

Planning Second Language Curricula: Needs Analysis and Behavioural Objectives

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Abstract

On the underlying assumption that the student should be at the centre of the learning process, this paper attempts an overview of different types of needs that students may have when learning a foreign language. It also touches briefly on the setting of behavioural objectives, and the importance of language awareness and learner's autonomy in the learning process.

Introduction

In this brief paper I will attempt a cursory glance at fundamental issues in planning curricula, i.e. analysis of needs and setting of behavioural objectives. The paper is rather general in its approach to the topic and the information and comments included in it can be applied to learning situations in different parts of the world. However, there are a few references to the role of the foreign language teacher in Italian schools and to the Italian national curricula. There are essentially two reasons for this: I know the Italian situation better than other situations, and it seems to me that it offers a good model, in line with research findings.

Analysis of Needs

It is unfortunately a very frequent occurrence in language teaching that syllabus, methods, materials and testing are not well integrated with one another. And yet in order to provide students with means for effective learning it is necessary for them to be. Effective teaching – and even effective testing – cannot take place if the objectives to achieve are not clearly identified. Methods and materials also should be determined in relation to them. When planning curricula therefore, it is necessary to define such objectives very clearly.

In order to define objectives, it is necessary to analyse learners' needs. In fact there is virtually no disagreement nowadays about the fact that the learner must be at the centre of the learning experience. According to Richterich and Chancerel:

Everything starts from him and everything goes back to him. It is not merely in relation to him, but with him, and depending on his resources [...] that his learning objectives will be defined, that the methods of judging when and how they have been attained will be selected, and that a curriculum of learning [...] will be made available to him. If there is

one desirable feature insisted on from the outset, it is that the system should be centred on the learner (1980, pp. 4-5).

Assessing needs is difficult for various reasons. To start with, needs may be of very different nature, and indeed they have been classified in different ways:

- *felt* needs vs *perceived* needs, where “Felt needs are those which learners have” and “perceived’ needs represent [...] judgements of certified experts about the educational gaps in other people’s experience” (Berwick 1989, pp. 55-56);

- *subjective* needs vs *objective* needs, where the term *subjective* “refers to the cognitive and affective needs of the learner in the learning situation” and the term *objective* refers to needs related to learners’ language use in real-life situations and to “their current language proficiency and language difficulties” (Brindley 1989, p. 70);

- ‘*bisogni utilitaristi*’ vs ‘*bisogni formativi*’ (*utilitarian* vs *formative* needs): examples given include the need to learn expressions useful in order to be able to take a train, and the need of learning how to learn respectively (Balboni 1994, p. 77);

- *present* vs *future* needs, which may be intended in different ways, i.e. (1) in relation to one’s perception of one’s needs, which is different at different stages, and (2) in relation to present specific learning needs vs future communicative needs:

- *present* vs *future* needs (1): according to Richterich the perception which an individual has of his needs “necessarily changes, since it depends [...] above all, on his relations, in a given place and at a given time, with his environment”; such a perception is also “constantly transformed” when and if a need is or is not satisfied (1983, p. 4);

- *present* vs *future* needs (2): present needs may be intended as one’s needs as a student, such as the need to work on texts at an appropriate level, the need not to get bored, the need to have one’s pace respected, etc., while future needs may be intended as what the learner will need to use the language for in future communicative situations (Balboni 1994, p. 77).

It seems clear from the points mentioned above that, in order to define needs, information of different kinds must be collected. However, not all the necessary information can easily be obtained. According to Richterich

Experience shows that in general the learner is little aware of his needs and, in particular, that he is unable to express them except in very vague terms. What is more, he *cannot* know them, especially if they are interpreted as the reflection of the language skills and content which he will use in the future when he has learnt the language. (1983, p. 3)

Even though it may not be very specific, it is important to collect whatever information learners may give in relation to themselves as individuals and as language learners, both because such information may form a basis on which to build up, and because attempting to define one’s needs may contribute to the creation of language awareness.

Another main problem that the curriculum planner has to face, especially if he intends to take into account the more subjective types of needs, is that individual needs vary so much that it would hardly be possible, with any group of learners, to define objectives in relation to the needs of each single learner. On the other hand, consideration of learners' personality is likely to improve learning. Brief reference to some research in this area is made in the next paragraph.

In an overview of research projects investigating a possible correlation between personality related factors and language performance, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, pp. 184-192) refer to the findings of a study conducted by Heyde (1979, cited *ibidem*, p. 184) according to which performance appeared to be significantly correlated to self-esteem, at three different levels: overall self-assessment, self-assessment in relation to certain personal characteristics (e.g. intelligence) and self-assessment in relation to specific tasks. The fact that the scores for task self-esteem varied from one class to another seemed to imply a teacher effect on self-esteem. As regards other features of personality, research has yielded inconclusive results: it appears that factors such as extroversion, anxiety, risk-taking, lower level of inhibition, may either improve or impede performance (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, pp. 184-192).

The implications of the above findings seem to be that a teacher who wishes to assist students' performance effectively, should consider ways of encouraging or discouraging certain tendencies, especially when handling contingencies, i.e. in relation to what Gallimore and Tharp call *contingency management* (cf. Gallimore and Tharp 1990).

Along with a profile of learners and their personalities, it is of course necessary to have information on their level of language proficiency. A possible way of assessing it is by means of an entry test. However, even the assessment of language level poses problems right from the beginning, and a major issue seems to be *what* to test, rather than *how* to test it. Discussing entry tests for Italian, Balboni states that

if indeed it is true that language competence is based on both 'universal' linguistic competence, i.e. processes shared by all languages, and specific competence in the Italian language, then a test will have to have a double object: *a. mastering of some profound-level processes underlying communicative competence [...]* *b. specific mastering of notions, functions, abilities and metacompetencies in Italian.* (Translated from Balboni 1994, p. 96)

A possible model for assessment of communicative competence in a foreign language is offered by Bachman (1990, pp.84-98), who classifies language competencies into two types: 'organizational competence' and 'pragmatic competence'. Each type in turn includes subcategories – 'grammatical' and 'textual' competence, and 'illocutionary' and 'sociolinguistic' competence respectively – which are made up of yet more specific components (for instance vocabulary, morphology, syntax and graphology or phonology are all elements of grammatical competence).

Bachman also lists strategic competence among the elements that contribute to effective communication:

I view strategic competence as an important part of all communicative language use, not just that in which language abilities are deficient and must be compensated for by other means. (Ibid., p. 100).

Setting of objectives

Once factual and subjective information has been acquired and the difficult task of analysing needs has taken place – or more precisely, once it has started – it would seem that setting objectives might come as a natural consequence. Unfortunately, matters are not so simple: apart from the difficulty of assessing needs, teaching is conditioned by many restraints, which cannot be ignored. However, it is possible to set broad goals *before* the course begins and adjust more specific objectives to contingent situations *while* the course is taking place. In view of the fact that needs themselves tend to change during the process of learning, flexibility is in fact necessary.

Objectives, like needs, may also be of different types: to a large extent they may in fact be viewed as counterparts of needs. Brindley classifies teachers' views of students' needs from three angles: the 'language-proficiency' angle, the 'psychological-humanistic' angle' and the 'specific purposes' angle. In each case needs are perceived as a gap between a current and a desired state (1989, p.66). Consequently objectives may be defined in terms of achievement of the desired proficiency level, psychological state or 'instrument' respectively.

It has become increasingly more common to include in curricula *behavioural* objectives, i.e. objectives defined in relation to various situations and relevant and suitable linguistic behaviour for each of them. Indeed, nowadays it does not seem to be at all exceptional for curricula to specify the communicative functions to be mastered. The Italian national curricula for foreign language teaching, for example, certainly do. They also envisage observations on the structural functioning of the foreign language, also in reference to the mother tongue, as part of the learning process. This is of course meant to foster language awareness, to be pursued for both foreign and native language.

A couple of paragraphs above I was referring to environmental constraints which exist and cannot be ignored. I believe however that within the constraints there is quite often some margin of freedom. A possible way to tackle the problem might be the implementation of specific *ad hoc* syllabi, designed within the framework of more general national curricula. Such an approach has been followed for many years in Italian schools, where teachers have to prepare their own syllabi for their classes, which of course cannot go against the national curricula, but can take into account more specific information about the classes themselves. Together with more general formative goals, not specifically linked to any one school subject, and to be set in collaboration with his colleagues, the foreign language teacher is expected to set his own objectives, usually categorised

in reference to time and in reference to type. *Long-term* and *short-term* objectives will both include communicative functions and the linguistic items necessary to achieve them, the behavioural objectives being selected first and the linguistic elements in reference to them, as it should be with communicative models (cf. Nunan 1993, pp. 55-58). Different degrees of proficiency, from mere comprehensibility to native speaker level (in line with the national curricula), may also be defined. I believe that on the whole the foreign language teacher in Italy enjoys a certain degree of freedom, which in most cases allows him to choose the methods and materials that he thinks most suitable, and to a certain extent even to create a 'personalised' curriculum for each class. The praxis established in Italy seems to be flexible enough to be adjusted to widely different learning situations and to be profitably adopted by curriculum planners and/or foreign language teachers operating in different realities, within or without Italy.

Conclusion

Defining needs is an extremely complex task because so many different types of needs bear on the learning process, because they tend to change and must be continuously assessed, because learners themselves are often not aware of their own needs, and because even if needs could be determined constantly and precisely, it would still be impossible to set objectives that took into account all of them for each learner in a class. Therefore, it seems to be essential that some compromise is found, when priorities are determined.

It seems essential that a balance is struck between *instrumental* and *formative* needs: satisfaction of the former takes care of future communicative needs, but satisfaction of the latter may have wider reaching effects in the learner's life. Examples of possible objectives related to formative needs are *language awareness*, i.e. awareness of how a language works, and *autonomous learning*, also known as *learning to learn*, i.e. learning how to learn on one's own, rather than making one's learning entirely dependent on a teacher. Both objectives may indeed be regarded as goals and instruments at the same time. They may in fact have a twofold effect, as they can greatly contribute to the attainment of behavioural objectives, in that they boost foreign language learning, and they may also have a bearing that extends well beyond the linguistic level or the school premises, if the strategies and abilities that have been acquired in the process are transferred to other subjects and other life situations. For these reasons I believe that language awareness and autonomous learning should both be part of any curriculum concerned not only with linguistic *products* (the 'visible' results of the language competence acquired) but also with learning *processes* (the processes through which such competence is acquired): although the former may well be the ultimate aim of second language curricula, they will certainly benefit greatly from attention to the latter.

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