grouped 4-5 teachers into teams to provide a cross-section of teaching experience at different proficiency levels. The Coordinator had prepared a set of questions on one particular skill, for example, grammar for each team to discuss. Teachers who embraced strong views were balanced by others, so that no one could dominate the team during discussions. At the workshop itself, teachers capitalized on having predetermined tasks and grouping; they discussed their classroom experiences supported by their individually-preferred teaching theory in agreeing on definite objectives in each skill area. Additions, deletions and modifications in the progression of skills were made.

Generally speaking, faculty workshops have to be carefully organized by a curriculum specialist to obtain quick and comprehensive opinions. Since teachers are knowledgeable about curriculum and want to be heard, they should be offered the opportunity to express their opinions on curricular matters within some defined time limits as set by the coordinator of such sessions. Here, compromises to avoid deadlocks should be encouraged by teachers and coordinator alike to prevent meetings from becoming excessively long and tiring. Another way to obtain faculty teaching views is to establish an open door policy between coordinator and teachers, so that both can enter into private discussion of curricular issues in their offices.

Teacher attitudes on aspects of the curriculum at AWU were also collected in written responses to questionnaires, composed and distributed by the Curriculum Coordinator, and by oral feedback at faculty and curriculum meetings. AWU's first complete curriculum guide was spawned from the analysis of the data from these sources

### **Situational Analysis: The Teacher**

Often overlooked in the process of curricular design and revision is an analysis of the teachers and their concerns. In fact, it is wise to examine the situation at one's institution and delve into the training, experience, preferred teaching, testing and assessment approaches, and program expectations of the faculty (Richards, 1990). Hostility to program innovation can be alleviated to some extent when attempts are made to incorporate the concerns of potential critics. Otherwise these individuals may battle curricular change that is alien to their previous teaching experiences (Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989).

Appreciating the value of such an analysis, the Curriculum Coordinator began the second step in curricular revision by making a profile of the ESL faculty at AWU. This profile was based mostly on informal discussions with faculty and by personal and direct knowledge of faculty points of view that had surfaced at meetings in the past. The findings were as follows:

About fifty percent of the twenty-six AWU teachers had prior experience with content-based instruction at the university level. The other half favored communicative language teaching and, in fact, disliked content-based methodology. Many instructors had previous experiences in programs quite different from the AWU program that emphasized content-based instruction. While those instructors in the upper, content-based levels desired more objective testing and limited teacher assessment, lower-level teachers promoted extensive teacher discretion in grading and a subjective assessment of students.

In order to unify such a diverse faculty at AWU in the enterprise of curricular revision, it was necessary: (1) to establish a free and harmonious atmosphere for academic discussion and to find solutions to the program's faults (as uncovered by the previously undertaken analysis of student needs and language skills), (2) to recognize and respect teachers' opinions and beliefs in preferred learning theory and methodology which would lead in turn to the creation of courses compatible with every other course and appealing to the majority of faculty, and (3) to promote a better understanding of the program's methodologies and approaches in use.

Unifying the faculty first involved a joint dissemination and sharing of data and opinion, oral and written. The Curriculum Coordinator requested teacher comment. In response, sixty-six per cent of the ESL faculty eagerly volunteered to research and report on the merits of classroom methodologies and approaches especially in regard to their past success in other academic programs overseas. AWU's level coordinators provided statistical summaries of student evaluations on courses at all levels. Analyses of TOEFL scores, prepared by individual teachers, were used as evidence of the success or failure of curricular design at particular stages in the language program. The revitalized Curriculum Committee meetings (to be described below) served as the main forum for presentation and intense analysis of pedagogy.

What was most apparent from this outpouring of teacher response was the realization and acceptance that ESL teachers at AWU had answers to problems, and that by working cooperatively with a curriculum coordinator and other teaching colleagues, a detailed curricular plan could be created.

In preparing accurate and unbiased faculty profiles, the curriculum specialist must be totally objective and has to base assessment on the teacher's professional views on teaching theory and practice rather than on the teacher's character and personal encounters with the individual.

### **Planning and Development**

Planning and developing the revised curriculum was the next step. At AWU, the original mechanism for handling this stage of curricular revision was of questionable value and effectiveness.

In the first two years of the ESL program's existence at AWU, the ESL faculty's Curriculum Committee, which was charged to plan and implement the curriculum, consisted of the Curriculum Coordinator, the six level coordinators and two lab coordinators. Meetings were the province of these individuals and no other faculty attended. Usually these meetings were merely reportorial in nature. Sparse comment was given to the committee by the other ESL teaching faculty. Actually, the Curriculum Committee did not sanction curriculum development since individuals often arranged course development in consultation with the ESL Chair alone. New course proposals given to the Chair did not follow any prescribed form of presentation and were not reviewed by the faculty as a whole. Those involved in curriculum revision must look beyond applied linguistics when contemplating changes in the curriculum because "...decisions about language curriculum rapidly cease to be decisions about ideas and become actions which affect people" (White, 1988: 113).

To embrace the opinions, attitudes, and concerns of the entire faculty, the Curriculum Coordinator altered the nature of the meetings. An agenda was issued to all ESL faculty each week to keep them abreast of discussion topics at the curriculum meetings and to invite all interested parties to participate in the debate over crucial curricular issues, such as objectives, testing, and program proposals. Thus, the faculty openly presented their points of view at these meetings.

This increased faculty involvement in curriculum meetings coincided with an alteration in procedures for course proposals. A standardized format for the presentation of new course proposals to the Curriculum Committee was instituted by the Coordinator. Now, formal course proposals required the inclusion of sample

materials and a full ten-week syllabus. Copies of proposals were distributed days in advance of meetings, so that the content could be digested and an opinion could be formed by interested faculty members. The faculty were knowledgeable about all pending propositions for change. Then, the faculty engaged in an organized discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of adopting new courses, objectives, and procedures in a timely manner.

Consequently, within six months, five course proposals were initiated and prepared by groups and individuals, put before the Curriculum Committee, and adopted into the program by majority faculty vote. Included were proposals to revamp the weak lower levels by introducing the Focal Skills Approach (Highland, Hastings, & Smith, 1990), and by adding a content-based credit bearing course in level 6.

At any institution contemplating the interaction-based curricular design proposed in this paper, orderly curriculum meetings are vital for planning and development. To maximize positive response and results, faculty and coordinator discussion of curriculum and interaction can best be attained by adherence to meeting rules. Although using Robert's Rules might seem to be an obvious solution, unfortunately, these procedures are unfamiliar to or disliked by many teachers and might be unnecessarily complex for faculty purposes. I would suggest a simpler procedure; one that uses time efficiently and encourages comment from everyone. A time limit for individual speakers and a list of speakers, organized perhaps by the course level or a skill area, would be prepared. At each meeting, the coordinator would set the agenda and call on each speaker by turn; individuals would be able to present their views on the subject for a designated time. This procedure encourages the less outspoken members of the faculty to speak out in formal meeting settings and not feel intimidated. Faculty must always remember to act professionally and refrain from engaging in interruptions of speakers, personal attacks, and arguments. Only when such actions are strictly monitored and controlled by the coordinator do faculty feel comfortable in openly expressing themselves. All faculty should be invited to attend meetings. There should be time at the end of the meeting for freer discussion, so that any teacher can add to the discussion. This prevents feelings that only the ideas and concerns of appointed and selected people on the committee are valued.

### **Implementation and Monitoring of the Curriculum**

After new course proposals were adopted, their implementation and monitoring followed. This stage of curricular revision required careful attention by coordinators and teachers to succeed. Fortunately in the case of AWU, ESL teaching faculty was already involved in these duties with varying degrees of success.

Having level coordinators, appointed by the Chair, at each level of the AWU ESL program was always one of the strengths of the program. Any interested ESL faculty member had the right and opportunity to assume a coordinator position in the program. Level coordinators prepared scope and sequences (syllabi) each term, monitored the implementation of the level objectives, organized testing and assessment, and performed other useful and necessary coordinating tasks, such as chairing weekly level meetings of teachers. However, the syllabi were non-standardized in format and individually written by the level coordinators. ESL faculty complained about the lack of detail regarding level course goals and the means to achieve them in certain course levels and a lack of knowledge of the curriculum as a whole.

In response to these concerns and to better inform the ESL faculty and organize their coordination tasks, the Curriculum Coordinator wrote and distributed an academic calendar each term that provided deadlines for preparing scope and sequences, indicated exam days and grade reporting and book-order dates, suggested sessions for calibrating the marking of tests and essays, and offered other curricular guidelines. In addition, a standardized format for the writing of scope and sequences was introduced by the Coordinator. This action was made to guarantee that, at the outset of a term, new

faculty members in a level would be given a complete outline of the broad curricular goals of the level as well as particular objectives and the activities and readings that were designed to meet these specific objectives. It was especially relevant to instructors at AWU where the teaching approach was markedly different depending on the level being taught.

Teachers' lesson plans will only be effective if they are associated with the curriculum as a whole (Omaggio, 1986). Content-based and focal-skill teaching methods can only be successfully applied in the classroom if the instructor teaches the course content and provides an environment in which learning success can emerge (Richards and Rogers, 1986). Practiced classroom teaching techniques are based on the instructor's knowledge and understanding of a specific method or approach and the learning theory upon which it is based.

To assist in this area at AWU, a new Curriculum Guide was devised and issued at ten-week intervals by the Curriculum Coordinator to provide faculty members with a global perspective of the program, its rationale and goals, and the progression of linguistic and academic skills throughout the modules and levels. It incorporated up-to-date design changes in the curriculum, and served as a guide and reference for the newly appointed level coordinators to use in preparing their own scope and sequences and materials. With a grasp of the total curricular structure in the Guide and a more detailed view in the individual scope and sequences, the entire faculty was armed with considerable knowledge of the framework of the program. They made daily lesson plans and created relevant materials that directly related to program curricular goals.

### **Evaluation and Testing**

The last step in curricular revision was evaluation and testing. Curriculum specialists (for example, Richards, 1990) stress the importance of evaluative measurement of a program to determine its ultimate success and efficiency. Evaluation should be conducted internally and externally.

During the development of the AWU curriculum, the ESL faculty at AWU had the opportunity to have its ESL program examined by an outside accreditation team. The revised curriculum received a very favorable report. Moreover, the faculty were advised of areas that should be improved. The branch campus of American West University in Japan became accredited in part due to the high standard of its ESL program. To complement external evaluation, teaching faculty and the Curriculum Coordinator internally performed on-going departmental appraisal of the program, the students, and their role. Teacher questionnaires on many topics, such as alternative proficiency and skill-assessment tests, were periodically distributed to faculty. Instructors and coordinators provided feedback on the curriculum's effects on student progress based on classroom observation, conversations with students, and achievement testing. The Curriculum Committee Meetings were a constant source of information. TOEFL and Focal Skills test scores provided objective, proficiency-based data.

In the main, the ESL faculty at American West University were quite pleased with the curricular changes and their effects during this one-year period of revision. Evaluation demonstrated an improvement in basic skills after the Focal Skills Approach had been applied to the lower levels of the program. Students appeared to have linguistic and academic strengths as they exited the upper content-based levels and entered the General Education program. Of course, the internal evaluation of the curriculum revealed some areas that demanded future attention. Most importantly, the faculty as a whole became a unified body that was actively involved in all aspects of curriculum design and development. Through their own efforts the teachers constructed the 'house,' the curriculum, to fit their instructional needs.

At other institutions, external evaluative data could be obtained by arranging visits of recognized experts in curriculum design who could provide frank assessment of the success of a revised curriculum. It would be possible to invite colleagues with

curricular knowledge from other institutions with similar programs to compare and contrast curricula. However, in my experience, internal evaluation by faculty and coordinator, based on long-term experience with and analysis of local conditions would be more reliable and valid. Other examples of internal analysis could be annual curricular reviews, student grades in college-credit courses and ESL classes, and teaching forums. Optional testing could be in the form of internally-designed common level or program-wide proficiency exams, and subjective analysis of students' performance by classroom teachers.

As described in the preceding scenario, a cooperative and interactive relationship of ESL teachers and curriculum coordinator in redesigning an ESL curriculum has considerable merit. Curriculum coordinators and teachers have complementary roles where neither dictate curricular policy and procedures. Active and creative involvement and commitment of the teaching body to the entire redesign process are promoted and stimulated. In addition, the revised curriculum usually has widespread support and acceptance. Satisfaction with and success of the final curricular plan has a better chance of being realized.

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