

## **Some models of language curriculum design: Analysis and Comparison**

Pham Huong Lan, Vietnam National University of Agriculture

### **Introduction**

Language curriculum design is a broad area involving principles and procedures for planning, management, and assessment of learning. This is a must activity for every educational institution before starting the implementation of a new language major. There have been numerous studies about language curriculum design in the literature which are derived from multiple perspectives. This article aims to present an overview discussion about a few models of language curriculum design which is part of the process in the preparation for developing teaching materials for English for Husbandry and Animal Science course at Vietnam National University of Agriculture.

### **Definitions of the curriculum**

As denoted by different scholars, there are a number of definitions to a language curriculum. Historically, curriculum refers to the “what should be” of a language program including syllabus outlines, sets of objectives, and various other planning documents. However, Nunan (1988) described the curriculum as a plan for learning, producing and outcome evaluating which was involved teachers’ activities in practice rather than what were expected. A more recent approach made by Thornbury (2010) viewed the matter of curriculum as the whole complex of ideological, social and administrative factors which contribute to the planning of an organization’s teaching programmes. According to this perspective, a curriculum practices at least four different kinds of decisions about (1) the objectives and goals of the programme, (2) the content of the syllabus, (3) the method of instruction, and (4) the evaluation of the programme. It could be found that all these references to the curriculum have not yet mentioned such matters as target learners, physical facilities and teaching and learning materials which all are focused in the current trend of curriculum research.

### **Curriculum versus Syllabus**

The differentiation between these two terms according to researchers is presented in the following table.

Viewpoints	Curriculum	Syllabus
Allen (1984) - Scope	a general concept which involves consideration of philosophical, social and administrative factors which contribute to the planning of an educational programme	a subpart of a curriculum which is concerned with the specification of what units will be taught
Nunan (1988) – program development process	related to planning, implementation, evaluation, management and administration of education programs	focuses more narrowly on the selection and grading of content
Rogers (1976, cited in Johnson, 1989)	all those activities in which children engage under the auspices of the school	prescribe the content to be covered by a given course, form only a small part of the total school programme
Dublin & Olshtein (1986)	a broad description of general goals which is the reflective of national and political trends by indicating an overall	more detailed and operational statement of teaching and learning elements which translates the philosophy of the curriculum into a series of

	educational-cultural philosophy	planned steps leading towards more narrowly objectives at each level
Candlin (1984)	concerned with making general statements about language learning items and suggestions about how these might be used in class	based on accounts and records of what actually happens at the classroom level as teachers and learners apply a given curriculum to their own situation

It can be concluded from those arguments that a syllabus works as one of the components constituting a curriculum.

### **Models of language curriculum design**

Various models of language curriculum development have been suggested by several curriculum design experts. There are ways to categorize these models. This article intends to provide an overview on two groups of curriculum design models based on the names of scholars: Nation & Macalister (2010) and Richards (2013).

#### ***Nation & Macalister's model (2010)***

Curriculum is largely a “how-to-do-it” activity. This model describes the curriculum design process as a circle in which the components connect to each other and have mutual influence in the development process.

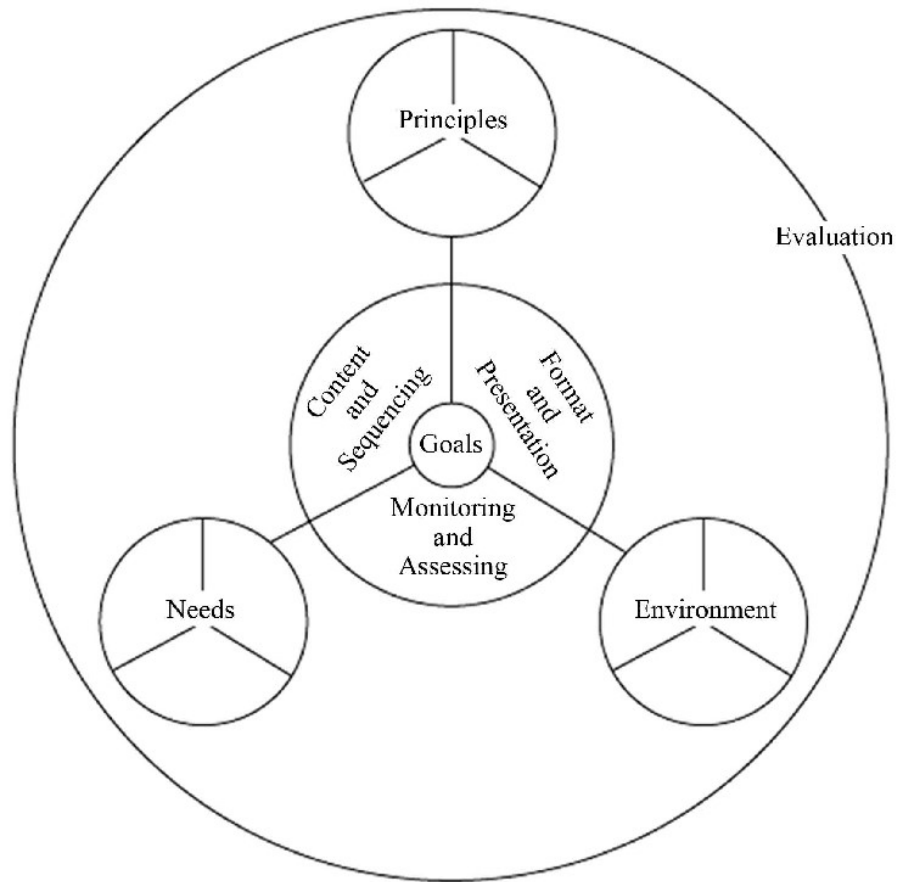


Figure 1. Model of the parts of the curriculum design process (Nation & Macalister, 2010)

As can be seen from Figure 1, the outer circle is the evaluation of the overall process in which the goals are set interrelatedly with the principles, environment and needs. All these are involved into practical and theoretical considerations that will affect guiding the actual process of course production. As further descriptions, there are several factors to consider when developing a course: the learners' current knowledge and lacks, the resources including time, the teachers' skills, the course designers' strengths and limitations and the principles of teaching and learning. Taking these factors into considerations helps to make the course suitable to the situation and learners, and result in an effective and efficient course in terms of encouraging learning. In Nation and Macalister's model of curriculum design process, the mentioned factors are illustrated in three sub-processes, namely environment analysis, needs analysis and the application of principles.

***Richards' model (2013)***

According to Richards (2013), there are three dimensions of a curriculum including the input (the content selected, organized into teachable and learnable units as well as arranged in a rational sequence – Syllabus), the process (teaching methods and the design of classroom activities and materials addressed – Methodology), and the output (what learners are able to do as the result of a period of instruction – Learning outcomes). Correspondingly, there are three approaches to curriculum design: the forward design, the central design and the backward design.

### *The Forward Design*

In the Forward Design, the three items *content*, *process*, and *outcomes* are put in a linear relationship. In other words, the input needs to be resolved before the methodology and the output are dealt with. In this sense, curriculum design is seen to constitute a sequence of stages that occur in a fixed order. This approach is normally adopted when referring to courses of “general English”, Communicative Language Teaching, Content-based teaching/CLIL



Figure 2. The Forward Design

Curriculum design process towards this type can be implemented in the following order:

*Content* → *Syllabus* → *methodology* → *outcomes* → *assessment*

### *The Central Design*

In the Central Design, curriculum development begins with teaching activities, techniques and methods, and then followed by either the elaboration of a detailed language syllabus or specification of learning outcomes. This is considered a progress-based approach.

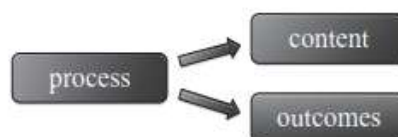


Figure 3. The Central Design

It is shown in research on teachers' practices teachers often adopt the central design approach in their lesson development by initializing their focus on the activities and teaching procedures they will use, and then it comes to the considerations into the input and output. Central design can thus be understood as a 'learner-focused and learning-oriented perspective' (Leung, 2012). In this regard, the model of the Central Design can be represented in another way:

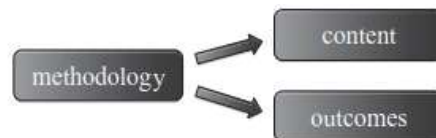


Figure 4. The Central Design – Teacher's implementation

One example of the Central Design approach involves Task-based Language Teaching TBLT (Version 1). According to Richard (2013), the focus in this approach is primarily put is on meaning, and students need to use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to perform the activities. The linguistic and communicative competence are the outcomes of the task work. Other examples can be named as Dogme (teaching is built around conversational interaction between teacher and students and among students themselves), Counseling Learning (the syllabus or language focus is not pre-planned and language and content emerge from the processes of interaction and negotiation that the teacher initiates), Post-method Teaching, The Ecological Classroom.

### *The Backward Design*

This approach starts with a specification of learning outputs which plays the fundamental role in developing instructional processes and input.



Figure 5. The Backward Design

The implementation of the Backward Design contains seven steps:

- Step 1: identifying needs
- Step 2: setting objectives
- Step 3: selecting content
- Step 4: organizing content
- Step 5: adopting learning activities
- Step 6: organizing learning activities
- Step 7: determining what and how to evaluate

Popular examples of those adopting the Backward Design include Competency-based Instruction and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT - Version 2) which starts with an analysis of the students' needs. In this regard, TBLT consists of five sequential stages namely (1) Identify target tasks through needs analysis, (2) Design classroom tasks, (3) Apply TBLT methodology, (4) Identify language and other demands of the tasks, (5) Follow up language work. The use of standards in the Common European Framework of Reference is also another employment of the Backward Design with a system of benchmarks, core skills, performance profiles and target competencies. The Common European Framework for Reference for Languages (CEFR) can be the most widespread example of backward design using standards in current use. The development of stages with the CEFR is illustrated as followed:

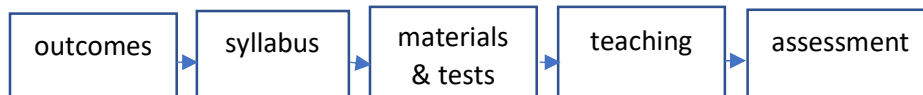


Figure 6. Development Stages with the CEFR

## Conclusion

This article has provided quite a brief discussion about the two groups of language curriculum design by Nation & Macalister's model (2010) and Richards' model (2013). Through analysis and comparison, the differences among the models are clearly inferred.

The latter model is known as an approach which consists of three sub-models namely the Forward Design, the Central Design and the Backward Design. These sub-models can be understood as other terms of the Content model, the Process model, and the Objective model. Whereas, the former model is considered as the mixed-focus curriculum which puts the focus on all the three main factors in a circular interrelationship. It is important for ESP materials developers to do an insightful study into each model so that they can find the most suitable model to their educational case.

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