


GETTING IN TOUCH WITH REALITY: AN ENGLISH CURRICULUM TO BOOST STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND INTEREST IN GLOBAL ISSUES



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INTRODUCTION

English teachers very often face experiences that cause high levels of frustration and anxiety that are the result of poorly planned curricula, limited and rigorous methodology, and lack of student involvement. However, this frustration and anxiety could be used as a platform to generate new ideas for the improvement of any English program. Our experience with students from various schools in the Universidad Externado de Colombia can be singled out as appropriate examples to illustrate how apparent negative input can be used to obtain positive outcomes.

The original program established by the School of Education was oriented towards the use of language for general purposes. Although the program provided the means to improve the communicative competence of students, there was an urgent need to make the program fit the specific needs of the students in terms of topics that were connected to their studies. We observed that the absence of articulation between the English program and the academic programs offered by the schools we worked with resulted into student poor motivation when learning English, and lack of awareness of its importance to their future careers. This lack of articulation and subsequent demotivation of students was of great concern.

Consequently, we decided to carry out a detailed analysis of curriculum components.

The first step in the process of developing or modifying a curriculum is to conduct a conspicuous analysis of needs. It is essential to determine the needs for which a group of learners requires a language and ranking and organizing those needs according to priorities (Jordan, 1997). Before designing a syllabus, developing instructional procedures, selecting material, and conducting evaluations it is indispensable to determine what it is that the learners want to achieve with the language.

In order to conduct our need analysis, we carried out a series of questionnaires and interviews with students and faculty members. The information we gathered served as the basis of our search for a strategy that could reorient the English program. The results of the data analysis indicated that the academic community wanted to merge the use English for general and specific purposes. Within this framework we decided to include strategies that foster independent learners, capable of using high levels of cognition.

Based on these findings we designed a syllabus that included English for both General and Specific Purposes. We strengthened the knowledge that students brought with them about their professional fields through

carefully selected topics and readings. Such an approach also confronts to Van Lier (1996) findings that individuals are capable of establishing fundamental relationships between what students learn and what they already know. We built meaning by integrating and assimilating new learning materials into the schemes that students already possess about the world that surrounds them.

Apart from making connections between students' schemata and the new knowledge about language, the objective of the selected readings and topics was to provide teachers and students with a useful tool with which to improve the reading comprehension of texts on social, economic, political, and environmental issues. In particular, the selection included a set of economic and business readings aimed at facilitating and motivating reading through a wide variety of enjoyable exercises. These in turn allowed students to become familiar with specific terminology and provided practice in grammatical structures. The reading comprehension exercises were designed so that they could be done in class because it was strongly believed that the interaction between teachers and students was important not only to clarify content and basic concepts, but also to guarantee the successful application of reading strategies (Núñez, 2000).

The selected readings and their corresponding exercises attempted to link the student's previous knowledge in particular areas to wider knowledge about these areas through the use of English. Using student's background knowledge and getting them involved in the interpretation and analysis of current issues has had positive consequences. Students' anxiety levels have been reduced because they feel more confident when arguing and expressing their opinions. They have also felt as if they were not working in a vacuum and that the English language has a purpose and is meaningful.

Our experience was similar to that of several institutions of higher education. For many years, English programs in Colombian universities have focused on developing what used to be traditionally known as language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Due to the growing need to become active participants in global communities, many programs have recently shifted to teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Their main goal has been the fulfillment of specific student needs related to their academic and professional areas. However, ESP programs have narrowed their focus down to such an extent that they have become rather mechanistic, emphasizing mainly the use of specialized terminology. Relevant aspects such as the use of critical thinking, the sense of independence in learning, and the use of the argumentative competence have been neglected. In order to integrate these aspects, to give the individual endless possibilities to improve, it is essential to involve students in current issues that can be easily blended into both general and specific English curricula.

Through this paper we have tried to highlight a quite innovative approach to fostering independent thought amongst learners. It integrates social, economic, environmental, and political issues in the English curriculum that will be presented along with a strategic plan to fuse critical thinking and the

use of the argumentative competence.

Fostering independent learning

A lot has been said about autonomy and independence. However, let us focus on its meaning and language application. Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's learning (Benson and Voller, 1997). Yet these notions have been interpreted in widely different ways. Narrowly they are seen as promoting individual study or self-directed study for specific purposes indicating the loose of institutional constraints so as to endow previously under-developed capacities or even the right of students to determine the path their learning takes.

We would like to emphasize that the concepts of autonomy and independence are rather problematic because they hold meanings from different areas and from applications in particular educational contexts. As a result, their interpretation has been characterized by ambiguities that are nested in issues such as an individual's degree of responsibility and freedom, and his/her constraints, and in the study of the individual as a person considering his/her involvement in a social environment (Benson and Voller, 1997)

It is not the aim of this paper to discuss the different meanings of autonomy. Basically, we have focused on answering the question "*what kind of autonomy do we want our students to develop considering their needs and our context?*" The answer has been to stress individuality in learning styles, and self-access to language learning. Hence, we want our students to learn language, learn through language and learn about the language as proposed by Halliday (as cited by Clavijo, 2001). In other words, we emphasize the process of learning to learn. Our ultimate goal is to enable them to make their own decisions in response to diverse needs and circumstances due to the effects of globalization. Although the mere existence of self-

access facilities does not ensure independent learning, well-organized self-access materials empower and encourage self-directed learning. Thus, we have channeled our efforts towards both designing appropriate materials, and carrying out activities that help the learner discover his/her personal learning preferences.

Integrating current issues in the English curriculum

Some English programs are built around texts, which usually do not fulfill the needs of the target population. Besides limiting the English language learning scope, these programs make teachers text dependent and do not allow for participation in curriculum making. One of our objectives has been to involve teachers in the process of designing an appropriate program for each school. In order for participation to take place, we decided to abandon the use of traditional texts, construct our own curriculum based on the particular needs of the students and work on creating our own texts and supporting material. Obviously, it has been a challenging and demanding task. Although we expected teachers to be enthusiastic, we realized that they felt threatened and really concerned about how to proceed. Generally, our teaching education system does not encourage educators to work innovatively, so they felt confused and reluctant to participate in the project.

We decided to ease anxiety by working collectively in small groups. A model for designing materials was provided. It included how to write objectives, work on instructional procedures, elaborate material, and design appropriate assessment and evaluation methods. We structured a program that has seven levels and that includes social, economic, environmental, and political issues that students could explore gradually each semester. The result was a spiral curriculum in which each issue was revisited with an increasing degree of difficulty

related to language use and a higher degree of language argumentative competence. The issues selected among those proposed by students have been:

- Crime and punishment
- Recession and the labor market
- Transportation
- The Environment
- Civil Rights
- The impact of technology
- The influence of mass media on people's life

- Preserving Cultural Heritage
- The world of business

Let us consider the following examples selected from levels IV and VII for the School of Economics to illustrate how a topic is introduced in two different levels but with different degrees of linguistic difficulty.

As shown in these examples, the objectives were built around a topic of concern in our country, which is the increase in crime rate. It was chosen from various options suggested by students in the questionnaires and interviews used in the need analysis. This issue, for example, provides the students with

the possibility of analyzing the world that they live in from different perspectives embracing political, economic, and social consequences. Once students get acquainted with vocabulary related to different types of crimes through carefully selected excerpts and exercises, they discuss this issue reflecting on its social impact and consequences within our community. We strongly believe that using language in context is not limited to transferring the newly learned idiomatic expressions. It is indispensable to guide students in the construction of knowledge through interaction in the classroom. This meaningful construction implies sharing personal

Level IV

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT



Workshop #5

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To recommend and suggest possible punishments to prevent people from committing crimes.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

◆ To be able to distinguish between different degrees of obligation and need while reading a text on crime cases.



To be able to give advice and make suggestions when judging people on the basis of conventional morality.



To be able to identify phrases commonly used to express personal points of view.



To be able to write a composition expressing personal opinions about the main causes of crime and the lack of punishment in Colombia using specific vocabulary and expressions.

Level VII

A WORLD UNDER FIRE



Workshop # 9

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To be able to convince and persuade an audience in the solution of a problem by providing solid arguments.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

a. To be able to identify the main and supporting ideas in a text about crimes.



To be able to discuss alternative solutions to punish terrorist acts of terrorism in our country.



To be able to identify words and expressions related to terrorist acts.



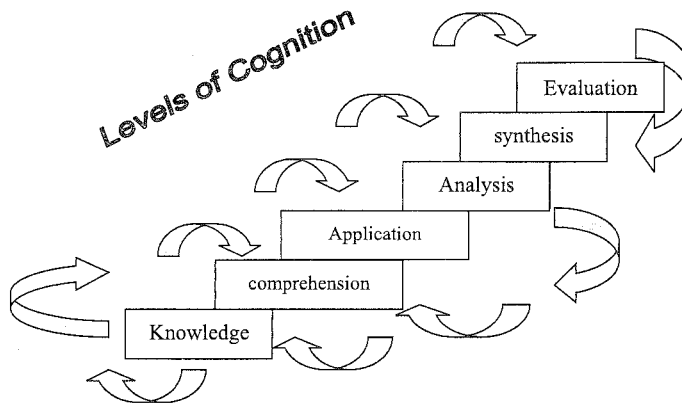
To be able to write an essay assessing the impact of the death penalty in Colombia.

experiences that bring together students and the world around them.

Organizing and implementing a program is only one step in the curriculum process. It is also essential to revise the syllabus, strategies, and materials used permanently so as to guarantee that the program fulfills identified needs and required standards. During this process, peer conferences were held weekly to revise the quality and appropriateness of the materials designed by teachers. Moreover, peer feedback served to make modifications to the proposed lessons. The material was then implemented in class and student's suggestions were also incorporated. The lessons were modified considering teachers and students' observations. The final product was compiled and published in a set of textbooks that are modified every academic semester.

Applying critical thinking skills

Bloom's taxonomy of knowledge (as described by Orlich, 1990) has provided our program with a theoretical framework that has guided us in devising appropriate activities as a means to develop critical thinking skills. He provides a categorization of cognition that begins from applying simple thinking processes to elaborating complex ones. It is our contention, though, that human learning entails a cyclical activity in which we constantly add and refine our knowledge base so as to keep on elaborating more sophisticated thinking processes to which we also attach our beliefs and personal values. The following diagram depicts our representation of cognitive processes:



a. Knowledge level:

Knowledge level refers to the capacity to evoke appropriate material when resolving a problem that usually embraces memorization and identification. It involves remembering specific terminology, facts, and conventions in specific domains, classifying, categorizing, and using criteria to prove or judge facts. Each unit begins with memory games, mind maps, webs, charts, and brainstorm activities that link words, concepts or ideas so that

students recall and retain the necessary linguistic information associated to each topic. Students construct linguistic foundations to be used in subsequent activities and units.

b. Comprehension level

Comprehension level refers to the capacity to apprehend a set of qualities that characterize a piece of information. It usually involves translation, interpretation, and extrapolation. Translating deals with paraphrasing using a person's own words. Students in the program are encouraged to state main and specific ideas about a text using their own words. Interpreting embraces students' ability to capture the content of a given context as a whole, the ability to understand and interpret different types of readings, and the ability to discern between legitimate and contradictory conclusions. When extrapolating, students are expected to draw conclusions, and establish consequences and effects of an assumption. Students are not

limited to reciting linguistic formulas but they are led to interpret an author's view.

c. Application level

Application level refers to the transfer of acquired knowledge to the solving of new theoretical or empirical problems. Students draw on their capacity to identify a theory, principle or method that should be followed to solve a novel specific situation. Students use the language learned in varied contexts that involve speaking and writing tasks such as role plays, text discussions, debates about current events, story telling, and essay writing.

d. Analysis level

Analysis level refers to the capacity to fragment material in to its components in order to establish relationships among those components and understand principles of organization. It entails three subcategories. The first one refers to the analysis of elements or the ability to recognize non-explicit assumptions; that is, distinguishing between facts and hypothesis. The second one deals with analysis of relationships or the ability to understand relations among ideas, and cause and effect sequences. The third one deals with the analysis of principles of organization. It evaluates the capacity to determine the structure and organization of communication through inferences. All three subcategories are incorporated gradually into the program in writing, reading, and speaking activities. We attempt to provide a scaffold that enables them to use logical reasoning when studying a situation. For example, when studying crime, the teacher elicits information about sources and origins of crimes by examining the current economic situation of our country. From an economic point of view, students establish possible consequence crime may have in our country.

e. Synthesis level

Synthesis level refers to the capacity to gather diverse elements to form a whole. It demands the articulation of elements that is based on a plan and a set of inferential processes. Based on the analysis that students conduct about different topics, they construct their own theories and alternative solutions for topics of concern.

f. Evaluation level

Evaluation level refers to the capacity to form judgements about the value of ideas, masterpieces, methods, materials, etc. It involves using solid criteria to establish the validity of any statement. Relying on student's personal construction of meanings, their analysis and their beliefs about the world, and the justification of the choices they make in socialization events such as group discussions. They also respond critically to material they read or hear by writing essays using different genres and styles. Getting students involved in evaluation processes helps to develop their argumentative competence.

Improving argumentative competence

A competence is the capability that individuals have to perform something utilizing their abilities and knowledge. Competence is only visualized through the performance of specific actions or behaviors (Secretaría de Educación de Santafé de Bogotá, 1998.). Therefore, a competence is not an observable phenomenon, it should be inferred from an individual's performance.

Besides strengthening the development of communicative competence, the approach we use enhances student's argumentative competence. It entails the use of language to form speech that shows our personal conviction about a given issue (Calderón and León, 1996). The main purpose of a given discourse is to convince or persuade an audience. The

premises used to accomplish this objective should be built around clear explanations, justifications and/or relationships that support a proposed thesis.

In our program, students are frequently required to discuss topics for which they need to state their point of view and provide solid arguments to justify their choices. First, they are given ample input to guarantee their understanding of vocabulary. Then, writing and speaking activities are developed in order to help students internalize grammatical structures, and they are also presented with formal and informal expressions while discussing factual issues. Finally, a discussion model is given to facilitate student's performance. Several types of discussions are held such as open discussions, debates, round tables, and role-plays. The argumentation process is based on the individual's elaboration of the discourse that provides reasons for his / her convictions about an issue. The validation of the individual's discourse is done through confrontation with others in the debates, which subsequently allows the reformulation of the individual's discourse by elaborating on the collective discourse.

IMPLICATIONS

The mere integration of current issues in an English curriculum does not guarantee that learners will use the language in a meaningful and effective way. It is necessary to base decisions on a curriculum framework that provides those involved in learning and teaching with a basis to share insights and limitations of particular program designs (Pineda, 2001). Such decisions have to be the product of careful data gathering procedures to collect information about the needs of learners, an analysis of the strengths and limitations of the instructional procedures, the materials designed, and the assessment and evaluation methods used.

Curriculum decisions also involve the participation of teachers in terms of creating appropriate learning environments that allow learners both to distinguish the different layers of meaning in a text, and to respond to information critically. Moreover, teachers should be empowered to become active participants in the curriculum development process by reflecting on their teaching practices and adjusting programs.

Students on the other hand should not be viewed as "recipients of knowledge". Educators ought to facilitate the construction of meaning, and the development of critical thinking skills by helping students draw on their background knowledge to establish connections to the environment that surrounds them. It is through the use of the English language in meaningful contexts that students' independence and argumentative competence are enhanced. Such meaningful contexts should embrace tasks that involve the learner in the gradual construction of meaning by applying different levels of cognition. They should also facilitate the transition from dependence to independence in learning. Selecting appropriate thought-provoking material to which the students can attach their belief systems and values creates those contexts.

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