

**Ongoing Project: Curricular Design for the English Extension Courses at
Universidad Libre, Bogotá - Colombia**

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Abstract

This article describes an ongoing research project at the School of Education at Universidad Libre in Bogotá. It presents a proposal of a curriculum design for the English Extension Courses. The proposal intends to fulfill some pedagogical and didactic needs the research group found in the learning and teaching processes in the courses mentioned, and to contribute to the professional development of the future teachers who are following their pedagogical research practice in that context.

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Introduction

This article is based on the presentation made at the European Conference on Language Learning that took place in Brighton on July 2014.

The research works on the three main functions of a university: teaching, research and extension to the community. The project is developed by the research group “Investigación, Aprendizaje y Comunicación IAC”, from the Languages Department at the School of Education - Universidad Libre.

The Pedagogical Research Practicum started with the beginning of the School of Education in 1961 and it has evolved according to the needs of students, future teachers, the university and the Colombian society. Foreign Languages Extension Courses is one of the ways Universidad Libre in Bogotá offers university extension to the community. This program began in 2004 and most of its teachers are pre-service teachers going through their Pedagogical Practicum who have not acquired the necessary competences for teaching yet.

Future teachers of the Languages Department develop their teaching practice in some nearby schools and also in the English Extension Courses. Students attending these courses come from different backgrounds: technicians and professionals from diverse fields, university students, high school students, stay-at-home parents, and other people belonging to the local community who do not have any academic degree and/or any occupation. There are not requirements to enter the courses.

The researchers and their research auxiliaries, who are teachers at the Extension Courses, through some instruments like direct observation, interviews, and surveys applied to students, teachers and administrators of the courses, found the following:

The English Program:

- Does not take into account students's needs and interests or the context they live in.
- It is based only on the contents of a commercial international book. Future teachers and students said that this material is very complex and sometimes do not reflect their reality.

Pre-service teachers:

- Are in the process of acquiring pedagogical competences and need experienced teachers's feedback.

Classes:

- Diversity of ages, academic level and socio-cultural background in the same group.
- Classes meet only two hours weekly. An academic semester covers 14 weeks, that is 28 hours of classes during an academic term.

Administration:

- Lack of meaningful communication between the directors of the Extension Courses and the Languages Department.

To sum up, the following needs were found: 1) to have a curriculum that takes into account student's characteristics, needs and wants and future teachers's pedagogical needs, 2) articulation among the research activity, teaching practice and university

extension to the community and, 3) research must be a process linked to the curriculum. Based on these findings, the research group established the following research question: **How can the design and implementation of a curricular proposal guide the learning and teaching processes at the English Extension Courses and enrich their quality?**

To answer the research question, the following objectives were pointed out.

General: Contributing to the betterment of the teaching and learning processes at the English Extension Courses at the School of Education of Universidad Libre, through a curricular design proposal.

Specific:

- Designing, applying, systematizing and analyzing the data that support the research project.
- Inquiring about theoretical foundations for the project.
- Designing a curriculum proposal and didactic materials for the English learning and teaching processes to address some of the needs of the Extension Courses population.
- Promoting a reflective, analytic and continuous learning attitude of future teachers that leads them to a permanent transformation of their teaching practice.
- Contributing to the consolidation of the materials design research field.

The **Object of study** is the English learning and teaching processes. The **Field of study** is Curriculum Design.

This is an **Action Research** that intends to address the three functions University Education has: teaching, research and extension.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework deals with the following concepts: curriculum design (planning and content, methodology, evaluation), learning a foreign language, teaching languages, intercultural competence, communicative competence, material design and teachers's development.

The researchers agree with Sacristan (2011), Berstein (1998) and Tyler (1998), who state that a curriculum gives a logical order to the sequence of contents of learning and teaching, and guides those processes. They also coincide in seeing education as the best way to develop the person as a human being: his mind, body and sensibility, and as a citizen. The Universidad Libre (2002) states that the curriculum reflects a pedagogical and didactic culture and it is integrated by classroom learning projects where characteristics, values, techniques and experiences are selected and contextualized.

In the field of teaching and learning languages, Stern (1990) remarks that the curriculum can be defined as the study programs of an institution or, in a restricted way, the syllabus of a specific subject, for example, the English curriculum. For Stern, a curriculum must consider the conceptualization of its three main components: objectives and contents, methodology and evaluation.

For Nunan (1996) a curriculum must be learner-centered; it will need to be modified during the course of program as the learners's skills develop. This view tends to see language acquisition as a process of acquiring skills rather than a body of knowledge.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) states that the curriculum construction must be done from the perspective of the following principles: 1) the promotion of plurilingualism and linguistic diversity, 2) this diversification is only possible if the cost efficiency of the system is considered. 3) the considerations and measures relating to curricula should be approached in terms of their role in a general language education, in which linguistic knowledge and skills, along with the ability to learn, play not only a specific role in a given language but also a transversal or transferable role across languages.

Nation and Macalister (2011) point out that curriculum is largely a "how to do it" activity. They provide a curriculum design model that has three general divisions. The first two are related to principles, environment and needs and they represent the curriculum. The other one represents the syllabus; it has goals and deals with three parts: content and sequencing, format and presentation and monitoring and assessing. Evaluation is in the entire model.

For Brown (2007) a curriculum should have the following factors: 1) situation analysis (educational setting, class characteristics, school characteristics, governance of course content and assessment and evaluation requirements), 2) needs analysis, 3) problematizing, 4) specifying goals, conceptualizing a course syllabus, 5) selecting textbooks, materials, and resources, 6) assessment, and 7) program evaluation.

In Colombia, the Lineamientos Curriculares para Lenguas Extranjeras (1999) point out that most of the teaching foreign languages programs emphasize on the How (grammar) to say What (vocabulary). Nevertheless the main principle of the study of a language is communication that points out the Why, Who, and Where (socio-linguistic and cultural aspects of language). This approach makes easy a genuine interaction with others, even though they are in other continent, country or city.

To build the proposal, the research group takes into consideration the three main curriculum components: 1) planning and contents, 2) methodology and 3) evaluation. The focus of this proposal is mainly on contents and methodology.

Planning and contents. As Nunan points out (1996), content should be derived through a process of teachers's consultation and negotiation with the learners, the information given by experienced expert colleagues, and revision of course books for ideas on content. The starting point for the curriculum must be: 1) the learners's goals, 2) the communicative goals students need to reach, and 3) the functions, structures, lexis that have to be a result of the previous two. That is to say, curriculum designers need to focus on output, on performance, instead of input, on what the student would be able to do at the end of a course.

Based on the above theories, the researchers started to specify the communicative tasks and skills the students would be able to perform in order to reach their language goals. The curriculum would be organized in a book series of four students's books,

audio cds and a teacher's book, having in mind that language learning is a process of learning to do things with language.

Methodology. It is considered the "how" to learn and teach. The researchers follow Gagne's ideas who says that the environment where the student lives in has a great influence in his learning process.

In relation to affective considerations, the researchers follow Spolsky (1989), Brown (2007) and Oxford (1990), who agreed on the importance of emotion when teaching and learning, and pointed out the factors of the affective domain as important elements in the learning and teaching processes.

Talking about cognitive considerations, Vigotsky (2007) and Ellis (1991) are revised when they established that learners need to be prepared for interaction in the real world. They need to be aware of the intentions as well as the meanings of the speakers and writers they interact with.

The intercultural competence underlies general competences and communicative language competences. It includes the regional and social diversity that is enriched by the knowledge of other cultures different from the own. All of these incorporate in the students new ways to see the world that lead them to be more aware of themselves and their place in the globalized world.

Referring to the Communicative competence, it is understood as a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use them appropriately.

The language learning process turns around the development of communicative skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Each one of them helps the others in their learning and use. However, each one is developed in different ways and they require different strategies to be learnt.

Moving to didactic material design, Tomlinson (2011) states that "...material writing is as its most effective when it is turned to the needs of a particular group of learners". Many writers agree that a home-grown textbook, if it is well written, stands a much greater chance of success, simply because the authors are more aware of the needs of the learners, and are thus able to design the materials to fit own learning and teaching styles while keeping in mind the knowledge and world-view their students bring to the classroom. Tomlinson also sees the need for teachers to write their own materials in order to reduce their dependency on publisher materials and a means of professional development.

On the other hand, Masuhara in Tomlinson (2013:236) points out that "global course books from English-speaking countries seemed impressive with more fashionable approaches promising success, but their contents are too alien to be imported directly into my classrooms". Those texts do not have into consideration students and their contexts, needs and interests.

In the same perspective, Nunan (1996) states that "materials are the tangible manifestation of the curriculum in action; they are omnipresent in the language

classroom and it is difficult to imagine a class without books... good materials also provide models for teachers to follow in developing their own materials". This research project at Universidad Libre started because there was a lack of a curriculum that took into consideration the needs and wants of the students and their context.

In the field of teacher's development, the researchers considered Simpson and others (2005) who spread Dewey's ideas. He believed that critical reflection is the most important quality a teacher may have and that it has big impact on the quality of schools and instruction. Reflective teaching is not simply doing what you are being told to do. The teacher should really dig and investigate the why something is wrong to make changes to teaching procedures.

Research is an important means of professional development for teachers. In his Reflective Model Wallace (1991), states that "teachers have demanding expectations for themselves and their colleagues because they regard professional development as an ongoing process". Discussion with colleagues about classroom situations is one of the most valuable experiences. The use of wide variety of formal and informal strategies like reading professional journals, attending conferences and daily reflection, are also considered to be very important.

This research follows Wallace's theories (1998) establishing that the key to effective teaching is definitely a balance between theory and practice. Theory is important not only to perform well, but also to be able to answer students's questions. Wallace says that "there is a continuous relationship between reflection and practice". Moreover, this cycle allows for reflection both before and after practice. Knowledge makes sense when it can be related to immediate and or past experience. He also points out that the teacher brings to class personal beliefs about and personal styles for teaching, personal perceptions of students's needs and even personal assumptions of what good teaching is.

Schon (1995) states that "an inexperienced teacher might need more detailed instructions and suggestions on teaching methods in the teachers's guide to supply a lot of different optional activities or interesting raw materials to be exploited". Besides, he considers that one of the crucial factors in the success of learning anything depends on what the learners themselves bring to the learning situation. Learners need to start learning what is simple; they need rules and also need to be prepared for interaction in the real world. They need materials which are designed to facilitate systematic progress but which at the same time, provide them with encounters with the reality of target language use.

About Critical Pedagogy, Wink (2005:26) and McLaren (2010) were considered in this research. Wink defines it as "a prism that reflects the complexities between teaching and learning. It is a prism which sheds light on the hidden subtleties that might have escaped our view previously. The prism has a tendency to focus on shades of social, cultural, political, and even economic conditions, and it does all of this under the broad view of history". McLaren believes that critical pedagogy is "a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state". From those authors, it is understood that critical pedagogy is a change in the way of

thinking that leads to asking about the how and the why knowledge is built in the way it is. Critical pedagogy calls to action to the actors involved in education. It is about the real world; it is about transforming it. It gives people the courage to challenge the current ways society forces them to live.

Evaluation. As Nunan (1996) stated, "evaluation is intimately tied to the rest of the curriculum". It is a wide term that includes assessment and decision-making process. It is done during the whole learning process and the questions: Who, What, When and How, should be considered for determining the efficacy of the curriculum. In the same way, Nation and Mcalister (2010), state that evaluation looks at all aspects of curriculum design to see if the course is the best possible. It requires looking at the results of the course and the planning and running of it.

Assessment, on the other hand, deals with the processes of what a student achieves as a result of a course. It generally involves the use of tests. Self-evaluation provides a very important way of developing critical self-awareness of what to be a student means.

Proposal

The findings described in the problem statement, allowed the researchers to work on a curriculum design proposal for the Extension Courses at Elementary and Pre-Intermediate levels, and design, pilot and evaluate a set of four students's books, audio materials and a teacher's book rich in explanations and information for future teachers. The series is called **Go Beyond the Limit**.

The current proposal is done from a perspective where the linguistic knowledge, the linguistic skills and the capacity to learn are incorporated and transferable among languages. The curriculum should: 1) develop cognitive skills (thinking development) and learning to learn a foreign language, 2) be oriented to students's interests and 3) take into account the social relevance of learning and individual differences.

The series shows a simple structure that helps future teachers to begin their professional practice as English teachers using a textbook to follow in the classroom, different from the commercial ones that are not design with the special characteristics of the Extension Courses.

The textbook *Go Beyond the Limit* adopts the comprehensive or "integrated" approach. It follows an informal syllabus where the focus is on language use and skill development: students work in a growing sequence from reception to production. Pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and structures of discourse are worked upon progressively following their mastery by the learner. Thus students complete the circle: reception, production, reception, growing their language learning in a cyclical way. Content Learning Integrating Language CLIL is another approach that is used as it encompasses any activity in which a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non- language subject, in which both language and subject have a joint role. (Coyle and Marsh, 2010)

Some linguistic concepts were taken into consideration on the development of the series. From the "Notional-Functional" syllabus: the cyclical nature of language

acquisition as it moves from the particular to the general to the particular in a spiral of growing complexity, and its use as a means for interaction. Conveying meaning is as important as fluency and accuracy. These concepts are applied in the books as it is described: Students begin with a listening exercise where they perform very concrete activities (particular), and then they go to the speaking section where they think and analyze their personal reality (particular). The grammar section makes them reflect about general rules of language and apply them in specific circumstances (general and particular). Finally they have the writing section where they express their own ideas about a particular subject (particular).

Regarding language as interaction, the speaking section and, in some cases, the reading section, are designed for students to interact according to the collaborative approach, applying the following basic principles when fulfilling the tasks : 1) two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together, 2) people benefit from one another's resources and skills, 3) learners engage in a common task where each individual depends on and is accountable to each other, 4) groups of students work together to search for understanding, meaning, or building knowledge as a product of their learning, 5) individuals are actively immersed in a context in which learning takes place through collaborative efforts, 6) activities can include group projects, joint problem solving, debates, etc.

From the "Task-Based syllabus", *Go Beyond the Limit* selects the ability to interpret and express meaning and the need to constantly develop new language. Students are asked to work actively in individual and/or collaborative ways, developing concrete tasks which demand the acquisition of new language to express their own reality, share and interpret their ideas. Sometimes they have to interact creating new situations that spring from the proposed tasks.

Following the "Communicative Approach", this series draws on the notion that meaningful communication promotes true learning. As such, it focuses on activities in which language is used to carry out meaningful tasks. By making real sense students can communicate among themselves. The series also adheres to the belief of the "Post Communicative Approach" that the classroom is an artificial setting in which the communicative environment the teacher attempts to create is, in fact, a pre-communicative one, where students rehearse in order to later apply their knowledge in a real context.

From the "Cultural Studies Approach", this series encourages students to use the cultural and linguistic knowledge they possess in their native language to add in their acquisition of a second one. The series also follows the "Intercultural Approach" that considers that intercultural communicative competence includes the ability to understand the language and behavior of native people. The cultural tips provided in the series, give students some insights of British and American cultures, according to personal experiences of natives or foreigners who have lived in these contexts for many years.

The approaches briefly described above, are clearly evident in the development of the proposed tasks in each unit. The series *Go Beyond The Limit* prepares students for the interconnected world they will be living in, making emphasis on the understanding of life and culture in English speaking countries.

Finally, evaluation is considered to be a continuous process in which students are given constant feedback about their achievements. This process includes the assessment of students' performance and communicative competency level through a variety of activities and tasks. Students are expected to master the specific elements of the foreign language required for communication and interaction. Their achievements are evaluated through oral activities, written assignments, listening exercises, reading comprehension activities and class work.

Self-evaluation is an important part of the learning process. The students are required to reflect on their knowledge, attitude towards learning, learning strategies, and personal responsibility. This process of diagnosis and revision is made explicit in the student's book self-evaluation section at the end of each unit, which results in promoting autonomous learning.

Stages for planning the curriculum and designing materials

Planning and content: A need analysis was done by collecting information from students, teachers and administrators. Students were asked about their needs and likes. Teachers answered questions related to their teaching preferences, current proficiency level, methodology and materials used. On the other hand, administrators were asked about their point of view about the way the courses are conceived, organized, and developed.

Results of data collection: The books Elementary A, Elementary B, Preintermediate A and the teachers' book for them were piloted during 2011, 2012 and 2013.

The evaluation process was done in different times. Students did it formally at the end of each course but during the classes they gave feedback to their teachers. Teachers did the evaluation in three different ways: 1) formally they answered a format, twice per semester, 2) they gave suggestions and comments weekly to the research auxiliaries, and 3) they attended a meeting to give face to face feedback to the researchers once per semester.

Content selection: The contents of the curriculum design were established from the results of the data collection, linguistics and pedagogical theories, researchers's experience, revision of some curriculums and materials for teaching English.

Methodology: The curriculum was designed taking in to consideration the information stated in the theoretical framework.

Evaluation: "Any element within the curriculum may be evaluated" (Nunan, 1996). The validation of the research project has been done by experts inside and outside Universidad Libre, teachers and students of the English Extension Courses.

Conclusions

So far, the research team can conclude that:

1. To have the research auxiliaries as teachers of the Extension English Courses was very valuable for the project. They were an excellent bridge of communication between researchers, teachers, students and administrators. They gave direct and constant feed-back as they were both part of the research, part of the piloting and teachers at the same time. In that way, they made a process of meta-research.
2. Participating in a research team promotes a reflective, analytic and continuous learning attitude in future teachers, leading them to a permanent transformation of their teaching practice.
3. Curriculum design makes the connection between research, theory and practice and it implies change or innovation in the learning and teaching processes.
4. The most common aspects about the series stated by teachers and students were:
 - ✓ The material provides balance in the communicative skills and variety of activities.
 - ✓ Contents and activities are according to students's English level.
 - ✓ The photos help to understand the texts and complement them.
 - ✓ To include information about Colombia is a good way to increase and/or reinforce identity and own values, and provides opportunities to compare native language and culture with foreign ones.
 - ✓ The information presented in the Cultural Tip provided by English native speakers and Colombians living in an English environment for many years, enlarges the students's knowledge and vision of the world.
 - ✓ The self-evaluation section is a very good way to reflect about how much each student has reached his own learning objectives.

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