An Investigation of Curriculum Elements for the Enhancement of the Teaching-learning Process

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Abstract

Any curriculum consists of several components: goals, disposition, duration, needs analysis, learners and teachers, exercises and activities, resources, ways of learning, skills to be acquired, lexis, language structure, and ability assessment. Before setting up a program or course of study, these components should be determined and described in detail. In fact, these elements help clarify various dimensions of the curriculum and consequently enhance its productivity. Practically, proper consideration of each aspect of these constructs can exert a tremendous influence on the richness of the program. Therefore, curriculum or course designers need to scrutinize these components one by one and determine their role in the program. Essentially, these elements should be explored at length prior to, during, and after the program. Thus, this article attempts to shed some light on the various constructs of a teaching-learning course.

Keywords: Curriculum, Components

1. Introduction

No matter what approach a language teacher adopts. The important issue to bear in mind is that the teacher should identify and define all the curriculum components in advance. Thus, all the elements of a course should be clear and explicit to the teacher before embarking on the program. The following sections present and elaborate on the various ingredients of a curriculum.

2. Goals

Generally, objectives are one of the quintessential aspects of any course or program. Any curriculum usually determines its instructional objectives at the beginning of the course. These objectives should clearly elucidate the language elements or skills which the students might learn during the program (Brown, 1995). In fact, objectives or goals are the ends towards which we try to direct our efforts. That is, objectives are things we aim to achieve at the end of the course (Van Blerkom, 2003). In this regard, Richards (2007) contends that objectives are the goals of a program which attempt to bring about some changes in learners. Therefore, objectives determine the goals of a program and offer guidelines for students and teachers. Mainly, the overall goals of the EGP courses are to enable the students to communicate effectively in English (Hedge, 2002) and to prepare them for their ESP courses (Stoller, 2001b). On the whole, specification of objectives has the following benefits:

- They save a lot of teachers' time and energy.

- They help to determine the necessary course materials.

- They improve the adequacy and effectiveness of the teaching-learning processes.

- They direct the students' attention, increase their persistence and motivate them.

- They encourage students to become involved and develop their own learning skills and strategies.

- They help to develop criteria for evaluating materials and methods and monitoring students' progress.

However, objectives and goals are not as straightforward as might appear. It is because there are different parties involved in a course of study such as: students, instructors, institution, ministry of education and so on. Therefore, each stakeholder has his/her own objectives towards the program. For instance, students' expectations of the course might be different from the curriculum as a whole. Thus, the students' and instructors' objectives might coincide or

be rather distinct. As Breen (2001a) puts: "The classroom is the meeting point of various subjective views of language, diverse learning purposes, and different preferences." (p. 129). The point is that some students have clear goals; however, others have vague aims (Harmer, 2002). As Longman and Atkinson (2002) argue the instructors should help students to develop realistic and achievable goals, make decisions based on those goals and finally reach their goals at the end of the course. Unfortunately, sometimes, teachers are not provided with enough information on their learners' and courses' goals (Tarone & Yule, 1999). The role of the instructor is to clarify the goals for himself/herself and then negotiate them with the students (Snow & Brinton, 1997). In this way, the instructors can organize the classroom activities in accordance with disparate students' and overall course's objectives (Mercer, 2001). Therefore, syllabus designers should gather detailed information on the course and formulate suitable objectives. The goals of a course might be built around the teaching of language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) or their subcomponents (pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar). Some courses might put emphasis on communication and oral skills and give priority to communicative competence. Yet, others might place emphasis on written and reading skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2002). However, it depends on the objectives and goals of the course to determine what should be emphasized and taught.

3. Disposition

Certainly, students' attitudes determine whether or not they intend to learn a foreign or second language. Mainly, favorable attitudes towards the language and its speakers augment students' motivation and their learning rate (Lightbown & Spada, 2003). In fact, motivation for learning a second language is one of the realizations of positive attitudes towards the language. Therefore, if students have positive attitudes towards the teacher, materials and methods, they will try hard to learn the second language. However, if they feel hostile towards the language, materials and the teachers, they will hardly achieve any success (Harmer, 2002). Thus, negative attitudes will increase the students' affective filter and hinder language learning.

Also, external pressure can bring about negative attitudes towards the second language. Breen (2001b) maintains that students' views about the classroom, their previous experiences of learning and their understanding of the classroom culture can have an important influence on their attitudes towards the language. In this regard, Lin (2001) argues that the teachers can hardly know about their students' attitudes because students "hold an ambivalent, want-hate relationship with English." (pp. 271-2). It goes without saying that teachers can play an important role in forming and maintaining positive attitudes in their students. Therefore, the teachers need to:

- encourage the students in positive attitudes,

- prepare the students in efficient skills and strategies,

- involve the students and make them responsible in their own learning,

- create a supportive and pleasant atmosphere to suit various student types,

- familiarize the students with the intended culture,

- try to know their students and their attitudes,

- try to lower the students' anxiety and promote their self-confidence.

Meanwhile, the teachers should try to create a harmonious and cooperative classroom environment because "Asymmetrical relationships very often entail disagreement in belief, in attitudes, and in values held" (Breen, 2001a, p. 131). Teachers also need to strengthen and enhance the students' "internal motivators" (Longman & Atkinson, 2002, p. 43) in order to help them develop positive attitudes towards the second language.

4. Duration

One of the crucial factors which has tremendous effect on the learners' learning rate is the amount of time spent on teaching-learning activities in the classroom. Certainly, hours of instruction per week and month play an important role in language acquisition (Rahimian, 2005). Peacock (2001) believes that the learners' time in the EAP classroom is limited and short. Consequently, the restricted amount of time could damage and decrease the quality and efficiency of the classroom teaching-learning activities. Therefore, Brinton and Holten (2001) argue that a few weeks of instruction could hardly impact the learners' language proficiency. Also, language is too complex and varied to be learned in a short period of time.

Therefore, the EGP teachers cannot cover the main language skills, grammar and vocabulary in a restricted amount of time (Jordan, 1997). In this regard, Hedge (2002) states that teachers barely have any time to devote to revision and obtaining feedback from the students. To compensate for the shortness of class time, the students need to

manage their time as efficiently as possible. To this end, Van Blerkom (2003) recommends "using good time-management skills." (p. 51). Also, Longman and Atkinson (2002) argue that if the learners want to achieve their goals, they need to regulate their time effectively. The students need to learn and develop effective strategies and tools in order to become autonomous. At this juncture, Peacock (2001) emphasizes the importance of the independent study outside the classroom. Generally, teachers need time to plan and organize coherent courses (Nunan, 1999). The teachers, also, need to regulate and distribute the class time as carefully as possible in order to have enough time for each activity and exercise (Hedge, 2002). On the whole, because of the shortness of time, the teachers should teach those aspects of the language that are urgently needed by the students and are based on the course objectives.

5. Needs Analysis

In order to devise a course and prepare materials and methods based on the students' and institution's objectives, we had better carry out needs analysis. As Richards (2007) holds "a sound educational program should be based on an analysis of learner needs." (p. 51). Needs analysis is the starting point which is usually done before, during and after the course in order to determine the course's outline, materials and resources. Any course should be set up based on the students' needs and we should be "sensitive to our learners and their needs" (Schmitt, 2000, p. 136). To this end, Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) contend that needs analysis attempts "to fine tune the curriculum to the specific needs of the learner." (p. 178). Generally, in addition to determining the learners' needs, materials and methods, needs analysis intends to:

- ascertain the students' objectives and goals,

- find out what the students need to do in order to learn (learning needs),

- determine what the students need to do in the target situation (target situation analysis),

- check the place and its availability of the resources, equipment, materials and facilities (means analysis),

- establish the students' language level at the beginning of the program (present situation analysis).

In order to better study the learners' needs, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) subdivide the needs into *necessities*, *lacks* and *wants*. *Necessities* refer to the requirement of the target setting. In other words, the linguistic elements the learners need to use in the target environment. In this way, the target situation analysis comes to the fore. Determining the necessities of the target situation is one of the aspects of what the learners need to learn. The other more important issue is to know what the learners already know. By determining what the learners have at their disposal, we can identify which of the necessities they *lack*. Therefore, by studying the gap between the necessities and the lacks we can select and teach the appropriate materials to the learners. The necessities and lacks are the objective points that are determined by the needs analysis. However, the learners themselves have their own wishes and *wants*. Therefore, any curriculum or syllabus designer should consider the learners' wants. However, the learners' wants may be in conflict with the teachers' or other parties perceptions. The following figure illustrates the different aspects of the needs analysis at a university level.

As the above figure indicates different stakeholders have different views about the needs. Remarkably, needs analysis is not a one-off exercise, rather it is an ongoing activity carried out continually during the whole teaching-learning processes. At this juncture, the important issue is the students' involvement in the needs analysis processes. In order to encourage the students to participate in the learning process, the teachers and course designers need to involve the learners in the needs analysis. As Peacock (2001) argues when the learners' needs and wishes are not considered "the results can be frustrated and disappointed students." (p. 283). Ultimately, the teachers should gather enough information about the students and the course and convert "needs analysis outcomes into course content and procedures" (Lynch, 2001, p. 394).

6. Learners and Teachers

Students are certainly the main stakeholders in a course of study. However, Skehan (1998) asserts that they have been marginalized and scant attention has been paid to them in designing and developing materials and methods. Generally, each classroom is made up of different types of students with "various personal characteristics and cultural backgrounds" (Mercer, 2001, p. 243). Undoubtedly, there are grave differences among the language learners in a classroom which makes the task of the language learning and teaching rather demanding. As Ferris (2001) holds "significant differences exist across L2 contexts and populations." (p. 299). Therefore, the disparity among the learners causes that they learn in their own way and respond differently to "the same stimuli" (Harmer, 2002, p. 45). It can also be claimed that the learners have different interests and needs which consequently influence their

acquisition and hence the "differences in learning outcomes" (Mitchell & Myles, 2001, p. 23). Thus, some learners are better in oral skills and some are competent in written skills. Inevitably, some of the students are unpredictable and inconsistent in their way of learning language.

Arguably, the students' language levels, prior education, experience and motivation play an important role in their language learning (Gatehouse, 2001). Also, the teachers' methodology and the cultural norms might impact the students' learning strategies. Based on the above figure, extrovert students are sociable and impulsive which make them to be fluent in oral skills. However, the introverts are intrinsically motivated to learn language without too much interaction with others (Johnson, 2001). Meanwhile, some students have high aptitude for language learning than others. This causes that they learn more easily and quickly (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). At this juncture, Clapham (2001) claims that "there is an imbalance between the science and the social science students." (p. 88). That is, she argues that the science and engineering students are rather more competent that the social science and humanities students. However, this assertion is difficult to prove. In general, good language learners regardless of their discipline:

- have a clear objective and goal for learning language,

- have a high degree of self-confidence and self-awareness,

- try hard to learn and use language inside and outside the classroom,

- are willing to take risk and use language at different situations,

- organize their time effectively and efficiently,

- monitor and evaluate their progress continuously,

- try to recognize their weaknesses and reduce them as far as possible,

- try to find their own way and become autonomous,

- have a tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity,

- are willing to attend to form and learn grammar,

- use their linguistic and world knowledge to help them in comprehension,

- receive and produce language simultaneously,

- have positive attitudes towards the language they are learning,

- try to know their needs and use every resource available to them,

- show great perseverance.

Generally, the learners' success is closely related to the teacher's functions and capabilities (Richards & Rodgers, 2002). It is the teacher who can orient the students and direct them towards achieving their objectives. However, the teachers are faced with several insurmountable problems in the EGP classes such as: large classes, low motivation, mixed abilities, lack of resources, pressure of time, and use of L1 (Hedge, 2002). Nevertheless, these problems should not discourage and deter teachers from doing their jobs. Generally, language teachers in addition to the normal functions of teaching have to design, adopt and adapt materials, do needs analysis, evaluate their course and students, and so on. Good language teachers, like good students:

- try to know their students and their needs and wants,

- ascertain the students' language level and find out their weaknesses,

- provide and shape the input,

- enhance communicative practice and realistic use,

- give feedback to each student,

- tailor methods and materials to the students' level, objectives, needs and interests.

7. Exercises and Activities

The effective classroom activities and exercises can contribute to learning and make it enjoyable. Students do not learn language by absorbing transmitted knowledge but they need to practice and produce language in meaningful contexts in order to acquire it. Nunan (2001) argues that students are only taught about the language forms and do not learn their functions and consequently cannot use them in meaningful communications. The important point is

that every learner, teacher, institution is unique and "language of instruction and curricula vary from country to country" (Mercer, 2001, p. 243). Therefore, the important task for the teacher is to design exercises which engage different types of students and consider their objectives, language levels, and needs as well as wants (Richards, 2007). In order to keep the learners engaged, the teachers need to provide them with a variety of exercises and activities. Also, the teachers should create situations in which the students could do the exercises in the meaningful contexts, rather than just answering them in a mechanical and abstract way. As Richards and Rodgers (2002) stress teaching activities that emphasize grammatical points are quite different from those that focus on communicative activities. Mainly, there should be a balance of activities between the grammatical accuracy and communicative fluency.

Quite reasonably, Johnson (2001) states that new language forms should be presented in a clear and memorable way in order to remain in the students' heads. Johnson also emphasizes that the teachers need to create situations in which to raise the students' consciousness and make them aware to notice language forms. To this end, Harmer (2002) assumes that the following techniques should be used to present new language points and activities: "demonstration, explanation, discovery, accurate reproduction, immediate creativity and check questions." (pp. 154-6). However, Skehan (1998) presumes that classroom activities can be best carried out through three Ps: presentation, practice and production. That is, the new items are presented to the students. Then, drills are used to practice the new points in a controlled way. Finally, in the production stage which is free learners produce language through communicative activities. Yet, Mercer (2001) contends that the traditional way of IRF (Initiation, Response and Feedback) is an appropriate technique of interaction between the students and teacher. Still, the most preferred and fashionable way of performing classroom activities is assigning and conducting tasks (Breen, 2001b). Task-based language learning-teaching activities are one of the ways in which the teachers can modify their methods to suit different levels of proficiency and taste. Doing tasks make the learners to practice the language skills and use language elements (vocabulary and grammar) simultaneously. Additionally, in order to make the students autonomous language learners, the teachers can ask the students to do project work (Hedge, 2002). Essentially, project works are collaborative and group-centered, integrate language skills, are learning-centered rather than teacher-oriented, encourage student responsibility, and can be done inside and outside the classroom.

Undoubtedly, one of the effective ways of practicing language and involving all the learners in purposeful activities is the communicative language teaching trend. On the whole, communicative language teaching nurturing message-focused activities, contributes to learners' freedom, enhances fluency, promotes meaningful activities (e.g. tasks and projects), and develops learners' linguistic, pragmatic, discoursal and strategic competence. Johnson (2001) suggests the following activities as some of the instances of communicative language teaching: "role play and simulation, communication games (e.g. board and card games), discussion and debates." (pp. 262-3). At this juncture, one of the effective dimensions of classroom teaching is the grouping of the students (Richards, 2001). Teachers need to organize classroom activities in different groups (individual, pair, group and whole class work) in order to meet diverse student levels and tastes. Clearly, there is no single method that might be presented to be used in the classroom. In fact, Long (2001) argues that the use of methods may harm rather than help teachers to implement classroom activities. In this regard, Brown (2000) is in favor of "an eclectic blend of tasks" (p. 179) which might suit different learners in different contexts.

8. Resources

Good materials not only can be taught straightforwardly but also can facilitate learning process. However, Clapham (2001) argues that finding useful materials is difficult and their suitability "cannot be known in advance." (p. 99). In this regard, Cunningsworth (1995) recommends selecting the best and most appropriate materials which are available. Essentially, many teachers do not have time or are not provided with enough time to develop their own materials based on their students' needs and course objectives (Gatehouse, 2001). As Richards (2007) acknowledges "A book may be ideal in one situation" (p. 256), however, it may be rather not useful in a different situation.

Generally, good and useful materials have some particular features. Therefore, the language teachers need to take heed of the following criteria in selecting course materials. All in all, good materials:

- are selected based on course objectives and students' needs,

- include a combination of simple, simplified and authentic materials,

- offer a balance of exercises, activities, study skills and language skills,

- contain a variety of texts, styles, genres for different levels of students,

- provide the major source of input and contact with the language,

- enable students to use language effectively both in spoken and written modes,

- use visuals in order to create meaningful contexts,

- set up communicative activities reflecting the use of language in realistic situations,

- include relevant and interesting topics and texts,

- are developed and prepared based on the students' social and cultural values and norms.

As language teachers, we need to engage students with pertinent and interesting materials. Hence, coursebooks are one of the adequate and handy means which mediate between the students and teachers. However, teachers should not depend too much on them. Cunningsworth (1995) cautions that "heavy dependence on coursebooks is far from ideal" (p. 10) because they limit teachers' creativity and flexibility. To this end, Harmer (2002) suggests the use of both coursebooks and "a variety of homegrown materials." (p. 305). Notwithstanding, good coursebooks:

- offer a consistent syllabus and average control of language,

- allow teachers and students to prepare in advance,

- promote students' perception of progress and provide material for revision,

- provide an organized sequence of items for teaching,

- provide input, language models, learning experience and language practice,

- provide opportunities for self-evaluation and independent study,

- serve as a resource for presentation and practice of new language items,

- serve as a resource for grammar and vocabulary.

Generally, teachers can improve materials by adapting them in order to suit the needs of the particular situations and students (Cunningsworth, 1995). Material adaptation may consist of: modifying, rearranging and expanding exercises, tasks and content (Richards, 2007). Meanwhile, teachers need to evaluate the appropriateness of the materials based on their local needs. To this end, they can prepare a checklist based on the course objectives, needs and social as well as cultural values to evaluate the materials. Also, the teachers should try to include their learners' views and opinions in assessing the materials (Harmer, 2002). After evaluating the suitability and appropriateness of the materials, the teachers need to sequence the content of the materials. Mainly, sequencing might be carried out by arranging the materials from simple to complex and based on needs and objectives (Hedge, 2002). Finally, materials should be revised in the light of the classroom use.

9. Ways of Learning

Definitely, study skills could equip the students with some essential and necessary techniques in university. Study skills approach came to the fore because learners needed more than linguistic competence and language descriptions to achieve their goals (Hyland, 2006). Some students "experience anxiety and frustration" at university; however, acquiring effective study skills can help them to gain more confidence in their studies (Van Blerkom, 2003, p. 25). Unfortunately, as Jordan (1997) argues many learners do not receive any instruction or training in study skills. In this regard, Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) emphasize that developing the learners' study skills competence is more crucial than teaching them language skills. In particular, after evaluating the ESP courses at the University of Guadalajara in Mexico, Lynch (1996) realized that the students needed study skills course before embarking on their ESP courses. At this juncture, Dudley-Evans and St John (2000) believe that learners whose first language is other than English are required to equip themselves with both study skills and language of the academic disciplines. Further to this, the students need to develop appropriate study skills in order to deal with their subject-specific requirements, tackle the new modes of technology and cope with the conditions of modern workplace. More specifically, by acquiring the necessary study skills, students can become strategic learners which in turn can improve their scores, organize their time and feel less stressed (Payne & Whittaker, 2000).

On the whole, study skills have a wide range of activities. They consist of reading skills such as scanning, skimming, identifying main vocabulary and guessing word meanings from context, listening comprehension and note-taking, writing skills such as summarizing, paraphrasing and report writing, oral presentation and seminar participation, using the dictionary, using the library, using a bibliography, using computers, using language laboratory and using self-access center. For instance, by using computers students can learn and access the different uses of words and linguistic items stored on computers which are called *corpus analysis or linguistics* (Schmitt, 2000). In addition,

students can be taught to use different types of dictionaries (general and specialist) based on their levels (elementary or advanced) and according to their needs (bilingual or monolingual). Undoubtedly, one of the main outcomes of developing students' study skills is that they become independent. Therefore, it is essential that every academic setting have a self-access center. These are places which contain grammar references, dictionaries, workbooks, reading and listening texts, cassettes, tapes, videos, CDs, and internet. The students can be encouraged to attend the self-access center and use these materials in their free times.

10. Skills to be Acquired

The four language skills comprise the main constituents of a language. Sometimes listening and reading are called the receptive skills and speaking and writing the productive skills (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). It is claimed that we should determine the type of language skills that our students need to develop. Harmer (2002) maintains that this decision is sometimes made by the syllabus or the coursebook. However, Jordan (1997) states that it depends on our students' needs and local circumstances. Yet, McDonough (1984) believes that it rests on the goals of learning. Generally, in the early days mastering reading skill was the main priority of the EAP courses. In fact, oral use or communication was not performed in the classrooms and was given a secondary role (Brown, 2000). Consequently, the emphasis was on dealing with different types of written texts. However, the multimodalities of modern university and workplace require that students read and write various types of texts and participate in oral communication and use of language (Hyland, 2006). Regretfully, some courses, materials, teachers and teaching approaches treat the four language skills separately. However, performing and practicing any single skill requires an amalgam of other skills to a greater or lesser degree. To this end, Johnson (2001) holds that the language skills have many similarities and are interconnected. Therefore, interaction requires both receiving and producing language through different language skills. In addition, written and spoken language is closely related and reinforces one another. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) zealously argue that if the same information is received and produced through reading, hearing, writing and speaking, that information will be richer and easily accessible. By the same token, Farhady (2005) ardently rejects a mono-skill approach of reading in the EGP courses. Thus, an integrated skills approach is preferred where all the skills are practiced simultaneously. However, Brinton and Holten (2001) assert that it is sometimes difficult to meet the different expectations of heterogeneous group of learners and maintain a balance across the four language skills. The important point to bear in mind is that the teachers should try to create a balance of skills through the materials and different types of classroom activities. Further to this, the materials and activities should facilitate the transferability of the skills to the real world (Cunningsworth, 1995). Ultimately, in order to enhance learning, guard against boredom and create variety, teachers should integrate the four language skills.

11. Lexis

Undeniably, the EFL and ESL students need to master the high-frequency vocabulary in order to perform some primary activities and produce and receive language. To this end, Cunningsworth (1995) points out that sustained communication requires that students to have a wide range of vocabulary at their disposal. Mainly, some students assume that the vocabularies of the English language are separate entities in themselves. However, English words are more than individual items and assume their meaning in a related network and their use are realized in a discourse environment, i.e. in an environment of context (Schmitt, 2000). Thus, Nation (2003) recommends a planned approach to vocabulary development rather than in a random and haphazard way. Vocabulary teaching, in fact, is intended to support language use across the four language skills. Nonetheless, selecting vocabulary is a complex and tricky issue. Generally, the words that should be taught depend on the objectives of the course and the availability of time. Richards (2007) suggests some criteria for determining the types of vocabulary for teaching: "high-frequency, wide range, teachability, similarity, availability, coverage and defining power." (pp. 7-8). On the other hand, Coxhead and Nation (2001) believe that language teachers can help students to develop academic vocabulary but it is not their job to teach technical words. On the whole, teachers can use the following techniques and guidelines in vocabulary teaching:

- doing physical demonstration, verbal explanation and translation,

- using visual aids such as pictures or blackboard/whiteboard drawings,

- encouraging students to use dictionary,

- recycling words in different contexts and reintroducing them repeatedly,

- encouraging students to work with word families, to learn prefixes, roots and suffixes and to learn word categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions),

- providing students with large number of examples in order to practice and learn the appropriate use of the words,

- encouraging noticing words by using typographical features such as italics, bold types and underlining.

Mainly, the most important technique of learning vocabulary is meeting them "in rich natural contexts" (Cobb & Horst, 2001, p. 320). However, the common problem that most of the students have is lack of enough exposure to different uses of words in different contexts. Apparently, our students' lexical knowledge is mostly passive than active. That is, they can hardly recall and retrieve their vocabulary in order to produce and use language in speaking and writing. Also, because of the lack of use of words, the students forget the vocabulary and consequently attrition occurs (Schmitt, 2000). Finally, the most common problem that university students suffer from is their limited range of general English words (Farnia, 2005). Seemingly, the students' reading comprehension problems stem from lack of enough general vocabulary rather than technical terms (Mahbudi, 2005). Regarding the students' vocabulary shortcomings and weaknesses, the following principles are worth considering in order to boost their lexical grasp:

- Students should take responsibility for their own vocabulary development.

- Word knowledge grows over time through receptive and productive use of language.

- Vocabulary should be learned and taught both explicitly (deliberately) and implicitly.

- Students need to engage with words and work on them actively.

- Phonological awareness helps to remember a word.

- Vocabulary acquisition can be affected by the students' L1, motivation, culture, proficiency level, objective and amount of classroom activities and tasks.

- Students need to learn both the denotative (basic, core or dictionary meaning) and connotative meaning (extra, affective, emotive or attitudinal meaning) of the words.

- Extensive reading and listening helps to develop the students' vocabulary.

12. Language Structure

In order to comprehend and produce accurate and correct sentences, students need to develop their grammatical competence. Although grammatical knowledge is necessary, it should not "be learned for its own sake" (Stranks, 2003, p. 338). Sometimes grammar exercises fail students because they present highly contrived sentences and ask the learners to internalize them out of context. Coursebooks usually give some isolated sentence-level exercises and the students are expected to learn the grammar points without linking them to their functions in meaningful situations (Nunan, 2001). However, if teachers contextualize grammar points, the students can also learn the social use of the language and develop their sociolinguistic and discourse competence besides their linguistic competence (Hedge, 2002). As Karimkhanlui (2005) argues the university students have already studied grammar at school so that they only need to put their knowledge into use.

Therefore, the students can develop their explicit and implicit grammar knowledge inside and outside the classroom through working on various materials (Schmitt, 2000).

The reason that students need some basic grammar knowledge is the concern about accuracy. In fact, explicit presentation of grammar can facilitate and speed up learning, provide input for noticing patterns, and communicative use as well as stylistic variation of language. To this end, Brown (2000) emphasizes that "formfocused instruction" (p. 280) can boost students' proficiency and help to strengthen their communicative competence. However, Long (2001) stresses "focus on form rather than focus on forms." (p. 183). That is, focus on form is non-interfering and the learners' attentions are drawn to grammatical forms when necessary during the lessons where the emphasis is on use, meaning and communication. But in focus on forms the stress is mainly on language forms to the exclusion of their function in discourse environment. At this juncture, the main issue is that what grammar items should be included in a coursebook and how they should be ordered (Cunningsworth, 1995). As Richards (2007) contends the number of grammatical forms is practically large. The general consensus is that the grammar points can be selected and sequenced from simple to complex. In general, the following guidelines can be taken in teaching of grammar:

- Grammar teaching approach should be based on the students' objectives, needs and different levels of proficiency.

- Grammatical proficiency is gradual and develops with the passage of time.

- Students should be provided with ample examples in order to work out for themselves how form and meaning are related.

- Good grammar rules and exercises should be simple, clear, relevant, learnable, frequent, feasible and true.

- New grammar points should be recycled sufficiently and frequently in the subsequent lessons so that students could internalize their various functions and uses.

- Teachers should engage students in interesting tasks and set up free activities so that students could produce language forms.

- The intended structures can be graded into a logical progression and introduced gradually to the students.

13. Ability Assessment

Assessment is an important tool by which language teachers can obtain information about the students and their learning process. The teachers should continuously monitor their students' progress in order to ensure that they are making adequate educational progress (Mercer, 2001). On the other hand, students expect to be assessed and learn about their learning rate and obtain feedback on their progress (Harmer, 2002). Therefore, teachers need to gather enough and adequate information about the learners and, of course, through different procedures. Additionally, the teachers need to carry out assessment in order to ensure that they are doing their job effectively (Johnson, 2001). In fact, efficient assessment enriches teaching and stimulates the learning process. Quite rightly, Rea-Dickins (2002) makes a distinction between testing and assessment. She believes that assessment is more inclusive than testing. Assessment is continuous and is carried out over an extended period of time. But testing is one of the means within the assessment procedure which only measures the students' attainment of course objectives and materials. Testing is more concerned with the mechanical ways of measuring the structural and grammatical knowledge of the students. It reveals nothing about the functional and practical use of language by the students. However, assessment tries to gather information on all aspects of learning and learners. Testing is only fulfilled through the end-of-semester exams and is carried out via the conventional paper and- pencil means (i.e. written form) (Bachman & Palmer, 2000). Assessment can be done not only by means of tests and exams but also through investigating the students' work: reports and comments (by both students and teachers), self assessment (by students), classroom observation (by teachers) and portfolios (samples of students' written and oral work). Clearly, scores or grades hardly reveal anything about the individual development. Therefore, in addition to tests and exams, other means of monitoring students' progress are necessary to be done. At this juncture, assessment can provide a wide range of methods to implement students' progress.

Obviously, exams and tests exert some control over the students, their learning and classroom activities in one way or another. Sometimes, the exam-oriented nature of some courses places emphasis on the rote learning and merely memorization of materials (Askari Arani, 2005). That is, the students prepare themselves for the end-of-semester exam through memorization rather than trying to understand the meaning and use of the materials. Therefore, the bad impact of the tests on the students is called negative washback effect (Johnson, 2001). For this reason, Farhady (2005) states that we would rather move from testing to assessment procedure in order to encourage more student involvement and learning.

There are a wide range of tests and testing procedures and the teachers should try to opt for the best methods based on the course objectives and students' language proficiency level. For instance, there are two test formats: *discrete-point* and *integrative* testing (Johnson, 2001). Generally, discrete-point testing merely tests one item at a time. In this type of testing language system is considered as a set of separate parts. The emphasis is on language structure and testing takes place in decontextualized and sentence-level situation. One of the examples of discrete-point tests is *multiple-choice item* format. However, multiple-choice items have been questioned because they do not measure the true productive knowledge of the students, are passive in nature and do not assess the normal use of language (Brindley & Ross, 2001). However, integrative testing does not attempt to isolate language elements or skills into separate forms. They require the students to perform several skills simultaneously and use language elements together, for example, cloze, dictation, composition or conversational/oral tests.

Another distinction is made between *formative* and *summative* assessment (Rea-Dickins, 2002). Formative assessment usually has pedagogical purposes. It attempts to record the students' progress, identify the areas they need assistance and find ways of helping them. However, summative testing is concerned with determining the students' achievement of the course objectives and materials and the emphasis is on the final result of learning. All in all, it is believed that both types of assessment should be used simultaneously. Further to this, from time to time

the teachers can use *diagnostic tests* in order to diagnose and identify the students' strengths and weaknesses (Harmer, 2002). In this way, they can recommend more classroom work and promote the learning process. Also, the teachers can give *achievement tests* at the end of the program in order to measure the students' attainment of course materials (Bachman & Palmer, 2000). More importantly, any educational institution should take heed of putting the students into the right classes. To this end, *placement tests* should be used at the beginning of the program in order to place the students in the appropriate level classes (Mahdavi-Zafarghandi, 2005). The placement tests are usually a common type of *proficiency tests* (i.e. general test items) which measure the new students' overall language level. Obviously, if the students are not placed in appropriate and equal proficiency level classes, they can cause problems for themselves, their classmates and teachers. That is, managing and teaching a mixed ability class is very demanding for a language teacher.

Sometimes, the teachers become too much concerned with the language forms and structures and consequently ignore the content of what their students write or say. Therefore, the teachers should consider both the form and content of what their students write and utter (Harmer, 2002). To this end, the teachers can make use of communicative tests in which the focus of attention is on the function of utterances rather than their structure. Therefore, the important issue is the authenticity of the texts and tasks. The learners are given opportunities to formulate their own responses. The texts and tasks which assess the students' ability are communicatively contextualized. For instance, the students may listen to a news item and retell it in their own words, they may write a paragraph or two about their chosen subject, or interact in a conversation with their classmates (Rea-Dickins, 2002). Finally, assessment procedures should be valid, reliable, faire and practicable. Brindley and Ross (2001) state that in order to assess students' ability, the teachers should use a wide range of tests and tasks. Also, they believe that for general English courses, the teachers should give general tests and tasks instead of subject specific questions and texts.

14. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the collaboration of a language teacher and course designer is of prime importance. Certainly, the close cooperation of these two parties can enrich a program to a great extent. In fact, a curriculum designer plans and sets up a course of study and it is the language teacher who implements it. This article reveals that the main responsibility of a course rests on the hands of a language teacher. The language teacher should consider all the curriculum components if he/she wants to produce competent learners.

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