Learning from Failure: Student Involvement in Curriculum Renewal

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While recent innovation theory emphasizes the need for continual curriculum evaluation and renewal, language learning theory suggests that learning takes place most effectively when the target language is embedded in meaningful content. It also indicates that the practice of language skills in an integrated manner with grammar and vocabulary input provided as a tool rather than an end in itself enables students to expand their knowledge of the language, master academic skills, and further their cognitive development.

This paper briefly describes the curriculum renewal effort conducted at the Department of Basic English (DBE), Middle East Technical University (METU) between 2002 and 2004, and points to the implications of change for students as well as teachers. It then focuses on the degree to which teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of a new program overlap by drawing upon data gathered during the evaluation stage of curriculum renewal process. The final section of the paper is dedicated to the importance of learner involvement in successful curriculum development.

Background

The curriculum renewal effort began with the decision to evaluate the program in practice. To this end, the minutes of previous staff meetings were reviewed, and a questionnaire aiming to assess the effectiveness of the program was administered to 400 representative students. Although for different reasons, the findings indicated that neither the teachers nor the students were satisfied with the program. Thereupon, to determine what specific aspects of the program would emerge as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats, SWOT analysis (Chang & Niedzwiecki 1993) was conducted.

The results of the analysis, carried out with a representative sample of 50 teachers and a random selection of 100 students, showed that the teachers and students were for the most part in agreement as to the strengths of the program. However, when it came to the weaknesses, it was observed that while the teachers were mainly concerned about the pace of the program, the absence of sufficient challenge, which brought about a student body with little desire to generate ideas, and the strategies that students somehow managed to develop enabling them to answer comprehension questions without grasping the meaning of a text, the learners were skeptical of the overall effectiveness of the program. They lacked faith in a program which they believed

would fail to cater for their needs. The majority were convinced that they would face serious problems in their first year courses as they would be unable to express themselves in an academic context.

To determine the language and academic skills the learners would require to fulfill the requirements of their first-year studies as well as the areas of difficulty they frequently faced, needs analysis was conducted in collaboration with the students, the teachers at the DBE and the faculty at various undergraduate programs of the university.

Changes Made to Targets and Teaching Approach

In the light of the data obtained from needs analysis, the first curriculum document in the history of the department, comprising eleven goals and forty-nine objectives was devised. The primary goals were determined as those which aimed at enhancing writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills as well as the one purporting to integrate the four skills. The secondary goals included learner autonomy, student motivation, ethics and critical thinking skills. The tertiary goals were those that aimed at promoting collaborative learning and the use of technology.

The choice of syllabus was also determined in line with the needs of the students. Given that the students' most urgent needs lay in acquiring proficiency in basic academic English that would enable them to fulfill the requirements of the first-year courses, a theme-based/integrated skills syllabus was adopted. A theme-based syllabus would create the academic content through which the learners would gain language awareness and practice language skills. Skills integration, on the other hand, would provide the learners with the opportunity to use the knowledge gained from the content in different modes of communication, which would be a simulation of their undergraduate studies.

As for the teaching approach, the primary focus shifted from *form* to *meaning* and *communicative intent*. Meaning had to be given primary emphasis if the students were to understand writers' or speakers' choice of language structure and lexis. It had to be highlighted if students were to make similar choices. Pragmatics had to be taken into account if critical thinking skills were to come into the picture. Thus, content and text had to gain priority over grammar rules. It was clear that

learners would benefit best if they were provided with a realistic purpose for learning. Thus, the structure of the program needed to be restructured so that students would practise basic academic skills through meaningful academic content and classroom tasks which would reflect the ones they would encounter in their first year courses.

Changes Made to Materials Design

The *6 T* approach (Stoller & Grabe 1997) to materials design was adopted. In accordance with this approach, language practice was provided through the use of *tasks*. These tasks involved the preparation of graphic organizers, which enabled learners to see the framework of a text as well as the discourse pattern and to discover the writer's communicative intent through choice of language and lexis. These organizers also served as the summary of the text, which would be revisited during another task involving written or spoken production. The overall aim was to create a "means for organizing and presenting information so that it [could] be understood, remembered, and applied" (Crandall 1992).

Thus, *text*, either in written or spoken form, formed the core of the teaching/learning process. The texts reflected the ones that the learners would encounter in their first-year courses in terms of genre and language and served three major purposes: a realistic and authentic source to extract meaning, a means to raise language awareness and a vehicle for building language skills.

The tasks and the texts were tied together with *transitions* that made the move from one task or text to another or from one skill to the other smooth and meaningful. These transitions were designed to enable the learners to practice the same skill in a different mode, discover the use of a certain framework in a different mode or move on to a new task by looking at the same topic from a different angle. The aim of designing smooth transitions was to raise students' awareness that most sub-skills existed across the four skills and that in academic life they would be expected to make similar shifts.

The texts and the relevant tasks were related to a *topic* under a specific *theme*. The rationale behind using various texts on the same topic and theme was to create ample opportunity for

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students to use the lexis specific to that theme as well as the language commonly used within that framework. Finally, the themes were tied together with a *thread*, i.e. an umbrella concept to which the students would be asked to relate the knowledge they had obtained from the themes.

Impact of Change on Learners and Teachers

The curriculum renewal effort meant a change in learner roles. Students could no longer be "passive recipients of knowledge from an educational system … imposed on them" (Brown 1995: 187). They were required to be active participants in the learning process. They became sources of information as they were expected to bring to class their knowledge of the world, and through active participation in awareness raising and noticing tasks, formulate and share their findings and theories. They were expected to be critical thinkers, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating information as well as risk-takers experimenting with language and seeking challenge. Finally and most importantly, they were to become lifelong autonomous learners equipped with the skills and strategies necessary for independent learning.

The change in learner roles led to a change in teacher roles. This meant new teaching behaviors and skills, which brought about changes in values and beliefs, philosophies and ultimately identity. This generated insecurity and loss of confidence.

The change also added to the already heavy workload as teachers were required to attend teacher education sessions and plan brand new lessons. This gave rise to skepticism as regards the necessity of the change and to doubts as regards the scientific nature of the process, which intensified to the degree that objections gave way to harsh criticism with the purpose of pressuring the administration to revert to the old system Finally, this negative attitude, resulting from lack of internalization and ownership, spilled over to the student body.

Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions Regarding the Program

Upon the completion of the academic year, a questionnaire was administered to the entire student population and the academic staff to determine students' as well as the instructors' opinion as regards to the degree to which the skills in the DBE curriculum had received emphasis in the program.

The results of the questionnaire (c.f. Appendix) administered to the student body revealed that 61.2% of the students had ranked grammar as the subject to which they had attached the most importance although the program implemented during the academic year had aimed to emphasize the importance of skills practice for purposeful and meaningful communication and to encourage students to view language and vocabulary as a means and not an end in itself,. The analysis of the responses provided for the questions which aimed to assess the effectiveness of the program revealed that the students were in most part dissatisfied with the amount of practice they had received on the individual language skills. Nevertheless, when asked to forecast their performance in their first year courses, interestingly, 73.2% of the students stated that they expected to display average or good performance in writing, 81.7% predicted that they would show at least average performance in meeting the reading requirements in their departments, 72.3% felt confident in their ability to meet the listening requirements and 63.7% estimated that they would be able to demonstrate at least average competence in speaking.

On the other hand, contrary to the students' opinion as regards the overall insufficiency in the amount of practice provided for the skills, the results of the questionnaire administered to the academic staff showed that more than half of the staff seemed satisfied with the amount of emphasis that the individual language skills had received with the exception of the speaking skill, which the teachers unanimously felt had been neglected, and justly so when the amount of hours allotted to the practice of speaking as the primary skill is taken into account. This was an interesting outcome as a number of teachers had demonstrated a consistent negative attitude throughout the academic year. The results indicated, however, that the teachers believed that the students had not received sufficient practice in writing simple, compound and complex sentences, which was the objective that directly required grammar practice. As for their projections as regards their students' performance in the following year, the majority of the instructors were confident that their students would demonstrate at least average proficiency in reading, writing and listening, but were divided when it came to their predictions as regards their students' performance in speaking.

The results of the questionnaire contradicted expectations, as a more optimistic picture from the students and a more somber one from the instructors had been anticipated. The more positive

feedback from the teachers may be attributed to the nature of the questionnaire which had been designed to gather quantitative feedback leaving little room for personal feelings. On the other hand, the rather negative feedback from the learners could have been the result of the learning environment as well as to insufficiency of the information disseminated to the student body. The students are in close contact with their teachers and spend between 15 to 20 hours every week with one particular teacher. In some cases, teachers discuss in class issues which should remain untouched, such as points brought up and concerns voiced during departmental staff meetings. Thus, the teacher's views of and attitude towards the material and approach may reflect itself on the students and influence their personal perception of the program.

Student Involvement in Curriculum Renewal

For the successful implementation of a new curriculum and teaching approach, it is vital to ensure that the learners are personally informed of and fully comprehend the mission and vision of the institution as well as the aims and objectives of the program and that, they understand the teaching philosophy as well as the rationale behind the materials being used. This will eliminate the threat of any one-sided influence, either positive or negative, which may come from their teachers.

This can be achieved by holding regular meetings with the student body. In cases when this is not feasible, students should be asked to select a class representative to act as the communications officer between the administration and the student body. Another possible method is to form a student focus group to ensure constant feedback. The members of this group should regularly meet with administrators and materials designers to provide face-to-face feedback. This will enable the administration to pinpoint the issues of concern for the students and take immediate action. Yet another way is to invite a select number of class representatives to attend the relevant sections of the administrative board meetings and departmental staff meetings. Finally, the teaching objectives of every task and piece of material sent to the students must be clearly specified. The students should not depend on their teachers to inform them of the purpose of the materials. There need also to be channels through which students can voice their concerns, give feedback and make comments as well as suggestions.

It is imperative that the learners be involved in the process because they are the primary stakeholders. Their needs, motivations and resources need to be taken into account when designing programs and who better than they to provide the insight required?

References

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Stoller, F. L. & **Grabe, W**. 1997. 'A six-T's approach to content-based instruction' in M. A. Snow and D. M. Brinton (eds.) **The Content-based Classroom: Perspectives on integrating language and content**. NY: Longman.

Students' & Teachers' Evaluation (Summary in %) of the 2003–2004 DBE Program

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	STUDENTS		TEACHERS	
	Ample + Just Enough	Little + None	Ample + Just Enough	Little + None
Please indicate the degree to which you / your students attached importance to and studied for the skills and points below.				
1. Writing	48.8	51.2	73.2	26.8
2. Reading	53.6	46.4	84.8	15.2
3. Listening	36.2	63.8	75	25
4. Speaking	22.7	77.3	22.3	77.7
5. Grammar	61.2	38.8	82.1	17.9
6. Vocabulary	54.3	45.7	82.1	17.9
In your opinion, how much emphasis did the skills below receive in the program?				
WRITING				
7. Writing simple, compound and complex sentences	61.7	38.3	42.9	57.1
8. Using correct and appropriate vocabulary	56.3	43.7	65.2	34.8
9. Using appropriate discourse patterns (cause-effect, compare-contrast, problem solution, argument)	58.8	41.2	84.8	15.2
10. Writing academic paragraphs with appropriate topic, supporting and concluding sentences	63.8	36.2	75.9	24.1
11. Recognizing & evaluating the elements of a well-written introductory paragraph in an essay	57.8	42.2	60.7	39.3
12. Writing thesis statements appropriate to cause-effect, compare-contrast, problem-solution, argument essays	71.1	28.9	84.8	15.2
13. Writing the body and conclusion paragraphs for cause-effect, compare-contrast, problem-solution, argument essays	49.7	50.3	70.5	29.5
14. Achieving cohesion in writing via referencing, maintaining focus and looking out for old-new info	45.5	54.5	59.8	40.2
15. Achieving unity in writing through the use of appropriate signal words	57.4	42.6	71.4	28.6

READING				
17. Understanding key ideas in a text by decoding simple, compound, complex sentences, recognizing patterns of discourse organization and using appropriate comprehension strategies	41.4	58.6	80.3	19.7
18. Understanding key ideas in a text by recognizing patterns of discourse organization	47.5	52.5	71.5	28.5
19. Recognizing the relationship between ideas in a text	50.8	49.2	82.1	17.9
20. Distinguishing between main idea and supporting detail	64.7	35.3	83	17
21. Distinguishing between fact and opinion	47.9	52.1	80.4	19.6
22. Determining the writer's attitude and purpose by focusing on his choice of language structures, vocabulary and patterns of discourse organization	44.8	55.2	77.7	22.3
23. Making inferences or drawing conclusions based on implicitly stated ideas	31.8	68.2	63.4	36.6
24. Understanding the functional relations between implicitly stated ideas in a text	37.2	62.8	54.5	45.5
25. Understanding referencing	55.3	44.7	86.6	13.3
26. Using clues to recognize definitions for words, concepts within sentences and parts of a text	53.5	46.5	80.3	19.7

LISTENING				
27. Identifying main idea(s) in spoken discourse	52.3	47.7	55.4	44.6
28. Distinguishing main ideas from supporting detail	37.5	62.5	46.4	53.6
29. Identifying discourse structure and organization	35.4	64.6	41	59
30. Making use of signal words to follow the ideas in a lecture	40.2	59.8	66.1	33.9
31. Recognizing the outline of the talk and the important information	47.3	52.7	64.3	35.7

32. Specifying a purpose for listening to dialogues and conversations	39.9	60.1	50	50	
33. Understanding and carrying out oral instructions	38.8	61.2	61.6	38.4	
34. Listening to a lecture and taking notes simultaneously	42.7	57.3	74.1	25.9	

SPEAKING

35. Initiating and maintaining a conversation appropriate to the context	13.8	86.2	27.7	72.3
36. Speaking with reasonably accurate grammar and appropriate vocabulary	23.9	76.1	26.8	73.2
37. Speaking with understandable pronunciation	31.5	68.5	32.1	67.9
38. Speaking with reasonable fluency	21.3	78.7	19.9	82.1
39. Speaking with appropriate register (formal / informal language use)	22.7	77.3	15.2	84.8
40. Building confidence in speaking in public	16.5	83.5	20.6	79.3

Integrated Skills

41. Using information from reading sources for a variety of speaking and writing tasks	38.1	61.9	55.4	44.6
42. Using information from listening sources for a variety of speaking and writing tasks	23	77	36.6	63.4
43. Comparing and evaluating information from multiple sources	32.7	67.3	40.2	59.8
44. Carrying out tasks that require multiple language skills	22.7	77.3	44.6	55.4

When you consider the requirements of your / your students' first year courses, how well do you think you/ they will perform in the following skills?					
	Very Good & Good	Ave.	Poor	Very Good & Good	Ave.	Poor
45. Writing answers to questions using grammatically & stylistically appropriate discourse patterns	33.1	40.1	26.8	32.2	48.2	19.6

46.	Reading authentic, non-fiction, field-specific material with relative ease at a fair rate of comprehension and reacting to it	32.8	48.9	18.3	41.1	44.6	14.3
47.	Listening and appropriately responding to spoken discourse in academic contexts	34.5	37.8	27.7	22.4	54.5	23.1
48.	Speaking with a reasonable degree of fluency and intelligibility	30.9	32.8	36.3	16.1	33.9	50

Answer the following questions.						
		Yes	Partly	No	Yes	Partly	No
49.	Reading and listening to texts under the same theme and speaking and writing about these themes and topics helped me / my students to learn and internalize	23	52.6	24.4	19.7	57.1	23.2
50.	Reading and listening to texts under the same theme and speaking and writing about these themes and topics helped me / my students to learn and internalize the target vocabulary items more easily.	36.2	40.5	23.3	44.7	45.5	9.8
51.	The topics we covered in class were mostly related to contemporary and current issues, so I / my students was / were able to add to my / their knowledge of the world.	27.1	40.4	32.5	17.9	53.6	28.5
52.	The instruction at the DBE raised my / my students' awareness of the importance of self-study and helped me / them become autonomous.	13.8	43.6	42.6	6.3	43.7	50
53.	The instruction I received helped me / my students improve my / their critical thinking skills.	16.9	43.4	39.7	15.2	57.1	27.7