From curriculum to classroom: designing and delivering courses in workplace communication

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Cet article s'interroge sur l'intérêt d'adopter une approche systématique dans le développement de programmes d'études. Même si ce processus est de nature pratique, il fait aussi appel à la recherche sur le développement de programmes d'études, à l'enseignement et à l'apprentissage des langues ainsi qu'à la communication professionnelle. Le modèle que nous avons utilisé montre l'importance d'une analyse des besoins. Il implique initialement une analyse de la situation ou du contexte dans lequel l'enseignement aura lieu. Puis il la met en relation avec des questions à la fois locales et globales qui pourraient avoir un impact sur les besoins des apprenant-e-s, comme par exemple la diversité croissante sur le lieu de travail et le besoin qui en résulte de connaissance de soi et d'aptitude à s'adapter à d'autres cultures. Pour illustrer ce processus, on donnera des exemples concrets empruntés à deux cours de Workplace Communication donnés au Centre de langues de l'Université de Zürich et de l'EPFZ. Un cours s'adressait à des étudiant-e-s avec un bon niveau d'anglais mais pas d'expérience professionnelle. Le second regroupait du personnel spécialisé avec un anglais un peu rouillé mais qui éprouvait un besoin urgent de communiquer avec des étudiant-e-s ou des membres du personnel venant de contextes linguistico-culturels différents.

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Introduction

Drawing on examples from two courses in Workplace Communication that were run in 2012 at the Language Center of the University of Zurich and ETH Zurich, this article considers the practical benefits of taking a research-informed approach to course development. Workplace Communication is sometimes equated with Business English, however, these courses were for specialist staff in the ETHZ Safety, Security, Health and the Environment Unit (SSHE), and University and ETH students studying a range of subjects, but not necessarily business or economics. As neither a standard business curriculum nor published Business English teaching materials were appropriate to meet their needs, the courses were developed from scratch, based on a systematic and principled, research-informed approach to course development. The process, which has relevance to the development of any course, involved drawing on published research on curriculum development and on research carried out on the use of languages in companies and other organisations.

Adopting a research-informed approach does not mean that the teacher has to be a researcher, but s/he can draw on relevant research as and when necessary, thus gaining valuable and grounded insights into course design in terms of individual language learning and teaching, for example with regard to the importance of frequency in choosing lexis and of regularly recycling items taught. On another level, the employers' perspective increasingly emphasises the need to work in teams, which implies having not only an adequate range and mastery of language, but also adaptability and sensitivity towards others based on an awareness of self and "different others" in a world of increasing diversity. The research is wide ranging, yet reference to just a few key publications can be helpful. In their short and straightforward book on the subject, Nation & Macalister (2010: 11) note that: "Curriculum design is in essence a practical activity". As such, it is both relevant and accessible to hands-on teachers and although situations and needs differ from one context to another, the principles and process can be applied to the development of any course.

Thus, to illustrate the generic process of curriculum design, I refer to a model for course development I derived from Richards (2001) and the work of a colleague at the University of Zurich Teaching and Learning Center, Balthasar Eugester. It is also worth considering terminology as the terms "curriculum" and "syllabus" are used differently in different contexts. In this article, "syllabus" refers to the content of a given course (Richards, 2001) and "Curriculum development" to "planning and implementation, from needs analysis, situation analysis, setting of aims and outcomes, course design, delivery and assessment." (*Ibid.*, 2001: 41).

A principled Approach to Curriculum Development

Adapted from Richards, J. (2001). *Curriculum Development in Language* and developed based on work with Bathazar Eugester, University of Zurich Hochschuldidaktik.

Situation or Context

Firstly, "Situation" or "Context" is often considered with regard to a specific workplace or group of learners. This is also the case here. However, given the considerable change in terms of globalization and resulting international mobility and diversity in the workplace, it is important to look beyond the immediate context and consider resulting implications concerning language use on a wider range of levels. In the case of the courses referred to here, relevant points include the use of English as a lingua franca in a multilingual context and immediate needs to use English effectively with colleagues from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, for example from Asia. At an institutional level, quality initiatives both within the University and the Language Center encourage the development of courses based on empirical research.

Courses and Participant Profiles

The two courses comprised firstly, a tailor-made course, designed at the request of the Director of the ETHZ SSHE Unit. It was one of a number of courses provided for the Unit and included eighteen 1.5 hour sessions held in the organisation's offices over a period of 18 months. Five members of staff followed the course and all were Swiss German. Apart from one person who spoke French and used it regularly in her work, the others used only English and German for their work. Each participant was a specialist in one of the unit's fields of activity. Their work covered a range of activities including training provided on the use of dangerous chemicals, setting up security procedures, e.g. for the evacuation of buildings, developing and monitoring environmental policy and, in one case, working shifts as a security guard and dealing with incidents at the Alarm Center. All five participants in the class had a reasonably high level of English (B2.2-C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference - CEFR). They could all be described as "middle aged", although covering a broad range of years!

The second course was a course entitled "Advanced Workplace Communication" and was on the standard English programme for Bachelor and Master students at the Language Center. The course comprised fourteen weekly sessions over one semester. All of the students were C1 or C2 on the CEFR and most in their twenties. Their mother tongues or first languages included: German (both from Switzerland and Germany), Romansch, Lithuanian and Russian. Two were bilingual, German and Spanish, and German and Danish. Some, but not all, had work experience in a range of contexts, but only one had a professional background as a lawyer, before starting studying again. Of the 10 students analysed here, in the initial needs analyisis two mentioned one other language alongside English, but the majority gave three or four languages in addition to their mother tongues. The additional languages included French, Italian, Spanish and Russian. The students were mainly studying at Master's level, although two were Bachelor students and their subjects included, Architecture, Business Administration, Chemistry and Business Administration, Economics, Law, Mathematics, Medicine and Political Science. This mix in itself provided many opportunities for interdisciplinary communication, in addition to considering cultural differences reflected in their backgrounds.

Needs Analysis and Aims

Nation & Macalister (2010) point out that needs analysis should consider what course participants already know and what they need to know to fulfill specific learning outcomes defined as a result of the analysis. A principled approach to course design should ensure that elements to be covered in the course are relevant and useful for the learners, thus also ensuring that return on time invested is profitable.

Given the very different target groups in the courses included here, the approach to needs analysis was considerably different. The students assessed their own language level, using the CEFR or previous official examination results, e.g. Cambridge Proficiency, and enrolled on a voluntary basis, having read the detailed on-line description of the course. Needs analysis for the

student course was guided, firstly, by the teacher's own research into workplace communication in companies, and teaching experience, and secondly, by published research on employers' needs (e.g. Crossing & Ward, 2002). After the first lesson, the students were also given an opportunity to write about their linguistic and cultural backgrounds and give reasons for following the course. One example of reasons included the following:

> "My goal is not to speak perfectly English but the ability to understand people and be understood by people. This course is a wonderful opportunity to make a further step in that direction and also become more aware of the challenges related to non-English speakers and multilingual workplace settings. Talking to Russian and Chinese students I've realised that I have less communication problems than native speakers who are not used to interact with non-native speakers."

The first step in the needs analysis for the ETHZ SSHE Unit involved interviewing the Director of the ETH Unit who gave an overview of the Unit's needs and her expectations. The staff then took a commercial on-line placement test and filled in a questionnaire. A draft syllabus consisting of an outline of areas to cover was drawn up and fine-tuned after discussion with the participants at the first lesson.

Whilst the students had little or no experience in the so-called "real world" and needed to focus on appropriate and effective communication in English, the ETH staff, as experienced communicators, used to dealing with difficult situations in an increasingly multicultural environment, had considerable sensitivity to "different others", but needed to "brush up" and build on latent knowledge, expanding their range of language, notably to gain automaticity and confidence in using English.

Based on the needs analyses, the following objectives were set:

Student Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will:

- be able to write straightforward e-mails and effective, well structured reports
- be able to plan and deliver a presentation in English
- have gained confidence in using English in communicating with people of different backgrounds and levels of hierarchy
- have expanded their vocabulary in relation to work and improved their grammatical range and accuracy
- have increased awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in terms of linguistic competence and communication skills, and be able to set further learning goals.

Staff Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, participants will:

- have developed fluency, confidence and more effective communication skills in spoken English
- increased their accuracy and awareness of appropriacy in writing e-mails
- be aware of their strengths and weaknesses in English and be capable of setting and achieving further learning aims.

The next step in the process was then Syllabus Design and Course Planning.

Syllabus Design, Course Planning and Delivery

Initially, a simple list of essential items was drawn up to comprise the syllabus. These were then ordered and developed into teaching units. Assessment can also be considered at this stage as it will relate to the teaching approach and course content. There are many different syllabus types, which may focus more or less on aspects of language such as grammar or lexis, or be based on functions or themes, or particular genres such as academic papers or business reports. Some syllabi also have tasks incorporated in them, although it is rare to find an entirely task-based syllabus. In fact, many syllabi are eclectic in that they draw on a number of threads to best meet the learners' needs.

In the case of the courses considered here, the student course was largely task-based with the whole course being organized around a project, which is described below. Nevertheless, there was a grammar thread (mainly dealt with as self-study outside the classroom), focusing on grammar points that tend to cause advanced learners problems, e.g. present perfect and simple past. Themes such as Teamwork, English as a lingua franca, and Corporate Culture were also on the syllabus list and practical activities such as conducting and participating in meetings and making telephone calls were included.

Gustave Caillebotte, *Les peintres en bâtiment*, 1877.

Curriculum development, syllabus and course design is an area where practice can and should meet theory, without teaching staff feeling burdened by distant theorists, but where all can benefit.

The staff course was more traditional in that there was a clear grammar thread that ran thoughout the course and grammar work was undertaken in class and regularly recycled. This was mainly as accuracy in written work was necessary, for example for texts appearing on the website. Vocabulary was also an important element in the course, particularly in developing automaticity. Work on presentations and practising participants' own training sessions in class related to real productive needs, whilst also allowing the integration and practice of both grammar and lexis. The teacher provided texts relating to the participants' fields of work, for example action in case of bomb threats or accidents in labs. These texts proved motivating and were used for discussions, jigsaw reading and summarizing activities. Wherever possible, authentic tasks were integrated into the course, e.g. writing and editing circular e-mails regarding safety training or health issues, and improving the website.

In working on syllabi, it is important to avoid "cluttering", i.e. being overambitious on what can be covered in the time available. Nation and Macalister (2010: 7) state that: "… it is important for the curriculum designer to keep some check on vocabulary, grammar and discourse to make sure that important items are being covered and repeated. Frequency is clearly important for lexis, as are lists of grammatical structures representing research findings on learning order. Richards (2001: 151) refers to "spiral sequencing", noting that "This approach involves recycling of items to ensure that learners have repeated opportunities to learn them."

Two examples of differences in approach and activities in the two courses that resulted from different needs and participant profiles are outlined below. Firstly, a key thread running through the student course was the development of socio-pragmatic and intercultural competence, including focus on self-awareness and the need to adapt to others. Socio-pragmatic competence can be related to Crystal's (1997) definition of pragmatics:

> "… the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication."

In the workplace, there are constraints, which students may be unaware of, for example with regard to hierarchy, and cultural differences relating to social norms or the different ways politeness is enacted. Seeing how such theoretical topics translated into practice was a particularly valuable aspect of the course.

The Student Project

It is notoriously difficult to enact truly authentic communication in a classroom, so the project was organized to give students access to professionals in a range of external contexts. These people were chosen and contacted by the teacher before the beginning of the course, and agreed to be interviewed by pairs of students. They included a medical doctor, a professor of economics, high-level administrative or technical staff, and executives from international companies. A journalist from ETHZ also made a presentation on interviewing people and presenting findings effectively. All external correspondence was reviewed by the teacher and different styles and approaches reviewed. The students were given complete freedom to conduct the interview, although the main focus was on the interviewees' career paths and what the students could learn from them. Practical questions arose such as how to address the professor or whether to use first names with managers in international companies. Dealing with very busy high flyers meant that the stakes were high and this created a need to communicate appropriately and effectively, both in writing and orally.

Individual Learning Plans for the Staff

An important feature of the staff course was the development of individual self-study plans to help the participants to integrate English into their very busy daily lives and focus on the learning process in a systematic way. Having identified needs on an individual level and discussed the concept of individual learning plans and the learning process, the participants drew up their own plans based on the following underlying principles. The individual learning plans should be:

- **systematic:** to allow regular extensive exposure to the language and regular opportunities to use the language and reflect on the learning process
- **individualized:** to allow for differences in linguistic levels, backgrounds, and learning styles and preferences
- **flexible:**
  - to allow for periods when there is no time to open a book, but activities such as listening and work-related reading can be continued
  - to allow for study in different places, e.g. listening in the car on the way to work or on public transport

- **progress oriented:** to create awareness of ways of measuring and reviewing progress, e.g. reading a difficult article or listening to a podcast once, and then again after a period of time to be able to gauge a difference in comprehension.

The plans themselves included a range of very different approaches from formal timetables with time set aside at different periods for "study" during the week, for example to read a work-related article and spend some time actively noticing and noting relevant and useful vocabulary, or working on grammar points in need of revision, to listening to audio books in the car during a 45-minute commute. Reading ranged from Harry Potter to specialist journals on security and the environment. University websites of similar organizations in both English and non-English speaking countries proved relevant and motivating.
The learning plans tended to be over-ambitious at the outset, but after revision became an integral part of the participants' lives. English almost became a hobby for two of the class members, who spent time in their holidays working on it. The plans were reviewed at the beginning of each lesson for a while and then just from time to time. They played an important role in the gradual, but considerable, progress that was achieved during the 18 months of lessons.

Assessment and Evaluation

In the staff course, there was no formal assessment, although regular mini-tests and exercises were given in class. Feedback on the course was positive, notably concerning the development of confidence and autonomy in using English for work. For the students, the oral assessment was a presentation of what they had learnt from their interviews. The written examination was in the form of a report. For a 'mock' test the students wrote a report to the teacher on the project. This required diplomacy in putting forward suggestions for improvement, whilst also emphasizing the strengths of the course. It gave valuable insights to the teacher, for example, many students initially failed to see the value of the project, and suggestions included clearer instructions, an overview of the process at the outset, and examples of outcomes. Still, all students felt they had learnt a lot from the projects, e.g. the value of writing and analyzing authentic e-mails and thus developing their own individual styles and sensitivity towards the reader. The final written test was a proposal nominating two lecturers or professors for an award for excellence in teaching. This was a topic they could all relate to and realistic in their context.

Conclusions and further applications

Finally, the process outlined here underlines the importance of identifying learners' real needs, both in terms of language development and in relation to how they need or will need to use the language in authentic workplace contexts. In current times of change, curriculum development or renewal is an on-going process. Indeed, at the time of writing, the results of a major needs analysis at the University of Zurich and ETHZ Language Center are currently being analysed. This wide-ranging study included working with the HR Departments of both institutions regarding the needs of administrative and technical staff for workplace communication.
In conclusion, curriculum development, syllabus and course design is an area where practice can and should meet theory, without teaching staff feeling burdened by distant theorists, yet where all can benefit.

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Eugène Atget, *Chiffonier*, 1899.