The coherent curriculum

Michael Thomas explores the elements of a coherent curriculum for EFL teaching.

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What makes a coherent EFL curriculum? How can curriculum planners avoid a mismatch between policy and pragmatics to produce an effective decision-making process? In *The Second Language Curriculum,* Johnson describes the coherent curriculum as one

> in which decision outcomes from the various stages of development are mutually consistent and complementary, and learning outcomes reflect curriculum aims. The achievement of coherence is said to depend crucially in most educational contexts upon the formalisation of decision-making processes and products. This formalisation facilitates consensus among those involved and is a prerequisite for effective evaluation and subsequent renewal. (1994: xiii)

The curriculum is always subject to a process of becoming coherent but never reaching its final point of realisation, as Johnson comments, due to the 'cyclical process of development, revision, maintenance and renewal which needs to continue throughout the life of the curriculum'. Nevertheless, in order to achieve increased levels of coherence, so as to avoid mismatch between 'needs' and what can be 'pragmatically realised', an *integrated* approach to the process of curriculum design must be adopted. 'The aim of the decision-making process as a whole', Johnson argues

> is to achieve coherent curriculum development, maintenance and renewal, *where a coherent curriculum is defined as one in which policy has been reconciled with pragmatic constraints, the products of each of the four stages of development are mutually consistent and complementary, and learner achievements correspond to the aims of the curriculum*. (op. cit.: 23) [my italics]

The four key stages of development are:
- curriculum planning,
- ends / means specification,
- programme implementation, and
- classroom implementation.

Curriculum planning refers to the role of policy makers in producing actual policy documents. Policy makers determine the overall aims of the curriculum and are influenced in varying degrees by special interest groups who are able to bring pressure to bear on the process.

The *specification* stage is the process by which policy, and the means by which it is to be implemented, are operationally defined. This stage outlines the detailed syllabus documents that can be put into practice by different instructors in different contexts. The specification of ends and means is an important aspect of the model in that it demonstrates the ends specification matches the policy, and that the means and ends are compatible. The *ends specification* determines the target proficiency, while the *means specifications* determine the methods by which the target proficiency will be achieved.

The selection of appropriate teaching and learning resources are the focus of the *programme implementation* stage. Agreement between the chosen methodology and the objectives of the syllabus is the main priority here.

The final stage, *classroom implementation,* is the stage where 'teachers, learners and programme resources combine and interact to create learning opportunities (op. cit.: 10). Coherence is here concentrated on avoiding a mismatch between the proficiency of the learners and the language level assumed by the EFL materials writer.

Teaching acts describe the teacher's role in interpreting the curriculum in actual teaching situations. Incoherence may result from a mismatch between the pedagogical habits of the teacher and the methodological assumptions of the curriculum's objectives. Similarly, *Learning acts* deal with overt and often covert assumptions that learners bring to the pedagogical environment. Nunan's concept of the hidden agenda (1988: 179) identifies how the students' orientation to learning objectives can affect his/her interaction with the objectives of the curriculum.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES	DECISION-MAKING ROLES	PRODUCTS
1 curriculum planning	policy makers	policy document
2 specification: ends	needs analysts	syllabus
means	methodologists	
3 programme implementation	materials writers	teaching materials
	teacher trainers	teacher training
4 classroom implementation	teachers	teaching acts
	learners	learning acts

Table 1: Stages, decision-making roles and products in curriculum development

PARTICIPANTS	STAGES IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT						
		syllabus		programme		classroom	
	policy	ends	means	materials resources	teacher training	teaching acts	learning acts
policy makers	■						
needs analysis		■					
methodologies			■				
materials writers				■			
teacher trainers					■		
teachers						■	
learners							■

Table 2: Stages in curriculum development

Consequently, the curriculum can only specify *what* the students should learn. It cannot effectively determine that the specified areas *are* learned.

Table 2 shows how the primary participants influence the development of a coherent curriculum. Each set of decisions is determined by the ideal or what Johnson calls the 'designated' specialists (op. cit.: 19). In the final classroom stage, the central place of teachers and learners can reinforce Johnson's notion of a continuing and cyclical process of development which needs to continue throughout the curriculum's life-cycle. Consequently, each specialist has a responsibility for making decisions.

Naturally Johnson's insistence on a coherent curriculum must be contextualised by a series of evident constraints, to do with policy and pragmatic issues. *Policy constraints* relate primarily to those decisions taken at all levels of the curriculum, while *pragmatic constraints* can be subdivided into two sources of pressure: those from *within* the curriculum (such as from the teachers, learners, and education managers participating in the curriculum), and those acting from *outside* the curriculum, constraints which cannot by and large by controlled by participants. Time and financial pressures are two of the most obvious examples.

Johnson's concept of the coherent curriculum has merit for EFL teaching contexts in that it emphasises the need for 1) constant revision, and 2) involvement and collaboration at each stage by appropriate specialists in a collegial management and pedagogical environment.

References

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Improving on the mind map: domain networking

Kent Hill questions the usefulness of mind maps.

My issue is twofold: the first is with graphic organizers such as mind maps; the second is with current process-writing methods. The well-intentioned thinking behind mind maps is that they involve starting with simple, main ideas and getting *deeper in*. But because the beginning of a mind map is a word with a circle around it, which then has lines branching out from it, I suggest that this process does not get deeper in but gets more disperse—and loses focus.

Additionally, mind maps are text-based. In actuality, however, language and the mind (where the writing process occurs) are more complex than just text. There is an important cognitive and conceptual basis to both as well. It is more likely that thought begins within broad cognitive domains and takes its own perspective from within them. Therefore, though text-based methods help students to accomplish the writing process, teachers could be doing

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