

# Designing Second Language Curriculum

*S. C. Sood*

## **Introduction**

Through this article, I have attempted to study the designing of a second language (L2) curriculum. The aim is not to suggest a new theory of L2 curriculum, but to describe in simple non-technical language the existing theory and its essential components. I will also explore how the various components of the theory have been used to design an L2 syllabus. The overall aim is to describe the theory and its practice over the years for the benefit of non-specialist teachers assigned the role of teaching L2.

A second language (L2) curriculum designer should begin with the question: Is he/she designing a new syllabus or revising an existing one? In the case of a new syllabus, the designer should decide the three components of curriculum theory, as propounded by Taylor & Richards (1979). These comprise:

- Curriculum philosophy (in this case, it could be rationale for teaching L2);
- Conceptualization, of: (a) goals; (b) means of attaining the goals; and (c) testing of learners;
- Management and implementation, involving: (a) development; (b) implementation; and (c) curriculum evaluation.

In the case of revision of an existing curriculum, the exercise could start with a critical analysis of the existing syllabus in the light of the three components. It may also be useful to study previous revisions, if any, to see how the syllabus has evolved.

## **Curriculum philosophy (rationale for teaching L2)**

An important aspect for consideration is the rationale for teaching L2, and the nature and background of the learners. The designer should be clear about the justification for teaching the second language, e.g. teaching of English in India in the post-independence period has a history which has a bearing on syllabus designing.

### *Learners' profile and learning infrastructure:*

Another important factor that needs to be evaluated is the profile of the learner. This includes information such as identifying who the learners are, their socio-economic background, age, motivation, emotional state, aptitude and previous experience in L2 learning, attitude towards the target language and its speakers, learning strategies, learning environment at home, personality, entry behaviour, needs, goals and expectations. It is also useful to know the teacher's profile, instructional time available, class size, and learning infrastructure such as learning/teaching aids, technology and resources.

## **Conceptualization of the three components**

### *1. Goals and objectives*

The goals and objectives of the curriculum are formulated based on the needs of the learners. The needs are identified using various research tools: Surveys, questionnaires, interviews, polls, and so on. The identification of needs is essential for drawing up a syllabus, selecting and grading

the content for teaching, and for working out instructional strategies. However, learners' perception of their own needs have been questioned on various grounds because in reality, it is the institutions and their representatives who determine the language needs of the learners on the basis of their experience.

There are however some prominent studies of such 'needs analyses'. For learning English, for example, there are: *Threshold Level* by van Ek (1975), published for the Council of Europe, and Functional and Notional Needs described by Wilkins in *Notional Syllabuses*, 1976. Munby (1978) suggests needs analyses in terms of the settings in which learners will use the target language for specific purposes, e.g. Hindi for Science and Technology, English for Academic Purposes, and so on.

## 2. Means of attaining goals/objectives

Teachers have used different methods and instructional materials at different times to help learners learn the target language. These can be discussed under two heads: (i) Pre-scientific, and (ii) Scientific.

### a. Pre-scientific: Grammar-translation method

We are all familiar with this once widely-used method. In fact, it was not a method in the true sense of the word, as it was not based on a theory of language or language learning. That is why it was called 'pre-scientific'. Moreover, its purpose was not to teach language; grammar-translation was simply a way of translating classics from one language into another.

b. Scientific: The scientific approach to language learning takes the theory of language and learning into consideration. The analysis of language has given us two ways of looking at it—language as a structure of structures, and language as a tool for communication. Hence, in the history of language teaching, we have two types of approaches—structural and communicative.

*b1. Structural approach:* This approach to language learning evolved under the influence of structural linguistics. Language was defined as a structure comprising phonemes (sounds), morphemes (words) and syntax. Classroom teaching was influenced by Skinner's behaviourist theory of learning in which learning a language was looked upon as learning a new behaviour for which the learner needed motivation, repetition and reward. Structural approach is still followed in some classrooms.

Since language is infinite, the principles of teaching suggest that we select some items for teaching, grade them, and then present them to the learner in meaningful contexts. So, at each stage of learning, specific structures were selected along with certain vocabulary items and the learner was exposed to them. Therefore, the classroom practice was mimic, memorize, repeat, and drill, until the structure became a habit with the learner, e.g. the teacher holds a pen in her uplifted hand and says:

*Yeh pen hai* (This is a pen).

and the students repeat:

*Yeh pen hai* (This is a pen).

The sentence was repeated and drilled a number of times.

Errors were strictly avoided, and the emphasis was on grammatical competence. It was expected that this repetition would help learners learn structures and consequently the language.

*b2. Communicative approach:* This approach was ushered in by socio-linguists. They talked of language not as an abstract system but as a tool for communication in society, in meaningful situations. They also redefined language competence as communicative competence, which meant (1) accuracy/grammatical competence, and (2) fluency, i.e. familiarity with the rules of usage, which included social appropriateness. There can be many types of

communicative syllabus based on the situation. Possible themes include:

- functions and notions, e.g. thanking, apologizing, seeking help, giving help
- Situations, e.g. at the railway station.
- Topics, e.g. weather, shopping
- Authentic tasks and activities,
- Role play and simulation,
- Analyses of discourse structure - conversational analysis and discourse analyses—to help learners learn the strategies of how the target language is used to make meaning.

The goal of all these syllabuses is to help learners focus on communication rather than the form or structure of the language. It is not unusual to select subjects such as Social Sciences, History, Economics or Commerce; or themes such as population, environment, Aids; or genres such as prose, poetry, fiction, drama, etc., for helping learners practice language forms and functions.

### 3. Classroom procedures

Communicative syllabuses consider language as a tool for communication, and language learning as a cognitive activity. This perspective has a strong bearing on the role of materials, the teachers and the learners, and the syllabus designer outlines these details. In this method, learners are seen as active participants in the process of language learning rather than just a passive receptacle. The role of the teacher is complex, and much of his/her effort goes into providing the right learning environment, selecting the right task/activity, creating an appropriate setting, and supervising the learning process. Since interaction is an integral part of communication, the class is arranged in pairs or groups.

*Integrated syllabuses:* It is believed currently, that for effective language teaching, integrated

syllabus (integration of structures and functions) is the right solution. However, to implement an integrated syllabus, materials need to be selected and graded to suit the learner's needs, coordinated with the class below and above, and correlated horizontally with different texts and skills.

*Testing:* Syllabuses must also provide for testing/evaluation of learners to assess whether the stated objectives were achieved. What should be tested (content or skills); how and when should the assessment be done (internal or external assessment and what is the weightage of each component); will the evaluation be continuous (formative) or end-programme (summative); who will test; how will learners be scored; how will objectivity and uniformity be ensured—these are questions that need to be answered before implementing a testing process.

### *Impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)*

During the last two decades, many researchers (Kern 2006, Nguyen 2008) have written about the use of ICT in second language teaching and its impact on what Richards (1990) terms as 'design' and 'procedure'. This includes the nature and types of teaching-learning materials; the roles of teachers, learners, and instructional tasks and activities; and the nature and kinds of teaching-learning practices and behaviours. The use of ICT in second language instruction is an emerging but fast-developing field, and its advantages and drawbacks ought to be kept in mind by language syllabus designers.

### **Management, implementation and feedback**

This is an important process of any project and L2 syllabus designing is not an exception. There are three steps under this head: (a) Project development, (b) Implementation, and (c) Evaluation.

### *(a) Project development*

One of the criteria for the success of a project is that it should follow a ‘bottom up’ movement in all aspects, in this case syllabus, materials and methods, testing, and teacher training. Initiation for language syllabus revision must come from the local authorities after a wider consultation with all stake-holders. They themselves must redefine their needs from time to time and see what is wrong with their existing situation, and seek a solution either on their own or in collaboration with other agencies – local or foreign.

The nature and role of local agency is crucial. Is this the right agency for initiating and completing this project or are their other local bodies concerned with this area? Does this local agency have the necessary expertise to assist the ‘community’—the teachers—or will it seek collaboration with other local agencies or a foreign agency. If the job is outsourced to a foreign agency or their collaboration is sought, what their status and role would be. Rivalries among various local agencies can pose a problem in developing and implementing a project. In India, for example, any differences between the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) for drawing up a language syllabus for teaching at schools can be harmful for the success of a language project. Hence a proper local coordinating authority ought to be in place to assist the ‘community group’.

### *(b) Implementation*

For effective implementation, the L2 project would require teaching/learning materials to be produced, teacher training to be executed and testing and evaluation procedures to be worked out. Will there be just one group to handle all

the above three areas or will there be one group each for these areas? Since not all the teachers can be involved, a selection from the ‘community group’ has to be made. Who will be selected and how? What would be the role of the local pre-service and in-service teacher training institutes in the initiation, designing and implementation of the project? Since the new curriculum must be understood by classroom teachers, their willing participation in understanding the change must be ensured. All these points are important, and need to be heeded when taking up a curriculum project.<sup>1</sup>

### *(c) Feedback and evaluation*

This step is vital to assess the new curriculum, and to find out the extent to which it has achieved the stated goals. Monitoring and feedback may be ‘formative’ (assessed during the stage of implementation), or ‘summative’ (evaluated at the end of the project). Two people need to be designated, one to monitor and give feedback, and the other to evaluate the project once it is put into operation.

### **Cyclical nature of curriculum/syllabus designing**

The aim of the feedback and evaluation is not to criticize those responsible for designing the curriculum/syllabus, but to learn lessons for the future and to initiate new changes in the curriculum in accordance with the feedback received. Curriculum designing is a cyclical process, and changes and updating are required to be made from time to time.

<sup>1</sup> Those interested in such projects may find more useful hints in Tribble (2012). This collection of papers and case studies, though these relate to Teaching of English as a Second Language, can prove a useful guide for language teaching in general.

## References

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**S. C. Sood** is a former Reader at Dyal Singh College (Even.), and Professor at Dilla College of Teacher Education, Ethiopia under UNDP. He is presently a practising ELT professional.

*scsood@rediffmail.com*