

Original Research Article

Curriculum Development: Sharing an Experience

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Received: 19 May, 2024 | Accepted: 12 June, 2024 | Published: 15 June, 2024

Abstract

This article describes the process of reforming the English curriculum for the University Requirement (EUR) program at the University of Khartoum. The original curriculum was a one-size-fits-all approach that did not meet the needs of the diverse student population. The reform process involved needs analysis, content and skills selection, and a new curriculum series development. The new curriculum (entitled Bridging the Gap) is designed to be more flexible and meet the students' needs at different levels. It also incorporates non-linguistic skills and is future-oriented, aiming to prepare students for their careers. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of curriculum development as an ongoing process and the value of professional development for curriculum developers.

Keywords: curriculum development; curriculum; need's analysis; diverse; curriculum reform

1. Introduction

a. Background

Curriculum Development as used in this article refers to the processes of planning and implementation involved in renewing and developing teaching material for English language at university level. There are a number of challenges for curriculum development. These challenges range from learners' individual differences, content delivery and receptiveness to time and resources availability, notwithstanding, questions of selection of content range, gradation, order and arrangement. Last but not

least is the question of qualification and drive to involve in such a long-term commitment. The current article shares the experience of developing a home-tailored curriculum, '**Bridging the Gap Series**'. The series is a three-level English course offered to university students as a university requirement course. The course is taught to students in twenty-two colleges at the University of Khartoum.

b. The Aims of the Study

A curriculum is crucial for the well-being and effectiveness of higher education, (Sharma, 2016). The accountability of the curriculum of English as University Requirement (EUR) at the University of Khartoum lies on the Department of English Language at the Administration for University Requirements (AUR). The department is to deliver English language as a University Requirement (EUR) across twenty-two colleges of the University of Khartoum. With a demeaning confined space and embarrassingly lean resources, the department shoulders the burden of the curriculum development and the courses delivery, assessment and evaluation within the deadlines of the twenty-two college lists of results for the courses delivered. The AUR course duration for each college is two, fifteen-week semesters. The classes are offered on weekly basis with a total load of 60 credit hours i.e., two hours a week. In spite of all the aforementioned challenges, the department succeeded in developing the required curriculum that takes into consideration all the stakeholders needs and specifications. In this paper the authors share the experience hoping that their experience contributes to the field of language curricula development.

2. Literature Review

a. Definitions

Given the vast significance, use and nature, curriculum development encompasses a spectrum of definitions and interpretations, (Jennifer Nias, Geoff Southworth, Penelope Campbell, 1992). The term 'curriculum' itself initiates a range of meanings: what to teach, who to teach, how to teach it, etc. Thereupon, it is more sensible to accommodate openness for significances of the term 'curriculum' and forsake its tightening to curriculum developers to subject to their convenience and due course. It is acknowledged (Wilkins, 1976) that the indisputable argument is not the definition and meaning of the term 'curriculum development'; it is electively the approach/ the protocol followed for the curriculum development.

b. Historical Review

Though the history of curriculum development and syllabus design traces back to the mid-fifties of the nineteenth century, it was not until the 1990s that materials development for language learning began to become accepted as an academic discipline in higher education (Buchanan, 2022). Before that it was forsaken for how to evaluate selected materials. Modern approaches to curriculum development maintain needs analysis for curriculum development. Thomas MD and Patricia A. (Patricia A. Thomas, 2022) state that the description of the current and ideal approaches to the problem of a curriculum is called a general needs assessment. Consequently, this article exemplifies the development of a curriculum based on the needs analysis.

3. Approaches to Curriculum Development

According to Buchan (2022) curriculum development still remains a relatively under-researched area. Therefore, approaches to curriculum development are often updated and are uninterruptedly remodeled. The election of an approach over others is subject to a number of constraints: context, resources availability, target group, intended outcomes/objectives, length and duration proposed, etc. notwithstanding subjective and personal delights/comfort. Kern (2022) proposed a six-step approach. Their approach derives from more generic approaches to curriculum development set forth by Taba, Tyler, Yura and Torres, and from the work of others. These steps include: (1) problem identification and general needs assessment, (2) targeted needs assessment, (3) goals and objectives, (4) educational strategies, (5) implementation and (6) evaluation and feedback. In addition to its applicability, the election of this approach over others is because of its close acquaintance to the approach adopted for 'Bridging the Gap Series' the model detailed in this article itself.

4. The Curriculum Before Reform and Change

The curriculum existed for the department to deliver was a one-fits-all general English course book for the twenty-two colleges of the University of Khartoum. Ironically, some of these colleges rattled with academically most-able learners i.e., learners of the faculties of medicine and engineering while some others accommodated the least able learners i.e., learners of the faculties of Forestry, Education, Geography, etc.

a. Academic Failures

Reform and change have been an inevitable choice. According to the World Bank on its report on Curriculum in the Sudan (Moreno, 2021), the complexity of the curriculum reform entails the need to be part of a larger comprehensive reform with a defined roadmap. The old curriculum course book was aligned to the less able learners. Thus, it is, intuitively, too easy and rather boring to the majority of more able learners. Being a single-level course book, it gives no care to individual differences, classroom interaction, autonomous learning, and let alone non-cognitive skills. That course book encompassed six incoherent and rather disintegrated units; neither the number of units nor the content coordinated with the contact hours or course duration.

b. Administrative Failures

Regarding quality assurance and managing the department, the course book has been an invitation to lecturers for absence, disintegration, indifference, and therefore an overall deficit of discipline (if any). The existed one-size-fits-all curriculum overbalanced the flow of sessions throughout university various colleges. This overbalance was crystal clear when encountering the inconsistency lecturers follow in regard to session sequence, content fulfillment, and exam standardization. Lecturers who went for colleges with more able students crashed the course book in few sessions and skip the rest of the semester. Those who undertook less able students spent the whole semester struggling with a unit or two, leaving behind them more than two thirds of the curriculum undone. With all these inconveniences and discipline deficit, the English department had to do something to fix that unfavorable situation.

c. Assessment and Evaluation

The forms of testing do have a considerable influence on the manner of teaching, (Wilkins, 1976). Performance and evaluation go hand in hand and; for the old curriculum, they were both left loosened for

individual educators' self-discipline, self-drive, conscience, job-satisfaction, and to the surrounding environment which in quite many occasions was rather discouraging. Exams, mid and end of term are forsaken for every lecturer to their situation and convenience. Lecturers nominated the mode, the difficulty, the length, the time allotted to their exams. Thus, the department has no tool, method, and legitimacy to direct, evaluate, judge, or interfere at any point of the production or the delivery of the curriculum.

5. The Initiation for Reform and Change

A committee at the English department proposed reform and change initiations including a curriculum development. As for curriculum issues the objective has been to home tailor a series of General English that would eliminate the aforementioned interferences and meet the needs assessed as much as time, resources, and authority would allow.

a. Challenges to reform and change

Apart from the above stated challenges to change and reform, there is the issue of time frame affordability for launching curriculum renewal. Much of the time of the lecturers of the department is spent commuting to those colleges provided they are scattered around the triangular capital Khartoum. A more fussing agony to add on the face of *change* is the inferior prospective towards EUR; for many administrators and few staff members, the university requirements deduct time, effort, and money at the expense of major courses. Nominated as a disobliging subject, EUR sessions are donated second-rate schedules. One last needless to say challenge is the day to day deteriorating levels of ESL learners in the Sudan as a whole (Moreno, 2021). Nevertheless, these challenges motivated the will for making difference and launching a three-year plus commitment for curriculum 'Reform and Change.'

b. The form of reform and change framework

Jack C. Richard stated (Richards, 2001) all teaching demands a choice of what to teach of the total subject. To launch a curriculum development project, first course designers should come to consensus on what to teach i.e., the selection of a particular content. Content selection and arrangement have been true challenges for the EUR department of the University of Khartoum having twenty-two colleges for the curriculum to cover. Theses colleges are of diverse levels, faculties, interests etc. Furthermore, the majors of the students of these colleges range from non-science like arts and human studies to basic science and medicine, engineering construction, law, laboratories... etc. With all abovementioned conditions, the development of an appropriate curriculum for such diverse groups of students needed a paced well-tight action plan. The development of the curriculum went through gradual phases that will be detailed later at the statement of the writing stage. The development of the curriculum targeted a wider perspective through foreseeing the future of the students' career. Students should just be given the fundamentals, which they then apply throughout their career to any problem, (Hargroves, 2014). This has been the cornerstone of the new curriculum. Rationally, the language chunks are graded ascending from Level A and moderated up to Level C. This is coupled with other linguistic and nonlinguistic skills, as well.

c. The writing stages

As clarified previously, the series subsumed three levels A, B, and C. As for levels A and B, each contains twelve units. Level C is divided into two volumes; each is ten units. Nevertheless, the template for all units in every level remained the same. The unit is to deliver in a week for every level. However,

Level C is presumed to keep the minimum of three weeks for the anticipated extracurricular activities, students' presentations, and class discussions. Appreciably, Level C students are often advance learners of English. The flow of the writing stages of the series 'Bridging the Gap,' is outlined below.

i. Stating the learning outcomes

To state the learning outcomes, a workshop on learning outcomes for higher education was held with the participation of a number of universities. The workshop was followed by a number of meetings in the department ended up with the statement of a set of learning outcomes for the university different colleges. The colleges were then graded into three main pools of learning outcomes according to students' achievements.

ii. Establishing learners' baseline

To establish a baseline for each academic group of the learners, the students' previous exam papers and test results were carefully studied and analyzed. The learners were grouped into three grades (A, B, and C). Level A represents the least able students.

iii. Selecting the content

Selecting a range of language content and non-linguistic skills entailed the extensive study and the careful inspection of a variety of texts and the reading extractions of the most frequent and useful linguistic items: lexicon, structure, everyday chunks, and themes. Then, the three levels were aligned to appropriate language contents in regard to: vocabulary, structure, and linguistic and non-linguistic skills. The content selection conceived both the baseline and the courses duration introduced in the introduction of this article

iv. Writing level C course books

To write the textbook for level C, first text extracts are selected, then required vocabulary is worked out via a multitude of exercises and rehearsal and reuse are maintained. Structures then follow with lesser emphasis on theory and larger portion of practice and production. Speaking activities are rather monologues, group discussions, expressing one's view point, etc. The topics vary and are often of high-level thinking. The writing activity is often based on the language and concepts stated earlier in the same unit. As mentioned earlier in this article, this level subsumed two volumes C1 and C2. Each unit starts with a lead in little brainstorming activity meant to furnish the ground for the reading yet to come.

v. Writing level A course book

Intuitively one would say there should come level B next to C. However, the need for Level A was urgent as it is the curriculum for more than a third of the colleges of the university. Moreover, lecturers find it difficult to come up with a content that is a university level and is nonetheless a false beginner. The developing of Level A is quite different from that of Level C. The first stage was the selection of the targeted vocabulary, then, followed by text writing and building up. The themes are carefully selected so that they revolve around everyday English. Though the writing process differs from that of Level C. the template stayed unchanged.

vi. Writing level B course books

Comparing the two approaches followed in developing the first two courses (Level C and level A) the latter is rather professional, interesting and to the point. The first step was the vocabulary selection,

then theme writing and texts. The grammar section included theoretical as well as practicable activities. The speaking of every unit revolves around the same reading of the unit. In most occasions speaking activities are worked in groups. Level B is divided into two volumes each has six units. Both Levels A and C have been piloted and published. Unlike Levels A and C, Level B has been piloted but not published yet.

6. Conclusion

It is asserted that (Walker, 2003) every curriculum leader should know that reform movements happen and that they may bring more change than years of patient work through the usual channels. When the writers of 'Bridging the Gap' first launched their project of curriculum reform, a colleague came by and when they told him about their project, he remarked "but are you text book writers?". Now experience shows that text book writers are made through patient hard work and non-stop professional development. Text book writers are not born. The naked eye leap in knowledge and practice exhibited after the accomplishment of Level C ignited the will to learn more about curriculum development through workshops, symposiums, readings on the profession, etc. Curriculum development is a progressive process. In one of the training sessions on material development, an ELT-Consultant, namely, Coralyn Brad Shaw said 'A curriculum is never perfect until it is published.' The purpose of this article has been to share the experience of starting a curriculum from a scratch with so little recourses and annoyingly squeezed time. Later, the series 'Bridging the Gap' has become the accredited curriculum for the EUR across the University of Khartoum and continued to be so.

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